

“I See America Dancing”¹: The History of American Modern Dance

Introduction

America grew up with dance, and dance continues to be a barometer of life in America. From the street to the stage, dance in America captures everyday gestures, social dances, cultural retentions, social and political issues, and spiritual principles. These sources – coupled with a spirit of independence, risk-taking, exploration, and persistence – have helped to form what we know today as American modern dance. With its diverse movement vocabularies, individual choreographic impulses, and social and cultural concerns, American modern dance is an irreplaceable touchstone and national treasure.

Since its birth in the early 1900s, American modern dance has been a cultural mainstay at home and a significant ambassador of American culture abroad. This genre of dance has developed through a chain of succession as generations variously build on the work of, or rebel against, their mentors, creating a lineage marked by innovation and even radicalism. Modern dance cannot be neatly defined. As its history reveals, it is not a style but rather a continually evolving quest to discover and share the expressive potential of human movement.

The dance innovators who represent DanceMotion USASM are part of this rich continuum. The project’s producer, the Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM), has a long history of presenting and nurturing the work of many seminal figures in American modern dance history, and selected these three companies as important representatives of the tradition. **Ronald K. Brown** and **Evidence, A Dance Company** “...promote [an] understanding of the human experience in the African Diaspora through dance and storytelling and ... provide sensory connections to history and tradition through music, movement, and spoken word.” **Brenda Way** and **ODC/Dance** offer “...programs [that] strive to inspire audiences, cultivate artists, engage community, and foster diversity and inclusion through dance performance, training, and mentorship.” **Jawole Willa Jo Zollar’s Urban Bush Women** “...weaves contemporary dance with music and text to illuminate the history, culture, and spiritual traditions of African Americans and the African Diaspora.”²

In order to understand the significance of these companies, it is productive to see their work in the context of the history of the development of this art form. In this essay, a few select choreographers have been chosen to illustrate the major periods of American modern dance. As two of the DanceMotion USASM choreographers (Brown and Zollar) are part of the black or African American tradition of modern dance, the history of this stream of dance is given particular attention. However, not all choreographers of African descent chose to draw from African or African American subject matter or movement elements, nor did all choreographers working in the black tradition create works that were exclusively in this genre. In addition, not all choreographers who create works about the African American experience have been black. The history of modern dance is far more complex than a dichotomy between two traditions.

The Beginning (Early 1900s): The Pioneers

Exemplar: Isadora Duncan

“I believe in the religion of the beauty of the human foot” ~ Isadora Duncan³

“[Duncan] helped liberate women from their corsets and dance from its academic restraints; she had a distaste for conventional restraints. America in the early part of the century was not ready for Isadora. She shocked people.”⁴

American modern dance had its origins in idealism and rebellion, guided by utopian notions of the freedom of the body and spirit, the quest for self-expression, and a conception of the vast potential of America. Its beginnings are generally traced to **Isadora Duncan** (1877-1927). Reacting against the amateurish form of ballet spectacle and popular entertainments prevalent in America at that time, she strove to discover a natural form of movement and to raise dance to a serious art form that expressed ideas and emotions. The many pictures of her dressed in Greek tunics show her running barefooted, knees bent, playfully with arms wide and lofty, or, alternatively, in a heroic pose – all in opposition to the idea of ballet. Duncan would have nothing to do with *tutus*, tights, nor ballet slippers. Her revolution in dance was connected to reforms in the rest of society, especially regarding women’s rights. Throughout its history, modern dance has been closely tied to larger cultural forces, reflecting and influencing society. Although American, Duncan performed primarily in Europe where she also founded schools. She trained a group of young dancers called the Isadorables who performed with her. Thus, from the beginnings of modern dance, there has been an international network of influences.

Other innovators of the time included Loie Fuller and Maud Allan and especially **Ruth St. Denis** (1879-1968) and **Ted Shawn** (1891-1972) who followed soon after Duncan’s initial experiments. While Duncan looked to the natural rhythms of the body as the basis for her style and philosophy, St. Denis and Shawn turned to music and other cultures for inspiration. They invented what they called musical visualizations in which dance embodied the structure and quality of the music. Exploring the relationship between dance and music has been an ongoing theme in modern dance. They also choreographed solo and group dances that were interpretations of the dance genres and rituals of other cultures. These included Native American, North African, Spanish, and especially Asian styles. Their repertoire was known for its exoticism and spectacle and they often performed in the context of popular entertainments such as vaudeville. They toured the US extensively, exposing a wide spectrum of the American population to dance and giving their audiences a glimpse of other cultures. After a 15-month tour of Asia in 1925-26, they also tried to reconstruct authentic dances that they saw. These included the *A Burmese Yein Pwe* and *A Javanese Court Dance*.

