## Montreal Modern Dance Company (1952-1955)

**Summary**

The Montreal Modern Dance Company (1952-1955) founded by Lithuanian dancers Yoné Kvietys (1924-2011) and Birouté Nagys (1920—) who met while dancing in Montreal with the Wigman-influenced choreographer Ruth Sorel. The Montreal Modern Dance Company gave its first evening-length performance in early January 1954. The show was well received, as was their performance that same year at the sixth annual Canadian Ballet Festival. The company disbanded in 1955 when Kvietys moved to Toronto. Kvietys and Nagys would collaborate again several years later at the 1963 Canadian Modern Dance Festival when Kvietys invited Nagys to be a guest choreographer for her Toronto-based group, The Contemporary Dance Company.

**Contributions to the Field and to Modernism**

The Montreal Modern Dance Company was an important though short-lived collaborative project between Lithuanian émigrés Yoné Kvietys and Birouté Nagys. Though Kvietys and Nagys did not know each other before moving to Canada, they both had studied movement in Lithuania with Danuté Nasvytis, a dancer who trained at the Mary Wigman school in Germany.

When the Soviets entered Lithuania, Kvietys left for Germany where she attended the Laban Concert and Theatre Dance School in Hamburg before moving to Toronto in 1948. Nagys left Lithuania in 1941 to pursue her dance training in Vienna, Austria, where she studied with Rosalia Chladek, another Wigman-trained dancer. When Soviet representatives came looking for Nagys in Vienna, she fled, eventually moving to Montreal as a displaced person in 1948.

Kvietys and Nagys met while working in Montreal with dancer and choreographer, Ruth Sorel (1907-1974). Kvietys and Nagys soon began to choreograph together and, under the artistic direction of Kvietys, the two founded the Montreal Modern Dance Company in 1952, which gave its first evening-length performance on January 9, 1954, at the Gesu Theatre in Montreal. Of the fourteen new works Montreal Modern Dance Company mounted, *The Return* is (1954) perhaps its best known. With music by Russian composer Alexander Scriabin (1872-1915) and story by Kvietys, *The Return* tells the tale of a happy couple who become tormented when ‘The Man’ becomes consumed by thoughts of his previous wife. Nagys and Kvietys co-choreographed the work and performed in it as ‘The Woman’ and ‘The Returning One’ respectively, while former Ballets Jooss dancer Alexander MacDougall, who had also worked with Sorel, performed the role of ‘The Man’. Another work of note in this programme was *The Cycle*, later renamed *Manière de Commencement* (*Manner of Beginning* 1954). This piece depicts the ‘the eternal cycle of life and death’ and is set to the music of French composer Eric Satie (1866-1925). After watching a performance of *Manière de Commencement* at thesixth annual Canadian Ballet Festival in Toronto, Herbert Whittaker of *The Globe and Mail* praised the work for its ‘excellent use of the piano score by Satie and fine sense of movement in space […] dignity and form’.

As dance artists, Kvietys and Nagys were interested in improvisation. Believing modern dance to be a more expressive and creative medium than ballet, Kvietys believed that modern dance allowed the body to move more organically and highlight the personalities of the individual dancers performing it. Montreal Modern Dance Company was one of the first highly skilled groups dance groups in Montreal to dedicate itself to the production of modern dance works.

The company disbanded in 1955 just before Kvietys moved to Toronto where she founded The Contemporary Dance Company. Nagys remained in Montreal where she continued to teach and perform. The two would collaborate again several years later at the 1963 Canadian Modern Dance Festival when Kvietys invited Nagys as a guest choreographer to create the work *Evolutions* (1963) for Kvietys’ Toronto company.

**List of Works:**

*March* (Kvietys, 1954)

# Sarabande (Kvietys and Nagys, 1954)

*Three Etudes* (Nagys, 1954)

*I met Them in a Dream* (Kvietys and Nagys, 1954)

*Turn Dance* (Kvietys, 1954)

*Nordic Dance* (Kvietys and Nagys, 1954)

*Slavonic Dance* (Kvietys, 1954)

*Elegi* (Kvietys and Nagys, 1954)

*Dance in Red* (Kvietys and Nagys, 1954)

*Dark Vision* (Kvietys and Nagys, 1954)

*The Return* ( Kvietys and Nagys, 1954)

*Cycle* or *Manière de Commencement* (*Manner of Beginning*). (Kvietys and Nagys 1954)

# Sarabande and Toccata (Kvietys and Nagys, 1955)

*Visions de l’Amen* (*Visions of Amen*). (Kvietys and Nagys, 1955)

*Brazilian Dance* (Kvietys 1955)

*…And time is the Master* (Nagys, 1955)

**References and Further Reading:**

Doolittle, L. (2000) ‘Yoné Kvietys’, in *Encyclopedia of Theatre Dance in Canada*, Susan MacPherson (ed.). Toronto: Dance Collection Danse Press/Presse. (This article provides biographical information on the life of Yoné Kvietys).

Doolittle, L. and Flynn, A. (2000) ‘Dancing in a Canadian Wasteland: A Postcolonial Reading of Regionalism in the 1960s and 1970s’, in *Dancing Bodies, Living Histories: New Writings about Dance and Culture,* L. Doolittle and A. Flynn, (eds). Banff: Banff Center Press. (This article provides an in-depth look at Kvietys’s career in Calgary).

Lindgren, A. (2005) ‘Birouté Vaitkunaite Nagys: In Conversation’, *Dance Collection Danse* *Magazine* 59: 10-15. (This article documents an interview with Nagys in which the choreographer discusses her dance career).

Tembeck, I. (2000) ‘Birouté Nagys’, in *Encyclopedia of Theatre Dance in Canada*, Susan MacPherson (ed.). Toronto: Dance Collection Danse Press/Presse. (This article provides biographical information on the life of Birouté Nagys).

Tembeck, I. (1991) *Danser à Montréal: Germination d’une histoire chorégraphique*. Sillery, HQ: Presses de l’Université du Québec, 1991. [Translated and revised by the author as *Dancing in Montreal: Seeds of a Choreographic History*. Madison, WI: Society of Dance History Scholars, 1994.] (In this book, Tembeck gives a biography of Ruth Sorel while positioning her within, as well as her influence on, Montreal’s arts scene).

Wyman, M. (1989). *Dance Canada: An Illustrated History*. Vancouver: Douglas McIntyre. (This book outlines the history of dance in Canada and briefly discusses Kvietys’s influence on Canadian modern dance).

**Paratextual Information**

Alexander MacDougall, Yoné Kvietys, and Birouté Nagys (prostrate) in “Dark Vision” (1954). Wachnianyn Photography, courtesy of Alexander MacDougall. In Max Wyman’s *Dance Canada: An Illustrated History*. (Please see image below)

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