

Dancemagazine

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**American
Ballet
Theatre's
Spirits of
Adventure:**

**Robert La Fosse
George de la Peña**

**Marianna Tcherkassky
in La Bayadère**

**Celebrating
Success:
Pittsburgh
Ballet Theatre**

**College
Dance Festival:
D.C. Connections**



May 14-16, 1981

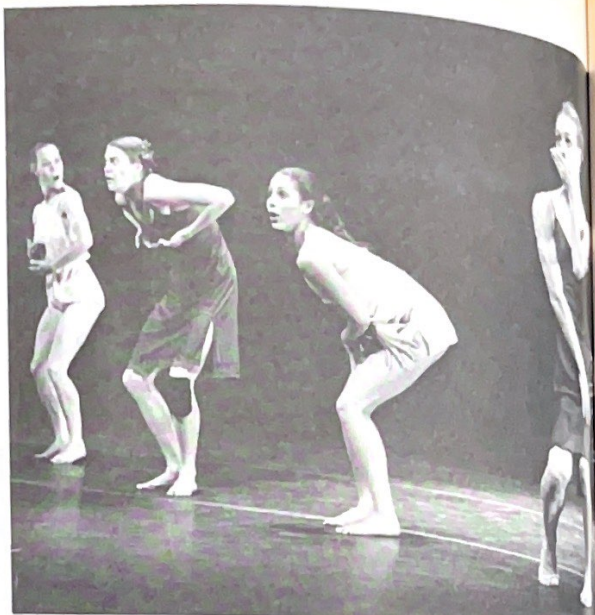
The First National College Dance Festival

by Margaret Pierpont
photos by Brian Eggleston

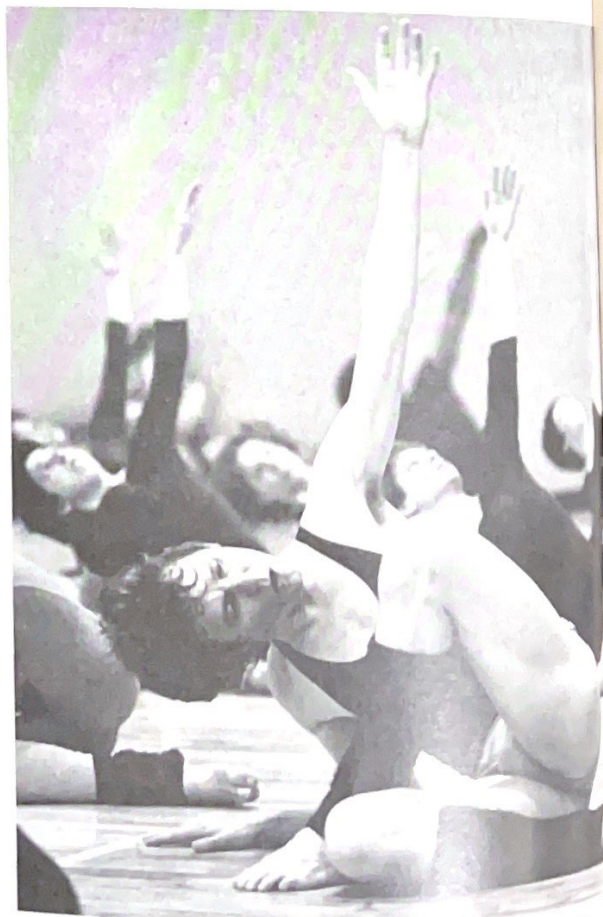
On May 15, the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., sold out its 500-seat Terrace Theatre for a performance of nine dances representing colleges in all parts of the United States. The concert was not exactly the social event of the evening in the nation's capital, where, in a room next to the theater, millionaires in cowboy hats ate chili and watched a screening of *The Lone Ranger*. Yet, as Alan Kriegsman wrote the next day in *The Washington Post*, "Were it not for the key role our colleges played as an incubator for dance in the century's earlier decades, the foot soldiers of today's dance millions—dancers, educators, and audiences—might never have materialized."

"The important thing is that it happened," say the women who first thought up the idea of a national festival eight years ago. The women who founded the American College Dance Festival Association to encourage higher standards in college dance (through regional festivals with concerts chosen by adjudication) come from the larger group of teachers who have kept dance alive in colleges and universities over the last fifty years. They are clear-eyed survivors who know what a struggle fighting for dance has been and is, and they have no illusions that this moment—the first national college dance festival—might mark the end of the era of growth they guided as much as the beginning of something else.

