

The Handy E-book of Contemporary Dance History: Maria Naranjo 2011

Rudolph Laban (1879 – 1958, Hungary - U.K.)

Among the figures that produce the ideological and conceptual basis of modern dance, Rudolph Laban is considered as one of the most productive of them.

As a choreographer, dancer, teacher and researcher, he achieves to spread his name and ideas widely: First through Europe, then to the United States and nowadays around the whole world. Laban publishes several articles and renowned books that are still important references for dance theory, practice and history.

Some of his titles are:

- “Choreutics”, “The Mastery of Movement” and
- “Educational Modern Dance”.
-

He also invents labanotation (or kynetography Laban), which is the most complete and effective system for analyzing and writing movement, created till the time. By this, he opens a completely new Rudolph Laban and his system for analyzing and recording movement: Kynetography (Labanotation) theoretical frame for movement shape and quality analysis. His thought includes the idea that human movement is the seat of life and that it expresses the social state of being. Therefore, dance would be a need of communitarian experience. He believes that educating individuals and groups by the means of movement can correct society. He influences Mary Wigman, Kurt Joos, Albert Knust and almost all European modern dancers from the period between the two wars.

Anne Hutchinson Guest brings his movement notation system to the United States of America, where it is taught nowadays almost in every institution for dance education of high degrees.

Mary Wigman (1886 – 1973 Germany)

From a choreographic and aesthetical production perspective, Mary Wigman is, after Laban, the first relevant, European, modern dance figure reported by modern dance history. As much as Laban, Dalcroze and Delsarte (who are of an extreme importance mainly because of their ideological contributions), Wigman develops her own understanding of dance and traduces it in a significant amount of choreographic pieces.

She opposes radically to classical dance values and methods, in a search for a dance that would accomplish an expressive function of the dancer's soul.

Concerned about a close relationship between spirituality and movement, she defends the idea of invisible forces that would give life to dance. From this point of view, she somehow recreates the cathartic function attributed to dance in ancient societies.

Her choreographic work and thought are considered as part of the artistic trend called German expressionism. Her practice itself receives the name of dance of expression or "Ausdrückstanz" (in German).

Wigman's dance pieces are remembered for their tragic, dark character and are described as introspective dances that reveal vibrant, vital, excited and passionate inner states of being. She engages herself into the social and educational mission of the choreographer, by creating several schools and transmitting her artistic legacy. Among her renowned students are Hanya Holm, Harald Kreutzberg, Gret Paluca and Kurt Joos. Her influence touches the whole German dance trend during the 1920s and 1930s and also what follows after the war. Her ideas are brought to the United States of America by Hanya Holm, who passes the heritage to figures like Alwin Nikolais.

Still, in other countries like France, for example, Wigman heirs are responsible for the respective modern dance trends at the time.

Her most famous piece is called "Hexentanz" (The Witch Dance).

Loïe Fuller (1862 – 1928, United States of America)

Loïe Fuller is not actually remembered as a dancer or a choreographer. This is because her main concern is not dance, or movement itself, as it is for the whole rest of subsequent modern dancers.

Though, she is the author of hundreds of scenic art pieces in which she displays innovative experiments mixing lightning, scenic elements (big tissues) and dance.

Initiated in her native country within music-hall shows, Fuller has no knowledge of classical dance traditions, as any of the American pioneers of modern dance. Though, she has a great success in Europe (especially in Paris) where she causes a big influence and marks the artistic trends and vogue of the time.

Other than being the very first modern dancer in chronological terms (she is already successful at a time when Rudolph Laban is just studying), she is recognized because of her great contribution about new possibilities of scenic illusion, thanks to her use of the development of electricity.

Isadora Duncan (1878 - 1927, U.S.A. - France)

Modern dance history describes Isadora as an emblematic figure of freedom. This is not only because she refuses to follow academic dance education but because she has the courage to break dance traditions and social codes with her aesthetical propositions.

She constructs her thought by studying other artistic languages or ideological fields (like poetry, sculpture, music and philosophy). Some when she says: "my dance teachers are J.J.Rousseau, Walt Whitman, and Nietzsche".

