

By Deborah Jowitz

**Scully, Hennessy,
Houston-Jones**

P.S. 122
March 16 through 19

**Merce Cunningham
Dance Company**

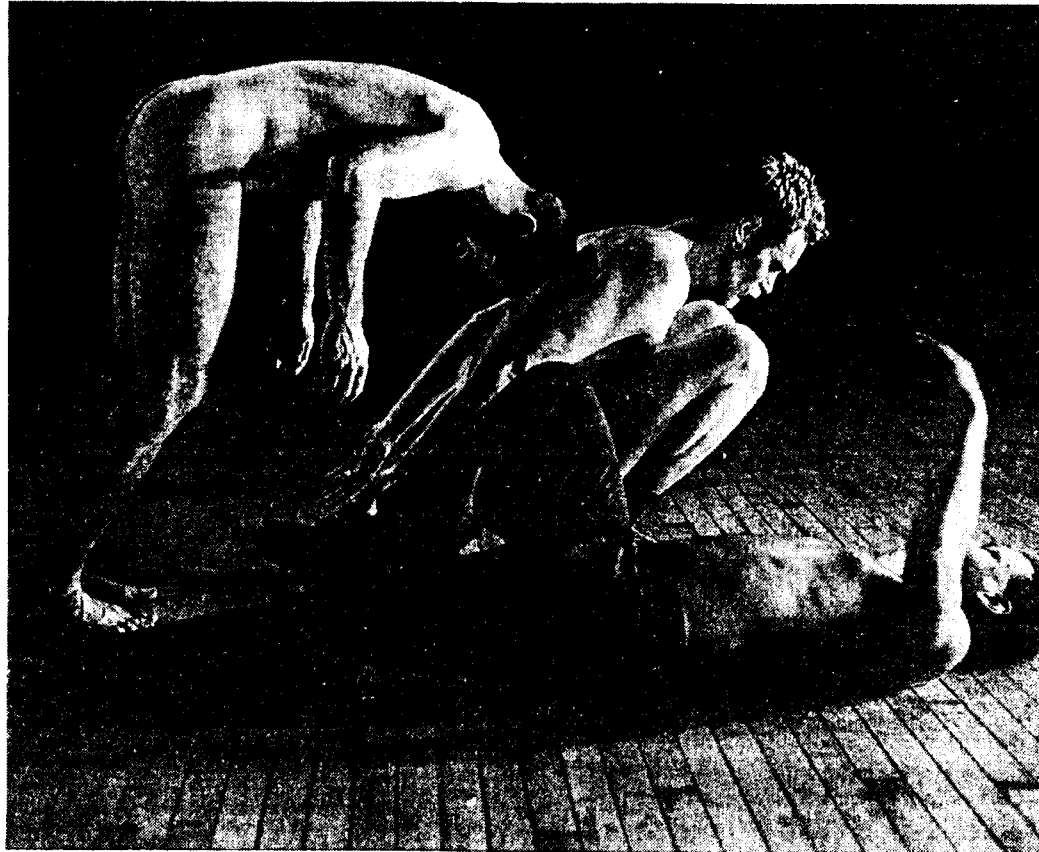
City Center
March 7 through 18

When Contact Improvisation was spawned in the 1970s, about a hundred years ago, love seemed easy, and *trust* was a major word. Contact duets may have struck off intermittent images of playful kids, drunks, lovers, combatants, but these melted—as did considerations of gender, size, and age—in the fluid business of taking and giving weight.

These days, sex and peril are partners, and who can you trust for sure? When Patrick Scully of Minneapolis, Keith Hennessy of San Francisco, and Ishmael Houston-Jones of New York collaborate on *Unsafe/Unsuited (A High Risk Meditation)*, Contact Improvisation techniques unsheath claws, bare teeth, slam bodies to the floor. The men hurtle into space; sometimes an absurdly minimal hint of an intent to catch is all they get from one another. Hennessy dives, and Houston-Jones steps out of the way, leaving Scully to improvise a catch. Scully—a giant beside the other two—lands flat as a board on the shoulder of Houston-Jones, who staggers under the impact.

Anger and desire shape this meditation by three gay male artists. And in the end Scully's terrible cry from the heart must speak for all of them: "I keep wondering ... where's the joy?" Saliva and sweat flow hard (and stand in, perhaps, for more dangerous body fluids). Hennessy wipes moisture from his armpits onto the floor, then scrubs it back onto his face. Scully and Hennessy spit minor fountains, and Houston-Jones runs around, mouth open, trying to catch a few drops. Riding Hennessy piggyback, Houston-Jones blinds him with one hand and

The Space Between



Bitter beauties: Keith Hennessy, Patrick Scully, and Ishmael Houston-Jones improvise.

jams the other into his mouth, taking it out only to wipe it on his own face and hair, while Hennessy tries in vain to shake him off. Not easy to watch.

The men defuse our discomfort—and perhaps their own—by occasional comments on process. "Is this what we're doing?" "Is this anything we want to do?" "Have we forgotten anything?" (A little tea with your sadism?) In one charged sequence, they replace one another in painful situations. Hennessy, bent backward over Scully, yells, "I'm being

snapped in fucking half!" Houston-Jones, carefully stepping into the pose, comments, "I feel stretched; I don't feel snapped in fucking half"—until Scully adjusts the grip and he has to howl.

So there's bitter humor, and beauty too (like Hennessy striding around fanning a drone out of a squeezebox, singing, while Scully adds a high, sweet harmony; like the men dropping little kisses onto their own and others' bodies and limbs, saying quietly, "He is gone"). In an improvised show like this, with its occasional drag-

gy moments, you can get very lucky about how things come together. I relish the irony of sweating male athletes using each other as plows or clambering into improbable pyramids while one invites another to "guess who my favorite goddess is."

That this is political art is undeniable, but I wouldn't call it propaganda. It offers no future but hanging on. Nor is it confessional; these men reveal no private scars. Their effort, their courage, and their intimacy are shocking and moving. The choices made in im-

provisation highlight their individuality as vividly as pools of light (by David Herrigel after Jeff Bartlett) pluck them out of darkness: taut, sharp-edged Hennessy—pierced in ears, nose, and nipples; tall, gentle, deep-voiced, bearded Scully; round-cheeked Houston-Jones, who, amid ferocity, can suddenly look like a timid child.

What pulls the piece together is the tension between the men's fierce physicality and the inherent utopianism of Contact Improvisation. Although their close interactions—often crazily timed or delivered with needless force—may give an illusion of recklessness, possessiveness, and cruelty, they are built on skill, cooperation, and affection. They attest, in fact, to the survival, however tattered and compromised, of trust.

the village

March 21, 1995

VOICE