Charles Weidman (1901-1975)
by Ann Dils and Clay Daniel

Charles Weidman was a celebrated and beloved modern dancer, choreographer, teacher, and dance company director, and a creator of dance for opera and Broadway. A key figure in the development in modern dance, Weidman was Doris Humphrey's creative partner in the Humphrey-Weidman Company during the 1930s and 40s, and a choreographer and director of his own companies in the 1960s and early 70s. He operated Expression Of Two Arts Theatre, a studio theater and company, with sculptor Mikhail Santaro from 1960-1970. Weidman's Theatre Dance Company performed in his own space and elsewhere until his death in 1975.

Despite Weidman's obvious contributions, company members who avidly continue his legacy, and the existence of a thorough biography by Jonette Lancos, Weidman is not situated as central player in any particular modern dance historical narrative. He is, instead, often seen as "the partner": Humphrey's creative partner, Martha Graham's dance partner at Denishawn, and José Limón's early mentor and lover. An "unlikely cultural hero," as Jennifer Dunning described him in 1985, Weidman has, perhaps, been waiting for a dance studies scholarship with the right tools and critical awareness to assess his life and works.1

Described as shy and genial, Weidman was loved by the dancers who worked for him.2 He was a fine modern dance craftsman and made serious dances, but Weidman's genius at comedy became his distinguishing mark. Writing in the 1950s, Winthrop Palmer described Weidman as "the archetype of the American man": "the urchin boy...half satyr, half hooligan, who can fish and also shoot crap, the dandy who will abandon any fashion as soon as it becomes commonplace" (quoted in Lancos 2007, 164). Weidman dancer David Wynne witnessed a spontaneous instance of kinetic pantomime at a party: "Weidman draped a sheet around his shoulders, borrowed a lipstick to line his face, and sat cross-legged on the floor to do a Denishawn Kabuki piece." As the guests admired his gestures and the monologue they thought might really be Japanese, the solo "subtly changed into a recognizable sketch of a man suffering from constipation" (quoted in Dunning). A choreographed use of mime occurs in Weidman's Flickers (1942), a spoof of silent films. The dancers, portraying villains, a sheik, a femme fatale, and their more innocent counterparts, endure moments when the film seems to malfunction, sending them jerking about the space and into new portions of the narrative.

The other part of Palmer's assessment, that Weidman is an American archetype, needs more investigation and explanation. In what era and for what social groups might Weidman have exemplified an ideal? How was this read in specific dances? How did his performances and crafting of aspects of masculinity change over time? Although there are many ways to approach critical biography, scholarly assessment of Weidman's performances and construction of masculinity would clarify his life, work, and contributions to American dance and culture.

Born in Lincoln, Nebraska, Weidman noted in a brief autobiography that his father was, "Chief of the fire department there, and later Chief of all fire departments in the Canal Zone during its building." His mother was "champion roller skater of the middle west."2 In love with architecture and with dance from an early age, Weidman went to Los Angeles in 1920 to study
with Denishawn, the school and company founded by Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn. He was soon sent out on tour, partnering Martha Graham in works like the Toltemic Xochitl, Arabic Duet, and The Princess and the Demon. Weidman stayed at Denishawn for eight years, leaving with Humphrey to establish their own, New York-based company and school, and to create their own variants of Humphrey-Weidman technique.

In addition to his work with kinetic pantomime, Weidman worked with the lush, sweeping falls that characterize Humphrey-Weidman dances to develop a series of exercises and refine a new stylistic approach. His work added forceful energy, percussiveness, and angularity to the company's dances. The energetic men's section of the Humphrey-Weidman New Dance (1935) is an example. Lynchtown (1936), which depicts a community hunting an outsider, is the best known of his political works from the Humphrey-Weidman period.

