**Edna Guy (b. 31 August 1907, Summit, New Jersey; d. 25 April 1983 Fort Worth, Texas)**

**Summary**

Edna Guy was a major figure in establishing African-American modern dance in the 1930s. Grounded in the technique of her mentor Ruth St. Denis, Guy was at the forefront of a movement that attempted to realize the ideals of the Harlem Renaissance in dance. Along with Hemsley Winfield, Alison Burroughs, and Charles Williams, she sought to elevate the image of Black people through their art. Particularly significant is her organization of the First Negro Dance Recital in America (1931) with Hemsley Winfield and the Negro Dance Evening (1937) with Alison Burroughs. Guy’s legacy is marked by her determination to, as she put it, ‘do beautiful’ as a Black woman,[[1]](#endnote-1) and create a space for Black representation within the modernist project.

**Early Artistic Development**

Edna Guy grew up an introverted and only child who found solace in reading and writing poetry, activities that remained a constant in her life. Little is known about her early dance training, except that, although of meager means, her parents were very supportive, and that she studied musical theatre dance with a Miss Linnel in Harlem. In 1924 Guy entered the Denishawn School of Dancing and Related Arts in New York City, two years after seeing St. Denis and her husband Ted Shawn perform in Greenwich Village. But by 1929, after nearly three years at the school and two years as St. Denis’s seamstress and maid, Guy’s increasing frustration with the racism at Denishawn, as well as what she perceived as St. Denis’ acquiescence by not allowing her to join the company, led to a rift between the two, although St. Denis would later provide substantial moral, artistic, and financial support.

**Major Contributions to the Field**

Guy’s first professional performances came in 1931, with an invitation to collaborate as the featured dancer with Hemsley Winfield, first at a benefit in Yonkers and then in New York, in a highly anticipated recital at the Chanin Building’s Theatre in the Clouds in Manhattan. This second evening was billed as The First Negro Dance Recital in America, a concert that became a significant milestone in the establishment of African-American modern dance. For the concert, Guy presented solo works influenced or choreographed by Ruth St. Denis, *Temple Offering* and *A Figure from Angkor ‘Vat*. In addition, she performed *Songs Without Words*, an abstract duet, choreographed with Hemsley Winfield, along with two danced spirituals--*Get on Board Little Chillun* and *Weeping Mary*.

In general, her performance in New York received positive responses from the mainstream press. In particular, Guy received a favorable notice from the critic John Martin, although he viewed her work associated with Black themes more appropriate than her St. Denis-like solos. Many scholars have pointed out that early responses to Black concert dance reveal a critical bias toward Black dancers by white critics as well as by members of the Black intelligentsia at the time.[[2]](#endnote-2)

Over the subsequent decade, Guy struggled to advance as a choreographer, creating works like *Madrassi Nautch*, fashioned after St. Denis’s portrayals of popular oriental street dances, as well as works inspired by Africanist themes, including *African Plastique*, *Gimme Yo’ Han’* and *Juba*. In 1932 and 1933 she presented programs of her works that featured female dancers, but was unable to sustain the company for very long. Whereas white modern dancers, such as Martha Graham and Hanya Holm, maintained all-female ensembles during the 1930s, Black modern dancers succeeded with predominantly male or mixed-sex companies.

In 1937 Guy and Alison Burroughs organized the Negro Dance Evening, which featured the works of Clarence Yates, Katherine Dunham, and Asadata Dafora. For the concert, Guy collaborated with Yates on a *Shout* for nine dancers and with Yates and Burroughs on a suite titled *Negro Songs of Protest* for six dancers. In addition, she performed her solo *After Gauguin*, and presented two more *Dance Spirituals*—*Do Don’t Toucha My Garment* and *Go Down Death*.

In winter 1937-38 Guy participated in the large-scale Dance International at Rockefeller Center, and she was also involved in the left-leaning American Dance Association. In 1938 she contributed an article to the association’s journal *Dance Herald* that outlined the accomplishments of the last decade in establishing ‘the Negro dancer…[as] an integral part in the developing American dance movement.’[[3]](#endnote-3)

Within a few years, however, marriage and declining health took her further from the modern dance field. Yet Guy’s legacy remains in the key role she played in establishing African-American modern dance during the 1930s—as a soloist, female choreographer, organizer, and advocate.

**Carl Paris**

**Selected List of Choreographic Works**

*Madrassi Nautch* (1931)

*A Figure from Angkor ‘Vat* (1931)

*Temple Offering* (1931)

*Get on Board Little Chillun* (1931)

*Weeping Mary* (1931)

*Song Without Words* (1931, with Hemsley Winfield)

*African Plastique* (1932)

*Luleta’s Dance* (1932)

*After Gauguin* (1932)

*Gimme Yo’ Han’* (1932)

*Juba* (1932)

*Woodcut Figurines* (1933)

*Swing Low* (1936)

*Shout* (1937, with Clarence Yates)

*Negro Songs of Protest* (1937, with Clarence Yates and Alison Burroughs)

*Do Don’t Toucha My Garment* (1937)

*Go Down Death* (1937)

**Writings by Artist**

Guy, E. (1938) ‘Negro Dance Pioneer,’ *Dance Herald* 1(5): 6

**References and Further Reading**

St. Denis, R. (1939) *Ruth St. Denis: An Unfinished Life,* New York: Harper.

Foulkes, J. (2002) *Modern Bodies: Dance and American Modernism from Martha Graham to Alvin Ailey,* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Manning, S. (2004) *Modern Dance Negro Dance: Race in Motion*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Nash, J. (1991) ‘Pioneers in Negro Concert Dance: 1931-1937,’ in *The Black Tradition in* *American Modern Dance*, ed. G. Myers, Durham: American Dance Festival.

Nicholson, J. M. (1984) ‘Three Black Pioneers in American Modern Dance 1931-1945: The Dance Careers of Hemsley Winfield, Edna Guy, and Wilson Williams,’ MA thesis, George Washington University.

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

**Visual Documentation**

Lacy, M.D. (2001) *Free to Dance,* coproduction of American Dance Festival and John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. Contextualizes Edna Guy within history of black modern dance.

**Suggested Paratex**

Announcement for 1934 concert titled, “Edna Guy, Negro Dancer with Group,” Archives of American Art.

<http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/images/detail/announcement-performance-edna-guy-and-her-group-10223>

Notes

1. From Guy’s letters to Ruth St. Denis, (Nov. 1924, Folder 749, Ruth St. Denis Collection, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts), cited in J. Foulkes (2002) *Modern Bodies Dance and American Modernism From Martha Graham To Alvin Ailey*, Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 24-25. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. S. Manning (2004) *Modern Dance Negro Dance: Race in Motion*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 30-38. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. E. Guy (1938) ‘Negro Dance Pioneer,’ *Dance Herald* 1(5): 6 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)