

The Ballet Continuum - Session 3 Outline  
Classic Modern Dance

1. 21<sup>st</sup> Century Appetizer: Alexei Ratmansky's *Russian Seasons*, 2006
  - a. #2 in series of vignettes: woman in red who doesn't want to marry an older man
  - b. Melodies and text from Traditional Music from the Russian Lake District
  - c. Modern elements: emphatic expression of emotion with movement; movement vocabulary and technique outside ballet standard
2. Modern dancers of the 1930s and 1940s
  - a. Rejected Denishawn Orientalism – not authentic
  - b. Rejected Ballet – too confining, all about beauty, not about real people
  - c. Wanted intellectual component, emotional impact, and American form
3. Modern dance recognized as separate art form in 1940s
  - a. Informed and positive reviews from NYTimes dance critic John Martin
  - b. Creation in 1934 of the Bennington School of Dance as a summer program at Bennington College in Vermont; brought together Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, Charles Weidman, and Hanya Holm to teach, choreograph, and perform
  - c. These dancers/choreographers became known as the Big Four of modern dance.
4. Martha Graham 1894-1991
  - a. Left Denishawn in 1923; in 1926, formed her company in NYC; created over 180 works
  - b. Used American themes and Greek tragedies to explore the psychology of the individual and the tragedy of the human condition
  - c. *Lamentation*, 1930, music Zoltán Kodály
    - i. Seated on bench for most of work, body inside a tube of stretchy fabric, only hands, feet, and face exposed, creating a sculpted form
    - ii. Limitations on movement intensified use of face, feet, and hands, jutting elbows and knees, rocking of whole body.
    - iii. Hints of Isadora in emotional portrayal, of St. Denis in theatricality
  - d. Graham Technique
    - i. Contraction and release: spasmodic rounding of the back and thrusting forward of the pelvis while exhaling, followed by an intake of breath and opening of the body
    - ii. Spirals: moving the body above the waste, though not always the head, in opposite direction from hips and legs – similar to epaulement in ballet, but larger
    - iii. turned in leg when extending leg to the side, thus engaging hip and spine
  - e. Graham common features: movement of the body, not just the feet, on or close to the floor; extension of a leg to the back with body parallel to the floor; rapid jumps; figure 8 swings of the leg
  - f. Costumes and sets
    - i. Costumes by Graham, usually long wide skirts for the women, used to amplify the movement
    - ii. Most sets by Isamu Noguchi, sparse and evocative
  - g. *Errand into the Maze*, 1947, music Gian Carlo Menotti
    - i. Derived from the myth of Theseus conquering the minotaur in the Labyrinth
    - ii. In Graham version, a woman conquers the minotaur, or perhaps, as the monster keeps returning, her personal demons.
    - iii. Standard Graham features: contractions and release; horizontal lines of deep leg extensions to the back; turned in leg and raised hip of side extensions; figure 8 leg swings; rapid foot movements
    - iv. Sparse and multipurpose set by Noguchi
  - h. *Appalachian Spring*, 1944, music Aaron Copland
    - i. Martha Graham dancing as Bride in 1959 film
    - ii. American theme
    - iii. Unusual role for Graham, a submissive female; choreographed for herself and Erick Hawkins whom she later married

- iv. Restraint and chasteness in duet of young couple, conveying the customs and lack of sentimentality in pioneer life
- v. Creative use of the floor to make different kinds of movement – circling on knees, drumming on floor, chastely intimate moments of young couple on floor
- vi. Use of the set and artful spacing of dancers to produce levels and balance in the placement of dancers on the stage

Of the Big Four, Martha Graham clearly had the most impact and was the most accomplished artist. There is so much to show and to say about Graham that I did not get to my comments on or videos relating to the other three of the Bid Four. I have included some notes on them below and the video list contains a video clip relating to each of them that you did not see in class.

5. Doris Humphrey 1895 - 1958 and Charles Weidman 1901 – 1975  
See video with comments by Weidman for with excerpts of Weidman and Humphrey dancing (watched in class)
  - a. Left Denishawn in 1928 and formed a company together, combining their different, but complementary dance styles and skills
  - b. Humphrey less focused on narrative and more interested in abstract presentation; most remembered for her development of a technique called fall and recovery using the capacity of the body to resist gravity with balance or to yield to gravity and recover. See *Two Ecstatic Themes*
  - c. Weidman interested in individual human stories and character portrayals; excelled in hand and face movement, pantomime, dramatic art, and humor
  - d. Also tackled serious topics as in *Lynchtown* about a mob undertaking a lynching. Generally, literal nature of the gestures and movement: pointed, wagging fingers, facial expressions, aggressive steps, though ambiguity in the hand in front of face gesture – maybe shame or horror.
6. Hanya Holm 1893 – 1992
  - a. Link to what was happening in dance in Europe: a student of Mary Wigman, the German expressionist dancer whose piece *Hexentanz* we watched last week
  - b. Came to the US from Germany in 1931 to open a Wigman studio in NYC
  - c. Created many serious works and became an important choreographer for musical theater, but most revered as a teacher
  - d. Although most modern dancers expressed hostility toward ballet, many ballet dancers came to study with Holm looking for ways to apply her lessons about using space and feeling the full range of a movement to their art form. See Hanya Holm documentary excerpt.