

Merce Cunningham

An Oral History Interview
Conducted for the GVSHP Westbeth Oral History Project

By
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ABSTRACT

Merce Cunningham (1919 -2009) was an American dancer, choreographer and leader of the Merce Cunningham Dance Company, located since 1971 at Westbeth in the West Village. He was interviewed along with Jean Craig and David Vaughn, archivist for the Merce Cunningham Dance Company.

Cunningham begins the interview by talking about the dance studios he had prior to Westbeth. He discusses his initial inquiry into the studio space at Westbeth, noting that he was unable to afford the rent. Jean Craig explains that a three year grant from the J.M. Kaplan Fund enabled them to move in, and speculates that Westbeth management was eager to have the company as a commercial tenant. Cunningham also touches on dynamic between the company and the residential tenants in the building.

Cunningham then compares the Westbeth neighborhood from the early 1970s to today. He reminisces about the large windows of the dance studio, one of the many features of the building that influenced his work. He continues to describe the influence of the physical landscape of the building and how part of the adventure of Westbeth was its unique history and size. Cunningham talks about the changes his dance company had to make to the studio to make it suitable for business. Such additions as a new floor, mirrors, a shower and bathroom were all done at the company's expense.

He also describes the community aspect of Westbeth and his interactions with the tenants. He talks about the many tenants that used to find their way up to his studio to watch the dancers practicing, including actress Helen Hayes and writer Anita Loos. At a time when there were few opportunities for the company to perform in theaters, recalls David Vaughn, they had to turn visitors away from their popular studio performances as a result of overcrowding. Cunningham credits the space offered at Westbeth for allowing them to open the studio up to school children who have been overcrowded in schools since September 11th as a result of school merging. Craig then describes how the company has become much more involved with the neighborhood schools.

Cunningham concludes by briefly talking about the video pieces he made for television. Finally, he speaks of how beneficial Westbeth is for artists, both the benefits of having low rent and the ability to showcase their work in the same building.

Q: Hello, this is Jeanne Houck, and I'm working for the Westbeth Oral History Project. And it is now May 29th, 2007, and I'm at the Merce Cunningham Studios at Westbeth at 55 Bethune. And I'm very pleased to be interviewing Mr. Merce Cunningham, Mr. David Vaughn (archivist, Merce Cunningham Dance Company) and Ms. Jean Craig. And in particular, we will be focusing on the early years at Westbeth. This is part of a project to help put Westbeth on the National Register of Historic Places. We're very much focusing on the early artists' life here at Westbeth during that time right after it was completed. So what I'd like to do is to set the scene for these early years in the 1960's. Before coming to Westbeth, I understand, Mr. Cunningham, that you had several studios in New York City at different addresses. One was 498 Third Avenue, which you moved into in 1966. And then before that it was The Living Theater Building, am I correct? What were those early studios like, if you could just say briefly what kind of spaces they were? Were they good practice spaces?

MC: Well at The Living Theater, I had one half of the top floor. The other half was their storage room. And their side leaked. (haha) I fixed the roof on our side. And I, Julian suggested I might do their part. And I said, "No, thank you. I've had enough." It was a studio, probably twenty-five feet wide and maybe thirty-five feet long. It was adequate. I put in a floor, fortunately, because otherwise, the dancers would have been working on the cement. And it was, let's see – one, two, three – the fourth floor, the top floor. And it was, as a work studio, it was adequate. The attendant facilities weren't very good. The toilet often didn't work, and the shower – we did have one – but nothing seemed to ever make it operate properly. I had to put in these things, and since I had very little money, it was mostly scrap this or that together. AND that's when David Vaughn began with us.

DV: I was on staff at that time. And I was the studio secretary.

MC: Yes, well, I said to David that I would need somebody to take care of the books in this new situation. He said, "I'll do it." And I said, "But David, I can only pay you about fifteen dollars a week." He said, "I'll take it." (haha)

Q: What were some of the challenges for artists and specifically dancers and choreographers in finding practice space?

