

Carry on...

THE CHARLES WEIDMAN NEWSLETTER

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Fall 1995

1994 GALA CONCERT

Thanks to all of you who made Humphrey-Weidman Gala: Dances From Their Years Together such a success! We could not have done it without you. The program, which included *David and Goliath*, *Two Ecstatic Themes*, *Life of the Bee*, *On My Mother's Side*, *Variations and Conclusion*, *Submerged Cathedral*, and *The Shakers*, was enthusiastically received by audience and press, alike. In case you missed the coverage, we would like to share the following...

THE NEW YORK TIMES, SUNDAY, AUGUST 28, 1994

DANCE

DANCE VIEW Jack Anderson

Catching Up With the Past To Look at Today

**Revivals of works by
Martha Graham,
Doris Humphrey and
Charles Weidman
illuminate a
glorious legacy.**

MODERN DANCERS CAN BE A sober lot; they usually don't like to appear sentimental. Yet it's possible that in the next few seasons, they'll find it hard to resist swaying to "Happy Birthday" and the "Anniversary Waltz." A time of commemoration and celebration is at hand.

This year is the 100th anniversary of Martha Graham's birth, and 1995 will be both the centennial of the birth of another modern-dance pioneer, Doris Humphrey, and the 20th anniversary of the death of Humphrey's colleague Charles Weidman. The Humphrey-Weidman Company was founded in 1928, and the pair worked together until the mid-1940's, when arthritis forced Humphrey to retire from the stage. Several New York groups are already scheduling festivities in these choreographers' honor.

A hint of what the Humphrey-Weidman repertory is like was provided by a stimulating Humphrey-Weidman gala presented this spring at the Kaye Playhouse by various soloists and college dance groups under the auspices of the Weidman foundation. The performance called attention to both the rewards and difficulties of reviving these choreographers' works.

Humphrey was morally earnest and, on occasion, esthetically severe. If her dances are not performed with a quiet, but burning, conviction, they can look merely prissy. Weidman was a deft mime who created roles for himself that demand expert timing from anyone who tries to follow him in them.

Nevertheless, the spring program demonstrated that when sensitively produced, both choreographers' works can be invigorating. The most distinguished single performance in the gala was that of Douglas Nielsen in Weidman's "On My Mother's Side" (1939), a suite of solos about the choreographer's Midwestern ancestors. Mr. Nielsen was both amusing and touching as he portrayed men and women of many ages, with no changes whatsoever in costume or makeup to help him intensify his illusions. Craig Gabrian was also effective in Weidman's "Submerged Cathedral" (1928). Wearing a costume resembling a monk's robe, he swayed with varying degrees of intensity, and the solo's somber choreography made him seem someone battered by storms or, possibly, by crises of faith.

Although she devised fine solos, Humphrey was best known as a choreographer for groups. A few of her works are now period pieces. Her "Life of the Bee" (1929), which was danced by students from Philadelphia's University of the Arts, did indeed concern a hive. Yet anyone uninterested in entomology would still have found it fascinating, for its imposing angular groupings were reminders that this piece of choreographic architecture came at a time when architects delighted in building skyscrapers.

Two other group compositions by Humphrey had a timeless excitement. "The Shakers" (1930), presented by the Dance Corps of the State University of New York at Purchase, depicted the rituals of the 18th-century celibate sect. After an austere beginning, the choreography grows increasingly fervent as Humphrey shows worshipers literally trying to shake sins out of their bodies.

Excerpts from "New Dance" (1935), performed by the Second Avenue Dance Company of New York University, envisioned an idealized society. The student dancers wisely realized the importance of bringing joyousness as well as seriousness to Humphrey's contrapuntal interplays of soloists and groups. As a result, "New Dance" became a living example of social harmony and not just a well-intentioned sermon in motion.

