Outside the Mainstream: A Comparison of Alwin Nikolais's Works to Modern and Postmodern Dance of the 1960s

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Outside the Mainstream:
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Modern and Postmodern Dance of the 1960s

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A Thesis submitted to the
Department of Dance
in partial fulfillment of
requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

Degree Awarded:
Spring Semester, 2008
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This thesis is dedicated to my husband, Brian who made the sacrifices of moving to Tallahassee and traveling to allow me to be able to obtain this degree. I love you and I truly appreciate all that you have done to allow me to follow my dreams.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. John Perpener for all of the help and encouragement he has given me throughout this process. I would also like to thank Dr. Tricia Young and Dr. Sally Sommer for their service on my committee and all of their insightful comments. Additionally, I would also like to thank my family for putting up with all of the missed birthdays and holidays as I have labored through this process and for all of the support they gave when I needed it most.
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ABSTRACT

This thesis compares the works of Alwin Nikolais from the decade of the 1960s with those of artists working in both the modern and postmodern dance idioms. In the study, the category of modern dance is represented by the choreographic works of Martha Graham and José Limón, while postmodern dance is epitomized by the work of the artists of Judson Dance Theater. By the 1960s Nikolais was an established member of the dance world, but was not seen as a part of the mainstream because of his innovative use of lighting design, slide projections, musical accompaniment, costume design, and props. Because of his heavy reliance on these elements, Nikolais cannot be categorized with the newer postmodern generation who were rebelling against the ideals of their predecessors.
INTRODUCTION

This thesis will focus on American concert dance in the 1960s, more specifically on the choreography of Alwin Nikolais. Nikolais’s choreography occupied a middle ground between the avant-garde and the mainstream and he is representative of several choreographers who, because of their artistic approaches, could not exactly be categorized as modern dancers in the same sense that more traditional artists could be. Yet this liminal group could not be categorized with the postmodernists that would come to dominate the American dance world. They were caught between the two extremes as the cultural norm swung from one idea to another. Nikolais was viewed as an oddity within the dance community and pushed the envelope with his method of choreography, his musical choices, his innovative costume designs and his staging. He was also one of the more established members of the dance community who, while working innovatively, was still in the process of developing a codified technique that was used in his choreography. His use of a prescribed technique and theatrical costuming, music, and lighting was in direct contrast to the young rebels of the Judson Church Dance Theater who were exploring new approaches to dancing using untrained dancers, untraditional performance spaces, and little to no theatrical trappings. Yet, at the same time, Nikolais’s works were in contrast to the choreography performed by the more mainstream dance companies in the 1960s. The work being done by the long established companies of Martha Graham and José Limón, for example, presented more traditional choreographic forms, costumes, and music.

I am undertaking this research for several reasons. First, the idea of Alwin Nikolais occupying a unique place between the avant-garde and the traditional is one that has not been discussed in any of the dance writings I have found thus far. A member of the avant-garde in the 1950s, his position in dance history changed as the artists and world changed around him. The avant-garde artists of the 1950s became passé once the artistic trends of the 1960s took hold and more innovative artists superceded them in their quest for originality. Second, Alwin Nikolais has been neglected in the field of dance history in general. Most of the available information has been written either by Nikolais himself, by his longtime dancer and partner, Murray Louis, or by other dancers or artists who collaborated with them. Few individuals outside this circle have examined his
artistic contributions. As a valuable and influential contribution to the development of concert dance, Nikolais’s work deserves to be thoroughly evaluated for its historical significance. The final reason for choosing this topic is my personal interest in this unique artist whose aesthetic vision matured during a remarkable period in American society. The decade of the 1960s was a particularly volatile one that saw significant changes in countless aspects of American life; and by the time it ended, the country had changed forever. The art that was created during this time reflected the changing norms of society in general and the changing aesthetics of the art world in particular.

This study will focus primarily on the choreographic works that Alwin Nikolais created in the 1960s. It will investigate the artist’s choreographic methods, musical accompaniment, dance technique, lighting designs, sets, props, and costuming in order to assess his occupation of a tenuous place between the extreme avant-garde and the more conservative and traditional modern dance companies during the decade in question. Nikolais’s use of abstract choreography, synthesized music, and theatrical effects and costumes that sometimes distorted and sometimes concealed the dancer’s body were elements he had in common with the American avant-garde dance that was popular when he first rose to distinction in the 1950s. However, the dancers and choreographers of the Judson Dance Theater—members of a movement that, by the early 1960s, was considered even more avant-garde than Nikolais and his contemporary Merce Cunningham—were doing away with theatrical staging altogether. At the same time, they were declaring that anyone could dance and technical training was not necessary in order to perform. What had been considered avant-garde in the 1950s when Nikolais began his experimentation had been replaced by the work of those who were even more extreme in their rebellion against the traditional aspects of the concert dance form.

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1 Other members of the avant-garde dance scene in the 1950s included choreographers Merce Cunningham, Paul Taylor, and James Waring. Cunningham worked extensively with chance choreography, collaboration with many artists including those in the visual arts and music, and the juxtaposition of ballet and modern dance forms. Taylor experimented with minimalism on his route to becoming a more mainstream modern dance choreographer. Waring is seen by many as the precursor to the Judson Dance Theater because he had more of a direct influence on many of the young artists there. Like Cunningham he combined elements from ballet and modern dance to produce flamboyant productions.
Even though Nikolais created radical new approaches to theatrical costuming, lighting, set design and a codified dance technique, in light of the newer developments in dance, his company still tended to be identified with the methods of more traditional dance companies such as Martha Graham and José Limón’s. Graham and Limón utilized traditional choreographic methods, narrative structures, conventional musical accompaniment and sets and costumes that related to the themes of their dances and enhanced their dramatic narrations. They also each developed their own dance technique as a way of training their dancers to execute their choreography. While Nikolais utilized some of the same principles as the traditionalists, he also employed some of the principles that influenced the formation of the Judson Dance Theater.

In this middle ground between the young innovators and the older traditionalists, Nikolais created what has been described as a total theater experience. His works put equal importance on all aspects of the production. The choreography, costumes, lighting design, slide projections, and music all played pivotal roles in ways that were very different than in the work of his contemporaries. Also, Nikolais highlighted the fantastic within his theatrical productions, often covering the dancers’ bodies with costumes that transformed them into otherworldly beings, and lighting the stage in such a way as to make the audience question what they were really seeing. This sense of illusion informed most of Alwin Nikolais’s choreographic works. He had a rare talent for transformation and an imagination capable of envisioning an astonishing array of exotic shapes and scenarios that he placed on stage.

In the 1960s Nikolais also began writing his own musical scores to accompany his choreographic works. He received a Guggenheim Fellowship, which allowed him to purchase one of the first synthesizers ever produced by Robert Moog. The electronic music Nikolais presented was a unique addition to the choreographic works he was producing. This additional role as composer made Nikolais’s work his own in a way that would not have been possible with a score written by another. Nikolais was also the mastermind behind both the costume designs and the lighting and set designs. While the actual costume, slide, or set may in reality have been created by someone else, the original idea was always Nikolais’s. The integration of various artistic elements into a seamless whole was one of Nikolais’s signatures. All of the ideas came from a single
artist and, therefore, coalesced to make his productions uniquely his own in a way that distinguished them from all others in modern dance.

Born in Southington, Connecticut in 1910, Alwin Nikolais had a number of early experiences that would influence him over the years and shape his artistic vision. Nikolais began his artistic endeavors as a pianist for silent movies where he learned to improvise music that accompanied and enhanced the dynamics of the movement on the screen. He was involved as a child at the local drama center in his hometown, and he used makeshift instruments to pursue his earliest experiments with lighting, often utilizing tin cans and other household items to achieve the desired effect. This theatrical experience inspired Nikolais and his brother to produce marionette shows in their attic, an experience that certainly contributed to his later employment as the director of the Hartford Parks Marionette Theatre from 1935 until 1937. This early work with marionettes also helped Nikolais form essential ideas that he would continue to develop during his career. The marionettes were able to communicate thoughts and feelings through movement only—for they were unable to make facial expressions. Thus, he concluded, dance is the art of motion, and any message can be conveyed if the motion is used properly.

During the Great Depression Nikolais worked for the Federal Theater Project helping to establish the Gilpin Players, an all African American troupe based in New Haven, Connecticut. After seeing Mary Wigman dance while she was on a tour in the United States, Nikolais became fascinated with the percussion instruments that Wigman used in her work. He discovered that one of Wigman’s students, Truda Kaschmann, had a school in Hartford. Kaschmann had trained in Germany with Wigman, and she brought the tradition of German Expressionist dance with her to the United States. She told Nikolais that he could learn percussion if he also learned dance. Nikolais’s first choreographic efforts occurred under Kaschmann’s tutelage and, in 1940 the two choreographed and presented Eight Column Line, thus marking Nikolais’s choreographic debut.

From 1937 through 1939, Nikolais attended the summer classes held at Bennington College, receiving his first exposure to professional American modern dance. He took classes from some of the greatest choreographers of the time—Martha Graham,
Hanya Holm, Doris Humphrey, and Charles Weidman were all on the faculty. Additionally, Nikolais had his first experience performing professional level choreography while at Bennington—a part in José Limón’s piece, *Danza de la Muerta*. However, World War II and his service in the Armed Forces put Nikolais’s career on hold, although he continued to work on his own version of dance notation while in the service. When he returned from the war, he began working as Hanya Holm’s rehearsal director and dancing in her company. Holm, like Kaschmann, was a student of Wigman’s and had trained in the tradition of the German Expressionists. After working with her for several years, Holm’s approach to teaching technique and choreography had a direct influence on Nikolais.

Nikolais’s ability to create and experiment freely was fostered by his access to the Henry Street Playhouse\(^2\), which he directed from 1948 to 1970. As director, Nikolais taught classes in technique, improvisation, composition, and accompaniment, along with running the resident company and presenting works. The freedom of having his own theater allowed Nikolais to experiment without restraint—without having to worry about being marketable (Glenn, 2003). While these circumstances changed once Nikolais’s company left the Playhouse, the initial freedom was essential to the development of his total dance theater concept. The theater and attached dance school were also instrumental to the development of Nikolais’s technique. He used the time with his students to manipulate movement and discover which combinations of ideas worked best. For

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\(^2\) The Henry Street Playhouse was founded in 1893 in order to provide services to help the poor of New York City. The theater was built in 1915 as one of New York’s first little theaters. The Henry Street Music School opened in 1927 with classes in music, dance, and theater for all ages. Louis Horst and Martha Graham were some of the first instructors at the school. The institution is still active today offering services for the people of New York ranging from a credit union to dance classes to summer camps for children.
instance, when Nikolais taught improvisation, half the class would observe so that the students could gain knowledge and ideas from seeing what the other students were doing. They also held improvisation sessions on the stage, with dancers, actors, and musicians participating so that all parties could learn to move together (Glenn 2003).

Unlike Nikolais who had only recently gained critical recognition, by the 1960s Martha Graham was an established artist with a company that had been in existence for over thirty years. She had reached choreographic maturity and was facing the grim possibility of finally retiring from the role of lead dancer in her company. An early pioneer, Graham epitomizes the traditional presentation of modern dance in her choreographic works. Born in Allegheny, Pennsylvania in 1894, she moved with her mother and two sisters to Santa Barbara, California at fourteen. While living in California, Graham began to study dance at the Denishawn School, which was run by Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn. While at Denishawn, she was a student with both Doris Humphrey and Charles Weidman. After touring extensively with the Denishawn Company, she moved to New York where she performed with the Greenwich Village Follies, after which she founded her company in 1926. During this period, Graham began to develop her own dance technique, based upon the concept of contraction and release, which molded dancers into the ideal for her style of choreography.

Graham worked closely with the composer Louis Horst, whom she first met at the Denishawn School. He influenced her work, not only through the composition of several scores for her early dances, but also through his strong ideas on choreography. Horst stopped working with Graham in the late 1940s, but his influence was such that it remained long after he was actively involved in her artistic works. Graham also worked
closely with the artist Isamu Noguchi who was responsible for constructing sets for some of her best know productions. Pieces that featured sets by Noguchi include Frontier, Appalachian Spring, Night Journey, and Cave of the Heart. At the time of her death in 1991 Graham had choreographed 180 works over sixty-five years for her company. They had toured extensively throughout the United States and overseas, and she had successfully developed a technique that is still being taught at studios, colleges, and universities around the world. Graham also inspired many of the next generation of choreographers who received their initial professional experience in her company—two of the most well known being Merce Cunningham and Paul Taylor.

Like both Nikolais and Graham, José Limón was established as an artist by the 1960s. The oldest of eleven children, Limón was born in Mexico in 1908. When he was seven years old, he immigrated with his family to the United States, eventually settling in Los Angeles, California. In 1928 Limón moved to New York to pursue his passion for painting and after some frustration about being unable to complete a masterpiece, he gave it up. Frustrated by his failure, Limón was convinced by a friend to attend a dance performance given by Harold Krueutzberg. Inspired by the performance, Limón decided to change his course and become a dancer. With this goal in mind, he began taking dance classes at the Humphrey-Weidman studio and quickly became a member of their company.

Under the tutelage of Doris Humphrey, Limón began to choreograph his own works, first as a member of the Humphrey-Weidman Company and later for his own company. He received a fellowship from the Bennington Dance Festival in 1937 recognizing his ability as a choreographer. Humphrey had a distinct view of how one should choreograph and these ideas are apparent in Limón’s choreography. Limón founded his company in 1946 and Humphrey gave up her own company and became the artistic director, a position she held until her

Figure 4: José Limón and Pauline Koner in “There is a Time” (Dunbar2000).
death in 1958. While a dancer with Humphrey-Weidman, Limón began to work on his
own independent technique. This was a natural response to a desire to learn how to better
control his rather tall frame. He found that what worked best was isolating body parts in
order to ground them individually. After Limón began teaching at the newly formed
Julliard dance department in 1951, his developing technique combined Humphrey’s and
Weidman’s ideas, coalescing into a definitive style of training. Another important force
in Limón’s life was his wife, Pauline Lawrence. Lawrence managed the Limón
Company for many years and also served as the primary costumer for the group.

Unlike Nikolais, Graham, and Limón who, to a certain extent, continued the
traditions of their mentors, the artists of the Judson Dance Theater tried to dispense with
their predecessors’ influences all together. They began as a collective that was formed as
the result of a choreography class taught by Robert Dunn3 at the Cunningham Studio in
four sessions ending in the spring of 1962. The class was a response to the choreography
courses that were being taught by Louis Horst. Horst based his classes on the “pre-
classic”4 dance forms, the gigue, saraband, allemande, pavane, galliard, and courante,
which were based on musical forms of theme and variation. Dunn’s students were
searching for a method that allowed them more freedom than the predominant method
 taught in Horst’s classes. They had seen the choreography of Merce Cunningham and
James Waring and knew that there was another way to produce choreography. Dunn
gave the students5 a specific challenge for each week’s class. These assignments varied
from “Make a three-minute dance” (Banes 1995, 21) to “use a chance mechanism to
choose body parts” (24) to dances based on the musical structures of compositions by
Erik Satie or John Cage (10). These innovative choreographic ideas were very different

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3 Robert Dunn (1929-1996) began as a tap dancer, touring Oklahoma as a young child, but was primarily
trained in music. He worked as an accompanist at the Merce Cunningham studios and with the company
while on tour in the late 1950s. He was asked by John Cage to teach a choreography seminar at the studio.
He used the experimental ideas that were floating around the music community and applied them to making
dance. Dunn had a rare analytical talent and could talk for hours about the merits of a dance. From his
class began the revolution at the Judson Street Church and the era of postmodernism in dance.

4 The pre-classic dance forms were based on the musical structure used as accompaniment. They were
social dances that were present in the European courts before ballet was developed and were performed by
the courtiers as a way to establish the hierarchy of the court. Being a good dancer could elevate a person to
a new level within the court and hours were spent perfecting steps so that one did not make an
embarrassing mistake in front of the King.

5 Dunn’s students included Steve Paxton, Yvonne Rainer, Simone Forti, Judith Dunn, Ruth Emerson, Fred
Herko, Elaine Summers, Bill Davis, Deborah Hay, Richard Goldberg, David Gordon, Gretchen Maclane,
George Herbert McDowell, Rudy Perez, Carol Scothorn, Jennifer Tipton, and Alex Hay.
than the pre-classic dance forms that influenced Louis Horst. Through their rejection of the accepted norms, the members of the Judson Dance Theater reflected the rebellious nature of the youth culture of the 1960s and searched for unconventional ways to accomplish their goals.

The first Judson Dance Theater concert occurred on July 6, 1962 at 8:30 in the evening. It presented the culmination of the work produced by the students during Dunn’s choreography class. The concert was performed in the sanctuary of the Judson Memorial Church despite the original agreement between the Reverend Al Carmines and Yvonne Rainer, Steve Paxton and Ruth Emerson which had the dancers performing in the church’s gymnasium (Banes 1982, 168-173). A copy of the original program from the concert can be found in Sally Banes’s article, “The Birth of the Judson Dance Theatre: “A Concert of Dance” at Judson Church, July 6, 1962” (Banes 1982). This program reveals that there were fifteen separate pieces scheduled to perform.

This first concert lasted until about midnight, lasting just over three hours, and was very well received by the audience. The concert was also well received by the only critic who attended, Jill Johnston. Johnston was an advocate for all that the Judson Dance Theater stood for during their existence. She attended all of their concerts and even helped to organize several. Because of the unconditional support of Johnston, the Village Voice reviewed all of Judson Dance Theater’s concerts long before any of the other New York City newspapers took notice of what was happening downtown. Johnston’s positive opinion of the first concert was clearly expressed in her conclusion of the review. She stated, “I didn’t mention that this was an important program in bringing together a number of young talents who stand apart from the past and who could make the present of modern dance more exciting than it’s been for twenty years” (Village Voice [New York], 23 August 1962). Johnston’s personal involvement with Judson Dance Theater unquestionably helped them to get the attention they rightly deserved. The reviews of their concerts in a major weekly newspaper gave the group much needed publicity and recognition for their work. If it weren’t for the retirement of John Martin, the conservative dance critic for The New York Times from 1927 until 1962, the Judson Dance Theater probably would never have been covered by that paper at all.
After the presentation of the first concert, Dunn’s choreography class was not continued. The members of the class still desired the exchange of artistic ideas, mutual support, and feedback that they had enjoyed. Therefore, the group set up weekly meetings at the Judson Memorial Church every Tuesday night in the church gymnasium (Banes 1995, 79-80). These weekly meetings continued for two years and resulted in “twenty concerts of dance—sixteen group programs and four evenings of choreography by individuals” (Banes 1982, 167). The weekly meetings had rules that were followed by all participants; the first being that all decisions would be made by consensus not by majority rule. Therefore, all members had to come to a unanimous decision in order for it to be valid. Another rule was that the sessions were not used for rehearsal time and so; a complete concentration upon the activities was required. Therefore, if an artist wanted to present a piece for critique, they had to participate fully in the evening by watching all of the work that was presented that night and giving feedback to the choreographers where appropriate (Banes 1995, 81-82).

The concerts given by the Judson Dance Theater and the choreography presented every Tuesday evening were the beginning of a new revolution in the modern dance world. The innovations in choreographic methods and styles, the costuming, or lack thereof, and the democracy of the group were all characteristics that distinguished the Judson Dance Theater from others who were working during the 1960s in New York City and elsewhere. With their choreography they attempted to stretch the boundaries of art by employing a broad perspective on what constituted dance. Many members of the Judson Dance Theater believed that anything could be dance. If it was performed for an audience and if the creator meant for the performance to be dance, then it was dance. Eating a sandwich was considered dance, as was walking, brushing one’s teeth and finding numerous ways to sit in a chair. Not only was this pedestrian, everyday
movement considered dance by the Judson Dance Theater, it was considered high art and just as valuable as ballet and traditional modern dance.

