**Shawn, Ted (b. 21 October, 1891, Kansas City, Missouri; d. 9 January, 1972, Orlando, Florida)**

**Summary**

The self-proclaimed ‘Father of American Dance’, Ted Shawn attained international prominence as a professional dancer and choreographer. Along with his wife Ruth St. Denis, Shawn founded Denishawn, the first U.S. modern dance company and school. In so doing, Shawn helped to establish dance as a theatrical art in the United States by emphasizing that dancing is a sacred, nationalist, and artistic form of human expression, thereby challenging prevailing attitudes that associated dancing with prostitution, social degeneracy, and commerce. He also led an artistic crusade to legitimize dance as a profession for men. Although he rejected the term ‘modern’ to describe his brand of theatrical dancing, he was essential to the development of modern dance in the United States in that he trained its pioneers Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, and Charles Weidman, as well as generations of modern dancers both at the Denishawn schools in the 1910s and 1920s and later at his University of the Dance at Jacob’s Pillow, a school and festival that continues today.

**From Primitivism to Modernism**

Born Edwin Myers Shawn, Ted studied theology at the University of Denver in preparation for becoming a Methodist minister. However, he was forced to leave the University when he contracted diphtheria and was temporarily paralyzed from the waist down. To regain his physical strength, he began to study dance, which redirected his life’s path away from the church and toward the theatre. In 1912, Shawn relocated to Los Angeles, where he began to teach and perform ballroom dancing. In 1913, he conceived of and choreographed the early dance film *Dances of the Ages*, which was produced by the Thomas A. Edison Company. The short film dramatizes the relationships between ‘primitive’ and ‘modern’ dancing, a tension that preoccupied Shawn throughout his career.

In 1914, Shawn moved to New York and met the international dance legend Ruth St. Denis. Within a few months the two married, formed a professional partnership, and founded Denishawn. Shawn directed the school and stewarded the company’s trailblazing domestic and international tours on the vaudeville and concert hall circuits, including a tour of South and East Asia in 1925-26. Shawn contributed to the company’s diverse repertory of interpretive dances based on Oriental themes, American historical pageantry, music visualizations, and ‘moving sculpture’. He was also among a small group of dance artists that travelled extensively in the early twentieth century. Wherever he travelled (Europe, India, Cuba, Africa, East Asia), he studied the vernacular, folk, or traditional dances of the region, which he interpreted in his modern dance compositions, an impulse shared among contemporary visual artists and musical composers associated with primitivism.

By 1930, Denishawn’s popularity had diminished, and although Shawn and St. Denis remained married for the rest of their lives, the couple separated on both professional and personal grounds. In 1931-32, Shawn performed in solo tours throughout Germany and Switzerland that were sponsored by Katherine S. Dreier, who along with visual artists Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray founded Société Anonyme, a modern art collective. During his tours Shawn was introduced to German modern dancers Mary Wigman and Kurt Jooss. Although Shawn claimed to have been unimpressed with German expressionism, he experimented with some of its defining stylistic and compositional devices, such as group tableaux, following his solo tours.

**Dance, Sexuality, and Modernism**

Upon his return stateside, Shawn appeared in the final Denishawn performances and then retreated to Jacob’s Pillow, a farm in the Berkshires of Massachusetts, where he transitioned into a new phase of his career: the formation of the all-male dance company Ted Shawn and His Men Dancers. During the winter months between 1933 and 1940, Shawn led a group of young men on concert tours throughout the Depression-era United States. Apart from Barton Mumaw, a former Denishawn dancer as well as Shawn’s muse and lover, few of the Men Dancers had any dance experience. Shawn trained them to perform in his modern interpretations of primitive rituals, sacred ceremonies, music visualizations, and athletic and martial spectacles. Appearing in high school and college auditoriums, town assembly halls, and small theatres across the country, the company brought modernism to Main Street by presenting avant-garde dances to audiences who had never before seen either theatrical dancing or men dancing together, much less in briefs and barefoot.