No one can predict what a once-famous work will look like today. So let the revivals, and the discoveries, continue. □

The Humphrey-Weidman Legacy

One of the most important programs seen this season—or, for that matter, in recent years—was offered by the Charles Weidman Dance Foundation at The Sylvia and Danny Kaye Playhouse at Manhattan's Hunter College on May 1. The program featured dances created between 1928 and 1945 by modern dance pioneers Doris Humphrey and Charles Weidman, and their work was fresh and alive, as if conceived today. To say that the pair was way ahead of its time is putting it mildly. You will seldom see the depth, range, and utter ingenuity that came out of the Humphrey-Weidman collaboration.

The May 1 program consisted of Weidman's "David and Goliath," as well as two solos originally performed by Weidman: "On My Mother's Side" and "Submerged Cathedral." The latter were performed by Douglas Nielsen and Craig Gubrian respectively. Humphrey creations included *Two Ecstatic Themes*, "Life of the Bee," "Variations" and "Conclusion" from *New Dance*, and "The Shakers."

Charles Weidman possessed a devastating sense of humor, as anyone could tell you who has seen his version of James Thurber's "Fables for our Times." His "David and Goliath," however, is a light-hearted spoof on that biblical theme. In addition to the two protagonists, the piece sees Israelite maidens and Philistines in tongue-in-cheek melodramatics almost on a par with those of the old silent films.

This was one time when, although David bested his enemy, Goliath (as performed by Paul Hamilton) won the day. Hamilton's hilariously blind staggering as David struck him was simply side-splitting. Ryan Galbreath's David was just right in his innocence and incredulity—when he struck Goliath a mortal blow his expression seemed to read, "Did I do that?"

The Israelite Maidens and Philistines, made up of dancers from the Purchase Dance Corps, really got into the goofy spirit of the whole thing.

Ms. Humphrey's *Two Ecstatic Themes*—"Circular Descent" and "Pointed Ascent"—was performed by Carla Maxwell, artistic director of the José Limon Dance Company. Coached by Ernestine Stodelle (an original member of the Humphrey-Weidman Company), Maxwell captured all of Humphrey's principles of movement—particularly in the contrast of circular and angular design.

Speaking of capturing originals, Douglas Nielsen, performing the arresting solo "On My Mother's Side," brought out every nuance of Weidman's suite of family portraits, and he even seemed to take on the appearance of Weidman himself. Nielsen not only portrayed Great Grandfather Walcott and Great Grandfather Hoffman, but two women, as well: the feeble, doddering Grandmother Hoffman and the dainty, "quaint" Aunt Jessie. All of these were climaxed by his portrayal of Sonny, an ambitious youngster who was the young Weidman himself, in a parade of characterizations that included imitations of Charlie Chaplin: a solo vaudeville turn, and spoofs on a young man attempting to master ballet technique. There were also ever-so-subtle takeoffs on the Denishawn school.

Mr. Nielsen seemed quite overwhelmed by the tumultuous ovation that greeted him at the conclusion of his performance, but he certainly was worthy of the acclaim. Cheers are also due Peter Hamilton, who recreated, restaged, and directed the Weidman creation. Hamilton was a leading dancer with the Humphrey-Weidman Company from 1940 to 1945 and with the Charles Weidman Company from 1945 to 1956. So he certainly knows the territory.

Hamilton also recreated "Submerged Cathedral," based on the French legend of a sunken cathedral that emerges from the sea once each year. This one is a rather complex solo in which the dancer's arms emulate the cathedral rising from the sea, as he portrays a monk in torment. Craig Gubrian was the monk submerged in conflict with his own spiritual values.

"Life of the Bee," created by Doris Humphrey in 1929, has been brilliantly restaged by Joanne M. Tulli with consultation by Ray Cook, Miriam Cooper, and Ann Vachon. The 65-year-old work was derived from the choreographer's close observations of the activities of bees.

As the program note explains: "The workers hover around the cell of the unborn queen, warming the wax to help her emerge. Just after her birth the old queen challenges the young one in a fight to the death, as the hive permits only one queen."

Renee Jaworski as the young queen bee and Milly Milicevic as the old queen created enormous excitement in their fierce battle. This remains one of Ms. Humphrey's most searing creations—one for the ages. The ensemble members—dancers from The University of the Arts—all gave fulfilling performances.

