

NEW DANCE

Writings on Modern Dance

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Declaration

My dance is an art concerned with human values. It upholds only those values that make for harmony and opposes all forces inimical to those values. In part, its movement may be used for decoration, entertainment, emotional release or technical display; but primarily it is composed as an expression of American life as I see it today.

This new dance of action comes inevitably from the people who had to subdue a continent, to make a thousand paths through forest and plain, to conquer the mountains, and eventually to raise up towers of steel and glass. The American dance is born of this new world, new life and new vigor.

I believe that the dancer belongs to his time and place and that he can only express that which passes through or close to his

experience. The one indispensable quality in a work of art is a consistent point of view related to the times. When this is lost, and when there is substituted for it an aptitude for putting together bits of this and that drawn from extraneous material and dead methods, there can be no integrity.

Since my dance is concerned with immediate human values, my basic technique lies in the natural movements of the body. One cannot express contemporary life without humanizing movement, as distinguished from the dehumanization of the ballet. The modern dancer must come down from the points to the bare foot in order to establish his human relation to gravity and reality.

I wish my dance to reflect some experience of my own in relationship to the outside world; to be based on reality illumined by imagination; to be organic rather than synthetic; to call forth a definite reaction from my audience; and to make its contribution toward the drama of life.

Principles of movement

I conceive movement, for the dancer's purpose, to be basically one of equilibrium. In fact, *my entire technique consists of the development of the process of falling away from and returning to equilibrium.* This is far more than a mere business of "keeping your balance," which is a muscular and structural problem. Falling and recovering is the very stuff of movement, the constant flux that is going on in every living body, in all its tiniest parts, all the time.

Nor is this all, for the process has a psychological meaning as well. I recognized these emotional overtones very early and instinctively responded very strongly to the exciting danger of the fall, and

the repose and peace of the recovery. Only much later did I find in Nietzsche a word expression of the meaning of these movements which revealed to me the fundamental rightness of my feeling. His two basic *kinds* of men, the *Apollonian* and the *Dionysian*, forever opposed and existing both in one man and in groups of men, are the symbols of man's struggle for progress on one hand, and his desire for stability on the other hand. These are not only the basis of Greek tragedy, as Nietzsche pointed out, but of all dramatic movement, particularly dance. And dance movement should be fundamentally dramatic, that is to say, *human*, not decorative, geometric or mechanical.

The technique evolved out of this theory is amazingly rich in possibilities. Beginning with simple falls complete to the floor and recoveries to standing, many elements of movements reveal themselves in addition to the falling of the body in space. One of these is *rhythm*. In a series of falls and recoveries, accents occur which establish a rhythm, even a phrase, as the time-space is varied due to gravitational pull on the mass of the body.

Another element is *dynamism*, that is, changes of intensity.

A third element is *design*. Even the latter, usually considered to be linear, having nothing to do with movement, is a functional result of the body's compensatory changes.

If left to itself, the body will make a number of weight adjustments in the course of a fall; and each of these will describe a design in space. I call these compensatory movements *oppositions*, and they occur in partial falls as well as in complete ones. For example, one foot will step forward to save the body on its way down. At the same time, the arms will swing out. This is also true in walking, *which is a partial fall*. Each one of these elementary parts of movement is capable of more or less isolation and almost limitless variation.

Extension of movement into studies

In addition to the purely technical development in dance which these insights led to, there was, all the while, the growing discovery that these movements were satisfying, even exciting to do and to see—not pure abstractions in the sense that technique is an abstraction, but had content. Because they sprang so truly and psychologically from physical life, they were emotionally stirring even without a program. This characteristic led me to compose a number of dance studies and even dance compositions entirely without a dramatic idea. Indeed, I think sometimes that the composer's meaning can only be conveyed fully by movement.

In the future, when America is finally won over to modern dance, audiences will enjoy the drama of life in motion as they now enjoy the drama of life in abstract music. Sometimes, however, the dance composer wishes to say something which demands specific treatment as to time and place and people. Here I use the same technical equipment; but all the movements, themes, phrases—in short, all the material of the dramatic dance—are conditioned by the idea to be expressed. Whereas we begin technically with natural movements resulting from fall and recovery that tend always toward the ideal, these same movements will be changed and distorted on being subjected to drama, which frequently demands less than the ideal or struggle for it.

This is the real explanation of the angular patterns which have come to be bywords of modern dance. The dancer cannot be concerned entirely with the graceful line nor even with the fine animal ease with which technical study can and does provide him, because he is a living being, played upon by life, bursting with opinions and compulsions to express them. Sometimes, not always,

he is concerned with themes of strife, struggle, and oppression. These demand an acrid line, a steely quality not found in purely kinetic movement unconditioned by ideas.

Body mechanics and technical studies

To dance well, technical mastery of the body is the first prerequisite. And since my dance grows out of natural bodily movement, training for it must involve natural movements. The following brief outline will indicate proper procedures:

A. Body mechanics

1. *Stretches*

The body must be prepared for greater than natural strength, suppleness, endurance and coordination. This involves relaxing body bends; isolation exercises for separate parts of the body; exercises especially for the feet, Achilles tendon, knee and thigh muscles to insure greater power in elevation; stretching for the legs, and stretching the torso for the development of the abdominal walls.

2. *Walks, runs, jumps and leaps*

These are fundamental *natural* movements of all persons. For the dancer, they are a basic vocabulary that he uses to express his ideas and communicate what is within him to others. I concentrate on natural form in walking, running, jumping and leaping, so that the dancer's expressions may be true and sincere.

B. Dance studies

1. *First series of falls*

These are simple complete falls and recoveries in four directions. They give balance and control in every position of the body, the basic movements in relation to gravity.

2. *Second series of falls*

When the first simple falls have been fairly well mastered, I give students a more elaborate and difficult series. Preparatory movements are developed. The falls require more strength and control. Falls are in four directions. They are essentially dynamic studies.

3. *Design studies*

There are three kinds of design in my dance. To explain them requires a knowledge of choreography too involved to explain here.¹

4. *Studies in contrasts of design and dynamics*

5. *Variations*

Combinations of all elements are conceived and performed, with stress on rhythms.

¹ See Ernestine Stodelle, *The Dance Technique of Doris Humphrey and Its Creative Potential*.

² See Doris Humphrey, *The Art of Making Dances*, chapters 6–10 for a complete discussion of design.