

## Developments of education in contemporary dance

### Legacy in Dance Education an Anthology Compiled and Edited by Thomas K. Hagood (excerpts)

24

LEGACY IN DANCE EDUCATION

Between 1934 and 1942 (the 1939 program was held at Mills College in Oakland, California), hundreds of dance educators and young professionals worked with the artists who came to the Bennington campus. Dance educators who attended Bennington returned to their campuses with questions about the essential nature of their discipline: Was college instruction in dance about developing dance artists, which then would necessitate the inclusion of professional standards in the curriculum? Was the promise of dance as a non-professional mode of self-expression and exploration plausible? Could it possibly be both?

In the first Bennington sessions (1934–1936), the majority of students were college dance educators. According to dance historian Margaret Lloyd,

Their training in the Normal Schools of physical education had included the theories of Delsarte and Dalcroze, modified ballet, folk forms, and the free, pre-modern interpretive dancing stemming from Isadora. That is, what was done in bare feet was interpretive, what in ballet shoes, aesthetic. They knew little of choreography, but did ready-made dances such as "At Dawn," "The Brook," "To a Wild Rose," and endless scarf dances, until slowly through the twenties a new type of program developed, which offered the pupils opportunity to compose dances of mood and emotion for themselves [*the H'Doubler model*.—Ed.] The dances were romantic, loose to form, and led to considerable rhythmized emoting around the campuses.

This was the background of the majority of physical education teachers, who taught dance along with field hockey and basketball, and other sports, exercises, and athletics of the full course, when they began to look into modern dance. They appropriated it as advanced calisthenics, as a logical successor to the interpretive dance, and because it was more assimilable and practicable for educative purposes than ballet, modified or classic. In the early days of modern dance's infiltration in the colleges, the point of view was preponderantly that of evolved gymnastics, and choreography was mainly a combination of movement techniques with little or no imagination in the use of space, and without expression. But it was a time of ferment and change. (Lloyd 1949, 317)

Legacy for Dance as a Discipline

25

Hill cancelled summer courses in teaching methods for dance after 1936. Teachers were using what they learned at Bennington indiscriminately, attempting to infuse a collection of ideas and practices they had little real understanding of into their teaching. It is here, in poorly managed attempts by women physical educators to imitate the techniques and aesthetic ideals of the artists with whom they had so briefly studied that dance education took a serious hit in the minds of many physical educators. Rampant imitation, the acceptance of practices with little (if any) serious analysis as to their efficacy, and the stark abstraction of their new movement choices left many physical educators scratching their heads, and wondering, what is *this* all about?

Kriegsman adds:

The School of the Dance granted no degree (although credits could be applied toward a degree elsewhere) and offered no certificate or grades. Nonetheless, because Bennington was the first coherent representation of the modern dance as a movement, it became something of a “Good Housekeeping Seal” for those who were affiliated with it; those who weren’t were left out. Moreover, Bennington and “the modern dance” had become synonymous, so that in a sense Bennington did promulgate a “method” or “approach,” that which was taught at Bennington. Given the school’s concentrated authority and success, and the geometric expansion of its influence through students, this was perhaps inevitable. Bennington’s curriculum, its methods, and its approach to training and composition, were widely imitated...

The curriculum was designed not only to foster greater technical proficiency but to get students to pay more attention to form and structure in dance making. Louis Horst introduced notions of discipline and historical model. He insisted that to dance meaningfully one must first learn the craft of choreography. Horst’s theories, based on musical form, and his teaching methods were powerful correctives to **amorphous self-expression**. But soon, in lieu of the dances he disparagingly called “collegiate plastique,” pale replicas of pre-classic and modern forms [*course titles for Horst’s approach to composition. –Ed.*] began to crop up across the landscape. Simultaneously, the techniques of the Big Four

the landscape. Simultaneously, the techniques of the Big Four [*a name for the group that was featured at Bennington: Martha*

Auteursrechtelijk beschermd materiaal

*Graham, Doris Humphrey, Charles Weidman, and Hanya Holm. –Ed.*], absorbed by students during a summer’s intensive orientation, were taught in turn to their students. The modern dance was, for the first time, in double jeopardy of becoming academized through repetitious formulas and diluted through the well meaning (but not always accurate) efforts of students who came, saw, and returned to their classrooms to teach after the briefest of encounters with the Big Four. These problems were to become

encounters with the Big Four. These problems were to become more serious as the interval between originators and disciples increased. Perhaps Bennington accelerated the process of dilution by precipitating a dispersion of the modern dance. (29)

