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Dance Education as Art and a Lever Of Social Change

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Kristen Smiarowski

I Am Therefore I Dance

15 December 2016

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Dance Education as Art and a Lever Of Social Change

Perhaps more than any other form, the teaching of dance is a personal interaction, and one in which the values and priorities of a culture are transmitted from one person and generation to the next. Gerald Jonas reports that “the impulse to move is the raw material that cultures shape into evocative sequences of physical activity that we call dance. This phenomenon is universal...”ⁱ And Deirdre Sklar notes, “All movement must be considered as an *embodiment* of cultural knowledge.”ⁱⁱ Dance gives physical expression to the values, passions and priorities of a culture, engaging participants and audiences in an immediate, visceral way:

“When a dance performance succeeds, it can transform passive spectators into active collaborators who may actually feel their bodies moving in sympathy with the dancers; at such moments, energy flows back and forth between performers and audience, and exciting, unpredictable things can happen.”ⁱⁱⁱ

In fact, the teaching of dance is in itself a powerful creative process: New discoveries in science, for example, are transmitted through notes and drawings that document experiments and triumphs in the field. Literature is shared through manuscripts, on paper or online, that bring ideas to life in the written word. But dance, as a physical performance, occurs only in the moment. It is visual, musical and energetic. As such, dance is not taught in writing or on canvas or tapes but personally, directly from dancer to dancer, teacher to student, across generations, styles and cultural lines. For this reason, dancers in all cultures and styles hold teachers in high regard; the process of developing a dancer is not just transmission of knowledge but a personal formation, the recreation of a legacy and a language within a new generation. Teachers of dance

are not just observing or discussing the movement process; they are themselves the embodiment of an art form, realized and shared through the teaching process itself.

As a direct expression of the art, dance pedagogy exerts a major influence on the shape and direction not only of dance, but of the cultural values it affirms. This is particularly true of modern dance in America which – in its a “revolutionary” challenge to the traditional norms of ballet -- has emerged and grown largely within the safe haven of college campuses across the nation. In my research on dance pedagogy, I have discovered that the teachers who launched this creative exploration within American universities have had a profound and lasting impact on the place of dance in performing arts, and in society as a whole

Deirdre Sklar writes that “Movement embodies ideas about life's ‘large questions’:
Where do I belong in the □ world? How do human beings behave? Where do I come from and with whom do I go through life? What do I value?”^{iv} By encouraging choreographers and dancers who express their insights and raise their voices, these teaching artists have created a dance culture of individual expression, purposeful community building and socially conscious questions – shedding light on issues of class, gender, ethnicity, spirituality, and other matters deeply important to artists everywhere. This is the thesis that this paper will explore.

Modern Dance in America: The Beginnings

The evolution of dance in America must be understood in the context of its own historical tradition. For four centuries, Western dance culture had been defined by ballet. This form, with origins in the courtly manners and values of the Middle Ages, expresses a particular view of human life and its place in the world: “Ballet is a product of the Western world, and it is a dance form developed by Caucasians who speak Indo-European languages and who share a common

European tradition.”^v Ballet represents a highly stylized approach to movement, with a priority on lightness and elevation beyond purely spontaneous gestures and positions:

“During the nineteenth century, audiences took delight in the illusion of weightlessness projected by ballerinas in toe shoes. In its resolve to prevail over, rather than accommodate the forces of nature, ballet gives expression to one of the predominant aspirations of Western societies.” ... “Even as professionals, dancers attend class daily... they cannot afford even the slightest diminution of control.”^{vi}

This illusion is achieved through long hours and years of disciplined training by dancers, striving to achieve an other-worldly performance that reinforced Western mental / spiritual ideals. But cultures do not remain static, and cannot be forever bound by any particular set of rules, norms, or stylistic conventions. As Jonas reminds us, “All dances are subject to change and development, no matter how convenient we may find it to dismiss some form as practically unchanged for 2,000 years.”^{vii} In the same sense that primitive and folk dances have evolved through millennia, the Western dance tradition has also continued to evolve.

It was this evolutionary path that led to the emergence of modern dance in America. The 19th century had seen the rise of a flourishing spirit of freedom and discovery, leading artists in all disciplines to test the boundaries of traditional norms in favor of more “natural” and individual expressions. Inevitably, this cultural evolution led to new forms of dance. In particular, what we now call “modern dance” emerged from the innovations of a handful of women whose radical approach bypassed the formal traditions of ballet in search of a new way of creating art in movement, allowing each dancer to be more fully herself. In time this shift altered not only the world of dance, but the very essence of an American cultural tradition.