The choreographic works of Alwin Nikolais in the 1960s occupied a unique space in this diverse dance world. His bold choices in choreography, costume design, lighting and stage effects, and musical accompaniment set him apart from the more traditional, established modern dance companies. Yet the fact that he placed so much value on these highly theatrical elements, ironically, aligned him with the artistic establishment; and his company structure and presentational approach further connected him with mainstream practices. On the other hand, his status as an avant-garde artist of the 1950s was overshadowed in the early 1960s with the beginning of the Judson Dance Theater. For, what had been considered avant-garde in the 1950s when Nikolais began his experimentation had been superceded by those who were even more extreme in their rebellion against the traditional aspects of the concert dance form. Their radical approach to choreography and performance placed them as the new avant-garde, while it shifted Nikolais into a more intermediary position during a period of transition within the larger dance community. He was no longer the avant-garde, however, his productions were very different from what had been the norm in the traditional modern dance companies of Martha Graham and José Limón. Nikolais produced works that were abstract and non-narrative; and the abstract nature of his works was further enhanced by his use of synthesized music. By occupying this position between avant-garde and traditional, Nikolais played a distinct role in the dance world. He was no longer the young rebel, but was far from being a staid modern dance traditionalist.

This thesis will examine exactly the position in which this new status placed Nikolais. Chapter Two will focus on the decade of the 1960s and the social, political, cultural, and artistic dynamics that were affecting every aspect of American society in ways that would leave the country permanently altered after a decade of unrest. In Chapter Three, the focus shifts to the different beliefs and aesthetics of the artists who are discussed. Each demonstrated their aesthetic beliefs in a different way, as reflected in their diverse approaches and their distinctive choreography. Each artist also perceived the dancing human body through a unique philosophical lens, and this determined how that body was displayed on stage. Chapter Four will concentrate on the technical aspects
of the artists’ choreographic works. The lighting designs, projections, costumes, props, sets, and music were utilized differently by each choreographer, or, as in the case of Judson Dance Theater they were sometimes not used at all.
CHAPTER 1

THE 1960S

The decade of the 1960s was one of change, discord, and rebellion that resounded throughout all aspects of American society. Political unrest was pervasive as African Americans, women, and other activists fought for increasing rights and freedoms. With the founding of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE), Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), and Martin Luther King’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), students became more active in political and social spheres than at any other time in American history, and they played a primary role in trying to bring change to the country. They staged protests for greater freedoms on campus, against the Vietnam War, and for the rights of African Americans, women, and homosexuals. They also paid the ultimate price, as some lost their lives trying to register voters in Mississippi and protesting the Vietnam War at Kent State University. American society was irreversibly changed because of the events of the 1960s, and the consequences reverberated through every facet of life, including the art that emerged as a result of the turmoil.

This decade of turmoil occurred immediately following one filled with fear and complacency. The decade of the 1950s was a difficult time for many Americans who were suspected of not supporting the status quo. Artists were particularly susceptible to these types of suspicions. Because of the investigations instigated by Joseph McCarthy and the House Committee on Un-American Activities, artists lived in fear of being labeled Communist and, therefore, many did not deal with political issues in their work—to do so would have resulted in being blacklisted and boycotted. There were artists in the dance community, like Jerome Robbins, who were criticized for cooperating with McCarthy’s committee and others who were labeled Communists. Alwin Nikolais, like many other artists active in dance, theater, music and the fine arts, examined the world around him without making any obvious political declarations in his work. The abstract nature of his work allowed this freedom and kept him safe from accusations in a time when many were extremely vulnerable. Even established artists like Martha Graham steered away from their politically charged pieces of the past and introduced works based
more broadly on stories from mythology, literature, or religious sources. Gone were the
works protesting the Spanish Civil War and in their place were the stories of Medea and
Jocasta. The coming of the 1960s changed artists’ attitudes as McCarthy and his
committee lost power, and the arts gained supporters in the White House with the
election of John F. Kennedy. The decade became one of change and dissension as a new
generation established their place in the country and in the world.

As America emerged from the stifling McCarthy Era, and fears of political
persecution abated, artists began experimenting once more with a sense that anything was
possible. Younger artists had grown up in an environment of post World War II
prosperity and, consequently, they were a generation with more resources and
opportunities than any that had come before. They were also a generation whose
comforts and sense of entitlement had given them the liberty of criticizing all that their
parents had worked for and valued. They aimed to change the world, not only in the
social and political arenas, but also through the culture in which they lived and the arts
through which they expressed themselves.

POLITICAL AND SOCIAL CONTEXT

The decade of the 1960s began idealistically with the election of John F.
Kennedy, the youngest U.S. President in history, and his ascendance to the presidency
brought a sense of optimism and endless possibility to the nation. His presidency brought
about the era known as Camelot. The idea of Camelot was an idealistic view of
Kennedy’s time in office that was initially suggested by First Lady
Jacqueline Kennedy immediately following his assassination. This
vision painted their family as almost
mythical in their perfection. They had
lived an ideal life of happiness—
beautiful people in their newly
remodeled White House. In spite of

Figure 6: Martin Luther King, Jr. addresses the
crowd during his famous “I Have a Dream” speech in
August of 1963 (McWilliams 2000).
debacles such as the Bay of Pigs invasion and the initial commitment of troops to a war in Vietnam that was to rip the nation apart for the next decade, Kennedy was able to institute some solid and lasting policies. For example, his establishment of the Peace Corps has since influenced the lives of hundreds of college graduates and people residing in third world countries. Kennedy also introduced the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which was passed after his death. This law made discrimination in education, employment, and public places illegal and furthered the cause of equality for African Americans. After the shocking assassination of Kennedy, the idealistic view of the world that had permeated the American psyche since the end of World War II came to an end. Americans became more politically involved, with students leading the quest for change. Politics and world affairs pervaded everyday life with the reality of the Vietnam War being played out on television sets across the country.

Socially, politically and culturally, the invention and proliferation of the television set significantly altered the lives of many people throughout the decade of the 1960s. With the results of the 1960 presidential election having hinged on a televised debate where a haggard looking Richard Nixon lost to the polished and well-rehearsed John F. Kennedy, the importance of the television in the everyday lives of Americans was thoroughly established. People stayed home for their nightly entertainment and they were afforded the luxury of the comfort of their own homes as they were amused by the dramas, variety shows, game shows, news coverage, and comedies enacted on their television sets. Perhaps, with the shifting images on the screen before them, they began to become accustomed to the disjointed and juxtaposed images that could be found in the work of popular avant-garde artists.

Figure 7: The television changed the lives of Americans and the race for President in 1960 (Woods 2005).
With political and social issues at the forefront of a great number of American citizens’ minds, protesting in very large groups became a common way to get messages across, no matter what that message might be. Many of these protestors were students and, therefore, the issues were centered around their main concerns. For example, students wanted to be treated as adults by their universities; they wanted to be in charge of their own affairs rather than having their parents consulted and required to give permission. One example occurred in 1968 at Barnard College in New York when controversy was ignited because a student named Linda LeClair moved in with her boyfriend, a student at Columbia University. The all-female population of Barnard was required to live on campus in the dormitories for their first two years of college, and when it was discovered that LeClair was living off campus as a sophomore with her boyfriend, Barnard called for her expulsion triggering a sit-in at the president’s office and a petition containing the signatures of almost half of Barnard’s 1800 students. The disciplinary board sided with LeClair simply banning her from the school cafeteria, but the fascination of the press with the story caused it to be national news. The instance symbolized “a radically changing society” in which “the ‘new generation’ had a ‘new morality’ and that for better or worse, the things youth were doing represented nothing less than a complete alteration in the values and mores of society with…far-reaching ramifications” (Kurlansky 2004, 191).

The young adults who were coming of age in the 1960s were desperately trying to find their own identities—many achieved this by simply rejecting the beliefs of their parents and other authority figures. In his book, Quest for Identity: America Since 1945, Randall Bennett Woods states that students were behaving in this manner because “to reject the dominant culture’s sexual mores was to reject its political institutions, repressive values, and even the war in Southeast Asia” (Woods 2005, 260). When the
Food and Drug Administration approved the first birth control pill in 1960, they inadvertently assisted the young people in their attempt to reject the sexual mores and all other relevant values of their parents. Without the fear of pregnancy, many did not see the point of refraining from sexual intercourse and these ideas were manifested in such notions as the saying “make love not war” and the “Summer of Love” in 1967.

Another defining aspect of the American political and social scene of the 1960s was the space race that was waged with the Soviet Union. With its roots in the Cold War quest for domination, the space race officially began with the launching of Sputnik by the Soviet Union in 1957. Continuing through the 1960s and culminating in the American landing on the moon in 1969, this struggle for technological superiority was important in both the United States and the Soviet Union. Each government displayed its scientific prowess as it strove to be the first to achieve specific goals. For example, the Soviet Union was the first to put a man in space, first to orbit the Earth, and first to put a woman in space, while the United States was the first to launch a communications satellite, the first to orbit the moon, and the first to land on the moon.

But Americans also had to address issues that were closer than the frontiers of space. One of the most pressing of these was the deteriorating state of race relations. In 1967 a botched police bust at an illegal after hours drinking establishment in Detroit, Michigan started one of the worst race riots in the nation’s history. It was triggered less than two weeks after a similar riot in Newark, New Jersey, and many of the people of Detroit believed that the police responded with overt brutality and purposefully targeted an establishment that was frequented by black patrons. With the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. in April of 1968, riots again erupted in both Newark and Detroit along with most of the major U. S. cities. These riots changed the landscape of American cities as the destruction of neighborhoods and businesses caused urban blight. Some cities, like Detroit, still have not fully recovered from the impact of the rioting. Businesses that were burned to the ground were never rebuilt and many white residents fled to the suburbs remaining, even today, fearful of urban, inner-city neighborhoods. Besides the death of Martin Luther King, Jr., the riots were also triggered by an increasing unrest as black activists moved from their origins in the nonviolent tactics of the Civil Rights movement to the disobedient and defiant tactics of the Black Panthers.
ARTISTIC AND CULTURAL CONTEXT

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, a new movement began in the visual arts with the emerging popularity of Jackson Pollock and his contemporaries. They revolutionized the visual arts by creating works that were adamantly non-representational. While their paintings might evoke emotional responses from the person viewing them, they did not portray a specific identifiable image or story on the canvas. Instead, the paintings featured splatters of paint, blocks of color, arbitrary shapes, and paint poured onto the canvas. Like those active in the other arts, it is believed that these painters’ abstractions stemmed in part from the stifling effect of McCarthyism. The artists were unable to overtly express their radical thoughts and beliefs, so they did it in a way that camouflage the true meaning. The abstract nature of the work of Jackson Pollock, Willem De Kooning, Adolph Gottlieb, and others is mirrored in dance by the choreography of Alwin Nikolais. Like the abstract expressionists, Nikolais did not spell out the meaning of his works for the audience. He placed moving dancers on the stage and allowed the viewer to glean their own meaning from the shapes, splatters, and blocks of color. He too received criticism for producing work that was different from the storytelling that had previously been prominent in his field. Jackson Pollock and Alwin Nikolais were not only contemporaries working at the same time, they were also pursuing similar paths through their art by expressing themselves abstractly and allowing the viewer to interpret their work. For both Pollock and Nikolais, this devotion to abstraction set them apart from the preceding generation.

Turning away from the abstract expressionism that was prevalent in painting, as the abstract expressionists had turned away from the works of their predecessors, the baby boomer generation that came of age in the 1960s leaned instead towards the realism of pop art, the sounds of the street, and pedestrian movement. The transformation of art from abstraction to reality mirrored the feelings of society in general. People were barraged with radical new ideas and unsettling events that challenged the dominant beliefs of the 1950s. The illusion of a perfect suburban housewife was shattered with the publishing of Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*; and the illusion of a fairytale couple ruling the United States was shattered with the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. These misconceptions were destroyed in much the same way as the illusion of
“separate but equal” had been shattered a decade earlier by the ground breaking decision of *Brown v. The Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*.

In the world of the visual arts, Andy Warhol’s work exemplified a synthesis of high art and popular culture within a changing society. His loft studio in Greenwich Village, known as the Factory, became a symbol of youth culture’s disdain for traditional cultural values. The Factory offered an alternative communal site—a place where young people could go to experience life outside of the mainstream. They snubbed the values their parents had held so dear and, therefore, the Factory became “both site and symbol of the alternative culture’s disdain for the bourgeois ethic, from work to sex to control of consciousness—a sanctified space where leisure and pleasure reigned” (Banes 1993, 36). It was used as a place to hang out, have sex, talk, do drugs, etc. There were even several people who resided at the Factory.

The American art scene changed as a result of a relatively small group of people living in and around Greenwich Village. According to Andy Warhol, who was active in the community during the 1960s, “It’s always surprising to me to think how small the downtown New York City avant-garde scene was in relation to how much influence it eventually had. A generous estimate would be five hundred people, and that would include friends of friends of friends—the audience as well as the performers….“ (Warhol in Banes 1993, 80). This small group of people altered what was considered acceptable in the visual arts, dance, theater, and music. These changes resulted in the rise of postmodernism in all areas of American culture, from theater to painting to art to literature to scholarly discourse.
Another major change in the youth culture of the 1960s was the reconfiguration of the idea of community. As Sally Banes states in her book *Greenwich Village 1963: Avant-Garde Performance and the Effervescent Body*,

In common parlance, a community is usually understood as built out of families. But while community, even a brand of domesticity, was often a desired value in the Sixties avant-garde, this notion was radically different from that of the bourgeois community, for here—foreshadowing the counterculture utopian communes of the later Sixties—‘togetherness’ was sought *outside of family life*, in groups coalescing around common work or common play. At times, even home life became collective…this alternative communalism linked the assertion of community to the politics of egalitarianism and liberation (Banes 1993, 36).

Unhappy with traditional nuclear family roles and ideals, the young people were searching for a way to interact with those with whom they lived. Epitomized by the avant-garde and hippie ideals, the desire to drop out of traditional American society and become part of a new and atypical community was fueled by a real and palpable gap between generations. For the older adult population who had fought hard for their country during World War II, family, prosperity, and peace were of the utmost importance, and they were unable to understand why their children did not place the same value on the lifestyle they were leading. But for the youth, their new form of community provided an alternative place for them to belong and a liberating environment that allowed maximum self-expression without the judgment of their parents.

Because of this omnipresent quest for different values than those held by their parents, young artists searched for new ways to express themselves, including innovative performance modes. Among these, Happenings were a way to explore visual art by continuing the principle of action painting that was pioneered by Jackson Pollack. There was a difference, however, in that for Pollack the action occurred as the painting was formed, while a Happening took place as part of the exhibition of the piece of visual art. Both did stress that there was more to the work of art than just the final product—an idea that was shared by those working in postmodern dance as well. Happenings stressed the environment surrounding the visual art as being just as, if not more, important as the work itself (Banes 1993, 27). Included in a Happening were many of the same elements that made successful theater or dance productions. Music, dance or movement, live performers, and, of course, the visual art were all displayed as part of a Happening. By
combining so many different elements into an exhibition the artists were able to take their concept of collage a step further. What began with the inclusion of three-dimensional objects on a flat canvas had progressed into an experience that not only was separated from the canvas, but also wholly surrounded the observer. Another distinct feature was audience participation, for they were expected to move around the space in order to experience all aspects of the featured works. Unlike a traditional theatrical presentation, the observers did not simply sit and watch; they became part of the action by moving around the space to take in all that was being displayed.

While Happenings were important as an aspect of the visual arts scene, they were also a revolutionary new way to perform that was not defined by the rules of existing disciplines. Because the Happenings were not concert dance, theater, or musical concerts they created a new category, performance art, that could be any mixture of the three main performing arts combined with the exhibition of the visual arts. The performances that occurred at some of the Happenings could easily have been transported into the sanctuary of the Judson Street Church as one of the dances presented by that group. For example, one Happening that took place in Los Angeles in 1963 was entitled, Water, and featured women clothed in cumbersome burlap sacks with only an arm or leg showing as they traveled across the space, colliding with one another, and falling down. Presented by Robert Whitman, this Happening featured a performance that portrayed people doing everyday, pedestrian actions in a presentational setting. Bathing, eating, and walking were shown to an audience as art, not just a part of normal life (Banes 1993, 132). By placing pedestrian actions in front of an audience, Whitman was stating that anything and everything could be considered art. He was also trying to make the audience think about the validity and interest of everyday actions—the movement that one does out of habit is just as relevant as that which has been ingrained into a highly trained dancer’s body.

Much like the Happenings, the radical Off-Off Broadway theater that developed in the late 1950s and early 1960s had an enormous impact on the innovations in various art forms. Epitomized by the Living Theater which was founded in 1951 by Julian Beck and Judith Malina, radical theater explored new techniques of presentation and also different subjects than had been previously prominent on the stage. Beck and Malina
additionally reinforced democratic ideas through the production of their plays as noted by Sally Banes

The Becks were pacifist anarchists, allied both artistically and politically to other anarchists…Their political views as well as their increasingly open attitude about theater practice led them to adopt unconventionally antihierarchical methods of working with their actors. Most acting studios, and even the ensembles of Off-Broadway, subscribed to the cult of authority assumed by the director since his rise in the art theaters of the late nineteenth century (Banes 1993, 41).

By giving actors a voice in the decision making processes of the productions, the Living Theater had subverted several centuries of tradition and shifted the importance away from the pivotal role of the director. Besides irrevocably changing theater through their ideas about equality, the Becks also advocated political action and the raising of political consciousness through the plays they presented. Opening May 13, 1963, The Brig was the last play that the Living Theater produced. Set in a U.S. Marine prison in Japan, the play was a grueling and cruel spectacle of the harsh reality of human brutality. A single day in the lives of the prisoners was all that was necessary for the audience to understand the emotional, physical, and psychological torture that these inmates suffered. Ranging from small indignities like name calling through severe physical beatings, the repetitious nature of the cruelty powerfully reinforced the Becks’ beliefs about pacifism by demonstrating what can occur when unnecessary force and violence are used to break the human spirit.

Along with new trends in the visual and theatrical arts, radical changes were also occurring in music as minimalist composers like Steve Reich and Phillip Glass emerged onto the scene in the 1960s. Reich’s compositions featured repetitious looping of sounds in order to form music with no harmony or through line. Some of his most famous pieces from the 1960s, It’s Gonna Rain (1965) and Come Out (1966), incorporated taped voices that were reiterated multiple times to form an abstract accompaniment. The voices were manipulated so that the words became unrecognizable, thus, creating a cadence of sounds and rhythms through the repetition of a single phrase. The music of Phillip Glass was
also repetitious and abstract. His compositions contained a melodic line that was continuously repeated throughout the work giving a hypnotic feel to his music. Some works that reflect the complex, diatonic, and repetitive structure that he has become known for are *Strung Out* (1968) and *Music in Similar Motion* (1969). Both Glass and Reich were influenced by musical rhythms from India and Asia and part of the repetition present in their compositions reflects the beats found in the indigenous cultures of that part of the world. They also both utilized technological advances while composing their music, feeding some of their music through mixers, or creating repetition through the splicing of tape, both manually and electronically. As we will see in Chapter Four, the repetition and electronic sounds found in Reich’s and Glass’s musical compositions can also be found in the music written by Alwin Nikolais to accompany his dances. The abstract characteristic of Nikolais’s dances also extends to the music that he wrote as an integral part of the production.

Music also had an enormous impact on American society in the 1960s through popular culture, and many of the artists professed the messages and beliefs of the youth culture through their music. For instance, Bob Dylan preached a message of tolerance, peace, and love through the songs he wrote, both for himself and other singers, while The Beatles skirted the censors in 1967 with their song about the high of LSD in *Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds*. The same year The Doors also challenged the status quo with the release of *Light My Fire* a song about drug use and sex. After performing the song without changing any of the lyrics, as had been requested by Ed Sullivan, they were subsequently banned from ever again appearing on *The Ed Sullivan Show*. Another more famous instance of censorship surrounded the song, *Louie Louie*, released by the Kingsmen in 1963. Unlike Dylan, The Doors, and The Beatles, the Kingsmen were not trying to convey any specific message with their song. It was, in fact, simply a remake of a fairly popular song by the African American artist, Richard Berry and their version proved to be scandalous only
because the listener could not understand the words of the song. That the Kingsmen were singing about someone named Louie was clear, however, not much else was. Consequently, the song was subjected to an FBI investigation and banned from radio stations across the country, thus reinforcing the general belief that the unknown should be feared.

