**Horton, Lester (b. 23 January 1906, Indianapolis, IN; d. 2 November 1953, Los Angeles, CA)**

Lester Horton is regarded as one of the founders of American modern dance. Working outside the established centre of New York City, he founded a permanent dance theatre in Los Angeles in 1946. The Lester Horton Dance Theater was a multi-disciplinary arts school for children and adults, offering training in all aspects of theatre production. The school and company were multiracial, a rarity at that time. Horton’s broad choreographic range allowed him to work in films and nightclubs and on the concert stage. His fascination with folklore, cultural history, and ethnic dance informed his diverse body of work, with themes ranging from the classics to melodrama, social commentary to satire. Working with his dancers, most especially Bella Lewitzky, he developed the Horton technique over two decades of classroom work. The Horton technique is still taught today in the U.S. and abroad. In addition to Lewitzky, Horton’s influence continued through the careers of Alvin Ailey, Janet Collins, Carmen de Lavallade, James Mitchell, Joyce Trisler, and James Truitte.

**Early Life and Career**

Born in Indianapolis, Lester Horton enrolled in dance classes after he saw a performance by the Denishawn Company in 1922. At sixteen, he began studying ballet with a local teacher, and after one year, he was teaching Saturday classes at her studio. Early in his training he received some lessons in the Russian and Italian schools of ballet, but preferred Native American dance and folk traditions to European formalism. He was drawn to community pageants, not only for their themes, but also for their production process, and he excelled at numerous aspects of theatre production, specifically costuming. In 1928 Horton was invited to perform his solo work *Song of Hiawatha,* based on Henry Wordsworth Longfellow’s poem*,* at the Argus Bowl in California. After the success of this performance, Horton remained in California and accepted short performance engagements of his solos, many based on Native American sources.

Horton’s first major concert debut was in the Olympic Festival of the Dance at the 1932 Los Angles Olympics. He contributed two dances to the program, *Kootenai War Dance* (1931) and *Voodoo Ceremonial* (1932), using students from Glendale High School. At this time he had also began teaching classes at Norma Gould’s studio in Hollywood, and the two collaborated on presenting visiting artists, specializing in Native American, Spanish, and African dancing.

**Company Formation and Development**

Between 1932 and 1937 Horton gave dance classes to a group of amateur students from Glendale High School, who formed his first dance company, the Horton Dance Group. The group gave concerts at major venues in the Los Angeles area, including the Greek Theater, Philharmonic Auditorium, Shrine Auditorium, Hollywood Bowl, Wilshire-Ebell Theater, Figueroa Playhouse, and UCLA’s Royce Hall. During this time Horton was also exposed to a variety of established dancer-choreographers who toured through Los Angeles while working on films and giving concerts, including Michio Ito, Mary Wigman, Adolph Bolm, and Martha Graham.

The paucity of modern dance on the West Coast gave Horton space to create something of his own. He took inspiration form the natural environment, Native American dance forms, and the many ethnic and cultural traditions present in Los Angeles. An amateur botanist and herpetologist, he had extensive knowledge of animal and plant life, and incorporated these influences into scenery for the stage and in his dance technique. He collected drums and gongs, and was known for his extensive collection of Mexican and Native American artifacts.

Horton’s *Le* *Sacre du Printemps* (1937) was a major departure from the preceding European choreographic interpretations. The tone, movement vocabulary and costumes expressed elements in Igor Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring* that Léonide Massine and Vaslav Nijinsky had not captured in either Paris or New York City. The European versions emphasized the darker side of the coming of Spring and spoke to humanity’s loss of power in relation to nature. In Horton’s *Sacre*, the dominant motif was not a sense of struggle but a sense of conquest and power over the elements, even a celebration of the spiritual relationship between humans and nature. The movement in Horton’s *Sacre* were said to resemble cave drawings because the angularity and simplicity of the body line in the choreography. The choreography had the flavor of American Indian dance with groupings of dancers in straight lines, feet caressing and pounding the floor, with flexion in the ankles, knees, and wrists. There was considerable use of the upper back, torso, and hips in his choreography, where the pelvis thrust forward and the entire torso is stretched and extended backwards. Horton’s choreography always demonstrated the length and strength of the dancers’ bodies, particularly in his use of opposition, where the legs and arms stretched in opposite directions.