Shawn also was on a mission to make dance a respected profession for men. He formed his own company of male dancers who often performed highly athletic works based on sports and work behavior. St. Denis and Shawn, who were married, founded the Denishawn School in California (and later in New York). These pioneers, in their charge to do away with ballet (although borrowing from ballet technique as needed), began what would be a perpetual search for “new” and “natural” dance techniques that would fuel the evolution of modern dance. In 1933, on a Massachusetts farm, Shawn founded a dance retreat, the origins of which would become Jacob’s

Pillow Dance Festival⁵. Still an active and significant presenter of modern dance, the Festival has presented all three DanceMotion USASM companies.

The Road to Discovery (1920s-30s): The First Generation ***Exemplars: Martha Graham and Katherine Dunham***

“...we have had a dance of ‘appearance’ rather than a dance of ‘being’ –instead of an art which was the fruit of a people’s soul, we had entertainment.” ~ Martha Graham⁶

“[Graham] invented and evolved a technique as rigorous and complex as the one that ballet required centuries to develop.”⁷

“[I want] To establish a technique that would be as important to the white man as to the Negro...To take our dance out of the burlesque—to make it a more dignified art.” ~ Katherine Dunham⁸

“...using her training as an anthropologist, [Dunham] lived with, observed, and studied the dance of people in New World black cultures.”⁹

Denishawn-trained dancers **Martha Graham** (1894-1991), **Doris Humphrey** (1895-1958), and **Charles Weidman** (1891-1972) left the school in the mid-1920s with an urgent need to make their own dances. All three dancers initially choreographed works based on the Denishawn model, but soon rejected the style and philosophy of their mentors to create totally new techniques and philosophies of movement. Humphrey explained: “I knew something about how the Japanese moved, how the Chinese or Spanish moved, but I didn’t know how I moved.”¹⁰ These modern dance pioneers wanted to create dance that was both a personal statement and an expression of American life. These two goals have been recurring themes in modern dance history.

Graham developed a technique based on the expressive potential of the basic biological rhythm of the “contraction” and “release” of breathing. She believed that dance could reveal the “inner landscape” of the human soul and could be a medium for powerful storytelling. Her repertoire included not only dances based on Americana such as *Frontier* and *Appalachian Spring*, but also on subject matter such as Greek myths as in *Night Journey* (the story of Jocasta and Oedipus) and *Clytemnestra*, emotional states as in *Lamentation*, and historical topics such as the life of Joan of Arc in *Seraphic Dialogue*. She founded a company and school that have continued after her death.

Doris Humphrey paired with Weidman to open their own school and form a company, working both together and separately for years. Like Duncan and Graham, Humphrey also developed a dance technique that takes its impetus from an analysis of nature. She found inherent drama in “fall and recovery,” the human body’s response to gravity. Humphrey is also known for elevating the discipline of choreography by publishing the book *The Art of Making Dances*.

Humphrey-Weidman also drew on American subjects as in *The Shakers*, social issues as demonstrated in *Lynchtown*, and the theme of social harmony as portrayed in *New Dance*. Just as Duncan’s dances were shocking to many, Graham and Humphrey-Weidman also challenged the public’s perception of what dance could express.

In Europe (principally in Germany), an equally important development of modern dance called *Ausdruckstanz*, or the dance of expression, was taking place and influencing what was going on in America. Some European leaders of this style were Rudolf von Laban and his students Kurt Jooss and Mary Wigman. Wigman's student **Hanya Holm** (1893-1992) came to the United States in 1931, bringing this alternative form of modern dance. Along with Graham and Humphrey-Weidman, she became one of the "Big Four" of the formative period of modern dance in the 1930s and 1940s. DanceMotion USASM choreographer Ronald K. Brown first studied with Mary Anthony who was a student of Hanya Holm and Martha Graham.

In the 1930s, educators began to accept modern dance into college and university curricula in either physical education or performing arts departments. The Bennington Summer School of Dance at **Bennington College** in Vermont (1934-1942) hosted summer festivals beginning with workshops with Graham, Humphrey-Weidman, and Hanya Holm and would be the training ground for many dancers, choreographers, and teachers. It is this period in which modern dance is credited with transforming itself from the avant-garde domain of a few experimentalists to becoming an accepted art form.

