**Denishawn (1915-1931)**

**Summary**

Denishawn, a for-profit enterprise combining a school and dance company, was founded in Los Angeles in 1915 by the internationally acclaimed solo performer Ruth St. Denis and her husband, then up-and-coming dancer and choreographer Ted Shawn. Denishawn paved the way for modern dance in the United States by challenging American perceptions of dancing as a degenerate or immoral activity and presenting dance instead as a theatrical art. The company performed at private society events and women’s clubs, on vaudeville circuits, and eventually on legitimate concert stages, such as Carnegie Hall. In 1925–27, it became the first U.S. dance company to tour Asia, presenting dances to both colonial elites and local audiences. The Denishawn School of Dance and its Related Arts (and later satellites in New York and other major U.S. cities) trained generations of middle-class American adolescents, several of whom went on to become prominent modern dancers and choreographers, including Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, and Charles Weidman, as well as Hollywood choreographer Jack Cole. Moreover, many aspiring actresses enrolled at the Denishawn school to study the art of physical expression, several of whom later became silent film stars, including Dorothy and Lillian Gish, Margaret Loomis, and Louise Brooks.

**Contribution to the Field and to Modernism**

St. Denis and Shawn drew upon a myriad of modern intellectual, artistic, and social movements and discourses to distinguish their developing brand of theatrical dancing from the modern dancing associated with the ballroom dance craze in the 1910s, as well as from the avant-garde dance works produced for Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes. Building upon their training in Delsartism, St. Denis and Shawn espoused the notion that dancing cultivated social, spiritual, and physical harmony. A student of the nineteenth-century theosophy, St. Denis lent the Denishawn enterprise quotients of glamour and mysticism with her repertory of Orientalist dances. Shawn, a former theology student and an erstwhile practitioner of Christian Science, was similarly interested in religious dancing, as well as popular social dances of the early twentieth century. Both St. Denis and Shawn ascribed to the romantic nationalism evoked in the writings of nineteenth-century literary giants Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman. Shawn and St. Denis defined their form of theatrical dance as a distinctly American endeavour despite the wide-ranging cultural influences of the company’s repertory. Drawing upon the popular eugenics movement, St. Denis and Shawn promulgated the notion that dancing was a method of ‘race betterment’.

The Denishawn idea was also influenced by the arts and crafts movement, a Victorian social and aesthetic movement that used art to rebel against systems of mass production and modern industrialization. As with other leaders of arts and crafts communes, St. Denis and Shawn referred to Denishawn as a guild in an attempt to legitimate dancing as a profession. Inasmuch as Denishawn was an arts enterprise, it was a lucrative commercial empire. The school made money through tuition for dance classes and teacher education courses, as well as through an elaborate mail-order business that sold costume designs, choreographic notations, and accompanying piano rolls or musical recordings to local dancing schools.

These disparate influences resulted in an eclectic repertory of interpretive dances: music visualizations (in the style of Isadora Duncan), sacred, ethnic, and primitivist spectacles, and American and historic pageantry. Early Denishawn programs included a section of ‘modern dances’, which essentially consisted of light-hearted novelty routines, such as the ‘baseball dance’ or the ‘aloha waltz’, that satisfied an unbridled public obsession with ballroom dances, albeit with a decidedly artistic twist.

Denishawn’s artistic influence waned in the late 1920s, when a politically and socially conscious modern dance tradition crystallized in the United States. Modern dancers and critics, including former Denishawn dancers Graham and Humphrey, repudiated Denishawn’s Orientalist aesthetic. Moreover, early pangs of the Great Depression began to limit touring and teaching prospects, a dilemma compounded by the personal strife between St. Denis and Shawn, which effectively led to the dissolution of Denishawn by 1931.

**Paul A. Scolieri**

**Selected Writings by Artists**

St. Denis, R. and T. Shawn (eds.) (1924 – 1925) *The Denishawn Magazine: A Quarterly Review Devoted to the Art of the Dance* 1 (1-4).

**References and Further Reading**

Cohen, B. (1979) ‘The Franchising of Denishawn’, *Dance Data* 4: 1–47.

Schlundt, C. L. (1962) *The Professional Appearances of Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn: A Chronology and an Index of Dances 1906-1932*, New York: New York Public Library.

Sherman, J. (1976) *Soaring: The Diary and Letters of a Denishawn Dancer in the Far East, 1925-1926*, Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press.

----- (1979) *The Drama of Denishawn Dance*, Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press.

----- (1983) *Denishawn: The Enduring Influence*, Boston: Twayne.

**Moving Image Material**

*Denishawn Dances On!* Directed by Ron Honsa. West Long Branch: Kultur, 2002.

**Paratextual Materials**

Images

<http://images.nypl.org/index.php?id=den_0619v&t=w>

*The Egyptian Ballet* (1915) by Ted Shawn, performed by the first group of Denishawn Dancers. Left to right: Vanda Hoff, Florence Andrews (Florence O'Denishawn), Margaret Loomis, Carol Dempster, Ruth St. Denis, Ted Shawn, Chula Monzon, Claire Niles, Yvonne Sinnard, Ada Forman. Jerome Robbins Dance Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

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