Shawn’s dances for his men’s group were informed by his personal and professional relationships with a group of scientists, intellectuals, and artists whose ideas contributed to the modern movement to depathologize homosexuality. Shawn corresponded with and twice met Havelock Ellis, the pioneer of the British eugenics movement and the co-author of the first English-language book about homosexuality. He also had influential relationships with homosexual British poet Edward Carpenter, who wrote impassioned defences of homosexuality and shared with Shawn his intimate knowledge about Walt Whitman, one of Shawn’s artistic inspirations. In 1933, Shawn developed a life-changing friendship with Lucien Price, an editor at the *Boston Globe* whose writings about art, society, and philosophy earned him the moniker the ‘Mentor to New England’. It was with Price’s encouragement that Shawn made the radical decision to form an all-male dance company. In 1945, Shawn began to correspond with Dr. Alfred Kinsey and participated in his controversial study of American sexual attitudes and behaviours. Shawn’s dances both influenced and were influenced by artists and scholars at the forefront of research in human sexuality.

**Shawn on Modern Dance**

Shawn did not use the term ‘modern dance’ to describe his choreography, since during the 1910s the term narrowly referred to ballroom dances against which he defined his emerging theatrical style. Even in the late 1920s and 1930s when modern dance came to index an expressive theatrical form of dancing, Shawn rejected the term, as it had come to imply a political and aesthetic break with Denishawn and its legacy.

In 1936 Shawn entered into the debates about the nature of American and modern dance as they had come to be defined by *New York Times* dance critic John Martin. In one particular editorial for the *Boston Herald*, Shawn outright rejected the political rhetoric of the modern dance movement (‘Shawn Refuses’). He aimed his critique at the New Dance Group, a company and school founded in 1932 to create dances related to class struggle. Shawn asserted that rather than create work with socialist allegiances, his men’s group was itself a social collective wherein all members owned everything in common – real estate, scenery, costumes, motor vehicles, as well as income from their teaching and performances – and received year-round living expenses, including housing, food, clothes, and medical and dental care. Moreover, Shawn believed that dance should project ideals of beauty, virtuosity, and harmony, and thus lamented the overtly political and nihilistic tendencies of the so-called ‘modern dance’ movement.

Shawn translated his critique of modern dance from page to the stage with *O, Libertad!: An American Saga in Three Acts* (1937), a dramatization of the history of the Americas from Montezuma to modernism. In a featured solo, Shawn appeared as a masked hag wearing a cloak emblazoned with a graph of the 1929 stock market crash. He thus obtusely satirized signature solos of both Mary Wigman (*Witch Dance*, 1926) and Martha Graham (*Lamentation*, 1930), both of whom had levelled criticism at the sentimental strains in Shawn's dances.

Although Shawn is widely considered a precursor to the modern dance movement in the United States, he conducted aesthetic experiments similar to his modern dance peers, especially in the dances he composed for his Men Dancers. He explored abstraction and expressionism, collaborated with modernist musical composers and visual artists, and drew upon myth and folklore as source material. He also made limited ventures into socially conscious themes in his dance works. Shawn never developed a distinctive physical vocabulary or dance technique. His dependence on ballet movement and Delsartean principles of gesture and pantomime is what most significantly distinguishes him from the later generation of choreographers who are more closely associated with modern dance. Shawn's significance to the development of modern dance is undeniable, as a choreographer, company director, educator, curator, and author.

**Paul A. Scolieri**

**Artist’s Writings**

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**Paratexts**

Images

[http://bit.ly/15HJs0P](http://bit.ly/15HJs0P" \t "_blank)

Ted Shawn in *Gnossienne* (1919).

Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts

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Ted Shawn in *Gnossienne* (1919).

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[http://bit.ly/14ZA9KN](http://bit.ly/14ZA9KN" \t "_blank)

Ted Shawn in *Palace Dance* (1916).

Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts

<http://photos.mycapture.com/BERK/287128/15223034E.jpg>

Ted Shawn and his Men Dancers

Berkshire Eagle

Video

*Jacob’s Pillow Dance Interactive.* <http://danceinteractive.jacobspillow.org>