

Judson Church & Its Dance Critics by George Jackson

George Jackson's 2010 reflection examines the work of Jill Johnston and Allen Hughes, two dance critics who paid early homage to Judson Dance Theater in the 1960s. Jackson contrasts Jill Johnston's breathless, energetic writing in the Village Voice with Allen Hughes' spartan, unbiased prose, published in the New York Times in between years as a music critic. As Judson turns 50 and we return to its history with new questions, we are indebted to the curiosity mustered by these critics during Judson's early years, and the attention they sustained through its heyday. Jackson's piece was originally printed in the Dance Critics Association newsletter; this re-publication marks its first appearance online.

A type of dance "as new as anything cultural could be," was born at Judson Memorial Church in New York's Greenwich Village in the early 1960s. It might also have died there without many people noticing if two critics, Jill Johnston and Allen Hughes, had not gone, seen, and written. What they said in their respective reviews (Johnston mostly for the alternative weekly the *Village Voice*, and Hughes for the mainstream daily the *New York Times*) was perceptive, although each had a distinct perspective.

The rest of the dance press pretty much ignored Judson or was dismissive initially, perhaps because the phenomenon eluded categories. It wasn't quite modern dance and, despite the participation of some ballet dancers, it certainly wasn't regularly classical. It encouraged diversely trained and untrained bodies to appear side by side, and some people felt that, rather than dance, it was Beat literature set in motion or a hyperactive form of Pop painters' Happenings. Hard data are lacking, but there is little question that people began to pay attention to Judson dance because of Johnston's and Hughes's reviews. Audiences grew. In 1962 one could walk into a Judson performance at the last moment and find a good perch. By 1964, long lines waited to get in. What was it the two critics said that caught readers' attention and helped change dance?

Both writers having died recently—Hughes at age 87 on November 16, 2009 and Johnston at age 81 on September 18, 2010—it may be worthwhile to recall some circumstances of their careers as critics and dance critics, but particularly as critics of Judson dance. To say that Johnston wrote about Judson dance from the inside and Hughes from the outside is overly simple. Still, I keep coming back to that statement as a practical approach in thinking about the differences in their criticism. Of necessity, to communicate to unknown readers, the insider must include enough objective information and description to make a topic recognizable, and the outsider must arrive at sufficient insight to conjure more than a shell. Johnston and Hughes were able to do that, but they came to write differently about dance, given their different backgrounds and outlets.

Johnston set out to be a critic. She first reviewed for Louis Horst's *Dance Observer*, and then the *Voice* made her its dance columnist. On occasion she also published elsewhere, including in Arlene Croce's *Ballet Review* and even in the *New York Times*. She herself has stated about starting in 1957-58 and then transforming that, "Until 1965 I was a dedicated critic." (1). Even at first, though, Johnston wasn't the standard sort of reviewer. I sense an impatience, which made her look beyond the work of art on which she was trying to focus. She did describe the work, sometimes even reveling in its details, but it was as if she had to prove that she could pay close attention. Like all "anointed" critics, Johnston was susceptible to beauty. She conveyed the effect it had on her forthrightly ("Flying in on a run, on a downstage diagonal, Aileen Passloff was not entering any ordinary enclosure where mortals engage in temporary affairs"). Often intrigued by the artist more than by a particular work, Johnston would keep switching her focus and jump from piece to piece. This nervousness gave her writing excitement. And the beyond she beheld was about how art is made. Process, rather than technique or style, was one thing that defined Judson dance, and Johnston made the discussion of process major in writing about all sorts of dance.

