**Martin, John (b. 2 June 1893, Louisville, Kentucky; d. 19 May 1985, Saratoga, New York)**

**Summary**

One of the first full-time newspaper dance reviewers in the United States, John Martin wrote for the *New York Times* from 1927 to 1962 and was often referred to as the dean of American dance critics during his thirty-five year tenure. Martin used his bully pulpit at the *Times* to launch a discourse within the dance community surrounding the aesthetics of modernism in dance as well as to educate and rally a new audience. In the process he helped to establish dance reviewing as a specialized field of arts reporting and commentary and not just a sub-genre of music criticism, as it had been treated before 1927. A vocal defender of the legitimacy of an American modern dance as defined by New York-based practitioners such as Martha Graham and Doris Humphrey, Martin was among the first theorists of the form, outlining a poetics of its form and function while introducing a new vocabulary. His prolific output includes thousands of essays and reviews for the *Times* and other periodicals, seven books, and a series of highly influential lectures given at the New School for Social Research, Bennington School of the Dance, and in the latter part of his career at the University of California-Los Angeles.

**Early Career**

John Martin moved to New York City in 1918, intending to pursue a career in theatre after several years of serious violin study at the Chicago Conservatory of Music. Over the next eight years he worked at a variety of industry jobs, including a stint as the executive director of Richard Boleslavsky’s Laboratory Theatre. There he was introduced to Stanislavsky’s acting system and the idea of internal psychological motivation, a concept that later influenced his thinking on the dramatic potential of dance. In November 1927 Martin was hired as a freelance dance columnist by *Times* music critic Olin Downes, who was looking for someone to cover the burgeoning concert dance field; a year later his post was upgraded to a full-time staff position as the paper’s dance critic. Along with the two other two full-time dance critics of the era (Lucille March at the *New York World* and Mary F. Watkins at the *New York Herald Tribune*), Martin advanced concert dance in New York City, establishing his Sunday column as a nerve center for the developing field and rejecting traditional standards of journalistic objectivity in favour of a prescriptive and often proactive methodology. Writing directly to and for the dance community, he offered a weekly events listing, advice to dancers on everything from performance etiquette to how to produce a concert season, and advocacy on a number of issues affecting the dance industry.

Martin made his particular mark by focusing on audience reception and the role of the viewer in the meaning making process. Writing for the general public, he used his columns, lectures and books to ‘open the people’s eyes to the fact that here was something worth looking into’.[[1]](#endnote-1) His strong relationship with the audience, as teacher and guide, helped to establish a dedicated constituency for concert dance in New York City and in regional cities across the United States, where as the voice of the *New York Times* his opinion carried considerable weight. Many dancers acknowledged that Martin’s approval allowed them to acquire bookings and to successfully launch road tours.

**Theory of Dance Modernism**

As a theorist for the emerging genre of American modern dance, Martin defined and codified the advance of modernist principles in American concert dance. (Martin understood ‘American’ as a combination of influences that blended to create new traditions in the United States.) Between 1927 and 1939 his reviews, lectures, essays and books diagrammed the emerging form, helping to establish aesthetic principles and terminology to support a new level of discourse. In *Introduction to the Dance* (1939), he appropriated and redeployed the ancient concept of metakinesis: ‘Not only does the dancer employ movement to express his ideas, but, strange as it may seem, the spectator must also employ movement in order to respond to the dancer’s intention and understand what he is trying to convey’ (31). Of particular interest in these early years was the nature of abstraction across the arts of modernism: for Martin, the modern dancing body had the capacity to distort reality and thus to move closer to the ‘essence of experience’.[[2]](#endnote-2) The angular vocabulary of Martha Graham was particularly appealing to Martin; he saw in her abstraction of the breath cycle (which she referred to as contraction and release) a style that ‘has much in common with modern painting and sculpture’.[[3]](#endnote-3) Martin continued to wrestle with defining the contours of modernism as he eventually broadened his attention to other genres, notably the modernist turn that American ballet took after George Balanchine launched his tenure at the New York City Ballet.

Martin’s position of power, his ideas and attitudes did not go without challenge in his time and since. In the late 1930s the writer and impresario Lincoln Kirstein charged him with having had a detrimental effect on the development of an American ballet because of a perceived anti-ballet bias.[[4]](#endnote-4) And in recent years a number of critics have confronted Martin’s belief that innate qualities of racial heritage make certain genres, in his words, ‘inappropriate’[[5]](#endnote-5) for some dancers. Though Martin enthusiastically supported the choreography of African-American modernists such as Katherine Dunham and Pearl Primus, he criticized Tally Beatty for dancing in a balletic manner and discouraged the young dancer’s experimentation with hybrid forms.