Another hallmark of the history of modern dance that evolved at Bennington and which distinguishes this genre from ballet and many other dance traditions is that modern dancers have been encouraged to find their own means of expression and therefore to become choreographers, often leading to their forming their own companies. Louis Horst (1884-1964), who was musical director for Denishawn, later became instrumental in teaching dance composition. He had a close association with Martha Graham but also taught at universities, dance schools, and festivals until his death.

Colleges and universities continue to be major forces in the education of modern dancers and are among the leading commissioners and presenters of dance in America. Choreographer Brenda Way founded DanceMotion USASM-participant ODC/Dance at Oberlin College in Ohio in 1971, where the collective remained for several years before establishing a permanent home in San Francisco in 1976.¹¹

Concurrently, African Americans were choreographing, performing, intellectualizing, and educating the dance world, creating the roots of the black tradition in American modern dance. This was the time of the Harlem Renaissance, also called the New Negro Movement. Living during a time of overt racial prejudice in society, as well as in the dance world, pioneers **Hemsley Winfield** (1906-1934), **Edna Guy** (1907-1982) (who also studied at Denishawn), and the Sierra Leonian-born **Asadata Dafora** (1890-1965) forcefully made a place for themselves. Guy and Dafora took the stage on their own terms by producing and presenting seminal works which then created opportunities for their peers. Winfield performed in Oscar Wilde's *Salome*, later choreographed for the Metropolitan Opera, and is remembered for his role as the Witch Doctor in a ground-breaking production of *Emperor Jones*. Winfield joined forces with Guy in a New York City performance titled *The first Negro dance recital in America* in 1931, while Dafora featured African themes and movement in his large-scale dance-dramas.

Katherine Dunham (1909-2006) entered the modern dance world when her first company, Ballet Negre, gave its only performance in Chicago in 1931. Dunham was also an anthropologist who lived and conducted research on the dances of the African diaspora in the Caribbean, having a special relationship throughout her career with Haiti. She also developed an influential modern dance technique that drew on principles of African dance movement. She too founded a school and was very active in community development in East St. Louis, Illinois. Like Graham and Humphrey-Weidman, she wanted to bring stories of her heritage to the stage. Dunham choreographed dances based on African roots such as *Haitian Suite* and *L'Ag'Ya* as well as those based on African American culture such as *Barrelhouse Blues*. Her choreography can readily be seen in the film *Stormy Weather*.

In 1965-1966, Dunham was appointed cultural adviser to President Léopold Senghor of Senegal. She attended Senegal's First World Festival of Negro Arts as a representative from the United States and helped to train the National Ballet of Senegal. Later, she established a second home in that country. The themes and movement vocabulary of Dunham's work influenced the generations of choreographers in the black tradition that followed her. Talley Beatty, Lavinia Williams, Vanoye Aikens, Sylvia Fort, Camille Yarbrough, and Walter Nicks are some of Dunham's successors. In addition, Dunham technique is also taught at The Ailey School.

Martha Graham and Katherine Dunham are exemplars of their generation. They sought to understand not only the reason behind physical movement, but also its psychological and cultural dimensions.

Other notables of this decade include the dancer and choreographer **Helen Tamiris** (1905-1966), who, though not African American, was renowned for her choreographic series *Negro Spirituals*. She was active in establishing the Federal Dance Project which was funded by the U.S. government during the Great Depression of the 1930s. During this same period the socially conscious New Dance Group, founded by Hanya Holm's students, declared themselves to be "...artistic innovators against poverty, fascism, hunger, racism and the manifold injustices of their time."¹² The group expanded to include choreographers associated with Graham and Humphrey-Weidman as well as with the black tradition. The **Lester Horton** Dance Theater was also established during this period. Horton (1906-1953) choreographed dances based on the themes and movement styles of many different ethnic groups that he encountered in Los Angeles, California where he lived. He also is credited with founding the first racially-integrated dance company in America.

Outside of the studio and away from the stage, the art of dance criticism was developing. John Martin is credited with championing the development of the emerging art form of modern dance through his writings and lectures. Newspapers now regularly assigned space to dance critics, such as Walter Terry and Edwin Denby. Over the decades, dance criticism developed into a profession. Critics documented the history of the form, educated the public about the often puzzling new work, and established the context for appreciating modern dance relative to other dance genres and arts disciplines and wider cultural and social trends. Some prominent dance critics have been Jill Johnston (post-modernism), Arlene Croce, Deborah Jowitt, and Marcia Siegel who all went beyond dance reviewing to providing deeper analysis of the art form.