**The Lester Horton Dance Theater**

After sixteen years of giving classes and concerts and choreographing films during the Second World War, Horton founded the Lester Horton Dance Theater in 1946. At its inception it was one of the few permanent theatres in the U.S. devoted solely to dance. Located in West Hollywood, it offered a performing arts school for children and adults and served as the training ground for Horton’s dance troupe. The curriculum at the Dance Theater included classes in choreography, dance technique, music, acting, stage make-up, lighting, improvisation, set design, and costuming. The Dance Theater was socially progressive, both in its approach to training and its demographic composition. The school was racially integrated and had a work-study and scholarship program so that anyone who wanted to dance could receive quality training.

**Technique and Style**

Horton’s approach to choreography and dance training emphasized dramatic presentation and visual effect. He was concerned with spatial patterns and light, which he used to create depth and visual planes on a proscenium stage. He spent as much time on scenery, décor, and costume as he did on choreography. He began his choreographic work in the classroom with improvisations, and then refined the movement until the idea developed into something suitable for presentation. Horton believed that experimentation and improvisation were key to finding new possibilities for the dance. Horton’s choreographies were a blend of European as well as culturally specific styles from Native American and non-European sources.

Unlike his contemporaries, such as Martha Graham, who built dance techniques based on their own movement capabilities, Horton built technical studies out of informal classroom work, using his dancers, most of whom were amateur, not classically trained, and at the very beginning of their performance careers. He favored working with large groups, a preference developed from his early work on pageants, and dancers learned to adapt quickly under his guidance. Horton’s students differed in age, weight, height, flexibility, and proportion. Not only did he learn more about anatomy by working with so many body types, but he developed training methods for dancers that would address anatomical challenges they might encounter.

Beyond gestures and positions, Horton created a whole-body approach to dance training, which developed the expressive possibilities of the human body. Technical exercises, such as ‘Deep Floor Vocabulary’, ‘Torso Language’, ‘Pelvic Actions’, and ‘Turn Motivations’ indicate that the movement was always motivated by story or action. What is called a ‘flexed foot’ by most dance teachers, Horton called a ‘curled foot,’ because of the shape the ankle makes when the toes are pulled toward the chin. Horton’ technique and choreographies were developed from both the visual expression and the emotional experience of performing the movement.

He incorporated Javanese and Balinese exercises for the fingers, eyes, and toes. His range of pelvis movement evoked African, Jamaican, Cuban, and Latin American isolations. He borrowed extensively from yoga and from arm gestures in traditional Japanese dance. Horton believed that his own exploration of ethnic dance had not only broadened his knowledge and appreciation of the varieties of human movement but had taught him, as well, a profound respect for the similarities and differences that exist among all people.

**Legacy**

Lester Horton died in Los Angeles in 1953 at the age of forty-seven. Horton’s business partner and companion, Frank Eng, and other company members kept the dance company performing until 1958, and the school open until 1960. Alvin Ailey briefly served as resident choreographer after Horton’s death, before moving to New York to pursue his career. When Ailey started his own school, the Horton technique became a core part of the curriculum, and his multiracial company followed the example of Horton. The Ailey company and the Lewitzky companies included Horton’s 1948 work *The Beloved* in their repertoires. Along with Graham, Humphrey-Limon, and Dunham techniques, his training method provides a foundation for dance training into the present. Equally influential are his holistic vision of training young artists in the full range of theatre arts, including improvisation, and his belief that a dance school and professional company belong together in the same building and institution.

**Diana Dinerman**

**Concert Works**

*Song of Hiawatha* (1928)

*Siva-Siva* (1928)

*Kootenai War Dance* (1931)

*Voodoo Ceremonia* (1932)

*Oriental Motifs* (1933)

*Allegro Barbara* (1934)

*May Night* (1934)

*Hand Dance* (1934)

*Lament* (1934)

*Aboriginal Suite* (1934)

*Dances of the Night* (1934)

*Two Arabesques* (1934)

*Oscar Wilde’s Salome* (1934)

*Aztec Ballet* (1934)

*Second Gnossienne* (1934)

*Concerto Grosso* (1934)

*Painted Desert* (1934)

*Bolero* (1934)

*Ave* (1934)

*Maidens* (1934)

*Salutation* (1934)

*Gnossienne #3* (1934)

*Vale* (1934)

*Mound Builders* (revision of *Aztec Ballet*, 1935)

*Antique Suite* (1935)

*Pentecost* (1935)

*Dictator* (1935)

*Dance of Parting* (1935)

*Rain Quest* (1935)

*Conflict* (1935)

*Ritual at Midnight* (1935)

*Tendresse* (1935)

*Sun Ritual* (1935)

*Rhythmic Dance* (1935)

*Salutation to the Depths* (1935)

*The Mine* (1935)

*The Art Patrons* (1935)

*Growth of Action* (1936)

*Two Dances for a Leader* (1936)

*Flight from Reality* (1936)