**Legacy**

Martin’s legacy remains considerable; without question his theories of dance in a modernist context played a key role in establishing the aesthetic legitimacy of American concert dance. And over the course of his four-decade career his dance advocacy helped to change the arts ecology in the United States, perhaps most notably in his call for government subsidy of the arts, a cause he wrote about frequently and with considerable fervor twenty years before the establishment of the National Endowment for the Arts in 1965.

**Lynne Conner**

**Critical Writings**

Martin, J. (1933) *The Modern Dance*, New York: A.S. Barnes.

------ (1936) *America Dancing*, New York: Dodge Publishing Co.

------ (1939) *Introduction to the Dance*, New York: W.W. Norton.

------ (1946) *The Dance*, New York: Tudor Publishing Co.

------ (1952) *World Book of Modern Ballet*, Cleveland: World Publishing Co.

------ (1963) *John Martin’s Book of the Dance*, New York: Tudor Publishing Co.

------ (1977) *Ruth Page: An Intimate Biography,* New York: Marcel Dekker.

**References and Further Reading**

# Burke, S. (n.d.) ‘Rejecting Artifice, Advancing Art: The Dance Criticism of John Martin’, *CJAS: The Columbia Journal of American Studies.* http://www.columbia.edu/cu/cjas/dance1.html

Conner, L. (1997) *Spreading the Gospel of the Modern Dance: Newspaper Dance Criticism in the United States, 1850-1934*, Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.

Harris, A. (2012) ‘Gendered Discourses in American Ballet at Mid-Century: Ruth Page on the Periphery’, *Dance Chronicle* 35: 30–53.

Hering, D. (1952) ‘Meet John Martin’, *Dance Magazine* 26 (11): 21-23, 38-39, 45.

Terry, W. (1956) ‘Walter Terry Interviews John Martin: An Information Discussion of the Role and Opinions of a Newspaper Dance Critic’, *Dance Magazine* 30 (1): 36-39, 66, 68-69.

**Paratexts**

Links to Martin’s early *New York Times* reviews and columns that connect with issues referenced in the exposition. Suggested items include:

* “The Dance: Growth of the Movie Theatre Ballet.” November 27, 1927, Section 9, p. 12. (Martin’s first *Times* column.)
* “Graham Dance Recital.” February 13, 1928. P. 17. (Martin’s first substantive review of Martha Graham’s choreography.)
* “The Dance: A Need for Trained Audiences.” November 11, 1928 (Section 10, p. 11)
* “Ill Considered Programs and Premature Debuts on the Concert Stage.” March 3, 1928 (Section 8, p. 8)
* “The Dance: A Language.” November 28, 1930. (Section 9, p. 4.)
* “The Dance: A Vermont Experiment.” August 26, 1934 (Section 10, p. 2.)
* “The Dance: Ballet Debut.” February 24, 1935 (Section 8, p. 10.) Martin’s first Sunday column on Balanchine and Kirstein’s American Ballet (the first iteration of the School of American Ballet professional company).

Sound Recordings:

* Audio Tape: “John Martin Reception at New York Public Library Dance Collection.” Lincoln Kirstein comments on time, criticism, creativity and **John Martin’s career. John Martin** then explains how he became a dance critic. Sound recording housed at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts/Research Collections. Call No.: MGZTC 3-444.
* Audio Tape: “John Martin Memorial.” Anna Kisselgoff serves as master of ceremonies for the **John Martin** Memorial program held at the Library and Museum for the Performing Arts. The featured speakers are Martha Hill, Lincoln Kirstein, Hanya Holm, Hortense Calisher and Murray Louis. Julia Levien speaks from the audience at the end of the program. Recorded 10 June 1985 in the Bruno Walter Auditorium at the Library and Museum for the Performing Arts, New York City. Sound recording housed at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts/Research Collections. Call No.: MGZTC 3-882.

Notes

1. W. Terry (1956) ‘Walter Terry Interviews John Martin: An Information Discussion of the Role and Opinions of a Newspaper Dance Critic’, *Dance Magazine* 30 (1): 38. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. J. Martin (1968) *America Dancing: The Background and Personalities of the Modern Dance*, New York: Dance Horizons, 114. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. J. Martin (1931) ‘Primitive Mysteries’, *New York Times*, Section 10, 4, quoted in L. Conner (1997) *Spreading the Gospel of the Modern Dance: Newspaper Dance Criticism in the United States, 1850-1934*, Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 130. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. L. Kirstein (1937) *Blast at Ballet*, reprinted in L. Kirstein (1983) *Ballet: Bias* *and Belief*, New York: Dance Horizons. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. J. Martin (1963) *John Martin’s Book of the Dance*, New York: Tudor Publishing Co., 189. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)