

## Doris Humphrey (1895-1958)

by Marcia B. Siegel

Doris Humphrey, one of the founders of American modern dance, is virtually unknown fifty years after her death. Her legacy endures in an aesthetic of humanistic idealism and a book of choreographic principles, but her mature choreography is seldom performed.

Humphrey began working at a time when art dance was best known through civic pageantry and private entertainments. As a specialty act, it imparted a tone of refinement to the more flamboyant attractions of the variety circuit. After the First World War, a new generation, with an eye on modernist developments in European art, began to cultivate higher aspirations for dance. Humphrey, [Martha Graham](#), and their peers had been trained in an eclectic mix of physical culture, drapery-clad interpretive dance, and exotic mysticism. Once on their own, they were determined to invent dances of noble artistic stature, dances that could reflect the experience of modern times. In opposition to the European ballet that was beginning to establish itself in North America, they wanted to move expressively, without drawing on any previously codified movement vocabularies or cultural models. This meant, for all of them in different ways, exploring the body's relation to time, space, gravity, energy, motion and emotion. Their first, stark efforts attracted devoted followers, mostly women, and small but supportive audiences.

Born in Oak Park, Illinois, Doris Humphrey was the only child of progressive middle-class parents. Fortified with training in free dance, folk and ballroom dancing, and a little ballet, she'd been teaching and performing for years by the time she was twenty. At the suggestion of her teacher, Mary Wood Hinman, she joined Denishawn, the successful Los Angeles-based company of [Ruth St. Denis](#) and [Ted Shawn](#), in 1917.

She became a principal dancer and a co-choreographer of St. Denis's music visualizations, but by 1928 she was longing to explore her own ideas.

Humphrey started her independent career as a collaborator, not as a lone creative adventurer, in partnership with musician-manager Pauline Lawrence and dancer-choreographer [Charles Weidman](#). The Humphrey-Weidman company lasted until World War II, when the alliance broke up and the financial situation became restrictive. Within three years, her protégé [José Limón](#) had invited her to become artistic director of his newly-formed dance company. From 1947 until her death from cancer in 1958, Humphrey not only taught and mentored dancers, including Limón, she produced some of her best choreography, for the Limón company and for a group of pre-professional dancers at the Juilliard School.

• • •

Humphrey's early dances, from 1928 to the mid-1930s, were brief and exploratory, but each one made a strong statement. *Air for the G String*, premiered on the first Humphrey-Weidman concert, at the Little Theater in Brooklyn, March 24, 1928, was a walking dance for five women. With costumes and movement design tracing smooth but simple art-deco curves, the dance retained some of the artiness of its Denishawn predecessors, but it gave a fresh interpretation to the familiar Bach music. On the same concert she applied her gift for design in an abstract work. *Color Harmony*, a group dance, explored then-current theories identifying the emotional effects that could be produced by specific colors and color combinations. This dance also suggested the way a leader could mold a group to create a collective resolution.

A series of nature dances during this period demonstrate Humphrey's interest in basic cycles, processes, and life forces as a source for choreographic material. *Water Study*, shown in the fall of 1928, was a much more radical work than anything she had attempted. In silence, 16 women used their breath rhythms to activate body movement and locomotive group patterns replicating the ebb and flow of waves, eddies, and tides.

*Life of the Bee* (1929), inspired by the insect studies of Maurice Maeterlinck, staged the activity of a bee colony and its selection of a new queen. The battle between the old and new queens provided a dramatic focus for the dance, but Humphrey was primarily attracted to the remarkable social organization of the bees. This translated, for her as for Maeterlinck, into an anthropomorphic utopianism.

The notion of perfect cooperation in the interest of group survival soon translated into a dance directly about human interaction. *The Shakers* (1931) depicted the rigorous gender separation and the dancing rituals that facilitated spiritual release for the members of the utopian Protestant sect, who settled several communities in 19<sup>th</sup> century America. Humphrey admired the Shakers' discipline, the simple beauty of their architecture and crafts, and their communitarian spirituality.

Drawing on the analogy between abstract movement and human drives that she had realized so powerfully in her solo *Two Ecstatic Themes* (1931), Humphrey made a series of dances celebrating the action and expression of everyday life. She did not profess any political affiliation, but she was married to a socialist, and lived for years in a communal arrangement in New York, sharing domestic life with her husband, Charles Woodford; her son, Charles Humphrey Woodford; and her dance

partners Lawrence, Limón and Weidman. She didn't intend to proselytize in her dances, but to represent a better world, achieved through collective dance action.

From the early days, Humphrey developed movement and choreography together. She was not invested in arriving at classroom exercises or a replicable technique. What was known as the Humphrey-Weidman technique was a loose assemblage of ideas that both directors used to train dancers for their work, and that were later taught independently and eventually subsumed into the José Limón technique. H-W technique, however, did have a clear set of principles that Humphrey articulated and that came to be known as "fall and recovery." Starting with basic physical resources like breath, weight, balance, and spatial orientation, the dancer moves between the "death" of stasis and the activity of maintaining balance. As the body approaches an extreme of off-balance, it reverses or rebounds into another risky trajectory. The resulting vocabulary of swings, suspensions, falls, leaps, and turns, with variations of energy and three-dimensional sculpting effects, produces exciting, viscerally expressive movement.

