

Ted Shawn (1891 - 1972)

by Paul A. Scolieri

The “Father of American Dance,” Ted Shawn was the first American man to attain international prominence as a dancer and choreographer. Shawn contributed to the dramatic transformation of the principles, practices, and perceptions of dance from a popular entertainment and pastime into a theatrical art. He accomplished this largely through choreography and writing that emphasized dancing as a sacred, nationalist, and artistic form of human expression and challenged prevailing attitudes that associated dancing with prostitution, social degeneracy, and commerce. In so doing, he contributed to the development of the modern dance movement in the U.S. and helped to legitimate dancing as a viable profession for men.

Edwin Myers Shawn was born and raised in Kansas City, Missouri, and moved to Colorado in order to attend the University of Denver where he studied to become a Methodist minister. However, he was forced to leave the university when he contracted diphtheria and was temporarily paralyzed from the waist down. As a means of regaining his physical strength, he began to study dance with Hazel Wallack, a former ballet dancer with the Metropolitan Opera, an experience that redirected his life’s path away from the church and toward the theater. In 1912, Shawn relocated again, this time to Los Angeles, where he began to teach and perform ballroom dancing. In 1913, he conceived of and choreographed the first all-dance film, *Dances of the Ages*, which was produced by the Thomas A. Edison Company. The short film dramatizes the tension between “primitive” and “modern” dancing, a tension that preoccupied many of Shawn’s dances and writings throughout his life.

In 1914, Shawn moved to New York, where he met the international dance legend [Ruth St. Denis](#). In a matter of months, the two

married and formed a professional partnership. Together they founded Denishawn, the first modern dance company and school in the U.S. Shawn directed the school and stewarded the company’s trailblazing domestic and international tours on the vaudeville and concert hall circuits, including the first ever tour by an American dance company in the Far East in 1925-26. Denishawn dancers also performed at society events, as well as in church services, stadium concerts and pageants, benefits, and Hollywood films. Shawn contributed to the company’s diverse repertory of dances based on Oriental and American themes, historical pageantry, music visualizations, and “moving sculpture” routines. He also influenced several generations of dancers and dance teachers who flocked to the Denishawn schools in New York and Los Angeles or to one of its satellites in other major U.S. cities. A few of his students went on to become legendary choreographers and performers in their own right, most notably his protégées [Martha Graham](#), [Jack Cole](#), [Doris Humphrey](#), and [Charles Weidman](#).

By 1930, Denishawn’s star had begun to wane, and although Shawn and St. Denis remained married for the rest of their lives, the couple separated on both professional and personal grounds. In October, 1930, Shawn embarked on a solo tour in Switzerland and Germany where he was intensively exposed to the artistic movement of German expressionism. Upon his return stateside, he appeared for a few of the final performances of the Denishawn group, then retreated to [Jacob’s Pillow](#), a farm in the Berkshires of Massachusetts, where he staged the second act of his career: the formation of the first all-male dance company, Ted Shawn and His Men Dancers. During the winter months between 1933 and 1940, Shawn led a group

of young men on concert tours throughout the Depression-era United States. Shawn recruited many of his dancers from a dance course he taught in the physical education program at the nearby Springfield College. Apart from Barton Mumaw, a former Denishawn dancer and Shawn's muse and lover, few of the Men Dancers had any dance experience, yet Shawn trained them to perform in his modern interpretations of primitive rituals, sacred ceremonies, athletic and martial spectacles, and music visualizations. Appearing in high school and college auditoriums, town assembly halls, and small theaters across the country, the company brought modernism to Main Street by presenting avant-garde dances to audiences who had never before seen either expressive and abstract dancing or men dancing together, barefoot and in cinctures no less. The Men Dancers programs featured group dances as well as Shawn's solos based on religious, mythical, and folk figures.

In 1937, Shawn choreographed the first full-length modern dance by a U.S. choreographer, *O, Libertad!*, a dramatization of the history of the Americas from the court of Montezuma to the birth of modernism. The company achieved critical success and eventually began to perform in major theaters such as Symphony Hall in Boston, Carnegie Hall in New York, and, in 1935, at His Majesty's Theater in London. During the summer months, the company trained and developed new dances at their Jacob's Pillow headquarters, as well as performed lecture-demonstrations for local Berkshires audiences. These "tea dances" later evolved into the nation's first dance festival and "University of the Dance."

Like Denishawn, Ted Shawn and His Men Dancers was significant to the professionalization of dance in the U.S. Whereas Denishawn operated as a

company, Ted Shawn and His Men Dancers was a collective wherein all members owned everything in common—real estate, scenery, costumes, motor vehicles, as well as income from their teaching and performances. Moreover, each member of the group received year-round living expenses, including housing and food, clothes, medical and dental care. As star, teacher, producer, and director of the men's group, Shawn arguably deserved a greater share in the profits, but accepted only the same salary as his dancers. In turn, the dancers contributed to the development of the Jacob's Pillow farm into an arts colony by building their own cabins, refurbishing a barn into a dance studio, and erecting a stone dining room.