For Isadora, dance is the expression of her personal life. She has an inclination for nature, what makes her create dances around related subjects like the waves, clouds, the wind and trees. A remarked feature of her creative method is the use of classical music as a source of inspiration, from which she translates its emotions. Also, her dance is influenced by the figures drawn on ancient Greek vessels.

Europe receives her charismatic personality, transparent tunic, bare foot and even scandals as a new lyrical message.

For dance history, she points the birth of another type of dance, which would be the consequence of an interior movement of the dancer. At the same time, she carries a new spirit of liberation from conventions and an idea of dance as an expression of the divinity inside every human being.

Her contribution is not considered so much in terms of a dancing technique but mostly because of what her work means for the cultural process of opening minds. Though, from the artistic perspective she acts according to some of the considered 'modern dance principles' like inventing a gestural language and adapting movement to each artistic project. But, as I mentioned above, she is mainly remembered because of her boosting to the liberation of conventional codes that restrict the body (and especially the feminine body) as a general fact in society.

Although she dedicates herself to teaching as well and founds numerous schools in Europe, she doesn't leave significant heirs. Isadora Duncan. Photo Courtesy of the Isadora Duncan International Institute, Inc., New York, New York.

Ruth Saint Denis (1877 - 1968, U.S.A.)

Ruth Saint Denis performs and is renowned mainly in the United States. She is the daughter of one of the first women admitted to University, feminist and amateur of alternative curative methods.

She grows within an ideological ambience of oriental religions, which will be reflected later in her choreographic productions.

Initiated in Delsarte's method, her mother pushes her to the scene in order to sustain their family. This is how she starts creating music-halls in New York. She has her own philosophical and mystical discourse too. The female dancer is for her like a priestess, which contrasts with the prejudice of the time of the dancer as a woman of little virtue. Dance is for Saint-Denis a mean for reunification with the divine.

Being famous already, she meets Ted Shawn, who will be her partner in the foundation of the 'Denishawn' school and company (Los Angeles 1915 - 1931). They are known for combining the passionate charisma of Saint-Denis with the technical rigor of Shawn.

The school offers an eclectic program of courses, from yoga and oriental religions to Delsarte's and Dalcroze's methods. Some of its teachers are Lester Horton, Michio Ito and Louis Horst. Important figures for modern dance history like Doris Humphrey, Charles Weidman, and Martha Graham, also go through their teachings and participate in their company's activities. The Denishawn choreographic pieces are remembered for its big and spectacular formats, with elaborated sceneries and development of what Saint-Denis calls "musical visualizations". These are danced representations of music and are considered as a first attempt of choreographic abstraction. In 1931 the school dissolves and the couple splits up.

Ted Shawn (1891- 1972, U.S.A.)

After the dissolution of the Denishawn School and company, Ted Shawn continues his choreographic career independently.

With the first company of the time that is composed of men only, he makes tours around the United States (visiting universities specially) and attracts a lot of young people from a high intellectual level. Ruth Saint Denis. Shawn, inspired in Delsarte, fights the prejudice of the effeminate performer. He educates boys that look like muscular athletes, creating an image of a masculine and sportive dancer. He also founds a choreographic center: The Jacob's Pillow (Massachusetts), which is still an important place for dance as much for its studying offers as for its dance festival.

Doris Humphrey (1895 - 1958, U.S.A.)

Doris Humphrey joins the Denishawn in 1917, being already a dance teacher in her native province. She works for Saint Denis as a teacher and dancer, participating in the company tours around America and Asia till 1926.

It is within the Denishawn that Humphrey associates with the dancer Charles Weidman and the pianist Pauline Lawrence to create the Humphrey – Weidman company (1927 – 1944).

Their artistic productions are known for being contrastingly sober beside the commercial and Spectacular wastes of Saint Denis. Also, Weidman contributes to them with a theatrical sense and use of pantomime and humour.

