**Donald McKayle (b. 6 July 1930, New York City –)**

**Summary**

In the mid-twentieth century, Donald McKayle became known for creating powerful modern dance works dealing with contemporary African-American experiences. He also helped break down colour barriers in the United States, first as a black dancer working in white modern dance companies, then as a choreographer and director of an interracial dance troupe, and finally as a choreographer of Broadway shows, television programs, and films. McKayle began his professional career in the late 1940s as a dancer with the New Dance Group. He then formed his own company, which he directed while continuing to dance with other major choreographers during much of the 1950s. By the end of the 1960s, McKayle was spending an increasing amount of time on the United States’ West Coast as well as creating choreography internationally in modern dance, ballet, and popular entertainment. From 1989 to 2010, he was a professor of dance at the University of California, Irvine.

**Training and Early Career**

Donald McKayle, the son of Jamaican immigrants to the United States, was born in New York City in 1930. A high school friend who was taking classes at the New Dance Group invited McKayle to a concert by Pearl Primus, one of the school’s teachers. The experience impressed McKayle so much that he auditioned for the New Dance Group’s school, where he was accepted on scholarship in 1947. By the next year, he was beginning to perform with the New Dance Group’s concert arm. The New Dance Group was one of the few racially integrated dance institutions in the United States at the time. One of the works in which McKayle appeared as a member of the New Dance Group was Sophie Maslow’s *The Village I Knew* (1950), a piece set in a Russian Jewish shtetl.

More than a decade later, McKayle commented on how leading dance reviewers criticized choreographers like Maslow for casting black dancers in their works ‘with no prejudgment because of color’. Influenced by the civil rights movement of the 1960s, McKayle commented, ‘It was perfectly all right for white performers to be orientals, Negroes, or just anything the convention of the work asked for—but for Negroes, unthinkable and lacking in “theatrical verisimilitude”.’ (‘The Negro Dancer in Our Time’, 191) Throughout his career, McKayle countered such narrow views of race.

**Concert Choreography**

The first public performance of McKayle’s choreography was a solo, *Saturday’s Child* (1948), set to a poem by Countee Cullen that dealt with a person discarded by society. McKayle spoke the poem while he danced. His first major choreographic success was *Games* (1951), which he made for a racially diverse group of dancers that would soon become Donald McKayle and Company. The work was inspired by the kinds of children’s games he had been exposed to as a boy in Harlem. The piece includes a political element in the appearance of a white cop who terrifies the children, and represents fear and power in the community. Among his other early modern dance works were *Her Name was Harriet* (1952, recreated in 1956), based on the life of Harriet Tubman, and *Nocturne* (1952), set to a score by Moondog, an itinerant blind musician McKayle met on the streets of New York City.

In addition to making works for his company, McKayle was in wide demand as a dancer, appearing with the companies of Anna Sokolow, Martha Graham, Merce Cunningham, and others. A generation earlier, it is doubtful that McKayle could have performed with white modern dance groups. During the years McKayle was performing with these choreographers, he also appeared on TV and in Broadway shows, including *West Side Story* (1957).

In 1959, McKayle created *Rainbow ’Round My Shoulder*, now considered a modern dance classic. It was set to anonymous chain gang songs and expressed the memories, hopes, and fantasies of the prisoners who did hard labour on roads and quarries. The title of the piece referred to the curved shape of the picks prisoners used for breaking rock. The eight-member cast included one woman, who appears as a dream-like figure to the men, variously representing a wife, mother, or lover. Reality intrudes in the form of an attempted escape in which oneof the men is shot and killed. The songs, with their percussive rhythm, were originally created to reflect and aid the men’s work. For this work, McKayle created choreography with a driving force, which embodied the rhythms of the men’s physical labour. Like *Games*, *Rainbow ’Round My Shoulder* pointed to aspects of discrimination and brutality in American life, but by creating these dances for an racially integrated group, McKayle brought a narrative based on specifically African-American issues into the perceived realm of universal experience, a key element of modernism at the time.

*District Storyville* (1962), another of McKayle’s important works, is centered on the development of jazz in New Orleans. In 1963, McKayle made two more large-scale pieces for his company, *Blood of the Lamb*, inspired by James Baldwin’s 1953 novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain,* and *Arena*, which dealt with the bull-leaping religious ritual of ancient Crete.

**Turning Toward Bigger Stages**

Like several modern dance choreographers before him, including Hanya Holm and Helen Tamiris, McKayle found his career moving toward working on Broadway. In 1964, he created the choreography for *Golden Boy*, which starred Sammy Davis, Jr. as a boxer who falls in love with a white girl. This was McKayle’s first Broadway hit. It was followed by numerous Broadway and London shows for which he worked as choreographer. McKayle helped break more racial barriers when he became both choreographer and director of *Raisin* (1974)*, Dr. Jazz* (1975), and *The Last Minstrel Show* (1978), joining a rare group of choreographer/directors of Broadway musicals.

McKayle spent much of the 1970s in Hollywood, working in films and television. From 1970 to 1974, he also headed the Inner City Repertory Dance Company in Los Angeles, for which he made works such as *Sojourn* (1971), *Songs of the Disinherited* (1972), and *Barrio* (1974). In the 1980s and 1990s he made dances for ballet and modern dance companies, including the Batsheva Dance Company of Israel, the Alvin Ailey Repertory Ensemble, and San Francisco Ballet. In addition to his choreography, McKayle taught at many institutions and schools throughout his career. He held an endowed chair in dance at the University of California, Irvine from 1991 until his retirement in 2010.

