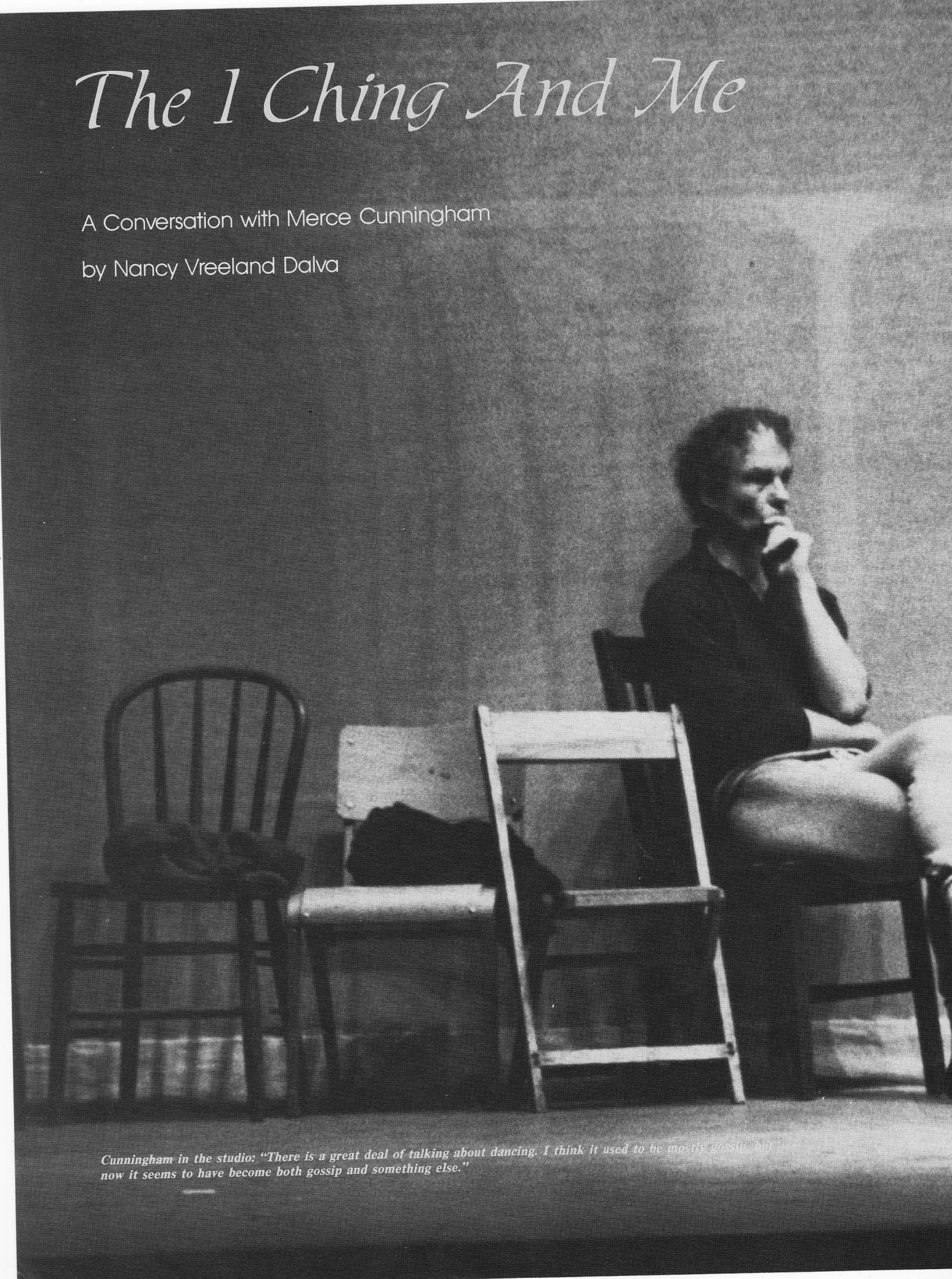


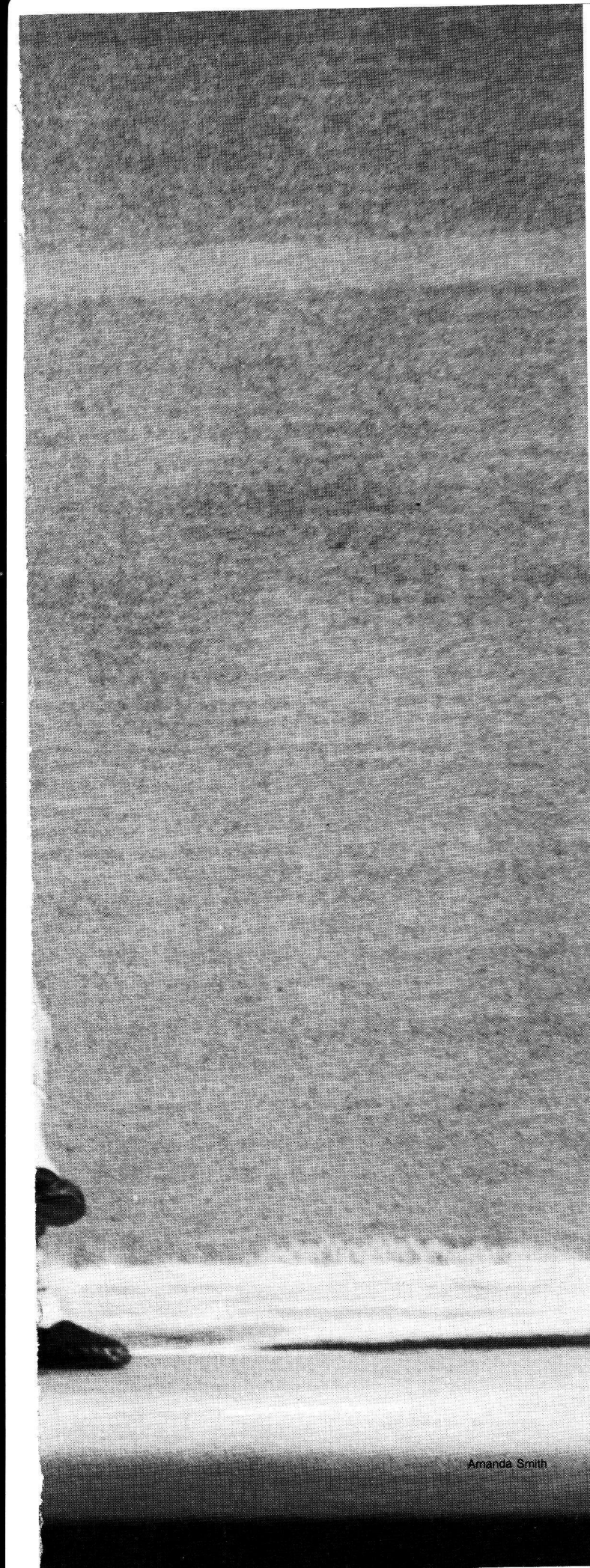
# *The I Ching And Me*

A Conversation with Merce Cunningham

by Nancy Vreeland Dalva



*Cunningham in the studio: "There is a great deal of talking about dancing. I think it used to be mostly gossip, but now it seems to have become both gossip and something else."*



**T**his March, the Merce Cunningham Dance Company appears in a month of repertoire at the Joyce Theater. The earliest work to be seen is *Septet* (1953). A new dance was still in the making when Nancy Vreeland Dalva visited Cunningham at his Westbeth studio last December and asked the choreographer some questions.

***Can I ask you first about the Joyce season?***

I don't know what I can tell you, but ask.

***Is this the longest repertoire run you've done anywhere?***

No, we were in London once for a month—many, many years ago. The first time we ever went, we stayed for a month.

***Do you like doing that?***

Well, you stay in one place. . . .

***Are you making a new dance?***

Yes.

***Have you started it yet?***

Just a little bit by myself, and vaguely with the dancers, not very extreme yet. We just started to rehearse yesterday.

