**Taylor, Paul (b. July 29, 1930, Edgewood, Pennsylvania)**

**Summary**

American choreographer Paul Taylor has made important contributions to dance modernism and postmodernism. His early choreography aligned him ideologically with New York’s avant-garde, most particularly with visual artist Robert Rauschenberg who designed all but one of Taylor’s dances through the 1950s. The work was ‘objectivist’ in that it privileged action over emotion and it presaged the more radical deconstructions of the Judson Church choreographers by almost a decade. Though some of his subsequent choreography used more traditional modes of representation, the majority of Taylor’s dance-making has been essentially non-narrative. He has created over 140 works across six decades, and his large active repertory is a rich source for rethinking definitions of dance ‘isms’.

**Training and early career**

Taylor came to dance late in life, while studying painting at Syracuse University (1949-1952). He created his first choreography, *Hobo Ballet*, for the university’s modern dance club before he had begun formal dance training. He was also a member of the Syracuse swim team and this elite athleticism would subsequently characterize both Taylor’s dancing and choreographic style. He transferred to the Juilliard School in New York at the end of his junior year and soon befriended several of the Black Mountain College artists, including Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns. Taylor’s main teachers at Juilliard were Margaret Craske, Louis Horst, Doris Humphrey and Antony Tudor, and he took additional ballet classes with Craske and Tudor at the Metropolitan Opera House.

Taylor became a founding member of the Merce Cunningham Dance Company in 1953 but left the following year to pursue his own choreography. His first professional work, *Jack and the Beanstalk*, was performed at the Henry Street Playhouse on May 30, 1954, which is also the date from which the Paul Taylor Dance Company takes its starting-point. By the early 1960s, he had created more than thirty dances and his company was touring extensively in the United States and Europe. His musical choices ranged from eighteenth-century Baroque scores to contemporary commissions by Morton Feldman, John Herbert McDowell and Clarence Jackson; his designers included the visual artists Alex Katz, Ellsworth Kelly, John Rawlings and Rouben Ter-Artunian. During the same period, Taylor performed as a soloist with the Martha Graham Dance Company (1955-1962) and with the New York City Ballet in George Balanchine’s *Episodes* (1959). The success of *Aureol*e at the 1962 American Dance Festival persuaded him to form a year-round company and to focus exclusively on his own choreography.

**Major contributions to the field and to modernism**

Taylor sought to distance himself stylistically from Martha Graham, most particularly from the expressivity of her mid-century choreography. His early work challenged audience expectations through its ‘aesthetics of indifference’[[1]](#endnote-1) and the dancers’ ‘relative lack of interaction’.[[2]](#endnote-2) A pivotal concert was *Seven New Dances* (1957), comprising solos, duets and trios choreographed by Taylor for himself and four women. In these seven dances, he explored different categories of posture and gesture, juxtaposed with stillness in order to discover his ABCs of choreography.[[3]](#endnote-3)

Subsequent works incorporated ‘scribbles’, which Taylor compared to action painting: ‘The idea is to see action rather than shape or line’.[[4]](#endnote-4) By the early 1960s, his body-led scribbling had developed into long, seamless travelling sequences, often at incredibly fast speeds. *Junction* (1961) contains some of Taylor’s most extended and legible scribbles, while *Aureole* (1962) alternates between sweeping, space-devouring travelling and slow, sculptural movements in place. At its premiere, *Aureole* was described as a ‘white ballet’ because of its focus on dancing and simple design elements.[[5]](#endnote-5) The timing of *Aureole*’s premiere—five months after Taylor’s farewell performances in Graham’s mythological opus, *Phaedra*, and a month following the debut of Judson Dance Theater—is also significant because it disrupts the standard narrative of American modern and postmodern dance. In that narrative, Judson Dance Theater represents a sharp break between modern and postmodern dance. But Taylor’s career reveals a more complex narrative of the overlap and coexistence of modern and postmodern dance, even within the work of a single choreographer.

The development of Taylor’s aesthetic and career can be divided into four different phases or periods. In his first period during the 1950s, the plurality of his work derived from the peripatetic nature of his experiences as a young dancer-choreographer and from his search for a distinct signature style. In contrast, the establishment of a full-time company in 1962 opened up new choreographic possibilities and permanencies. In his second period from 1962 to 1974, his dances increased in scale, complexity and theatricality, and included the hour-long *Orbs* (1966) to Beethoven’s last string quartets and his first evening-length work, *American Genesis* (1973). Taylor’s retirement from performing in 1974 initiated new choreographic processes and a new company identity—his third period. From this point on, he accompanied the company on tour only occasionally, spending long periods at home listening to music and envisioning his next new work. Thus he became distanced from his dancers, both geographically and generationally, as he watched his choreography evolve, from the outside, as it were, from his perspective as an audience member at performances. *Esplanade* (1975) established this new choreographer-company relationship. It was created over several weeks during which Taylor directed his dancers in various movement experiments based upon walking, running, falling and sliding, and these were eventually set to sections of J.S. Bach’s ‘Violin Concerto #2 in E major' and `Double Concerto in D minor'. In its pedestrianism, *Esplanade* recalls *Seven New Dances*—and Judson Dance Theater—but the overarching structure is musically-inspired and the performance demands are virtuosic.

