

Bennington School of the Dance (1934-1942)

by Sali Ann Kriegsman



Introduction

In the summer of 1934, in the depths of the Great Depression, the Bennington School of the Dance began an audacious experiment on the campus of Bennington College, a small progressive women's college in Vermont's Green Mountains. The enterprise brought together in common cause prominent figures and viewpoints in the burgeoning young world of modern dance. Over the course of its nine summer sessions, modern dance in America coalesced into a movement and its influence spread to every corner of the country.

Although the School was initially conceived to be a training ground for dancers and dance teachers—the first center devoted wholly to the study of modern dance under the aegis of an institution of higher learning—it quickly became as well a haven for leading dance artists of the time; a laboratory for experienced and neophyte choreographers; a major production center drawing informed audiences and critics to programs of new works; a testing site for subsequent New York premieres and tours; and an arena for experiment in which the sister arts of music, drama, design, and poetry were assembled in the service of dance.

Founding Philosophy and Curriculum

The School's visionary founders were [Martha Hill](#), who taught dance concurrently at Bennington College and New York University, and Mary Josephine Shelly (1902-1976), administrator and physical education teacher at New College, Columbia University Teachers College. Robert Devore Leigh (1890-1961), Bennington College's first president, invited Hill and Shelly to create and lead this new enterprise.

At Bennington, Martha Hill put into practice her belief that a dance student must learn through direct contact with the professional artist and that dance training must occur in the context of professional production. Teachers learned how

to teach dance technique and composition by dancing and composing themselves. In dance composition courses with Hill, [Bessie Schönberg](#), and Louis Horst (1884-1964)—[Martha Graham](#)'s music director—students made their own dances and studied musical forms and structures. Hill and stage designer Arch Lauterer (1904-1957) offered experimental workshops in collaborative possibilities for choreographers, musicians, designers, and poets.

The six-week curriculum focused on technique and composition. There were laboratories and workshops in choreography, music for the dance, and stage design and production, and even a few courses in dance history, criticism, and notation. By 1940, subjects included ballet, tap, and folk dance. Rigor, discipline, form, systematic method, and historical models were considered prerequisites for dance composition. Individual creativity was fostered; amorphous self-expression was discouraged.

Faculty and Guest Artists

The core faculty – Martha Graham, [Doris Humphrey](#), [Charles Weidman](#) and [Hanya Holm](#) – came to be known as “The Big Four” at Bennington. They brought their dancers with them to teach and perform in works they created during the Bennington sessions. Bennington was a crucial source of support for these and other artists, providing the time, opportunity, and resources to make new works; food and housing for their companies; a pool of apprentice dancers from which to enlarge their groups; and composers and designers with whom to collaborate. Bennington became a model for supporting artists with the kind of fellowships, commissions, and residencies for choreographers and their companies that proliferated during the next decades.

The dance groups of The Big Four were shaped in the technical and stylistic image of their creative leaders. They existed to perform the

choreography of their leader and no other. Though the groups were unified, within each group dancers were markedly individual. They were of different sizes, shapes, personalities, and abilities. Cohesiveness came from intimate contact with the powerful creative force, charismatic command, and singular aesthetic point of view of the leader.

The Bennington faculty also included John Martin (1893-1985), the first dance critic of The New York Times and a modern dance champion whose lectures, courses, and writings brought this new dance art into public prominence; Bessie Schönberg; composer-accompanist Norman Lloyd (1909-1980); and stage designer Arch Lauterer, who designed and supervised productions and transformed the 150-seat College Theater and 500-seat Vermont State Armory in the town of Bennington into performance spaces.

Hill broadened the range of the School beyond its core artists and faculty by presenting performances and lectures by “outsiders.” For example, the School sponsored the world debut of Lincoln Kirstein’s experimental Ballet Caravan in 1936, premiering Americana ballets by [Eugene Loring](#), [Lew Christensen](#), and William Dollar, and the troupe’s return in 1937. There were also recitals by members of the New Dance League, a leading Leftist group.

Students

Approximately 1,000 students from every state and several countries studied at Bennington with the masters. Most were dance teachers from high school and university physical education departments where dance was taught as a form of physical exercise. Inspired, they returned to their gymnasiums, classrooms, and communities and began to teach new dance forms and book engagements for the modern dance companies and artists they encountered at Bennington. A touring network consisting of college physical education

departments came to be known as the gymnasium circuit.

The School’s students comprised a generation of choreographers and performers who would go on to distinctive careers: William Bales, [Merce Cunningham](#), Jean Erdman, Nina Fonaroff, Eve Gentry, [Anna Halprin](#), [Erick Hawkins](#), Ann Hutchinson, Pearl Lang, Welland Lathrop, Katherine Litz, Iris Mabry, Barbara Mettler, [Alwin Nikolais](#), Nona Schurman, and Sybil Shearer. Bennington students also included educators whose influence spread across America: Ruth Alexander, Helen Alkire, Ruth Bloomer, Alma Hawkins, Truda Kaschmann, Louise Kloepper, Marian Knighton, Eleanor Lauer, Gertrude Lippincott, Ruth Murray, Barbara Page, Esther Pease, Helen Priest, Muriel Stuart, Virginia Tanner, Betty Lynd Thompson, Theodora Wiesner, and Mary Ann Wells.