Ray Cook also reconstructed and staged two other Humphrey creations: "Variations" and "Conclusion" from *New Dance* and "The Shakers."

When "New Dance" premiered in 1935, the idealistic Doris Humphrey explained, "New Dance represents the world as it should be, where each person has a clear and harmonious relationship to his fellow beings."

While the world has yet to achieve that state, the stunning choreography accomplished an awesome contemporary pattern—one way ahead of its time. Thanks are due to the dedicated spirit of members of the Second Avenue Dance Company.

Doris Humphrey's deep range of subject matter culminated in "The Shakers." The Shakers were a religious sect given that name because part of their rituals consisted of vigorous movements, purported to rid the body of sin. The sect observed a doctrine of celibacy amid communal living. Humphrey based her choreography on authentic steps of the Shaker ritual, accompanied by speech as well as original Shaker hymns. The overall choreography illustrated temptation and salvation, and the tensions stemming from suppressed passion. The work was given an intense realization by Purchase Dance Corps.

Doris Humphrey and Charles Weidman were just as vital to the modern dance movement as Martha Graham. While the Graham company is seen occasionally, the masterpieces of Humphrey-Weidman are viewed too seldom, although the universities seem to be attempting to remedy this situation.

Let us hope that foundations will support recreations of the team's masterworks while those who remember it are still alive.

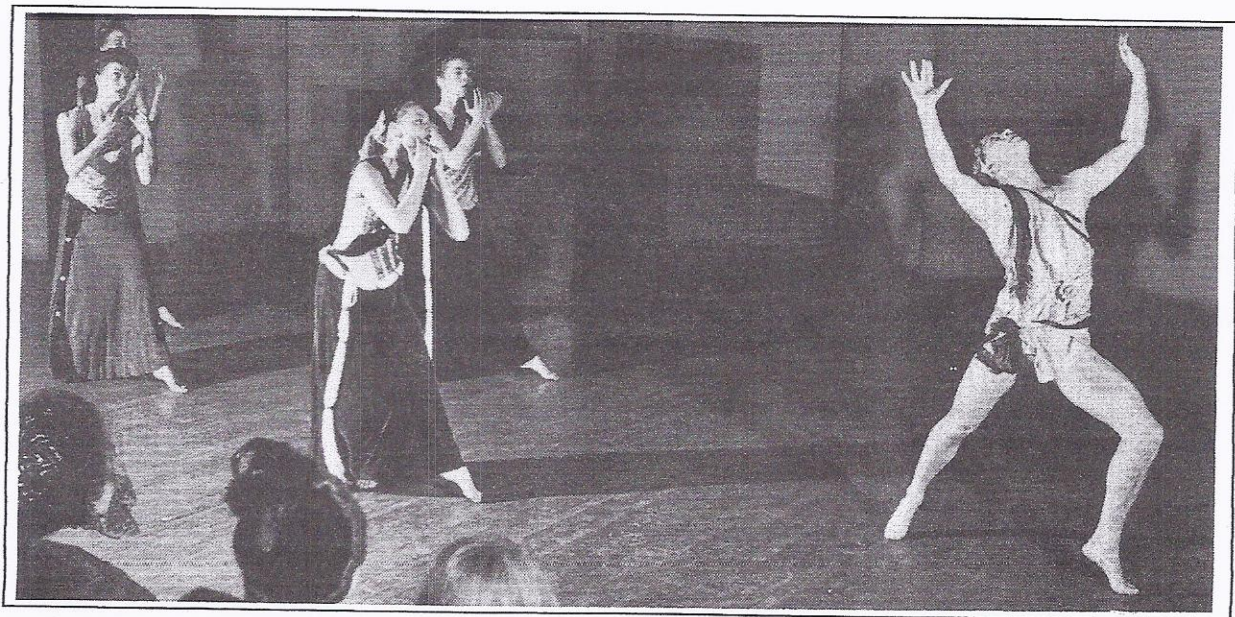
Jennie Schulman

The January/February 1994 issue of *Arabesque* featured an article entitled "David and Goliath, Bringing Life to a Biblical Story Through a Weidman Dance." It chronicled Peter Hamilton's efforts in bringing the dance, once again, to the concert stage. Peter was the original David to Charles' Goliath.