Specifically whom did Johnston review? Her list of Judson dancers is quite comprehensive. She covered those who appeared at the church from 1962 into the late 1960s and/or those who belonged to Judson Dance Theater, or had participated in composer Robert Dunn's seminal workshop, as well as those otherwise allied (2). She also wrote about those she considered Judson's forerunners: Merce Cunningham/John Cage, Paul Taylor and Ann(a) Halprin. Definitely not part of Judson but present in Johnston's dance awareness were some of the big names of old modern dance and ballet: Isadora Duncan, Doris Humphrey, Martha Graham, Charles Weidman, José Limón, Kurt Jooss, Lotte Goslar, Anna Sokolow, Frederick Ashton, George Balanchine, and Léonide Massine. She touched on several dance makers prominent at the time but no longer: Norman Walker, Brian Macdonald, John Butler, Richard Kuch. However, the most attention Johnston paid was to just a few of all these figures, the Judson dancer-choreographers Yvonne Rainer, Steve Paxton, Robert Morris, Lucinda Childs; also Cunningham/Cage; and Graham. Johnston's word count for Graham probably exceeds that for any other dancer, even though she thought of Graham the artist as representing time past. It was Graham as woman who continued to resonate in Johnston's writing. In 1965, Johnston says, her writing changed. She describes the change as a "conflagration" of her work as a critic and of her life as a private person. Becoming a "mental case," she decided to use that vantage to criticize society and, in particular, criticism's "academic" and "political" roles.

One of the things that had happened to dance throughout the 20th century was a rapid expansion of the idea of what dance is. Movement previously regarded as nondance became dance. Judson, which incorporated pedestrian actions, games, and exercise, was a prime example of that expansion. I see Johnston's change as pushing the definition of dance to include all of life. The *Village Voice* continued to publish her post-conflagration writing. Some of it was stream of consciousness in the extreme. Of course, as an alternative voice, that newspaper supposedly was under obligation to be tolerant and support experimentation. There were protests from readers, and other writers were brought in to supply object-focused and syntactic dance criticism, yet Johnston's *Village Voice* "dance" columns continued past "first generation" Judson, even past "second generation," into the middle of the 1970s and her own moving on to other concerns. What she had given her readers was the feeling of dance being born; experiencing her words today is still astonishing.

Fellow critics were sometimes mentioned by Johnston. The dance critics included Edwin Denby, Walter Sorell, Arthur Michel, Louis Horst, Clive Barnes. She enjoyed sparring with Barnes and relished conversation with Denby. The art critic Gene Swenson artfully dodges in and out of her texts. During the early 1960s, Johnston and I would sometimes nod hello at intermissions. We had mutual acquaintances and even mutual friends, but it took a rumor and the intercession of a particular friend for us to sit down together to talk. The rumor was that our reviews of Judson were being ghost-written for us, and by one and the same individual. He was younger than we by about a decade I'd guess, in his 20s, well spoken, good-looking and much around New York's downtown dance scene. Sometimes, he came up to me at performances to chat. His remarks about what we were seeing made sense and showed an understanding of dance. I asked him whether he had ever thought about writing on dance. He said he did write already but was being published under another reviewer's name. That sounded odd, yet he didn't explain. I suggested that he send me a sample of his writing, because I could probably get him published under his own name. At the time, some European publications were looking for New York dance correspondents and had contacted me, but I was already writing for Louis Horst and for Britain's *Ballet Today*, so would have been glad to recommend someone else. The knowledgeable young man took my address and assured me that he would soon send some of his writing. I continued to see him at performances downtown that season, and, on one occasion, he mentioned that his ghost writing was for Jill Johnston.

I was still waiting to receive samples of the young man's criticism when painter-virologist Frank Lilly invited me to a dinner party. Frank said that it would be a small party, because he wanted the guests to get to know each other and talk. In fact, there were just four of us - Jill Johnston, cellist

Charlotte Moorman, Frank, and me. Jill wasn't formidable, which she sometimes appeared to be in public, but warm, open about herself, and a good listener, too. I think I told her about Louis Horst as editor, the fit he'd had about a piece I'd written on Judson and his refusal to print it. Towards the end of the evening, I felt comfortable enough with Jill to ask about her ghostwriter. Astonished, she replied that's exactly what she'd heard about me and that it concerned the same individual. Our host jumped in, confirming that the rumor was circulating about both of us. We concluded the dinner party shaking our heads, laughing and speculating about our "ghost." Subsequently, we weren't able to learn much about him. Moreover, he disappeared from the scene after that season.