Evolution in Modern Dance

During the Bennington years, the sharp, percussive outcries of the early experiments in modern dance began to give way to a more fluid, even lyrical movement. The modern dance was evolving from the darkly austere “abstract” style of the 1920s and early 1930s to a more consciously programmatic dance theater. Costumes, stage design, music, spoken word, and poetry were employed with movement to magnify themes and concerns of the time: the threat to liberty and life, the rise of fascism, the hypocrisy of war, the search for meaning in the American past, the relationship of individual and society, and the elusive goal of harmony in human relations. Extensive program notes accompanied dances to explicate the choreographer’s intent and help audiences “understand” this new art. Longer dances lasting half a program or an evening replaced short solo recital pieces. Large groups of dancers flooded the stage. The dance recital developed into a theater form.

Forty-two works premiered during six Bennington summer sessions, including 16 dances choreographed by The Big Four: Martha Graham's *Panorama*, *Opening Dance*, *Immediate Tragedy*, *American Document*, *El Penitente*, *Letter to the World*, and *Punch and the Judy*; Doris Humphrey's *New Dance*, *With My Red Fires*, *Passacaglia in C minor*, and *Decade*; Charles Weidman's *Quest* and *Opus 51*, and Hanya Holm's *Trend*, *Dance Sonata*, and *Dance of Work and Play*. Twenty-six new dances were composed by neophyte choreographers, most of them dancers in the ensembles of The Big Four: Ethel Butler, Merce Cunningham, Jane Dudley, Sophie Maslow, William Bales, Jean Erdman, Erick Hawkins, Esther Junger, Eleanor King, Louise Kloepper, [José Limón](#), [Anna Sokolow](#), and Marian Van Tuyl. Music was written for them by composers in residence including Vivian Fine, Ray Green, Louis Horst, Hunter Johnson, Harrison Kerr, Norman Lloyd, Robert McBride, Jerome Moross, Alex North, Lionel Nowak, Harvey Pollins, Wallingford Riegger, Gregory Tucker, and Esther Williamson.

The spirit of innovation and rebellion was in Bennington's DNA. Even before the School's end in 1942, some members of the youngest generation at Bennington were questioning ideas that seemed to them to be hardening into orthodoxies. Iconoclasts including Merce Cunningham, Jean Erdman, Ann Halprin, and Sybil Shearer set out on their own paths.

After five summer sessions of the School of the Dance (1934-1938), one summer session held by invitation at Mills College in Northern California (1939) and two expanded sessions involving Bennington College's faculty in theater and music under the umbrella Bennington School of the Arts, the project ended in 1942. It was reconceived in 1948 at Connecticut College under the new banner "[American Dance Festival](#)."

Historical Context

The Bennington experiment was shaped by a dark, but regenerative, time in American history: the Great Depression, Recovery and the New Deal, and a looming world conflagration. Although the Bennington years were a time of economic, social, and political turbulence and of widespread fear and disillusionment, it was also a time of uncommon energy, pluck, and vision. The "can do" spirit of the New Deal and its promise to rebuild society along more just and progressive lines permeated all aspects of life, including the arts. Dancers, like other Americans, were impelled to try to work together toward goals that were impossible to achieve alone. In the bustle of national recovery, the insurgent modern dance art took hold and spread like wildfire.

Impact

"Unity in diversity" was an ideal associated with Bennington. Each of The Big Four had competing theories and techniques, which they nurtured zealously with devoted acolytes. Modern dance as a movement matured and gained momentum in these years. The School of the Dance served as a vibrant testing ground, a modern dance "commons." Critics and journalists were drawn to the School and wrote about modern dance for local and national newspapers.

The Bennington School of Dance helped win legitimacy for modern dance as an American art and an appropriate subject of higher education. It fostered commitment, purpose, experimentation, collaboration, study, growth, and the systematic transmission of these values. The School nurtured individual careers and provided unique opportunities for creative work, collaboration, and recognition. Bennington College gave modern dance more than shelter; it conferred an aura of academic respectability with attendant cultural and intellectual status. In return, the School gave the newborn college an international reputation

and enlarged its constituency and influence beyond a small, elite class of undergraduate women. The Bennington model spurred American colleges to become major ports of support for modern dance in the years that followed.

This modest experiment in the bucolic green hills of Vermont had deep and lasting impact on dance in the 20th Century. The influence of two intrepid women, Hill and Shelly, and the space, time, and opportunity given to them by this fledgling experimental college and its first president Robert Leigh—cannot be overstated. Any history of dance in America must credit the Bennington School of the Dance as one of the most far-reaching contributions to the growth and propagation of an original American art.

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