R.E.:

CROCE

Dear Arlene:

May I add my two-cents plain to the brouhaha accruing from your article of June 30? Insofar as Kenneth King has done so admirable a job (and one with which I largely concur) on the Monk-King--Dean-Wilson-Glass connections, let me confine my remarks to my own peers. For this purpose I am enclosing a crudely drawn—and vastly oversimplified—genealogy chart which adds several wrinkles to your revisionist sense of history. Mainly, I have enlarged your oddly reduced number of fountainheads, thus opening up the patterns of lineage. I have also given the poor bastard—our esteemed mutual friend, David Gordon—a proper parentage worthy of his name and have ejected Trisha Brown from the ranks of the "Mercerians." So much prefer this term to your "Mercists." After all, while we’re at it why not call forth the whole imperial baggage—what Kenneth King calls the "bankrupt monarch model"—and use a term lying closer to "caesarian" and Caesar?

Even my name gets absorbed into this model in your hands. You say "The whole post-modern movement from Yvonne Rainer onwards" as though at a given point in time my work formed an apex from which everyone else developed. I fervently wish you Sunday historians might acquire a sense of history based on something other than a sequence of one-man/woman epiphanies. Things are always more complicated than that. True, Cunningham/Cage were doing their thing 30 years ago. But why was their influence in the dance world not felt in any visible degree until 1960? Clearly it required a convergence of a number of people from different areas of art-making to manifest the ideas that in the intervening 10 years had lain fallow. And to further muddy the waters: the harvest that ultimately developed bears in many instances no relation to the original association. Hence, to call Steve Paxton’s Contact Improvisation Mercerian is like calling Morris & Judd Smithsonians because David Smith’s work preceded theirs. Much of the work that developed in the Judson Dance Workshop was in opposition to Cunningham’s then perceived elegance and classicism. Things like walking, running, and quotidian activity performed in varying repetitive modes have never been of much interest to Cunningham, and the term “austerity” frequently used to connect the two generations is a cliche obfuscating of differences than revealing of similarities.

This suggests that a good deal of the work of Paxton, Childs, Hay (whom you overlook altogether) and Rainer might be shunted off to another corner of the yard (I don’t think I’m too far off in describing your enterprise in these “railroading” terms). As for
Trisha Brown—Brown hardly studied with Cunningham at all. Although she participated in the Robert Dunn workshop, her real roots come straight out of the Halprin/Forti axis, e.g., her dance constructions early on in her career and her highly personal—and untheatricalized—approach to movement exploration more recently.

You're right in making a distinction between Childs and Dean. However, I prefer to articulate it as the difference between task and trance. Despite her recent predilection for dancing on the beat, her emphasis on floor patterns and the stiff, slightly awkward, almost parodistic relation to balletic steps thrusts the work more in the direction of children’s games than toward the ritualistic atmosphere of Wilson and Dean. In this respect Childs is true to her Judson origins.

Perhaps a whole new set of categories is called for: Cagists, Warevers, Judsonians, West Coastians, Halprinians, Literarians, Passlovians, Fortitudians, and post any of the above. And what about Artworldlians? Thus I would qualify as a former Passlovian-Fortitudian-Judsonian Cagist and lapsed Artworlddian Mercist and new Literarian Cinemist. If my chart provides Rainer with a more complex input than any of the others that is merely the result of knowing my own history best.

One last exhortation: Let’s stop blaming everything on Cunningham, for heaven’s sake, and—if I were you—I wouldn’t blame anything on Wilson!

Yours in felicity and art,
Yvonne Rainer

P.S. Preferences from the standpoint of taste are no justification for the re-writing of history.

Dear Ms. Croce:

It is obvious after reading your article, “Dancing: Slowly the History Comes out,” that you think that artists and readers of The New Yorker are uninformed and inarticulate enough to accept without argument one person’s taste presented as historical fact.

Another danger of an article like this is its effect on funding. It is no secret that you are on the Dance Panel of the National Endowment for the Arts, a consultant to PBS and generally considered an authority in the field of dance. Your article, which mixes fact with fiction, showing little research done and in some cases blatant examples of voluntary amnesia, can actually inhibit the possibilities of some artists getting funding to continue their work. The trend is for funding organizations to give money for the large enterprises and eliminate the smaller projects. This article only affirms the deadening trend—I say “deadening” because most of the exciting energy of young and creative work is nipped in the bud, leaving only the old and tired elephants to lumber on doing the same old things, taking no risks and offering no contribution to American vitality. When I say “old,” I am not referring to age nor do I mean to imply that all large institutions lack courage. What I do mean to imply is that your writing of this article (about a sub-
ject that hardly interests you) is simply a way that you put your money down on your favorites so that you can be in on what you think will be the most profitable “action.” The only contribution that Robert Wilson has made to American art is that he makes the most expensive and well publicized shows in town. Your article, extolling the old “bigger is better” American dream of which Wilson is a prime example, perpetuates the decadent, ruthless image of an American gigantism that has sadly contributed to the sorry state of world affairs.

