**Barrett, Cynthia (b. 25 December 1921, Toronto, Canada; d. 1 October 2006, Toronto, Canada)**

**Summary**

Choreographer, teacher, and dance artist Cynthia Barrett was part of a circle of modern dance artists in Toronto. She established her own company in Toronto, and for a short while directed the Neo Dance Theatre (later to become the New Dance Theatre under Nancy Lima Dent), for which she choreographed *Song of David*, which was performed at the Second Canadian Ballet Festival in 1949. While a self-professed ballet dancer, she looked towards modern themes, music, and aesthetics, including the plight of Jewish people during the Second World War in her *Child Refugee: I Don’t See No Butterflies* (1944), as well as local social histories in *Canadiana* (1946) and *Eskimo Dances* (1946). During the mid-1960s, she began using a group of dancers including Peter Randazzo, David Earle, and Patricia Beatty, who would eventually become the founders of Toronto Dance Theatre.

**Life and Training**

Cynthia Vita Barrett was born in Toronto, Ontario. Her future interest in modern dance was sparked by a concert her mother had attended at Toronto’s Royal Alexandra Theatre in 1928, featuring renowned modern dance artist Mary Wigman – a performance her mother referred to as ‘the miracle of the modern age’. Soon after, Barrett began studying dance, including tap, toe-dancing, Scottish and Irish folk dances. In 1934, Barrett began taking classes with Saida Gerrard, who had studied at the Wigman School in New York with Hanya Holm, and had trained in Dalcroze Eurhythmics. She also studied with Marion Hobday. In 1936, the young dancer studied dance at the Workers Educational Association (WEA), an organization that offered educational programming and non-credit university classes to working class individuals. It was at the WEA that Barrett took a course with Frieda Flier (then a Martha Graham company dancer), before heading to New York City in 1938, where she took classes at the Martha Graham School and studied composition with Louis Horst. Submerging herself in the US dance scene, Barrett also studied with Doris Humphrey, Charles Weidman, and Benjamin Zemach.

Upon her return to Toronto, Barrett taught dance classes at the WEA before receiving a WEA-sponsored Carnegie Scholarship in 1940, and then again in 1941, to attend the Bennington College School of Dance summer schools in Vermont. During this period, she also lectured at the University of Toronto’s School for Social Studies on dance methodology and ‘primitive’ dance. In 1941, she formed her own school at the Hashomair Hatzair and the United Jewish People’s Order. Subsequently, her dancers performed across Toronto in various venues, including the Royal Ontario Museum, Eaton Auditorium, and the Heliconian Club of Toronto.

In 1943, Barrett gained commercial performance experience when she was hired by Agnes de Mille to perform in the Broadway musical *One Touch of* Venus (which ran from 1943 to 1945), starring Mary Martin and John Boles.

**Contributions to Dance and Modernism**

In her works, Barrett explored a variety of socially and politically conscious themes. For instance, in 1942, she created *‘The People, Yes!’* inspired by the Carl Sandburg poem of the same title. In *Child Refugee: I Don’t See No Butterflies* (1944), Barrett brought to the stage the plight of the young victims of Nazi Germany’s concentration camps, a contemplative work influenced by her identity as a Jewish-Canadian. *The Swallow Book* (1946), a choreographic work based on Ernst Toller’s poem of the same name, explored the constraints of war on individual freedom while combining text and dance. In 1946, she explored and celebrated Canadian culture and history in *Canadiana*. That same year she incorporated anthropological knowledge of Inuit culture in *Eskimo Dances*. Barrett's interest in international collaboration was not restricted to theme alone: she choreographed a work titled *Ballad For Americans* (1941), a ballet accompanied by American singer and civil rights activist Paul Robeson's anthem of the same name; the piece explored the slavery of African Americans in the United States.

Bennett also co-founded the Neo Classical Dance Theatre Group (or Neo Dance Theatre, and later renamed the New Dance Theatre under the direction of Nancy Lima Dent), which performed her work *Song of David* (1949) at the Second Canadian Ballet Festival. Later, she staged and choreographed several works for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation’s (CBC) television department.

**Legacy**

Barrett is connected to the lineage of Toronto Dance Theatre (TDT), a Graham-technique company. Barrett’s last choreographic work was *Heritage* (1967), which she created for the debut performance of Patricia Beatty’s New Dance Group of Canada. Shortly after this performance, Beatty co-founded TDT with Peter Randazzo and David Earle, two other dancers who had studied with Barrett.

**Selected Choreographic Works**

*Ballad for Americans* (1941) with the music of Paul Robeson, Earl Robinson, and John Latouche

*Stages in Adolescence* (1941)

*‘The People, Yes!’* (1942)

*Song of David* (1949)

*Child Refugee: I Don’t See No Butterflies* (1944)

*Canadiana* (1946)

*Eskimo Dances* (1946)

*Awakening* (1947)

*Spring Thaw* (1957)

*Mesiras Nefesh* (1965)

*Heritage* (1967)

**Selected Choreographies for CBC Television Programs**

*The Big Review* (1953)

*On Stage* (1954)

*The Barris Beat* (1957)

*Moonlight Bay* (1957)

**Archives**

Cynthia Barett Oral Histories, Dance Collection Danse Archives, Toronto.

Cynthia Barrett Vertical Files, Dance Collection Danse Archives, Toronto.

Dance Collection Danse Press/es, 'Cynthia Barrett', *Pages in History* Online Exhibit, Toronto: Dance Collection Danse. http://www.dcd.ca/pih/cbarrett.html.

**Photo Credits *(digital photographs sent in separate files)***

1. [Photo #201] Cynthia Barrett, date unknown. Courtesy of Dance Collection Danse Archives.
2. [Photo #202] Cynthia Barrett, c. 1946 in *Canadiana*. Courtesy of Dance Collection Danse Archives.
3. [Photo #203] Cynthia Barrett, c. 1946 researching Inuit culture for *Eskimo Dances*. Courtesy of Dance Collection Danse Archives.
4. [Photo #204] Photograph of designer Hilday Denny and Cynthia Barrett (1946). Courtesy of Dance Collection Danse Archives.

**References and Further Reading**

Kaiser, P. (2000) 'Cynthia Barrett', *Encyclopedia of Theatre Dance in Canada/Encyclopédie de la Danse Théâtrale au Canada*, Toronto: Dance Collection Danse Press/es: 65-68.

Kaiser, P. (1991) 'Cynthia Barrett: Forgotten Trailblazer', *Performing Arts & Entertainment in Canada* (Winter): 10-11.

Lindgren, A. (2005) ‘Contextualizing Choreography: Cynthia Barrett’s *Eskimo Dances* and National Identity in Post-War Canada’, *The Dance Current* 8 (2): 40-42.