

# Introduction to Modern Dance

History and Definitions



# The Purpose of Modern Dance

- Modern stemmed from a rebellion against traditional ballet and a rejection to the vaudeville circuit.
  - Ballet: Rejected the strictness of the body, the unnatural lines and strict training, and the hierarchy found in most ballet schools.
  - Vaudeville: Rejected the “offensive exhibitionism.”
- Modern dance could make people think about real life and not about fantasies or fairytales. Dance could be social commentary; it could lead to political change.

# Characteristics of Modern Dance

- No set curriculum
- No regular set of exercises
- No particular music
- No particular costume
- No particular body type
- No fancy music or scenery
- However, you will typically see parallel position and bare feet in modern classes.



# Phases of Modern Dance

“Free Dance”

Late-1800s - early 1900s

# Modern: The “New Dance”

- Social, economic and political changes raised new **questions about morality, rights, freedom and the human condition as well as questions about the purpose behind art.**
- This new dance was not traditionally beautiful to the accustomed fine arts patron. In fact, it often looked like improvisation. **Dance began focusing on the expression of the artist rather than entertaining and appealing to the audience.**

# Isadora Duncan (1877-1927)

- Known as the “**Mother of Modern Dance.**”
- Believed ballet was "ugly and against nature."
- Founded her “Free Dance” of interpretive dance, **blending poetry, music and rhythms of nature.** She **danced barefoot** with her hair **down and flowing** in simple Greek apparel.
- Dances used the solar plexus and torso, and breathing was important.
- Though an American, she traveled Europe and was not popular in the U.S. during her life.



# Loie Fuller (1862-1928)

- Known as the **“Goddess of Light.”**
- Choreographed natural movement and used improvisation techniques with silk costumes illuminated by multi colored lighting.



# Ruth St. Denis (1878-1968)

- Her choreography had Indian & Asian influences
- Believed that dance should transcend the physical realm and enter the spiritual and that dance was capable of dealing with complex philosophical themes.
- She formed the dance company Denishawn with her dance partner and husband **Ted Shawn**. Famous students of Denishawn include:
  - Martha Graham
  - Doris Humphrey
  - Charles Weidman



*Poster for a Denishawn dance program.*



# Phases of Modern Dance

“The Big Four”

*Modern Dance Pioneers*

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Early 1900s - mid-1900s

# The Big Four

- The main choreographers during this period were **Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, Charles Weidman and Hanya Holm.**
- The major theme for the works created was about the American spirit.
- The big four were influenced by the creators of the New Dance.
- In 1935, these four choreographers introduced the **American Dance Festival**, a six-week summer festival of modern dance classes and performances that continues annually.

# Martha Graham (1894-1991)

- Graham developed the principle of **contract and release**. Her style focused on muscular control and appeared jarring to many viewers.
- **Founded the first Bachelor of Arts Degree in Dance.**
- Founded the Martha Graham Dance Co. in 1926. Famous students include:
  - Paul Taylor
  - Merce Cunningham



# Martha Graham on Modern Dance



# Martha Graham on the meaning of modern



# Martha Graham's Choreography

The slide features a light green background on the left side, which transitions into a white area with a rounded top-left corner. A thick, dark blue horizontal bar spans across the white area, positioned below the title. Below this bar is a large, solid black rectangular area that occupies the lower half of the slide.

# Doris Humphrey (1895-1985)

- Created the principle of fall and recovery.
- Humphrey was a leading soloist in *Denishawn*.
- Created the Humphrey-Weidman school and company with Charles Weidman.



# Charles Wiedman (1904-1975)

- He was known for *abstract, rhythmic pantomime*.
- Performed with Denishawn.
- Co-founder of the Humphrey-Weidman school and company.





# Hanya Holm (1893- 1992)

- Trained in Germany. Turned her attention to Broadway and choreographed 11 hits such as *Kiss Me Kate* and *My Fair Lady*.
- Founded the Wigman School of Dance in 1931 in New York, introducing these techniques:
  - Wigman technique: which used silence as well as tribal music & masks
  - Laban's theories of the spatial dynamics, including space, time, weight and flow.



# Phases of Modern Dance

The Second Generation  
& Post-Modernism

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1940s – 1980s

# The Second Generation

- This is the time period when students of the Big Four struck out on their own. The Big Four used these students to develop their own techniques and then the students broke out.
- This resulted in more development and exploration of modern techniques & form. These techniques are still performed today.

