

doris humphrey the art of making dances

Doris Humphrey: The Art of Making Dances has had a profound impact on the evolution of modern dance. As one of the key figures in the development of American dance in the early to mid-20th century, Humphrey's contributions extend beyond her choreography; she also shaped the way we understand and teach dance. Her philosophy, encapsulated in her seminal work "The Art of Making Dances," offers insights into the creative process and the principles that underlie effective choreography. This article delves into her life, her philosophies, and the lasting legacy of her work.

Early Life and Career

Doris Humphrey was born on October 17, 1895, in Oak Park, Illinois. Her early exposure to the performing arts came from her family's appreciation for music and theater. She began her formal training in dance at the University of Chicago, where she studied various forms of movement, including ballet and modern dance.

Influences and Training

- Ballet Foundations: Humphrey initially trained in ballet, which provided her with a strong technical foundation. However, she quickly sought to explore more expressive forms of movement.
- Denishawn School: In 1917, she joined the Denishawn School of Dancing and Related Arts, co-founded by Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn. This experience exposed her to a range of dance styles and philosophies, greatly influencing her artistic development.
- Collaboration with Charles Weidman: Humphrey formed a significant partnership with fellow dancer and choreographer Charles Weidman. Together, they founded the Humphrey-Weidman Company, which became renowned for its innovative modern dance pieces.

Philosophy of Dance

Doris Humphrey's approach to dance is encapsulated in her core philosophy that emphasizes the importance of movement as a means of expression. She believed that dance should convey emotion and narrative, rather than simply showcase technical skill.

Dance as a Form of Expression

1. Emotional Connectivity: Humphrey advocated for dance to resonate emotionally with both the performer and the audience. She believed that the dancer's ability to communicate feelings was paramount.
2. Movement Dynamics: She emphasized the importance of dynamics in movement, arguing that variations in speed, weight, and energy could evoke different

emotional responses.

3. Theme and Narrative: Humphrey often incorporated themes into her choreography, urging dancers to tell a story through their movements. This approach transformed dance into a powerful narrative art form.

Choreographic Principles

In "The Art of Making Dances," Humphrey outlined several key principles that guide the choreographic process:

- Fall and Recovery: This concept, central to Humphrey's technique, involves the natural ebb and flow of movement. Dancers learn to embrace gravity, using it to enhance their expressions and movements.
- Body as an Instrument: She viewed the body as an expressive instrument capable of conveying a wide range of emotions and ideas. This perspective encouraged dancers to explore their physical limits and capabilities.
- Space and Time: Humphrey emphasized the importance of spatial relationships and timing in choreography. The interplay of movement in space, combined with rhythmic timing, creates a dynamic and engaging performance.

Choreographic Works

Throughout her career, Doris Humphrey created numerous influential works that showcased her innovative approach to dance. Some of her most notable pieces include:

1. "Water Study" (1928)

- Concept: This piece explores the fluidity of movement, drawing inspiration from the natural elements of water.
- Choreographic Elements: The dancers embody the qualities of water, using gentle, flowing movements to create a serene atmosphere.
- Legacy: "Water Study" is celebrated for its pioneering use of minimalist choreography, focusing on the beauty of pure movement rather than elaborate staging.

2. "The Shakers" (1934)

- Concept: Inspired by the spiritual community of the Shakers, this work captures the essence of their religious fervor and simplicity.
- Choreographic Elements: The piece features repetitive, rhythmic movements that reflect the Shaker lifestyle, emphasizing community and devotion.
- Impact: "The Shakers" was significant in its representation of American culture through dance, showcasing how movement can embody societal themes.

3. "Air for the G String" (1936)

- Concept: This piece is a lyrical interpretation of J.S. Bach's music,

showcasing the beauty of the human form in motion.

- **Choreographic Elements:** The choreography is characterized by graceful, flowing movements that mirror the music's melodic lines.
- **Significance:** "Air for the G String" exemplifies Humphrey's ability to seamlessly blend music and movement, creating a cohesive and transcendent experience.