The first, Loie Fuller, was born near Chicago in 1862; after a brief career as a child actor, she went on to perform and choreograph for burlesque, vaudeville and even circus shows. An enthusiastic champion of what she called “free dance,” Fuller developed a unique and expressive style of improvisation, often enhancing her choreography with flowing silk fabrics and multi-

colored lighting – additions she designed to create a more complete sensory experience of the movement.^{viii} As an embodiment of the *art nouveau* style, Fuller was beloved in France but felt dismissed by an American public who viewed her as an entertainer rather than an artist.

However, her spirit gained new life through her protégés: it was Fuller who “discovered” Isadora Duncan and introduced her to the dance world, allowing a deeply innovative dance philosophy to gain exposure, take root and grow.

Duncan (1877 –1927), a native of San Francisco, is perhaps the best known pioneer of modern dance. Like Fuller, Isadora Duncan began in theater, enhancing her performances with the unrestricted, fluid movement that became her trademark.^{ix} The style intrigued young dancers, and she began teaching eager students – first in Paris, where her “natural movement” marked a dramatic break with the formalism of classical ballet, and later in New York, where the same free-flowing style met predictable resistance from (the typically well-heeled) lovers of classical dance.^x With the enthusiastic support of Loie Fuller, whom she had met in Paris, Duncan opened a studio to teach “natural movement” – a sharp contrast to the strict discipline enshrined in the Paris Opera Ballet. Despite mixed reviews she gained both exposure and followers for her “evolutionary” style. In her studio, tutus and pointe shoes gave way to a new spontaneity and freedom, where each movement emerged organically from the last. This style would become known as the very essence of modern dance.

The third pioneer of this movement was Ruth St. Denis. Born in New Jersey in 1879, St. Denis too got her start in dance entertainment, pursuing “more traditional genres: acrobatics, high kicking and skirt dancing.”^{xi} While on tour, she was captivated by an image of an Egyptian goddess in a temple; she immediately began creating dances that explored this “exotic” Eastern style. In 1906 St. Denis struck out on her own and soon met and married a young dancer, Ted

Shawn, who became her partner in dance innovation. Together the pair combined barefoot ballet movements with eurhythmy, gymnastics, and a theatrical exploration of Eastern themes. This fascination with other styles and art forms, and deliberate integration of cross-cultural influence, was another hallmark of the new dance genre. Modern dance developed through openness not only to a new range of motion, but to an entirely new language of music and visual forms.

Seeking continued creative growth, St. Denis went on to launch the Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival in the Berkshires, a major forum for the teaching and exchange of ideas among dancers, choreographers and students alike. In 1938, she initiated a dance department at Adelphi University – one of the first institutions to welcome dance as a recognized discipline with a distinctive and formal college curriculum.^{xii} St. Denis' passion for teaching dance as a channel of spirituality and “the mysticism of the body”^{xiii} provided a platform for spreading the emerging philosophy of modern dance nationwide.

Of course, these American expressions did not arise in a global vacuum. The story would not be complete without acknowledging the role of Mary Wigman (1886-1973), who brought a European influence to the emergence of American dance. An advocate of German Expressionism, Wigman was inspired by Emile-Jacques Dalcroze, whose “eurhythmic” work taught concepts of rhythm and music through physical movement. In 1913 Wigman was introduced to Rudolf von Laban, and began to incorporate his technique based on contrasts of movement (push/pull, expansion/contraction and so on) into her own work.^{xiv} In 1921 Wigman began a dance school to share this new philosophy; in 1930 a group of her students, most notably Hanya Holm, traveled to New York and there founded an American school based on her methods.

This approach to expressive movement encouraged teachers to introduce dance to non-dancers as a vehicle for expanding confidence and self expression, especially among women. So, as educational opportunities for women expanded across the country, it is not surprising that dance would begin to appear in college curricula – first as an element of physical education, and later as a discipline in its own right.

Dance as a “Science”: Ideas in Motion

In the coming decades modern dance gained a foothold in forward-thinking universities, where it could flourish free from the demands of immediate market success. This protected environment also made the art form accessible to those who were not already part of the “dance scene.” This allowed others, including non-dancers, to find their own creativity, voice, and their authentic selves through movement, during the prime years of their lives at college. This fortunate turn of events would play a key role in the way modern dance would unfold, not just as a performance medium, but a channel for participation, community-building, and self discovery.

Through this new pathway, two women would make an especially profound impact on the *teaching* of dance, and its role in opening new possibilities for the field: Margaret H’Doubler and Martha Hill. These women not only worked to revolutionize modern dance into what it is today, but brought aspects of self expression and exploration to the table, both for trained dancers and for movers of all shapes and sizes. The early-mid 20th century American culture in which these women worked provided a unique environment and community for this particular dance revolution to occur.