MC: I think that previous to that, I would rent something by the hour or whatever. It wasn't a very good way of siphoning the costs. You simply worked in a studio that was often used by television crews all day long, and frankly they were filthy. And that part I didn't like at all. So when we got this situation, we were pleased. There were problems. It wasn't always very warm in the winter. But it was a place to work. And in those days, when we

did have programs, we went in a Volkswagen bus, and we would leave from there, and say two days or two weeks later we would come back at two or three in the morning, driving back. But it was a good workspace. Certainly for me since what I had previous to that was hardly sufficient. The second one, the 498 Third Avenue, was an old gym of some kind. I don't know the details of it, but someone who lived there was leaving, and it was a bigger space than 14th Street. It was at Third Avenue and 34th Street. And we were there for three or four years, and it really was a good, big space, but I began to suspect there was something wrong. Not when the corners would creak, but when you jumped in the middle, and it would creak. (haha) I began to think we would have to get out of here. The other thing about it was, on the first floor, there was a store for kitchen utensils run by a Mr. Bridge. (haha) It was very famous in the kitchen equipment world. Julia Child would come, and cooks would come, all of that, looking for things. That was fine. But, if somebody came in the store just to look around, he would walk up and say, "What are you doing there?" (haha) So once, one day it was like a spring day, and it was pleasant. He was sitting out in front in his chair, and I was walking into my place, and he said, "Hello, Merce. I found enough space. No space for you." (haha) But from that we came here. And the difference has been huge.

Q: How did you find out about this space?

MC: David?

DV: Well I read about it in the Observer. I justread it - and she [Jean Craig] said she read about it in the paper. That's what happened. I read about it in the paper, and since as Merce has suggested, the place we had at 498 Third Avenue was going to be pulled down if it didn't fall down first, so I called the number to ask if there was a space, a suitable space, for a Merce Cunningham studio in Westbeth. And they said there was something, and I went over to look. I might add that one of the people who was involved at the moment, at that time was Howard Moody¹ who was the minister of Judson Memorial Church, and I was involved in performances at Judson, so I had this sort of a little bit of an 'in' there with Howard Moody. But Merce and I came over, and we clamored about in hardhats. Didn't we?

MC: Yes.

DV: ...to look at this space.

¹ Howard Moody, a minister at Judson Memorial Church in Greenwich Village, served on the board of Westbeth.

MC: Yes.

DV: Of course this space was all right. But, I mean the rest of it, coming up here, was not so good....

Q: It was still under renovation.

DV: Yes, absolutely.

Q: When you were looking at it, it was still under renovation?

DV: When we looked at it, Merce obviously thought this looked like a better space than we had in either of the other venues, and it would work beautifully for us. And then we found out how much it would cost.

MC: Yes, of course.

Q: And was the cost the right cost to you?

DV: No, no.

Q: Or was it more than you expected?

DV: Yes it was more because we had been paying I think about a hundred dollars a month at Sixth Avenue, and then it went up to something like four hundred or four hundred and fifty on Third Avenue, and then this was ...

JC: Ten times.

DV: Ten times that, or something like that, which of course was impossible for us. So we said, "Thanks very much. Good-bye," more or less at that time.

JC: With the walk around I remember making, Joan Davidson was with us. Was that the first time? Or was that a follow-up visit? It may have been a follow-up.

MC: She was representing the Kaplan Fund...

JC: Right. Was she with you the first time you came?

MC: I don't remember. I don't think so.

DV: I don't think so.

MC: We came and it had been the Bell Telephone Laboratories. Then, I think, after the war they moved to Jersey, and eventually it became this possible housing for artists. And I remember that this stage was here, for example.

DV: The projection room booth up there was certainly there.

MC: Yes. Yes.

DV: Where those little holes are.

MC: Yes.

DV: And there's this little stairway up to there.

Q: Did you ever find out what the projection booth was used for before?

MC: It was used for their Bell Telephone Laboratories to show things when they gathered all the people up here and they could show somebody a film. And in 1927, they did the first set up for television.

DV: Yes, the first television transmission was here.

MC: Yes, here. So it's famous.

Q: This is a very historic room for many reasons. So you recall that it was probably a gentleman who showed you around first?

DV: I think so.

Q: And then a follow-up visit with Joan Kaplan?

DV: Did you come the first time [addressed to Jean Craig]?

JC: I didn't come the first time.

DV: I think the first time was with just Merce and me. And then Jean came another time.

JC: I think by then you were already concerned about the money issue. And Joan knew that. I don't know whether, looking back, I wonder if Harvey

Lichtenstein² hadn't encouraged us to go to Joan, or encouraged Joan to listen to us.

MC: Yes.

JC: We were a so-called 'resident company' at Brooklyn Academy at that time, which meant that we had a two week season every year, which was marvelous, because the company hadn't had that kind of New York exposure. But it didn't provide a residence for the dancers. We had offices over there. That was no help when the ceiling fell down on Third Avenue, for example. (haha)

DV: We've been plagued by falling ceilings in every building, including here, as you can see.