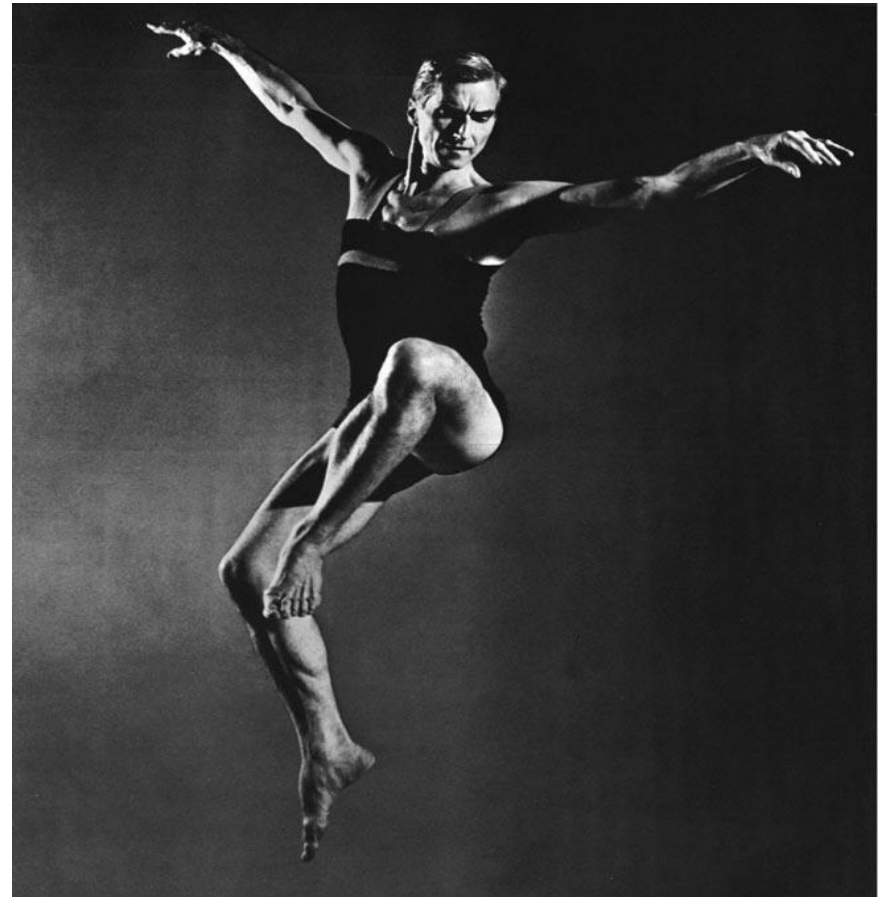
# José Limón (1908-1972)

- Studied dance at the Humphrey- Weidman school; practiced the Humphrey principle of **fall and recovery** and the Weidman principle of **pantomime and expression**.
- Founder of the Limon Company, which is still in existence.



# Erick Hawkins (1909-1994)

- Developed the Hawkins Technique which is a forerunner of **somatic dance techniques** – focusing on the spirit-body connection.
- Technique is inspired by **kinesiology**.
- Student of George Balanchine.



# Paul Taylor (1930-present)

- Uses everyday gestures and modernist ideology.
- Creator of the Paul Taylor Dance Company and Taylor 2.
- Danced for Merce Cunningham, Martha Graham and George Balanchine.



# Postmodernism (1960s-1970s)

- The postmodernists (“after-moderns”) rejected the techniques and theories of modern dance and experimented with new movement structures.
- Claimed that any movement (even every day pedestrian movement) was dance, and any person was a dancer (with or without training)
- Chance dance, happenings, contact improvisation, dance theatre and performance art were brought back from the early 1900’s.

