

## DORIS HUMPHREY

**Humphrey, Doris (b. October 17, 1895, Oak Park, Illinois, USA; d. December 29, 1958 at Flower and Fifth Avenue Hospital, New York City, USA)**

Doris Humphrey is a seminal figure in the history of modern dance as performer, choreographer and teacher. Her contribution traverses artistry with unstinting advocacy for the emerging art form in 1930s America and a deep pedagogic insight that continues to influence the teaching of the craft of choreography. Her explorations of natural movement drew on principles she identified as Fall and Recovery, the yielding and resistance to the gravitational pull of the body. Humphrey's predominant concern was the creation of ensemble dances, with signature works such as *New Dance* and *Passacaglia* coming out of residencies at the fabled Bennington Summer School in Vermont. Her choreographic emphases lay in design, form, structure and lyricism alongside fluid musical dancing. The Humphrey-Weidman Company, which she co-directed with Charles Weidman, performed extensively in New York City and nationally between 1928 – 1946, bringing this new form of American dance to the American people. In 1946, Humphrey became artistic director of the Jose Limón Dance Company until her death. John Martin, dance critic of the *New York Times*, said of her, "Doris Humphrey is an enduring part of the dance in America as the granite under the soil is enduring. We can turn nowhere in the art without finding her."

### Training/Career

"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. " (Doris Humphrey, 1942)

Humphrey enjoyed an eclectic childhood exposure to dance and music that ranged from the traditions of classical ballet, Bach, and piano lessons through tap dancing and vaudeville, to expressive movement with the inspiring educator Mary Wood Hinman. It was Hinman who encouraged Humphrey to go to Los Angeles at age 18 to work with Ruth St Denis and Ted Shawn. She quickly became a valued member of the Denishawn Company, dancing leading roles and teaching in the Denishawn School for ten years. As Humphrey's choreographic experience grew, so did the desire to find a creative voice beyond Denishawn's exotica repertoire. This deep-seated need to pursue her own choreographic ideals led her to join forces with fellow 'Denishawnites' Charles Weidman and Pauline Lawrence, and to leave the company in 1928 to set up their own studio in New York City.

The Humphrey-Weidman studio, located on East 59<sup>th</sup> Street and later, West 18<sup>th</sup> Street, was the fulcrum around which the two choreographers explored and developed their independent creative voices. The company performed regularly in New York and toured the country extensively for many years. Notable engagements included concerts at the 92<sup>nd</sup> Street Y and summer residencies at the renowned Bennington School of the Dance in Vermont, founded by influential educator, Martha Hill in

1934. In exchange for teaching on the summer school program, Bennington provided space and time for experimentation away from the pace of the city, as well as willing dancing bodies for the choreographers. Key figures in attendance alongside the modern dance pioneers - Humphrey, Weidman, Graham and Holm - included Louis Horst and other contemporary composers such as Wallingford Riegger whose music was commissioned by both Graham and Humphrey.

In her later years, Humphrey became artistic director of the Jose Limón Company after Humphrey and Weidman decided to part ways in 1946. The on-going relationship with her foremost protégé gave Humphrey a creative outlet and, at the same time, allowed her to support Limón's career as an independent choreographer. She produced one of her most celebrated works, *Day on Earth* in 1947 for Limón, Letitia Ide, acknowledged as perhaps the finest of the Humphrey-Weidman dancers, and Betty Jones, who was to become one of the great Limón exponents. The work itself is recognised for its magnificence in its reflection of the cycle of life and work through the prism of a single family. Intertwined with this narrative is a significant artistic shift, as one generation merges with the next, as captured in the dancing of Ide and Jones. During this period Humphrey also taught composition and repertory at the Juilliard School in New York City, with many of her students going on to perform with the Limón Company. A number of her lectures at Juilliard were recorded and are transcribed in the appendix of Selma Jeanne Cohen's seminal biography of Humphrey, *An Artist First*.

