**Gerrard, Saida (b. April 9, 1913 Toronto, Ontario, Canada; d. March 15, 2005, Los Angles, California, United States of America)**

**Summary**

Toronto-born Saida Gerrard was one of the first artists to import modern dance to Canada following study in the United States. Her early training included character dancing and Dalcroze Eurhythmics in Toronto, and in 1931 she moved to New York City to train at the newly opened Mary Wigman School, where she studied with Hanya Holm and Fe Alf. She later continued her training at the Martha Graham School and danced with Charles Weidman through the Federal Theater Project. Gerrard eventually settled in California where she continued to teach, choreograph and perform. From 1932-1936 Gerrard returned to Toronto for personal reasons and opened The Studio of Modern Dance, teaching adaptations of exercises in absolute dance (*Ausdruckstanz*) learned at the Wigman School. Her influence is seen through to the professionalization of modern dance in Toronto in the 1960s. Gerrard’s professional career blossomed during her return to Toronto. She performed her own work before crowds as large as 8,000 with the Toronto Symphony Orchestra, exposing many to modern dance for the first time. Her article/manifesto ‘The Dance’ explains the artistic and philosophical impetus behind the developing art form. She eventually returned to New York where there was an infrastructure to support a professional dance career which was not available in Canada at the time.

**Early Career**

Saida Gerrard was born in Toronto, Ontario, Canada to Russian immigrant parents Luba (Lillian) and Maurice Gerrard who had amateur interests in music. She gained early exposure to the performing arts through the Workman’s Circle Peretz School, a secular, arts-oriented program that focused on Jewish history and culture. At Workman’s Circle she studied character and interpretive dance with Nora Griffiths, Maude McCann and Amy Sternberg. Her early training also included classes in Dalcroze Eurhythmics with Madeleine Boss Lasserre at the Royal Conservatory of music. Recognizing the limits of Toronto’s undeveloped dance scene, Gerrard moved to New York City in 1931 where she studied on a full scholarship with Hanya Holm at the newly opened Mary Wigman School. She would continue her training with Fe Alf, Martha Graham, Louis Horst, Margaret Craske, and Hebraic dancer Benjamin Zemach.

**Contributions to the Field and to Modernism**

Following the death of her father in 1932, Gerrard returned to Toronto to help support her family during the depression. She opened her own school, the Studio of Modern Dance, and based her classes on the exercises and improvisations she learned at the Wigman School, though she strove to keep them unique. With Holm she studied absolute dance or *Ausdruckstanz*, the expression of feeling and emotion through movement. These aligned with and developed Gerrard’s own beliefs that dance could reflect contemporary times and act as both commentary and community builder. Gerrard was in New York when developing modern dance of both European and American streams (Graham, Humphrey) were aligned to different degrees with social action, socialism and communism. While she never had direct affiliations with any party, Gerrard considered herself a dance revolutionary – working against the so-called frivolity of classical ballet and vaudeville.

During her return to Toronto Gerrard began to perform professionally. In 1934 she appeared before an audience of 8,000 with the Toronto Symphony Orchestra (TSO) and in 1935 her works *Hunger* (1935), *Schwanda* (1935) and *Negro Spirituals* (1935) were performed at the TSO’s Promenade Symphony Concerts, a program series developed to build audiences through offering affordable prices. Reviews describe Gerrard’s dancing and choreography as exceptionally musical and her movement ranging from graceful to grotesque. Her performances would have provided many spectators with their first exposure to ‘new’ or modern dance. Her classes offered students something previously unavailable in Toronto, making her both a pioneer and advocate in Canada. Her influence can be traced through to the professionalization of modern dance in 1960s Toronto. Gerrard received substantial praise and media recognition. Her 1935 article/manifesto ‘The Dance’, which was published in *The Jewish Standard* was a response to the questions she was frequently asked about her approach to dance.

Despite her successes in Canada, Gerrard left for New York again in 1936, returning to Toronto to perform only a number of times, the last in 1949/1950 when she created dances for Max Helfman’s choral tone poem *Die Naye Hagode* (*The Glory of the Warsaw Ghetto*). Toronto simply did not have the infrastructure to support a professional dance career. Upon her return to New York she continued her training with Martha Graham and became involved with the Federal Theater Project (1935-1939). She danced with Charles Weidman through this initiative. In 1951 she and her musician husband Aube Tzerko turned down an offer to head up the dance and music departments at the Toronto Royal Conservatory of Music and instead moved to Los Angeles, California where she continued to teach, choreograph and perform. She died there in March 2005.

**Seika Boye**

**List of Works**

*The Sorcerer's Apprentice* (1934)

*Country Dance* (1934)

*Death and Transfiguration* (1935)

*Dance Suite - Songs of Unrest* (1935)

*Hunger* (1935)

*Negro Spirituals* (1935)

*Sea Shanties* (c. 1937)

*Waterfront Hornpipe* (c. 1937)

*The Machin*e (an ice ballet for the Toronto Skating Club, 1938)

*Fancy Fanny's Judgement Day* (1939)

*The Grapes of Wrath* (c. 1941)

*Hostages, 1942* (1942)

*Die Naye Hagodah (Glory of the Warsaw* Ghetto, 1949)

*The Lonesome Train* (1950)

*Hebraic Legend* (1950)

*Vig-Lid (Cradle Song)* (1950)

*Tapestry* (1956)

*Visions and Prophecies* (1956)

*The Unanswered Question* (1961)

*Ballads of Our Land* (1961)

*Ancestral Memories* (c. 1985)

*A Legend of Queen Sabbath* (c. 1985)

**References and Further Reading**

Boye, S. (2005) ‘Saida Gerrard 1913-2005: A time and a place’, *Dance Collection Danse Magazine* 60: 26-28.

Odom, S. (2004) ‘Music and Movement: The Overlapping Careers of Madeleine Boss Lasserre and Saida Gerrard’, *Canadian Dance: Visions and Stories*: 95-106.

----- (2000) ‘Saida Gerrard’, *The Encyclopedia of Theatre Dance in Canada/Encyclopédie de la danse théâtricale au Canada*: 222-224.

“Pages in History: Saida Gerrard,” Dance Collection Danse Archives Press/es, accessed January 22, 2012, http://www.dcd.ca/pih/saidagerrard.html.

**Live Links**

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