

**MERCE CUNNINGHAM – INNOVATIVE DANCER AND CHOREOGRAPHER -  
TO BE HONORED WITH THE 2000 DOROTHY AND LILLIAN GISH PRIZE AT CEREMONY  
INCLUDING ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG  
AND LEADING MEMBERS OF THE DANCE AND ARTS COMMUNITY**

Dancer and choreographer Merce Cunningham, long recognized as one of the major forces behind the evolution and innovation of modern dance, will be recognized with the 2000 Dorothy and Lillian Gish Prize for his tireless devotion to the field. Cunningham will receive the honor—a silver medallion and approximately \$250,000—at an awards ceremony to be held on Wednesday, October 18, 2000 at the Hudson Theatre, Millennium Broadway, New York City. The Prize will be presented by Gish Prize Committee Chairman and President of the Art Center College of Design, Richard Koshalek. Cunningham friend and artist, Robert Rauschenberg will deliver introductory remarks.

One of the largest awards in the arts, the Gish Prize, now in its seventh year, recognizes outstanding talents from a spectrum of disciplines in the arts. Mr. Cunningham is the latest to join the select assembly of Gish Prize winners that includes author/playwright Arthur Miller (1999); author Isabel Allende (1998); singer/songwriter Bob Dylan (1997); artist/director Robert Wilson (1996); film director Ingmar Bergman (1995); and architect Frank Gehry (1994).

The annual Gish Prize has no application process and is not determined through a competition. Each recipient is chosen by the Gish Prize committee, a group that changes every year. Composed of leaders in the arts community, the committee for this year includes Richard Koshalek, president of the Art Center College of Design in California; Karen Hopkins, president of the Brooklyn Academy of Music; composer and conductor Tania León, sculptor Martin Puryear, and Tony Award-winning director Lloyd Richards.

“It is a great honor and a pleasure to receive the Gish Prize, and I am grateful to the committee for their decision,” said Mr. Cunningham, upon hearing of his selection. “I am also deeply touched that this award is given through the generosity of the Gish sisters. Lillian Gish is such a large figure in the American Theater. She was there at the beginning of film history and her remarkable career spans the twentieth century. The munificence of the prize is matched by the spirit of the givers.”

“As for the prize,” Mr. Cunningham added, “it will be used to continue my work with the dance company. It is a welcome boon.”

Born in 1919 in Centralia, Washington, Merce Cunningham began his professional dance career in Martha Graham’s dance company where he was a soloist from 1939 to 1945. During that time, he began to choreograph independently, presenting his first New York solo concert in April 1944. He continued to stage annual performances alone or with an ad hoc group of dancers until the formation of the Merce Cunningham Dance Company at Black Mountain College in 1953.

An artist ahead of his time, Cunningham had a highly original style that was new and provocative, but not always understood. He was the first to break free of conventional staging patterns, sending his dancers off

(more)

in different directions with each group performing their movements independently of the music, which often consisted of electronically produced sounds. In essence, the dissonance in Cunningham's dances was designed to resemble life, which he saw as being complex and random. As a reflection of this, Cunningham has used chance processes in which the continuity of dance phrases was decided at the toss of a coin.

To date, Cunningham has choreographed nearly 200 works - including the early *Suite by Chance*, with the first electronic modern dance score; the multimedia *Variations V*; and the award-winning *Pictures*. His work continues to redefine and shape contemporary dance.

Cunningham has also been a leader in investigating new technology. In the seventies, he experimented with video dances. In 1991, he began to work with *LifeForms*, a computer program he still uses to create his dances. And last year, he brought dance into the digital age with *Biped*, a piece in which real and digitally manufactured virtual dancers interact. Throughout his career, Cunningham has collaborated with other innovators, including long-time friend John Cage, the late experimental musician who scored many of Cunningham's works, and visual artists Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, Frank Stella and Andy Warhol.

Today at 81, Cunningham's edge remains sharp. For the 2000-2001 season, his company returns to New York City with a November performance at the Joyce Theater. In addition, an April 2001 performance at City Center will feature the New York premiere of *Interscape*, his most recent dance, which received its triumphant world premiere at The Kennedy Center this year. Cunningham still performs, sharing the stage last year with Mikhail Baryshnikov, and he continues to tour with his company and choreograph new work. Many of his past achievements have entered the repertoires of numerous ballet and modern dance companies that continue to showcase the genius of Merce Cunningham around the world.

Established in 1994 by the Dorothy and Lillian Gish Prize Trust and administered by The Chase Manhattan Bank and Nathan Hale as trustees, the prize is given annually to "a man or woman who has made an outstanding contribution to the beauty of the world and to mankind's enjoyment and understanding of life." In her will, Lillian Gish stated: "It is my desire, by establishing this prize, to give recipients of the prize the recognition they deserve, to bring attention to their contributions to society and encourage others to follow in their path." Lillian Gish died in 1993 and Dorothy Gish, also an actress, died in 1968.

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