Q: So then it sounds as if you found a way to talk it through to perhaps get the better situation financially from Westbeth? Or did you come to a good agreement?

JC: The solution was a three-year grant from the J.M. Kaplan Fund. And I can't remember the details of it now. I'm not sure I'm correct about Ted Weiss (?) our Third Avenue rep, and it was something.

DV: But it was something way beyond our capability.

JC: What the Kaplan Fund was able to do was give us a grant for the first three years, so that we could plan for raising the money to be able to pay that rent in the future, which we did.

DV: As I understand it, they gave us a grant to pay the rent, rather than giving us the building without rent. Because for one thing they wanted to establish a commercial rent floor space in the building.

JC: Which they absolutely had to have.

DV: Because otherwise it was all working space for artists, which at that time the rents were low.

Q: There were two types of rental units as you just described – the residential and then the tenants.

² Harvey Lichtenstein is an American dancer and arts administrator, best known for his 32-year tenure (1967-99) as executive director of the Brooklyn Academy of Music.

DV: Yes.

Q: Commercial tenants, or non-profit tenants.

JC: They called them 'commercial'.

Q: They did?

JC: The lingo they used was 'commercial', which was strange, given what they were trying to do.

DV: And what we were.

Q: They wanted arts organizations in here?

JC and MC: Yes. Yes.

Q: And I think having the Merce Cunningham Dance Company was very important to them to set a standard for the kinds of tenants they wanted.

JC: I think still it was fortunate that David saw what he saw when he saw it, because they didn't approach us. Joan, as it turned out, was a fan, and knew Merce's work, and thought it was a wonderful solution. But they hadn't come offering it to us.

MC: No, no.

JC: And I never got any sense of competition, though. I don't know whether they shopped around then for other dance companies. I think it just came about smoothly; it was a good fit.

DV: I think so.

MC: I think they just decided that they would help us under the provisions of whatever it was, and then we fix it. For instance, we put in the floor. This floor which was originally made, I just remember that the day they were starting to put the floor in, at the very beginning of all this, I came up; we were leaving on tour...

JC: I went to get you, so I had come up and the boards were mucked, and you were living then just around the corner, and I said, "Merce, you've got to go walk on that floor, because I think it's wrong." And even so, it was too hard, and definitely too hard for years.

MC: ...and I said to the man, "You'll have to put in another sleeper." He had only one.

JC: That was it.

MC: Yes. And shortly after we moved in, I said, "I don't care what it costs, you have to put in." And he grudgingly agreed to do it, because of the labor of it. But he did put it in, and so that for a great many years, too many years, we had the two sleepers and underneath this is - a cement floor this thick. So that's very good as a firewall, but not too good for dancing. So it's only recently that - two years ago - that we got a spring floor. The dancers were always complaining, as they should. It was much too hard, particularly since we do jumping. And there was no spring in the floor. But the space, there are two things about it I remember from the very beginning. First of all it was just the size. It was wonderful. And I finally woke up to the fact about the views. It took awhile, but I suddenly realized you could see out here and see a great deal of Manhattan, and up here see the river and every once in a while a big boat will pass. I kept thinking what it must have been like a hundred and fifty years ago with the river dotted with sailboats. There are two things about the windows. I remember that, would it have been Mrs. Kaplan? Not Joan Davidson.

JC: Her mother?

MC: It could have been her mother.

JC: Possibly.

MC: But one day, Mrs. Kaplan, if it was she, she came and she said she wanted to keep all these archways. She thought they should stay, and so did I. I like them. But then she asked about getting the top windows open. Well you can't open them. I don't know why, but they just don't open from the top. But I remember she got up there and tried. (haha) And I said, "You won't be able to do it." And she said, "Well I'm going to try." She yanked and she tugged for a few minutes, then realized it was hopeless. And then she gave up the whole idea of whatever she had about the arches. But that really wasn't a problem. It was that I thought that this building was so far over at that time, who would come? There was nobody on Bethune Street who had ever heard of any of us. And it was very difficult for us. I finally found a way to tell people how to get here. You go down to Hudson Street, turn right and you'll see a trestle. And that's the building. Remember the trestles.

JC: Oh, yeah.

MC: I used that as my directional. It worked. At least it got to be a way that people could begin to find out where this was.

Q: Could you tell me a little bit more about what the neighborhood felt like at that time compared to now?

MC: Well the meat market of course was still here and still active. There were grubby bars up and down. These was mostly manufacturing buildings, like the Ink Building, which got torn down across the street.

DV: Just recently.