During the 1960s, theatrical concert dance was finding its own ways to become culturally relevant to American society. In the ballet world, the stability of George Balanchine’s New York City Ballet was underscored by the fact that it became the resident company of the New York State Theatre in the newly completed Lincoln Center complex. During his years in America, Balanchine had honed his innovative neo-classicism with works such as *The Four Temperaments* (1946) and *Agon* (1957). The 1960s were a prolific period for him and with the addition of Suzanne Farrell to the company in 1961 he acquired a new muse who inspired him to even higher levels of creativity. In contrast to Balanchine’s success at the New York City Ballet, the 1960s were a difficult period for the other premiere ballet company in the country, the American Ballet Theater. Founded in 1940, by the end of the 1950s the company was in dire financial straits and in 1958, the company disbanded. It was resurrected in 1960 by its founder Lucia Chase and continued to struggle for most of the decade to regain its former prominence. The Joffrey Ballet was also finding its voice during the 1960s. Founded in 1956, the company made a name for itself by touring the country in a station wagon and performing decidedly American works choreographed by an American, Robert Joffrey. This set them apart from many of the other ballet companies that were reproducing the great European ballets or utilizing the talents of European choreographers.
Much of what was happening in America’s ballet companies was fostered by support from the Ford Foundation. In 1963 they announced a dance grant of $7.7 million to be provided over a ten-year period. While Balanchine’s company, the New York City Ballet, and his school, the School of American Ballet, received $6 million of that funding, the balance went to supporting regional companies. The San Francisco Ballet, the Pennsylvania Ballet, Boston Ballet, Houston Ballet, the National Ballet, and Utah Civic Ballet all received funding. They were also granted the right to have Balanchine works in their repertoires. These grants enabled ballet companies throughout the country to develop into leading artistic and cultural centers.

Among African American dancers, Alvin Ailey was coming into his own as a choreographer during the 1960s. With the premiere of his seminal work Revelations in 1960, he established his company’s relevance in American society. Bolstered by a government-sponsored tour of Asia in 1962, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater developed into a staple of American modern dance. Ailey was not interested in pursuing the indulgences of the avant-garde, instead he wanted to make dances that the general public could relate to and that would entertain them. By assembling a group of dancers with a wide range of abilities, including an infamous ability to exude personality, and a repertoire that required many different talents from those dancers, Ailey was successful in forming a company with mass appeal (Reynolds 2003, 348-350).

In the modern dance scene, another influential choreographer was Merce Cunningham. Working abstractly in the same vein as Nikolais, but with very different beliefs, he was a proponent of chance choreography or using the roll of the dice, the draw of a card, or the toss of a coin to determine everything from the order of the movement to the dancers’ positions onstage. This was an idea that Nikolais did not practice, for he had control over the precise placement of all movement and dancers in his works. Cunningham worked extensively with several influential visual artists of the 1960s.
including Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns, both of whom created sets and costumes for various pieces. Cunningham also collaborated closely with musician John Cage⁶ who was his partner for many years. Because each component of the collaboration was created independently, the associations that Cunningham fostered were unique as the pieces were assembled for the first time on the stage for the performance. They were, therefore, collaborators who collaborated only in the sense that their work was eventually presented together.

Also during this time period, the more traditional modern dance companies of Martha Graham and José Limón were flourishing. Graham was coming to the end of her performing career, slowly and reluctantly handing over all of her leading roles to the other members of her company. Limón, meanwhile, was at the peak of his career. During the decade of the 1960s he produced the work, A Choreographic Offering, which was a tribute to his mentor Doris Humphrey who had died in 1958. At the other end of the spectrum, the avant-garde dance scene of the 1960s was dominated by the events occurring in the Judson Church in Greenwich Village. Reflecting the rebellious attitudes of the youth culture, the Judson Dance Theater was turning the dance world on its head by questioning everything that had been traditionally valued by artists like Martha Graham and José Limón. Their use of pedestrian movement, chance choreography, game structures, and an uninflected performance persona were just some of the characteristics that set them apart from those who had come before.

The volatile social and political climate of the 1960s also directly affected the artists and cultural institutions of the time by bringing about changes in policy regarding the funding of the arts in America—a practice that had traditionally been left to the private sector. In 1965 President Lyndon B. Johnson approved the formation of the National Endowment for the Arts to provide grants to artists and institutions in order to help fund a variety of programs. While government funding had been previously available through the Works Progress Administration in the 1930s and through cultural ambassador programs in the 1950s and early 1960s, this was the first permanent and

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⁶ John Cage (1912-1992) was an American composer who is well known for his unconventional rhythms, lack of harmonic structure, and chance compositions. He was the long-time partner of Merce Cunningham and had an enormous influence on the ideas perpetuated by Cunningham. The two worked together for many years with Cage composing music for a large number of Cunningham’s dances.
comprehensive funding of the arts by the United States Government. Although many debates concerning the agency’s priorities have occurred over its forty-year history, the money provided through the NEA undoubtedly aided in the development and advancement of dance in America and helped to produce the “Dance Boom” that flourished throughout the 1970s and early 1980s.

CONCLUSION

As a whole, the 1960s was a decade of contradictions, rebellions, changes, and sacrifices. The decade irrevocably changed American politics, society, and culture because people’s beliefs concerning their role in the government, their personal morality, and their individual rights were altered by the radical events they witnessed and participated in. The consequences of this remarkable period of time are still reverberating through the psyche of the American people—these consequences color everything from the schools children attend to the music playing on the radio to the treatment of military personnel to the dance visible on the concert stage. After more than forty years, such a chaotic and revolutionary era still resonates as a special time in the history of the United States of America.
CHAPTER 2

AESTHETICS OF ALWIN NIKOLAIS, MARTHA GRAHAM,
JOSÉ LIMÓN, AND THE JUDSON DANCE THEATER

Aesthetic choices (such as those related to subject matter, movement vocabulary, and composition) are the key to a choreographer’s identity. Early on, Alwin Nikolais committed himself to abstraction through the absence of narrative and specific characterization, the theory of decentralization, and to his concept of a total theater environment in which the dancing human body was not necessarily the unquestionable center of attention. These are a few of the many things that set him apart from those who had come before him. Epitomized by Martha Graham and José Limón, the earlier generation of modern dance choreographers were basically storytellers. While their aesthetic choices were not identical, and they often utilized the dancing body in different ways, the subject matter that Graham and Limón presented was quite similar. Basing most of her works on stories from myths, literature, religion, and history, Graham focused on portraying a female point of view in a way that foregrounded women’s concerns, beliefs, and passions. Limón drew upon similar sources, but instead used a male perspective to comment on the universality of the human condition. In a radical departure from Nikolais, Graham, and Limón, the artists of the Judson Dance Theater concerned themselves with presenting the dancing body in a deconstructed and untheatrical way. Because of their preoccupation with chance practices and pedestrian movement, their choreography was more often about the process than the product. When subject matter did become important, however, it was mostly focused on political issues that were important to the group and the youth culture in which they lived.

ALWIN NIKOLAIS

Nikolais’s theory of decentralization, first conceived during his tenure at the Henry Street Playhouse, was essential to his ideas about choreography and performance. Blossoming from his mantra of dance as the art of motion not emotion, “decentralization releases the central ego’s hold and allows the body and mind to freely shift the focus and movement center to any point in the body or surrounding space” and it “allows space,
time, and shape to relate their contribution to the totality of a movement” (Nikolais, Louis 2005, 12). In other words, decentralization dictated that the choreographer and dancer release their egocentric impulses and explore space and movement beyond their usual boundaries (Ipiotis 1984). Movement did not need an emotional motivation or meaning and, therefore, one was encouraged to move simply for the sake of the motion, with the impulse for that motion stemming from the center of the body, one of the extremities, or even the forehead. In seeking ways to extend the boundaries of the human body, Nikolais began using props and costumes that extended the natural shape and line of the human form (Ipiotis 1984). Therefore, decentralization provides the explanation for many of Nikolais’s choreographic and costuming choices. It is also the source of many cries of “dehumanization” that have come from Nikolais’s critics throughout his career. By not using emotional intention to motivate his movement, he was making works that, in his opinion, were more about honest motion and less about contrived, melodramatic storylines (Nikolais, Louis 2005, 10).

Decentralization was the idea upon which all of Nikolais’s productions were based beginning in 1953 with his work Masks, Props, and Mobiles. Decentralization was built around the ability to change what was the center of the body through the use of “...improvisation and a technical approach to movement that included fluidity of mind, imagery, and response” (Louis 1980, 138). According to Nikolais’s beliefs, movement does not come from one internal emotional place, but it can emanate from many different ideas and spaces inside the human psyche. “For a decentralized dancer there is no single point of initiation. She/he attends to articulating joints; peripheral designs of body parts, points, lines, and volumes in space; dynamic textures; and qualifiers of motion identified by physics. Centered motivation tends towards the emotional; decentralized execution is intellectually commanded” (Gitelman 2007, 29-30). Decentralization was utilized as both a tool for the choreographic process and to train the dancers who came through Nikolais’s various classes. Nikolais wrote that with decentralization “one could now place the origin of force in or on any surface of the body, even a pinpoint of flesh. The concept quickly developed a new potential for nuance in motional expression” (Nikolais 2005, 11). Movement no longer came, for example, exclusively from the solar plexus as had been proposed by concert dance pioneer Isadora Duncan; it could be initiated by the
hip, foot, elbow, or right thumb. Nikolais believed that this expanded the possibilities of motion in addition to allowing a greater freedom in how movement was executed by the dancer. The dancer was permitted to shine through the movement, rather than assume another identity through acting. Decentralization epitomized the abstract nature of Nikolais’s productions. By removing the character, the meaning had to come from the movement alone. There was not a story for the audience to focus upon—instead they had to analyze the action on stage and come to their own conclusions.

Like so many who came before and so many who came after him, Nikolais discarded older ideals in favor of something new and different. Separating himself from the storytelling imperative of previous choreographers was one of his primary objectives. By decentralizing the movement Nikolais did not take all meaning away from his dances, he simply did away with meaning that depended on a story. He changed the center of focus from one protagonist to an entire stage full of dancers and the environment in which they were moving. There was always an idea present, whether the piece explored the relationships of people in a futuristic city or those frolicking under a tent. However that idea was not forced upon the viewer, it was instead subtly presented through the skill of Nikolais’s dancers and the spectacular stage effects. Yvonne Hardt relates Nikolais’s feelings on emotionally centered dance in her essay, “Alwin Nikolais—Dancing Across Borders.” She states that Nikolais

…rejected certain types of emotionally charged movements and the stories around which they were generated, associating them with Freudian, sexually driven performance. Dancers are not agonizing over their fate or contemplating solutions, but rather “they make the play of forces visible by their kinetic machinations within the environment.” The kinetic interplay is somehow understood as effectively neutral and regarded as an antipode to emotional communication (Gitelman 2007, 72).

Nikolais repeatedly reiterated his concept of motion not emotion (Nikolais 2005, 10). He believed that the impetus for motion should not be to convey what one is feeling or pretending to feel. Joseph Mazo, in his book Prime Movers, quotes Nikolais as having said “man wanted other things too; that to go around looking in heat was not necessarily the thing we should be devoted to” (Mazo 1977, 232). The dance, therefore, is not dependant on the passion that one feels; instead, it depends only upon the movement. In the same vein, the choreography and, thus, the dancer should then be able to connect with
the world around them solely through their use of time, space, shape, and motion. The audience may have an emotional reaction to the movement, but the movement is not motivated by that—or any other—emotion.

While Nikolais had a distinct opinion on the more traditional practices in modern dance, he was not attempting to alter what others were doing. “Nikolais…makes the conformist impulses and sexual prudery of his day evident without proposing alternatives. His politics, which can be activated by a critical approach to his work, lie more in the choreographic means to reveal how the world is ordered, than in the visions of a reordered world that had characterized the avowedly political work of those who preceded and followed” (Gitelman 2007, 19). For example, Martha Graham was exceedingly concerned with the political climate of her time and, during the early years of her career, produced works about the Spanish Civil War and the Great Depression. The members of Judson Dance Theatre also addressed political topics as exemplified by Robert Morris and Robert Huot’s choreographic work entitled War. The piece “consisted of the two men, dressed in ‘armor’ that was a collage of found objects, whacking at each other with sticks and releasing white doves” (Banes 1993, 101). This is not to say that Nikolais was not concerned with what was happening in the world around him, for he was. He simply did not use his art as a platform for the overt expression of his political or social beliefs.

In his choreographic process, Nikolais depended heavily on the input of the dancers he had trained. This was especially true with his first generation of dancers—Murray Louis, Gladys Bailin, Phyllis Lamhut, Beverly Blossom, Dorothy Vislocky, and Bill Frank. As company members, they not only took part in technique classes at the Henry Street Playhouse, but they were also required to take improvisation, composition, percussion, and pedagogy (Glenn 2006). This repeated exposure to Nikolais’s method of improvisation and composition provided the
dancers with insight into his way of working. For example, when improvising, Nikolais did not ask the dancers to impersonate an animal, object, or emotion. Instead they were asked to embody an idea. In an assignment he might ask the dancers to create a high level movement that was light and fast in order to achieve motion that elicited a certain emotional state from the viewer—in this case, they would experience happiness or joy (Glenn 2007).

Nikolais, however, did not take his improvisation onto the performance stage. By the time the works were ready to be placed in front of an audience, all movement was set. “Nikolais resisted the prevailing ideas by insisting that improvisation remain in the studio as a pedagogic and creative tool” (Gitelman 2007, 28). None of his works were left up to chance, a popular choreographic tool used by Merce Cunningham and the Judson artists in the 1960s. With his precise emphasis on lighting effects, onstage improvisation would have been difficult to coordinate with other theatrical elements, and as the master behind every aspect of the production, Nikolais would not have been able to achieve his desired level of control.

In the early years of his career, Nikolais often choreographed his dances to a set time frame, rather than emphasizing the temporal structure of the music. The first members of his company rarely rehearsed to the music. Instead, they learned to dance the movement within the time frame set by Nikolais and to feel the motion of those around them in order to establish unison when it was required. For instance, “the time element of ‘Dignitaries’ in Imago (1963) concerns itself with the holding of space until the time-space tension melts or breaks into motion. The eight dancers who were in the Nikolais Company when Imago was choreographed had to learn to ‘see’ one another with the backs of their necks in order to perform what Nikolais imagined, for not only does ‘Dignitaries’ treat time durationally, it also is exquisitely exacting in its motional and spatial design” (Grauert 1978). This practice of moving without acknowledging the structure of the music changed as Nikolais and the company matured. Restaging old works necessitated a need to make the productions consistent so that they could be identically repeated for each performance.

This unique utilization of time gave Nikolais’s choreography a feeling that was decidedly different from motion that is choreographed to or with the musical
accompaniment. That the dancers learned the movement based on a set length of time, not on cues found within the music was one aspect of Nikolais’s process that greatly resembled that of Merce Cunningham. Both choreographers stressed the use of time instead of musicality, with Cunningham often not revealing his music to his dancers until performance time. Nikolais did not usually leave his dancers in suspense about the sound score; however, it did occur on occasion when music was not completed in time. For Metamorphosis, one of his pieces from a concert in 1942, the composer completed the score during an extended intermission—leading Nikolais to literally snatch the latest draft from his hands so that the concert could continue (Grauert 1978).

Nikolais made a significant distinction between movement and motion, and he was quoted by Murray Louis as saying that “movement is the gross or general pattern of action, and motion the inner itinerary that qualifies it and distinguishes it as dance. All creatures, human and otherwise, move; but anyone who can apply their sentient facilities towards sensing the motion transpiring through their movement, dances” (Louis 1980, 139). Nikolais’s choreography reflects his conceptual beliefs—his personal vision (Louis 1980, 140). The movement found in his works also reflects the training that he received from Truda Kaschmann and Hanya Holm, both disciples of Mary Wigman. He was greatly influenced by the philosophies of Ausdruckstanz, or the German Expressionist movement in dance, in which Wigman had a primary role. One of the principles of Ausdruckstanz was that its proponents were emancipating dance from its past and moving simply for movement’s sake. The hope was, if the movement was pure then the expression of the individual would emerge. While Nikolais’s choreography did not reflect all aspects of German Expressionist dance, his focus on movement for movement’s sake is one area that was greatly influenced by Ausdruckstanz.

Nikolais’s training in traditional modern dance is visible throughout his choreographic repertoire, reflecting not only his training with Kaschmann and Holm, but

Figure 16: Mary Wigman in her “Witch Dance” (Reynolds 2003, 88).
also his early experiences working with Graham, Humphrey, Weidman, and Limón at the summer institute held at Bennington College. An example of Nikolais’s connection with traditional modern dance practices can be seen in the male/female partnering that occurs in the “Rooftops” section of *Imago*. This duet is performed by a woman and a man and, according to Murray Louis, the narrator of the video series *The World of Alwin Nikolais*, it is making a “simple and direct statement of the uncomplicated relationship of the man and the woman. Based on sculptural design, it made its statement through motion, time and shape” (Nikolais 1996). Though, as Louis points out, it is abstract, the roles played by the woman and the man are those traditionally found acceptable within society. For example, the man lifts the woman. They occasionally support each other while continuing to support their own weight, however, their roles are never completely reversed. One particularly powerful moment occurs at the end of the duet when the woman steps up onto the man’s legs and with her arms stretched out behind her, she executes a deep back bend. The man does his duty by leaning back to counter her weight while holding her arms for stability (Nikolais 1996). The duet leaves the audience with a glimpse into the workings of a relationship, however, because of the abstract nature of the piece, a specific story is not told and the viewers are able to decide for themselves what the choreography means to them. While Nikolais does use this male/female partnering in a way that conforms to social norms, his abstraction of the relationship is a very different approach than the male/female relationships in Graham’s works, which take place in narrative forms such as those found in *Night Journey* and *Cave of the Heart*. In those dances, Graham’s roles (Jocasta and Medea respectively) portray passionate women who are involved in emotional turmoil with the men they love. The male-female dichotomy drives the narrative and the drama. It was not a realistic portrayal of a well-known story that Nikolais sought to depict, it was instead a universal interpretation of the relationships people perpetuate, not only with each other, but also with objects, sounds and the wider universe surrounding them.

MARTHA GRAHAM

Martha Graham began presenting her own choreographic works in the late 1920s and, at this time, a new and highly stylized technique emerged from the unique way that
her body moved through space. Unlike Nikolais’s theory of decentralization, this technique was based on the principle of contraction and release and how that idea can be applied to the way the body experiences movement. Initiated from the center or core of the body, all motion radiated out from the lower abdomen and the pelvic area. The primary impulse was based on the breath, “the gasp, the sob, the slow sigh of relief, and the ways in which these—heightened and abstracted—could affect the dancer’s muscles and skeleton” (Jowitt 1988, 166). Graham believed that the movement should be inspired by emotion or feeling, whether those emotions were felt by a particular character, as shown in Clytemnestra, or expressed in the despair of a generation, as demonstrated in Steps in the Street. As Susan Leigh Foster details in her article “Dancing Bodies,” in Graham technique “the goal of dance, to represent in archetypal form the deep conflicts of the human psyche, can be realized only through a rigorous training program” (Foster 2003, 246). Graham’s dancing often focused on expressing her inner demons and she utilized her movement to speak about the struggles in her life and in the lives of Americans in general. Indulgent self-expression, however, was not what Graham was about; she was magnifying her emotional responses to convey the feelings of all humanity. This aspect of her choreography was as essential to her aesthetic as Nikolais’s abstract notion of decentralization was central to his movement invention.

