

Scott Cunningham

Learning to Draw Attention to Yourself Isn't Always Easy



Scott Cunningham (above, in white) in *Championship Wrestling* at BAM; (below) warming up in Boston.

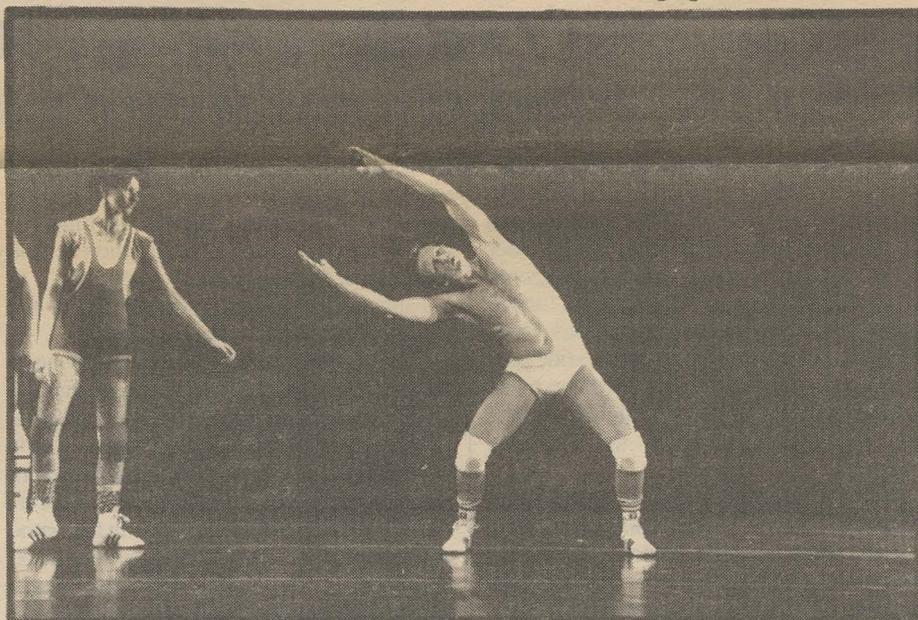
by Gary Parks

The way Scott Cunningham sees it, it's time to ditch what he calls his "Spartan attitude" toward performing. As one of the newest members of the widely touted Mark Morris Dance Group, Cunningham, 25, is beginning to recognize his stage power. He's beginning, slowly, to acknowledge that it's okay to go out there and make yourself noticed, an idea that has not come easily to him. Still, he sees that a completely self-effacing performer doesn't bring much to the party. Morris likes his dancers to be individual artists—"He wants you to go out there and perform it like yourself"—and Cunningham is ready to admit it: "I want to be seen."

Cunningham has just the right sort of smiling, all-American good looks you'd expect in a guy who grew up in the middle-class town of Needham, Massachusetts, outside Boston. He's not exactly tall, but the combination of his trim muscularity and expansive gestures gives the impression of largeness, which is matched in conversation by his affability.

A kid's life in Needham is sports-oriented. The community is filled with teenage soccer players, whose parents organize tournaments as a gesture of civic pride. Cunningham, the youngest of three, didn't like soccer. But when he was six, his father took him to a symposium on wrestling and he was hooked. "It's a lonely man's sport," Cunningham points out, noting that the wrestler is out there by himself, alone against his opponent. The coach can't send in a substitute. Six-minute matches, and you're dead tired by the time it's over.

Cunningham maintains that wrestling is a safe sport, with the usual injuries limited to a neck sprain or the occasional cauliflower ear. Safe, that is, as long as you keep your concentration. His concentration went, just for a minute, at the worst possible time—during a match. "I thought, 'Why am I here? I'm not enjoying this at all.'" At that instant, his opponent broke his arm in four places. Cunningham was 15.



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Looking back, he admits that losing his focus at that moment was a dramatic ("suicidal") way of saying, "I can't do this any more." That's when he started dancing.