*Lysistrata* (1936)

*Ceremony* (revision of *Sun Ritual*, 1936)

*Prelude to Militancy* (1937)

*Chronicle* (1937)

*Salome* (1937)

*Prologue to an Earth Celebration* (1937)

*Exhibition Dance no.1* (1937)

*Le Sacre du Printemps* (1937)

*Pasaremos* (1938)

*Haven* (1938)

*Conquest* (1938)

*Departure from the Land* (1938)

*Five Women* (1938)

*Something to Please Everybody* (1939)

*Tierra y Libertad!* (1939)

*Sixteen to Twenty-four* (1940)

*A Noble Comedy* (revision of *Lysistrata*, 1940)

*Pavanne* (1941)

*Barrel House* (1947)

*Totem Incantation* (1948)

*The Beloved* (1948)

*Salome* (1948, revision)

*Warsaw Ghetto* (1949)

*The Park* (1949)

*The Bench of the Lamb* (1949)

*A Touch of Klee and Delightful 2* (1949)

*Estilo de Tù* (1950)

*A Bouquet for Molly* (1950)

*El Rebozo* (1950, revision of *The Park*)

*Brown County, Indiana* (1950)

*Rhythm Section* (1950)

*Tropic Trio* (1951)

*On the Upbeat* (1951)

*Another Touch of Klee* (1951)

*Medea* (1951)

*7 Scenes with Ballabilli* (1952)

*Sarong Parimaribo* (1952)

*Liberian Suite* (1952)

*Prado de Pena* (1952)

*Dedications in our Time: To Ruth Mary, and Martha; Memorial to Hiroshima, to Carson McCullers, Dedication to Jose Clemente Orozco, To Frederico Garcia Lorca* (1953)

*Face of Violence* (revision of *Salome*, 1953)

**Select Film Choreography**

*Moonlight in Havana* (1942)

*White Savage* (1943)

*Phantom of the Opera* (1943)

*Gypsy Wildcat* (1944)

*The Climax* (1944)

*Frisco Sal* (1945)

*Salome, Where She Danced* (1945)

*Shady Lady* (1945)

*That Night with You* (1945)

*Tarzan and the Leopard Woman* (1946)

*Tangier Universal Pictures* (1946)

*Sirens of Atlantis* (1949)

*Bagdad* (1949)

*South Sea Woman* (1953)

*3-D Follies* (unreleased)

**Musicals and Pageants**

*Song of Hiawatha* (1926-1928)

*The Lady in the Sack* (1932)

*Takwish, the Star Maker* (1932)

*Shootin’ Star* (1946)

*To Tongue and Cheek* (w/Bella Lewitzky) (1949)

*Girl Crazy* (1951)

*Annie Get Your Gun* (1951)

**Artist’s Writings**

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Horton, L. (1941) ‘American Indian Dance’, *Educational Dance* 4 (4): 4-7. Reprinted in L. Warren, *Lester Horton: Modern Dance Pioneer*, pp. 204-11.

**References and Further Reading**

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*Journal* 16, (1): 35–40.

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Moore, E. (1978) ‘Bella Lewitzky: A Legend Turned Real’, *Dance Chronicle* 2 (1): 1-79.

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Prevots, N. (1987) *Dancing in the Sun: Hollywood Choreographers 1915-1937,* Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press.

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Warren, L. et al. (1967) ‘The Dance Theater of Lester Horton,’ *Dance Perspectives* 31.

**Visual Documentation**

Goldoni, L. (1993) *Lester Horton (1906-1953): Genius on the Wrong Coast*, Hollywood: VDI.

Havinga, N. (2007) *Tribute to Lester Horton*, Kent CT: Creative Arts Television. Originally broadcast on CBS arts program titled *Camera Three* in 1963.

**Suggested Paratextuals [all sent in as separate attachments]**

*Prairie Chicken Dance*, 1929. Lester Horton (photograph by Toyo Miyatake). From the Lester Horton Dance Theater Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.

*Oscar Wilde’s Salome,* 1934. Choreography by Lester Horton. Bruce Burroughs as Herod, Joy Montaya as Salome, Elizabeth Talbot-Martin as Herodias. (photograph by Toyo Miyatake). From the Lester Horton Dance Theater Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.

*Le Sacre du Printemps,* 1937. Choreography by Lester Horton. (rehearsal photograph by Toyo Miyatake). From the Lester Horton Dance Theater Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.

Workshop at the Dance Theater, 1949. Photographer unknown. From the Lester Horton Dance Theater Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.

Lester Horton Directing, 1952. Photograph by Bob Willoughby. From the Lester Horton Dance Theater Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.