While the concept of contraction and release was always stressed, Graham’s technique also centered around several other ideas. For example, the spiral was an important component of her training method. “Exercises…cause the body to spiral around a spinal core, extending out and then pulling back into dynamic positions. The body, galvanized into action as much by its own potential energy as by the dissonant textures of the musical accompaniment, arrives on the downbeat, but then surges almost immediately in a new direction” (Foster 2003, 246). The downbeat is an essential ingredient in Graham’s technique because it allows a dramatic emphasis to be placed on the movement of the dancer. The accent reinforces the emotion by drawing the viewers’ attention to the tension of the moment. When the music and the movement are synchronized in such a way, with both being strongly executed, the synchronization inevitably highlights the action and increases the dramatic impact of the moment.
The movements that Graham utilized in her choreography became codified into a prescribed dance technique in the late 1920s and early 1930s. According to former Graham dancer and teacher, Gertrude Shurr,

Graham technique, as it is known, came about in several ways. Some came from experimentation and some from a simplified version of movements from one of Graham’s dances. Some movements were devised to aid a technical need of the class or the dance company. The technique began to be quite codified and the class quite structured...One half hour of the class was spent on the floor, one half hour was standing, and one half hour moving across the floor (Horosko 2002, 24).

As Graham continued to create new movement through her choreography, some of that movement was inevitably incorporated into the class work. Whole sections were taken from different pieces and repeated in class in order to perfect the manner in which the movements were being performed. In this sense, then, the narrative and dramatic phrasing of specific dance works significantly contributed to the overall movement vocabulary of her developing dance technique. This might be considered the kind of “centralization” that Nikolais discarded, however, for Graham it was an essential conceptual framework for creating movement.

Graham focused primarily on telling a story through her movement. Her choreography and all the aspects of her stagecraft were geared toward that goal. Most notably, she often based her choreographic works on Greek myths, the American experience, and religious subject matter. Her works based on Greek myths included Clytemnestra, Cave of the Heart, Night Journey, and Phaedra (1962). Those featuring the American experience include Frontier (1935), Appalachian Spring, and Chronicle (1936). Her works on religion were varied and prevalent throughout her career. Some of those works were Primitive Mysteries (1931), El Penitente (1940), and The Triumph of St. Joan (1951). While she did occasionally create a work that focused on a single emotional state, as in her 1930 piece Lamentation, more commonly her work centered around a primary female character, who she portrayed as she relayed the circumstances of that woman’s life. For instance in both Frontier (1935) and Appalachian Spring (1944) she focused on a pioneer woman’s life. While Frontier was a singular journey, a soloist celebrating and lamenting the hard life away from the civilization of the cities in the East,
*Appalachian Spring* concentrated on life within a small community on the frontier and the decisions that must be made for survival.

Before the addition of Erik Hawkins in 1938, Graham’s company was comprised solely of women. Her choruses of women were strong and powerful particularly in the work *Heretic* (1929). The members of the chorus condemned Graham, the heretic, with each movement, silently and forcefully crossing their arms as they peered down on her. The dynamic of Graham’s works shifted when men were introduced into the company; the relationship between members of the opposite sex became more central, and the stories she chose to tell reflected that emphasis. Narratives featuring an emotional interplay between a man and woman became a central inspiration for her works. She produced pieces such as *Appalachian Spring*, *Cave of the Heart*, *Letter to the World*, and *El Penitente*, each with a male/female relationship at the heart of the work. By introducing men into the company Graham substantially altered the feeling of her choreography. Her works went from featuring a leader with a chorus or a solo to an exploration of the interaction between two or more people with a chorus supporting their movement. The ever-present chorus was an essential ingredient of Graham’s dances, however, the chorus became less of a focal point with the inclusion of men. The main female character no longer primarily interacted with the chorus, instead she related to the male character in the piece.

By basing her work on a story Graham was able to use her movement to express the emotions of the characters being portrayed. Therefore, the dancer’s acting ability was equally important as their dancing ability. Due to Graham’s early training and years touring with Denishawn, she had been thoroughly schooled in the art of the dramatic dance performance. She took this training and experience and in her own way attempted to rebel against it by no longer dancing the perceived dances of other cultures as Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn did. Instead her works were motivated by the inner feelings of a specific character. Graham, however, was unable to escape several aspects
of her training with St. Denis—the drama, the charismatic performance quality, and the emotionality of Denishawn permeated Graham’s works as well.

Graham’s focus on the drama and emotionality of the movement allowed for an interesting connection between her choreography and the mental state of the performer. As Foster pointed out in her essay “Dancing Bodies,” this connection was essential to Graham’s technique. “The principle metaphor explored in these exercises, that of contraction and release, promotes a connection between physical and psychological functioning. Students introspectively delve into the interior body as they contract and relate internal to external space through various pathways of release” (Foster 2003, 246). Because of her close studies of Jung, Freud, and other popular psychoanalysts of her day, Graham had an in-depth understanding of the most recent ideas about the psychological dimensions of human existence. These ideas informed her choices both choreographically and in subject matter. They also “taught her how to objectify her emotional life and forge a dancing persona” (Jowitt 1988, 206).

JOSÉ LIMÓN

Developed from his need to adapt the movement of Doris Humphrey and Charles Weidman to fit his rather tall frame, José Limón’s technique was based on his interpretation of the “arc between two deaths”, or the principle of fall and recovery found in the Humphrey technique. He expanded upon the idea by adding movement vocabulary that focused on suspension and succession, and he applied the fall and recovery, suspension and succession to each part of the body separately. “These ideas were reflected in José’s classes, and his movement phrases were passionate, gorgeous, full of strong movement which swept through space” (Dunbar 2000, 38). In his book, The Illustrated Dance Technique of José Limón, Daniel Lewis relates how Limón conceived his understanding of technique.

In solving his early problems with technique, José began to conceive of the human body in motion as an orchestra, the different parts of the body as the many instruments. This became the central concept in his approach to dancing and teaching. The process of learning how to move and how to dance became the process of learning how to play each of these instruments, first separately and then in harmony, in order to create the full orchestra (Lewis 1984, 18).
The technique, therefore, was developed to isolate each part of the body, cultivating an ability for each to be centered independently so that they are able to work together as a whole. This ability to move each part independently was seen by Limón as an essential ingredient to total control over the dancer’s body.

That each body part was independent of the others greatly resembles Nikolais’s concept of decentralization. For Limón also advocated movement that was not initiated from the solar plexus, as decreed by Isadora Duncan, or the core of the body and pelvis, as decreed by Graham. By concentrating on the parts of the body separately and controlling each independently Limón advocated a technique that was not center-focused and, therefore, was decentralized. One major difference in the decentralized techniques of Nikolais and Limón is the motivation behind the movement. The purpose of Limón’s movement was to serve the drama and emotion that was omnipresent in his works while; in contrast, Nikolais’s decentralized movement was abstract and open to interpretation by the viewer. This delineation between the two choreographers is the major point that places two men of relatively the same age into two different artistic generations. With Limón’s emphasis on preserving past traditions and Nikolais’s insistence on trying new and different techniques, they can thus be thought of as having two very different artistic visions.

In Limón’s technique and choreography the movement of the breath was extremely important to the action of the body. It resembled the flow of the waves in the ocean and all of the body parts reacted in turn to this flow. The action of the torso, arms, and legs happen in a pulse of extension and release. By fully utilizing each part of the body through the extension and release, the dancer is able to effectively express a myriad of emotions. This use of the breath gave Limón’s movement its signature feeling of flow with moments of suspension and in contrast, moments of an earthy weightiness. By using the body in these different ways there is a distinguishing quality to the movement that makes it interesting to watch and gives it a sense of ease that is deceptive.

Limón’s choreographic inspiration came from an emotional place, and his Mexican heritage, his place as a male modern dancer, his Catholic upbringing, and the influence of Doris Humphrey all informed his choreographic works. While Limón presented emotionality, he did it from a decidedly male perspective, much in the same
way that Graham had provided the female point of view. In one of his most well known pieces, *The Moor’s Pavane*, as the title character of Othello, Limón dominated the work with his powerful performances and his amazing ability to enrapture an audience. “Limón’s embodiment of the tormented Othello shows us nobility gone wrong: the powerful but lonely leader who is conquered by a disloyal friend and his own inner turmoil” (Dunbar 2000, 21). Additionally, Limón expressed his heritage through his 1972 piece entitled *Carlota*. This piece “tells the story of the Belgian princess Carlota who became Empress of Mexico until her husband’s assassination and her subsequent exile. The dance shows an older, insane Carlota who relives the earlier episodes of her life through a series of visions” (Dunbar 2000, 24).

Limón also created several pieces based on Biblical themes. These include *There is a Time* (1956), *Psalm* (1967), and *The Traitor* (1954). *There is a Time* is based upon the well-known Bible verse from Ecclesiastes and relates the story of human existence, chronicling life from birth to death. By basing the piece on such an extremely well-known Bible verse, Limón was able to easily communicate his message to the audience. Betty Jones states that the rhythm was the defining characteristic of the piece.

In *There is a Time* created by José in 1956, he emphasized the two opposite qualities of rhythm: metric and breath rhythm. The duet *A Time to Speak, A Time to Keep Silent* is choreographed without traditional musical accompaniment. It uses clapping sounds for the man’s solo, which has driving, rhythmic, beating steps, uneven in timing and using phrases in counts of 5’s and 7’s. The woman’s part, which alternates with the man’s solo and signifies the silence of the sectional title, *A Time to Keep Silent*, is in complete contrast to the man’s dance. It gently repeats her phrases, without any counts, always varying her timing using what we call breath rhythm. The juxtaposition of the two rhythms is dynamic, giving great contrast and emphasizing the difference in the attitude of the two dancers (Dunbar 2000, 40).

The piece relies heavily on the contrast to make its point between the two extremes in life, in this particular case silence and speaking, but the disparity can be applied to all aspects of life including birth and death.

While *The Traitor* was in fact based on the story of Judas from the Bible, its true purpose was to comment on the political climate of the 1950s in America. In the program note for the piece, Limón wrote “The arch-betrayer, Judas Iscariot, is used in this work to symbolize all those tormented men who, loving too much, must hate; these
men who, to our own day, must turn against their loyalties, friends and fatherlands, and, in some fearful cataclysm of the spirit, betray them to the enemy. This work, in its treatment, costuming and décor suggests our present era” (Limón in Dunbar 2000, 21). By using an acceptable topic in the guise of religion, he was safe to comment on the events that had many artists fearful of retribution from McCarthy’s committee.

Another important topic that Limón focused on later in life was the honoring of those who came before him, for he had been greatly influenced by working with Doris Humphrey and wanted to remember the tradition that she had passed down to him. This dedication can be seen specifically in his choreographic work, Choreographic Offering (1963), a piece based on movement taken from Humphrey’s choreography. In their comprehensive book, No Fixed Points: Dance in the Twentieth Century, Nancy Reynolds and Malcolm McCormick state that

The dances Limón created in the eight remaining years of his life represented an intense effort to reinterpret the life-affirming spirit of the early modern dance for an audience that he felt was spiritually endangered by postmodern skepticism. He was hostile to the tendency of younger choreographers to minimize the separation between life and art, and he rejected their use of chance methods as an abnegation of responsibility. But he was determined to stay abreast of current trends, without sacrificing his belief in art’s transcendent ability to touch basic human sensibilities and without abandoning theatrical values (Reynolds 2003, 333-334).

Because of his desire to preserve the past and his disagreement with the methods of the newer choreographers, Limón created several works that were slightly different in nature from those he had previously created. As mentioned above, Choreographic Offering, honored his mentor Doris Humphrey, and in December of 1971 Dances for Isadora (Five Evocations of Isadora Duncan), paid homage to Isadora Duncan, a woman who is often considered the mother of all modern dance. The latter differed from the former in that it was set to silence—one of the techniques Limón was using to stay current while maintaining the integrity of the past (Reynolds 2003, 334).

Figure 18: Isadora Duncan (Jowitt 1988, 93).
Limón’s choreographic works were created partially as a vehicle for his own
dancing, much in the same way that Graham created her works around herself. This
practice is drastically different from what Nikolais did with his choreographic choices as
he never danced in his own works—his creativity was not at all influenced by the desire
to place himself in the spotlight. Limón most often choreographed his dances around a
central male figure, sometimes with a chorus and sometimes with an ensemble of
characters, but most of the time with the male persona as the center of the piece. This
character was inevitably the epitome of the masculine male. Whether the fixation came
from Limón’s background in the infamously male-dominated society of Mexico or his
desire to establish his manliness in a profession dominated by women is uncertain, but
what is certain is that this characteristic was a major aspect of many of his dances.

JUDSON DANCE THEATER

The choreographers involved in the first class with Robert Dunn, along with those
who joined the collective later, were primarily interested in finding new ways to create
dance and the message it could relay, not just through the movement, but through the
process that lay behind the making of a work of art. These individuals felt that the
modern dance world had grown predictable and stagnant. In the words of Sally Banes
“the hardening of the arteries that had set into modern dance by the early Sixties made it
the dance world’s Off-Broadway—unadventurous, overinflated, and over-priced” (Banes
1993, 66). This new generation felt that the works being produced did not reflect any of
the changes that were happening in American society as the complacency of the 1950s
wore off and the rebellion of the 1960s began—they needed dance that would mirror the
world in which they lived.

The different choreographic experiments placed an emphasis on approaches to
dance that were untraditional—whether purposely or accidentally. For example, the
Judson Dance Theater’s choreographers often created movement focused on the real-time
duration of the movement, rather than, its relationship to whatever music happened to be
playing. Very simply, the movement would take the same amount of time on stage as it
did off stage. In Trio A, Yvonne Rainer took this concept a step further by integrating
uninflected phrasing throughout the piece. “Uninflected phrasing...had the effect of

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flattening the time structure so that the dynamics no longer participated in the design of the dance over time” (Banes 1987, 16). The phrasing impacted how the viewer perceived the movement within the work. The static energy made it feel as if the dance was repetitive, while in reality the phrase did not repeat. The only time movement was repeated was as “strings of repetitions that constitute discreet events, e.g., four low swings of the arm in front and in back of the body…” (Banes 1987, 45). The piece was one continuous string of movements, each in their set order. The performer did not emphasize one motion over another, every time the body moved there were no accents in the movement.

The practice of utilizing uninflected phrasing was important for another reason—it also went against the established norms of the traditional modern dance choreographers. For choreographers like Graham and Limón, their success was dependant on the dynamic and climactic phrasing that could be found within their dances. By adding these moments of emphasis they were making certain movements more important than others usually for the purpose of furthering the dramatic narrative that dominated the dance. The lack of any nuances in the performance was one way for the artists of the Judson Dance Theater to express the equality that was so important to them in all aspects of the organization; for there was no movement that was more essential to the successful performance of a dance than any other. Deborah Jowitt offers a clear description of this method of performance in her book, Time and the Dancing Image.

Using the minimum amount of energy required to execute the steps, they stitch together the modules that make up the sequence without the dancerly phrasing that would shape the material into peaks and transitions—substituting an uninsistent delivery that gives every moment equal importance and irons out even the dynamic inflections that inform everyday movement. The performers are rather like dancers ‘marking’ or people speaking in a clear monotone (Jowitt 1988, 307).

By dancing with monotone motions, they were reiterating their break from traditional modern dance and reinforcing their ideals about democracy and equality that were ever present within the Judson Dance Theater, both structurally and artistically.

Chance choreographic methods also played a role in emphasizing abstraction by decreasing the importance of music and, more importantly, destabilizing the ultimate control that an artist would have on the final outcome of a work. Chance allowed the
choreographer to develop a game structure to decide which movement would be performed and in what order that movement would appear. Various structures were utilized, from tossing pennies to determine spacing to complex lottery configurations. Rulegame 5 by Trisha Brown is one example of choreography derived from a chance method. Rulegame 5 premiered in 1964 and featured extremely severe limitations on what the dancer could choose to do during the piece. The “five performers proceeded along a path marked by seven parallel rows of tape, with instructions to change level from the highest to lowest at the end of the course” (Banes 1987, 79). The piece also required the dancers to speak to one another about the movement. This type of improvisational structure caused the length of the piece to be indeterminate. The movement could take on a life of its own and continue for as long as the dancers felt it needed to continue. This decreased the dependence of the choreographer on the music because the chance nature of the choreography did not purposefully highlight certain phrases of music or attempt to reflect the music through the movement.

Another example of the innovations displayed by the Judson Dance Theater can be found in the pedestrian movements utilized by Steve Paxton in much of his choreography. In her book, Terpsichore in Sneakers, Sally Banes stated that “Paxton used formal structures and depersonalized methods of teaching the choreography to build frameworks for commonplace steps, especially the act of walking itself. He used prosaic objects made gigantic or texturally altered to emphasize the importance of the ordinary” (Banes 1987, 57). Part of Paxton’s pedestrianism was a response to his work as a member of the Cunningham Dance Company from 1961 until 1964. One of his major complaints about working with Merce Cunningham was that Cunningham did not coach
his dancers on what emotions they were supposed to be communicating through their movement and therefore, most of the dancers simply wore a blank expression on their faces when they performed. Paxton desired his creations to convey a sense of reality to the audience and having the dancers present themselves as real people was one way that he accomplished this goal.

Paxton’s choreography contained actions such as eating a pear, standing on ball bearings, drinking a glass of water, telling stories, getting dressed and, the most important aspect to Paxton, walking (Banes 1987, 59-60). He incorporated walking in his dances from the beginning and used it in English, a piece he made in 1963. English “used a walking pace as its rhythm, though its activities included group configurations and pantomimes of routine activities” (Banes 1987, 60). Paxton’s walking dances culminated in one of his most well known works, Satisfyin Lover, which premiered in 1967. This dance used from thirty to eighty-four performers who spent the entire piece walking from stage right to stage left, stopping to sit or stand as dictated by a written score. Satisfyin Lover was performed by people who were not necessarily trained as dancers. By using many different types of people Paxton brought attention to the diverse ways in which people moved across the stage while doing the simple everyday task of walking.

Members of the Judson Dance Theater used pedestrian movement for several reasons. First, it reinforced the notion of democracy and equality through their choreography. Part of the rebellion against the established norms in the dance world included revolting against the elitist image that many people had of dance. Pedestrian movement allowed those who had not had years of training to perform just as well, if not better than those who had the privilege of acquiring advanced dance technique. Because the untrained dancers did not have any of the habits or mannerisms of the trained dancers, many of Judson Dance Theater’s choreographers found their movement to be more interesting and more authentic. There were no pointed toes, a lack of exact alignment, and a naturalness to the movement performed by those who were untrained. Some of the choreographers made a point of trying not to use their training in their performances. For example, Sally Banes details an anecdote in her book, Democracy’s Body: Judson Dance Theater, 1962-1964, in which a member of the collective questions Judith Dunn about whether or not she meant to point her foot while performing a piece with Steve Paxton.
Dunn stated that she had not done it on purpose, and she and Paxton performed the piece a second time to allow her the opportunity to concentrate on not pointing her foot—something a ballet dancer would rarely do (Banes 1995, 80-81). Nondancers were also used “to strip the polish from dance style and restore to dance what was felt to be an authenticity of presence” (Banes 1993, 70). Theatricality was considered undesirable and unnatural. The reality of the situation was being sought with the pedestrian movements that were performed by the Judson Dance Theater.

Equality was also a reason for the dances to be a mixture of many different art forms with or without any harmony or sense in the way that the choreographer compiled these elements. All the arts were treated equally with maybe only the dance taking precedent over the others. “For in the realm of radical juxtaposition, anything could appear next to or after anything else; no hierarchical logic of perspective, plot, or character development dictated artistic choices” (Banes 1993, 132). In dance the radical juxtaposition took the form of spoken text being read as the dancer moves, mixing dance styles that were considered either high or low art, or usurping the role of the corps by making each performer a soloist. In a dance world where the musical movement of Balanchine reigned supreme, Tricia Brown and Yvonne Rainer’s blatant use of movement that did not fit the musical accompaniment purposefully ignored accepted conventions and reached for something new and different.

