

The term renaissance man is used rather too freely these days, but it certainly applies to Charles Atlas, whose output includes film directing, lighting design, video art, set design, live video improvisation, costume design and documentary directing.

For the past 30 years, Atlas has been best known for his collaborations with dancer and choreographer Michael Clark, who he began working with as a lighting designer in 1984. His first film with Clark, *Hail the New Puritan*, was a mock documentary that followed dance’s punk renegade as his company, aided by performance artist Leigh Bowery and friends, prepared for a new ballet.

First broadcast on Channel 4 in 1986, *Hail the New Puritan* mixed faux-cinéma vérité style documentary with surreal interludes and extraordinary, dada-inspired dance pieces, set to the music of the Fall. Shot among the decay of Thatcher’s Britain, the film now serves as a vital document of 1980s London, when fashion, music, art, dance and club culture collided.

The pair continued their exploration of London’s post-punk subculture with their next collaboration, *Because We Must*. Recently screened to coincide with *To a Simple, Rock’n’roll... Song*, Michael Clark Company’s new ballet at the Barbican in London, *Because We Must* was based on an original stage production from 1987. The piece mixed footage of that Sadler’s Wells performance with hallucinogenic dream sequences and the surreal invention of club kid Leigh Bowery, who, as well as appearing in the film in his own idiosyncratic outfits, co-designed all of the costumes with Stevie Stewart of 1980s fashion brand, and longtime Clark collaborator, BodyMap.

Atlas teamed up with Bowery and Clark again on the video installation *Teach* (1998) and the

short film *Ms. Peanut Visits New York* (1999), before directing the documentary feature *The Legend of Leigh Bowery* (2002). The two have remained close collaborators – Atlas designed the lighting for Clark’s production at the Barbican – but it was with another legendary choreographer, who was himself a great influence on Clark, that Atlas came to prominence when he first mixed video and dance in the mid-1970s.

Merce Cunningham was already a leader of the avant-garde when Atlas joined his company as an assistant stage manager, in 1970. He began filming him soon after, in experimental movement studies shot between rehearsals. He became filmmaker in residence in 1974, a role he held until 1983, during which time he became a pioneer of media and dance. “We really were committed to human movement and body, and what a body could do,” Atlas explained during his installation-based work *Charles Atlas and Collaborators*, at Tate Modern in 2013. “The way that I learned from Merce is about really exploring all the possibilities of any given situation. We always started with the questions and whether we found the answer or not was not that important.”

As well as collaborating with Cunningham on works that forever changed the way dance is filmed,

Atlas also created the 90-minute documentary *Merce Cunningham: a Lifetime of Dance*. And in 2008, a year before Cunningham died, Atlas filmed a production of the choreographer’s ballet *Ocean* (inspired by Cunningham’s partner and collaborator John Cage) at the base of the Rainbow Granite Quarry in Minnesota, the performance unfurling against 160ft walls of rock.

Alongside his better-known works, Atlas has directed more than 70 other films, from *As Seen on TV*, a profile of performance artist Bill Irwin, to *Put Blood in the Music*, his homage to the diversity of New York’s downtown music scene of the late 1980s. In the early 1990s he made *What I Did Last Summer*, a short film trilogy that celebrated New York’s gay subculture at a time when Atlas lost many friends to Aids. In 1999 he released the film *It’s a Jackie Thing*, about the excesses of Johnny Dynell and Chi Chi Valenti’s Jackie 60 parties, thrown in New York’s Meatpacking District (Atlas’s home for many years) before its regeneration.

Over the past decade, Atlas has become absorbed in live improvisation. His work with experimental artists such as Mika Tajima and William Basinski, electronic producers Christian Fennesz and Julianna Barwick, and his MC9 installation/performance in 2012, has seen him compose and edit in real time. He’s also forged new collaborative partnerships, such as *Turning* with New York band Antony and the Johnsons, a project that began in 2004.

In January, Atlas has his first performance in New York of his “stereoscopic 3D dance film”, *Tesseract*, with choreographers Rashaun Mitchell and Silas Riener. Shortly after the Michael Clark Company programme at the Barbican, we caught up with Atlas at his studio in New York.

Words **Andy Thomas** Portrait **Janette Beckman**
Images © **Charles Atlas**, courtesy of the artist and **Luhring Augustine**, New York

CHARLES ATLAS

Famed for his filmic collaborations with choreographers Merce Cunningham and Michael Clark, over the past five decades Atlas has been pushing the boundaries of performance on screen.





