



History

Home of an Art Form

In July 1934, the small town of Bennington, Vermont, became the unexpected scene of another American revolution. It was a revolution that managed to irreversibly change the face of American art.

At the time, four of its leaders—Martha Graham, Hanya Holm, Doris Humphrey, and Charles Weidman—were known only to a small number of fiercely devoted and partisan fans. Their art was in its infancy. Money was scarce; there was no government and little private support of the arts in those days, especially for modern dance. Even with those daunting truths, Bennington College in Bennington, Vermont was soon to become the epicenter of the modern dance world.

The American Dance Festival, formerly known as The Bennington School of Dance, was the desperately needed laboratory in which four of the five great modern dance second-generation pioneers (Helen Tamiris being the fifth) could experiment, train students, and create the early works that made modern dance one of the great cultural triumphs of the twentieth century.

The Festival, directed by Martha Hill and Mary Josephine Shelly, remained in Bennington until 1942 (with a one-year sojourn to Mills College, California, in 1939). Despite the onset of World War II, Martha Graham spent the summers of 1943–1945 in residence in Bennington, and in 1946 José Limón brought his first company to Bennington. In 1947, Martha Hill initiated a pilot program at Connecticut College in New London, Connecticut, for dance teachers, college dance groups, and young dancers. Due to the success of that pilot program, the Connecticut College School of Dance/American Dance Festival opened officially in 1948. For the 1969 season the name became simply the American Dance Festival.

In the fall of 1977, under the direction of Charles L. Reinhart, ADF took over the sprawling green lawns, studios, offices, and dormitories of Duke University in Durham, North Carolina. Reinhart directed the Festival from 1968-2011, with his late wife Stephanie Reinhart serving as Co-Director from 1993-2002. Following Reinhart's retirement after 43 years at the helm, former Associate Director and Co-Director, Jodee Nimerichter, was appointed Director of the Festival in January 2012.

The Festival Today

Today the ADF has grown to more than 400 students from all over the world and a faculty of 50. The curriculum has expanded to include classes in dance medicine and the body therapies, as well as repertory, composition and all the major dance techniques. There are also professional workshops offered in teaching and performance, as well as a special

program for younger dance students. In 1996, ADF expanded its programs to include a series of classes and choreographic workshops in New York City. The first endowed faculty chair in dance, the Balasaraswati/Joy Ann Dewey Beinecke Chair for Distinguished Teaching, was established in 1991.

Performances by professional dance companies, from the most experimental to the most established, remain at the heart of the Festival. Since its founding in 1934, ADF has been the scene of over 640 premieres, over 340 commissions, and over 50 reconstructions by artists such as Martha Graham, José Limón, Merce Cunningham, Paul Taylor, Erick Hawkins, Alwin Nikolais, Alvin Ailey, Twyla Tharp, Pilobolus, Laura Dean, Meredith Monk, Martha Clarke, Mark Morris, Bill T. Jones, and Eiko and Koma, among others. In 1981, the Samuel H. Scripps American Dance Festival Award was established, to honor choreographers who have made a significant lifetime contribution to the field of modern dance. In 1998, ADF established the Doris Duke Awards for New Work and implemented the three-year Doris Duke Millennium Awards for Modern Dance & Jazz Music Collaborations, offered in partnership with the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. It has commissioned works from modern giants such as Merce Cunningham, Paul Taylor and Twyla Tharp, as well as encouraged young talent through programs like its Young Choreographers and Composers in Residence Program and its Emerging Generation Program.

International Activities

The 1980s were marked by the ADF's move onto the global stage. As worldwide recognition of American modern dance grew, the ADF assumed an active international role. In 1984, it created the International Choreographers Residency Program, through which more than 400 choreographers from around the world have studied and choreographed at ADF to date. That program's success led to the creation of the International Choreographers Commissioning Program (ICCP) in 1987, which offers especially talented international choreographers a chance to create new works using ADF dancers during a six-week residency. In 1999, ADF initiated a new residency program designed to enhance choreographers' skills in arts management.