Teaching and Legacy

Doris Humphrey's influence extends beyond her choreography; she was also a dedicated teacher and mentor. She taught at various institutions, including the New Dance Group and the Juilliard School, where she trained the next generation of dancers and choreographers.

Educational Contributions

- **Humphrey Technique:** She developed a unique method of teaching dance, focusing on the principles of fall and recovery, as well as the expressive potential of the body.
- **Influence on Modern Dance Education:** Her teachings have shaped modern dance curricula, emphasizing creativity, emotional expression, and the importance of movement dynamics.

Enduring Impact on Modern Dance

Doris Humphrey's contributions to dance have left an indelible mark on the art form. Her innovative choreography and educational philosophy continue to inspire choreographers and dancers today. The following points highlight her legacy:

- **Pioneering Modern Dance:** Humphrey was instrumental in establishing modern dance as a legitimate art form, distinct from ballet and traditional forms of dance.
- **Influence on Future Generations:** Choreographers such as Martha Graham and Merce Cunningham drew inspiration from Humphrey's work, further advancing the evolution of modern dance.
- **Recognition and Awards:** Over her lifetime, Humphrey received numerous accolades for her contributions to dance, including the prestigious Capezio Dance Award.

Conclusion

Doris Humphrey: The Art of Making Dances remains a crucial text and philosophy in the world of choreography. Her commitment to exploring the emotional and narrative potential of dance, coupled with her innovative techniques, has fundamentally shaped the landscape of modern dance. As both a choreographer and educator, Humphrey's influence continues to resonate, inspiring dancers and choreographers to embrace the beauty of movement as a powerful means of expression. Her legacy as a pioneering figure in dance is secure, reminding us of the enduring power of the art form to communicate and

connect across time and space.

Frequently Asked Questions

Who was Doris Humphrey and what is her significance in dance?

Doris Humphrey was an influential American choreographer and dancer, known for her pivotal role in the development of modern dance. She co-founded the Humphrey-Weidman Company and is recognized for her innovative techniques and contributions to dance education.

What is the main theme of 'The Art of Making Dances'?

'The Art of Making Dances' focuses on the creative process of choreography, exploring how movement can convey emotion and narrative. Humphrey emphasizes the importance of structure, form, and the dancer's physicality in the creation of dance.

How does Doris Humphrey define choreography in her book?

Humphrey defines choreography as the art of arranging movements in a way that expresses an idea or emotion, highlighting the importance of rhythm, space, and the relationship between dancers.

What techniques does Doris Humphrey suggest for developing choreography?

Humphrey suggests techniques such as improvisation, exploring various movement qualities, and using musicality to inspire choreography. She also emphasizes the need for a clear vision and intention behind each dance piece.

How does 'The Art of Making Dances' influence contemporary dance?

The book has had a lasting impact on contemporary dance by providing choreographers with a framework for understanding the creative process. It encourages experimentation and innovation, which are foundational in modern dance practices today.

What role does emotion play in Doris Humphrey's approach to dance-making?

Emotion is central to Humphrey's approach, as she believes that dance should evoke feelings and tell stories. She encourages choreographers to tap into their own emotional experiences to create authentic and relatable dance works.

In what ways does Doris Humphrey address the relationship between music and dance?

Humphrey discusses the integral relationship between music and dance, advocating for a deep understanding of musical structure. She believes that music should inform movement choices and enhance the overall expression of the dance.

What is the significance of the 'fall and recovery' technique in Humphrey's work?

The 'fall and recovery' technique, developed by Humphrey, symbolizes the dynamic nature of human experience, reflecting the interplay of gravity and movement. It serves as a metaphor for resilience and the cyclical nature of life.

How does Doris Humphrey's philosophy on dance differ from classical ballet?

Humphrey's philosophy emphasizes natural movement and emotional expression over the strict formality and technical precision of classical ballet. She advocates for a more free and organic approach to movement that reflects individual expression.

What impact did 'The Art of Making Dances' have on dance education?

'The Art of Making Dances' has become a foundational text in dance education, providing students and aspiring choreographers with valuable insights into the creative process. It is often used in dance curricula to teach the principles of choreography.

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