

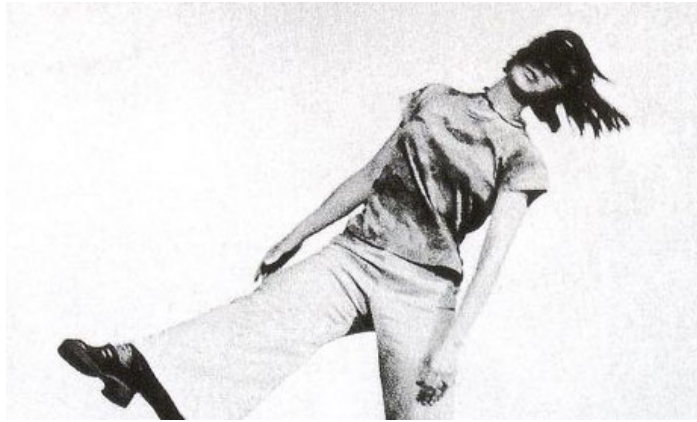
Step-by-step guide to dance: Yvonne Rainer

Yvonne Rainer and her works are uncompromising, challenging and highly influential. But she won't be guesting on X Factor



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Combative ... Yvonne Rainer dancing Trio A.

In short

An artist who is anti-art, an activist who is also an aesthete, Yvonne Rainer is a combative, contrarian and confounding figure whose work has crossed from choreography to cinema and back again. She has never been popular but she has, for a very long time, been influential.

Backstory

Born in San Francisco in 1934, Yvonne Rainer had an unconventional and contradictory upbringing. Her parents – a Polish-Jewish mother ("a potential stage mother") and an Italian father ("an anarchist and a house painter") – mingled with artistic bohemians and political radicals, but for several years she and her brother were raised away in a disciplinarian children's home. Confused, intense, adventurous and often depressed, young Rainer fell into the art world, where she met her future husband Al Held, an abstract expressionist painter. She moved to New York in 1956, in part to be with him.

Initially she studied acting, but the Stanislavski method then in vogue did not suit her. She turned to dance, training with Martha Graham, Merce Cunningham and ballerina Mia Slavenska. A turning point was [Anna Halprin](#)'s experimental summer school in California in 1960, where she first met [Trisha Brown](#). Back in New York, Rainer and Brown became founding members of the enormously influential [Judson Dance Theatre](#) in 1962, a loose collective of artists interested in experimental performance. Among them was [Robert Morris](#), with whom Rainer formed an intense and complex relationship.

Rainer was the most prolific and controversial of the Judson choreographers, and threw herself into a kind of anti-dance which favoured banal movements, non-expression, randomness and disconnectedness. Her famous dance manifesto of 1965 (see "In her own words", below) and her 1966 Trio A became not only signatures for her but emblems of the whole Judson movement.

In 1970, Rainer and her dancers became founders of another highly influential performance collective, the Grand Union. In 1971, following a separation from Morris, Rainer attempted suicide. She returned to work with a "resurgence of ego", increasingly interested in film as a medium to explore more sharply defined personal and political concerns. She had used film in her multimedia performances for some time already – most notoriously in 1969, when a group of avant-gardists were invited to an uptown Broadway theatre and Rainer, ever the downtown rebel, had shown a pornographic film ("the filthiest thing I ever hope to see in a theatre", wrote one critic). But by 1975, Rainer had abandoned live performance altogether, devoting herself to film-making with the same adversarial determination that she had shown in dance – and attracting as much attention in the art world.

Then, in 2000, ballet superstar Mikhail Baryshnikov invited her to choreograph for his White Oak Dance project – and her interest in dance was rekindled. In the last decade, she has abandoned film and returned, circumspectly, to choreography. "I've come back to the body as the main element of my work," she says. "Once a dancer, always a dancer, I suppose."

Watching Yvonne Rainer

Watching is a key word: Rainer is always very conscious of the spectator. In her early works, she reacted against the presentational manner of ballet as well as the expressive/dramatic mode of modern dance, seeking instead an objective, undemonstrative style. She favoured a matter-of-fact delivery (rather than "performing" a movement, the dancer would "just do it"), task-like actions, monotone dynamics, sometimes excruciating repetitions. Spectators might be baffled, maddened or bored, but Rainer was not interested in gratifying her audience. Just as she had refused to "bedeck" herself for social occasions as a girl, so her choreography insisted that the audience see plainly what is there instead of buying into some comfy illusion.