The radical juxtaposition that was prevalent in the art world in general was also present within the artists of the Judson Dance Theater. There was a practice of accepting the mingling of different artists and arts as a part of the avant-garde scene in New York in the 1960s. It was common for people to participate in arts that were not within their specific specialty. For example, Robert Rauschenburg choreographed dances. He was not known as a dancer or choreographer, instead his artistic training was primarily in the visual arts and he is most widely given recognition for achieving excellence in that field. Robert Dunn was trained as a musician, but actively taught composition classes for dance using the same principles of composition he had utilized when writing music. Robert Morris, who choreographed and danced, was trained as a visual artist and painted in the style of the abstract expressionists. Yvonne Rainer began as an actor, who then turned to dance. The skills found in one artistic discipline were not valued more than those found
in another, instead there was an equality of the arts. Training in one discipline did not render a person unable to successfully produce art in another discipline. The abilities of the artists were also radically juxtaposed against one another, no hierarchy of training existed among people who desired to produce art.

Many of the dances done by the Judson Dance Theater included props in some fashion, either as an object that was manipulated through the movement or as a primary object around which the movement was based. One such instance of the manipulation of objects can be found in Group I choreographed by Deborah Hay. “In one section of the work, a group of people wearing suits or dresses stood on a platform wielding long wooden poles, which they raised, lowered, clattered together in response to signals from a ‘conductor’” (Jowitt 1988, 328). They not only manipulated the objects throughout the piece, they were following the lead of a conductor who was instructing the dancers as to what action they were to perform. The task they were given and the object they were maneuvering controlled their movement by limiting what they were able to do to the instructions they received from the person in charge. By placing someone in charge of the movement of others, Hay took the control partially away from the dancers and, therefore, restricted their available movement.

By emphasizing the ideas of democracy, pedestrianism, and choreography based on chance, game structure, manipulation of objects, and tasks, the members of the Judson Dance Theater developed a new and different way to move and to make dance. As Nancy Reynolds and Malcolm McCormick write in their book, No Fixed Points: Dance in the Twentieth Century, “By objectifying the creative process and by treating their dances as events in which the process occurring and the act of moving were of the greatest interest, postmodernists drew attention to the body as a vehicle; corporeality became a way of thinking and the subject of close observation” (Reynolds 2003, 402). The young artists, in other words, were more concerned with how the work got produced and less concerned with what was actually presented on the stage. Since they often did not charge for their concerts this was a position that they could afford to take. By emphasizing process they were also able to present deceptively simple movement—which was deceptive because the concepts behind the movement were so complex and full of highly analyzed ideas and thoughts about art, dance, and life in general.
CONCLUSION

A choreographer is ultimately defined by the choices they make aesthetically and the way that they define dance. By emphasizing emotionality, abstraction, theatricality, reality, or pedestrianism Nikolais, Graham, Limón, and the group working out of Judson all conveyed an individual message through very different means. Nikolais’s focus on decentralization set him apart by producing works which conveyed their message abstractly, instead of overtly relaying the meaning. Graham and Limón utilized their own personal technique to create dramatic masterpieces that told the viewer a specific story. The choreographers participating in the Judson Dance Theater incorporated pedestrianism, chance, and other alternative methods in order to find a distinct method of exposing the significance of their movement.
CHAPTER 3

TECHNICAL PRODUCTION ASPECTS OF
ALWIN NIKOLAIS, MARTHA GRAHAM, JOSÉ LIMÓN,
AND THE JUDSON DANCE THEATER

By the mid-1960s, Nikolais had advanced the technical aspects of his production as a signature part of his total theater environment in which he considered choreography, costumes, lighting design, projections, props, and musical accompaniment to all be of equal value. Even with this equality of elements, Nikolais’s lighting techniques and use of projections were the factor that set him apart from other artists and made his work unique. Whether compared to the work of more traditional modern choreographers or that of the Judson innovators, Nikolais’s theatrical staging was original and revolutionary. On the one hand, he rejected many of the accepted paradigms that the artists of the Judson Dance Theater had also discarded, but, at the same time, he maintained an allegiance to using highly sophisticated technical theater elements. On the other hand, his use of those elements diverged significantly from the more conventional usages of staging that were employed by artists like Martha Graham and José Limón. A primary factor that affected the work of all the artists discussed here was the type of spaces that were used for particular performances. For the most part, Nikolais, Graham, and Limón worked almost exclusively in theaters with a proscenium stage. Therefore, they had all of the traditional theatrical effects available to them—a full light grid, wings, a curtain, and a cyclorama. Nikolais, however, utilized theatrical effects to create an environment where light, movement, sound, and color could coalesce into a shifting abstract and technological environment. In contrast, Graham and Limón used theatrical effects to promote the dramatic intention of their choreography.

Unlike Nikolais, Graham, and Limón, Judson Dance Theater almost exclusively performed in unconventional spaces; which is part of the reason they diverged from the standard use of theatrical effects. The sanctuary of the Judson Street Church, the gymnasium in the church basement, a roller rink, and a New Jersey farm were among the places their concerts were held. Critic Allen Hughes stated that “they have been able to get along in all these places for two reasons: 1) They tailor their dances to fit the
limitations of the performing area. 2) They can, if necessary, maintain a sublime disregard for the comfort of their audiences. (They have been helped in this by the fact that many of their performances have been given free of charge)” (New York Times 9 February 1964). These unusual spaces meant that the trappings normally found in a proscenium theater were not present. The simplicity of the lighting complimented the unaffected movement style that was being presented by the Judson Dance Theater. They worked with what was available to them and, conveniently, the absence of theatricality complimented the aesthetic they were striving for. The collective did not work with professional lighting, set or costume designers; however, many of its members were extensively trained in arts other than dance and were more well known for their work as painters or actors than as dancers. For example, a choreographer does not need a professional set designer when that choreographer happens to be the artist Robert Rauschenberg. Just as Philip Corner who was trained as a musician and composer did not need to find another to compose music for his choreographic works. Thus, all of these artists additionally brought their many other talents with them to Judson Dance Theater. They were focused, however, on their amateur status as dancers and not on their expert abilities in other areas. Their purpose was to create art using the theory that everyone can make art and anything can in essence be art. This equality permeated not only who was dancing, but what was considered dance, and where that dance was performed.

LIGHTING AND PROJECTIONS

Throughout his career, stage lighting and slide projections were an integral part of Nikolais’s total theater experience. Like the other elements of his productions the creation of the lighting was Nikolais’s domain and his innovative use of this element had an enormous impact on the way that his choreographic works appeared on stage. He manipulated different colored lights, gobos, projections and whatever else he could conceive to get the effects that he desired. Nikolais’s extensive experimentation with lighting was fostered by his permanent position as director of the Henry Street Playhouse from 1948 to 1970. Full access to the Playhouse theater at any time enabled him to explore the farthest reaches of his imagination and helped him to achieve some
remarkable lighting effects. Nikolais utilized lighting design not only to highlight and enhance what was happening on the stage, but also to distort the images that were seen.

The most revolutionary of his methods centered on the way he projected images on the stage with slides. Excepting the genius of Loie Fuller who illuminated her oversized skirts, slides had previously been restricted to projection onto a cyclorama behind the dancers. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Fuller utilized the newly invented technology of electricity to alter stage lighting forever. She expanded her skirts, using literally hundreds of yards of fabric, and lit them with electric lights from various angles. She patented many of her designs, including a lighting instrument that was projected from beneath the dancer who stood on a glass platform inserted into the stage, lighting the body from the bottom up. Like Nikolais, she also used slides with her lighting instruments to create colors and patterns on her skirts—invoking images such as a lily or a fire. Nikolais, however, employed slides in a different manner from Fuller. She utilized them to entrance the audience and focus the attention onto herself. Nikolais, on the other hand, used the projections as part of his complete theatrical vision, highlighting, concealing, and distorting the dancers and their movement in turn. Nikolais’s projections and lighting designs served a very

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7 Loie Fuller (1862-1928) was born Marie Louis Fuller in Fullersburg, Illinois. She had a long theatrical career that began with vaudeville and skirt dances but she evolved into one of the pioneers of modern dance. With her dazzling light creations she was the darling of the Art Nouveau movement and had a theater built specifically for her performances at the 1900 Paris Exhibition. While an American, Fuller was more widely accepted in Europe and spent much of her life there. She was a scientist as well as a dancer, experimenting with everything from lighting instruments, to costume designs, to paint that glowed. She was a good friend of Marie Curie and her death from cancer was ultimately due to her experimentations with the radium that she used to paint her costumes.
different purpose than Fuller’s as an integral part of his total theater concept that was reflected in each of his choreographic works.

An excellent example of Nikolais’s use of slides can be found in *Tent*, which premiered July 5, 1968 at the Theatre Auditorium on the campus of the University of South Florida in Tampa (Gitelman 2007, 239). In this piece, Nikolais cast slide projections onto the white filmy material of the tent that was hung on stage. In her essay, “The Nikolais Dance Theatre’s Uses of Light,” Barbara E. Nickolitch states that “the tent...is molded by projections, colorful curved-line designs in orange, yellow, and white, then red and purple. The slightest movement spills the projection so that the giant prop seems almost alive, an unearthly phenomenon” (Nickolitch 1973, 88). This unearthly phenomenon gave the audience a feeling of unreality. The images one saw on the stage represented some other time and place, some other mysterious world, or Nikolais’s own view of the universe. In the “Cave” section of the piece projections were thrown not only on the tent and the cyclorama at the back of the stage, but also on the costumes of the dancers. At the start of the section the tent was transformed to look like a cave with a circular opening in the center. The texture was altered through slide projections, making a smooth white sheet appear to be bumpy and rocky in composition and the transformation caused by the slide allowed the illusion of the cave to emerge from the pristine whiteness of the tent. Nikolais’s hand-made slides were essential to the total theater experience he was trying to create. They enabled him to create different atmospheres simply by changing the projections that were being used. In other words, he did not have to physically alter the stage in order to change the scene.

Besides using the slide projections to create the setting and establish a mood, Nikolais also utilized them as a form of costuming for the dancers. This effect was

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*Figure 21: Tom Caravagalia’s photo of Nikolais’s “Tent” (Gitelman 2007).*
especially present, again, in his production of Tent. For the “Cave” section, the dancers were costumed in very sheer skin colored unitards that left the viewer questioning whether they were dressed at all. At different moments Nikolais projected images onto their bodies, hiding certain limbs and parts of their torsos. After the eye became accustomed to seeing a fragmented body, he abruptly altered the images and startled the audience with the fully lit dancers’ bodies. For example, toward the end of the section, all of the dancers emerged from the cave and danced in front of it. A green and black projection was directed at the dancers and the areas that were left black by the projection seem to be lost, altering and skewing the shape of the dancers’ bodies. When a white light suddenly replaced the projection, the viewer was surprised to see that the writhing beings, which were only partially visible, were actually humans dancing. The projections, therefore, were used just as effectively as the actual costumes in distorting, concealing, or revealing the shapes made through the dancers’ performance of the choreography. That Nikolais chose to misrepresent the dancers’ bodies sets him apart from almost all other choreographers. Graham, Limón, and the choreographers of the Judson Dance Theater were, for the most part, trying to highlight the beauty and perfection of the human form. This is not to say that all three were attempting this feat in the same manner, for Graham and Limón were celebrating the beauty of the highly trained body while the Judson artists were more interested in the splendor of a normal body doing what it does every day. Nikolais, in contrast, abstracted the body in order to make a statement about the relationship that exists between people and their surroundings. He did not believe that human beings were the center of the universe, nor was the dancer in a Nikolais work the center of the piece. In each case the person is part of a larger and more important whole that coalesces to become complete.

An additional example of Nikolais’s projections can be found in the “Mantis” section of Imago. Instead of projecting the images onto the dancers or a prop they appeared on the cyclorama at the back of the stage. In “Mantis” the audience saw some of the same lighting effects as in Tent, along with the use of projections. The cyclorama showed a projection of a piece of art reminiscent of the abstract expressionists who were active throughout the late 1950s and early 1960s. The random squiggles and swirling lines on the backdrop changed color and occasionally disappeared and reappeared quite
abruptly. At another point the lines on the backdrop remained white while the two separate groups of dancers were highlighted by red and blue light respectively.

The pattern featured on the cyclorama shows the influence of Nikolais’s artistic contemporaries on his productions. Just as the abstract nature of his musical compositions demonstrated the influence of John Cage and other minimalist composers, the abstract nature of his backdrop demonstrated the influence of Jackson Pollock and other abstract expressionists. While these artists may on the surface have little in common, they were all disciples of an abstract aesthetic that discarded conventional views of art as a reflection of the natural world. Cage, for example, did not utilize traditional harmonic tones when composing. He had trouble composing harmonies, so he based his music primarily on rhythm. In order to discover these rhythms he employed chance composition, unconventional instruments, and electronic synthesizers. Some examples of the unconventional instruments Cage employed include anything from twelve radios to shells and water. He also altered traditional instruments, like the piano, inserting plates and screws in with the strings to change the sounds that the instrument could produce. Another of Cage’s innovative practices was the use of found sounds in composition. He believed that anything with rhythm could be considered music and, as a result, recorded sounds from the streets, like car horns and jackhammers, into compositions. Cage is also infamous for his piece entitled ‘33’, which consisted of three movements where no music was played—that is, the piece was four minutes and thirty-three seconds of silence.

As previously mentioned, Pollock, with his action painting, created canvases full of splatters, drips and pours from a paint can. Often accused of being chaotic or haphazard in his artistic choices, in reality Pollock was methodical, thoroughly considering the placement of each pour from his paint cans. He also often used found objects in his paintings; much in the same way that Cage utilized found sounds in his compositions. Pollock included grains of sand, pieces of glass, and dried paint chips to give texture to his paintings. Like Nikolais’s dances, his paintings did not represent any specific time or place; instead, it was up to each viewer to find their own meaning or response to the work. Nikolais’s dance compositions also demanded the same feat from the audiences. John Cage, Jackson Pollock, and Alwin Nikolais were all masters of
abstraction within their chosen discipline. They did not make art about nothing; however, neither did they choose to spell out their message for the audience, viewer, or listener.

As mentioned earlier, Nikolais’s use of lighting was a unique element used to transform the stage into a kaleidoscope of movement and color. Applying lighting in an untraditional way, he did not stick to the belief that cool or warm light should be used to depict certain emotions or feelings that are being portrayed by the performers on stage. Instead, the lighting instruments emphasized the costumes, the props, the scenery, and the dancers in ways that were unusual, and sometimes even bizarre. For example, in *Sanctum*, which premiered in 1964 at the Henry Street Playhouse, Nikolais used the lighting to change the colors of the props held by the dancers. “There is a scene where all of the dancers carry long, flat, lathes. They are any color Nikolais chooses as he pours his lights on them, and in the end they send off iridescent sparks” (Gitelman 2007, 204). It was an effect similar to that of Nikolais’s projections—they altered what the audience saw and enabled him to change the stage environment into something unexpected and unusual.

In his 1969 piece *Echo*, Nikolais created lighting designs that mimicked the name of and the idea behind the piece. Anna Kisselgoff in her review of the choreographic work related this idea of the piece.

The echo in question is a visual one—dancers’ movements being “echoed” by their shadows, often magnified in size or at a highly inventive variety of angles (the shadow of a girl onstage runs parallel to another girl while the second girl’s is seen one degree behind). At one point the situation is reversed. A stationary group-silhouette is projected on one panel and is echoed by a group on stage that strikes the same pose (*New York Times* [New York], 4 December 1969).

Nikolais took his optical illusions to a new place with the creation of this work and demonstrated once again his ability to imaginatively craft a complete theatrical presentation that transcended the category of dance. Kisselgoff also makes the point in her review that *Echo* is not merely about the dancing, but instead about a seamless environment of which the dancers are one part. She stated, “The dancers are the environment. They form a continuous abstract with the projections or without them—a result that is all the more sophisticated because these effects are realized without any
costume disguises” (New York Times [New York], 4 December 1969). The dancers have, in Kisselgoff’s estimation, successfully been integrated as a part of the total theater setting and, therefore, are not the center of the choreographic work. In this piece the critic identified the accomplishment of Nikolais’s ultimate goal—the incorporation of all of his decentralized pieces into one meaningful and complete vision.

At other times, Nikolais utilized lighting in a more traditionally theatrical and dramatic way. He isolated and highlighted different areas of the stage by using various intensities or colors of lights—a technique that was utilized extensively in the 1968 piece Tent. In the section “Descent to Hell” the lighting, and thus, the audience’s attention is focused on the figures who appear to be wearing the large tent in the middle of the stage that has been the focus of the piece thus far. There are, however, three dancers clothed in smaller tent-like costumes on the front of the stage. Fabric is hung from the dancers’ shoulders and, ending in a large hoop, gives the costumes the shape of a cone or tent. The arms and legs of the dancers are completely hidden by the costume disembodying them so that they appear to be floating heads. These dancers remain fairly still throughout most of the piece and, since the lighting is concentrated on the large tent in the center, it is possible to forget that the shapes at the front of the stage are indeed dancers. When they move around to the back of the stage, it goes unnoticed until they swallow three of the dancers into their smaller tents at the very end of the section.

Another example of Nikolais’s dramatic use of lighting can be found in the aforementioned “Cave” section. The dancers emerge from the opening of the cave tentatively and all dance together on stage right. They are bathed in bright light causing the focal point to be outside the cave. The cave, however, is still lit with the same light that was used while the dancers were performing within its opening. The additional light outside the cave opening results in the change of the audience’s attention. This remains true even as some of the dancers return to dance in the cave’s opening outside of the primary light source.

Traditionally, dance lighting is different from other types of theatrical lighting mainly because the purpose is different, as dancers are customarily lit by designs that specifically highlight the body. “The visibility and clarity of movement are crucial…A three-dimensional effect is needed to make the figures and movements stand out from
their surroundings and the dancers’ bodies are approached as if they were sculptures” (Cooper 1998, 81). In order to achieve this sculptural quality, the dancers are lit from the front, top, and sides of the stage. The side lighting is truly the key to achieving the three-dimensional look that is desired. This is the way that Graham and Limón utilized lighting in their works, resulting in effects that were very different than Nikolais, primarily because they lit their dancers for different reasons. Essentially, in Graham and Limón’s work lighting and projections were not given equal footing with the other aspects of the production in the same way that Nikolais equalized those elements. This is particularly true of Graham’s choreographic works. In both videos and restagings of her works, it is apparent that lighting was employed mainly to establish dramatic atmosphere for the choreography, a strategy she consistently made use of.

For a 1982 restaging of her 1947 piece, *Errand Into the Maze*, lighting designer Beverly Emmons was asked by Graham to update the lighting to make it a design that was current and relevant. In order to honor the original design by Jean Rosenthal, Emmons looked over the cue sheet for the lighting, which had originally been executed by one man at a manual light board. Of the original design Emmons stated, “it had a lot of front light, and its transparent quality was wonderful; lighting has gotten very sharp and spooky and jagged and harsh. Jean’s stuff was very lucid and very simple—just not bright enough by today’s standards; in the same way that sound has gotten louder and louder, lighting has gotten brighter and brighter” (Jowitt 1997, 45). Therefore, both the original lighting design by Rosenthal and the reconstruction by Emmons for *Errand Into the Maze*, were straightforward and rather simple in nature. The design served one main purpose and that was to highlight the actions on the stage in order to enhance the narrative that was played out through the choreography.

Another example of this clear and uncomplicated lighting can be found in the design for the restaging of Graham’s piece *Steps in the Street*, that was performed in November of 2006 at Florida State University. It featured lighting which was somber and matched the desperation conveyed by the dancers in the piece. *Steps in the Street*, is part of a larger work, *Chronicle*, and depicts the plight of the unemployed and hungry that were walking the streets during the Great Depression. The lighting design, therefore, was dim and the dancers were lit mostly from the side preventing the audience from fully
seeing their faces. Even though the lighting was subdued, it continued to reflect the dramatic nature of the topic being addressed and the movement that was being danced. In a review of another restaging of the same dance, Laurence Rawlins comments that “the women are like Amazons. They command the stage in jumps that are in unison as if defying gravity they leap through the air. The blue lighting against the black dresses highlighted the dramatic quality of the work” (Rawlins 2004, 53). Graham’s deeply emotional choreographic visions were, therefore, enhanced by the lighting choices that were made for her dances.

