Anna Schuman Halprin (1920 - )
by Dr. Janice L. Ross

Anna Schuman Halprin is one of the "founding mothers" of the American avant-garde in modern dance. Beginning with her work in the late 1950s and early 1960s, she radically expanded the idea of what could constitute a dance, what kind of personal material was permissible as content in a dance work, and how to give voice to forgotten segments of our population -- people of color, the aged, the terminally ill. Among Halprin’s major contributions to the field of American dance, and arguably her most influential, has been to move pedagogy from the margins to the center.

In her earliest classrooms in the settlement houses of Boston, she re-imagined dance as a site of improvisatory invention rather than drill. She experimented with danced narratives of her own cultural position as a Jewish American in the late 1930s, and extended this into a fresh vision of dance as a path of social inquiry in the 1960s. Later, in the 1980s and 1990s, her processes evolved into using dance as a map for personal reckoning and deep emotional confrontation about health and survival. Most recently, Halprin has probed uses of dance as an affirmation of the pleasures that reside in an aging body in the 21st century. She has made the dance studio a lab for investigating bodily wisdom. She has re-envisioned dance performance as an instruction manual for the stages of life.

Ann Schuman was born July 13, 1920, in Wilmette, Illinois, to Ida Schiff, daughter of Lithuanian immigrants, and Isadore Schuman, a native of Odessa, Russia. Her father, who had no education beyond elementary school, went from wholesaling women's clothing to being a successful real estate entrepreneur as the family rose rapidly into upper-middle-class comfort. Halprin, who had two older brothers, was indulged by her mother, a housewife with a high school education, with interpretive dance lessons as a child. She also enjoyed exposure to the arts through the model Progressive education she received in the Winnetka, Illinois elementary, middle and high schools. By the time she entered the University of Wisconsin at Madison in 1937, Halprin knew she wanted to be a dancer. At U.W., Halprin, a fiery red-headed performer, became a protégé of the chair of the dance program, the distinguished dance educator Margaret H'Doubler. She received her B.A. in 1941 and became active in the student dance group Orchesis, for which she choreographed several dances on Jewish themes. It was at U.W. that she met Lawrence Halprin, a distinguished landscape architect and environmental designer and a graduate student in biology at U.W. They were married on Sept. 19, 1940.

After a brief stint performing on Broadway with Doris Humphrey’s company, Halprin, with her husband, moved to San Francisco in 1945, where their daughters Daria Halprin Khalighi, who became an expressive arts therapist, and Rana Halprin, who became a marriage counselor, were born in 1948 and 1951 respectively. In San Francisco, Halprin co-founded a dance studio with Welland Lathrop and, soon after, her own company, The San Francisco Dancers Workshop, with which she toured Europe to great acclaim in 1963 and 1965. It was on this tour that she premiered Parades and Changes, the work that generated controversy for her both in Europe and the United States.

Parades and Changes has since become emblematic of the capacity of Halprin’s work to echo and amplify many of the social and political values of the 1960s, from the broad questioning of the status of the body in public space to the relationship between agency and structure and how to stage the simple state of being present. The dancers’ movements in each section of Parades and
Changes are drawn from a repertoire of tasks—non-theatrical, practical actions that are routinely performed as part of daily life. Instead of being heavily mediated by virtuoso movement technique, the challenge in doing these actions lies in not theatricalizing them, in making them as immediately visually accessible and undifferentiated from life as possible. Halprin’s premise in Parades and Changes aligns closely with the tactics of the mass public actions of the anti-Vietnam War protests, since both her dances and the civil disobedience collapsed the divide between performer and spectator, activist and citizen.