Trio A became her signature work – except Rainer was uncomfortable with the very idea of a "signature", because it implicated her as the "boss lady". She relinquished her "authorship" of Trio A by announcing that anyone who had performed it could teach it to anyone else. She also altered it herself several times (it was danced variously as a trio, a solo and in relays) – an idea that she furthered in works that were inherently mutable, such as Continuous Project – Altered Daily, which accumulated bits of material as they were performed, depending on the performers themselves.

With her film work, you could say that Rainer shifted her attention from object (what the viewer sees) to subject (what the viewer reads). The subjects of Rainer's films were close to her heart – the lives of performers, feminism, ageing, racial identity, menopause, lesbianism (Rainer took the step from a rhetorically "political lesbian" to a practising one in the mid-90s). Though her cinema was more obviously thematic than her choreography, Rainer remained more interested in confounding viewers than gratifying them.

Returning to dance, her recent choreography has taken a sly stance on dance (and movement) itself. Her two "indexical" pieces – AG Indexical with a little help from HM (2006) and RoS Indexical (2007) – cheekily refer to (or "index") Balanchine's Agon and Nijinsky's Rite of Spring respectively, peppered with other references such as the

Pink Panther theme, bowling and tennis, Marx-brothers pratfalls and – perhaps inevitably – Trio A.

Who's who

Steve Paxton, David Gordon, Douglas Dunn and Pat Catterson were among Rainer's early dance collaborators. Catterson still works with Rainer as part of a multi-generational group of dancers that includes Sally Silvers, Patricia Hoffbauer and Emily Coates.

Fact

When Rainer was recovering from her suicide attempt, one of her dancers, Pat Catterson, brought Rainer's students to the hospital and they performed Trio A for Rainer on the pavement outside.

In her own words

"No to spectacle no to virtuosity no to transformations and magic and make believe no to glamour and transcendency of the star image no to the heroic no to the anti-heroic no to trash imagery no to involvement of performer or spectator no to style no to camp no to seduction of spectator by the wiles of the performer no to eccentricity no to moving or being moved."

Rainer's famous dance manifesto (1965).

"While we aspired to the lofty and cerebral plane of a quotidian materiality, our unconscious life unraveled with an intensity and melodrama that inversely matched their absence in ... our austere sculptural and choreographic creations."

Rainer, framing her early anti-expressive art in emotive, personal terms.

"I left dance because I felt I couldn't adequately deal with these [personal and political] issues and I became interested in the possibilities of using language and voice-over, dialogue with image. It seemed a much richer palette with which to work."

Interview with Moira Jeffrey, The Scotsman 2010.

In other words

"Lots of people at that time were doing process-driven, task-oriented dance with natural movement. A lot of it looked dogged. Ms Rainer was such a riveting presence, and her ideas were so intense and dazzling, that her personality couldn't help manifesting itself, right below and even above the cool, formalist surface."

John Rockwell, New York Times 2006.

"Rainer... is a hybrid, both aesthete and activist."

Ann Daly, Chronicle of Higher Education 2002.

"One of the most iconoclastic choreographers of her generation."

Judith Mackrell, Guardian 2010.

Do say

"The process is the product, the medium is the message and the status is not quo."

What does it mean? Let your listeners go figure.

Don't say

"Shouldn't they point their feet? Why don't they stretch their knees? Are these even dancers?"

See also

Alongside Rainer, the best known names to have emerged from Judson Dance Theatre include Trisha Brown, [Lucinda Childs](#), [Twyla Tharp](#) and [Steve Paxton](#).

Village Voice [dance critic Jill Johnston](#) was an interestingly parallel figure to Rainer: an early supporter of Rainer's choreography, she was one of the first critics to take up the Judson cause, and (like Rainer) was a combative figure who threw herself into 60s liberationist ideals, 70s identity politics, psychotherapy, came out as lesbian, and trod a wayward path that spanned both high-minded ideals and messy realities.

Now watch this

Rainer performing [Trio A in 1978 \(as a solo\)](#).

Rainer [teaching Trio A in 2002](#) to Martha Graham female impersonator Richard Move.

Rainer's first film, the [minimalist Hand Movie \(1966\)](#), made while she was in hospital.

[RoS Indexical \(2007\)](#).

Where to see Yvonne Rainer next

A season of [Rainer's films continues at the BFI Southbank](#) until 28 December.

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