Humphrey develops an original dancing technique by observing the relationship between gravity and human body. She establishes a main physical principle for dance: 'fall and recovery'. This notion is resumed in her famous sentence: "Movement is located on a tended arc between two deaths" (which would be vertical balance and horizontal balance).

Other than being the first dancer to choose imbalance as the base for her movement technique, she also teaches extremely important notions (as technical means) like weight, rebound, suspension and the importance of breath.

Another one of her contributions is the understanding of the dancing group as a main choreographic entity and not only as a mass counterpointing the soloist. The piece called "Water study" (1928) is an example of her group experiments.

She is concerned about other questions too, like American subjects (reflected in choreographies like "The Shakers", 1931), or the violence of the world ("Theater piece", 1936 and "Inquest", 1944).

She leaves a written patrimony about her choreographic thought in a book entitled "The art of making dances".

In 1944, she stops dancing because of arthritis and José Limón, who has joined the Humphrey-Weidman group since 1928, creates a new company for which she continues working as an artistic director.

Jose Limon (José Arcadio Limón, 1908 - 1972, Mexico - U.S.A.)

Limon is responsible for spreading Humphrey's technique in Europe. Although that knowledge is renowned under his name, he always insists that she is the innovator and he is a continuator.

Though, he has his own choreographic concerns and works over social themes. He expresses a consciousness of the precarious state of humanity in dramatic and tragic pieces about subjects from his natal historical context.

Some examples of that are his pieces

- "La Malinche" (1949),
- "Carlota" (1972)
- "The Pavane of the Moor" (1949).

Limon is strongly affected the first time he sees a dancing piece (by Harald Kreutzberg and Ivonne Georgia). His impression is an example of what the entire western world is still discovering at the time: "what I witnessed, simply and irreversibly changed my life. I saw dance as a vision of indescribable power. A man can dance with dignity and torrential majesty; dance as Michelangelo's visions or Bach's music".

According to modern dance history, his debut in 1947 owns him the title of the finest male dancer of the moment by the New York Times. He was successful in Europe too, with a first performance in Paris in 1950.

Martha Graham (1894 - 1991, U.S.A.)

Graham enters the Denishawn school and company in 1916 and becomes the most famous and monumental pupil of this seedbed.

In 1923 she moves to New York, where she participates in music halls and musical comedies, at the same time she works on dancing solos at her studio.

She develops her own training technique, which will reach a world-wide success till the present time.

These are some of its principles:

- Focus on the 'center' of the body.
- Coordination between breathing and movement.
- Relationship with the floor.
- Alternation between two movement intentions: "contraction and release".
-

She creates an original choreographic vocabulary focused on the movement of the pelvis for she privileges this part of the body as the zone of expression of the feminine libido. Her company is exclusively for women until 1938.

She also proclaims the idea that dance works over an ancestral memory. Graham remains active as a choreographer during a process that lasts over sixty years. Some aesthetical cycles have been determined by historians in order to understand her work: the oriental cycle, the primitive, the American and the Greek.

Her work also reflects the American ambience of the moment through her search for an identity, exaltation of the pioneer spirit, fight against the Puritanism and follow of a mystical spirituality.

Figures like Louis Horst, Erick Hawkins, Isamu Noguchi and composers like Aaron Copland or Samuel Barber are among her collaborators.

These are the titles of some of her pieces:

Primitive period:

- -"Lamentation" (1930)
- -"Primitive Mysteries" (1931).

American period:

- -"Frontier" (1935)
- -"Appalachian Spring" (1944)
- -"American Document" (1938)

Greek period: (inventory of archetypes from a matriarchal society).

- -"Hérodiade" (1944)
- -"Cave of the heart" (1946). Subject: Medea's myth.
- -"Night Journey" (1947). Subject: Jocasta's myth.
- -"Clytemnestra" (1958)
- -"Judith (1950)"
- -"Errand into the Maze" (1947).

In 1984, Martha Graham's company is worldwide recognized till the point of being invited by Rudolph Nureyev to the Paris Opera. She dies in New York in 1991, leaving the 'Martha Graham Center of Contemporary Dance'. The centre is a legacy which remains as an invaluable patrimony for the dancers' community.