Allen Hughes studied music and performed as a choral conductor and organist before turning to criticism. He became a journalist critic in the traditional sense, writing about music before and after his brief but intense tenure as dance critic for the *New York Times*. Initially employed by *Musical America*, he had moved to Paris to be an independent author, then returned to America and joined the music staff of the *New York Herald-Tribune*. The *Times* hired him for music in 1960, on the recommendation of composer-critic Virgil Thomson, whose colleague he had been at the *Herald-Tribune*. Already in the summer of 1961, towards the end of John Martin's long tenure as *Times* dance critic, Hughes also began to review dance for the *Times*. For over a year, beginning on June 30, 1961, into November 1962, both writers covered dance for the paper, although the *Times* had announced on July 4, 1962, that Martin would retire that week as its official dance critic and be succeeded by Hughes. Nevertheless, Martin reported on New York City Ballet's Russian visit in the fall of 1962, and Hughes continued to write about music, too, into the beginning of 1963. Thereafter, Hughes covered dance almost exclusively through September 11, 1965, following which Clive Barnes replaced him as dance critic.

Prior to reviewing dance intensively for the *Times*, Hughes—although by no means a stranger to the art form (3)—decided to update himself. He went to see as much as he could. I'm not sure exactly how long this period of looking lasted, but it was a matter of months, at least. Moreover, he resolved to be an omnivore - to sample as great a variety of dance as possible, regardless of its reputation as good or bad, professional or amateur. That's how he stumbled onto Judson. To an exceptional extent Hughes continued his attendance at performances of all sorts after he was named *Times* dance critic. His editors supported that policy because his predecessor had been criticized for narrowness; John Martin in his later years had been reluctant to travel to out-of-the-way locations or see dance that wasn't mainstream—which was why the *Times* retired him.

Hughes was heading back to Manhattan from one of his early dance forays when we met. We picked each other up on the subway from Brooklyn College, where a small French ballet troupe, led by Janine Charrat, had just performed. For quite a few stops, we were the only two passengers in our subway car, and both of us were holding programs, so a conversation was easy to start. By the time our train left Brooklyn, it was clear we had more to talk about. Subsequently, when Allen was named *Times* dance critic, he saw to it that I was invited to the party that *Dance Magazine's* editor Lydia Joel threw to welcome him into the dance world. At that party were most of the senior critics, including the venerable Carl Van Vechten, who was frail and forgetful by then. For the first time, I had the pleasure of conversing with Edwin Denby. John Martin, I think, had stayed away. Allen also took me to see Judson. I was living near the church then and continued on my own to go to Judson performances as well as to open rehearsals and related events. It was the 1962/3 season. Tackling his *Times* assignment seriously, Hughes was well aware of what was expected of the individual holding America's top dance-writing slot. However, he also wanted to change that image. He did not approve of the *Times* being a pulpit for its critics' pronouncements about what was good or bad. Rather, Hughes hoped to give America's fairly conventional dance audience alternate perspectives on mainstream fare and point out new and neglected dance. Describing (4) the "what" of a performance matter-of-factly ("the straight-line and right-angle tendencies of the choreography"), he then liked to juggle the pros and cons instead of arriving at a final judgment. A comment ("There was nothing wispy, pretty or delicate about any of this. All was spare, simple and straightforward even when not very

interesting") made about a Maurice Béjart ballet (5) was not untypical, and he sent similarly mixed signals concerning some Merce Cunningham and Paul Taylor modern dance works.