MC: Yes. And several buildings which are now here were not here. Some of the buildings were empty in a way. There were structures which were not used or were storehouses, perhaps. To the south, of course, the first thing that struck me looking out the window was not just that you could see all the way down, but that those apartment houses were there for middle and low income.

DV: They were already there?

MC: Yes.

JC: There was the new lowrise. Just a couple of years before.

MC: Jane Jacobs managed to get them, and they remain. They're still there, fortunately. There's now a number of new buildings further down. And what has changed is the Jersey skyline. Most of those buildings weren't there then.

JC: And pollution. Remember when you noticed the pollution, and then that the sunsets became less vivid when pollution dropped.

MC: Yes, yes.

DV: When I was sitting at the desk in the afternoons, our pianist, Pat Richter, would sometimes run out and say, "You've got to come in and look at the sunset!" (haha)

MC: Oh, that's one of the first things I remember working here was that as the days went on in the winter, the sun coming in the windows would hit the floor and bounce off the mirror. And each day I could tell how the seasons were changing, if it were sunny. Like these days, it would slant down and hit the mirror, and just light the whole place up in the most extraordinary way.

And photographers would come in, and they'd never seen this. "Oh, it's marvelous!" But one of the difficulties they had if you moved half an inch, the light changes, because of the windows. But if you just look at it for what it is, it's one of the marvelous things about the place. It's been this connection with the geography. It's just amazing. The other part of Westbeth over there; it has those office buildings where the executives lived, like their houses in Long Island? They're still there.

JC: Do you have Mimi Johnson on your list to speak to?

Q: I had her name.

JC: She had a little organization called Art Services that had its office in one of those offices, a corner office.

MC: Yes, she could see the river.

DV: On the fourteenth floor. You had to go down to the ninth floor and across and then up. I can give you her number.

Q: Oh good, good. You're describing the influence of the physical landscape around you here looking out at the views here in New York and on the harbor. How would you say this space influenced how you worked?

MC: Well first of all it's the size of the space. It's big enough like the Paris Opera House.

JC: We began making bigger dances.

MC: (haha)

JC: It changed our stage requirements a bit as we grew.

Q: That's important to know.

MC: Yes. That was right away impressive to me. And since we were taking the whole floor, we put in bathrooms.

JC: That was very exciting. I remember when somehow the phone cable got plastered into the men's shower or something.

MC: Yes, because when the Bell Telephone Laboratory left, I think they cut all the wires. Just every wire, so that you would find something in this room that is connected with the elevator. (haha) It was, and this would take a

while. Something wouldn't work, and they'd have to follow lines and so on. And finally find out, as they did, that the connection was here. Why it's here, nobody knows, but that's where it was. That was part of the adventure of this place, too. Not only where it was situated in Manhattan, but *what* it was. We put in the small studio. We had the whole floor. And with taking the whole floor, we had to figure out dressing rooms, and the two bathrooms, two toilets and shower and so on. And then there was this space left, and I wondered if you couldn't build a small studio. So I said, "Let's just do it." (haha) So we did it fortunately, because we use it constantly. And then for the rest we had to figure out the layout. We could allot this much to the women's dressing room, this much to the men's, this much for the company, and then the rest became the office, which really led to an exit to the roof. But we made use of that space, too.

Q: You came in and it sounds like there was some work, quite a bit of work you needed to do to make it suitable. Did the Westbeth Corporation work with you to do any renovations that you needed? Or was it mainly, "Here's the space," they said to you, "and you do what you want with it." Or did they help you in any way to fix the space?

MC: Well they helped us by not getting in the way.

JC: It was our expense.

MC: Yes.

JC: We were concerned about the cost. I actually was trying to remember any memory of where we got the contractor. Whether it was somebody Richard Meier and the contractor here had recommended, or we found the contractor on our own?

JC: For the floor we picked somebody who had done floors in Princeton.

MC: Well, it was also the same man who did the one on 14th Street.

JC: Really?

MC: No, you may be right.

JC: I think it was somebody who was just beginning to do dance floors, so I think that's why there was the one riser. He was used to doing gyms and basketball courts, which is different.

MC: We really did everything that needed to be done: The Cunningham Dance Foundation.

JC: I can't remember who paid for it. (haha)

Q: So you moved in, and when were you able to start really working here on your pieces?

MC: I think... it has to be '70.

JC: When were classes first offered here? Do you remember, David?

DV: I wasn't here.

JC: Did we keep anything for the archives?

DV: I'm sure they have something.

Q: I do have from some other histories 1971 as when you moved in.