Unlike Nikolais and much like Graham, Limón utilized projections and lighting in theatrically traditional ways to enhance the subject matter, theme, or narrative of a particular dance. For example, in Missa Brevis, the image of a ruined church is projected onto the cyclorama, appropriately reflecting the musical choice of a Catholic Mass and underscoring the tragedy and destruction of war that is the theme of the work. In this work, there was nothing new or innovative about the use of the projection. It was thrown onto the cyclorama in a traditional manner, not onto the dancers or the stage as Nikolais later did.

The lighting designs for Limón’s work were done primarily by Tom Skelton from the early 1950s through Limón’s death in 1972 (Dunbar 2000, 54). Skelton worked on new ideas about lighting during his tenure with the Limón Company. Jennifer Tipton, herself an accomplished lighting designer, tells about the techniques Skelton used for lighting. She writes

By lighting The Moor’s Pavane, The Emperor Jones, and The Traitor he developed his sense of the dramatic: his ideas about light shining from the outside in, from the inside out, and his ideas about no color crosslight. In lighting the dances Missa Brevis, There is a Time, and A Choreographic Offering he refined his ability to make a stage space shimmer with color. During this period he began to develop the idea of having two different, fairly saturated colors together on stage, one from the left and the other from the right, cut through by light with no color in it. This no-color light usually came from the ends of the pipes over the stage. This combination gave his lighting a rich and luscious look that was entirely in tune with the Mexican temperament and aesthetic of José (Dunbar 2000, 55).

The lighting, much like Limón’s choreography, was dramatic in nature and ultimately created a mood that supported the story that Limón was trying to relate through his
choreographic process. While Skelton’s work with lighting design was innovative in the angles of his instruments and mix of colors he used, there was nothing radically different from the established practices in theatrical lighting. The main purpose of his designs was to illuminate the dancers and to enhance the choreography. Unlike Nikolais, Skelton did not try to distort the dancers’ bodies or conceal any part of them as they performed.

The younger artists of the Judson Dance Theater differed considerably from Nikolais and the traditionalists in that they purposefully performed without the customary stage lighting. They rarely had special lighting because they performed in unconventional spaces and most often, they were fortunate if they were able to use any lighting to separate the audience from the performers. By not utilizing highly theatrical lighting in their productions, the artists of the Judson Dance Theater were also trying to break with the traditional practices of presenting dance. They were, however, able to utilize projections or films within their performances and one example of the Judson Dance Theater’s use of projections was the showing of a film that occurred at the very first concert. The film, Overture, was presented as the audience was entering the church and the screen was placed in such a manner that the viewers had to cross in front of it to be seated (Banes 1982, 174-175). The Judson Dance Theater utilized the films to provide additional entertainment, to make the audience uncomfortable by forcing them to cross the screen, and as an introduction to their concert. These uses were very different from those practiced by Nikolais whose projections were used to create myriad effects within his total theater environment.

COSTUMES, PROPS, AND SETS

Nikolais’s choreography was strongly influenced by his choice of costuming and use of props, and he often utilized costumes that changed the appearance of or hid the true shape of the dancers’ bodies. Because of this distortion, the costumes also restricted the amount and types of movement the dancers could physically accomplish. Nikolais’s first abstract work, Masks, Props, and Mobiles, which premiered in 1953, included a section entitled Noumenon Mobiles that was frequently performed as a separate piece. Noumenon Mobiles featured the dancers clothed in large, stretchy, square, fabric bags that did not allow the audience to distinctly see the parts of the body. The dancers
manipulated the fabric creating interesting shapes as their bodies moved within their bags. By stretching one appendage farther than the others they were able to make that body part briefly visible to the audience; this generated a unique result particularly when the head was that appendage. By giving the audience a brief impression of a face, head, or hand Nikolais was giving a brief glimpse of the human form of the dancer. For that single moment they were transformed into something that the audience could personally identify with. Another example of a costume that altered the dancers’ bodies can be found in the 1959 piece, Allegory. One section, “Finials” featured the dancers encased in long tubes of material with various sized hoops inserted at intervals causing the dancer to indeed look much like the object for which the section was named (Gitelman 2007, 76).

Body-transforming costumes can also be found in the dance Imago, which premiered in 1963 at the Hartford Jewish Community Center in Hartford, Connecticut (Gitelman 2007, 238). Throughout the piece the dancers wear white, conical hats on their heads. The conical shape elongates the head and makes it appear slightly out of proportion with the rest of the body. For the “Mantis” section of Imago, Nikolais extended not just the head but the dancers’ arms as well. He expanded the dancers’ bodies by placing progressively larger conical extensions on their arms,
giving the arms the look of trumpets when they are held parallel to the floor. By using the conical extensions, Nikolais exaggerated the length of the dancers’ arms, and in doing so, changed their function and the way they moved. The dancers’ arms appeared to be almost as long as their legs, which created the illusion that they were giant four-legged preying mantises instead of humans. Nikolais distorted the bodies of the dancers just enough to warp reality—just enough to make the audience question what they were seeing and why they were seeing it.

The “Boulevard” section of *Imago* also has costumes that garble the bodies of the dancers. The dancers are draped from the neck to the calves with primary-colored fabric sacks. The only parts of the body that are visible to the viewer are the ankles, feet, and head, with its cone-shaped hat. Of the parts of the body that are visible to the audience, the feet are bare and the face is colored white. With the costume coming down to the ankles, the movement of the legs is not readily visible so the dancers appear to float across the stage as they move. Further, concealing the trunk and arms with the costume renders the dancers androgynous. Although there are both men and women dancing, these particular costumes make it impossible to tell them apart.

It was a common practice for Nikolais to dress both the women and the men in the same costumes—often creating the effect of androgyny that is apparent in “Boulevard.” The only concession that was made to gender was that on some occasions the men would perform bare-chested and the women would not. Throughout his career, Nikolais used same-sex costuming in many of his works, including *Tent, Noumenon Mobilus,* and *Allegory.* One exception however, is that in *Tent* the dancers’ genders were apparent because the costumes were made of a transparent material. Androgyny was also present in the choreography, as both sexes were given the same movement to perform. Identical movement that was free from the usual conventions of gender allowed Nikolais to extend his ideas about equality to the motion that occurred on the stage, not just to the different elements that comprised his choreographic productions. The men and women were not distinguished from each other in any way through the movement they performed; they were instead one equal part of Nikolais’s vision. He was not trying to necessarily make a political statement by utilizing identical movements, but because of his emphasis on
abstraction and the absence of gender-driven narratives, there simply was no need for the movement to be created according to the sex of the dancer.

Nikolais designed all of his costumes, but they were executed by Frank Garcia. It was Garcia’s job to decipher Nikolais’s ideas and translate them into costumes that the dancers could wear and actually move in. Nikolais’s costume designs often went from one extreme to another. For instance, in Tent, the dancers wore flesh colored unitards that caused the viewer to question if they were wearing anything at all, while in Imago each section had different elements of the costumes that extended the line and reach of the dancers’ bodies. In an article about Imago, critic Allen Hughes makes the point that “it is people, of course, who do the dancing in his works, but…they are people transformed by costume, make-up, head-dress, or mechanical additions to the body into beings that never were” (New York Times, 29 September 1963). This transformation is at the heart of many of Nikolais’s works, and Imago is a prime example of a work of transformation. A mutation of the dancers occurs as they morph from regular people in solid unitards of primary colors with a cone-shaped hat, to a group of insects with unnatural arm extensions, to a group of heads floating on bodies draped with fabric designed to hide all of their appendages. Within this one choreographic work, Nikolais displays both his tendency to distort and alter the body and his inclination to reveal the human form in all its beauty and imperfections.

Nikolais uses unitards as costumes for the “Rooftops” section of the dance that features a duet between a man and a woman, allowing the viewer to clearly see their movements. This is in contrast, especially, to the “Boulevard” section in which the dancers are completely covered, as the costumes found in “Rooftops” show every miniscule movement the dancers make allowing one to see all the intricacies of their motion. The idea of being hidden in public and exposed in private is reflected in the names of the sections. A “Boulevard” by its very nature is a public place and a wide, crowded street offers no privacy. “Rooftops,” on the other hand, are places that are not easily viewed or invaded by others.

Another instance where Nikolais did not conceal or alter the body of the dancers can be found in his piece Tent. As previously mentioned, the dancers in this piece wear only flesh colored unitards, and the men and the women are dressed in the same exact
costume for the entirety of the piece. For the “Garden” section, the dancers have long strands of silver fringe suspended from their shoulders giving the viewer, at first glance, the illusion of a Mylar dress. As the bodies begin to move, the fringe moves, revealing and concealing parts of the body. The dancers in Tent are very clearly human, as opposed to the strange beings that are presented through the costumes of Imago.

Because of Nikolais’s ability to conceal the body, at certain points, so that it becomes unrecognizable, he is often accused of dehumanizing his dancers with his costume designs. Totem, a piece that premiered in 1960, elicited a cry of dehumanization from several critics. For example, in her article in Dance Magazine, Doris Hering states

In his newest work, Totem, as in its predecessors of the past three or four years, he has created an enchanting world of the senses. But because he gives it no point of reference with reality, one feels that his dancers are in some way betrayed. We are forced to forget they are people. And in doing so, we are forced to forget that art in its fullest definition implies emotional involvement (Hering 1960, 69, 71).

Hering’s conclusion is that without emotion the movement is empty and without meaning. Nikolais, however, believed that “dance is the art of motion, not emotion, and it carries its own intelligence within itself” (Nikolais 2005, 10). Therefore, according to him, the motion itself delineates the relationships and ideas being portrayed, not the stage production’s imitation of reality. Lois Balcom corroborated Hering’s opinion in a review in Dance Observer. Balcom critiques Totem, focusing for a moment on the section titled “Rite IV.” She states that “here we saw a man and woman dancing— and the interlude was memorable. It was the only glimpse of humanity in a whole evening of depersonalized arms, legs and torsos—sticks, scarves and stools—light rays, tones and flashing colors” (Balcom 1960, 40). Balcom valued Nikolais’s production only in light of a socially recognizable relationship between a man and a woman. Theatrical elements that were valued when they were used in the service of narrative and drama were here regarded as depersonalizing and dehumanizing. Sticks and scarves when utilized by Martha Graham were seen as symbolic and essential to the storyline, however, Balcom didn’t recognize the importance of these objects in Nikolias’s choreography. Because of the abstract nature of the work, she did not see those elements as being symbolic or essential to the relationships occurring onstage, instead they were seen as objectifying the
dancers by taking away their humanity. Balcom also divided all aspects of the production into separate pieces, “legs, arms, and torsos,” instead of looking at it as a whole. Without experiencing all the pieces equally, including the dancers, costumes, choreography, lighting, music, and sets, one cannot truly understand the vision that Nikolais was attempting to create.

Nikolais’s movement and choreography were also heavily influenced by his extensive use of props. For instance, in one of his later works, Pond (1982), each dancer spent the entire piece seated on a rolling platform that was only three or four inches above floor level. They moved by rolling themselves across the stage. The scooter was an extension of their body, for they never left it in the course of the dance. A recent restaging of the piece by Alberto Del Saz at Florida State University’s Department of Dance in November of 2006 allowed the author a live glimpse of the work. Almost twenty-five years after its premiere, the props, slide projections, and lighting effects were still a marvel. The dancers’ integration of movement and prop had a mesmerizing effect on the audience. Nikolais’s vision came to life in the creation of an environment through which the dancers moved. Each element was an equal but important part of the performance.

Another example of Nikolais’s innovative use of props in the 1960s can be found in Tensile Involvement, which premiered as a full company piece in 1968. The props in this piece consisted of several long pieces of elastic ribbon that were fastened to the ceiling at one end. Much like that of Pond, the choreography of Tensile Involvement centered on the way that the props affected the dancers’ ability to move. In her essay, “Alwin Nikolais—Dancing Across Borders,” Yvonne Hardt describes the piece in these words:

In this piece an indefinable assemblage of lines, colors, and bodies cannot be visually untangled. Dancers are involved with the bands that link them to each other, creating a net that has no central perspective to lean on, to orientate the

Figure 24: “Tensile Involvement” featured long pieces of elastic with which the dancers performed (Gitelman 2007, 71).
viewer in space. Then a memory of flux contrasts with clear squared forms that suddenly frame the dancers. Something seems to trick perception; clear outlines of space and movement are lost. A symbiotic relationship creates something new through relationality that dancer, light, or costume could [not] have done alone (Gitelman 2007, 70).

Nikolaïs was, once again, able to transform each element of his work into a whole that was very different from the parts. Using props to define the movement vocabulary can both increase and decrease what the dancers are able to accomplish. A prop can give the choreographer and, thus, the dancer, choices and abilities they may not have had otherwise. For example, in *Tensile Involvement*, the dancers utilized the ribbon to create the illusion that they were allowing it to take some of their weight, thereby dancing at an angle otherwise unattainable. Also, in *Pond*, the scooters enabled the dancers to smoothly sail across the stage, as was demonstrated in their exiting magically in one straight line with no hands or feet pushing against the floor. On the other hand, a prop can also limit the movement that a choreographer can create. Once again in the words of Yvonne Hardt, “When dancers lean onto discs or sticks in Nikolaïs’ dances one cannot distinguish where the movement of the dancer ends; definitely, it is not with the surface of the skin. The movement extends, on a purely physical level, the boundaries of the dancer’s body and its movement range” (Gitelman 2007, 70). Without the props in dances like *Pond* and *Tensile Involvement*, Nikolaïs’s vision, again, would not be complete.

*Figures 25 and 26: Nikolaïs’s “Noumenon Mobils” and Graham’s “Lamentation” both manipulated lengths of cloth—the main difference being the appearance of Graham’s face. (Gitelman 2007 and Jowitt 1988).*
Though Nikolais’s experimentation with costumes that completely obscured the dancers’ bodies began as early as 1953 with *Noumenon Mobilis*, in 1930 Graham created a work that could have almost been a precursor to Nikolais’s work. In *Lamentation*, Graham wore a purple tube of fabric that she stretched and manipulated throughout the piece, much in the same way Nikolais’s dancers did in the later work. The major difference between Graham’s creation and Nikolais’s was that Graham showed her face. Once again, her character retained its essential humanity even within the disguise of the enveloping shroud. With the combination of the stark expression on her face and the dynamic lines that her movement created in the stretched fabric, Graham was able to convey her emotional message, as the personification of grief.

Early on in her career, Graham established her own specific conventions for the costuming of her dancers. The Graham costume for a female usually consisted of a simple leotard bodice and a long, weighted skirt that moved as the dancer moved. The male dancers, on the other hand, were minimally costumed—often they wore only a pair of briefs decorated to fit the theme of the dance. Graham designed many of the costumes and according to Horosko, she favored swirling, long dresses and floor-sweeping scarves. They made a strong statement and were wonderfully constructed. The hairpieces were symbolic and bold, as were the ornaments: a simple clasp indicated status, capes indicated mystery. She combined vivid colors—black with gold, magenta with red, pure white against dull browns (Horosko 2002, 104).

The symbolic nature of the costumes advanced Graham’s dramatic intentions; they aided in the quest to have the work be understood by the audiences. Unlike Nikolais’s dancers, Graham’s dancers always wore costumes that defined and enhanced the shape of the idealized human body. There was never any doubt when viewing a Graham piece that her dancers were people who were acting out the drama of life.

In several of Graham’s choreographic works, the use of a prop was so important that it functioned as an indispensable element in the unfolding narrative. For example, in *Night Journey*, which tells the story of Oedipus from his mother Jocasta’s point of view, Graham dances with a long length of white rope. This rope is central to that story because as Jocasta, she hangs herself with it when she discovers that she has been intimate with her own son, Oedipus. Additionally, the rope also represents the umbilical
cord between mother and son. Despite their familial relationship, they unknowingly consummate their bond as man and wife and, therefore, “the fatal umbilical cord also gives symbolic shape to their erotic entangling, and they strain against it even as they yield to it” (Jowitt 1988, 218). Within the same piece, Tiresias, the seer, also carries a large staff. The staff helps to create his signature step as he bangs it forcefully against the floor in order to move from one place to another. The two props interact in the piece. “As the curtain rises, Jocasta stands swaying, holding a length or white rope. Tiresias enters with huge, purposeful steps, swinging his staff ahead of him to announce his presence, and knocks the rope from her hands. With this act, he forces her to think back on her incestuous relationship with her son, that she may not die without understanding” (Jowitt 1988, 215-216). The props, therefore, are used by Graham to expand upon the tale her movement is telling. As critic Clive Barns noted in a 1967 review of Night Journey, “When Tiresias blindly stumbles through the web of their love (a metaphor presented with memorable and vivid literalism on the stage) the mind cries out, yet also clicks cerebrally at a conclusion noticed and, because foreseen, justified” (New York Times [New York], 1 March 1967). By choreographing primarily to convey the enormity of the experiences in the characters’ lives and to relate the message of the classic Greek myth, Graham utilized the props to this purpose. They were present as part of the action specifically to assist in the storytelling and to extend the meaning and impact of the movement through the extension of the dancers’ bodies. This differs from Nikolais because his props were used as an integral part of the choreography in a different way; they were not representational or symbolic. They achieved their significance by being part of Nikolais’s total vision for his choreographic work, in which props, costumes, and dancers could become one.

As important as Graham’s symbolic props, the simple, sculptural sets of Isamu Noguchi can be found in many of her best-known works, including Appalachian Spring (1944), Night Journey (1947), Cave of the Heart (1946), and Clytemnestra (1958). The sets were not merely decoration for the stage, but were used physically in the choreography. For example, in Appalachian Spring, the dancers utilized the cabin-like structure as they told the story. The character of the Pioneer Woman spent much of the dance in a stylized rocking chair crafted by Noguchi. Her stoic expression and stillness
in the chair reflected the hardships of the life on the frontier. Another instance of the integration of choreography and sets occurred in *Night Journey*. Jocasta

...lies on the ambiguous structure that Isamu Noguchi designed. It is the incestuous marriage bed, but it also represents a gridiron—a torture rack—and, if one looks closely, it is composed of a primitive male and female figure entwined. The smaller objects that form a stairway up to it look like dolmens, a miniature Stonehenge. A narrow swag of fabric—half column, half beam of light—twists down from a point high above the stage (Jowitt 1988, 216).

It was the site of the consummation of their relationship and remained onstage as a constant reminder of that event. Additionally, it was the location of the final horrifying events, where the true identities of Jocasta and Oedipus were revealed and reviled. Noguchi’s sculptures were integral to the choreography and the telling of the story—they were another effective tool for Graham to relate the narrative, and they were part of a complex concept that could not be conveyed as clearly without all of the pieces. “In the case of Graham’s dances, the cryptic archetypal structures that Isamu Noguchi set about the stage often provided home bases for various characters, places to which they could retreat when out of the action, as if they still lurked at the edges of the heroine’s mind” (Jowitt 1988, 223). By keeping the dancers on the stage, Graham kept them in the audience’s attention and enabled the exquisite sets by Noguchi to serve a purpose whether or not they were currently being utilized by the main character.

In one of Graham’s dances from the late 1940s, *Cave of the Heart*, the main character, Medea, danced by Graham, utilized a sculptural dress designed by Noguchi that was a costume, prop, and set all in one. The wire structure Noguchi built stood
onstage as part of the set for the entirety of the work with Graham even lingering underneath it in contemplation over Jason’s unfaithfulness. It was transformed from set piece into a complicated mix of costume and prop as Graham stepped into the wire sculpture and, while wearing it, manipulated it and danced. The structure “becomes a garment that reaffirms her supernatural power, a symbol perhaps of the golden fleece she once guarded, but as she spins, she seems to fuse with the consuming jealousy that led her to murder, and, as she stands encased in its rays, you can see it also as a cage” (Jowitt 1988, 225). While unique in its multifaceted nature, Noguchi’s set/prop/costume in Cave of the Heart inevitably served the account of Medea’s experiences that was portrayed by Graham’s choreography.