Now and Then, Photographs of "David and Goliath"



"Now" photograph (1993) courtesy of Purchase College



"Then" photograph (1947) courtesy of Annie Dunbar Williams
(Annie Dunbar Williams was an original cast member in "David and Goliath")

A community workshop and lecture-demonstration in Humphrey-Weidman technique was presented by Hunter College's Dance Department on April 27, 1995. Audiences for both the workshop and Gala concert on May 1st, included former Humphrey-Weidman dancers and students, dance celebrities, and fans. We also introduced Charles' and Doris' art, philosophy and technique to many who had never experienced it. In fact, 25% of the gala concert tickets were purchased by students!

Again, thank you to all our Gala supporters. . .



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WEIDMAN ACTIVITIES

Alice Teirstein, former student of Weidman and Peter Hamilton, and now director of Performing Arts at the Fieldston School for Ethical Culture in Riverdale, NY, produced **Weidman Week** in March, 1994. A year-long intensive study of Weidman technique culminated in a flurry of master classes, lecture-demonstrations and performances of several dances: **Lynchtown** (by the Fieldston Dance Company), **David and Goliath** (Purchase Dance Corps) and **Brahms Waltzes** (Dance Consort: Mezzacappa-Gabrian).

Rising interest in Weidman works has led to many stagings across the country. Recent productions include:

BARGAIN COUNTER

The Moving Company, Univ.
of Nebraska @ Omaha (UNO)

BRAHMS WALTZES

The Moving Company, UNO
Oberlin College
Dance Consort: Mezzacappa-
Gabrian

CHRISTMAS ORATORIO

Deborah Carr Theater Dance
Ensemble

DAVID AND GOLIATH

Purchase Dance Corps

LYNCHTOWN

Oberlin College
Jersey City State College

ST. MATTHEW PASSION (excerpt)

Young Dancers In Repertory

We would like to compile a comprehensive listing of performances of Weidman's works. If you are involved in or know of any Weidman reconstructions or stagings, please contact the Editor.

WEIDMAN CLASSES

Saturday Weidman technique classes have now been extended to three days per week and are held at the Center for Dance Studies in Brooklyn.

Since 1994, New York University's Jerome S. Coles Sports & Recreation Center has also been offering Weidman technique classes.

We have also learned from our last questionnaire that Humphrey-Weidman studies, philosophy, and principles of movement are being taught across the country. If you are interested in classes, please call the Editor.

DORIS HUMPHREY CENTENNIAL CELEBRATION

The year-long Doris Humphrey Centennial Celebration was kicked off in New York City December 1994 with **The Legacy of Doris Humphrey**, presented as part the inaugural season of the 92nd Street Y Harkness Dance Project at Playhouse 91. This inaugural season also coincided with the 60th Anniversary of the Dance Program at the Y. In 1935 the 92nd Street Y's dance faculty boasted a who's who in dance: Martha Graham, Hanya Holm, Doris Humphrey, Anna Sokolow, and Charles Weidman.

The Legacy of Doris Humphrey, coordinated by Joan Finkelstein, featured three Humphrey-Weidman generations. Ernestine Stodelle, dance critic, teacher, choreographer, reconstructor, and former member of The Doris Humphrey Concert Group and Humphrey-Weidman Company, graciously introduced the program which included Weidman's **Brahms Waltzes**, Humphrey's **Two Ecstatic Themes** and **The Call and Breath of Fire**, Jose Limon's **Chaconne**, and Nona

Schurman's Humphrey-Weidman technique demonstration in dance form, *Salute*. Former Limon company member, Jennifer Muller, presented an excerpt of her choreography, *Beach*.