MC: That's right.

Q: And then I was wondering how much time did it take to fix up the space before you could really get to work.

DV: As soon as there was a floor, probably.

DV: At least the company could have a class and have a rehearsal, which they needed to do.

MC: Yes, we did it as quickly as possible. There were lots of things which weren't finished, but I wanted to get to that part as fast as possible. I remember getting these mirrors up. They, I don't remember the details of it, but there was some reason why we have that extra mirror down there. We thought we had enough, so we put this in with all this, and then realized that space was left uncovered, so we just got the mirror.

Q: What was the community like to move into here?

MC: I don't think it was full.

DV: No, I think they said that when I came to look at it, they asked me if I wanted an apartment here, but I said no because I was all right where I was,

but sometimes I've regretted it. But of course there were a lot of people we already knew living here.

MC: Yes, we knew some of them. Greta Solton.

DV: Yes.

MC: I think she came almost the same time we did, or shortly after. And she lived until she died of course in a small apartment on the eighth floor. And I asked her once if she liked it, and she said, "Oh, it's wonderful." She said, "I have everything I need to work." She had two grand pianos in place. And she set it up like a small ...; it was a very warm situation.

DV: It was like a little bit of old Vienna.

MC: Yes. Yes. And then she said, "And I also feel secure, because I know if something went wrong, I could call downstairs to the security desk." And actors, there were still theater people here, of course, and painters because they could live and work in the same situation. Of course, they need to. And they were supposed to, if they got so successful, leave. They were supposed to go someplace else. Many of them were still here (haha).

Q: I think part of the early mission of Westbeth that Joan Davidson and the people who helped her organize it is they wanted to have an opportunity for artists to have a community where there would be some cross-pollenization. And do you think it happened at times? Or did it happen for you? Where you met artists and you knew them and you knew their work and it might have had some influence in some of what you were doing?

MC: I think just because we [the studio] are a little hamlet in a sense, that all of my connections shall we say, are commercial. But when I come in, in the morning, and am waiting for the elevator, I see these people. I don't know their names. But I know they've been here for years. And I will say hello, and all that. And I ask how they are, and they do the same. And these people, I don't know what they are. I think a lot of them are visual, and in some way connected with the visual arts. There are actors, and there was a fellow, maybe he's still here, from Ailey.

DV: Howard?

MC: Yes, yes.

DV: Dudley Williams³ lives here. Yes. I think he's been here almost from the beginning. I think he moved just a few years into a different apartment, a better apartment.

JC: Wasn't there a poet friend of John's, Spencer...?

MC: Spencer Holst,⁴ I think. But yes, yes. He was here for years. And Will Grate of course.

DV: Mousy Meahan is another choreographer that has a studio. I know she's over on that side. [Azayeva] I don't know if she has a studio where she can work, but she has an apartment.

Q: Before we turned on the recorder, you were talking about a young girl that used to watch your dance class.

MC: Yes, she was three years old. There were a couple who are still here. Delores and Irving Minsk, and they had twin sons, all grown up now. And one of them has done something in the movies.

JC: One of them is Vin Diesel.⁵

MC: And the other one, the younger child, was Samantha. And once Delores, Samantha's mother, was sitting in the studio.

JC: She was our secretary for a while.

MC: Yes.

DV: When I was away.

MC: Her daughter was Samantha, and so of course the dancers would be there, and Samantha would stand in the doorway there and she'd watch. She would never come in. And I said it's all right, but Samantha wouldn't do that. But she would watch. And finally she took up dance standing in the doorway.

Q: That's a wonderful story.

³ Dudley Williams was a dance with the Martha Graham Company and the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater.

⁴ Spencer Holst (1926 - 2001) was an American writer and storyteller who lived at Westbeth until his death in 2001.

⁵ Vin Diesel is an actor who has starred in films such as *Saving Private Ryan* and *The Fast and the Furious*. He was born Mark Sinclair Vincent and was brought up in Westbeth.

MC: Well actually that's the entrance there, where the elevators are, where there was a way to get to the roof. So there were quite often people who would just come through. Now it's getting more frequent. They seem to just come through (haha) and that door's open, so they go out over there.

Q: So are you able to use the roof?

