

New Dance Group (1932-2009)

by Victoria Phillips



Established in 1932 by six young Jewish women on the Lower East Side of New York City, New Dance Group (NDG) trained leaders of the American dance through the twenty-first century. Founded with the desire to combine radical left-wing politics with modern dance, NDG proclaimed in its first anniversary bulletin in March, 1933: "Dance is a Weapon of the Class Struggle." The early NDG included concert dance soloists, a men's group, ensembles that performed in union houses, and a folk dance unit. By the mid-1930s, the school boasted an enrollment of 300 students, including workers and children.

Responding to the Great Depression that officially began in 1929, NDG founders became inspired by the Workers Cultural Federation (WCF). In 1931, a contingent of artists who had met with Communist Party leaders in Moscow returned to the U.S. and declared, "Art is a Weapon." The WCF included writers, musicians, filmmakers, photographers, and Edith Segal's Red Dancers. The future NDG members trained at the Mary Wigman School in New York City, where they learned the formative German free dance and movement-based improvisation. In 1932, they formed NDG to participate in a rally to mourn the death of Harry Simms, a communist youth who had been shot during a miners' strike in the South. The WCF-inspired collaboration among artists including dancers, musicians and writers continued at NDG. Under the umbrella of the Workers Dance League, it joined [Anna Sokolow](#)'s celebrated Dance Unit, Segal's Red Dancers and at least ten other groups such as the Harlem Prolets, The Needle Trade Workers Union Dance Group, and the Nature Friends, a group of German communist hikers.

The Group followed socialist practices to execute its plan for a new dance. The NDG school charged 10 cents a class for a three-

hour session devoted to technique, improvisation, and discussions of Marxist thought. The performers followed theatrical scripts published in *Workers Theatre* magazine, and collaborated with the Musicians League. The inspiration for works began with dance improvisation based on social themes such as *Strike* (1932). The dancers' political roots led them to create a choreographic collective; individuals were not necessarily credited with specific dance works. These efforts led to pieces such as *On the Barricades*, *Hunger*, and *Van der Lubbe's Head*, although the *New York Times* cited founder Miriam Blecher as the creator of this work. *Van der Lubbe's Head* became celebrated both by radical and mainstream critics. While garnering first place in the 1934 Soviet-inspired Spartakiad, winning a bronze statue of Lenin, the work also earned strong reviews in the *Times* from the paper's highly discerning dance critic, John Martin. NDG's performing units included workers, "shock troupes," and folk dance groups; they joined professional dancers to present works and teach in union halls. They embodied the Communist Party's call to action, "Workers of the World Unite!"

Yet NDG changed in lock step with the culture of revolution; as it became a recognized institution, it also began to realize the potency of individual choreographers. Jane Dudley set her first seminal work, *Time is Money* (1934), to a communist writer's poem published in the radical journal, *New Masses*. Individuals including Blecher, Dudley, and Sophie Maslow presented their solos on New York City concert stages. Yet maintaining the collectivist tenets, they shared subjects with filmmakers and musicians who protested sharecropping, the oppression of farm workers, and fascism.

The 1935 Nazi-Soviet Pact created an untenable alliance between the German Nazis and the Soviet Communists, particularly for the Jewish dancers, and many severed their ties to the Communist Party of the United States. As dancers began to follow the Popular Front, which retained radical ideology without Party membership, they became known as "fellow travellers." NDG remained dedicated to presenting works with radical themes. *Workers Theatre* magazine became *New Theatre*, and the Workers Dance League became the New Dance League. It sponsored performances including all-male selections and featuring dancers [José Limón](#) and [Charles Weidman](#). In keeping with both revolutionary and radical tenets, these choreographers included African Americans in their works. Under the direction of Judith Delman, New Dance Group registered itself as a not-for-profit corporation in 1939.

As New Dance Group entered the mainstream, it maintained its dedication to social justice. Some members trained under [Martha Graham](#), including Dudley, Maslow, Jean Erdman, and Marjorie Mazia. At the same time, Erdman produced *Tenant of the Street* (1938), a work about homelessness. Dancers continued to work with radical musicians Woody Guthrie, Alex North, and Earl Robinson; they set works to jazz and spirituals. Maslow became a pillar at NDG with her board leadership and choreography, including *Dust Bowl Ballads* (1941), with music by Guthrie. NDG became the first mainstream dance school to support African American students and choreographers, including [Pearl Primus](#), Donald McKayle, and Jean-Léon Destiné. Primus choreographed dances based on poetry by radical writers, including Langston Hughes in her *The Negro Speaks of Waters* (1944). Her students, including McKayle, continued in her footsteps; in 1959, he protested the treatment of workers and prison chain gangs with *Rainbow 'Round My*

Shoulder. Calls for people to unite for equality and other seemingly radical American freedoms remained embedded in the NDG institution.

In the 1940s, choreographers embraced patriotic sentiment while maintaining their belief in a leftist social agenda under the tenet that protest was deeply American. In 1941, the NDG performed in New York City with a program titled *American Dances*. The evening included Dudley's *Harmonica Breakdown* (1938), which demonstrated the plight of workers and African Americans in a work she called a "misery dance" (*Harmonica Breakdown*, 1995). Maslow lamented the Depression-era farmland Dust Bowl in her depiction of the struggle of farm workers. Yet the *American Dances* season also marked the last performance of a collective choreographic work. However, in the same year as *American Dances*, the NDG board of directors initiated a letter writing campaign to free Earl Browder, a Communist Party leader in the U.S. During World War II, Dudley choreographed a celebratory work about sailors on leave, and NDG offered free classes to soldiers in New York. One dancer remembered, "We were not Communists. We just believed everything they believed" (Anthony, 2006).