Your statement that Robert Wilson and Philip Glass are “mentors” to such “younger” choreographers as Lucinda Childs, Kenneth King, Phoebe Neville and myself is impossible. Depending on the artist, we pre-dated both of them by five to ten years. By the time Robert Wilson arrived on the scene in the Fall of 1967, all the younger choreographers had presented many major works of their own and had generally built their reputations on styles which they continue to use today. I presented my first work in New York in 1963. By 1967 I had created: “Break” 1964; “The Beach” 1965; “Duet with Cat’s Scream and Locomotive” 1966; 16 Millimeter Earrings” 1966 (which you wrote a favorable review about in Ballet Review when I revived the piece at the Billy Rose Theatre in 1969); and “Blueprint” 1967 (a two evening work) among many other “multi media” (for want of a better word) performance pieces. Kenneth King had created: “cup/saucer/two dancers/radio” 1964; “Spectacular” 1965 among others of his extraordinary works. Phoebe Neville had presented many of her exquisite pieces and the Judson Dance Theatre including the exceptional and groundbreaking work of Yvonne Rainer, Judith Dunn, Lucinda Childs, Steve Paxton, Trisha Brown, David Gordon, Sally Gross, Deborah Hay, Elaine Summers, Robert Morris and others had already, in the early ‘60s, presented formidable concerts which challenged all that went before them. It’s strange that you don’t remember you edited an issue of Ballet Review in the Spring of 1967 about Judson Church. In it were articles about the Judson Dance Theatre and an article about Kenneth King and myself by Constance Poster. There was also a mention of us and Phoebe Neville in the articles by Jill Johnston and Al Carmines. Naturally, there was no mention of Robert Wilson at all, since he had not even arrived on the scene.

His history has simply been that of seeing things and exploiting them in as profitable a way as possible by making them more visible through his access to more money and a better press agent than most of his contemporaries. The fact that he is an elegant set designer and a shrewd business-man should be acknowledged. But he does not enjoy the kind of respect from fellow artists that innovators like Yvonne Rainer or Merce Cunningham do because (1) he is not an innovator and (2) he has conducted himself in such a way that respect is an impossibility.

As for your statement that I have composed several “remarkably Glass-like scores,” it is entirely absurd. You can hear all the attributes of what you call the “School of Glass” i.e., electronic keyboards, eerie harmonies, pulsing rhythms and especially vocalise in my record album “Key” (1970), which contains music composed from 1967 to 1970. Phil Glass had not even begun working with harmonies, or even chords at all much less vocalise. His music from that period was repeated additive figures played by one instrument or by instruments in unison. He is basically an instrumental composer who uses voices incidentally in an instrumental composition. The voices could easily be replaced by other instruments or even by machines (which he has said himself). I am a vocal composer and a singer. If I use instruments at all, I use them incidentally in a vocal composition. My music is built on special vocal techniques and a vocabulary intrinsic to the voice which I’ve developed over a thirteen year period. My music is tailored to my own voice and to the voices of the singers in my Vocal Ensemble (who are extraordinary virtuosos) while Glass’s music uses conventional, standardized vocal techniques. The idea of a “School of Glass” is ridiculous—La Monte Young, Steve Reich, Terry Riley, Charlemagne Palestine, Pauline Oliveros, Philip Corner, Malcolm Goldstein, David Behrman, Julius Eastman not to mention the Ramones, the Beatles, Patti Smith, Mick Jagger and traditional African, Japanese, Indian, Laotian, Balinese, Chinese, Cambodian, Peruvian and American Indian musicians have all used repetition as a structural element but have certainly not been influenced by Phil Glass. An article like this can only be embarrassing to Glass. He is certainly aware of who has contributed what to the field of music and would probably be the first to say that you are barking up the wrong tree. The point is, it is clear that you have no information about music and certainly not about music history in the last twenty years. Therefore, you have no business writing about it. No one is the originator nor the owner of 8th notes, polyrhythms, electric instruments or vocalise. If your ear is so insensitive that you can’t distinguish one person’s music from another, leave the writing about musicians to music critics.