Margaret H’Doubler (1889-1982), founder of the dance program at the University of Wisconsin, did not share St. Denis’ esoteric vision of dance as a spiritual impulse. Rather, her approach blended the realm of feeling with a scientific awareness of the body.^{xv} A native of

Wisconsin, H'Doubler began her studies in biology, eventually earning a dual degree in biology and philosophy from the University of Wisconsin. After several years as an assistant athletics instructor (in the Department of Physical Education for Women), H'Doubler returned to Teachers College at Columbia University to study philosophy and aesthetics. H'Doubler was intrigued by dance, but struggled to find a form that called to her – until taking a class where students were required to begin by lying on the floor. It was there that she developed an insight to the relationship between movement and gravity, approaching dance as a natural motion based on “self generated creativity” that did not require formal dance training to explore.

H'Doubler began to integrate dance within her classes in physical education, asking students to express their feelings and ideas in movement and then to describe that movement in scientific terms.^{xvi} She explained her technique as “training the mind to use the body as an expressive instrument;” using knowledge of the body to enable the artist to create movement that embodied her thoughts and emotions. In this way, H'Doubler designed a new approach to dance pedagogy, joining science with philosophy and imagination to yield a distinctively contemporary art form.

As a faculty member in Wisconsin, H'Doubler presided at the 1921 opening of a dedicated dance studio on the first college campus to offer dance courses (albeit as part of the Physical Education curriculum). In 1926, in collaboration with the university's School of Education, H'Doubler developed the first curriculum in which dance was offered as an undergraduate major. Among her students was Anna Halprin (1920---), whom she encouraged to study anatomy as a way to understand and design effective movement. Under H'Doubler's influence, Halprin abandoned the conventions of modern technique and began to invent her own way of expressing everyday life through art. Halprin used improvisation as a way to explore how

individuals come together as community.^{xvii} This interest in dance as a collaborative process became a hallmark of her work, and has been highly influential in the movement to bring dance to non-dancers as an instrument of personal growth and social change.

Dance as a Channel of Social Action

While Halprin's approach to expressive movement helped to greatly expand the audience for and participation in dance, she was not the first to consider its societal possibilities. During the 1930s several troupes had begun working with poor women in urban settlement houses; some of these troupes became vehicles for grassroots Communists who saw in dance a prime channel to effect profound social change.^{xviii} Their legacy lives on today in artists as diverse as Alwin Nikolais, who uses dance to explore the place of individuals within their environment, and Jacques D'Amboise, whose National Dance Institute brings dance to disadvantaged children and teens as a means of empowerment, awareness and personal growth. Here in Los Angeles, a recent presenter from Contra-Tiempo expressed his vision in this way:

“To create, through the transformative power of dance, communities where all people are awakened to a sense of themselves as artists and social change agents who move through the world with compassion and confidence; ... to move audiences to reimagine what is possible, and to engage communities as active participants and witnesses of arts experiences tied to their humanity.”^{xix}

This power of dance to inspire and catalyze change is not a new discovery. For centuries observers have known that the physical enactment of the rituals and ideals of a culture has a unique ability to foster emotions and community bonds in participants. Thus, attempts to control populations have often led to suppression of the dance of their culture. Describing the white settlement of the American West in the 19th century, Jonas writes:

“The authorities, mindful of the power of dance to focus discontent among the Plains tribes, banned all danced ceremonies. To ensure that the Plains Indians did not rekindle their resistance, government authorities continued to discourage all ceremonial dances until the 1930s
...^{xx} ...

Today, dance is deliberately introduced to help specific communities through a process of

healing, grieving, resisting injustice, or sheer celebration. For example, Sarah Wilbur, Hilary B. Meyer, Matther R. Baker, Kristen Smiarowski, Christine A. Suarez, et al. describe programs of dance for recovering veterans: “To promote awareness of the mind–body connection, class content is focused on somatic principles, which emphasize unity of mind, body and spirit...”^{xxi} Or in the wake of the AIDS crisis, choreographers like Bill T. Jones make use of dance to express the fears, tenderness, bewilderment and rage that bring the experiences of victims and loved ones to life, and simultaneously serve to unite and strengthen the dance and the AIDS communities.