***Can you say anything about it?***

Very little. (*He laughs.*)

***Douglas Dunn once said that dancing was dancing and talking was talking. (Cunningham continues laughing.) What is the use of talking about dance?***

Well, people do it all the time. I don't know if it is useful or not, but people do it all the time. (*Still laughing.*) There is a great deal of talking about dancing. I think it used to be mostly gossip, but now it seems to have become both gossip and something else.

***In recent years, people have begun to call your dances "dramatic," as if that were something new. Has the way people look at the dances changed, or has the work itself changed?***

Well, I think it's probably both, except that I did dances earlier which were, as far as that goes, dramatic. Drama is simply opposition—one thinks of good opposed to bad, or one kind of thing opposed to something else—that makes drama, and I have lots of dances with that kind of thing in it, but because . . . the way I worked was strange, [people] couldn't see it that way. . . .

*Winterbranch* was dramatic, as far as that goes, but of course people wouldn't have thought of that, and just screamed about it. . . . If you do a light movement and then you do a strong movement, you have a kind of opposition. Or if you have one person going one way and somebody else going another way, you have a kind of . . . opposition. And if at the same time they're doing different kinds of movement—or if they go at each other with different kinds of movement—that seems to me to give a kind of drama without making any issue about it: simply a form of opposition, because that's really what drama is based upon—good and evil forces, if you like, battling with each other. And you can make that explicit by stating what you think it is, or leave it to somebody else's imagination, to think for [himself], which is exactly what I prefer to do.

**What is your role as a dancer now? Will you talk about performance?**

I suppose if one has performed as I have—well, almost all my life—then it's part of what I do, or a great deal of what I do. So that it isn't that not doing it is impossible—it certainly is, since I perform less than I did years ago—but at the same time it's so much a part of me that I continue to do it. At the same time I can see perfectly well I don't have to. Somebody else can do it.

**But not the same way?**

No, but everybody's different. Each person is unique. I don't think that anybody is necessarily better than anybody else. It's just different. And I do it one way, and then someone else can do something another way and be just as valid and just as strong from that point of view.

**About your performance—there seems to be an extraordinarily wide range of reference . . . a long chain of associations. . . .**

. . . Thinking about what I'm doing—I guess that's the best way to say it—or when I've dealt with a whole piece—I don't—I never—made explicit references. I have many references, many images, so in that sense I have no images. Because I could just as well substitute one image for another, in the Joycean sense of there being not a symbol but multiple [symbols]—one thing can build on another, or you can suddenly have something—the same thing—being something else. . . . That seems to me the way life is anyway, so I think the theater is that way. I think that when theater gets down to one thing, it is not interesting to me.

**Do you think some of the dances have stronger suggestions of associations or stories than others? Like Gallopade or Quartet?**

Probably, yes. You can make, perhaps, things out of them—ideas about stories in ways that other dances don't lend themselves to. Of course, yes.

**Once, years ago, at a performance of the first Inlets—Inlets I—I decided to watch two of the dancers [Louise Burns and Chris Komar] and make up a story about them. I was astounded when they ended up together at the end. . . . It worked out so well I was just flabbergasted, and I thought, "I could do that every night with a different story and I bet they'd all come true."**

Of course they would. Yes, why not? Fairy tales are supposed to come true.

**What influences you now? (Cunningham laughs.) What new things come into play? (More laughter.) What things are you reading, what are you thinking about?**

Oh, what am I reading? I'm reading a book called *Memory of Fire Genesis* by Eduardo Galianos—a book I've tried to find for years. . . . It's a wonderful book. He's a man from South America who decided he didn't like the way history was written . . . and proceeded to write it in a totally different way, with these excerpts from

hundreds of books that he read . . . describing what the Spaniards did when they came to Mexico. It's not a book in the sense of a continuous continuity. It's a series of things taken from other books and translated.

**It sounds Joycean.**

Oh, yes—oh, it's a marvel—oh, yes, yes, yes—because he goes from Jamestown to Lima to Spain to Philip II to Charles V and so on, back and forth, giving you a picture of history as it affected the Americas and the Indians, which is marvelous. Then I have a book called *In Search of Schrödinger's Cat*, which is about the quantum theory, which I can't understand, so I'm re-reading it.

