**Atkinson, Madge (b. 16 February 1885, Manchester, England; d. 19 February 1970, London, England)**

**Summary**

A dancer, choreographer, educator and writer, Madge Atkinson worked during the second and third decades of the twentieth century on the development of the dance form known as Natural Movement. Based in Manchester, she was active in the theatre, presented her own choreographic work from her studio, established a school and taught widely. Atkinson was concerned with the systematic development of skill and artistry, based on an extension of the natural functions of the human body. Her work was disseminated nationally and internationally through the teaching of graded syllabi and the craft of choreography. She made a significant contribution to dance in the early twentieth century through her role as a female artist and her privileging of a holistic but skilled approach to movement from which evolved a new dance language. In accord with the ethos of the times but in her own unique way, she constructed and contested the concept of the ‘natural’ in theatre dance.

**Training and Background**

Atkinson studied with Annea Spong, a London-based teacher inspired by the work of Raymond Duncan. Dalcroze’s eurhythmics also interested Atkinson, and she combined these influences in her own system for which she adopted Spong’s term of Natural Movement. Atkinson focussed on the relationship between movement, music and artistic expression. She aimed to redress the significant lack of a systematic approach to the development of physical and artistic skills in the work of Isadora Duncan and other proponents of ‘natural’ or similarly ascribed dance forms. Atkinson established her own School of Natural Movement in 1918. Throughout the 1920s, she devised the dances for theatre productions at the Gaiety Theatre in Manchester, produced her own choreographic work (for which she devised a basic system of notation) and taught extensively in the health and education sectors. The importance of her work in the north-west of England allows for a more regionalist approach to the study of dance, thus expanding its traditional centralist focus on London.

**Contributions to the Field and to Modernism**

In 1936, Atkinson moved her school to London, and in 1944 she was instrumental in co- founding the first teacher training college in dance, the London College of Dance and Drama. Her theatre work did not survive much past the Second World War, and she gradually withdrew from active teaching. However, Atkinson continued to oversee the Natural Movement syllabus work, which, offered under the auspices of the Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing, influenced the education of dancers both in Britain and internationally.

Although Atkinson predicated her ideas on the basic functions of the human body such as walking, running and jumping, and retained the principles of feet placed in the direction of the movement, an oppositional stance of the limbs and bodily harmony through balance and co-ordination, she extended these concepts to a sophisticated degree. Improvisation was a part of her class work, but her choreography, which addressed themes not only from nature, myth and legend but also from contemporary topics and music visualisation, was carefully crafted. Her studio costumes, as well as the costumes for many of her theatre works, were simple tunics of varying lengths which retained the dignity of the body but left it unencumbered. For performances, sets and props were sparse, a strategy informed by stylistic and economic imperatives. Response to music, in its structure and qualities, was and is still central to Natural Movement. In all of Atkinson’s work, ideas of the natural were transformed by an aesthetic sensitivity and by artistic skill.

Indebted to the neo-classical concepts of grace and harmony, the music of the Romantics and the flowing lines of Art Nouveau, Atkinson did not see her own dance vocabulary as stylistically ‘modern’ when compared with that of American modern dance. However, like other women dance artists who worked in the early to mid-twentieth century, she rejected an unmediated flowing of ‘inner’ emotion to ‘outer’ bodily movement and created a new dance language based on a rational approach to expressivity in dancing and dance making. Allied with emancipatory movements such as dress reform, she allowed women to have a more knowing and overt relationship with their bodies in the public domains of stage and studio. Atkinson’s work is situated on the cusp of the neo-romanticism of the nineteenth century and the modernity of the twentieth. As such, she is one of the lesser-known artists who contributed to the destabilisation of the solidity of Modernism as both a period and a style.

**Legacy**

Although confined primarily to the private sector, Atkinson’s codified system enabled the coherent transmission of dance in education. Natural Movement is now far less extensively taught, but there is renewed interest in the work of Atkinson and her British contemporaries. The archives of the Natural Movement Group and the National Resource Centre for Dance at the University of Surrey provide a plethora of evidence of its importance. Reconstructions of Atkinson’s choreographic work by former students, supported by Atkinson’s own notation and visual sources, are now being preserved in digital media as a record of the time when artists constructed the natural for the modern age in the art of dance.

**Selected List of Works (dates approximate)**

*Moon Maiden* (1917-34)

*Pastorale* (c.1919-39)

*Fingal's Cave* (c. 1925)

*Bacchanale* (1926)

*Spirit of the Bush Fire* (1926)

*The Legend of Daphne and Apollo* (c. 1931-33)

*Soaring* (c. 1933)

*Wind Tossed* (1935-38)

*Toil* (1936)

*Largo* (1938-49)

**References and Further Reading**

Alter, J.B. (1994) *Dancing and Mixed Media: Early Twentieth-Century Modern Dance Theory in Text and Photography*, New York: Peter Lang. (A useful extrapolation and comparison of principles and practice of earlytwentieth-century dance artists and pedagogues)

Carter, A. and Fensham, R. (eds.) (2011) *Dancing Naturally: Nature, Neo-classicism and Modernity in Early Twentieth Century Dance*, Basingstoke: Palgrave. (An edited collection of eleven contributions on how ‘the natural’ informed the development of modern dance in the early twentieth century in the US, UK, Europe and Australia. See, particularly, Fensham’s Chapter 7 on ‘Undressing and Dressing Up: Natural Movement’s Life in Costume’, and the excerpts from Atkinson’s manuscript ‘Dancing Based on Natural Movement’.)

Churchill, E., Griffiths, L. and Roberts, H. (2009) ‘The National Resource Centre for Dance, University of Surrey’, *Dance Chronicle*, 32 (3): 490-98. (A description of the *Pioneer Women: Early British Modern Dancers* project and the associated archival holdings, which include substantial material on Atkinson and Natural Movement)

**Manuscript Sources and Online Resources**

A substantial archive of Madge Atkinson/Natural Movement material is held at the National Resource Centre for Dance (NRCD), University of Surrey. The online descriptive catalogue of the archive collection including some images, can be accessed via the NRCD Archive website <http://www.surrey.ac.uk/library/nrcd/archives/>.

The Digital Dance Archives website ([www.dance-archives.ac.uk](http://www.dance-archives.ac.uk)) holds a selection of images taken from the above archive.

**Moving Image Material**

A DVD of reconstructions by the Natural Movement Group, reconstructed by Jean Kelly and Jacqueline Ferguson, filmed and edited by James Hudson (Hudson Pictures) can be obtained from James W. Hudson.  email   [www.jameshudsonfilms.com](http://www.jameshudsonfilms.com/)

**Paratextual Sources**

The Madge Atkinson Dancers in *Toil* at a matinee given by the Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing at the London Palladium on Saturday, 21 November 1936. Photograph by Guttenberg Ltd. (NRCD reference: NM/F/2/23/1)

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