**Dudley, Jane (b. 3 April 1912, New York City; d. 19 September 2001, London)**

**Summary**

Jane Dudley was a key figure in the radical dance movement of the 1930s, a choreographer who developed her own distinctive voice within the modern dance idiom and an educator who trained numerous dancers both in the United States and in England. An early member of the New Dance Group (NDG), she oversaw the creation of group works such as *Strike* (1934), while choreographing solos such as *Time is Money* (1934), in which she used the modern dance idiom to embody a worker’s oppression on the assembly line. A striking performer, Dudley joined the Martha Graham company in the mid-1930s. At the same time, she continued to develop her own repertoire, in part through the Dudley-Maslow-Bales Trio, whose founders – Sophie Maslow, William Bales and herself – remained committed to the social ideals of the 1930s long after they had abandoned the making of overtly political works. Dudley’s loyalty to NDG extended over several decades during which it became a major New York training venue, offering inexpensive classes and professional training to promising students, including many African Americans.  From 1970 to 2000, Dudley directed the London School of Contemporary Dance, transforming this into one of Europe’s leading modern dance institutions.

**Training**

Dudley began dancing at the Walden School, a progressive day school in New York City based on the writings of Henry Thoreau and ideas of civil disobedience. Her professional training began in 1931 at the Mary Wigman School in New York, where she absorbed Hanya Holm’s interpretation of German *Ausdruckstanz* (the expressive dance form associated with Wigman), and took classes in technique, improvisation and dance history. In 1935 she continued her movement studies with Martha Graham.

**Contributions to the Field and Modernism**

Inspired by the devastation of the Depression and her ties to leftist artists in theatre, music, writing, film and photography, Dudley joined the New Dance Group in 1934. A ‘choreographic collective’ which experimented with agitprop based on social realism and representational gesture, NDG produced dance works originating in classes which combined technique, improvisation on political themes and Marxist readings. Students included both workers and aspiring professionals. Using both types of dancers, Dudley directed group works using narrative choreography with everyday movements intended to inspire revolution.

Critics had defined ‘modern dance’ as movement derived from the ‘inner compulsion’ of the individual. To succeed, the choreographer had to create the expression of a ‘universal’ human emotion through abstraction. Dudley’s early works protested workers’ oppression while addressing the corrupting influence of society on the individual. Both as a dancer and a choreographer, she remained committed to technical skill and craft, and the signature roles she created during her years with the Graham company attested to her artistic mastery. Her most important roles in Graham’s choreographic works included *Letter to the World* (1940), with poetry by Emily Dickinson, and one of the three female leads in *Deaths and Entrances* (1943), inspired by the lives of the Brontë sisters. During that period, she choreographed her signature solo, *Harmonica Breakdown* (1938), which protested the exploitation of African-American sharecroppers and was set to the music of blues harmonica player Sonny Terry.

In 1942, Dudley co-founded the Dudley-Maslow-Bales Trio, which presented new choreography using modern dance technique. She retained her dedication to both modern dance principles and the power of cooperative work. With the trio, Dudley choreographed and performed political works which protested racial discrimination in the United States and fascism abroad, as well as celebratory Americana works which used fables and comedy, such as *As Poor Richard Says* (1943) and *Furlough: A Boardwalk Episode* (1945), about the soldiers and women engaged in the war effort. Between 1950 and 1966, Dudley served as President of the New Dance Group, nurturing a new generation of choreographers and presenting them in concerts on Broadway. Although the group’s radical ideology was muted during the Cold War, one of these concerts featured Mary Anthony’s *The Devil in Massachusetts* (1952), which protested McCarthyism. During the 1940s and 1950s Dudley not only continued to choreograph but also pursued an active career as a master teacher at the Neighborhood Playhouse, American Dance Festival, Teachers College (Columbia University) and Bennington College. In 1967 she became Artistic Director of the Batsheva Dance Company in Israel, where she taught classes, set modern dance repertoire and led the company on its first successful international tours.