Limón’s costuming methods were similar to Martha Graham’s and were also very different from Alwin Nikolais’s. Limón was intent on theatrically demonstrating a dramatic idea through the choreography and this led to costumes that were appropriate for the story. For example, in his work, Mazurkas (1942), Limón had the dancers wear costumes that were based upon the traditional clothing of peasants—the original dancers of the mazurka. This type of costuming honored the cultural heritage of Limón’s people and recognized their plight, as he often depicted the lives of Mexican peasants in his works. Another example, Missa Brevis, featured the dancers wearing muted colors: skirts and blouses for the women and pants and shirts for the men. The story of the piece was one of horror at the destruction of World War II and

Figure 29: Graham in her Noguchi costume/prop/set (Jowitt 1988, 224).

Figure 30: A performance of “Missa Brevis” by the Juilliard Dance Theater (Reynolds 2003, 333).
the muted colors of the costumes appropriately reflected the feelings of despair that were prevalent at that time. Most of Limón’s costumes were designed and executed by his wife, Pauline Lawrence, who also aided in managing the company. One of Lawrence’s most notable design contributions was the costumes for Limón’s seminal work, The Moor’s Pavane, based on the Shakespeare play Othello. Lawrence clothed the women in voluminous skirts, with the character of Desdemona wearing a virginal white dress that represented her innocence in the whole ordeal that unfolds throughout the story. Limón, who portrayed Othello, was costumed in a crimson velvet robe that symbolized, not only his royal status, but also his rage and quest for vengeance for the supposed infidelity of his wife.

The Moor’s Pavane also exemplifies Limón’s significant use of props in his choreographic works. Much of the action centered around a prop, Desdemona’s white handkerchief. “It is dropped by her in the course of a pavane and retrieved by Emilia. She gives it to her husband, Iago, who returns it to Othello as proof of Desdemona’s infidelity” (Siegel 1979, 171). The handkerchief was a small-scale element in the dance, but it served much the same purpose as the props in Graham’s dances—it promoted the dramatic course of events that make up the story of Othello. Limón, therefore, utilized props as a way to assist in his storytelling and, in the case of The Moor’s Pavane, as a thematic link throughout the whole of the piece.

In line with their other aesthetic choices, Judson Dance Theater artists chose to use eclectic costumes that ranged from street clothes and tennis shoes to more theatrical garments. The choice to wear everyday clothing reinforced the idea of pedestrianism that could be seen throughout the choreography of some of the artists. In a famous photo taken by Jack Mitchell of Judson choreographer Yvonne Rainer, from her piece Trio A,
she is shown jumping with her feet in a narrow fourth position, her arms down with one hand in a fist and her head lifted to the sky. She is wearing a short-sleeved t-shirt, trousers with a belt, athletic socks and tennis shoes (Banes 1987, 42). The artists of the Judson Dance Theater also used dance practice clothes along with the pedestrian clothing. One example can be found in a piece by Fred Herko. In a review from The New York Times, critic Allen Hughes commented on Herko’s extraordinary use of the ordinary in his costuming choices for Binghamton Birdie. Hughes stated that Herko “wore black tights, a yellow-and-blue jersey with ‘JUDSON’ emblazoned across the front, and, on one foot, a black shoe and his means of locomotion—a roller skate. His other foot was bare...he skated around the floor for a time, moving his arms and the unencumbered foot through various balletic positions...he did a bit of toe dancing—roller skate and bare foot notwithstanding” (New York Times 26 June 1963). With the help of his costume, Herko was effectively able to present a juxtaposition between the ridiculous, the roller skate on one foot, and the elite, the balletic movement and toe dancing. This contrast questions the validity of both sets of movement. Why is ballet any less ridiculous than skating around on one roller skate? Does tradition really make something more relevant to society? These were the questions that the Judson Dance Theater members were seeking the answers to through their choreography and their productions as a whole.

The more traditional costumes used by these innovative young artists included leotards and tights, tutus, and sweat suits. For example, in Concert #4 Trisha Brown and Steve Paxton wore unitards in Brown’s Lightfall. Unitards were also worn for Yvonne Rainer’s Terrain. These costumes were contrasted against the pedestrian nature of many of the costumes that were utilized. The Judson Dance Theater also made radical, counter-cultural statements by performing in as little as was allowed by law. For example, in
Paxton’s *Word Words*, Rainer and Paxton wore only pasties and a g-string. The range of costumes chosen by the artists demonstrated the straightforward manner of the Judson Dance Theater—anything could be a costume, just as anything could be a dance.

The choreographers of the Judson Dance Theater also made extensive use of props and sets within their dances. For Concert #13 the choreographers collaborated with sculptor Charles Ross who created a movable landscape comprised of “a big iron trapezoid, a long seesaw, and a platform of wood planks set about eight feet above the floor” (Johnston in Banes 1995, 171). This design proved to be both set and prop in that for some dances the objects were stationary and for others the dancers manipulated them throughout. One piece in which the sculptures were used mainly as props was *Room Service* choreographed by Yvonne Rainer in collaboration with Charles Ross. For the duration of the piece Ross and two assistants were responsible for moving the sculptures around the stage while Rainer led three groups of three—one comprised of all women, one of all men, and one of mixed sex—through an elaborate game of follow the leader. By working with the props the dancers’ movements were both limited and changed. “Rainer became intrigued with the stylistic constraints placed on the dancer’s movements and performance demeanor by carrying objects” and she continued to explore the
possibilities of moving props around the performance space as can be seen in her work in Concert #14 where the dancers moved furniture throughout the piece (Banes 1995, 177, 178).

The method of manipulating props as a task for the dancers can also be found in one of Nikolais’s works from the mid-1960s. Tower, which was sometimes performed as a single piece and sometimes as a section of the larger work, Vaudeville of the Elements, premiered in 1965. The dancers used aluminum pipe to build a tower, symbolizing the Tower of Babel. As they were building the structure, the dancers chattered, conveying the impression of mindlessness through the endless noises they were making. The tower inevitably exploded and collapsed on the performers in the dance. The piece was startling to the audience because they had just watched two sections where the dancers were silent and to suddenly hear them as well as see them was a dramatic departure from the then status quo of dancers being seen but not heard onstage and in the creative process. The purpose of the tasks that Nikolais required his dancers to do was not that different than the reasoning of prop manipulation featured by the choreographers working in the Judson Dance Theater. In each case the dancers were instructed on what to do and were expected by the choreographer to follow the directions. In each instance, the task was employed to further the choreographic meaning of the dance.

Much like Martha Graham in Cave of the Heart, Judson choreographer Steve Paxton utilized his costume as both prop and set in his piece Flat from January of 1964. “The action of the piece consists of the circling walks, interrupted by sits and by repetitions of five simple, attentive poses, at least four of which appear to be derived from sports (an up-at-bat stance is most obvious), and all of which Paxton performs with a minimal yet efficient use of energy and a noncommittal facial expression” (Jowitt 1988, 305). Throughout the dance, Paxton took off most of his clothing and hung the pieces from hooks attached to both the front and back of

![Figure 34: Steve Paxton in his piece “Flat” (Jowitt 1988, 304).]
his body. The everyday action was put on display as performance, changing its meaning and its significance; the role of the clothing had been decidedly altered from one of function to one that was completely nonfunctional (Jowitt 1988, 305). What began as a costume was transformed into part set, part prop, as the pieces were removed from the body. The removed pair of shoes sat on the floor in front of the chair becoming a piece of scenery, while the other clothing was manipulated giving it a new and different purpose.

MUSIC

Nikolaï’s early training as a musician informed every aspect of his dance career, from his teaching methods to his stage productions. As an accompanist for the silent movie theater in Southington, he learned early how to improvise music for movement and how to convey the dynamic qualities of that movement through the music. This skill was one he utilized extensively when teaching and many of his dancers marvel still at how adept he was at matching improvised music to the motion that was being performed in the classroom (Glen 2006). In the 1950s, it was common practice for Nikolaï to compose music for his choreography by taking recordings of compositions written by others and splicing them together to form new music. He would stretch the tape to change the sound, layer different compositions on top of one another, and add live percussion and non-western music in order to give the final product a unique sound. For example, his 1955 piece, “Village of Whispers, consisted of extracts from compositions by Carlos Chávez, Henri Dutilleux, Béla Bartók, John Cage, Harold Farberman, and Julián Carrillo” (Gitelman 2007, 136). That he was able to produce such high quality musical compositions by literally cutting and pasting pieces of tape together is quite remarkable in itself considering the fact that sophisticated computer programs are now utilized to do the same thing.

Nikolaï’s compositional techniques changed in the early 1960s when he was afforded the opportunity to work with James Seawright, who had access to a RCA Mark II music synthesizer. This synthesizer did something that a reel-to-reel tape recorder could not: it could produce its own new sounds. Bob Gilmore explained its use in detail in his essay “The Music of Alwin Nikolaï.” He stated
The RCA Mark II synthesizer had a frequency/tone generator, with oscillators and white noise; a pitch glide and vibrato generator; a volume and envelope controller; a timbre (tone color) controller; and amplifiers and mixers. Its complex set of controls, which enabled the user to shape the various parameters of sound, promised unlimited resources for the experimentally minded musician (Gitelman 2007, 143).

The first production that Nikolais composed music for with the help of Seawright and the synthesizer was Imago. In Imago Nikolais composed his music and his dance together, as was a normal practice for him at that point in his career and the musical timing sets the tone of the piece. In a review published in The Dancing Times in 1969, Mary Clarke describes the music of Imago as being “so aptly matched to the movement he is going to create that it almost sets the dancers in motion. It lifts them in the same way that the famous old Minkus and Drigo piece numbers set classical dancers soaring and spinning—in fact one might call it electronic Drinkus” (Clarke 1969, 576). Clarke’s review of Nikolais’s musical score, while slightly silly, demonstrates the connection between the movement and the music in his works. After completing Imago, Nikolais was introduced to a new synthesizer that Robert Moog had recently invented. He was awarded a Guggenhein Fellowship in 1965, which allowed him to purchase the Moog synthesizer. This machine became an integral part of Nikolais’s productions, and he composed music on it for at least part of every one of his works for the next ten years (Gitelman 2007, 143). When composing, Nikolais did not use meter, scales and the aesthetic of harmony. Instead, like many musicians of his generation, he composed music that was abstract, just as his dances were abstract (Nikolai-Louis Foundation for Dance 2006).

It is important for a listener to remember that Nikolais did not compose music simply for the listener’s pleasure. He composed it specifically to accompany dance—whether that dance was choreographed by him or someone else. David Gregory, one of Nikolais’s collaborators later in life is quoted by Gilmore stating

Sound for Nik was an abstraction of either shape, space, time, or motion…If you listen to his compositions without watching a performance then you are missing half the experience. You wouldn’t watch a movie without the sound. Nik did not compose music for people just to listen to. If you want to do that as an academic exercise, since I can’t imagine it would be that aesthetically pleasing, then try to decide if he is defining shape, space, time, or motion with the sound, because that will be what it is all about (Gitelman 2007, 149).
Nikolais’s productions were unique primarily as a result of the responsibility he personally took for each and every aspect of his choreographic works. While he may have had assistance in executing some of the tasks—for example, the execution of the costumes by Frank Garcia or movement ideas from his dancers—ultimately these productions were the creation of one man. Another important point is that Nikolais’s musical invention was innovative in the 1960s. Electronic music was just being developed and few composers even had access to the equipment necessary to make music like Nikolais’s. This is something that we forget today simply because dance to an electronic score is no longer something that could be considered unusual or an oddity.

While Graham did not compose her own music as Nikolais did, her choreography was affected by her musical choices and those choices were highly influenced by her partnership with musician Louis Horst. The two met at the Denishawn School where Graham was a student and Horst an accompanist. When Graham began her own company, Horst was an integral part of the company and her artistic growth. He was “Graham’s musical director, accompanist, mentor, and lover” (Jowitt 1988, 154). Horst arranged and wrote music for several of Graham’s early choreographic works. For example, he arranged the music for Heretic, which premiered in 1930 at a collaborative concert that included Doris Humphrey, Charles Weidman, and Helen Tamaris. The music was originally a ten-bar Breton folk song. Horst played it on the piano seven times using the same speed and intonation each time (Jowitt 1988, 153-154). The result was purposefully repetitive and imbued the piece with an effective quality of condemnation that the chorus of dancers directed toward Graham, the central character.

Graham worked with many other contemporary composers in addition to Horst, especially after he severed ties with the company in the late 1940s. One of the many important composers with whom Graham collaborated was Aaron Copland who wrote

Figure 35: The Graham Dance Company in “Heretic” (Jowitt 1988, 154).
the score for her masterpiece, *Appalachian Spring*. Graham never worked with the music as her inspiration, although it aided in creating the atmosphere for her vision of an active society in a prairie town as depicted through the movement. By the third draft, Copland had written a score which was based on the Shaker hymn entitled *Simple Gifts* and followed a musical structure previously determined with Graham. Although it matched the original score, it had its own autonomous identity from the original narrative Graham had planned. Thus, she altered the choreography to fit the brilliance of Copland’s composition (Robertson 1999, 8). Because of these alterations, moments of the piece reflect a visualization of the music that would not have been possible otherwise. In her essay, “Musical and Choreographic Integration in Copland’s and Graham’s *Appalachian Spring*” Marta Robertson relates one instance in the piece where this visualization occurs.

Paralleling the music, each of the first three Followers sits in unison with the staggered solo woodwind sequences in mm. 152-53. The fourth and final Follower remains standing during the two beats of silence in m. 153. During the same rest, The Revivalist motions from offscreen for the last Follower to be seated, and she finally sits, like a belligerent Sunday school girl, in unison with the delayed flute entry (m. 154). Both the last Follower and the final solo flute entry are rhythmically displaced from the three previous entries of the choreographic and musical sequence, humorously thwarting the expectation of consecutive sequences established musically in mm. 149-150 (Robertson 1999, 10).

It is important to note that not all of the choreography in *Appalachian Spring* so closely followed the musical accompaniment, however, even when the music did not mirror the movement, it still ultimately influenced it to a large degree. The music additionally highlighted the ideas that the choreographic work was conveying and much like the other elements of theatrical production; the purpose of the music was to propagate the message of the choreographer that was revealing through the movement.

Much like Nikolais’s, Limón’s accompaniment choices were varied and ranged from a traditional mazurka to silence. Limón did not compose any of his own music. He did, however, use a wide range of contemporary and classical composers in his musical choices. Unlike Graham, he did not have one specific musical influence that dominated his work. He choreographed pieces to music by Johann Sebastian Bach, Sergei Prokofiev, Franz Liszt, and Frederic Chopin and he also utilized a score by Silvestre
Revueltas that was originally composed for the film *The Wave*. Many of the scores for Limón’s choreographic works were arranged by Simon Sadoff and one of his most notable arrangements was Purcell’s music for *The Moor’s Pavane*. The feelings the music provoked had a palpable influence on how Limón’s choreography was received. John Martin related this impact in his second review of the work in 1949. He stated “The music…proceeds with a relentless impersonality, conspiring with the whole formalism of the composition to stay the insurgencies of personal passion” (*New York Times* [New York], 28 August 1949). Through his selection of music Limón reinforced the decorum and propriety of the dancers’ movement and provided a contrast to the emotions simmering under the surface.

Limón’s musical choice also greatly affected the feel of his choreography in his piece *Missa Brevis*. In a 1966 review, Clive Barnes related the importance of the music: “Zoltan Kodály’s ‘Missa Brevis in Tempore Belli’ was written at the end of World War II, and its first performance took place in a blitzed church in Budapest. The pain and compassion suggested by Kodály’s elegiac and deeply felt if conventional music, finds its choreographic match in Mr. Limón’s gravely serene yet powerful choreography” (*New York Times* [New York] 14 February 1966). The music perfectly reflected the somber grieving of the dancing and successfully reinforced Limón’s intent of demonstrating the horrific and heroic consequences of war on a nation and its people. Kodály’s music effectively supported Limón’s movement imagery of human perseverance amid the adverse conditions within a war torn and rebuilding Europe.

While leaning toward music that was orchestral and from the classical period, Limón, however, did utilize accompaniment that was outside that classification when he presented works that were danced in silence or took advantage of modern scores that were originally intended for other uses. He believed that no music was unavailable for dance and that if the dance is choreographed well then the music becomes part of the movement, instead of a distraction from it. In a commencement speech for Julliard, Limón stated

And here is a curious thing about the relationship between dancer and musician. It has been said often that on first viewing a dance, if you are fully aware of the musical accompaniment, the dance has failed to interest and absorb you as it
should. It bored you. It was too long, too tedious, too repetitious, badly composed, badly danced. You took refuge in attending to the music. All dancers and choreographers have had this bitter truth to contend with. Music for dance is successful and effective only when it has been so skillfully utilized that you are not aware of it as a separate component or ingredient. It has blended so perfectly that you are not aware where the dance ceases to be and the music begins (Dunbar 2000, 12).

He believed the music should be carefully selected and the movement should be just as carefully crafted to fit that particular piece of music. This is in direct contrast to those in the Judson Dance Theater who were employing chance methods for everything from movement to music. The belief that music and movement must meld was also one that was held by Nikolais and something that he practiced throughout his career.

As mentioned earlier, the choreography class taught by Robert Dunn, a catalyst for the formation of the Judson Dance Theater, was created, in part, in response to the classes in choreography that were being taught by Louis Horst, the former composer for the Martha Graham Dance Company. Horst based his choreography on the canonized musical structures of what he called the “pre-classic” dance forms, meaning Pre-Romantic court dancing that included dances such as the gigue, gavotte, saraband, and pavane. Therefore, the choreographers in the Judson Dance Theater had a clear objective in rebelling against what they considered to be rigid and restrictive choreographic methods. Much like Nikolais, they simply wanted a different way of doing things—they were uninterested in perpetuating the musical hierarchies that were being taught by Horst. They were also adamant about discarding preceding practices and exploring innovative relationships between music and dance. Consequently, the choreographers of the Judson Dance Theater were extremely eclectic in their musical choices and inventive in the ways that they used music. For example, in Concerts #3 and #4 Yvonne Rainer used romantic music, Berlioz and Rachmaninoff; Steve Paxton composed a piece of music for his choreographic work, Word Words, which was performed on a different night than the dance; while Phillip Corner had the musicians take cues from the dancers’ movement. Some of the other choreographers used no music at all or, more traditionally, used either pre-existing music or music that was composed for the dance (Banes 1995, 84-86). For the members of the Judson Dance Theater anything could be used as a sound score—
from the sound of a jackhammer to a string quartet—just as any movement could be used in a dance.

CONCLUSION

Alwin Nikolais’s choreographic innovations were highlighted by the production elements, which he considered to be as important to the final product as the movement phrases themselves. This is not true of many of his contemporaries. For example, as we have seen, Graham and Limón focused more intently on the choreography and the narrative it followed than on the other aspects of production. For them, the lighting design, costumes, props, and musical accompaniment existed solely to further the choreographic theme. The theatrical elements were not the most important parts of the dance or even on equal footing with the choreography. The movement and expression of the dancers was valued more; however, the theatrical elements were indeed necessary to generate the type of production that Graham and Limón desired. Additionally, Judson Dance Theater also valued the choreography over the production elements. They often disregarded these elements when presenting work, in part because they performed in unconventional spaces, but also as an additional rebellion against the established modern dance community.
CONCLUSION

In the history of the development of modern dance in America, the works of Alwin Nikolais occupy a uniquely different position from that of any other artist in his era. His position as an individual who could not easily be characterized as a traditionalist or as part of the avant-garde of the time provided the audiences and critics of the 1960s with a new kind of dance theater that shared common elements with both of those worlds. His dances were considered too innovative and abstract to be categorized with the works of Martha Graham and the José Limón, and yet his adherence to many of their highly theatrical practices precluded him from being categorized with the rebellious choreographers working under the umbrella of the Judson Dance Theater. Those younger artists were adamantly opposed to embracing the theatrical values that had become standard usage in modern dance. At the same time, Nikolais’s creative process had some parallels with the Judson artists. He—like them—was not interested in traditional narrative structure, he dismissed dramatic expressiveness as just so much self-indulgence, and he did not believe that technical virtuosity should always be the primary aim of dance performance. All of these things placed him in a position between the avant-garde and the mainstream.