By the end of World War II, NDG became a home for a group of dance companies named for the choreographers themselves. As the institution grew, Dudley and Maslow formed a Trio with William Bales, Hadassa brought works and classes inspired by Middle Eastern themes, and Mary Anthony bravely risked being blacklisted when she choreographed *The Devil in Massachusetts* (1952), which protested the tactics of HUAC hearings and Senator Joseph McCarthy during the cold war "Red Scare." Indeed, the publication "Red Channels" named NDG performer and teacher Muriel Manings along with Anna Sokolow and Jerome Robbins for subversive activities. Although

the Federal Bureau of Investigation watched NDG and some of its members, a myriad of dancers passed through the NDG studios for rehearsals, as teachers, or for meetings, including [Anna Sokolow](#), Daniel Nagrin, [Doris Humphrey](#), José Limón, [Alvin Ailey](#), and [Jerome Robbins](#). Modern dance luminaries including Graham star Ethel Winter and Bertram Ross, who had no political affiliations, taught technique classes at the studios. The school remained hub, providing classes for professionals, non-dancers, and children. Choreographers shared dancers who took class there. The curriculum included Afro-Caribbean, modern, Middle Eastern, folk dance, and even ballet.

In 1953, NDG produced its first Broadway season. In 1955, NDG firmly entered the capitalist system when it purchased a building in Manhattan's theater district for the school and to house rehearsals for the choreographers. Jane Dudley signed the deed. The institutional transition from communal membership to capitalist ownership became finalized. Yet NDG's corporation formed a board of directors with members, not titled officers. The dancers and their companies thrived, and the building secured the group's place as a New York City institution.

By the 1960s, NDG's collective spirit began to wane as leaders left for universities or opened independent studios. Financial problems began to plague NDG. Members of the board of directors struggled to find solutions. Yet the studio remained a creative center for dissonant dance activities. In 1967, Sokolow used the studios to rehearse dancers for the musical *Hair*, with songs protesting the war in Vietnam, depicting illegal drug use, sexual freedom, and irreverence for the American flag. Although producers removed Sokolow as choreographer before the Off-Broadway opening at Joseph Papp's Public Theater,

graphic black-and-white pictures of Sokolow's work remain in the NDG archives. In 1974, Joyce Trisler's NDG workshop production of Stravinsky's *Sacre du Printemps* provided the impetus for the formation of the Joyce Trisler Danscompany. While these productions remained significant, NDG increasingly drew income from dance studio rentals.

With deficits mounting, the NDG board turned to dancer Rick Schussel in 1983. In 1984, the board eliminated "members" and replaced them with titled officers. As treasurer, Schussel demanded that each board member contribute money to the corporation; this drove out most founding members who, as dancers, had little extra income or savings. Schussel became artistic director and treasurer, and a waning group of board officers supported his decisions to mortgage the building repeatedly and invest NDG funds in the stock market. In addition, NDG began to pay expenses with credit cards.

Despite these developments, NDG's legacy remained potent, which is reflected in its inclusion in the Dance Heritage Coalition's 2000 exhibition, "America's Irreplaceable Dance Treasures: the First 100." Recognizing the NDG seventieth anniversary, political luminaries from Vice President Dick Cheney to Hillary Clinton wrote letters of congratulations. Yet questionable financial dealings drew attention to NDG's twenty-first century practices. In 2003, the attorney general's office of New York launched an investigation. As the investigation continued, NDG sold its building and opened a new, lavish studio in rented space. Still, financial problems and lawsuits plagued the institution. Artistic practices became frenzied. Asserting that NDG owned all works choreographed under the NDG umbrella from the 1930s due to its "collectivist roots," in 2007 Schussel began

rehearsing works by Dudley, Maslow, and Erdman for a benefit performance. Legal action firmly established the choreographers as the owners of their works. As deficits mounted at the new studios, a new NDG board chosen in cooperation with the attorney general's office elected to close operations in 2009.

With the permission of choreographers and dancers, in 2008 The Centre National de la Danse opened an exhibit on NDG titled "Dance is a Weapon"; it toured France for two years. In 2009, Historic Dance Theatre began a lecture series that presented NDG works in historical context. In the same year, the Martha Graham Dance Company staged a production of NDG works, which it also titled "Dance is a Weapon"; it toured nationally through 2011. In 2012, the 92nd Street YW/YMHA celebrated the NDG choreographic legacy in a lecture series. While the NDG choreographic legacy remains with the estates of the individual artists, its rich document-based and photographic archives have been deposited at the Library of Congress in Washington, DC.

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

Victoria Phillips has published works in the *New York Times*, *American Communist History*, *Dance Research Journal*, *Ballet Review*, and *Dance Chronicle*. In France, 2008-2010, she curated "Dance is a Weapon," and her exhibit, "Politics and the Dancing Body," co-curated with Elizabeth Aldrich at the Library of Congress can be accessed at myloc.gov/exhibitions/politics-and-dance/Pages/default.aspx