**It often seems to me that what you've done in dance very much parallels what twentieth-century writers have done in literature—Stein, Joyce, Eliot. . . . I think the history of twentieth-century poetry is going to be the history of the fragment, things floating up, a series of associations.**

Well, it goes from paragraphs, to sentences, down to words—and now to words themselves separated, so you don't have even a whole word, you just have part of a word. And that is quite apparent—and seems to me quite reflected—in our technology. That doesn't mean that they did it because of technology. It just happens that those ideas are in the air. Technology is full of this . . . the electronic system where they cut things so fine. You get it on television all the time.

**Is there some of it in Points in Space [a work originally choreographed for video]?**

Well, I don't put it there purposely, but [those are] the ideas I deal with, those are the ideas that interest me, and if that comes out that way, that's fine. I think that the camera is so different from the stage, I don't see the point in simply using it as I would to make it look like a stage piece. . . . It seems to me a visual medium to be used for what it is. It's not easy, but then neither is the stage easy. It's just more familiar.

**What are some of the virtues of video?**

Virtues, or whatever—there are possibilities with it that don't exist on the stage. You must change the size of somebody. You can change the dimension. You can change the angle of the way you see somebody. . . . A person could turn on the stage but you would see the turning, whereas with the camera, it can suddenly be turned, because you can cut from one camera to another. . . . It gives you the chance to see something in a way that you wouldn't see otherwise.

**What about chance? I always think chance needs demystifying.**

Oh yes, it confuses everybody, and it's really so simple. I don't mean the using of it is necessarily simple, but the point of it is simple. It's one of the things in the book, *Schrödinger's Cat*—where they've come upon this thing—I can't explain it—I wouldn't attempt to—but it's something about where there's an area with very small matter . . . an area where they can't really say 'This is exactly what this is.' They can only do probability. . . . Einstein said he wouldn't confront that—or didn't want to confront it, he said—because



Jack Mitchell

Cunningham, then: "Each person is unique. I don't think that anybody is necessarily better than anybody else. It's just different."

'God doesn't play with dice. . . .' He always felt that everything could be figured out exactly, when they've come upon this thing which they cannot figure out exactly. It's something about . . . the shape of very small things, things that are inside atoms . . . an area of probability.

**That's a very good way to explain chance to the general public—it will clear things up. (Cunningham laughs.)**

Well, it's just that if you see *that* . . . that it [chance] exists, then you can see that it must exist in many works—not necessarily that way, which is complicated and scientific and most involved, obviously—but that there must be chance elements everywhere. And the thing about chance, the use of it, is like the *I Ching*, where you cast your fortune, and you accept what the fortune is at that time, in that place. The next second, it might be different. . . . Okay, so I cast in my way for a particular movement to be done in a particular time in a particular place, and that's that. Okay? That's that one. Then I cast to see what the next one is, and the next one. Then of course the thing is to put it together, to somehow make 'How do you get from one to the other?' But that's what it is. . . . You carefully set up—or I do. I have to set up what I am going to cast from: what kind of material for each dance, something about the time, and something about the space. And then, through the chance means, it's determined what

that movement is and how long it takes and where it is.

**Every dance is made this way?**

I use it many different ways, it's not some kind of strict method, by any means, but chance is in every piece in some way. . . . The idea of personality not being there isn't true simply because when the dancers do it, they—in doing it—take it on. It's like a second skin.

**How has your work changed and how has it stayed the same, over the years?**

I think the dancers themselves probably as a whole company—though I always had several, say, who were very good, like Carolyn [Brown] and Viola [Farber]—but I think now in general the technical level is higher for all of them, because the demands of the dances are, from that point of view, harsher. . . .

I think that working in video changed some of the technical demands. . . . That changes the technique and it changes then the dancers of course, and it changes what you think is available to use for a dance. . . .

I think movement, to me, is, always has been, and remains the same. It has a life of its own. I don't think that it needs an explanation—you can, but I don't think it needs it. It has a spirit—if you can get it out, if you can find a way to let it come out. And it certainly is a part of what anybody does, in life, whether they are dancers, or not dancers, because it is part of the world. . . . It happens to be the thing that interested me the most. □