

WOMEN'S WORK: AMERICAN MODERN DANCE

BY MARTHA ULLMAN WEST

American modern dance began at the turn of the 20th century with three determined women seeking personal and artistic freedom in a world dominated by men. Their approaches were different, but all possessed equal amounts of fearlessness, intelligence and creative passion, and their influence on future generations was profound.

Nature and the ancient Greeks inspired California-born Isadora Duncan. The curved movement of her upper body came from watching the waves lapping the Pacific coast. And, dancing barefoot in loose tunics, she rebelled against the unnatural strictures of ballet and the physical constraints of the clothing of her day. Corsets don't permit women to breathe naturally; hobble skirts impede walking. Duncan, like many who followed her, danced to express herself personally, her choreography infused with her passionate feelings about political events such as the Russian Revolution, and the anguish derived from her personal tragedies.

Loie Fuller, born in the Midwest, approached dancing like a scientist, exploring the connections between movement and light, presenting herself as flame or the ocean, using yards of fabric, glass platforms and dozens of recently invented incandescent light bulbs. While her way of moving didn't endure, her lighting innovations influenced later designers for dance such as Jennifer Tipton.

Ruth St. Denis, founder with her husband Ted Shawn of the Denishawn school, was much more of the theater than Duncan, beginning her career dancing on the vaudeville circuit. Nevertheless, there was a spiritual impetus behind much of her work, particularly solos that were inspired by her perceptions of Asian and Near Eastern dance. The next generation of modern dance pioneers, Charles Weidman, Doris Humphrey and Martha Graham were all alumni of the Denishawn

school and company.

In Graham we find St. Denis's multicultural approach, Duncan's female point of view, and Fuller's inquiring mind. Her collaborations with Japanese-American sculptor Isamu Noguchi gave much of her work a distinctly Asian flavor. They collaborated on many narrative dances, told from a woman's point of view. But where Duncan danced about herself, Graham, influenced by psychologist Carl Jung, created archetypes. *Night Journey* tells the Oedipus story from Jocasta's point of view; *Cave of the Heart* paints a more sympathetic portrait of Medea as a woman betrayed than Euripides' jealous, infanticidal monster. Graham's fine-tuned esthetic philosophy was woman-specific, her technique emanating from pelvic contractions and a flexible torso, easier for women than for men to perform.

Humphrey looked to the American experience and her own as the subject of her choreography, making handsomely crafted dances about Shakers for example, and exploring the nature of movement itself, most visibly in *Water Study*, now widely used to teach modern techniques of fall and recovery and the rhythmic use of breath. Humphrey and Weidman left the Denishawn company in the 1930s to form their own. Like Graham and Duncan before her, Humphrey made many politically oriented pieces, as did Anna Sokolow and Helen Tamiris.

Graham and Humphrey had an impact on the men they worked with: Graham influenced Erick Hawkins, Merce Cunningham and Paul Taylor, who rebelled against her; Humphrey inspired José Limón. And today's female modern choreographers—and there are many—dance about many of the same issues as their forebears, but from a contemporary point of view. For Anna Halprin, the most senior, dance as art isn't enough;

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she uses it as a tool for healing, focusing like Duncan on natural movement. Trisha Brown explores movement like a physicist, even taking it into space, with dancing on trapeze. They too seek personal and artistic liberation through dance that crosses boundaries of society and time.

*Martha Ullman West is a West Coast-based dance historian and critic. This essay was commissioned in 2008 as a companion piece for the Dance Heritage Coalition's traveling exhibition **America's Irreplaceable Dance***

***Treasures: The First 100.** For additional information about the exhibition or the *Dance Treasures*, contact Imogen Smith, project manager, at 202/223-8393 or email her at [ismith \[at\] danceheritage \[dot\] org](mailto:ismith[at]danceheritage[dot]org).*

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