

Education of (contemporary) dance

excerpts from:

"Legacy in Dance Education, an Anthology Compiled and Edited by Thomas K. Hagood "

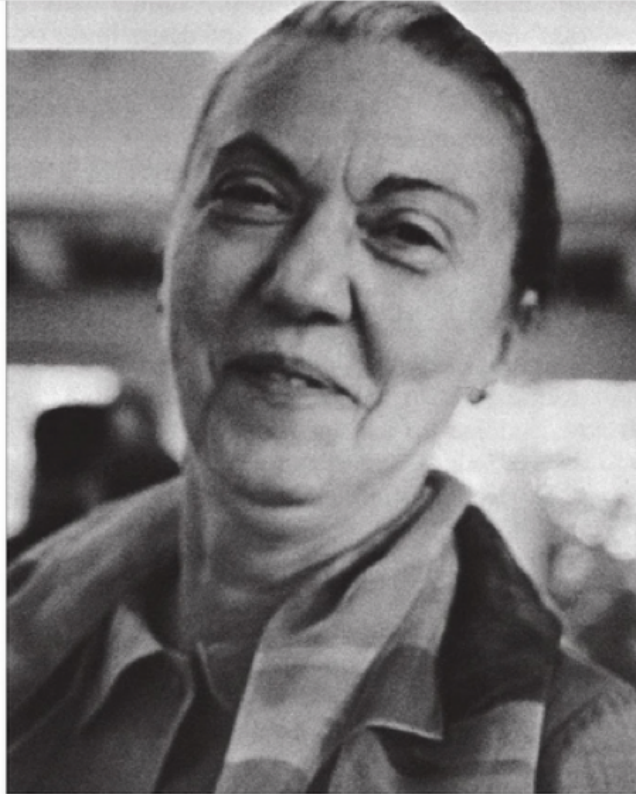


PLATE 2. Martha Hill, 1966. Photograph by Nik Krevitsky, courtesy of Impulse Publications, Inc.

ALMA HAWKINS

The path of dance, like the path of life, starts its progress in one general direction and then takes a new course. From the 1930s until the 1960s, the journey was shaped by the H'Doubler–Hill dialectic. There was an ongoing, vibrant, and even contentious field discussion about what dance education was, how to practice it, and how to organize it. This was a decidedly Eurocentric argument about modernist ideas played out in a homogeneous educational milieu. For decades, dance in the American university was a white woman's world. Moreover, dance in education was a series of "island programs," as each program secured its own identity and future with little in the way of shared or formalized field standards. Even so, and now and then, new voices came into the nascent national discussion. One voice that stood out and became an important contributor to the field's emergent conversation about dance in the university was that of Alma Hawkins.

Hawkins was a native of Missouri, and when old enough to do so, took summer sessions at Bennington and at Wisconsin. She completed the Ed.D in physical education at Teacher's College in 1949. In 1953 she became chair of the dance program in women's physical education at the University of California–Los Angeles (Carol Campbell, "UCLA obituary for Alma Hawkins," January 28, 1998). In 1954 Hawkins published her dis-

Alma Hawkins," January 28, 1998). In 1954 Hawkins published her dissertation, "The Modern Dance in Higher Education," articulating the dialectic for dance education and framing its discussion well into the 1960s.

In her text, Hawkins addresses the "current controversy and confusion" surrounding dance in higher education, and provides insights and "Guiding Principles" for reconciling these matters. The first chapter, "Modern Dance: Uncharted Development," outlines the issues facing the field of dance education in the American university circa 1950. Hawkins acknowledges the "rapid growth of modern dance programs in colleges across the country, plus the powerful influence of concert dance on these programs, undoubtedly gives some clue to the cause of the current controversy and confusion"(1). A set of questions "raised by a conflict of various points of view," faced dance educators:

Should the teacher be more concerned with working toward good dance or with using dance as a means for the development of the individual?

Should the teacher direct his efforts primarily toward the skilled students who have artistic ability, or should he have equal concern for all students?

Should the teacher approach modern dance through technique and body conditioning, reserving composition for advanced students, or should dance provide creative experience at all levels of participation?

Should the teacher choreograph for all students, or should the students create their own dances even though the resulting dances will be at a lower artistic level?

Satisfactory answers to questions such as these cannot be reached through mere acceptance of another person's point of view and imitation of his method. This sort of unreasoned acceptance and imitation as a basis for teaching dance is the primary cause of the confusion that exists today. A real solution to the problem of defining the proper approach to dance in education will be attained only as dance educators acquire a true understanding of the potential contribution of dance experiences to the growth of an individual and establish a philosophy of dance and guiding principles in conformity with the goals of education. (2)

Clarifying the historic record, Hawkins outlines the history of dance in higher education as this unfolded between 1925 and 1935:

The swift development of modern dance compelled teachers to spend much time to keep abreast of changes, and left little opportunity for objective thinking about dance... This new dance world found itself in a perpetual whirl of activity—nothing stood still. Professional artists were busy experimenting and formulating a technical approach to movement that would satisfy their needs as concert dancers. These were of necessity highly individualized approaches. College dance teachers rushed out to learn newly developed techniques during short courses or holiday sessions, and then hurried home to teach them to their classes. Seldom did they question or evaluate these techniques as to their appropriateness for college students. It was assumed that anything the artist did was good.¹

Now, as never before, there was a constant interplay between the professional artist and the college dance teacher, both on and off the campuses.

Artists talked about modern dance as a point of view and as an art form. So did the educators, although their talk was not always supported by real understandings of art. Their interest in experiencing this new dance and in improving the techniques of instruction took precedence over a serious consideration of philosophy or principles.

In spite of a lack of principles to guide creative work, teachers and their students worked fanatically on composition. Their early dances evolved primarily through imitation of the artists rather than from use of principles. In fact, the artists themselves had not yet clearly defined principles. (17–18)

Hawkins's discussion clearly illustrates the problem the practicing artist had become for dance in the university; "It was assumed that anything the artist did was good." John Martin had said so. Martha Hill had said so, too. However, the physical educators in whose programs the majority of university dance still resided, did not always buy it. Early on, Hawkins understood the importance of field discussion and consensus for the *why* of dance in education, and the development of field standards for the *how*. Yet, it would take another decade to get the field together.

Meanwhile, in fits of starts and stops, the debate Hawkins outlines above continued well into the 1950s. Like many aspects of the larger culture, during the 1950s things for dance in American education stewed. The number of programs grew, but also seemed to wait for change. Then in the 1960s, American culture and American higher education changed on all fronts. By the middle of the decade, three events moved the discipline much further along its path: the 1965 Dance as a Discipline conference, the 1966 creation of the first professionally oriented dance major at a public university (University of California–Irvine), and the 1967–1968 Developmental Conferences on Dance hosted by Alma Hawkins at UCLA. A brief overview of these events provides us with a sense of where the path for dance education was headed.²



PLATE 3. Alma M. Hawkins, 1966. Photograph by Nik Krevitsky, courtesy of Impulse Publications, Inc.