MC: You can go out, and yes there's a bridge, which will take you to that side, and this just connects to it. I don't think they like lots of people on the roof, and I don't think it's that strong. But in fact in '76, when there was the July 4th celebration, with the boats and the Statue of Liberty and all those things, they wouldn't let anybody on the roof. It may have been fixed since then. I don't know. But the people would stop in the doorway and look through. What's going on? (haha) What are these people doing? And several times we've had people just come in and sit down. (haha) And I, sometimes it gets disturbing for me, because I'm trying to do something. But they don't stay long. They realize that there's going to be a lot of reputation, so they have no interest to stay. (haha)

Q: To go back in time again, in 1970, '71, when you moved in here, what was it like to be an artist in New York City? Was it a supportive city for the arts at that time? Was something new beginning in terms of the support for the arts? How would you describe the landscape?

MC: Well, as I said earlier, because the building at that time seemed so far west in relation to the city, I wondered whether students would come? And it took a while. But they began to come. And I think also this is a very good big studio, and having windows, all of it makes it an attraction, considering some others up town. I began to realize what a marvelous place it was to work in. To spend your day not in something in a basement where there were no windows, or something so small you could barely move. And I think that since Westbeth was considered housing for artists, that idea was strange to lots of people anyway. But it began to be, as more people moved in, I don't know how many apartments are in this place.

Q: Three hundred and eighty three.

MC: Three hundred and eighty three. That's a lot. And just because I was here everyday, I began to recognize and know people, and often didn't know whether they were painters or actors or so on, but eventually began to have conversations. I'd ask them what they did, or they would come up here sometimes and want to know if they could look. I remember one day I was here, it was a Saturday, or could have even been a Sunday, but I think it was

Saturday. Everybody was gone. But it was like this day. It was warm outside, and I went out there to get something and opened the door, and there were these two ladies. And I looked at one of them and of course recognized it was Helen Hayes.⁶ (haha) And she was with another lady, and I introduced myself and she said, “This is Anita Loos.”⁷ Yes, *Diamonds Are A Girl’s Best Friend*. You know? And they had come to see Westbeth. And they asked questions, and I showed them where they could see the Statue of Liberty perfectly. And every once in a while we have people who, out of curiosity, come but they don’t know anything about artists. They ask “But what is this building? What goes on here?” (haha) I don’t know whether they expect to see paintings for sale in the lobby.

DV: There was a time in the ‘70s when there were very few opportunities for the company to perform in theaters, and every weekend we would do performances in the studio. And certainly we used to turn people away from those.

JC: That was why we stopped, finally. Merce said he was tired of walking the street and having people shout at him because they couldn’t get into the performance.

DV: People certainly found their way here then, including Rudolph Nureyev.⁸

MC: Oh, yes. It’s changing so much below us in the neighborhood. And now I don’t know that this is a condo or not, the new one...the Ink Building.⁹

DV: I’m sure.

JC: But there had been a residential flavor to all the row houses. And there were a number of artists living in that part of the neighborhood. I think the biggest, highest rise apartment building was a newish one on James Street that was probably built in the sixties.

MC: That’s right. That’s right, yes.

⁶ Helen Hayes (October 10, 1900 – March 17, 1993) was an American actress whose career spanned almost 70 years.

⁷ Anita Loos (April 26, 1888 – August 18, 1981) was an American screenwriter, playwright and author. The song *Diamonds are a Girl’s Best Friend* was sung in the Broadway version of Loos’ book, *Gentleman Prefer Blondes*.

⁸ Rudolf Khametovich Nureyev was primarily a ballet dancer from the Soviet Union who defected to the United States.

⁹ Construction to convert the former Superior Inks factory into residential condominiums at Bethune and West Streets began in 2006.

JC: And that's probably all of eight stories.

MC: Yes.

DV: How long had Roy Lichtenstein¹⁰ had the building across the street?

MC: They had it from before we were here.

DV: He had his studio and offices and an apartment there, I think.

MC: Oh, yes, just across Washington Street. I liked him so much. I liked his work, of course. But I remember I came in a taxi here, and I was getting out of the taxi. I was getting out on this side. And this person was getting in, and I turned around and saw it was Roy. And I said, "Oh, it's wonderful to see you. I'd like to ask you if you would do a décor for us." He said, "Yes, but not right now. I have to go to the dentist." (haha)

Q: So you could be running into so many people here. I mean still, and then over the last thirty-five years, a lot of different people have come in and out of Westbeth and also your studio. If possible, what would you say would be the legacy of having this studio space here in Westbeth for the Merce Cunningham Dance Studio.

MC: For me? It has been certainly the best place. Leaving out the windows and all that – just the space itself.

DV: The life.

MC: Yes, this much space. And then we've been able to do so much with it. Not only my company, but there are shows here almost every weekend. All these things happen, with small companies, not very well known, with five or six dancers. And they give two or three performances. And this goes on all year long.