#### Major contribution to the field and to modernism

“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.” (DH)

Humphrey's philosophy on life as in dance reflected her inherent idealism that the human condition was ultimately pre-disposed toward good. This sentiment was a dominant theme in her work throughout her life, although her means of expression was rarely literal and never sentimental. Humphrey's primary artistic concern was to make dances of her time, indigenous to her American roots.

Two early examples illustrate the breadth of her creativity. Humphrey's choreographic emphasis could be on design and form, as in *Water Study* (1928), her first major post-Denishawn ensemble work and radical at the time for its absence of accompaniment or sound beyond the natural breath patterns of the dancers as they moved through a series of successional motifs that took on the form of moving water. Equally, the emphasis could be on design and form within a socio-cultural or thematic context, as with *The Shakers* (1931), inspired by the religious sect that had taken hold in America in the 1800s. Humphrey's choreographic design captures aspects of Shakerism – a sense of line, order, structure, balance. Her choreographic vocabulary moves from quiet contemplation to ecstatic release. These two dances were amongst her most popular throughout the 1930s and 40s, and continue to be performed by contemporary companies in the USA and Europe.

From the mid-1930s, Bennington became a summer retreat for the New York-based modern dance choreographers. It is no surprise, therefore, that a number of Humphrey's best known works are associated with this period, including *New Dance* (1935), *With My Red Fires* (1936) and *Passacaglia* (1938). These particular dances are illuminating examples of Humphrey's concerns, in one respect with society, and in another with the possibilities for the human body in ensemble form. To Wallingford Reigger's exhilarating modernist scores, *New Dance* was a positive affirmation of humankind existing in harmony set against a study of possessive and destructive matriarchal love and manipulation of the mass in *With My Red Fires*. *Passacaglia*, set to Bach's *Passacaglia and Fugue in C Minor*, is regarded as her greatest work, and by some observers as her response to the rise of fascism that preceded World War 2 in Europe - "The dance was inspired by the need for love, tolerance and nobility in a world given more and more to the denial of these things".\*\*

Humphrey had eclectic musical influences, spanning Bach (a recurring favourite), Beethoven and Grieg to the modernist composers of her own generation including Dane Rhudyar (*The Call/Breath of Fire*, 1929), Wallingford Reigger (*New Dance* trilogy 1935 - 36), Aaron Copland (*Day on Earth*, 1947) and Norman Lloyd (*Invention*, 1949).

Examples of Humphrey's later work continued to reflect her long concerns including *Day on Earth*, and *Dawn in New York* (1956). The latter was inspired by a Garcia Lorca poem that describes the New York dawn as "four columns of mud and a hurricane of black doves." Humphrey set youth and lyricism against the rigid strictures of city life to a score by Hunter Johnson. Her final work, fittingly, was a large ensemble piece set to Bach, *Brandenburg Concerto No. 4*, completed by Ruth Currier following Humphrey's death in 1958.

#### Development of technique

"Since my dance is concerned with immediate human values, my basic technique lies in the natural movement 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 relations to gravity and reality." (Doris Humphrey)

Between 1928 – 31, Humphrey defined her movement philosophy as 'Fall and Recovery', the "giving into and rebound from gravity...the very core of all movement, in my opinion". She further articulated her theories of movement as follows: "The desire to move stimulates organic matter to reach out from its centre of equilibrium"; "To fall is to yield; to recover is to re-affirm one's power over gravity and oneself"; "Falling and recovering is the very stuff of movement, the constant flux which is going on in every living body all the time. I... instinctively responded very strongly to the exciting danger of the fall, and the repose and peace of recovery". The emergence of these principles came through Humphrey's creative response to movement exploration. Subsequent development, essentially to train her dancers to dance her choreography, resulted in the evolution of a more structured vocabulary. Important elements are the gravitational pull, lyricism, successional flow, opposition, the idea of taking movement to its very edge, the constant play between balance and imbalance, the use of breath in a 'whole body' context in which the body's surfaces take on the

physiological action of the lungs in terms of expansion and subsidence. From an exploratory, experiential beginning, there now exists a codified dance technique taught on an increasingly wider scale through the work of former Humphrey-Weidman dancers such as Ernestine Stodelle and Nona Schurmann.