The Many Faces of American Modern Dance (1940s-50s): The Second Generation *Exemplars: Pearl Primus and Merce Cunningham*

“Dance has been my vehicle. Dance has been my language, my strength.” ~ Pearl Primus¹³

“With the increased acceptance of black performers in modern-dance companies during the 1950s, black choreographers...emerged to identify and describe the black experience in America.”¹⁴

“I think of dance as a constant transformation of life itself.” ~ Merce Cunningham¹⁵

“Cunningham’s innovations...demanded a new type of response on the part of an audience. His disregard for unity and this elimination of what he felt were extraneous elements—story line, emotion, self-expressive symbolism, glamorous theatrical accessories—produced a pared-down system of pure movement and style...”¹⁶

In the 1950s the choreographers of the second generation of modern dance continued to make history because they “...saw themselves as ‘heirs of a great tradition...’”¹⁷ Dancers from the major companies broke away to become choreographers and to form their own companies. Some continued in the style of their mentors. In the Graham tradition, these include: Pearl Lang, Sophie Maslow, and Jane Dudley; in the Humphrey-Weidman tradition: José Limón, Sybil Shearer, and Katherine Litz; and in the Holm tradition: Valerie Bettis, Alwin Nikolais, and his student Murray Louis.

José Limón (1908-1972) was a disciple of Humphrey-Weidman (and many Humphrey dances were originally set on and continue to be performed by his company). In several of his works, Limón explicitly drew on aspects of his Mexican heritage as in *La Malinche*, based on a Mexican legend, and *Carlota*, about the Mexican Emperor Maximilian’s wife. His primary works include *The Moor’s Pavane* (based on *Othello*) and *There is a Time* (inspired by the biblical *Ecclesiastes*). The work of **Alwin Nikolais** (1912-1993) and **Murray Louis** (b. 1926) reflects the German influence of their teacher, Hanya Holm, but is renowned for the multi-media dance theater they developed, using props, costumes, lighting, and special effects to transform the human body to create theatrical spectacles.

Others radically departed from their dance roots. Principal among these rebels were three of Graham’s major male dancers: Merce Cunningham, Erick Hawkins, and Paul Taylor. As happened to those innovators who came before them, their work was also met with controversy.

Merce Cunningham (1919-2009) was an experimentalist who was fascinated with actions, sounds, movement, the unfamiliar, and the unexpected. He left the Graham company in 1945 and presented his own company in 1952. Cunningham reacted against Graham’s storytelling and emotionalism to develop a style and technique of dance that was abstract, that did not follow a narrative or embody an emotion. He was also involved in some of the first Happenings of the 1950s, performance pieces which were collaborations between performing and visual artists, often involving improvisation, audience participation, and absurd behavior and juxtapositions of the arts.

Cunningham and his partner and collaborator, composer John Cage, introduced radically different methods for making dance such as the “...use of chance procedures, which meant that not only musical forms but narrative and other conventional elements of dance composition, such as cause and effect, climax and anticlimax, were also abandoned.”¹⁸ Music, costume, and set design were also divorced from movement. Although he collaborated with innovative composers (Cage, David Tudor, Christian Wolff, Earle Brown, Morton Feldman, and Takehisa Kosugi) and visual artists (Robert Rauschenberg, Andy Warhol, Jasper Johns, Frank Stella), they worked independently. This method was not only in contrast to Graham who frequently commissioned the music and the set design to create an integrated work of art, but ran counter to the whole history of dance in which music and dance have been inseparable. These iconoclastic ideas about how a dance work should be structured were further demonstrated in his innovative presentations of *Events* which were composed of segments from previously choreographed works, intermingled by chance techniques into new, one-time only performances.

Cunningham was an innovator to the end of his life, still choreographing at 90, using computer software to generate movement ideas, and seeking out the music of contemporary composers such as the rock musicians Radiohead and Sonic Youth. Merce Cunningham first performed at BAM in 1952; the same venue presented Cunningham’s *Nearly Ninety* a few months before his death in 2009.

Erick Hawkins (1909-1994) developed a style of movement that took the beauty of nature as its model, the antithesis of the high tension of the Graham technique. **Paul Taylor** (b. 1930) evolved a technique characterized by free-flowing, loping movements, and expanded the range of choreographic material. Taylor is known for the eclectic range of his dance works, encompassing abstract dances as well as narratives, and wit and satire as well as serious social and psychological commentary.

