

Martha Hill (1900-1995)

by Janet Soares

Martha Hill was an important catalyst in the development of American dance as an art form deserving serious study in colleges, universities, and arts institutions. As an educator and innovative administrator, she was the founding director of dance programs at Bennington College, Connecticut College Summer School of the Dance, and the [American Dance Festival](#), the Juilliard School, and New York University. Hill's leadership and unerring support of her colleagues has produced generations of America's most distinguished leaders in the dance field.

Born in East Palestine, Ohio, Martha Hill had a "bible belt" upbringing that forbade dancing, but her passion for movement led her to Michigan's Battle Creek Normal School of Physical Education (renamed the Kellogg School of Physical Education in 1919). Graduating in 1920, Hill continued her studies while assisting her teacher Marietta J. Lane for a year and then taking over Lane's position for the next two. In 1923 she accepted another teaching job at Kansas State Teachers College before moving to New York City in 1926, where she first encountered [Martha Graham](#). "It was instant conversion. That was it. I realized it was possible to communicate serious ideas in movement. It was what I was looking for," she explained (Soares, 2009, 22). But, out of funds, she returned to academe for a two-year stint from 1927 to 1929 at the University of Oregon in Eugene. "I needed to make a living so that I could [return] to study with Martha. It was my meal ticket," she explained (Soares, 22).

Hill returned to Manhattan to perform

with Graham's company of women, dancing in seminal works such as *Heretic* and *Primitive Mysteries* from 1929 to 1931 while also studying Dalcroze eurhythmics, teaching children at Columbia University's Lincoln School, and completing a BS degree from Teachers College, Columbia. She joined the New York University School of Education faculty in 1930, and in 1932 also became head of dance at the newly founded Bennington College in Vermont.

In 1934, Martha Hill, with Mary Jo Shelly as administrator and under President Robert Devore Leigh's directive, hired "the best there is" (Soares, 43) for the first faculty of the [Bennington Summer School of the Dance](#). Hill, who believed that students should learn directly from major dance figures, recruited Graham, [Doris Humphrey](#), [Hanya Holm](#), and [Charles Weidman](#) (labeled the Big Four) to teach and also create exemplary work for their companies-in-residence (often augmented by students), to be performed at the end of each season. From this auspicious beginning, Hill created a curriculum encompassing modern technique along with dance history and critical writing, repertory, dance composition, and music for dancers that has become the mainstay of dance departments across the United States. The Bennington summer sessions ran from 1934 to 1942 (with 1939's summer program shifted to Mills College, California), until curtailed by the hardships of World War II.

In 1948, Hill reinstated the Bennington model as the Connecticut College Summer School of the Dance in New London, Connecticut, formalizing the

summer's productions as the American Dance Festival (now relocated to Duke University in North Carolina.) She continued in this role until 1952, when she left, after also resigning from New York University and Bennington College, to become the first director of dance at The Juilliard School. Within this school of music, Hill championed the equal study of ballet and modern techniques for all dance majors, with [Antony Tudor](#) and Margaret Craske joining faculty members Graham, Humphrey, Louis Horst, [José Limón](#), and later [Anna Sokolow](#).

Committed to developing highly skilled, well-rounded dance artists within the conservatory environment, Hill designed a four-year degree for Juilliard that now highlighted the performance of major dance repertory along with commissioned works in both ballet and modern styles, enhanced by Juilliard's policy of live musical accompaniment for every public concert. She also expanded the study of dance to include Labanotation, anatomy, and electives such as classic Indian and Spanish dance, in addition to the school's music requirements.

This period was perhaps the happiest of Martha Hill's life: in 1952, after a long relationship, she married former president of Colorado College and administrator for New York City's Town Hall, Thurston Davies—a marriage sadly cut short by his death in 1961.

With Juilliard's move to become a constituent at Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts in 1968, Hill fought a difficult battle to retain the dance division as she had envisioned it. Through a series of political maneuvers, three-quarters of the new dance

complex were leased to [George Balanchine's School of American Ballet](#).

The uneasy sharing of space continued until 1990 when SAB moved to other quarters, five years after Hill was asked to retire at the age of 85. Hill continued to influence the growing success of the dance division as Artistic Director Emerita, advising students and maintaining an office at Juilliard for the next seven years while contributing as an advisor in the field for such international projects as the development of the Hong Kong Academy of the Arts.

Hill's contribution to dance included serving on panels for the United States Government and the City of New York, among many others, and she was recognized with awards from organizations such as the American Dance Guild and the Association of American Dance Companies. She received citations from New York University, Teachers College, Columbia University and others, and honorary degrees from Bennington, The Juilliard School, Mount Holyoke College, and Purchase College, SUNY, this last praising her as "a pioneer at the dawn of the golden age of modern dance, the art form which American exported to the rest of the world" (Soares, 309).

Hill died after a short illness at her home in Columbia Heights, Brooklyn, New York, at the age of 94. The Martha Hill Dance Fund, established to honor her memory as an educator and creative force, has presented Lifetime Achievement Awards annually since 2001.

For full citations to sources references in this essay, see [Selected Resources for Further Research](#).

Janet Mansfield Soares graduated from The Juilliard School and received a doctorate degree from Columbia University. She served on the dance faculties of Juilliard from 1962–1987 and Barnard College, Columbia University from 1963-2005. Her non-profit company, DANCES/Janet Soares, presented over 125 of her works in concert from 1974 to 1995. She is the author of *Louis Horst. Musician in a Dancer's World* (1994) and *Martha Hill and the Making of American Dance* (2009). She is now co-director of The NADINE Project (New ArtistsDance in New England) for the development of professional choreographers.