Dance Pedagogy Claims Center Stage

But in the mid twentieth century, while H'Doubler was expanding the vision of dance as a platform for personal and social transformation, others were securing a firm place for modern dance as an established and distinctively American art form. In this development, no one plays a greater role than Martha Hill. Born in 1900, Hill was raised in the farmlands of Ohio with a traditional Midwestern work ethic. Upon graduating from a School of Physical Education in Michigan, she immediately went to work for the school as a dance instructor, teaching ballet and gymnastics until she was offered a position teaching dance in the physical education program at Kansas State Teachers College. She remained in that role for three years, eventually moving to New York City to study with Martha Graham, and finally joining her company. In time, Hill joined the faculty in physical education at New York University, where she was later named Director of Dance. In 1932 the president of the newly-founded Bennington College invited her to lead their emerging Dance Department; for the next two decades she taught at both Bennington and NYU, establishing both schools as leaders in the development of dancers and choreographers of the 20th century.^{xxii}

In the summer of 1934 Bennington invited Hill to open a summer dance festival, bringing together the most idealistic and dedicated dancers and teachers.^{xxiii} A champion for the new expressive style, Hill used the festival as an opportunity to inspire and nourish the leading talents of the day; the Bennington Dance Festival became a catalyst for those who would establish modern dance as a formal discipline within colleges and universities nationwide. In fact, Hill made it her personal mission to gain full recognition of this form as a respected performing art; her stated intent was to initiate a dance department in every college and university across the United States.^{xxiv}

In 1951, Hill became the first Director of Dance at Juilliard, later moving the program to its new home at Lincoln Center -- over the strenuous and outspoken objections of George Balanchine and Lincoln Kirstein, whose New York City Ballet sought to secure its place as the epitome of American dance. Welcoming the battle, Hill insisted that as an authentic American voice, modern dance had earned its own place on this “sacred” ground; a permanent home at Lincoln Center would give the form the legitimacy it deserved. Hill prevailed, and with this move modern dance finally gained acceptance at the very heart of performing arts in America. Hill remained in her leadership role for the next 30 years, highlighting the vital importance of modern dance as a quintessentially American expression. Under her leadership the Dance Program at Juilliard went on to train performers, teachers and choreographers who would become the guiding lights of the century – Paul Taylor, Lar Lubovich, Pina Bausch, Daniel Lewis and Martha Clarke, to name a few. Bessie Schonberg, one of her early students and an avid follower of eurhythmics, took her skills to New York City and eventually secured a post teaching dance at Sarah Lawrence College, just north of New York.^{xxv} There she built one of the

foremost dance programs in America, providing a model from which many other programs would be born.

In its earlier years, modern dance found its primary home on the sheltering campuses of innovative universities – Wisconsin, Oregon, Bennington, New York University, Adelphi, and Sarah Lawrence College, to name a few. There, modern choreographers, dancers and teachers enjoyed the freedom to experiment, to combine influences, to ask new questions and break new ground. As a result, the artists trained and encouraged in this fertile soil became not only performers but teachers in their own right, embodying a new, distinctively American tradition that captured the restless spirit and curiosity of the age, and shaped and gave voice to communities of all kinds.

Through the latter half of the 20th century, modern dance gained widespread recognition as a form with a particular power to generate self discovery and awareness; as such, it moved beyond personal expression, becoming a lever to raise consciousness of broad social issues and serve as an agent of lasting change. Dance artists expanded their own perspectives, reaching beyond music and technique to find links with anatomy, philosophy, literature, social sciences, and other critical fields of study. Today, dance educators are taking their work into communities and schools, even at the elementary level. There they encourage youth to express themselves honestly, finding the best and most creative version of themselves, and to explore that identity within the power of dance. This not only provides them with a new enjoyment of the form, but connects them to their own cultural tradition and bonds, giving them a physical language to speak truths they could not articulate before.

Conclusion

As it has grown, “modern” dance has given voice to non-professionals in all parts of society, empowering them to discover in dance a dynamic catalyst for both personal discovery and social change. As In the last century, the growth of higher education in America dovetailed with a unique cultural mix – a spirit of personal freedom, increased cultural pluralism, and a rejection of the class-bound traditions of Western Europe – to foster new modes of physical expression that revolutionized the art form. Jonas tells us “dance begins with the essential physicality of the human body in motion, and evolves to demonstrate the essential values, experiences, stories and aspirations of the community. As such, all forms of dance reflect the cultural traditions in which they arose.”^{xxvi} A study of the emergence of modern dance, and particularly dance pedagogy, in American colleges and universities of the 20th century allows us a glimpse of this process, as a new cultural tradition began to take its form. In this particular era, the convergence of four key factors – a pluralist culture of exploration and freedom, the frustration with longstanding and restrictive artistic norms, the emerging empowerment of women and marginalized groups, and the stability afforded by university campuses – has fostered new forms of expression in movement, and, in the process, has revolutionized this powerful art form.