• • •

Humphrey's major work of the 1930s, *New Dance Trilogy*, put together all these concerns: the use of abstraction to express and comment on contemporary life, the crafting of group design and body movement to convey great life themes, and the creation of models for building a less flawed community through group action. The sections of the trilogy premiered over a year's time (1935-36) in New York and Bennington, Vermont. As an acknowledged leader of the field, the Humphrey-Weidman Company was a key element of the Bennington [College] School of Dance, the first major institution devoted to modern

dance training and creative work. Humphrey, Weidman, and members of the company served on the faculty of the summer sessions in Vermont, continuing to develop the technique classes which they offered in their New York studio during the winter, and teaching their old dances in repertory classes. *New Dance* was choreographed in part at Bennington, and its intended first section, *With My Red Fires*, premiered there with an augmented Humphrey-Weidman group incorporating 29 workshop members drawn from the school.

The trilogy treated three different aspects of modern life, and the sections were choreographed in different theatrical styles. *New Dance*, choreographed first but intended as an affirmative culmination, depicted what Humphrey described as "a brotherhood of man [in which] the individual has his place within that group." (Siegel, 157) *Theatre Piece* satirized the foibles of American commercial and social life. *With My Red Fires* was a harsh depiction of matriarchal prejudice and tribal vengeance, with the large ensemble serving as a sort of Greek chorus, a metaphorical contemporary crowd that celebrated its heroes and then turned against them under the incitement of a crazed leader. The three dances were never performed together on a single program.

In 1938, Bennington also supported Humphrey's large-scale orchestration of the Bach *Passacaglia in C Minor*. Her other important works of the 1930's included the three-part ensemble work *Pleasures of Counterpoint*; the duets with Weidman *Rudepoema* and *Duo-Drama*; and the comedy *Race of Life*, based on the cartoons of James Thurber. Humphrey was unable to hold the company together during World War II. Weidman was working in the commercial theater. Limón was beginning his independent choreographic career.

Other company members dispersed into the armed services. It became harder to marshal enough dancers to fulfill the touring engagements that constituted the company's livelihood. Humphrey herself waged a losing battle with arthritis and retired from dancing in May, 1944. Humphrey-Weidman as a producing organization came to an end that fall.

• • •

During the next, transitional years, Humphrey remained an active presence in the dance world, teaching, choreographing on a modest scale, serving as an adviser to the Dance Center of the 92<sup>nd</sup> Street YM-YWHA, and mentoring other dancers, chiefly Weidman, Pauline Koner, and Limón. She and Limón had shared a very successful all-Bach program at the Humphrey-Weidman Studio Theater at the end of 1942, and their relationship gradually matured into a unique partnership. Ceding the onstage limelight to his impressive presence, she remained in the role of mentor for his choreographic work. When the components of Humphrey-Weidman fell away and she no longer had a large group to work with, her main instrument became the company of theatrically skilled dancers that Limón was building, which was to include Koner, Lucas Hoving, Betty Jones, and Ruth Currier. Humphrey's dances became less abstract and more dramatically focused.

Beginning with *Lament for Ignacio Sánchez Mejías* (1946), a eulogy for a fallen bullfighter with spoken lines from Federico García Lorca, Humphrey created several impressionistic dances that complimented Limón's choreography in the repertory, notably *Night Spell* (1951), *Ritmo Jondo* (1952), *Ruins and Visions* (1953), and her most poignant and enduring late work, *Day on Earth* (1947). Active on the faculty of the dance division at the Juilliard School of

Music from the time of its establishment in 1951, Humphrey undertook the directorship of Juilliard Dance Theater, a pre-professional company the school started in 1954. She was also a founder and advisor to the Merry-Go-Rounders, a dance company performing for young audiences, based at the 92<sup>nd</sup> Street Y.

*Humphrey, Howling Near Heaven - Twyla Tharp and the Reinvention of Modern Dance*, and four collections of reviews and essays. She is an internationally known teacher, lecturer and dance critic.

For Doris Humphrey, dance and choreography were always bigger than one person's contributions. She not only encouraged collaborative choreographic efforts within Humphrey-Weidman, she allowed former dancers to teach her compositions to their own students. As students in her repertory classes rehearsed her dances, Labanotators were often invited in to document the choreography. These records are still used by student groups to learn reading, directing and performing from a written dance score. With her own career in eclipse and her health declining, Humphrey continued to serve as a tireless mentor and creative midwife, lending her expert eye and candid advice to young choreographers in her composition classes, as well as to professionals seeking new directions in their careers.

During her final illness in the fall of 1958, Humphrey completed her long-planned book on choreography, *The Art of Making Dances*, and began her autobiography. Virtually bedridden, she worked with Ruth Currier on the *Bach Brandenburg Concerto No. 4* for Juilliard Dance Theater. She died in New York on December 29, 1958.

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

---

**Marcia B. Siegel** is the author of *The Shapes of Change - Images of American Dance, Days on Earth - The Dance of Doris*