In the opinion of the physical educators familiar with the dance pedagogies of Margaret H'Doubler, the modern dance they were seeing now was ugly, distorted, and potentially harmful to students who practiced its techniques. Graham's work, in particular, was suspect because of its angularity, abstract design, and stylistic use of a violent contraction of the solar plexus. Authors debated the "fit" for modern dance within programs of physical education in articles with titles like "Physical Education and the Emergence of Modern Dance" (Beiswanger 1936), and "What Business has Modern Dance in Physical Education?" (Howe 1937). Mary Jo Shelly paraphrased the concerns of physical educators in "Facts and Fancies about the Dance in Education" (1940), writing, "Modern dance, which seems to be assuming more importance than any other kind of dancing, is ugly, morbid, and un-childlike. Look at the professional dancers, what do they know about education? And again, is the modern dance not a lop-sided development in physical education because only the women are interested in it?" (56). Similar articles raised more questions than they answered. Chief concerns included the health impact of practicing mod-

answered. Chief concerns included the health impact of practicing modern dance, the introduction of professional standards in the academy, the hiring of practicing artist-teachers in academic programs for dance, and perhaps most telling, the identification of dance as a "lop-sided development" because its chief practitioners were women (Hagood 2000).

Framing dance education as arts education shifted the nature of studies in dance from recreational, amateur, creative, and pedagogical contexts, to fine arts, professional, performance, and choreography perspectives.

Sequential training in technique and choreography enabled the student to generate and perform in contemporary dance at an advanced level. The idea that the college-trained dancer would become the professional performer or choreographer was more and more a reality—especially in the world of modern dance. A professional focus for dance in the colleges set a high standard for participation in its advanced study. This was attractive to faculty and students who wanted to be viewed as proficient in the practice of dance as athletes were in sports. Professional standards were also attractive to dance educators who wanted to distinguish their work from recreation and physical education, and have an educational paradigm that would permit them to offer a curriculum in dance as fine and performing art.

Techniques were developed and instruction became sequential, leading toward a new formalism in developing the movement skills necessary for the practice of concert dance. Choreography reflected similar compositional approaches in music and painting. Author Marcia Siegel

compositional approaches in music and painting. Author Marcia Siegel writes, "For years [following Bennington.—Ed.] there wasn't a modern dancer who did not know how to make an Air Primitive study, an ABA form, or a Pavane as a result of Horst's classes and their many successors in dance departments throughout the country" (Siegel 1987, 145).

Bennington had a great impact on the development of dance curricula nationwide. So too did the vitality of the choreographic work that emerged from Bennington sessions. Between 1934 and 1941, Graham, Humphrey, Weidman, and Holm choreographed some of the masterworks of twentieth-century concert dance. Humphrey's *New Dance* (1935), Weidman's *Quest* (1936), Graham's *Letter to the World* (1940), and Holm's *Trend* (1937) are just a few of the works created at Bennington that stand out as extraordinary examples of modern choreography. These dances came to represent a "literature of dance" and helped establish legitimacy for modern dance both as fine art and fine arts discipline.

In the years following Bennington, dance programs in women's physical education grew slowly but steadily. The trend toward separate, arts-related dance departments began in women's liberal arts colleges,

especially those with a strong tradition in John Dewey's educational philosophies. Departments appeared at Sarah Lawrence College (1935) and Adelphi College (1938) in New York; Bennington in 1940; and Mills College of California in 1941. In 1962 Alma Hawkins initiated the first, independent, arts-aligned dance department at a research university at the University of California–Los Angeles (Hagood 2000).

The Bennington summer dance session ended on that campus in 1942. In 1948 Hill reorganized summer sessions in dance at Connecticut College. Hill brought in Louis Horst, Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, and Humphrey's protégé, José Limón as core faculty (Hanya Holm took her work to Colorado College from 1941–1983). The summer program at Connecticut evolved into the American Dance Festival, staying at Connecticut until 1978 when it was moved to Duke University in Durham, North Carolina, and where it continues today (Ibid.). It is in the "ongoingness" of Hill's original vision for intensive and professionally oriented study in dance that the path of dance in higher education was sustained in its new orientation. As a value, Bennington has never ended. As a nexus, its legacy continues to shape, frame, and inspire (some might say, limit) dance education in the academy.