By the early 1990s, a new musical interest—popular songs from different time periods—resulted in a series of works structured in suite form, which became characteristic of his fourth period. *Company B* (1991), created for the Houston Ballet to Andrews Sisters songs from the 1940s, began this new artistic phase. *Company B* also started a trend of classical ballet companies commissioning new works from Taylor, for example, *Black Tuesday* (2001) for American Ballet Theatre, *In the Beginning* (2003) for Houston Ballet, *Spring Rounds* (2006) and *Changes* (2008) for the San Francisco Ballet. *Black Tuesday* and *Changes* are in suite form, respectively to songs from the Depression era and the Mamas and Papas, but neither is a story ballet reflecting the situations suggested by the songs. Instead, both works appeal to classically-trained dancers because of their technical rigour and intricate rhythmic structures rather than mimesis.

Not all of Taylor’s choreography fits easily within an objectivist frame. Several works—most notably *Big Bertha* (1970), *Le Sacre du Printemps (The Rehearsal)* (1980), *Speaking in Tongues* (1988), and *De Suenos* (2007)—feature clearly-identifiable characters and themes, while other works—such as *Private Domain* (1969), *Churchyard* (1969), *Last Look* (1985), and *The Word* (1998)—offer ominous reflections on social and religious dystopias.

**Legacy**

Taylor’s large active repertory is central to his legacy. Since 1993, a second smaller company, Taylor 2, has amplified the reach of national and international touring by the Paul Taylor Dance Company. Former company members teach Taylor’s style and repertoire at the school affiliated with his company in New York, thereby fostering a deeper understanding of his signature style and disseminating it more widely. Taylor’s most notable works, such as *Aureole*, are also performed by other dance companies.

In 2014, Taylor announced a new initiative to mark the company’s sixtieth anniversary, broadening ‘its mission to include past masterworks of modern dance and works of contemporary choreographers in addition to [his] oeuvre’.[[6]](#endnote-6) Taylor’s studio has been reimagined as a centre for modern dance, and the inaugural season of Paul Taylor’s American Modern Dance in 2015 presented two new works by the choreographer, along with works from his repertoire, in addition to the Limon Dance Company performing Doris Humphrey’s *Passacaglia and Fugue in C Minor* (1938) and Shen Wei Dance Arts performing Shen’s *Rite of* *Spring* (2003).

Although Taylor’s aesthetic is predominantly formalist because of its privileging of movement over other choreographic concerns, the stylistic paradoxes in certain works demonstrate how difficult and undesirable it is to pigeon-hole any choreographer. Perhaps Taylor’s greatest legacy is in demonstrating, through sixty years of dance-making, that different versions of modernism are at play, both philosophically and historically.

**Angela Kane**

**Selected works**

*Jack and the Beanstalk* (1954)

*3 Epitaphs* (1956)

*Seven New Dances* (1957)

*Fibres* (1961)

*Insects and Heroes* (1961)

*Junction* (1961)

*Aureole* (1962)

*Scudorama* (1963)

*From Sea to Shining Sea* (1965)

*Orbs* (1966)

*Churchyard* (1969)

*Big Bertha* (1970)

*American Genesis* (1973)

*Esplanade* (1975)

*Airs* (1978)

*Le Sacre du Printemps (The Rehearsal)* (1980)

*Arden Court* (1981)

*Roses* (1985)

*Last Look* (1985)

*Musical Offering* (1986)

*Brandenburgs* (1988)

*Speaking in Tongues* (1988)

*Company B* (1991)

*Spindrift* (1993)

*Eventide* (1997)

*Piazzolla Caldera* (1997)

*The Word* (1998)

*Black Tuesday* (2001)

*Promethean Fire* (2002)

*De Suenos* (2007)

*Beloved Renegade* (2008)

*Also Playing* (2009)

*To Make Crops Grow* (2012)

*Sea Lark* (2014)

**Artist’s Writings**

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**Paratextual illustrations**

Paul Taylor in *Aureole* (1962) Photo: Jack Mitchell

<http://www.artsjournal.com/dancebeat/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/ptslide_last.jpg>

Paul Taylor Dance Company *in Esplanade* (1975) photo: Paul B. Goode

<http://paulbgoode.com/journal/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Taylor_3813_blog.jpg>

Paul Taylor Dance Company in *Company B* (1991) Photo: Andrea Mohin

<http://graphics8.nytimes.com/images/2010/06/11/arts/11brahmsspan-1/11brahmsspan-1-articleLarge.jpg>

1. M. Franko (1995) *Dancing Modernism/Performing Politics*, 81. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. R. Kowal (2010) *How to do Things with Dance: Performing Change in Postwar America*, 176. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. P. Taylor (1987) *Private Domain*, 76-78. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Qtd. in S.J. Cohen (1966) *The Modern Dance: Seven Statements of Belief,* 99. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. A. Hughes (1962) ‘Dance: Debut of *Aureole*, a Modern “White Ballet”, *New York Times*, August 6. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. M. Cooper (2014) ‘Legacy in Mind, Taylor Plans a Center for Modern Dance, *New York Times*, February 9. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)