It's hard not to think of these women as "the ladies," though most of them have done things ladies would never dream of, like living in New York on twenty-five cents a day in the late thirties

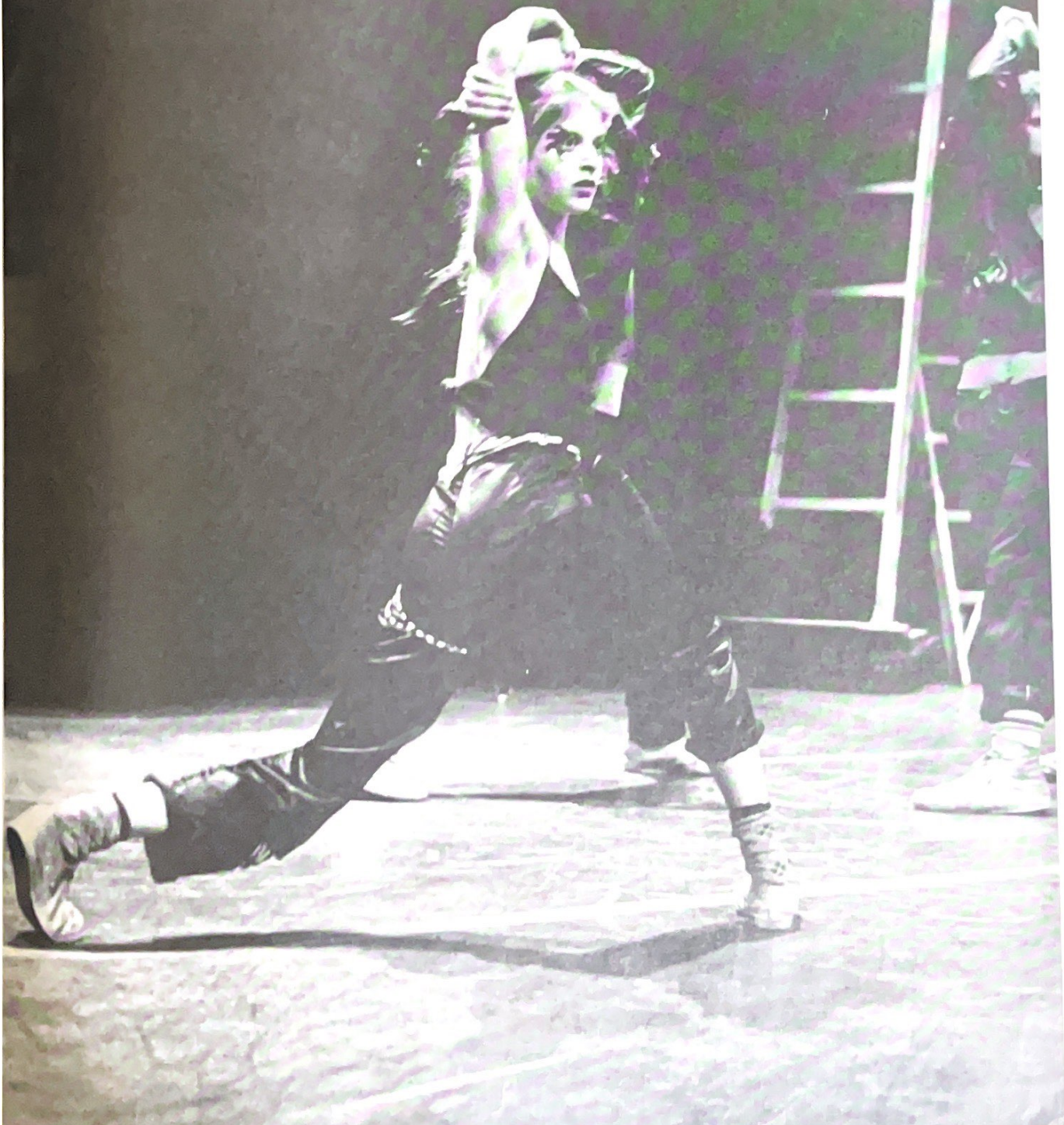


Dancers from the University of Utah depict the perils of growing up female in *My Mother, Myself*.



Bill Evans leads a class during the three-day national festival.

A hot moment from Cool Wave, the dance that won its choreographer, Lynn Lesnick, a Dance Magazine scholarship.



so that they could study with "Martha" or "Doris" or "Hanya." These are the teachers who have to repeat the same admonitions to students over and over and see all that is boring, tedious, and repetitive year after year. They must get tired of mouthing modern dance clichés like "One must never form habits," or "Dance is not the shapes, it is what's in between the shapes." But in a lobby after viewing a good dance, women who have difficulty walking look like they will fly to the ceiling from the lift the movement has given them.