Sincerely,

Meredith Monk
Dear Ms. Croce:

Because the basic, pivotal facts and perspectives in your column in the June 30th issue of *The New Yorker* ("Slowly Then the History of Them Comes Out") are so flagrantly incorrect and so blatantly and authoritatively issued forth, they must be responded to, challenged, and corrected. True, as a journalist you’re free, even entitled to parade the most extravagant or biased claims across your pages; it’s just that when it purports to be historical, naming names, delineating lines of contact or influence, that your injustice has to be amended, or (better) retracted.

John Cage and Merce Cunningham have worked in their extraordinary, undoubtedly baffling but always innovative ways for at least four decades, and no matter how much fashion changes, or how you assay the trends, they are our mentors. Merce Cunningham explained years ago that his breakthrough had to do with the realization that dancing didn’t have to happen on the or a beat. After two and a half decades, by 1975 or ’76 his dance *Torse* broke through to a new way of measuring, seeing, allotting and experiencing bodyspacetime (new word).

However, your article raises the most spurious view of all that should, and must be challenged across the board, with regard to Mr. Wilson’s exploits, anyway. He’s hardly any mentor for the aforementioned, cited in your initial paragraph. Meredith Monk, myself (and I believe Lucinda Childs) were most certainly presenting and exploring the kind of work we are now known for—years before Robert Wilson. Really, it’s the other way around. At this point we are all working on very different things in quite different styles.

The enormous oversight and glaring error—while you’re citing, or shooting mentors—is Yvonne Rainer and the wonderfully complicated choreographic collaborations generated by the decentralization process of The Judson Dance Theater and The Grand Union. Really, the monarch model is over; the alternative barely recognized, investigated, inquired into. I agree—it might be better to call it all “post-Cunningham” (and not Mercists, please), though obviously no one approaches Merce Cunningham’s expansive, genuinely illuminated expertise. You’re skipping decades in favor of trend and fashion by making a glib, tenuous, myopic jump from Mr. Cage and Mr. Cunningham in four decades to Mr. Wilson and Mr. Glass in one.

Since 1964 I have been presenting a wide variety of dance and theater works and performances. From the beginning they were involved with other things and studies but included movement, dance, recorded, spoken and published texts, word and voice experiments, and theatrical elements. For example, in 1966 on a well-documented program at Judson Church shared with Meredith Monk, Phoebe Neville, and in a dance of mine entitled “Blow-Out”—a duet with Laura Dean, I performed a super-slow motion study of a motorcycle couple. I never saw the need to inflate it into a five-hour, or all-night extravaganza. In 1966 I also presented my first evening-length theater work *m-o-o-n-b-r-a-i-n-withSuperLecture* at The Gate Theatre (across from St. Mark’s Church) and again early in ’67 at The Filmmaker’s Cinematheque then located on 42nd Street. In 1967 and ’68 I presented PRINT-OUT, a fragmented, pun-permutated language performance piece (actually a “meta-semantic”) with film and recorded voice in The Judson Gallery, and also as part of an Annual Benefit for Judson Church (’67).

In 1967 I began whirling and spinning. All of movement can be derived from the circle: that’s ancient and universal. From then until ’73 I whirled, often with a rope tied around torso and over shoulders, for long, long periods, not only in numerous public performances, but in workshops (one in particular for a month in the fall of 1970 at American Theater Lab) and at informal gatherings, parties, open houses, etc., and in the lofts of Mr. Wilson, Mr. deGroat, and Miss Dean. Everyone took to it of course, to say the very least. This all for nearly five years, before it started becoming the rage. It was never my intention to save it up, crank it out as a style (or worse, exploit it for my career). Now, alas, it’s been institutionalized.

It’s true that Mr. Wilson mounted several very early theatre attempts in the late ’60s, one at the Bleecker Street Cinema, and one at American Theater Lab, another in an alley. I should know; I was in the first two. We did have a creative exchange—he was in two of my dances as well—at Judson Church and at Eisner/Lubin New York University performance in 1969. But it wasn’t really until the very end of the ’60s that he began presenting what is now his characteristic oeuvre—*The Life and Times of Sigmund Freud at Brooklyn Academy of Music.* So: secondly, I object to your saying we (Monk, Childs, myself, etc.) “reflect different aspects of Wilson’s work, just as Trisha Brown and Steve Paxton and Douglas Dunn reflect different aspects of Cunningham’s work.” With regard to my work—what aspects? Fragmented voice? Whirling? Theatrics? Ms. Croce, these are all as old as the hills. Since 1975 at least everyone mentioned has gone in quite different, really independent directions.

The real breakthrough for those working in dance today is the
constant challenge, exchange and nourishment that obviates our historically plagued, culturally obsessive and repressive need . . .
for the tyrant-despot . . . for daddy. Why don't you maybe try
writing about that, or at least reading and researching them that found it out.

Sincerely,

Kenneth King