For readers of traditional reviews, that was too uncertain. Moreover, the sly humor in his ostensibly dry descriptions often went unnoticed. Hughes sometimes (comparing, for instance, the Kirov's *Swan Lake* and the Bolshoi's) discussed the "how" of performances, i.e., the dancing's qualities (6). On rare occasions, but only when he thought it truly warranted, was he undividedly enthusiastic and eloquent, as for George Balanchine's *Apollo* (7). It was the 80th birthday of the ballet's composer, Igor Stravinsky, and Hughes's prose became subtly alliterative as he deployed the terms "poem," "poise," "praise," "play," and other pungent vocabulary. He pointed incisively to this ballet's less-is-more approach, to the structure of its music, how pedestrian movement was combined with classical, and to the qualities of American dancers. He went further, speculating whether *Apollo* and *Agon* (it "starts and stops in unexpected ways") might lead to an American ballet style, which, he insisted, hadn't yet fully happened. At the premiere of Taylor's *Aureole*, Hughes called it a "white ballet" danced by "barefoot angels" (8). His eye discerned the inherent classicism of Vienna's Spanish Riding School and the subtle partnering between the riders and their Lipizzaner stallions (9). Still, many of his evaluations reminded readers of a conflicted patient free-associating for a psychiatrist. Readers—those who had been skeptical from the beginning about a music critic taking on dance, about the wide range of work being reviewed and the reportorial style of many of Hughes' reviews—complained. In line with his open-looking policy, Hughes insisted that all letters of objection to his dance criticism be published in the *Times*. Once, as a joke about some of these complaints, I wrote an exaggerated rebuttal to his statement that modern dance was an American invention and sent it to his private address. To my surprise, he took it into the office and had it printed verbatim in the *Times*. Although also receiving praise, he did not have the complimentary letters about his criticism published. Popular were the so-called "think" pieces he wrote for the Sunday paper (10), in which he began to develop a sociology of the dance, investigating such topics as dance's audience, media, and infrastructure (including the writing about it).

Hughes's matter-of-fact reportorial style suited Judson. Judith Dunn's *Acapulco*, 15 minutes long, "shows a woman walking to a chair to brush the hair of a girl seated in it. This is done in just about the slowest slowmotion possible." Or, "Fred Herko flashed in looking beatific. He wore black tights, a yellow-and-blue jersey with Judson emblazoned across the front and on one foot, a black shoe and his means of locomotion—a roller skate. His other foot was bare." Further, Hughes thought that such scenes, if "painted rather than analyzed in movement would have qualified as pop art" and at their best would make "one aware of movement detail we seldom take time to observe in daily life." He pointed out the casual atmosphere of Judson performances, their unexpected juxtapositioning of diverse dance content and how fresh their avoidance of everyday logic seemed. There was "nonsense neighboring seriousness, balletic movement mixed with buffoonery, virtuosity contrasted with staggering awkwardness, banality juxtaposed with beauty." He didn't overpraise but did conclude that Judson had "expanded the range and possibilities of theatrical dancing and related it to the intellectual currents of our time" by "creating a splendid chaos." Judson held Hughes's attention. Reading his reports (11) today makes one want to see that dancing again.

However, complaints about Hughes's reviews kept coming. Some were from big names in the dance world, Katherine Dunham and Lincoln Kirstein among them. 1960s readers seemed particularly incensed when he praised Balanchine's *Movements for Piano and Orchestra* in its original white costuming yet was skeptical when it was re-dressed in black (12). Isn't, though, his comparison of the two versions plausible? Hughes analogized the first version to the white Taj Mahal and the other to the proposed but never built black one. Kirstein also was furious that Hughes took a divided stance on the first big Ford Foundation grant to dance, which had all gone to Kirstein and Balanchine's New York City Ballet and its offshoots. Hughes approved of Balanchine being funded but not necessarily the offshoots while worthier dance (American Ballet Theatre, Martha Graham et al.) had been ignored. A new critic, Arlene Croce, wrote devastatingly

about what she considered Hughes's bad thinking and writing habits in the first issue of her magazine *Ballet Review* (13). The Judson dancer James Waring defended Hughes and, if I remember correctly, called him a saint (14) but not in prominent pages like those of the *New York Times*. The bottom line was that the *Times* decided to replace Hughes and announced this decision without informing him first. He was in Europe at the time (late summer of 1965), and only a message sent him by Anatole Chujoy, editor of *Dance News*, relayed what had happened back home. Returning from Europe, Hughes continued writing on dance for the *Times* through September 11, 1965. His replacement, London's Clive Barnes, published his Critic's Credo on the following day and soon began regular reviewing of the New York dance scene. Hughes returned to music and also became an arts editor for the *Times*. Ironically, it had been he who enlisted Barnes for the *Times* in the first place (beginning in November 1964 as a dance correspondent from Britain). Hughes took pride to the end of his days in having seen the worth of Judson.