Ted Shawn and His Men Dancers disbanded in 1940, owing largely to the fact that many of the company members enlisted in the wartime military effort. Shawn continued to teach and perform at Jacob's Pillow throughout the following two years, during which time a school and festival had developed under the artistic leadership of Mary Washington Ball in 1940 and ballet stars [Antony Tudor](#) and Alicia Markova in 1941. In 1942, Shawn took the artistic helm when he was appointed as General Manager by a The Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival Committee, a newly-formed entity dedicated to transforming the Pillow into a mecca for the study and presentation of dance. The newly formed board committed to raise \$50,000 to purchase the property from Shawn and to build on its premises the first U.S. theater specifically constructed for the presentation of dance. The Ted Shawn Theater opened on July 9, 1942. In the ensuing decades, Shawn transformed the Pillow into an internationally acclaimed center for the promotion of dance in its many forms—ballet, modern, ethnic, and folk. In 1952, Shawn signed with Columbia Artists Management to produce a national tour of the Pillow's affiliate stars. Though

the Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival Tour was short lived, Shawn remained the artistic and executive leader until the final years before his death.

Shawn was also the first prominent American choreographer to write multiple books on the subject of dance, nine in total. His autobiographical *One Thousand and One Night Stands* offers glimpses into his extensive travels throughout the U.S. and abroad. He also published a collection of his field reports based on his study of world dance traditions (*Gods Who Dance*), his lectures on dance education (*Dance We Must*), a treatise on American dance (*The American Ballet*), and a book about Delsarte training (*Every Little Movement*), among others. In 1936, Shawn wrote a series of 27 special editorials on the topic of dance for the *Boston Herald*, which covered wide-ranging topics such as dance criticism, art as propaganda, the development of ballet in America, and the "scourge" of tap dancing on the dance world. With these editorials, Shawn directly entered into the debates about the nature of "American" and "modern" dance as they had been shaped by *New York Times* dance critic John Martin.

Shawn's life and work had meaningful resonances beyond the world of the theater. During his early career, Shawn became a symbol of male fitness and beauty. In fact, he had come to be known as the "Most Handsome Man in America." Semi-nude photographs of him appeared in publications such as *National Geographic* and *Physical Culture Magazine*, and in a few instances alongside his quasi-scientific and philosophical missives about dancing as a means toward physical, spiritual, and social well being. Although Shawn publicly staged his body as a masculine ideal and consistently sought to dispel popular assumptions that the male dancer was intrinsically effeminate, Shawn's ideas about gender and sexuality became

increasingly complex once he acknowledged his own homosexuality and increasingly engaged with ideas about sexual difference.

Throughout his life, Shawn developed personal and professional relationships with a group of scientists, intellectuals, and artists whose ideas contributed to the radical movement to de-pathologize homosexuality. For instance, Shawn corresponded with and twice met Havelock Ellis, the pioneer of the British eugenics movement and the co-author of the first English-language book about homosexuality. He also had influential relationships with British poet Edward Carpenter, who wrote impassioned defenses of homosexuality and shared with Shawn his intimate knowledge about Walt Whitman, one of Shawn's artistic inspirations. In 1933, Shawn developed a life-changing friendship with Lucien Price, an editor at the *Boston Globe* whose writings about art, society, and philosophy earned him the moniker the "Mentor to New England." It was with Price's encouragement that Shawn made the radical decision to form an all-male dance company. Price mentored Shawn in the codes of gay history, culture, and literature, some of which made their way into Shawn's choreography. Correspondingly, characters based on Shawn's dancers populated Price's gay-themed novels. In 1945, Shawn began to correspond with Dr. Alfred Kinsey and participated in his controversial reports on American sexual habits and histories, which ignited the sexual revolution. Kinsey also commissioned Shawn to write a report about the relationship between sexuality and dance, "Sex in the Modern Art of the Dance." Shawn's relevance to an emerging gay consciousness is reflected in his relation to these pioneers of American gay liberation.

Shawn was honored with several recognitions and awards in his lifetime. In 1940, the Dance Archives of the Museum of Modern Art in New York presented “American Dancing,” an exhibit that illustrated the evolution of American dancing from minstrelsy to modernism through photographs and memorabilia. The exhibit featured materials from Shawn’s and St. Denis’s personal collections and firmly enshrined them within the history of American dance, prompting John Martin to recognize that without Shawn and St. Denis, “there could scarcely have been an American dance at all.”ⁱ

In 1957, Shawn was awarded a Capezio award and in 1970, a Dance Magazine Award. In 1958, King Frederik IX of Denmark knighted Shawn for his support of Danish ballet in the United States. In 2003, Jacob’s Pillow was named a National Historic Landmark and in 2011, the Jacob’s Pillow Dance Festival was awarded the Presidential Medal of the Arts.

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ⁱ “100 Years of Dance Depicted in Show,” *New York Times*. October 23, 1940: p. 27.