Fifty years ago, dance began to infiltrate the physical education departments on the wave of interest in Dalcroze and Delsarte, both men whose theories about rhythm, movement, and gesture affected European and American dancers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The influence of modern dance across America was felt from physical education teachers who spent their summers in the New York studios of such early moderns as Doris Humphrey. At Columbia Teachers' College, progressive educator John Dewey influenced Gertrude Colby, Bird Larson, and Margaret H'Doubler, pioneers in college dance. The Bennington School of Dance became a link between the educational and professional worlds when it was founded in 1934 by Martha Hill, then head of the physical education department at New York University.

Today, there are 167 dance major programs and 341 non-major, interdisciplinary programs offered by 508 colleges and universities. From physical education, dance has moved into its own department or into theater or music. Ballet, once taboo in college dance departments, is now offered, as are jazz, tap, African, notation, reconstruction, history, Ph.D.'s, M.A.'s, and B.F.A.'s to potential scholars, therapists, analysts, performers, teachers, and choreographers. In a career seminar sponsored by *Dance Magazine*, festival students learned there is now a greater demand for notators than there is a supply, and good ones can make up to \$30,000 a year, though that amount of money is still the exception in the field.

"Sophisticated," "realistic," and "addicted" to movement is how Bill T. Jones described the students he taught in Washington, where such teachers as Benjamin Harkavy, Melissa Hayden, Viola Farber, Sarah Stackhouse, Chuck Davis, and Honi Coles offered a choice of five classes each hour-and-a-half to 400 students. "When I was a student, I didn't think it was happening in the universities. Now I think it's a noble thing," Jones said, pointing out the universities' role in preserving dance tradition.

The road to Washington

Since its inception in 1973, the American College Dance Festival Association has held festivals in five regions: West, Midwest, New England, Northeastern, and Mid Atlantic. Colleges take turns hosting the festival. This year, from festivals at UCLA, University of Illinois, Temple University, Boston Conservatory of Music, and North Carolina School of the Arts, Murray Louis, Pauline Koner, and Clay Taliaferro chose the dances that appeared in Washington.

It is in these regional festivals that one can see the directions departments have taken, since students from all over show up for classes and to perform in either the gala concert or in informal showings. Each festival draws from faculty, friends, and local resources that give it its own distinct flavor, whether it's Barbara Dilley, Meredith Monk, and a contact improvisation jam at Temple, or Phyllis Lamhut explaining "emotion is in the motion" to long-legged Southern girls with creamy complexions and vivid Milliskin unitards, or Clay Taliaferro helping a choreographer focus an idea such as "Well, you know, yin and yang" in a workshop in Boston.

There are community colleges where one teacher leads a bunch of spunky kids and little departments where one teacher rebels and offers nothing but improvisation. There are the professional performing arts schools where from high school on, girls and boys are immersed in their craft. There are colleges that offer one or two courses, and don't want a major. There are ballet departments. There are ethnic dance departments. There are intellectuals who waver between doing it and thinking about it, and physical education enthusiasts who wish dance had never left the gym. And there are small and large departments that offer a range of training and produce competent choreographers and performers who, when they graduate and go to New York, "land on their feet, running," in the words of Bill T. Jones.

All of these colleges "competed" for the national concert, an issue the organization knows it must address since mostly dances from the bigger and more professional colleges were chosen. Choreography may be by a faculty member, student, or professional, but the performers have to be undergraduate or graduate students. At least one dance had to be chosen from each region, and from all the regional performances, one performer and one choreographer were chosen by the adjudicators for *Dance Magazine* scholarships of \$1,000 each, to be used in the way the recipients thought best to further their artistic careers. The judges, though not required to do so, considered need as well as merit in making their decision. The winners were Wanda Dryer of Brooklyn College, for technique, and Lynn Lesniak of Connecticut College, for choreographic potential.

What kinds of dances did the adjudicators have to choose from? Sometimes the dances were kinetic and playful, but without "technique." They were usually from the smaller departments or noncredit dance groups. Other times there was all "technique"—usually Graham dominated—but no excitement, no vision, and particularly no indication that the world had gone on since the 1950s. Some dances—and they usually landed up in informal or faculty concerts—were so personal it became painful to sit through them. Many were too long. (In one dance, a woman moved without any particular kind of force towards a chair. When she was almost there, a stagehand appeared and moved it to another spot; the process began again, about seven times.) In much of the choreography, there was a preference for a spaced-out, slow, sustained quality, the result of the attraction, in the 1970s, to strain-free movement that is always centered and always feels good. "Everyone has trained their spines but forgotten their hands," Clay Taliaferro said.

The war between technique and creativity is an old one in modern dance, especially in universities. Right now, students' strength and agility seems much more developed than what they're using their skill to make. "It's an eternal problem. What is technique?" Clay Taliaferro asked students in a choreography workshop. You don't choreograph by deciding "a chaîné turn will represent my passion, but the other way around! . . . You've got these wonderfully emotional ideas—but you're not allowing your instrument to participate."