Atlas during a live collaboration with composer William Basinski, *Strange Pilgrims*, the Contemporary Austin, Texas, 2016

Who were the first filmmakers to inspire you?

I was a big film buff in my early years. I was inspired by everything - from the New York underground to Hollywood. From the New York underground it was really Andy Warhol and Stan Brakhage. I also really liked movie musicals, but at the same time people like Carl Dreyer and Jean-Luc Godard. I had a wide range of tastes - everything from D.W. Griffith to Sam Fuller.

What was your introduction to dance?

The Merce Cunningham Company. I hardly knew anything about dance before then. Before I started working with Merce, his work was the only dance I'd ever seen. And that was because I went to see it for Robert Rauschenberg [who created the décor for Cunningham's work in the late 1950s] who was really my hero at the time.

How did you move into making films yourself?

I got a Super 8 camera in 1970 when I was 21. I started working on small personal films, doing these little home movies when I was travelling with the Merce Cunningham Company. My first work was called *Cartridge Lengths and Long Shots* and was filmed while we were on tour, just the things I saw along the way. Footage of me in a dressing room in the Netherlands or the grey landscape of Pittsburgh

shot through the window. And then I made a short Super 8 film of one of the dancers from the company, Valda Setterfield, doing one of Yvonne Rainer's pieces during a residence in Berkeley, California. That became *Valda Dances Yvonne* from 1971 and was the first time I had ever filmed dance.

When you started using video was that your decision or Merce's?

I'd made a 16mm film of one of his dances called *Walkaround Time*. That was an existing stage piece from the repertoire of the company and so he didn't choreograph it for the camera. I filmed the first part at Zellerbach Hall in Berkeley, using a single handheld camera, then the section in Paris, where I rented three cameras and shot the final performance by Merce's longtime dance partner, Carolyn Brown, before she retired. Soon after Merce said he wanted to start working with video, so turned to me. That was when we really started collaborating properly. I had never worked in video so bought a book

called *The Spaghetti City Video Manual* and learned everything from that. Then we spent three or four months just working on ideas before we began working on a piece called *Westbeth*.

Could you talk about your next piece from 1976, *Blue Studio: Five Segments*, when you started to explore the possibilities of video and dance?

Even though Merce never really liked watching himself, he was open to everything and

choreographed five solo dance pieces and performed each one in a different costume. The last segment was particularly challenging as he choreographed it so he could appear on-screen with all five costumes at once. The main thing we had to learn was the relationship between the body and the camera and how to think in terms of multiple camera angles.

How did the creative process work between the two of you?

He treated me like an equal, even though there was a great difference in our age and experience. I would tell him what kind of video ideas might work for an upcoming piece and then we would try and get those central to the choreography. Before we started with moving the video camera we did stuff with a still camera, panning and zooming, and then when we got it right we started moving the camera. That took about four pieces for us to get it right, because it gets really complicated when you move the camera and the dancers.

What were the biggest challenges of filming dancers? I'm thinking in particular of pieces like *Coast Zone* from 1983 - that must have been technically very difficult.

Everything is moving so it takes a lot of rehearsal. We always had the dancers for about six weeks, from scratch. For the first four weeks, we would rehearse the moves and work out how that interacted with the cameras. Then the last two weeks were when we did the shooting. That was just a matter of doing it over and over again until we got it right. For *Coast Zone*, we used a moving crane shot to open, which was the first time



Still from *Ocean*, choreographed by Merce Cunningham, directed by Atlas, 2011



Atlas and Merce Cunningham, Westbeth Studio, New York, 1970s

I had used one. We also used a dolly with a crane arm to move around the dancers. We really were experimenting with depth of field with this piece. Then we had cameras positioned around the room and Merce threw a coin to determine where the shoot would start and end.

I want to ask you about Merce's use of the ancient philosophical text, the *I Ching*.

The *I Ching* was really part of Merce's constant work in all of his pieces in various ways. There were various elements of pieces that used some form of chance methods to make decisions.

You once said that Merce always started with a question and whether you found the answer or not was not that important. What were the other main things you learned from him?

