



MUSES

The Choreographer Who Turned Walking Into Art

By Ruhama Wolle, the Cut's style partnerships editor.

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Photo: © Lucie Jansch/B) Lucie Jansch

If there's anyone who has shaped the language of contemporary dance over the last half-century, it's Lucinda Childs. The choreographer and dancer emerged from the radical experimentation of 1960s downtown New York, where artists at Judson Dance Theater began reimagining what dance could be, stripping away narrative and virtuosity in favor of clarity, repetition, and movement drawn from everyday life. Working alongside figures like Merce Cunningham and composer Philip Glass, Childs helped pioneer a minimalist approach that transformed the stage into a living geometry of bodies moving through space. Her choreography, often built from simple gestures — walking, turning, running — reveals a precise architecture that is at once athletic, meditative, and hypnotic to watch.

Over the decades, her work has traveled from experimental church halls to major museums and opera houses around the world, influencing generations of dancers and choreographers along the way. And yet, even now, Childs continues to approach movement with the same curiosity that

defined her earliest works. As part of our ongoing series exploring the muses who shape creative culture, Childs shares the rituals, inspirations, and philosophies that continue to guide her practice today. On March 14 and 15, her early works were presented at the Guggenheim with Works & Process, in collaboration with Dance Reflections by Van Cleef & Arpels, with performances held in the museum's rotunda.

How did dance first enter your life?

My sister and I started taking classes in modern and ballet. It wasn't serious training; we went on weekends, as many children did at the time. It wasn't intended to lead to a professional career at all. At first, I was actually interested in theater. I wanted to be an actress. But when I became a student at Sarah Lawrence, everything changed. That's where I met Merce Cunningham, and that experience shifted the direction of my life entirely.

Was there an early moment that made dance feel transformative?

One memory I'll never forget is when the dancer Tanaquil Le Clercq came to our school as a guest. She walked into the room and felt like a goddess. I was very young, it was the 1950s, but moments like that stay with you. Just seeing someone embody that kind of presence can leave a lasting impression.



From left: Photo: Titus Ogilvie-Laing; Photo: Titus Ogilvie-Laing.

Your choreography often incorporates everyday gestures: walking, running, what some people call “pedestrian” movement. Where did that language come from?

That really came out of the Judson Dance Theater period. At the Cunningham studio, we were all students together, people like Yvonne Rainer and Steve Paxton. There was a strong influence from John Cage as well. The idea was to move beyond traditional dance vocabulary and ask, “What happens if we include movements that are part of everyday life?” Walking, running, ordinary gestures. That shift opened up an entirely new way of thinking about choreography.

When you revisit those early works now, decades later, do you ever feel tempted to change them?

No. The choreography stays the same. What changes are the dancers. Each new group brings something different to the material. I prefer to preserve

the works as they were created and allow the performers to bring them alive in their own way.

You've spent decades working with the body. What has that taught you?

One thing you learn very early is that dance requires consistency. It has to happen every day. Even now, I begin every morning in my small studio doing my own conditioning routine. It's about strength, flexibility, and preparation so that when I step into rehearsal, I'm ready to move. It only takes about an hour, but it has to be consistent. That discipline is what carries you through the years.

When you start creating a new piece, where does the process begin?

Casting is very important. I look for dancers who respond deeply to the music and can work within the style. The movement language is demanding both athletically and classically. I usually arrive with material prepared, though sometimes it evolves completely once I see it on the dancers. The work develops through that interaction.



From left: Photo: Paula Court; Photo: Paula Court.

What do you look for in a dancer?

Sensitivity to music. An ability to move within the style. And perhaps most importantly — they make the work look easy, even when it isn't.

Where does inspiration come from for you today?

It can come from anywhere. For example, I've worked with Philip Glass for many years, beginning with *Einstein on the Beach* with Robert Wilson. I'm still discovering pieces of his music, sometimes early compositions, that inspire new choreography. Returning to music by Philip Glass or John Cage feels like coming full circle. It's exciting to find something new within those worlds.

Your work often feels very architectural. Do you see choreography visually?

Yes, in a way. I often record the choreography in two dimensions, like an overhead map. You can see the patterns dancers create in space: circles, diagonals, lines. Geometry becomes a tool for understanding relationships between dancers, the space, and the music. Even though we have video today, I still rely on written notes. They help preserve the structure of the work.

What do you hope people really get about your work?

For me, dance is a visual experience. Each person sees something different, and that's perfectly fine. But one thing people often respond to is the sense of teamwork among the dancers, the way they are aware of each other and activate the entire space together. That sense of collective presence is very important to me.

What still pulls you back into the studio?

The chance to create something new. Reviving works is meaningful, but making new work is always the most exciting. I feel very fortunate that I'm still invited to do that. There are always unfinished ideas, things still waiting to be explored.

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