The scene of the American debut of Japanese Butoh in 1982 and French modern dance in 1983, the ADF subsequently hosted the first North American engagements by major dance companies from Argentina, China, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Finland, Indonesia, India, Italy, Korea, Venezuela and Zaire. In 1984 ADF held its first international modern dance festival as part of its 50th anniversary celebration and most recently for its 70th anniversary. In 1984, ADF took off in an even more surprising direction—temporarily re-rooting itself offering classes, workshops and performances with world-renowned dance companies and faculty. These mini-ADFs have included ADF/Japan (1984 and 1986); ADF/Korea (1990, 1991, 1992, 1994, 1996, 2000, 2002, 2004); ADF/India (1990); ADF West (Salt Lake City, Utah, 1992); and ADF/Russia (1992, 1997, 2000).

In 1987, ADF's first linkage program began in Guangzhou, China. ADF sent faculty to teach modern dance classes to students and teachers at the Guangdong Modern Dance Academy, and brought Chinese dancers/choreographers to the US. These dancers, trained in traditional dance and ballet, were for the first time given the opportunity to express their own thoughts and feelings in choreography and the freedom to develop new approaches to dance that could be applied to their own heritage. The students who participated in

these teaching residencies went on to form China's first modern dance company, the Guangdong Modern Dance Company which made its US debut during the 1991 season and completed its first US tour in the fall of 1997. In addition, a young artist from the company, Mr. Shen Wei, was invited to participate in ADF's ICCP in 1995, and in 2000 he formed his own company at ADF. Each year since then, ADF has commissioned him to create a new work which has been premiered at the Festival to critical acclaim. Most recently, Mr. Shen Wei was selected by the MacArthur Foundation as recipient of the 2007 "genius" award, and will serve as choreographer of the openings ceremonies for the 2008 Beijing Olympics. In addition to China, ADF has developed specially designed international collaborative projects with dance institutions in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, Cuba, Czech Republic, Ecuador, Estonia, Ghana, Indonesia, Latvia, Lithuania, Mongolia, Mozambique, Panama, Paraguay, Philippines, Poland, Romania, Russia, South Africa, Uruguay, Venezuela and Zaire.

In 1996, the ADF initiated its annual International Screendance Festival, which provides a major survey of the current trends and practices in video dance from throughout the global dance community.

Projects in the Humanities

The ADF's Black Tradition in American Modern Dance project, directed by Dr. Gerald E. Myers, was created in 1987 to preserve, celebrate, and create access to classic dance works by African American choreographers. To date, 23 works have been reconstructed on leading US companies and videotaped, often along with rehearsal footage and interviews with the choreographer. Some works have also been Labanotated. Since 1992, the Black Tradition in American Modern Dance project has toured the country, presenting these works in conjunction with humanities presentations on the topics of African American Perspectives in Modern Dance and Modern Dance and Spiritual Life in America to ever-widening audiences.

As an outgrowth of this project, ADF produced the Emmy Award-winning television series, *Free to Dance: The African American Presence in Modern Dance*, on the crucial role played by African Americans in the development of twentieth-century modern dance. The story is told with an ongoing social and historical background, using dance as an illuminating window on American history and culture. ADF's companion performance program, *Dancing in the Light*, aired on PBS Great Performances on June 20, 2007. The one-hour program is comprised of six dances: Asadata Dafora's *Ostrich Dance*, an excerpt of Katherine Dunham's *Barrelhouse Blues*, Pearl Primus' *Strange Fruit*, Talley Beatty's *Mourners Bench*, Donald McKayle's *Rainbow 'Round My Shoulder* and the first section of Bill T. Jones's *D-Man in the Waters – Section 1*. The dances are introduced by actor/choreographer Taye Diggs.

ADF has issued a series of humanities publications, including *Philosophical Essays on Dance* (1981), *The Aesthetic and Cultural Significance of Modern Dance* (1984), *The Black Tradition in American Modern Dance* (1988), its sequel, *African American Genius In Modern Dance* (1993), *Dancing Across Cultures* (1995), *Reflections on the Home of an Art Form* (1998), and *Modern Dance, Jazz Music and American Culture* (2000). In 2008, the ADF published a book by Dr. Gerald Myers, titled *Who's Not Afraid of Martha Graham?*