Pearl Primus (1919-1994) carried the torch in the black tradition beginning in the 1940s. Now known for her raw agility and daring dance characterized by high jumps and conviction in every movement, Primus told stories through dance about African culture and African American life in works such as *Hard Time Blues* (1945) about sharecropping and *Strange Fruit* (1945) about lynching. One of her signature works is *Fanga* based on a traditional welcome dance from Liberia. Like Dunham she became an anthropologist, focusing on studying West African dance. Inspired or trained by Dunham, Primus, Dafora, or Horton, notables such as Alvin Ailey, who collaborated with Carmen De Lavallade to form the Alvin Ailey American Dance Company, emerged in the 1950s.

Say “No” To Dance and Dance as Cultural Identity (1960s)

Exemplars: Yvonne Rainer and Alvin Ailey

“No to spectacle no to virtuosity no to transformations and magic and make-believe no to the glamour and transcendency of the star image not 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.” ~ Yvonne Rainer¹⁹

“Yvonne Rainer has been called the most prolific and polemical of the Judson choreographers, as well as adventurous. And there is no question that until 1973...Rainer’s intrepid experimentation was axial in the proliferation of postmodern ideas and the controversy surrounding them.”²⁰

“The only way Modern Dance can survive is by a broad offering of its works in its best forms to a wide audience...[through]...education in dance...disseminat[ing] information with regard to the dance...illuminat[ing] the history of American Modern Dance, and...entertain[ing].” ~ Alvin Ailey²¹

“Ailey’s goal and achievement was to make black bodies visible, if not dominant, in the discourse of modernist American dance. He did this in selecting his company of mostly black artists, but also in the very real establishment of a solid, African diaspora [sic] concert dance—going public.”²²

Now that modern dance had found a place in the art world, it was time to shake things up a bit. The 1960s were a time of social rebellion in the U.S. Modern dance mirrored and influenced this questioning of the status quo. Some Cunningham dancers, for instance, now rejected his teachings, principally his emphasis on technique. These dancers became known as the post-modernists.

The influential **Judson Period** (1962-1968) was named after the venue for avant-garde performers of the time – Judson Church in Greenwich Village, New York City. These new revolutionaries, including David Gordon, Yvonne Rainer, Trisha Brown, Steve Paxton, and Deborah Hay, came together in movement workshops led by the musician Robert Dunn, Cunningham’s dance class accompanist who had been influenced by John Cage, and presented their first concert in 1962 at the Judson Church to wide acclaim. Other choreographers associated with Judson over the years included Meredith Monk, Lucinda Childs, and Kenneth King.

Yvonne Rainer (b. 1934) summed up many of the concerns of the post-modernists in her 1965 “No Manifesto” quoted above. Rainer’s revolutionary dance work, *Trio A* (also know as *The Mind is a Muscle, Part 1*), is a perfect example of what is meant by the reduction of dance or minimalism that many of the Judson choreographers were seeking to discover. Each dancer, non-dancer, performer, non-performer in this four-and-a-half minute work offers a phrase that abides by her manifesto.

Unlike their predecessors, these choreographers of the 1960s questioned the very nature of dance. The post-modernists were concerned with movement as problem solving, about exploring the elements of movement, and not about self expression. They questioned whether performers had to be trained dancers and often used non-dancers and everyday movement in their pieces. They performed in unconventional spaces and often blurred the boundaries between performers and audiences. Improvisation was a frequent choreographic methodology. Steve Paxton and others developed the technique of contact improvisation based on the giving and taking of weight between movers rather than on prescribed steps.

The 1960s highlighted themes and controversies that periodically resurfaced in the history of modern dance:

- Should the goal of modern dance be about exploring the elements of movement, personal or cultural expression, storytelling, or political and cultural issues?

- Should movement be natural or artificial (skilled and virtuosic)?

African Americans in the modern dance world such as Alvin Ailey, Donald McKayle, Talley Beatty, and others chose not to follow the Judsonites, insisting that “It is not about dance for dance’s sake, but it is dance to communicate to people, who in turn are part of the whole process.”²³ The Civil Rights Movement was also a major force in the 1960s and the issues of that period inspired many black choreographers. Many chose not to reject “...the traditions they had struggled so hard to become a part of just a few years earlier,”²⁴ including Jeraldine Blunden who founded the Dayton Contemporary Dance Company in 1968. Eleo Pomare, Rod Rodgers, Ishmael Houston Jones, Blondell Cummings, and Gus Solomons jr, however, were somewhat influenced by the tenor of the Judson movement.

In the 1960s another choreographer emerged who would have a profound influence on American modern dance – **Alvin Ailey** (1931-1989). Founding his company in the mid-1950s, he rose to prominence in the early 1960s with his strikingly distinctive choreography which made historical themes personal and immediate onstage. Since then the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater has performed in over 70 countries on six continents, becoming the most-traveled dance company. On the occasion of the company’s 50th anniversary, a U.S. Congressional resolution proclaimed the company a vital “American Cultural Ambassador to the World.”

