

Helen Tamiris (1902-1966)

by *Elizabeth McPherson*

Helen Tamiris is one of the great pioneers of American modern dance. A dynamic dancer and choreographer, she explored themes that were central to the American experience viewed in a broad, multicultural manner. Her diverse career included not only her work in modern dance, but also in ballet, nightclubs, and musical theater. Descriptions of Tamiris invariably include the word “powerful,” describing both her dancing and the force of her personality. This personality propelled her into a career in which she followed her passion from one idiom to another, capturing her audiences with vibrancy and sincerity, despite many obstacles. She was a renegade who forged ahead with her beliefs, able to work within or outside any given structure.

Tamiris was born Helen Becker on April 23, 1902 in New York City. Her father, a tailor, was soon supporting and caring for himself and five children after Tamiris’s mother passed away in 1905. Tamiris was the only girl in the family, and ran wild in the streets unsupervised until one brother suggested to her father that he send her to dance classes. At Henry Street Settlement House, she studied “interpretive dancing” with Irene Lewisohn (1886-1944) and Blanche Talmud (c.1900-c.1990). In high school, she added folk dance. At the age of 15, Tamiris auditioned and was accepted into the Metropolitan Opera Ballet, though she had never studied ballet or pointe work.

After three seasons at the Met, she joined the Bracale Opera Company for a tour to South America, followed by one more season with the Met. Unsatisfied with these dance experiences, she began looking for other avenues, studying with Michel Fokine (1880-1942) and at the [Isadora Duncan](#) School. But neither of these provided the new direction she desired. She thought: “What more can I learn – in schools? Each school develops its own type of dancer – I don’t want to be a Duncan dancer – or a ballet dancer – I want to be myself – But what was myself? I was all the things I had learned – I

would make some dances – my very own” (Palfy, 20). She choreographed and auditioned two dances for a Chicago-based nightclub manager. She was hired, and changed her name to Tamiris, after an Amazonian Persian queen. (She would add “Helen” back to her name in 1939.) Performances went well, but Tamiris found herself making changes in her dances to captivate the audience in the nightclub setting, and had to alter her dances once again when she presented them in the Music Box Revue in New York.

As a result, Tamiris decided to give a recital of her own where she could have complete control. She worked earnestly to fundraise and prepare choreography. With Louis Horst (1884-1964) as her accompanist, she presented twelve dances at the Little Theatre on October 9, 1927, just a little over a year after [Martha Graham’s](#) (1894-1991) debut solo concert. The reviews were positive and the experience fulfilling. While supporting herself again with nightclub dancing, Tamiris prepared for her second concert of January 29, 1928, for which she choreographed two solos to Negro spirituals, among other works. This was the beginning of her exploration of African American forms, about which she said she wanted “to express the spirit of the Negro people – in the first his sense of oppression – in the second, his fight – and struggle and remembrance” (Palfy 40-41). Tamiris had grown up in poverty, and her parents had escaped the severe persecution of Jews in Russia when they immigrated to the United States. She felt a kinship with oppressed people and wished to bring themes of oppression and overcoming oppression to the stage. As well, being the child of immigrants, she was exploring the American experience with fresh eyes that were not swayed by entrenched prejudices in the United States. The American experience, to Tamiris, was every American’s experience, not just Caucasians’.

Following her second concert, Tamiris prepared for successful performances in Europe – Paris,

Salzburg, and Berlin. In 1929, she opened the School of American Dance with hopes of gathering students who might form a group to dance with her. She also proposed the idea of concert dancers joining together for performances to reduce expenses. The group of Graham, [Doris Humphrey](#), Tamiris, and [Charles Weidman](#) was called Dance Repertory Theatre and lasted for 2 seasons (1930-31), with [Agnes de Mille](#) joining in the second year. Although financially successful, it did not last due to differences of opinion and conflicts of personality. However, Tamiris continued to perform in concerts with her group, and choreographed a scene for the play *Fiesta*. In a review of her concert of January 14, 1934, John Martin of *The New York Times* placed Tamiris and her company among the best of the dance groups (13).

Clearly, Tamiris was well respected in concert modern dance, yet she was not asked to join the faculty of the [Bennington School of the Dance](#) (1934-42) where Graham, [Hanya Holm](#), Humphrey, and Weidman made such inroads to establishing modern dance as a serious art form. There are several probable reasons: she had a less formalized technique, preferring her dancers to find their own voices; she was also working in fields outside of modern dance; and her modern choreography had a more popular style, which was often equated with being less artistic. [Martha Hill](#), Director of the Bennington School of the Dance said, "She didn't just have one aim for her dancing; she was spreading out more, into more fields" (Hill, 79). This must have made her seem less devoted to the cause.

Tamiris was not held down by the exclusion. The United States was in the depths of the Great Depression, and the Works Progress Administration was formed to provide jobs. Tamiris lobbied successfully for the inclusion of a [Federal Dance Project](#), for which she would choreograph four major works over its span: 1936-1939. The most acclaimed was *How Long Brethren?*, which was based on seven African American songs of protest, collected by

Lawrence Gilbert in the American South during the Depression. One of her dancers, Pauline Bublick Tish, remembers that *How Long Brethren* was a "stirring masterpiece of tremendous urgency for people everywhere," and that the performances received standing ovations ("Remembering Helen Tamiris," 334).

Tamiris and her dancers performed consistently through the early 1940s; then she set her sights on musical theater. Between 1945 and 1957, Tamiris choreographed eighteen shows, fourteen of which ran on Broadway, including *Up in Central Park* (1945), a revival of *Show Boat* (1946), *Annie Get Your Gun* (1946) and *Touch and Go* (1950), for which she won a Tony Award. Several dancers who performed in her shows forged new ground in modern dance over the next decades, including: Mary Anthony (born 1996), Talley Beatty (1918-1995), Valerie Bettis (1919-1982), Pearl Lang (1921-2009), [Donald McKayle](#) (born 1930), and [Pearl Primus](#) (1919-1984). Tamiris was one of a few musical theater choreographers of the 1940s and 1950s who worked to make dance more integral to productions, rather than creating isolated interludes separate from the story. Her other great innovation was integrating casts of dancers. Instead of having separate dances for the white dancers and African American dancers, she had everyone dance together.

Her soon-to-be husband, Daniel Nagrin, worked as Tamiris's assistant on many of these shows. They married on September 3, 1946. In 1957, Tamiris and Nagrin formed the Tamiris-Nagrin Dance Company, with Tamiris once again working in modern dance. The company received good reviews but dissolved when Tamiris and Nagrin separated in 1963. Tamiris died of cancer in New York City on August 4, 1966.

Tamiris purposefully created dances that reflected her times, but these dances still hold resonance today because they also speak more generally to what it means to be human. Exploration of the human experience is an

important aspect of modern dance past and present, and one which Tamiris epitomized. She explained: “The validity of the modern dance is rooted in its ability to express modern problems (and some of those are social problems), to touch modern audiences into sympathetic awareness of social conditions, even to excite them into wanting to do something about them” (Lloyd 12).

Although there is not yet a comprehensive study of Tamiris’s life and career, her influence on modern dance through the decades is extensive. Of all the second generation modern dancers, Tamiris, more than anyone else, carried forward the Isadora Duncan ideals of free expression from inner motivation, unbound by rules, ideology, or imposed structure. That freedom in modern dance to make one’s own path, without adherence to any fixed idea of what modern dance should be, is still possible today and is the overarching legacy of Tamiris.

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

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