The early Judson reviews by Jill Johnston and Allen Hughes influenced not just the dance audience. They gave the Judson dancers confidence, also providing feedback that contributed to further work. So many new ideas were tried at Judson that, even now, some of the material is still being developed. Has there been anything really revolutionary in dance since Butoh, Tanztheater, and Judson in the 1960s?

George Jackson

George Jackson began writing about dance for his college newspaper at the University of Chicago in 1950 and has since reviewed for the general media (Washington Star, Washington Post, Times of London, PBS, NPR) and dance publications on four continents (recently for Ballet Review, Dance Chronicle, Dance Magazine and danceviewtimes.com). He has lived in Vienna, London, Cogenhoe, Chicago, New York and Washington DC. As a child he figure skated and later took ballet class, majored in microbiology and worked as a science researcher, instructor and editor. Currently he is writing a novel.

Footnotes:

(1) See the Preface to *Marmalade Me* (E.P. Dutton; New York; 1971), Jill Johnston's book selection of her columns 1960-1970, and also the actual columns. To gauge the scope of Johnston's writing see <http://jilljohnston.com> and <http://deeplisting.org/site/content/jill-johnstonliterary-archive-appeal> .

(2) There's even mention of Hermann Nitsch. He linked Judson with Central European Tanztheater. The only Judson dancer seemingly not mentioned by Johnston was Maurice Blanc, but I've not looked in all the columns.

(3) Leslie Satin (in her chapter [#3] of *Reinventing Dance in the 1960s*, University of Wisconsin Press, 2003) mentions the assertion that Hughes knew nothing about dance and, for advice, turned to his friend Fred Herko and to Herko's mentor James Waring. Indeed, during his familiarization period, Hughes asked many people what they would go to see if they were in his shoes. In no way, though, was Herko, Waring, or anyone else Hughes's guide. The decision to pay attention to Judson was Hughes's own.

(4) The *New York Times*; August 19, 1961: Connecticut College.

- (5) *The New York Times*; December 16, 1961: Bejart's Ballet of the 20th Century.
- (6) *The New York Times*; October 4, 1961: Kirov's *Swan Lake*. *The New York Times*; September 7, 1962: Bolshoi's *Swan Lake*.
- (7) *The New York Times*; June 17, 1962: *Apollo*.
- (8) *The New York Times*; August 6, 1962: *Aureole*.
- (9) *The New York Times*; May 17, 1964: Lipizzaners.
- (10) *The New York Times*; May 31, June 17, June 24, 1962; August 22, 1965: Think pieces.
- (11) *The New York Times*; May 31, June 10, June 17, and June 24, July 17, 1962; Feb. 9, June 26, Fall 2010/Spring 2011|
- (12) *The New York Times*; April 10 and April 21, 1963: Movements. Black leotards for the women were used for the ballet's second performance, April 10. Hughes learned about it from his readers. The color switch had been requested by the cast's principal female, Suzanne Farrell (15). She changed her mind and presumably ever after white leotards were used, so Hughes never actually saw a "black" performance. The New Yorker's St. Clair McKelway made fun of Hughes for focusing on the color of the costuming but, as summarized by Arlene Croce (13), mistakenly reversed black and white. Martha Swope's photo, which accompanied Hughes's review of the first "white" performance, is a rehearsal shot showing black leotards!
- (13) "Hughesiana," *Ballet Review* 1, #1; 1965
- (14) James Waring's letter in praise of Allen Hughes was, I thought, published by Arlene Croce in *Ballet Review*, but it isn't in BR 1, #6 - the Judson issue – or thereabouts.
- (15) *Holding On to the Air* by Suzanne Farrell with Toni Bentley (Simon & Schuster, 1990; University Press of Florida, 2002).

End Notes:

The text above was first printed in DCA News (Fall 2010 / Spring 2011), the Newsletter of the Dance Critics Association. Jackson's piece on Judson which Louis Horst refused to print was published as "Naked in Its Native Beauty" by Dance Magazine, April 1964. His recent piece on Judson dancers is on the Dance Heritage Coalition's website of American Dance Treasures - the First 100.