Prominent dancers from the 1950s such as Betty Jones and Ruth Currier danced under Humphrey but also had Limón's stylistic influence in their bodies. There was a perceptible change, therefore, in the feeling and quality of movement from the early Humphrey period of the 1930s to that of late Humphrey/early Limón. I became familiar with these stylistic nuances, dancing for many years with Stodelle and studying with Currier. Both forms are underpinned by 'Fall and Recovery', the core principle of Humphrey's movement philosophy. In a broad sense, 'Humphrey-based' technique as taught by Stodelle is fluid, lyrical, expansive, with a core emphasis on breath rhythm and 'whole body' movement through the pelvic connection. 'Humphrey/Limón' technique as taught by Currier was similarly fluid with the pelvic connection, but less expansive and possessed a greater emphasis on intricate gesture and rhythmic patterns, in keeping with my experiences with other Limón teachers, including Jeanne Yasko, Clay Taliaferro and Daniel Lewis.

### Legacy

"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. " (DH)

Humphrey's legacy resides in her technique, her works still performed in repertoire, her writings, and her choreographic vision. Humphrey's foresight in having her work recorded in Labanotation has allowed many of her most significant works to survive, including *Air For the G String*, *Water Study*, *Concerto in A Minor*, *Quasi Waltz*, *The Call/Breath of Fire*, *The Shakers*, *Two Ecstatic Themes*, *New Dance*, *With My Red Fires*, *Passacaglia*, *Day on Earth*, *Fantasy in Fugue*, *Ritmo Jondo* and *Dawn in New York*. These are dances that continue to have the power to excite audiences.

Generations of students have read Humphrey's treatise on the craft of choreography, *The Art of Making Dances* (1959), and have experienced the basic principles of fall and recover in the studio. Her influence stretches wider, however. Choreographic emphases on design, form, structure and lyricism alongside fluid musical dancing can be seen in the work of choreographers such as Paul Taylor (who studied composition with Humphrey), Tricia Brown and Mark Morris. In this way, her modernism informs the post-modern and contemporary, substantiating John Martin's claim that "we can turn nowhere in the art without finding her."

### **List of works**

*Valse Caprice* (1920)

*Bourree* (1920)

*Soaring* (1920)

*Sonata Pathetique* (1920)

*Sonata Tragica (Tragica)* (1923)

*Scherzo Waltz (Hoop Dance)* (1924)

*A Burmese Yein Pwe* (1926)  
*At the Spring* (1926)  
*Whims* (1926)  
*Air For the G String* (1928)  
*Gigue* (1928)  
*Concerto in A Minor* (1928/29)  
*Waltz* (1928)  
*Papillon* (1928)  
*Color Harmony* (1928)  
*Pavane of the Sleeping Beauty* (1928)  
*The Fairy Garden* (1928)  
*Bagatelle* (1928)  
*Pathetic Study* (1928)  
*The Banshee* (1928)  
*Riguadon* (1928)  
*Sarabande* (1928)  
*Water Study* (1928)  
*Air on a Ground Bass* (1928)  
*Gigue* (1929)  
*Speed* (1929)  
*Life of the Bee* (1929)  
*Quasi Waltz* (1929)  
*Courante* (1929)  
*Mazurka to Imaginary Music* (1929)  
*The Call/Breath of Fire* (1929/30)  
*A Salutation to the Depths* (1930)  
*Drama of Motion* (1930)  
*La Valse* (1930)  
*Descent into a Dangerous Place* (1930)  
*March* (1930)  
*Salutation* (1930)  
*Etude No. 1* (1930)  
*The Shakers* (1931)  
*Dances of Women* (1931)  
*Burlesca* (1931)  
*Lake at Evening* (1931)  
*Night Winds* (1931)  
*Tambourin* (1931)  
*Three Mazurkas* (1931)  
*Variations on a Theme of Handel* (1931)  
*Two Ecstatic Themes* (1931)  
*The Pleasures of Counterpoint* (1932)  
*Dionysiaques* (1932)  
*Suite in E* (1932)  
*Rudepoema* (1932)  
*The Pleasures of Counterpoint No. 2* (1934)  
*The Pleasures of Counterpoint No. 3* (1934)  
*Exhibition Piece* (1934)  
*Theme and Variation* (1934)  
*Credo* (1934)