Ailey’s “blood memory” works about African American culture – *Blues Suite* (1958) and *Revelations* (1960) – brought unprecedented fame which led to the company’s selection in 1962 as part of John F. Kennedy’s “President’s Special International Program for Cultural Presentations,” which sent the company on tour to Asia and Australia.²⁵ In the company’s signature work, *Revelations*, spirituals sung by gospel singers accompany dancers depicting the strains of segregation and the central role of religion and the church. Although emphasizing the black tradition, the company has been multi-cultural and its repertory includes the work of a wide spectrum of choreographers. For more than 50 years, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater has served as a home for the presentation of classic works by Dunham and Primus, Beatty, and McKayle, and the work of contemporary dance makers such as DanceMotion USASM choreographers Jawole Willa Jo Zollar and Ronald K. Brown, George Faison, Judith Jamison, Bill T. Jones, Ulysses Dove, and many others. The Ailey School, too has perpetuated his legacy. After Ailey’s death, his principal dancer Judith Jamison assumed the artistic leadership of the company.

Exploring ethnic identity through dance was also a growing trend, not just for African Americans but also for members of other ethnic backgrounds. Graham disciples like Maslow and Lang frequently used aspects of Jewish culture in their choreography, and Asian Americans such as Kei Takei draw on Japanese movement forms and themes in their work.

Late Modernism and Melding Styles (1970s)

Exemplars: Trisha Brown, Twyla Tharp, and Dianne McIntyre

“If I’m beginning to sound like a bricklayer with a sense of humor, you’re beginning to understand my work.”²⁶ ~ Trisha Brown

*“Brown has honored the performers as denizens of the ballet world and, at the same time, devised magical, fluid complications for them. A move that might seem familiar quickly becomes something else.”*²⁷

*“All those nos would become yeses.”*²⁸ *“You could only walk or run—if you danced, you had sold out”*²⁹ ~ Twyla Tharp

*“In particular, [Tharp] would challenge the Judson rejection of difficult movement that only trained dancers could do. She would also call on her ability to connect with the audience, something with which the hard-core avant-garde was not concerned.”*³⁰

“Many themes, musical ideas, and movement motifs come out of the fabric I’ve experienced in the life and culture of Black people of America” ~ Dianne McIntyre³¹

*“McIntyre’s idiom builds largely upon her own brand of theatrical realism. Her movement grammar blends modern dance movement, African American social dance forms, African dance steps and everyday gesture.”*³²

Those who began pushing boundaries in the 1960s continued in the 1970s. Key members of the Judson group including Steve Paxton, David Gordon, Yvonne Rainer and Trisha Brown came together as The Grand Union, extending the experimental philosophy of the Judson period. Choreographers now tended to fall into two camps of modern dance: the very technical camp, and the anti-dance or anti-technique camp. For the technical or theatrical practitioners such as Lar Lubavitch and Jennifer Muller, and later Lucinda Childs and Twyla Tharp, the challenge was to choreograph dances requiring skilled technique. For others – such as Meredith Monk, Martha Clarke, Laura Dean, Elizabeth Streb, Pilobolus, and Anna Halprin – the intention was to reinvent the *idea* of dance.³³ Each of these choreographers, however, was as different from each other as from a choreographer that emphasized virtuosic technique. Monk and Clarke, for instance, developed theatrical works, Halprin explored the therapeutic aspect of movement.

Many of the choreographers of the 1960s and 1970s who experimented with non-dance aesthetics evolved over the decades to embrace virtuosic movement, narrative, and, in some cases, ballet vocabulary. DanceMotion USASM company ODC/Dance “was one of the first American companies to return, after a decade of pedestrian exploration, to virtuosic technique and narrative content in avant-garde dance and to commit major resources to interdisciplinary collaboration and musical commissions for the repertory.”³⁴ Trisha Brown, Lucinda Childs, and Twyla Tharp are examples of choreographers who returned to the technical camp and brought to it a new understanding of what modern dance could be.