It was not accidental that the name Halprin gave to the group of dancers who worked and performed with her from the late 1950s through to the 1970s, and on whom she created Parades and Changes, was The San Francisco Dancers’ Workshop. The name is, of course, a nod to the Bauhaus aesthetic she had imbibed with her husband Lawrence Halprin in the circle around Walter Gropius at Harvard’s School of Design in the late 1940s, while Lawrence Halprin was a student there. This name also speaks to Anna Halprin’s lifelong focus on the collective and social process of creation and reception, which has always surrounded her vision of dance as a deeply participatory practice – an action where the dance remakes the dancer. By the 1960s, Halprin’s work had become a key unlocking doors leading to wide experimentation by other artists working in visual arts, theater, music, Happenings, and performance art. Her use of dance as her compass through the stages of life from youth into old age, and the stages of the profession—from dancer, choreographer, teacher, performance theorist, community leader, healer, wife, mother, cancer survivor, and ultimately dancing elder—has proven inspirational to generations of dancers, teachers, health care providers and expressive arts therapists. In 1978, Halprin co-founded with her daughter, Daria Halprin, The Tamalpa Institute, a center in Marin County, California, as a venue to focus specifically on this expressive arts therapy work. (In the 1970s, after surviving cancer, she changed her name from Ann to Anna—closer to her Hebrew name of Hannah.)

Leading artists who have studied with Halprin include the choreographers Meredith Monk, Trisha Brown, Yvonne Rainer, Simone Forti, Ruth Emerson, and Sally Gross. Over the years, her legendary outdoor deck on the hillside of her home in Marin County, California, has been a platform for innovation with artists including Merce Cunningham, Eiko and Koma, and Min Tanaka; composers John Cage, Luciano Berio, Terry Riley, LeMonte Young, and Morton Subotnick; visual artists Robert Morris and Robert Whiteman; poets Richard Brautigan, James Broughton, and Michael McClure, among others.

Halprin has also investigated numerous social issues through dance and participatory audience events. Starting in 1982, Halprin began her annual performances of Circle the Earth: A Planetary Dance for Peace, a community dance ritual designed to address challenging social and individual life issues globally. As an outgrowth of her work with individuals with AIDS, she also founded two on-going workshop groups, one for men, Positive Motion, and one for women, Women with Wings. In 1995, her Planetary Dance: A Prayer for Peace, a dance spectacle with 400 participants, was staged in Berlin at an invitational event commemorating the 50th anniversary of the signing of the Potsdam Treaty ending World War II.

Halprin is the recipient of many honors including a Guggenheim Fellowship, a
Fulbright Specialist Fellowship, N.E.A. Fellowships and six honorary degrees, including a Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin in 1994, and awards from the American Dance Guild, Dance/USA, and many others. In 1997, Anna received the Samuel H. Scripps Award for Lifetime Achievement in Modern Dance from the American Dance Festival.

Through her performing and teaching, which she continues in her 90s, Halprin created the groundwork for a redefinition of American modern dance as a contemporary ritual and a forum for the artist as a morally, psychologically, and socially engaged individual. In September, 2004, she performed a challenging dance about confronting terminal illness, Intensive Care: Reflections on Death and Dying, at the Centre Pompidou as an opening event for the Festival D’Automne in Paris. In 2005, she developed a filmed performance, Seniors Rocking, documenting a collaborative dance she made for seniors in a retirement center in Marin County. In these and other works, she reached back into the late 1960s, when she encountered the Gestalt therapist Fritz Perls and became an active conduit between this experimental form of therapy, which emphasizes personal responsibility, and dance improvisation. In 2009, an award-winning film, Breath Made Visible, a documentary of Halprin’s life in dance, premiered internationally. Halprin has continued creating new site-specific works, presenting Spirit of Place, a site-specific group dance in San Francisco’s Stern Grove, created as a tribute to Lawrence Halprin and to commemorate his gift of the design of the site to the city. In May of 2011, she presented Song of Songs at her Mountain Home Studio in Kentfield, California, an elegiac and erotic reminiscence of her 69-year marriage to Lawrence, performed by a husband-and-wife pair of Butoh dancers, Sinichi and Dana Iova-Koga, as a danced memorial to his passing.

Janice Ross, Professor, Drama Department, and Director, Dance Division, at Stanford University, is the author of Anna Halprin: Experience as Dance (UC Press 2007), winner of a de la Torre Bueno Award 2008 Special Citation, San Francisco Ballet at 75 (Chronicle Books 2007) and Moving Lessons: Margaret H’Doubler and The Beginning of Dance in American Education (University of Wisconsin 2001). Her awards include Guggenheim and Fulbright Fellowships. For ten years she was the staff dance critic for The Oakland Tribune and for twenty years a contributing editor to Dance Magazine. Her articles on dance have appeared in The New York Times and The Los Angeles Times among other publications. She is past president of the Society of Dance History Scholars.