

# Neville Dance Theatre: “53 Movements” in 45 minutes with 8 Dancers, One Helluva Show

by Bonnie Rosenstock  
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When director/choreographer Brenda Neville first heard minimalist composer Terry Riley’s pioneering “In C” (1964) from a live performance recording by Bang on the Can, she instantly fell in love with it and knew that at some point she had to create a piece with it for her company, Neville Dance Theatre. “The vibrant orchestral layerings, driving underlying pulse, and the ever-changing uniqueness of the musical scoring caused movement phrases to instantly play across my mind’s eye (a choreographer’s dream!),” she recalled.

After attending a live performance at Carnegie Hall in 2018, Neville realized its improvisational potential. “While being comprised of 53 distinct and set musical phrases, the musicians are allowed certain liberties as they play, causing each and every performance to be unique,” she continued. “I thought, what would happen if we did the same thing with movement while we performed the musical score?” Thus, “53 Movements” was born.



Photo: Yi-Chun Wu

And **beautifully delivered** in its World Premiere for two performances only on June 1 (3 pm and 7:30 pm) at Dixon Place in Lower Manhattan. The eight dancers (seven women and one man) enter individually and form a line in front of a white screen that counts up the numbered musical phrases throughout the **compelling and unique 45-minute piece**. The dancers wear variations of black and white dance clothes meant to represent the color of the sheet music. They begin by tapping their toes, soon followed by individual breakout machine-like movements, which form their signature dance phrase. The dance rhythms vary from slow walks, smooth bounces, sharp, quick body part gestures to fast leaps and turns, with many exits and re-enterings. There are numerous groupings (trios, quartets, duets, etc.), as well as solos, where one can note patterns of repetition and emerging new movements. **It’s a glorious blend of music, set choreography and improvisation.**

“53 Movements,” an abstract ballet, is a departure for Neville, who usually presents thematic works. Also **uncharted territory** was creating the musical phrases individually from guided improvisations, with the collaboration of the performers, “**a great new realm** for my company and my dancers,” she told me after the performance. “We took one phrase at a time. Sometimes I would have a very specific idea of the movement I wanted and said okay, this is going to be the movement, and maybe you can choose how you want to progress along the stage to it. Or okay, for this phrase let’s everybody do something where first, we’ll do a leg twist and then a drop, so it would be very structured instructions. Each dancer could pick [his/her] own movement. It was a marriage of some structure and of little bit of improv but still trying to capture the musicality and the musical phrase that was happening at the time. And we just worked our way through the whole score that way.”

The dancers made spontaneous, improvisational choices during the performance in timing, repetition, spatial placement and facings. Thus, if I had attended the earlier 3 pm show, it would have been different, confirmed Lauren Settembrino, one of the dancers. “The section at the beginning, all that timing, who comes in and when, and all of those patterns, were different,” she said, as were other sections, including when they were in a pod, i.e., grouping. “Each pod has two different phrases, and a phrase and variation of that phrase, based on who comes in and where they come in.” She also noted that the solo work was probably choreographed by the dancers, “those little bits and pieces when they pop up.”

After seeing a video of “53 Movements,” Riley said, “I think your work is quite **beautiful and engaging**.” Indeed.