**Legacy**

Beginning in 1970, when Dudley became Director of the London School of Contemporary Dance, the centre of her professional activities shifted to Europe. In the next three decades she moulded the school into a leading institution for modern dance in Europe and a seminal force in the emergence of revisionist choreographic practices in Britain during the 1980s and 1990s, contributing to the creation of what has come to be known as ‘contemporary dance’. She took part in performances which challenged the age boundaries of the performing body and, until the end of her career, remained committed to political theatre, portraying Mother Courage in Richard Gaines’ 1978 dance adaptation of Bertolt Brecht’s *Mother Courage and Her Children* (1938). In the 1990s she created an evening of her selected work, *Dates* (1996), and was the subject of two BBC television films, *Harmonica Breakdown: Speaking About the Dance* (1994) and *Dancing Inside* (1999), both of which featured her choreography.

**Selected List of Works**

*In the Life of a Worker* (1934)

*Strike* (1934)

*Time is Money* (1934)

*Middle Class Portraits* (1935)

*Songs of Protest* (1936)

*Under the Swastika* (1937)

*My Body, My Carcass* (1937)

*Song for a Soviet Youth Day* (1937)

*Jazz Lyric* (1938)

*Harmonica Breakdown* (1938)

*Ballad of Molly Pitcher* (1939)

*Adolescence* (1940)

*Skatter-brain* (1941)

*The Kiss of Judas* (1941)

*Pavane* (1941)

*Short Story* (1942)

*As Poor Richard Says* (with Sophie Maslow) (1943)

*Swing Your Lady* (1944)

*New World A Comin’* (1945)

*Furlough: A Boardwalk Episode* (with William Bales) (1945)

*Cante Flamenco* (1946)

*The Lonely Ones* (1946)

*Ballads for Dancers* (1946)

*Vagary* (1949)

*Passional* (1950)

*Family Portrait* (1953)

*Haiku* (1965)

*Five Characters and Conclusion* (1978)

*Bird as Prophet* (1983)

*Proverbs* (1988)

*After the Ark* (1990)

*Dancing Inside* (1999)

**References and Further Reading**

Franko, M. (1995) *Dancing Modernism/Performing Politics*, Bloomington:

Indiana University Press. (Franko considers the aesthetics of political dance in the 1930s and how this influenced the development of American ‘modern dance’. Using performance theory, he explores cross-fertilisation amongst genres to analyse choreography within the context of the era’s broader culture.)

Garafola, L. (ed.) (1994) *Of, By, and For the People: Dancing on the Left in the 1930s.* Studies in Dance History 5 (1). Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

(This edited volume includes articles on politics and dance in the 1930s and as well as a collection of articles by the dance critic Edna Ocko.)

Geduld, V. P. (2008) ‘Performing Communism in the American Dance: Culture, Politics, and the New Dance Group’, *American Communist History* 7 (1): 39-65. (This article argues that the origins of the early New Dance Group can be linked directly to the Communist Party of the United States of America, traces the group’s history through its integration into the mainstream dance community and considers the implications of the early communist ties during the Cold War and McCarthyism.)

Graff, E. (1997) *Stepping Left: Dance and Politics in New York City,1928-1942*, Durham: Duke University Press. (Graff uncovers the radical roots of modern dance and describes the Depression-era demands for social change by artists, including dancers. She focuses both on revolutionary dancers who explored modern dance whilst using the new language to express leftist political beliefs and on high-art dancers who later sought to conceal their earlier political commitments.)

Prickett, S. (1989) ‘From Workers' Dance to New Dance’, *Dance Research* 7 (1): 47-64. (Prickett demonstrates how dancers more deeply committed to politics than to the creation of a new dance form became transformed into a group dedicated both to political expression and to the aesthetic of modern dance.)

Rosen, B. (ed.) (2000) *The New Dance Group: Movement for a Change*, London: Routledge. (This edited volume contains articles by scholars as well as interviews and roundtable discussions with dancers and choreographers active in the making of the New Dance Group.)