**Legacy**

McKayle’s modernist legacy lies in opening up career options and opportunities formerly closed to black artists as well as in creating works that brought African-American experience into the mainstream of modern dance. Yet, as much as McKayle has dedicated himself to African-American themes, he refuses to be categorized solely as a ‘black’ choreographer. His work has ranged from the ancient Cretan ritual of *Arena,* to the Walt Disney film *Bedknobs and Broomsticks* (1971) set in postwar London, to the Peter and Edward Hall production of the ten-hour *Tantalus* (2000), which chronicles the Trojan War. In the course of pushing beyond racial boundaries, McKayle has insisted that black artists have the same freedom as whites to pursue subject matter and genres that are not limited by race.

**Gay Morris**

**Selected Works**

Abbreviations

DM: Donald McKayle

DM &C: Donald McKayle and Company

ICRDC: Inner City Repertory Dance Company

UCI: University of California, Irvine

*Saturday’s Child* (1948 Donald McKayle)

*Creole Afternoon* (1950 DM and Jacqueline Hairston)

*Songs of the Forest* (1950 DM)

*Exodus* (1950 DM)

*Games* (1951 DM and group)

*Her Name was Harriet* (1952, recreated 1956 Donald McKayle & Company)

*Nocturne* (1953 DM & C)

*Four Vignettes* (1953 DM & C)

*The Street* (1954 DM & C)

*Prelude to Action* (1954 DM & C)

*Four Excursions* (1956 DM & C)

*Muse in the Mews* (1957 DM & C)

*Rainbow ‘Round My Shoulder* (1959 DM & C)

*They Called Her Moses* (1960 Camera Three-CBS TV)

*District Storyville* (1962 DM & C)

*Blood of the Lamb* (1963 DM & C)

*Arena* (1963 DM & C)

*Legendary Landscape* (1963 DM & C)

*Reflections in the Park* (1964 DM & C)

*Daughters in the Garden* (1964 Batsheva Dance Company)

*Golden Boy* (1964 Broadway Musical)

*Crosstown* (1964 DM & C)

*As You Like It, Antony and Cleopatra* (1964 New York Shakespeare Festival)

*Amahl and the Night Visitors* (1964 NBC-TV)

*Incantation* (1965 DM & C)

*Wilderness* (1965 DM & C)

*Burst of Fists* (1965 DM & C)

*A Time for Singing* (1966 Broadway Musical)

*Black New World* (1967 92nd Street Y, NET-TV)

*T.C.B.* (1968 Diana Ross and The Supremes, The Temptations, NBC-TV)

*Bill Cosby Special* (1968, NBC-TV)

*The Great White Hope* (1969, 20th Century Fox Film)

*Bedknobs and Broomsticks* (1970 Walt Disney Film)

*Sojourn* (1971 Inner City Repertory Dance Company)

*Migrations* (1972 ICRDC)

*Songs of the Disinherited* (1972 ICRDC)

*Raisin* (1974 Broadway Musical)

*Barrio* (1974 ICRCD)

*Dr. Jazz* (1975 Broadway Show)

*Album Leaves* (1976 Batsheva Dance Company))

*Blood Memories* (1976 Alvin Ailey Dance Company)

*Mountain of Spices* (1977 Batsheva Dance Company)

*Argot* (1977 Joyce Trisler Dance Company)

*The Last Minstral Show* (1978, Broadway Musical)

*Solaris* (1983 The Company We Keep)

*Collage* (1983 The Company We Keep)

*Avatar* (1984 San Antonio Ballet)

*Vever* (1985 Alvin Ailey Repertory Ensemble)

*Looking for Jerusalem* (Batsheva Dance Company)

*Beneath the Baobab* (1986 Dimensions Dance Theater)

*Apsaras* (1986 Cleo Parker Robinson Dance Ensemble)

*Ring-A-Levio* (1990 UCI Dance Ensemble)

*Distant Drum* (1990 African American Dance Ensemble)

*Sombra Y Sol* 1991 UCI Student Dance Ensemble)

*House of Tears* (1992 Cleveland San Jose Ballet)

*Mysteries and Raptures* (1993 Cleveland San Jose Ballet)

*Vigils* (199 UCI Dance Ensemble)

*Gumbo Ya-Ya* (1994 San Francisco Ballet)

*When I Grow Up…When I Was a Child* (UCI Dance Ensemble)

*Heartbeats* (1997 Jose Limon Dance Company)

*Delicious Obsession/Sweet Bondage* (1998 UCI Etude Ensemble)

*Supplication* (1998 American Repertory Dance Company)

*Danger Run* (1998 Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater)

*Children of the Passage* (1999 with Ronald K. Brown, Dayton Contemporary Dance Company)

*Death and Eros* (2000 Lula Washington Dance Theatre)

*Tantalus* (2000 Edward Hall, Sir Peter Hall, Denver Center Theater Company)

**Writings by McKayle**

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---- (2002) *Transcending Boundaries: My Dancing Life*, London: Routledge.

**References and Further Reading**

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Morris, G. (2006) *A Game for Dancers: Performing Modernism in the Postwar Years, 1945-1960*, Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.

Perpener, J. O. (2001) *African-American Concert Dance: The Harlem Renaissance and Beyond*, Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.

**Documentary**

D. McKayle (2005) *Donald McKayle: Heartbeats of a Dance Maker*, Princeton NJ: Dance Horizons.

**Paratextual Material**

<http://www.donaldmckayle.com/uploads/7/4/4/1/7441675/3208327_orig.jpg>

Donald McKayle and Carmen De Lavallade in *Rainbow ‘Round My Shoulder* (1959). Undated. Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<http://www.donaldmckayle.com/uploads/7/4/4/1/7441675/8505064_orig.jpg>

Donald McKayle in *Rainbow ‘Round My Shoulder* (1959). 1963. Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

*Rainbow ’Round My Shoulder* is included in the video *Dancing in the light* (2001), American Dance Festival Production, in association with Thirteen/WNET New York. Kultur Films, Inc.