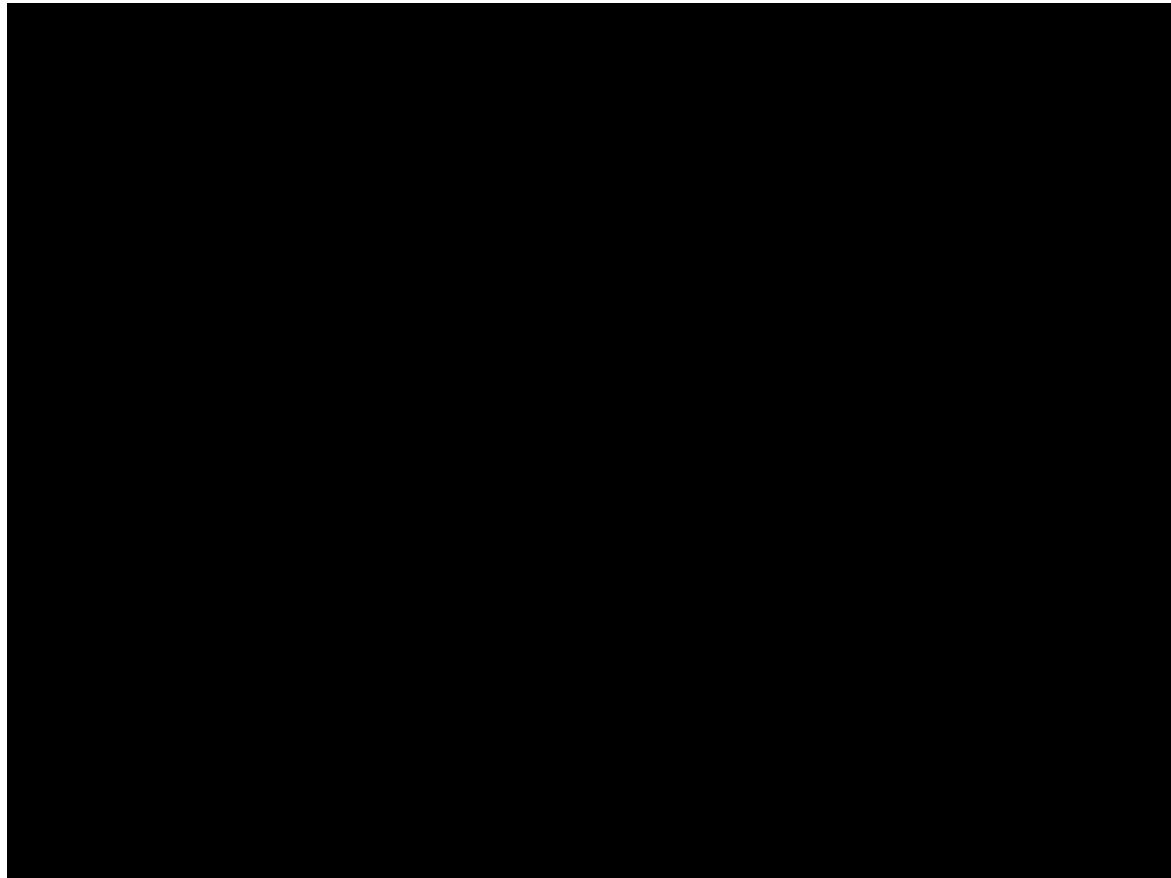
# Merce Cunningham (1919-present)

- Considered modern & post-modern.
- Developed Cunningham Technique which focuses on *non-linear, non-climactic, non-psychological work.*
- Worked with Composer John Cage on “*chance dance*” happenings.
- Meaning of choreography was to be determined by the observer.
- Former performer with Martha Graham.





# **Merce Cunningham-Rockerfeller Award**



# Phases of Modern Dance

Contemporary Dance &  
Internationalism

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Late 1900s - present

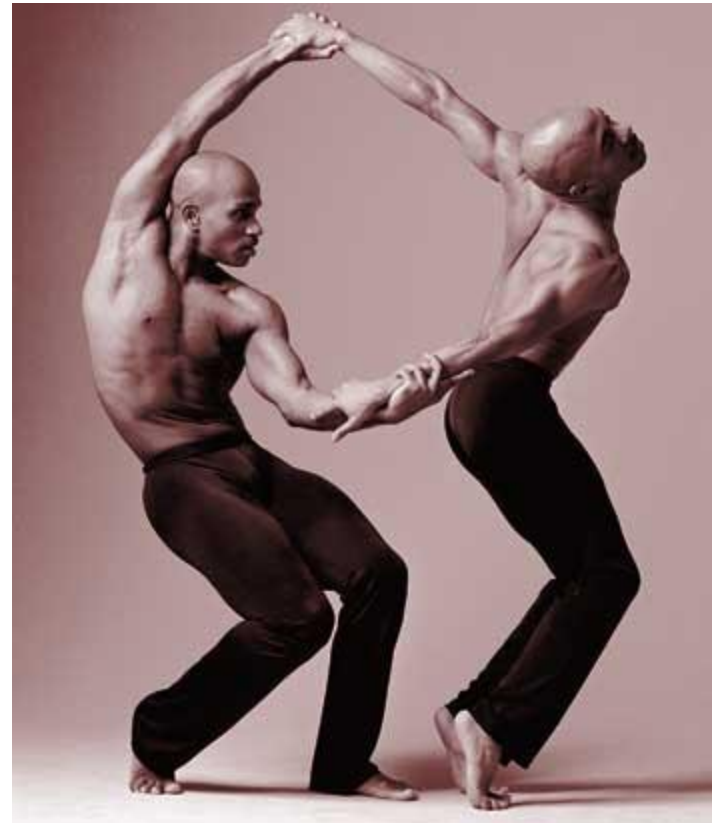
# Contemporary Dance (1970s-present)

- “Anything Goes” - contemporary Dance is a melting pot of modern, post-modern and other dance styles.
- Internationalism: contemporary concert dance has **no national face and no particular cultural face.**



# Alvin Ailey (1931-1989)

- *Inspired by gospel, spirituals and the blues.* Ailey's dances fuse modern with elements of jazz, ballet, and African dance, and draw heavily upon African-American themes.
- Created Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre in 1958; the company gave exposure to many African-American and Asian dancers.
- *Revelations* is his most critically acclaimed work.