Trisha Brown (b. 1936) emerged from the Judson group and The Grand Union to form her own company in 1970. Her playful and unpredictable choreography ranges from site-specific work for alternative locations to, more recently, celebrated choreography for full-length operas. Her work is marked by interdisciplinary collaborations, including groundbreaking works created with visual artist Robert Rauschenberg and composer Laurie Andersen.³⁵

Twyla Tharp (b. 1941) brought back what was rejected by the Judsonites – virtuosity in dance technique, and went even further, melding ballet with modern dance, bringing together the “two poles that anchored [American dance] for more than fifty years”³⁶. Her *Deuce Coupe* (1973), set

on the Joffrey Ballet Company to music of the Beach Boys, juxtaposed five women from her company in high heels, a man, and fourteen ballet dancers, and made “...theatrical fodder of the contrasts as well as the similarities between them...”³⁷

In the black dance tradition, “...though commonalities could often be found in their work, African Americans in modern dance were expressing themselves as never before through different styles and techniques that varied from artist to artist.”³⁸ **Dianne McIntyre** (b. 1946) and her company Sounds in Motion emerged in the 1970s. Her body of work tells stories and is collaborative in the use of music and movement. *Up North, 1881* (1975), which chronicles the migration of blacks from the south to the north, is set to music from the Louisiana State Prisoners; slavery is the subject in *The Voyage* (1976), set to traditional slave songs. Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, founder of DanceMotion USASM-participant Urban Bush Women, studied with McIntyre as well as with a student of Katherine Dunham.

Other choreographers and directors from this period include Blondell Cummings, Joel Hall Dancers, George Faison Universal Dance Experiment, Joan Myers Brown (Philadanco), Cleo Parker Robinson Dance Ensemble, Ann Williams (Dallas Black Dance Theatre), and Garth Fagan Dance.

Diverse Aesthetics and Dancing Personal Histories (1980s through Today)

Exemplars: Bill T. Jones and Mark Morris

“...I think life and experience enters artists in such a way that they have to produce—create something. And that’s what I think is the sexual and the spiritual aspect of artistic creation.” ~ Bill T. Jones³⁹

“Though [Jones’] works are replete with striking beauty and emotional power, he has made his mark with dances that rankle and push, ask questions, and often get to the very heart of who we are as human beings.”⁴⁰

“Often my things look clichéd...It doesn’t mean it’s corny. It means it’s true. So that’s what I do, too. What I’m saying is, what do you do with a hoop? You jump through it. What do you do with a ribbon? You swirl it. ... So I go for a certain reality.” ~ Mark Morris⁴¹

“[For]...Mark Morris’s 1984 BAM season.... the great surprise [was]... the renewal of traditional modern dance. Morris’s dances had none of the sleek containment, the minimalist cool, of the post-Judson choreographers.”⁴²

This next generation of modern dance innovators – influenced by the past and curious about their present – began to manipulate differing methods and attitudes about dance. Far into the 80s and the 90s, these dance makers sought out “new” and “natural” ways of presenting dance. In their explorations, they often grappled with their own histories and issues of identity. Some members of this next generation used the stage as a platform from which to present their personal histories, using more than movement to tell their stories. Drawing from many styles and techniques, each choreographer grew more specific. Their stories were now told in much iteration, in a multidisciplinary context including text, music, set and costume design, and the use of multi-media and technology.

In the 1980s **Bill T. Jones** (b. 1952) created works that did not quite fit into the trope of “Black Dance.” After eleven years of performing duets with Arnie Zane, who was white and his partner on and off stage, they formed the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company in 1983 using contact improvisation, personal narrative, social commentary, text, and more in their works. Their interracial relationship was often a catalyst for their work, but the repertoire of the company is widely varied in its subject matter and style. Many, but not all, of their works, draw on African American history including *Last Supper at Uncle Tom's Cabin/The Promised Land* and their 2009 work *Fondly Do We Hope... Fervently Do We Pray* which is based on the life of Abraham Lincoln, the U.S. President who put an end to slavery in America. Jones often tackles difficult topics, as in *Still/Here* (1994) which explores issues of survival in the face of life-threatening illnesses such as AIDS (which claimed Zane’s life).

Mark Morris (b. 1956) founded the Mark Morris Dance Group in 1980 and is celebrated for the great diversity of his choreography in style and content and his musicality and choice of a wide range of musical inspiration. His works range from whimsical solos to full-length abstract works to the music of classical composers. He also choreographs for ballet and opera companies. Full-length works include *The Hard Nut* (a modern update of *The Nutcracker*), *L’Allegro, il Penseroso ed il Moderato*, and *Dido and Aeneas*.