JC: That was one of the things that was happening in the late '60s, early '70s, that was of course more government support for the arts and all that. And one of the things that we did when we moved in here was immediately apply for additional funding. And one of the justifications of that was that we were making the space available. It was so badly needed, performance space for dance particularly. And it was perfectly set up for that. And that's continued, and it has been very, very lively. I was here the other night and

¹⁰ Roy Lichtenstein (October 27, 1923 – September 29, 1997) was a prominent American pop artist, his work heavily influenced by both popular advertising and the comic book style.

I'm impressed by how Alberto can make a black box and all this, but he does it very neatly and efficiently.

MC: Yes, and quickly.

JC: And quickly. It's a very, it's marvelous.

MC: Did you come to the performance?

JC: I came to the faculty show.

MC: I think that we were the first people to do events like that. We did those events here. And not too long after we had gotten in, I remember the first one. We were facing that way, the dancers. And the people sat on the pews, maybe fifty people. All of a sudden I said, "If you get bored with the dancing, you can look out the window." (ha) And see New York. It was so beautiful, to have all that as the background.

DV: Actually one of *The Times'* critics actually wrote something like that. She said, there was another very interesting performance, but it was upstaged by the wonderful views from outside the windows.

JC: That series of studio events that the company did here was also exciting. Normally when we toured, the repertory, there were pieces of music that had been written to be performed with various dancers. But in this case, we wanted something a little simpler and something a little more fluid. So we had a different composer every weekend coming in and making music. It was a very, very exciting time. In the music world too, because again this was a venue that they had not had before. I remember Jamson McClove and I remember his kids, Clarissa and I forget his son's name. He brought them, he was setting up whatever it was he was doing, and they were quite young. And they were scooting back and forth on the floor in preparation.

Q: What years were these done?

JC: It would have been the early seventies.

DV: Early to mid-seventies.

JC: '72, '73.

MC: Earlier today, there was a class of children from Brooklyn here, sitting here, on the rugs; the understudy did a short thing for them. And then they, some of the children get to move also. Some one doesn't instruct them – just

hints at ways to move. And then they get to ask questions. And this group was full of questions.

Q: That's wonderful.

MC: Today they didn't ask this, but one of the questions one day not long ago was, "Do you have snacks?" (haha) And another one said, "Why don't you talk?" (haha) And another one said to me, all these comments are different groups, "I make drawings, too. I'm ten. I've been drawing since I'm eight." (haha) Wonderful. Today, there were like forty kids, where there's a dance teacher. She came with them. They were marvelous. With one group, they ask questions like "How much do they eat?" And there was a lull, so I said to the group, "I'm going to ask you a question. How many ways are there to jump?" There was a big pause, a big, long pause. One little boy said, "Well, two feet." I said, "Go ahead, figure it out." Then they wanted to do it. (haha) So the dancers helped them. There are only five ways – it is to make them think about dancing. Not about what people eat.

Q: That was a great way to redirect them.

MC: Yes. Well this particular group was very bright. One thing about dancing, there are the brightest children. I think they're third graders, something like that.

DV: This has really been happening sort of since 9/11, because the former member of the company who was a teacher in a public school asked if she could bring her class in because they were put into a school with another school.

JC: They were a downtown school.

DV: And they were crowded, and so they needed to get out. And so she brought them here, and the studio director has expanded this program. Different schools come. And we have sent teachers to the schools to work with the kids. And then they come here and they do their own choreography sometimes.

Q: So it sounds like there's been this long legacy of inviting people into the studio.

JC: The emphasis on school children actually began, like David said, after 9/11. Although do you remember, we tried. We wanted to interact with the neighborhood. And I remember we got an engagement at PS 41.

MC: Right, yes.

JC: And you and the dancers trouped over to the school, and they went into the gym and I think we were dealing also with third grade and fourth grade kids.

DV: Because Ann Goldman was ... at that school.

JC: Undoubtedly. Allen Sutterfield was in the company at that time. His mother

MC: Yes, we did one of our pieces for them, and afterwards there was a reporter who went around asking the children what they thought of this. And one little girl said, "Oh, I like it very much. It was like looking at the inside of a watch." (haha) Very smart.

Q: We'll wrap up in a few minutes. But what do you feel is happening now at Westbeth? And what are the kinds of things you hope for in the future for the dance company here?

DV: Well we hope to stay. That's the main thing. And we're hoping to get the repairs done.