The split between technique and creativity can come, too, from the departments, from what their leaders' motivations are and how able they are to enact a broad vision. "Twenty years ago, the people who went into the colleges were teachers," Murray Louis said. Now, though he thinks it's changing, he sees professionals using the positions to work out their own ideas. Even those veterans he mentions have mentors from their youth to contend with. There's a parallel between the styles of departments and the approaches of the dominant teachers of the older educators, though it's not a one-to-one sort of analogy. The Doris Humphrey or Hanya Holm approach to teaching was to develop the individual creative talents of their students, or to

challenge them to discover new aspects of their performing personalities. The Graham approach emphasized imitating the master and making the teacher's vision paramount.

At the Kennedy Center

So what rises to the top for a concert at the Kennedy Center? Not surprisingly, it was dominated by modern dance. There was no ballet, jazz, ethnic dance, or even reconstructions. The dancers throughout were equal to the technical demands of the choreography—surefooted, professional, and not visibly shaken by the occasion.

Byron Richard, a graduate student at Ohio State, is a wonderful performer. His solo, *Leave it on the Left*, was active and inventive with such moments as a sudden diagonal scoot on his back to an upstage corner, a movement that cut his size in half and surprised the audience into laughter. He dared to be sexy and use popular music. *Circus* was the creation of UCLA's Martha Kalman, a graduate student who looks like she'd find a way to mug her way out of a strait jacket. She doesn't care if she looks idiotic. Tiny, strong, and agile, she dominated the stage shared with musicians as she imitated the fawning of animals and people, obviously sharply observed. *Ritual/Habitual* was a joyous, lighthearted series of duets that burst out of group sections in shadowy light. It extended Murray Louis's cleverness through a former member of his company, Dianne Markham, who choreographed the piece for her sophisticated and versatile students at the North Carolina School of the Arts.

From the University of Utah (choreography by faculty member Loabelle Mangelson), *My Mother, Myself* was an audience pleaser with its stock-humor vignettes, but the movements that brought the laughs were stereotyped and didn't illuminate the recorded text, from the best seller of the same name. Another solo, *Atmospheres*, choreographed and danced by Jane Siarny, came from the University of Illinois. Set to music by Toru Takemitsu, it was one long spiral up and out into an upward straining arabesque. There was a slithery duet from the Boston Conservatory of Music (*Monoecia* by Mary K. Wolff) and a group piece called *Afterglow* (Aaron D. Smith) from the University of Colorado in which the most vivid image was a long diagonal of blue light in the dance's beginning that left an ordinary slow-flowing piece when it was gone.

Recent Temple University graduate Marlene Schmidt offered choreography on a social issue with "A Shift in the Wind." A taped monologue echoed about world starvation while the dancers moved as though on the moon or shell-shocked, a weightless oozing and tumbling.

In contrast was Lynn Lesniak's hard-edge, punk-rock *Cool Wave*, a flash of what is happening now: the indifference, the violence, the nasty sexual relations, and the overriding sense of darkness. (Taking up the beat in his foot, Taliaferro says: "There's nothing we can do about it. We've got to let this period happen.") Lesniak has a great theatrical sense. At one point, she lined the New Wave characters up against a brick wall, like one of those sullen photographs on album covers. No one would say *Cool Wave* is a great piece yet. It presents a scene but gives it no tone. But the choreographer is obviously in touch with something of the movement, the bodies, and energy of the times in which we live.

In her book, *Dance: A Creative Art Experience*, educator Margaret D'Houbler wrote: "A living art must be aware of the problems of its own age and discover answers in terms of that age. It cannot express feelings and ideals that have vanished or adopt techniques and aims without consideration of their patience." This seems as good a prescription as any for the continued health of college dance. □



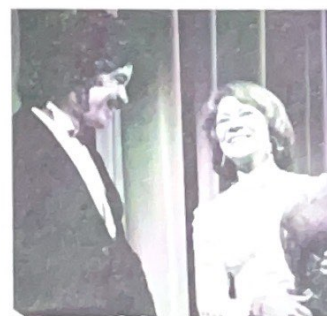
Haruki Fujimoto shows students how to use a Kabuki fan.



Melissa Hayden gives an adagio.



Familiar faces at the college festivals were "Teddy" Weisner, who is retired from Brooklyn College, and Ruth Murray, who led the Wayne State dance department for nearly fifty years.



John Finck, from the Kennedy Center, and Pat Boyer, from Swarthmore College, organized the national festival.



Helen Alkire, head of the dance department at Ohio State, and Jeanne Beaman, professor emeritus at the University of Pittsburgh, are two of the motivating forces behind ACDA.