In the early days, we would sit there and watch all the takes together and I would learn everything

about phrasing and performance, all sorts of technical things about dance. He also developed my eye, so I saw things like he did so I didn't need to consult him as much when editing. It was all about rhythm and he was a master of that. But then I also picked up his bad habits of being a workaholic. I used to go to the studio every day.

What do you think Merce thought video brought to his work?

I couldn't say from his point of view, but I think it was an interesting challenge for him and he always liked challenges. He was interested in doing things he hadn't done before, in the same way I was. So that's why I think we worked so well together. I thought he was the most interesting

choreographer at the time and also since. But I was part of that family so maybe I'm a little prejudiced.

You became known for your multi-channel video installations. When did you first use them?

The first one I did was in 1984 at the Pompidou Centre in Paris. I also did something similar with Merce, though, where we used to have live cameras with monitors and screens. That was like the third piece we did together, called *Fractions*, from 1978. For that, I stationed video cameras and monitors around the studio and the feed from each camera would appear on a monitor in a different place. This was really the start of my live video editing, to create alternative perspectives of the dancers or different parts of the dance.

One critic wrote that *Fractions* "tests the boundaries of perception... and in turn demonstrates the inadequacy of any one angle or structure". You could see this even more in a work like *Channels/Inserts* from 1982.

Channels/Inserts was using cross-cutting between different spaces to show simultaneous dances. My inspiration for that was the parallel action of the wedding scene in *The*

Godfather where there were a lot of things going on at the same time and they used cross-cutting between them. So we divided the studio into separate spaces and had dancers doing different things and running from one space to another. This was also the first time I used animated travelling mattes as transitions between shots. Before this I had only used cuts and never used dissolves, but I used them to connect to the movement so they would tear or crack into the next scene.

Is the concept of space and the use of it one of your main interests?

I was interested in everything you could do with film, video and dance, so of course space was part of that. We never used special effects and always respected what a body could do. Our work was based on the possibilities of the human body rather than something you can only do on film. That was never something that interested me.



Performance artist Bill Irwin in *As Seen on TV*, directed by Atlas, 1987



Leigh Bowery and Rachel Auburn in *Hail the New Puritan*, choreographed by Michael Clark, directed by Atlas, 1986



Because We Must, choreographed by Michael Clark, costumes by Leigh Bowery, directed by Atlas, 1989



Leigh Bowery and Atlas at Wigstock, New York, 1993

I was also interested in *Secret of the Waterfall*, where you used poetry rather than music. That was with the choreographer Douglas Dunn and was the first work I did for television. But I actually shot the piece in silence and put the poetry into the piece in the edit. So the poetry affected the rhythm of the edit, rather than the rhythm of the dancers.

Shortly after this you began working with Michael Clark. How would you compare working with Michael to Merce?

It was completely different because Michael was 21 and part of this whole underground scene in 1980s London. But I got to use everything I had learned with Merce over the previous 10 years and I started to apply it to a situation with Michael that was much more what my real life was like at the time. Less of the studio work I did with Merce and more the London scene at that time. I also didn't work with Michael in the same way as Merce, because with Merce we worked much more on things together, and we had a lot more of a history. With Michael I basically picked things out of his work I thought I could do something with.

I think of *Hail the New Puritan* as being one of the definitive documents of that creative time in London. Could you talk about the making of it? It started out as a proposal for a little half-hour



Atlas on the set of *The Pedestrians*, a live installation with Mika Tajima and New Humans, South London Gallery, 2011
Photograph Mark Blower

dance film and I told the producer I would do it if I could work with Michael Clark. And so we came up with the idea of a half-hour dance piece based on Echo and Narcissus [from Greek mythology]. And then by the time we got the proposal to Channel 4 what they really wanted was an hour-long arts documentary for television. So that's the budget I got. As I've said before, it was my love letter to London and the larger than life personalities of this underground scene that I knew couldn't last. Meeting Michael, Leigh Bowery and all these different people in London was very important to me. I felt very lucky to be in that position and I wanted to make something of it.

As well as some wonderfully surreal dance pieces, it featured that hilarious improvised scene in Bowery's apartment. Could you talk about that? The plan was, we were going to shoot that day with Leigh, Rachel Auburn and Trojan. We knew that Michael was coming over and it was improvised around an idea of them getting ready to go out. And they were always going out to clubs. The way I did it was each time we did a different take there would be a set line to start out, and then they would just go with that. My only instruction was: "You don't have to be nice to each other." And I knew they were good at that.