Early modern dance defined itself in opposition to ballet; students were often forbidden from taking ballet classes. However, over the decades, modern dance and ballet began to influence each other. Modern dancers frequently study ballet technique and ballet choreographers frequently discard pointe shoes and incorporate characteristic modern dance movement that articulates the torso and works with rather than fights gravity. In some cases, it is hard to categorize a choreographer’s work. Sometimes the term modern ballet is used to label those ballet choreographers who are heavily influenced by the style and spirit of modern dance. Both genres have been enriched by borrowing from each other. In addition, major modern dance choreographers like Twyla Tharp, Mark Morris, and Trisha Brown frequently create works for ballet and opera companies. In the past, modern dancers like Holm and Tamiris choreographed for Broadway; today modern dance is having a renewed impact on Broadway as choreographers like Twyla Tharp (*Movin’ Out*, *Singing in the Rain*, etc.), Garth Fagan (*The Lion King*), Karole Armitage (*Hair* and *Passing Strange*), and Bill T. Jones (*Spring Awakening* and *Fela*) are creating award-winning choreography for musicals.

Today, many of the groundbreaking choreographers and established companies—Martha Graham, Merce Cunningham, Paul Taylor, Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane, Twyla Tharp, Mark Morris, Trisha Brown, and Alvin Ailey—continue to exert their influence. Hundreds of American modern dance choreographers now create work in the U.S. and abroad, variously continuing in the footsteps of their mentors or striking out to innovate in ever-surprising ways. Notable dance makers who are now adding to the American modern dance story include Susan Marshall, Sarah Michelson, Alonzo King, Rennie Harris, Ralph Lemon, Bebe Miller, Lula Washington, John Jasperse, David Rousseve, David Dorfman, Doug Varone, Abdel R. Salaam, Wally Cardona, David Parsons, Molissa Fenley, Karole Armitage, Elisa Monte, Annie B. Parsons, Ben Munisteri, Joe Goode, Neil Greenberg, Margaret Jenkins, Stephen Petronio, and many, many more.

Although this essay focuses on American modern dance, what has happened in this country has never been isolated from the rest of the world. American modern dance makers toured the globe from the form's beginning years and in turn, met, studied with and incorporated ideas from masters of other cultures and traditions. In today's global environment, multi-national interchange has accelerated, enriching the whole world of dance. Among the many influences on American dance are Butoh from Japan, the tanztheater of Germany's Pina Bausch, classical Indian dance (such as the Bharatanatyam modern dance fusions of the Ragamala Music and Dance Theater), Chinese dance (such as in the dance theater of Shen Wei Dance Arts), and capoeira and other South American dance and movement forms (such as in the choreography of Ballet Hispanico and Dance Brazil).

Contemporary choreographers working in the black tradition today have also expanded their scope; some have collaborated with African companies. For instance, Urban Bush Women and Reggie Wilson/Fist & Heel Performance Group have both co-choreographed works with Senegalese companies (Germaine Acogny's Compagnie Jant-Bi, and Andréya Ouamba's Compagnie 1^{er} Temps respectively) and Ralph Lemon worked with dancers from Cote d'Ivoire and Guinea as well as from India, Japan, China, and Taiwan in his *Geography Trilogy*.

Conclusion: What Is Modern Dance?

The term modern dance encompasses a wide variety of styles and content. However, there are some recurrent themes or characteristics revealed in its history. What emerges is that modern dance is more a point of view than a movement vocabulary or style. Although there are some general movement preferences in modern dance that distinguish it from ballet, such as exploring the expressive potential of the torso or acknowledging rather than defying gravity, even these qualities are not universal. Modern dance is not defined in terms of mastering a specific vocabulary of codified steps, but rather as a mode of expression. Innovation, personal and/or cultural identity, and social relevance are resonant through-lines.

The motivation to create a dance may be dance for dance's sake, dance as storytelling, or dance as social activism. The genre embraces technical virtuosity as well as the concept of natural, everyday movements. Modern dance also has had a history of inclusiveness, incorporating influences from other dance cultures and subject matter. As its history makes clear, modern dance is in constant motion, changing and reinventing itself, prizing reinterpretation, self-expression and innovation, as it powerfully illuminates the human condition. Twyla Tharp sums it up: "*Modern is not less, modern is more. It's everything that has been done plus.*"⁴³

Charmaine Patricia Warren with Suzanne Youngerman

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⁴ Mazo, p. 35

⁵ <http://www.jacobspillow.org/exhibits-archives/history/>

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- ⁷ Mazo, p. 154
- ⁸ Cass, Joan. *Dancing through History*, (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc.), 1993, p. 302
- ⁹ Perpener, John O. III. *African-American Concert Dance: The Harlem Renaissance and Beyond*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001), p. 129
- ¹⁰ Mazo, p. 117
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