ⁱ Gerald Jones, *Dancing; Pleasure, Power, and Art of Movement*, (Harry N. Abrams, Incorporated, New York: 1992) 12.

ⁱⁱ Deirdre Sklar, *Five Premises for a Culturally Sensitive Approach to Dance*, (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press: 2001) 30.

ⁱⁱⁱ Gerald Jones, *Dancing; Pleasure, Power, and Art of Movement*, (Harry N. Abrams, Incorporated, New York: 1992) 25.

^{iv} Deirdre Sklar, *Five Premises for a Culturally Sensitive Approach to Dance*, (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press: 2001) 30.

^v Joann Kaelinohomoku, *An Anthropologist Looks at Ballet as a Form of Ethnic Dance* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press: 2001) 40.

^{vi} Gerald Jones, *Dancing; Pleasure, Power, and Art of Movement*, (Harry N. Abrams, Incorporated, New York: 1992) 23.

^{vii} Gerald Jones, *Dancing; Pleasure, Power, and Art of Movement*, (Harry N. Abrams, Incorporated, New York: 1992) 35.

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- viii Susan Au, *First Steps towards a New Form*, (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2002), 87-89.
- ix Susan Au, *First Steps towards a New Form*, (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2002), 89.
- x Susan Au, *First Steps towards a New Form*, (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2002), 90.
- xi Cynthis Nazzaro Noble, *Bessie Schonberg, Pioneer Dance Educator and Choreographic Mentor*, (Lewiston, NY.: Edwin Mellen Press, 2005) 38.
- xii Janet Lynn Roseman, *Dance was her religion : the sacred choreography of Isadora Duncan, Ruth St. Denis and Martha Graham / Janet Lynn Roseman; foreword by Alonzo King*, (Prescott, Ariz: Hohm Press, 2004) 84-86.
- xiii Janet Lynn Roseman, *Dance was her religion : the sacred choreography of Isadora Duncan, Ruth St. Denis and Martha Graham / Janet Lynn Roseman; foreword by Alonzo King*, (Prescott, Ariz: Hohm Press, 2004) 84-86.
- xiv Isa Partsch-Bergsohn, Bergsohn, Harold, *The Makers of Modern Dance in Germany; Rudolf Laban, Mary Wigman, Kurt Jooss*. (Hightstown, NJ: Princeton Book Co. 2003) 36.
- xv Sheet- Johnstone, Maxine. "Chapter fifteen; On Learning To Move Oneself" in *Margaret H'Doubler The legacy of America's Dance Education Pioneer* edited by John M. Wilson, Thomas K. Hagood, and Mary A. Brennan. Youngstown, New York: Cambria Press, 2006. 321-323
- xvi Sheet- Johnstone, Maxine. "Chapter fifteen; On Learning To Move Oneself" in *Margaret H'Doubler The legacy of America's Dance Education Pioneer* edited by John M. Wilson, Thomas K. Hagood, and Mary A. Brennan. Youngstown, New York: Cambria Press, 2006. 265-276.
- xvii Linda J. Tomko, *Dancing Class; Gender, Ethnicity, and Social Divides In American Dance, 1890-1920*, (Bloomington, IN; Indiana University Press. 1999) 79.
- xviii Linda J. Tomko, *Dancing Class; Gender, Ethnicity, and Social Divides In American Dance, 1890-1920*, (Bloomington, IN; Indiana University Press. 1999) 79-100.
- xix CONTRA-TIEMPO | Urban Latin Dance Theater. <http://www.contra-tiempo.org/what-we-do>.
- xx Gerald Jones, *Dancing; Pleasure, Power, and Art of Movement*, (Harry N. Abrams, Incorporated, New York: 1992) 27.
- xxi Sarah Wilbur, Hilary B. Meyer, Matther R. Baker, Kristen Smiarowski, Christine A. Suarez, Domma Ames, & Robert T. Rubin, *Dance for Veterans: A complementary health program for veterans with serious mental illness*. (Art & Health ; 2015) 100.
- xxii *Miss Hill: Making Dance Matter*. Dir. Greg Vander Veer. San Francisco, California, USA: Kanopy Streaming, 2015.
- xxiii Sali Ann Kriegsmen, *Modern Dance in America; The Bennington Years*, (Boston, Mass: G.K. Hall, 1981) 11-18
- xxiv *Miss Hill: Making Dance Matter*. Dir. Greg Vander Veer. San Francisco, California, USA: Kanopy Streaming, 2015.
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- xxvi Gerald Jones, *Dancing; Pleasure, Power, and Art of Movement*, (Harry N. Abrams, Incorporated, New York: 1992) 34.

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