

Interview with Marianne Preger-Simon
author of
Dancing with Merce Cunningham

You first met Merce Cunningham while studying abroad in Paris. What career path did you originally plan to take, and why did seeing Merce dance change your goals?

I was never much of a planner or goal setter; rather a “seize the moment” person. I went to Paris for my junior year for the adventure of it, and Merce Cunningham was an unexpected part of that adventure. One step led to another, and there I was, in the middle of what is now history.

Ironically, you first began dancing *after* an Achilles tendon injury. What were some of the biggest challenges you faced as someone who did not grow up dancing from a young age?

So many. Feet that couldn't point much, less than remarkable turn-out and leg extension, shoulders that needed frequent reminders to stay down, a tendency to try to “think out” challenging movement combinations.

Merce Cunningham developed unconventional choreography. As part of his unique dance group, how did you cope with critics who didn't understand Merce's style of dance?

I tended to dismiss them as stuck in the world of dance as storytelling and as dependent on the beat of the accompanying music. I'd call my coping a combination of irritation and disdain.

How do you think Merce's dance style compares with today's modern dance choreographers?

I believe he helped free up choreographers to explore new avenues of movement, stillness, and the relationship between movement and meaning, movement and sound, and movement and audiences. His dances are very relevant to the world we live in, and much admired internationally.

You decided to leave your career in dance behind to focus on raising a family, but you continued to immerse yourself in the dance world. As an insider, what was it like to be in the audience at performances by your friends and future generations of Merce's students?

It was mostly a revelation, especially seeing dances in which I had performed. It was very exciting to see new dances, how his choreography was developing, and how splendidly the new dancers were trained and performed. I was a very enthusiastic audience member.

Your granddaughter, Lizzie Feidelson, took Cunningham classes and became a dancer in New York. What was it like to watch her embark on the same journey you took decades before?

It was wonderful and very satisfying. It was also very familiar to see her working with another choreographer who was completely unlike her contemporaries.

Training to become a dancer and dancing for a living requires immense discipline. What is one aspect of being a dancer you think most newcomers don't anticipate?

I would guess that the occasional hopeless feelings of “I can't possibly ever be a dancer” would be hard to anticipate; also, the frequent minor or even major bouts of pain and discomfort as new aspects of body strength and posture develop. These would be impossible to imagine before entering such an unfamiliar physical experience.

Do you have one sentence of advice for new dancers?

Eat well, sleep well, and notice and appreciate every bit of progress you make.