*Duo-Drama* (1935)  
*New Dance* (1935)  
*Theater Piece* (1935)  
*With My Red Fires* (1936)  
*To the Dance* (1937)  
*American Holiday* (1938)  
*Race of Life* (1938)  
*Passacaglia in C Minor* (1938)  
*Square Dances* (1939)  
*Variations* (1940)  
*Song of the West* (1940/42)  
*Dance- 'ings'* (1941)  
*Decade* (1941)  
*Four Chorale Preludes* (1942)  
*Partita in G Major* (1942)  
*El Salon Mexico* (1943)  
*Inquest* (1944)  
*The Story of Mankind* (1946)  
*Lament of Ignacio Sanchez Mejias* (1946)  
*Day on Earth* (1947)  
*Corybantic* (1948)  
*Invention* (1949)  
*Quartet No. 1 (Night Spell)* (1951)  
*Fantasy in Fugue* (1952)  
*Ritmo Jondo* (1953)  
*Ruins and Visions* (1953)  
*Felipe el Loco* (1954)  
*The Rock and the Spring* (1955)  
*Airs and Graces* (1955)  
*Theatre Piece No. 2* (1955)  
*Dawn in New York* (1956)  
*Descent into the Dream* (1957)  
*Dance Overture* (1957)  
*Brandenburg Concerto* (1959)

### **References and further reading**

Cohen S.J. (1972) *Doris Humphrey - An Artist First*, Middletown Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press. (Begun as an autobiography, the main body of the text was completed by Selma Jeanne Cohen, arguably the most renowned dance writer/observer of that period, who presents an informed and detailed commentary. The volume also contains important writings by Humphrey herself and an excellent chronology of works.)

Diel, I. and Lampert F. eds (2011) *Dance Techniques 2010 TanzPlan Germany*, Germany: Henschel Verlag. (This work is designed to provide dancers, dance professionals, teachers, scholars and choreographers with applicable knowledge about different approaches, and to illustrate the respective historical context and make the didactics and relevant concepts more transparent.)

Main, L. (2012) *Directing the Dance Legacy of Doris Humphrey: the Creative Impulse of Reconstruction*. USA: University of Wisconsin Press. (This book considers four of Doris Humphrey's major choreographic works—*Water Study* (1928), *The Shakers* (1931), *With My Red Fires* (1936), and *Passacaglia* (1938), and analyses how directorial strategies applied in recent contemporised stagings could work across the modern and contemporary dance genre).

Siegel M. B. (1993) *Days on Earth*, New Haven : Yale University Press. (This volume is by one of the leading dance writers and Humphrey scholars in the USA. Siegel charts Humphrey's life by way of her choreographic career.)

Stodelle E. (1995/1979) *The Dance Technique of Doris Humphrey - and its Creative Potential*, New Jersey: Dance Horizons [e-edition available]. (Stodelle provides an insightful prologue of her time with Humphrey, a chapter on performing Humphrey works and more than sixty exercises that describe and illustrate this ground-breaking technique.)

### **Artist's Writing**

Quotations from Humphrey in Rand Rogers, F. ed (1941/1980) *Dance: A Basic Educational Training*, New York: MacMillan

\*\* Humphrey's programme note for *Passacaglia*, 1938

Humphrey, D. (1959) *The Art of Making Dances*, New York: Grove Press Inc. (Published posthumously, this was the first book of its kind to articulate the craft of choreography and it continues to make an important contribution to choreographic pedagogy, not least to rebel against.)

Humphrey, D. (2010) *New Dance: Writings on Modern Dance*, New Jersey: Princeton Book Company (A new collection of previously unpublished writings by Humphrey on a range of her dances, collated and edited by her son, Charles Woodford).

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