An investigation of Nikolais’s choreographic methods, musical accompaniment, dance technique, lighting designs, sets, and costuming not only reveals his indeterminate position between the extreme avant-garde and the more conservative and traditional modern dance companies, but it also reveals the complex ways in which the practices of different artists can overlap and intermingle. The similarities and differences between artist’s ways of presenting their works help determine the broader categories that they are perceived as belonging to. For example, Graham and Limón can be placed into a similar category because they presented their dances in proscenium theaters, they made full use of the lighting instruments, music, and costuming to enhance the narrative structure of their dances, and they both began choreographing partially as a vehicle for their own dancing—playing the lead role to a supporting chorus or cast of characters.

On the other hand, Nikolais used the proscenium stage along with its various theatrical capabilities as fully as Graham and Limón, but he used all of those elements for very different purposes. He focused on a world of abstraction where human relationships
were delineated by their vague, indeterminate connections—or disconnections. Again, these relationships were not pressed into the service of narrative and dramatic intention. As we have also seen, his lighting design and projections were an integral part of his dances in a very different way than those elements had been used in traditional modern dance. His innovative approaches explored how lights and projections could take on a life of their own as equal elements beside the dancers, competing with them—and sometimes overpowering them—as well as complementing them. His use of these elements was not limited to the traditional roles of defining dancers’ bodies in space and establishing dramatic atmosphere. Likewise—and as previously mentioned—Nikolais’s radical use of costume design also expanded the visual possibilities of moving human bodies. He could present his dancers as everything from exquisitely modeled human beings to amorphous blobs or fantastic androids. The boundaries of these possibilities reached far beyond the form enhancing, character delineating costumes of the traditionalists.

Nikolais’s works also share a number of similarities and differences with the artists of the Judson Dance Theater. They are similar in the respect that they rarely followed a specific narrative; props or costume pieces often functioned as an extension of the dancer’s body and helped to dictate their movement; and improvisation was sometimes used as a choreographic tool. Nikolais, however, only used improvisation during his creative process, while the Judson choreographers sometimes utilized improvisation onstage during performance. Some of their other differences have been pointed out in the previous chapter. For example, when the Judson Dance Theater began in the early 1960s, they rejected all that had come before and yearned to make dance into an entirely new form of art. The theatricality that had been so integral to both the traditionalists and the abstractionists became irrelevant as the postmoderns moved dance out of the theater and into alternative spaces. The mystique that came along with the traditions and tricks of the theater also faded as the members of Judson made the ordinary special by declaring that anything could be and was art.

The dancers of all the companies that have been discussed projected a distinct and unique persona while on the stage. While these personas were very different, they were nonetheless present in each artist’s work. Nikolais’s dancers did not purposefully project
any emotion or feelings as they danced, because they embodied his principle of decentralization, stressing the idea that they were not the center of his productions. They instead projected their presence through their focused energy that seemed to enervate the entire body and course through each limb. This created a liveliness and quality that might be characterized by the same term that has often been used in regard to Cunningham’s dancers—“animal alertness.” Nikolais’s adage that dance is the art of motion and not emotion prevented the dancers from working to personify a specific feeling or emotion. However, they were expected to have that tenuous, indefinable quality that makes a performer interesting to watch. They were required to capture the audience’s attention with the quality and energy of their movement instead of the emotionality behind it.

Because of the total theater concept that Nikolais prescribed to, the dancers were only one piece of his vision and were not expected to dominate the stage picture or be its primary focus. They were not to be the center of attention any more than his exceptional lighting designs or his unusual electronic music. As Deborah Jowitt points out, Nikolais dancers were “now displaying their range as dancers, now scuttling about in the dark, turning flashlights on and off at carefully timed intervals, now making a piece of fabric shudder into ghostly life” (Jowitt 1988, 354). Their personas were not defined simply by their role as dancers. Just as the slide projections or props were not meant to stand alone, the dancing was also intended to be part of the audience’s experience that reached beyond the centrality of the dancing human bodies.

In contrast to Nikolais, the persona of Graham’s dancers was completely and totally defined by their dancing and acting—more specifically by the emotion, passion, and overall expressiveness they exuded as they danced. These qualities were essential ingredients in her work from the very beginning of her career as a choreographer. A trait that can be attributed to the dramatic training in dance that she received from the Denishawn School and Company, her acting skills were indispensable to the storylines found in her choreography and essential to the persona she developed as a performer. A convincingly dramatic delivery was also expected of her company members, and it continues to be a trait associated with the Martha Graham Dance Company well after her death. “For the Graham-created dancer, there was (is) no such thing as a casual moment,
no relaxation of tension... The high pitches of feeling she was trying to convey could only be expressed by a body working at an extreme physical pitch, protected from the maudlin by the dancers’ discipline and the structural finesse of the gestures” (Jowitt 1988, 226).

Again differing from Nikolais and continuing in the same vein as Graham, José Limón’s choreographic works projected the image of a proud and heroic man. This image permeated his works and defined the major characters of his dances. Limón’s fixation on heroic figures stems, according to Norton Owen, from the profound influence of those who came before him. “The dance pioneers he credits as his ancestors were more than mere influences. Their personal styles were mirrored in the noble carriage and powerful presence of Limón’s persona, and the urgency of their dancing was invoked in many of Limón’s stage works” (Dunbar 2000, 20). The noble carriage and concentration on heroic characters reflects, in part, a masculinity in Limón’s dances that is unique to his choreography. By highlighting these traits, he was able to celebrate men dancing, not by exaggerating their masculinity as Ted Shawn8 had done in the past, but by depicting them as people to be emulated, individuals who were admirable as men. Limón’s dances demonstrated the strengths and weaknesses of men along with the emotional content of relationships between that noble man and a woman, or another man.

Working less on projecting a clearly definable persona, the dancers and choreographers of the Judson Dance Theater mirrored more the ideals of Nikolais than those of Graham or Limón. The artists of the Judson Dance Theater held some contradictory views on performance qualities, but all of these views were opposed to the theatrical status quo of traditional modern dance. The Judson choreographers did not want or expect the same performance qualities from their dancers. As Deborah Jowitt stated “On the one hand, it was felt that the performer should go about his/her ‘task’ of performing in the most neutral, efficient way, interposing no comment between concept and art object. On the other hand, wasn’t it a suppression of nature to conceal feelings of

8 Ted Shawn (1891-1972) founded an all-male company after the dissolution of Denishawn, the company and school he ran with his wife Ruth St. Denis. He purchased a farm, Jacob’s Pillow, in Massachusetts at the height of the Great Depression and based his company, Ted Shawn and His Men Dancers, in this location. He made it his mission to promote dance in the United States and around the world and to especially preach the acceptability of male dancers. His choreography for his company of dancers often featured men who danced as a representation of their masculinity, in direct contrast to the prevalent stereotypes of male dancers in American culture.
glee or discomfort or puzzlement?” (Jowitt 1988, 327). As Jowitt suggests, some of the choreographers, wanted the performers to suppress any emotion that might surface during a dance, while others wanted performers that let their natural responses to movement be seen. Both ways of performing were the antithesis of Graham’s and Limón’s presentational style. The Judson artists were also at odds with the performing methods of Nikolais’s dancers; though not emotionally motivated, his dancers did project an energy to the audience that was not necessarily as natural or spontaneous as that of the Judson dancers. By dancing without any expression or with whatever expression happened to occur during a particular performance, the dancers in the Judson Dance Theater were not only defying the accepted norm of the emotional and dramatic dance that had long been a staple of the modern dance world, but they were also rejecting some of the principles of abstractionists like Nikolais.

Another factor that sets Nikolais’s work apart from those who came both before and after him is the particular kind of cohesiveness that pervades his choreographic works. It is safe to say that a certain amount of unity between the choreography and the various other elements of the theater is common in the work of most choreographers, with the exception of those instances where an artist purposefully does not coordinate these elements. How the components of production complement each other—or don’t—is one of the key factors in a choreographer’s aesthetic approach to his or her work. Consequently, how artists combine these different elements determines the overall perception of their work. In the following quote from critic Clive Barnes’s 1968 review of Tent, the reaction to Nikolais’s balance of elements is revealing:

Magic—it is the key to Nikolais. No one in today’s theater possesses a visually more innovative or original mind. His electronic music...is superficially attractive, and his staging, with its lighting, color projections and props is absolutely bewitching. This is Nikolais’s positive side—and it is enough. He could transform a Broadway revue or a Las Vegas spectacular. With his wildly beautiful stage effects and compelling multimedia switch-ons, he is, in my contention, very possibly the greatest pure showman in the American theater, and I do mean theater and not dance. Strangely enough it is so often his dance element that is the least impressive part of his work. His choreography is not really inventive or meaningful, and in many ways it is fortunate that it is often buried under the rest (New York Times [New York], 28 November 1968).
The critic was, interestingly enough, not overly impressed by Nikolais’s choreographic abilities, but felt that his works were still successful because of his consummate skill in balancing all of the aspects of his work. Barnes suggests that the dance almost plays a supporting role, assisting in the cohesion of the performance along with the music, lighting, and other elements. This approach to presenting choreography encapsulated Nikolais’s ideals about decentralization upon which his theory of dance and choreography had been built. The elements of Nikolais’s productions worked together seamlessly as one complete vision.

In general, Martha Graham and José Limón were also trying to present one seamless vision to the audience through their choreographic works. There is, however, one key difference in the emphasis that was placed upon the varied theatrical elements found within their productions. All elements were, of course, important to them, but the dance movement was meant to be the main focus of every work. As the choreographers and most often the star dancers, both Graham and Limón ultimately produced cohesive works that enabled all theatrical elements to work together to support the choreography that incontrovertibly showcased the dancing abilities of themselves and their dancers.

Utilizing the postmodern idea of random juxtaposition, the Judson Dance Theater created disjointed works of art, in which the separate elements often deliberately did not have anything to do with each other. In Robert Rauschenberg’s Pelican, for example, a female dancer wearing pointe shoes is partnered by two men on roller skates. The choreographer may have been commenting that dancing on pointe and roller-skating were equally valuable forms of movement that could be considered as art. This line of thought is supported by Sally Banes when she states that the work of the Judson artists was often created to achieve a “demystification of the ballet or modern dance mystique—bringing high-art dance back home, so to speak” (Banes 1993, 91). Rauschenberg succeeded in presenting an art form that had long been labeled elitist as an activity that could be considered more relevant and understandable to the common person.

Although Pelican represents an excellent example of the random juxtaposition found within the works presented by the Judson Dance Theater, not all of their dances adhered to that structure. The various choreographers sometimes worked in the same vein, but not identically, and they could often be as meticulous in their crafting as
Nikolais tended to be—it merely depended upon the approach that the individual artist chose to use for a particular project. An excellent example of precise and deliberate crafting of dance can be found in Steve Paxton’s *Satisfyin’ Lover* from 1967. One of his many dances to feature walking, *Satisfyin’ Lover* has a distinct pattern of walking, pausing, and sitting that each dancer must follow as they move across the stage from one side to the other. The piece was performed with various numbers of people who were split into six groups, each person with a distinct pattern of movement. Each group proceeded across the stage based upon their written directions with short intervals occurring between each one. For example, in Group D the first dancer walked across the stage and the second started when the first had taken twenty steps and then walked to center stage, paused for five seconds, walked the rest of the way across the stage, paused for fifteen seconds, and exited. The third dancer in the group entered when the second paused and then walked all the way across the stage (Banes 1987, 71-74). Paxton meticulously timed out the instructions so that distinct patterns would emerge as the dancers walked, stood, and sat at different intervals. While the movement is pedestrian and not as elaborate as Nikolais’s, Paxton nonetheless created a piece that required precise timing from the dancers in order to be effective. Precision was something Nikolais required, not just for the visual effect that the movement would create, but for the coordination of the other production elements that were prevalent in his dances.

Nikolais was not a transitional figure between traditional modern dance and the postmodern movement in the same sense that Cunningham was because by facilitating the classes that were taught by Robert Dunn at his studio, Cunningham helped pass on some of the radical approaches that he and his partner, John Cage, were championing at the time. Moreover, these classes supported innovative explorations that went well beyond his own; and, in addition, younger artists like Steve Paxton danced in Cunningham's company before they set out in their own directions. Nikolais's transitional role was less direct. During the 1960s and 1970s, he could be looked to as an exemplar of the shifting purpose of modern dance from an art form that unwaveringly presented expressive dance movement as *the* central experience in a performance to an art form that melded choreography into a total theatrical environment where audiences could be bombarded with light, sound, *and* movement. He wanted to bestow unique
experiences upon his audiences, introducing them to his world of kaleidoscopic images. His imagination led him to distort reality in the service of the fantastic, and as a result, he created some of the most striking visual images that had ever been seen in dance theater.

Alwin Nikolais was an artist whose ability to single-handedly conceive and create all aspects of his dance theater set him apart from his contemporaries of the 1960s. As a result, he conceived some of the most striking visual images ever created in concert dance. Nikolais combined the visual stimulation of motion with theatrical production elements that allowed a whole new world to be developed. He created a fantastical journey for the audience bombarding them with visions found only in his imagination. Nikolais’s innovative ability to contort reality was the main thing that set him apart as a choreographer and he developed a wide range of effects within his productions to achieve this end. For instance, his electronic music provided a unique and intriguing background because it was, in the 1960s, a new sound, an aural experience that few had had the opportunity to encounter. All of his technical elements worked together and, along with the movement, created a total theatrical product that was Nikolais’s alone.

Another aspect of Nikolais's work that makes him--in his own way--a transitional figure is his use of costuming to create androgynous beings whose relationships were not determined by the traditional gender roles that had dominated so much of the mainstream dance of the time. No doubt, Nikolais's homosexuality influenced his adamant refusal to incorporate the emotional and dramatic implications of male/female relationships into his work. But at the same time, he belonged to a generation of artists who had not yet begun addressing their alternative sexuality through their art. This direction would later be pursued by artists like Bill T. Jones and Ron Brown. However, by excluding the imperatives of gendered relationships and narrative that had dominated the works of artists such as Graham and Limon, Nikolais helped pave the way for other artists to explore a wider array of human relationships in their works. Also, the fact that he, for the most part, did not distinguish between the movement he assigned his female and male dancers was another break with tradition that pointed in the direction of postmodern practices.

Over the next decade, Nikolais continued to explore the possibilities that could exist in the midst of the eclectic array of theatrical elements. Later examples of his
experimentation can be found in pieces like *Gallery* (1978) and *Crucible* (1985). Both of these dances reflected his continuing desire to push the envelope through experimentation with all aspects of the production. *Gallery* is set in a shooting gallery and it begins with the targets being lifted from behind a barrier on the stage. These targets respond to musical cues that sound like shots and fall as they are hit, recovering each time to be targeted once more. The round disks are soon replaced by the dancers’ heads as the targets and they respond to the sound of shots in the same manner. The heads seem to float onstage as the rest of the dancers’ bodies are hidden causing a disjointed image for the viewer. Nikolais created this effect with the use of face paint that glowed under a black light. His integration of this new lighting technology assisted in producing a unique illusion and allowed Nikolais to continue to promote the fantastical through lighting design.

*Gallery* is also an example of Nikolais’s tendency toward comedy that he displayed from time to time. His more irreverent works featured movement and situations that mocked the deadly seriousness of many of the traditional modern dance choreographers. These were the same choreographers who, during the early days of modern dance, fought for their art to be appreciated as a “high art” form like classical music or serious theater. For Nikolais to explore farcical possibilities in modern dance was a definite departure from the attitudes of those who had struggled to legitimize the art form in the face of its detractors. This is not to say that he considered his dance to be anything but art. Even the comic relief that was present in his dances was there for a purpose and, like his other elements, part of his one complete vision. His dances turned comedic often through a synchronization of the movement with certain sounds in the accompaniment. Through a collision of music and the often-quirky motions of the dancers, Nikolais achieved a facetious result with his choreography. The humorous floating head is an excellent example and another can be found in some of the sections of his 1963 dance, *Imago*. At several points in the work the idiosyncratic movements of the group of dancers in their brightly colored fabric bags coincided with the musical accompaniment to produce whimsical images.
While not comical like *Gallery*, *Crucible* also creates the same disjointed feeling through its capricious movement and set. This dance features the dancers performing behind a mirror that is laid parallel to the stage on an angle pointing upward. The first glimpse the audience gets of the performers is of their fingers and hands as they peek over the top of the mirror. Since most of the dancer is hidden and the finger is reflected in the mirror so that a symmetrical object appears, the viewer is challenged to figure out what they are actually seeing. As more of the dancers’ bodies are revealed the answer becomes apparent, however, throughout the course of the piece the body is continuously abstracted so that the parts are difficult to distinguish. The bodies morph from unknown creatures into human forms and back again. Aided in this transformation by the lighting and projections, the choreography keeps the viewers questioning what exactly they are seeing. The disguising effect is not provided by the costumes, which are nude colored and revealing of the dancers’ bodies; all the transformation is achieved through the placement of the mirror and the lighting and projections thrown onto the stage. By continuing his experimentation with lighting techniques and the fantasies that they can create, Nikolais’s pieces from the 1970s and 1980s furthered the practices he established in the 1950s and 1960s.
Nikolais’s legacy from the 1960s, while visible in his later work, can also be seen in many artists currently working in the dance field. By furthering the ideas about how light and projection can be used onstage, he made a substantial contribution to the development of a new direction in concert dance—dance technology. His techniques have been expanded and refined by many of those who are currently experimenting with technology in their choreographic works. For example, the duo Bridgman/Packard Dance made up of Myrna Packard and Art Bridgman specialize in creating illusions within their choreography. They project images upon the dancers and the stage, magically achieving a quartet that is made up of a live Bridgman and Packard dancing along with a previously recorded version of themselves. Several of their pieces feature this use of real time, delayed, or prerecorded projected video images, mainly Under the Skin from 2005 and Memory Bank which premiered in 2007.

Nikolais's legacy that continues to this day began with the unique place he carved out for himself during the 1960s. As mentioned before, he chose not to perform in his own works, staying instead on the sidelines so that he could commit all of his time and energy to perfecting his theatrical wizardry and controlling every aspect of his work. This choice also reflected his idea that the dancer/choreographer's ego did not have to dominate the stage by making him or herself the central focus of every dance. Ironically, by casting himself as the puppet-master who pulls all the strings, he could be thought of as the consummate egotist, obsessed with keeping a tight rein on the various aspects of his world. It was, however, a magical world, created by an artist who synthesized movement, light, and sound into a mesmerizing theatrical spectacle. Though he was
often accused of "dehumanizing" his dancers, perhaps the best response to this criticism is that the over-riding trajectory of his work was guided by a most human element—human imagination.
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ADDITIONAL MATERIALS


Glenn, Tim, former dancer Nikolais and Murray Louis Dance Company. Interview by author, 13 June 2007. Florida State University, Tallahassee.


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Beth Perry was born and raised outside of Detroit, Michigan. She earned her BA in History with a Specialization in Dance from Michigan State University. While at MSU she performed with the Dance Repertory Company, Orchesis, and in the MSU School of Music’s production of Orpheus and The Underworld. She was also on the executive board for Orchesis, the student dance group. After graduation Ms. Perry taught at several dance studios and after school programs in and around Detroit while working for the Detroit Historical Museum. She performed for two years with MoreDances Contemporary Dance Company based in Troy, Michigan and also in Bravo, Bravo! an annual fundraiser for the Detroit Opera House. Ms. Perry received her MA in American Dance Studies at Florida State University. While at FSU she performed in Days of Dance and represented the Dance Department at the annual ACDFA conference. She also taught classes for non-major students and at a local Tallahassee studio. Ms. Perry is continuing to work in the dance field through arts education.