**Moving Image Material**

*Dancing Inside* (1999) An APT Film and Television Production. (This programme originally aired on BBC Television.)

*Harmonica Breakdown: Speaking About the Dance* (1994) A Singh Production for the Arts Council of England. (This programme originally aired on BBC Television.)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ybvHgFUCuPo> (Part I). <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O1C7uMMfLqY> (Part II).

*New Dance Group Gala Historic Concert 1930’s-1970’s* (1993)

American Dance Guild. (Includes a performance of Dudley’s *Time is Money* and an interview with the choreographer.)

*Time is Money*. Exhibition webcast, Library of Congress. Historic Dance Theatre. http://www.360fullcircle.net/repertory.html

**Exhibitions**

*Politics and the Dancing Body* (2012) Washington, DC: Library of Congress. <http://myloc.gov/Exhibitions/politics-and-dance>

*Dance is a Weapon* (2008-10) Pantin, France: Centre national de la danse. (Exhibition catalogue in French.)

**Archives**

The Jane Dudley Collection, Library of Congress, Music Division, Washington, DC.

Dudley, Jane. Oral history. Bennington Summer School of the Dance Project. Columbia Center for Oral History, Columbia University Libraries, New York, NY.

**Photographs**

*Harmonica Breakdown* (1938). Photograph by Barbara Morgan. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division.

For permission, contact:

Lloyd Morgan

The Barbara Morgan Archives

45 Dorchester Avenue

Hastings on Hudson, NY 10706

Fax: 914-478-0132

*Under the Swastika* (1937). No copyright and available through the Library of Congress (http://myloc.gov/exhibitions/politics-and-dance/pages/slobjectlist.aspx)

*Jane Dudley during her period with Hanya Holm, early 1930s.* Photograph by Leo Hurwitz. Collection T. Hurwitz.

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*Jane Dudley in ‘Harmonica Breakdown’, 1942.* Photograph by Barbara Morgan. Collection T. Hurwitz.

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45 Dorchester Avenue

Hastings on Hudson, NY 10706

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*Jane Dudley in the mid-1930s.* Photograph by Holmes Studio. Collection T. Hurwitz.

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Tom Hurwitz

116 Pinehurst Avenue

New York, N.Y. 10033

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*Jane Dudley in ‘Cante Flamenco’.* Photograph by Barbara Morgan. Collection T. Hurwitz.

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Hastings on Hudson, NY 10706

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*Jane Dudley in ‘New World A Comin’, 1945.* Photograph by Barbara Morgan. Collection T. Hurwitz.

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*Jane Dudley at Bennington College with the Martha Graham company, mid-1930s.* Photograph by Leo Hurwitz. Collection T. Hurwitz.

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*Martha Graham (left), Jane Dudley and Erick Hawkins in Graham’s ‘Letter to the World’, ca. 1940.*  Photograph by Barbara Morgan. Collection T. Hurwitz.

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*Jane Dudley in the role of Mother Courage in ‘The Brood’,* choreographed by Richard Kuch, 1967*.* Collection T. Hurwitz.

Source: Tom Hurwitz, 116 Pinehurst Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10033; [tomhurwitz@tomh.com](mailto:tomhurwitz@tomh.com)

*Jane Dudley teaching at The Place, London School of Contemporary Dance, early 1980s*. Photograph by Wolfgang Suschitzky. Collection T. Hurwitz.

Source: Tom Hurwitz, 116 Pinehurst Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10033; [tomhurwitz@tomh.com](mailto:tomhurwitz@tomh.com)

*Jane Dudley teaching at The Place, London School of Contemporary Dance, late 1970s.* Photograph by Wolfgang Suschitzky. Collection T. Hurwitz.

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*Jane Dudley in the late 1980s.* Photograph by Wolfgang Suschitzky. Collection T. Hurwitz.

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Victoria Phillips Geduld