While he was still a high school wrestler, Cunningham sang in a chorus and was soundly ribbed for it by his team. His sister was a star in the town musicals, and, though not a trained dancer, was a quick study at steps. She introduced him to performing in musicals, and Cunningham subsequently took up the form with his characteristic enthusiasm. He even choreographed some shows. The last high school play Cunningham did was the musical version of *Some Like It Hot*. He was one of the leads, but as the role was that of a musician who tries to evade the mob by disguising himself as a woman, Cunningham was terrified at having

to do the first part of the show in drag. Determined to make good, he went through with it, and was a hit. Even his father liked it.

Cunningham continued performing in musicals throughout his days as an English major at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst. He also partied a good deal—"good training," he says, for his subsequent career with Mark Morris. Cunningham eventually left Boston, because he felt local choreographers had a set idea of how he worked and were satisfied with their notion. "I was a strong male, a decent presence, and I could lift people" is how he describes it. "Nobody said, 'You can dance better than you do now.' They were satisfied and I wasn't. I knew I could dance with more subtlety."

In the spring of 1984, looking for a change

of scene, Cunningham applied to the American Dance Festival and Jacob's Pillow. He won a scholarship to the Pillow, and off he went. Between taking class and cleaning studios (part of the scholarship duties), Cunningham met Mark Morris.

Cunningham was immediately struck by Morris's appearance and manner. Looking back, Cunningham says he imagined Morris, who had already earned notoriety for his irreverent dances, to be an "exotic, man-eating flower." Morris had "long, long hair, sandals with socks, loud Bermuda shorts," and a T-shirt with a hand grenade embossed on the front. Cunningham was dazzled.

The view from the other side, thinks Cunningham, was less complimentary; he remembers supposing that Morris took him for an "obnoxious, straight male dancer out to prove something." Fascinated by the way Morris analyzed ballet technique while teaching class, Cunningham stuck it out. Doing steps in Morris's class was a matter of "doing it right," not making it pretty. Morris varied the rhythms when teaching combinations, which challenged Cunningham's grasp of musicality.

Morris was going to make a dance while at the Pillow, and Cunningham decided to audition. Morris showed material, says Cunningham, that was "really suicidal, where you did this turn in second and . . . corkscrewed your leg down [Cunningham dances, sitting in his chair], so you just did this thing . . . on this leg, rolled over, and then there was this flip that looked terribly gymnastic and very difficult and at the same time was a piece of *cake* if you just did it right. I said to myself, 'I've got to do that.' It was just that athletic sensibility. I went, 'If he can do it, I can do it.' Or I can kill myself doing it, and maybe I'll earn myself some respect that way, or even some points . . ."

Cunningham got in the piece. The experience of making *Coming Home*, as the piece was called, proved to be important for Cunningham. Morris "had a hook in me and he knew what to get out," is how Cunningham describes it. It was an intense, month-long period of growth. The dance was choreographed to the music of Lambert, Hendricks, and Ross, scat singers setting words to Duke Ellington instrumentals. In typical Morris fashion, the cast wore hot pink and orange toreador pants. For the most part, Morris used the men and women identically. The girls from baton-twirling school had to pick up guys, and so on.

In what Cunningham now recognizes as something of a pattern, Morris exasperated a lot of the cast. Morris can be "stormy and temperamental" when he works, Cunningham mentions. When someone had trouble picking up a step, Morris would say, "Work on it," then go outside and smoke a cigarette. But—and this is also part of the pattern—many people gravitated to Morris after an initial period of resentment. Cunningham characterizes Morris's habit of challenging his dancers, of asking them to do something they've never tried before as "damn exciting."

Following the summer at Jacob's Pillow, Cunningham moved to New York. In the fall of 1984, after being in the U.S. dance capital for only two weeks, he got a job with Elisa Monte. (They'd told him in Boston that he'd never get a job dancing in New York.) Morris had told him to call when he came to town, and so, almost immediately after working with Monte, Cunningham learned a new dance—called, appropriately enough, *Wrestling*, with Morris.

On Thanksgiving Day, Cunningham passed out in a friend's garage in Connecticut. He was severely ill, but went ahead and per-