# Alvin Ailey



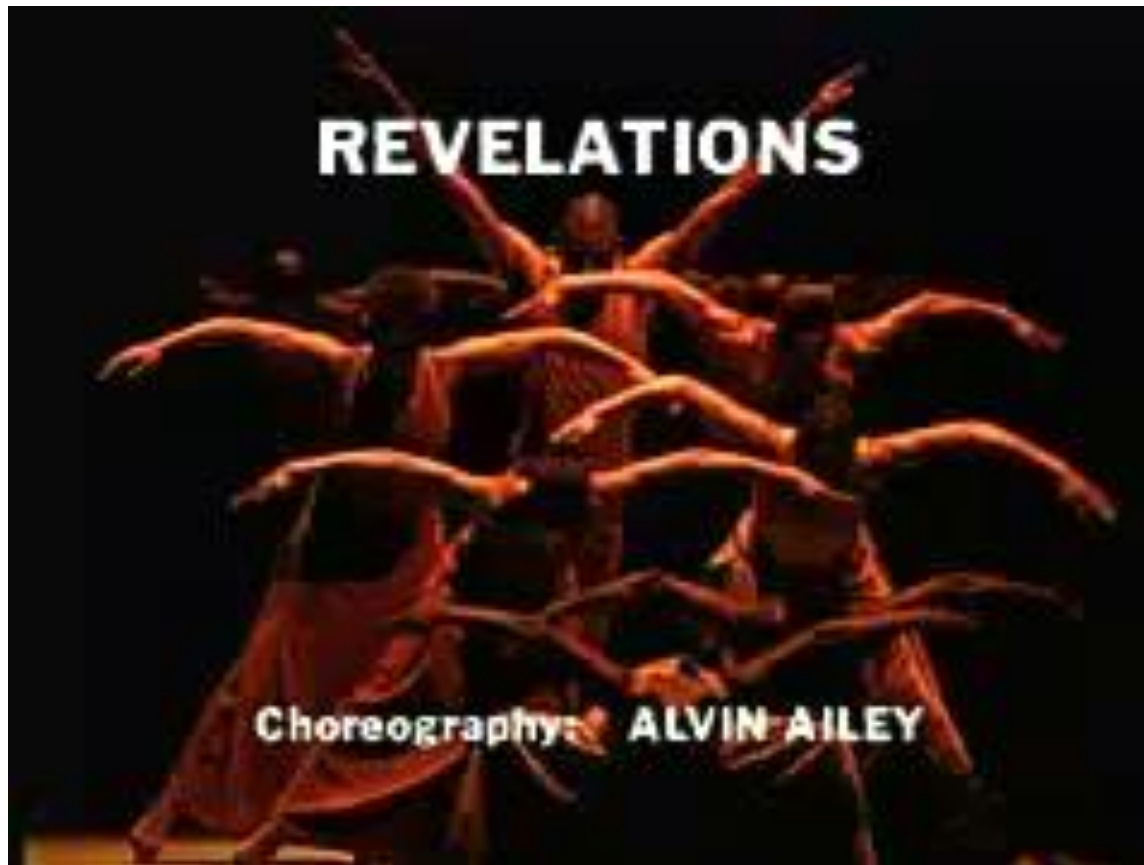
# Alvin Ailey-Renee Robinson



# Alvin Ailey



# Alvin Ailey---Revelations





# Twyla Tharp (1941-present)

- Danced for Paul Taylor.
- Created Twyla Tharp Dance.
- Choreographer for numerous Broadway shows, Hollywood movies.
- In 1988, Twyla Tharp Dance merged with American Ballet Theatre.



# Mark Morris (1956-present)

- Has earned a reputation as “**the bad boy of modern dance.**”
- Known for his musicality, use of ballet and social dances, craftsmanship, ingenuity, humor, and at times diverse music choices, Morris is popular among dance lovers and mainstream audiences.
- Morris and Baryshnikov established White Oak Dance Project contemporary dance company.
- Noted for his musicality, he also created classical ballets for numerous companies, including the American Ballet Theatre and the San Francisco Ballet.

<http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/entertainment/markmorris/index.html>