Weidman worked on Broadway from the 1930s through the 1950s and, in the late 1940s, choreographed for the New York City Opera. As Thousands Cheer (1933) was especially suited to Weidman's talents as a comic. A revue by Moss Hart and Irving Berlin (the songs "Heat Wave" and "Easter Parade" are both from this show), it includes sketches about 1930s news-makers, among them Gandhi, Josephine Baker, and evangelist Aimee Semple McPherson.

After the Humphrey-Weidman Company disbanded in the mid-1940s, Weidman experienced a period of personal hardship and introspection. He re-established himself as a New York-based artist again in the early 1960s. Works from this period include his tribute to Humphrey, Brahms Waltzes (1960), and large group works such as The Christmas Oratorio (1961) and The Easter Oratorio (1967). Recent showings of his later works suggest that Weidman has been underestiimated as a modern choreographer with a formalist bent.

Weidman's Christmas Oratorio is a beautifully complex work that contrasts large, sweeping group sections evoking arched windows and the massed forces of heaven, and small, jewel-like depictions of aspects of the Christmas story, among them Mary and Joseph searching for a place at the inn, and an angel visiting shepherds. In a review from Back Stage in January of 1971, Jennie Schulman described a performance of Christmas Oratorio at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine as "reminiscent of figures seen in masterpieces of Renaissance painting." By turns humble and grand, the contrasting vignettes and formal group sections make a compelling, very modern dance.

Weidman's history and legacy have been carried on by his company members and in turn by their company members; his legacy includes a 2007 biography by Jonette Lancos, Reclaiming Charles Weidman (1901-1975): An American Dancer's Life and Legacy, and a 1990 biographical video, Charles Weidman: On His Own. The Charles Weidman Dance Foundation (http://www.charlesweidman.org) sponsors creative projects extending Weidman's work. Weidman's papers are held in the Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

Dancers who have reconstructed Weidman's work include Deborah Carr, Peter Hamilton, Mary Ann Mee, Janet Towner, and Clay Daniel, who performed in companies headed by Carr and Mee. One strong Weidman tradition exists at Central Piedmont Community College in North
Carolina where Mary Ann Mee taught for many years. Her student, Clay Daniel, now heads that program. He and Mee, who began the tradition prior to his tenure, stage Christmas Oratorio every year, performing to packed houses. Another outpost of the tradition is at the State University of New York Genesco where Humphrey-Weidman dancer Nona Schurman taught and where she trained Jonette Lancos in the Weidman style of Humphrey-Weidman technique.

Scholarly investigation of Weidman's performances and constructions of masculinity has begun. In her Modern Dance, Negro Dance: Race in Motion (2004, 83), Susan Manning discusses Weidman's Traditions (1938) in two ways. Based on her own viewing and on Edna Ocho's 1930s review of the work, she interprets the trio as a negotiation of new social patterns: two "revolutionaries" (in the original cast, danced by Limón and William Matons) subverting the actions of an "aristocrat" (originally danced by Weidman). She then re-interprets the work as representing a transition from understanding sexuality based on persona--the aristocratic fop/fairy--to a more energized, commanding view of sexuality based on choice of sexual partner. Extending this kind of analysis across his career would allow for a firmer understanding of Weidman--shy, white Midwesterner, American modern dance pioneer, and cultural hero--as well as a more nuanced understanding of how dance and dancing construct masculinity.

Notes
2 Jonette Lancos's Weidman biography includes a section of remembrances from his dancers, among them Deborah Carr, Rosalind Pierson and Deborah Jowitt, that make this clear.

3 This brief biography appears in Clay Daniel's 2007 "Reconstructing Weidman: A Dancer's Perspective." Dance Research Journal. 39,2 (Winter, 2007): 83-98. Daniel notes that Weidman's biography was used with permission from the private collection of former Weidman dancer, Dot Murphy.

4 Also from Daniel's investigation of Murphy's papers.

5 I saw the work in rehearsal and performance when Clay Daniel reconstructed portions of it at the University of North Carolina, Greensboro in 2006.

For full references to works cited in this essay, see Selected Resources for Further Research.

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