What was Leigh like to collaborate with? He was completely cooperative and keen to do anything and try anything. He really was fun. In *Because We Must*, you can also see he was becoming more of a performer. He was never shy and retiring before that, of course, but in terms of what he could do on the stage he wasn't that practised before. But he grew into it really quickly.

There was that incredible dream sequence with the Velvet Underground's 'Venus in Furs'. Whose idea was that? Michael had made a dance to the music and it had started out as a single shot. Leigh had made the costumes, which we didn't see until the day of the shoot. The dancers were kind of freaked out that they had to wear outfits with masks, so they couldn't see anything. Then after the piece had been shot

I added a lot in the editing. It looks like something you could do on your computer now. But at that time, I worked at this editing facility in Ireland and I had to use about 10 machines at once.

Could you talk about your film work from New York in the late 1980s? *Put Blood in the Music* focused on Sonic Youth and John Zorn, so it was really the two strands of New York's downtown scene of the late '80s. One was rock based and the other was the jazz, free improv world. That was actually made for London Weekend Television, for Melvyn Bragg. Then *Son of Sam* was shot in 1988 and was finished in 1991 and was a lot of New York performers I knew from the clubs. It was focused on the Aids epidemic and the violence of the time. I also shot the trilogy, *What I Did Last Summer*, including *Butchers' Vogue* that I made after being incensed by Madonna's appropriation of voguing. These films were made with my friends from the clubs and shot around the Meatpacking District, where I have lived since 1980. The other two films were called *Draglinquents* and *Disco 2000* and they were also coming from the clubbing mentality - so very campy and sexy.

How do you compare the live video experimentation you are doing now with what you were doing with Merce in the 1970s? I try not to repeat myself and I try to engage with more and more complex situations. It's certainly more challenging what I am doing now. I've always done a lot of planning and put a lot of thought into my previous work with dance and now I am doing it live, so that is really demanding.

How did *Turning* come about? Me and Antony, or Anohni as she is now known, were friends for 10 years before we started working together. So I had seen a lot of his work already. The situation came up where Antony was to do a performance for the Whitney Biennial, in 2004. And he asked me to collaborate with him. I was doing live video by then but I didn't think I was ready to do it for the stage. But he convinced me to go ahead and do it. My idea was to put women on a revolving platform and film them with two cameras and then do a live mix portrait during the



Johanna Constantine performing to live video editing within the installation *MC9*, by Atlas, Tate Modern, London, 2013
Photograph courtesy of Tate Modern

“Hail the New Puritan was my love letter to London and the larger than life personalities that I knew couldn't last.

Still from a live audiovisual performance with guitarist Fennesz, directed by Atlas, 2009



performance. And once we did the intimate performance in New York we went to Europe and did it for larger audience in big venues.

You are now also working with different producers and DJs. You've done almost everything else so I wondered if you had ever considered making music yourself?

No, I have to draw the line somewhere. I have so many good musician friends and collaborators that I don't need to. I guess I like to work with someone else who is better at organising sounds.

What do you look for in producers you work with? I've only ever worked with electronic music producers. And I normally work with music that doesn't have what you would call a regular beat. I have done some things with pop music to accompany some of the parts of my films, but when I improvise or use live video I like the more experimental electronic musicians.

Could you talk about your upcoming piece with Rashaun Mitchell and Silas Riener? Half of it will be a stereoscopic 3D film, projected on the screen with the audience wearing glasses. And then the second half will be live dance with live cameras and live mixing, projected on the screen in front of the dancers. So it's two different kinds of 3D. The performance is called *Tesseract* and it has a sci-fi atmosphere. Rashaun Mitchell and Silas Riener are dancers I knew through their

work with Merce, but I've never worked with them as choreographers before.

What is it about working with choreographers that continues to inspire and challenge you? I just love dance and I love performers. And I've always been very much into collaborating. But this is the first time I've done a major dance piece for a long time. It takes a lot of time, money and organisation to actually pull these things off.

Tesseract is at Empac, New York, in January; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, 16-18 March; and the Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA), Chicago, 23-25 March
empac.rpi.edu walkerart.org mcachicago.org

Atlas's work forms part of the exhibition Merce Cunningham: Common Time, at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, and MCA, Chicago, from 11 February; and the Robert Rauschenberg exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, from 21 May
moma.org