* * *

Teachers College Columbia University's celebration of the centennial began this summer with workshops in Humphrey-Weidman technique, Humphrey-Limon technique, Humphrey repertory, and other related courses. This celebration culminated October 20-22, 1995 with a week-end of panels, workshops, technique classes, lecture-demonstrations, and a gala concert of Humphrey works (*New Dance*, *Fantasy and Fugue*, *Night Spell*, *Soaring*, and *Day on Earth*), Weidman's tribute to Humphrey, *Brahms Waltzes*, and Limon's *Symphony for Strings*. Photographic exhibits were concurrently on display at the Dance Collection of the New York Public Library at Lincoln Center and the Teachers College Student Lounge.

* * *

1996, the first year of the Kennedy Center's *Celebrating American Dancing*, *The Revolution*, is devoted to *The Genius of Doris Humphrey and Charles Weidman*. Humphrey-Weidman performances will be held February 27 & 28; 202-416-8500 for ticket information.

ANOTHER MILESTONE IN DANCE HISTORY

Mary Washington College in Fredericksburg, Virginia, celebrated 50 years of dance this past spring. Claudia Moore Read, former Humphrey-Weidman dancer, founded the college's dance program in 1945. Works by Humphrey, Weidman, and Hamilton highlighted the program which was also a tribute to Miss Read. Several generations of

her students from across the country were present for the festivities.

MORE

In addition to the stagings of her *Salute*, Nona Schurman has written a book on choreography, expanding upon Humphrey and Weidman principles of movement and composition and on her own vast experience as a dance educator. During the summer of 1994 she taught a workshop at Ohio State University on Humphrey-Weidman technique for reconstructors, notators, and students.

* * *

We are in the early stages of compiling an oral history and are continuing our chronology project. There is a great deal of information to be gathered!

* * *

We have also applied to the Dance Notation Bureau for aid in notating the Humphrey-Weidman technique and principles. We plan to videotape the technique and studies as well.

* * *

If you are interested in working on any of these projects, please contact us.

THANKS FOR YOUR RESPONSES

Thanks to all who sent in completed questionnaires! We have learned a great deal from your responses and invite others to share their Humphrey-Weidman experiences with us. Please take the time to complete the following questionnaire and return it to us in the enclosed envelope.

We are also trying to locate two former Weidman dancers: Bill Matons and Mariana McGuire. Please contact the Editor if you know their whereabouts.

CHARLES WEIDMAN & HUMPHREY-WEIDMAN DANCERS: We would like to hear from you! (use additional paper, if necessary)

Name _____ Telephone _____

Address _____

-- Did you study with Charles Weidman and/or Doris Humphrey? If so, what years/studios?

-- Were you a member of the Humphrey-Weidman or Weidman Companies? What years?

-- What repertory did you perform?

-- Do you remember any of the repertory? Are you interested in working on reconstructions?

-- Do you have any programs from performances with either Charles or Doris? Are you willing to share these programs with us?

-- Did you perform in any of the Broadway shows and/or operas choreographed by Doris and/or Charles? If so, which ones, what years?

-- If you are a dance educator, where do you teach? Do you utilize Humphrey-Weidman technique in your teaching?

-- Do you know other Humphrey-Weidman or Weidman dancers/former students who would like to share their experiences with us? Please give us their names/address, or have them contact us directly.

SALES: WEIDMAN & HUMPHREY-WEIDMAN ITEMS (prices include shipping and handling)

- Buttons (studio portrait of Doris & Charles, as pictured on page 4).....\$2.00
- T-shirts.....\$15.50
 - Humphrey-Weidman Poster design from first school (size XL) color-natural
 - Weidman as Lincoln in A House Divided (size XL) aqua red white (circle one)
- Video: Charles Weidman: On His Own.....\$53.95
- Postcards (Charles, set of 6).....\$6.00

TOTAL..... Payable to the Charles Weidman Dance Foundation.....\$_____

NAME _____ TELEPHONE _____

ADDRESS _____

▶ You can continue to be a part of the Charles Weidman Dance Foundation's on-going activities. Help us keep Charles' contributions to American dance in the limelight. Join our efforts with a tax-deductible contribution (Payable to the Charles Weidman Dance Foundation, Inc.) and mail to the Charles Weidman Dance Foundation, Inc., c/o Carol Warracappa, 105 Avenue P #6D, Brooklyn, NY 11204.

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