JC: Well one thing that we haven't mentioned is Merce was a fairly early adopter of technology. A group of supporters in Paris, the French Friends of Merce Cunningham, put together two thousand dollars, I think, and got you your first video camera.

MC: Oh, yes.

JC: Which sat in the box for a very long time. It went into Merce's office. He isn't one to ask for help. It was there for a very long time. Finally he asked Charlie Atlas, who was our stage manager, but also a filmmaker, if Charlie would help him. And what was the first piece you did? Was that after you had done the thing for Channel 13? Or was it before?

MC: I think it was after.

JC: After. So you had some idea of the new video technology.

DV: The first piece that was done here for the camera was called 'Westbeth'.

MC: Yes. The first thing Charlie and I worked together on. And I never had anything to do with a camera, even as a child. So he had to show me how to

look through, and I had talented dancers who had done things with television. And they almost all didn't like it because they didn't look like what they thought they would, or the space was not usable or something. And when I looked through it, the only thing I could think of was it was wonderful, because it doesn't look anything like the stage, so you can do something else. And working with Charlie was such a marvelous experience, because he, over the years, has a remarkable talent, and a remarkable eye for dance not only for the camera, but for dance. So since then we've made a number of works with him. And we hope to do some more this summer.

JC: And I'm really not up to speed on this, but aren't we getting equipment that will allow us to stream what's going on here in the studio?

MC: There's a project, yes. Well it's going along, I think.

JC: So the dance department in a university can subscribe, and have every Monday a class that they can observe, or a talk with Merce, or watch rehearsal. So we're growing.

Q: That's marvelous.

MC: Well, we really use the space. I mean *it* is used. Because almost every weekend, Thursday they come and rehearse. They play on Friday, Saturday and Sunday. And then we have our regular classes going on. And when the company is not here in rehearsal, then we're still working with it. In a sense it is constantly active.

Q: Is there some other topic you feel like we should address about Westbeth. The emphasis for this interview has been on the Westbeth space and how it's been a part of your lives, and its influence on your work, perhaps, or how you have worked. And is there some other area you feel we needed to discuss?

MC: Well I think that Westbeth, although I don't live here, as a place to live and for artists to do their work here has been for a great many of them something fortunate. Because it more or less has stayed within their financial means, so that they can pay their rent and do their work. And they're able then to show it or sell it or whatever, rather than having to maintain another space in order to function, to do the work in. So if you think of the different kinds of artists who worked here, who are still here working...

DV: They certainly know we're here. People always ask me on the elevator, people I don't necessarily know except by sight. And they say, "How's Merce?"

MC: Yes, there's one lady, I see her once in a while. She's always smiling. So it's all right. She said, "I can always hear you up there." (haha)

JC: Oh, I'd love to live underneath this space. That would be marvelous.

Q: So then to conclude would you say that the mission of Westbeth has been fulfilled for you, perhaps, to provide housing for artists, to provide workspace for artists?

MC: Absolutely.

DV: For us, certainly. I think for the people here, as far as I can tell.

MC: But I don't know about the actors. But I think, yes. I think someone like a writer's a very good example of someone for whom it was important. There was a musical person, she had to leave Germany, but when she was there, she played Arnold Schonberg before anybody else did. And so she has that history, and she was a remarkable pianist. And she also could survive. That is, she didn't have to go someplace else to have people come, so that she was able both to live here in somewhat comfort and do her work. And I think for most artists, I'm sure that's a very important thing. I know for some of the young artists in visual arts, I don't know them well, but I know they can just get up and go to work. And they don't have to do something else about that. And I think when that was established way back in the beginning, it was, although I don't think many New Yorkers knew about it. Obviously the people who got here first and are still here have used it very well. The building is used and used. There are constant complaints about things. But I think just on the side of the men who work here, it's an enormous task to try to keep care of this thing, and I think they are remarkable, from my end. When something's wrong here, we phone up and very shortly someone comes up to see if there's anything they can do. They can't get up on the roof, because they're not roof carpenters. But they came up one day, three or four men, and found that the thing to open on the side of the wall. They opened it up, and then they put some kind of pipe way down. And they kept doing this all the way down. And then I finally heard a voice saying, "I can't find the switch." It was from the bottom. This is when they were beginning to find out what might be possible about fixing the roof.

Q: I thank you, all three of you, for being here today. And thank you very much for the interview. It's an important history, and an important moment in time to capture, these early years of Westbeth. And it's great to know what it was like for the Merce Cunningham Dance Company to have Westbeth as a rehearsal space. Thank you so much.

MC: You're welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW