**Denby, Edwin** **(b. 4 February 1903, Tsientsin, China; d. 12 July 1983, Searsport, Maine)**

**Summary**

Edwin Denby is best remembered as one of the preeminent critics of dance modernism. Yet he also was an accomplished poet and an experienced dancer, choreographer, and librettist. Both his poetic gifts and his practical experience in the theatre informed his dance criticism, first collected in *Looking at the Dance* (1949) and amplified in *Dancers, Buildings* *and People in the Street* (1965). As the title of his 1965 volume suggests, Denby placed primacy on the pleasures of perception, recording what he saw rather than advocating for a distinct point of view, as did his contemporaries Lincoln Kirstein and John Martin. Denby’s sensibility was widely admired in New York’s postwar avant-garde milieus, and he became an important friend, muse, mentor and tutelary spirit to visual artists—including Rudy Burckhardt, Willem and Elaine de Kooning, and Alex Katz—and to New York School poets—especially Frank O’Hara, James Schuyler, John Ashbery, Ted Berrigan, Ron Padgett, and Anne Waldman. In the last several decades of his life, Denby continued to be a key figure in the downtown scene across several performance genres.

**Training and Early Career**

Edwin Orr Denby was born in China in 1903 into a prominent family of American diplomats. His father’s diplomatic appointments made for a cosmopolitan childhood that included periods of residency in Washington, Shanghai, and Vienna. He excelled at The Hotchkiss School in Connecticut, and in 1920 he attended Harvard University at age sixteen for one year. Three years of itinerancy followed: a trip to London with a young male companion, then residencies in New Hampshire and Greenwich Village. A long expatriation began in Vienna in 1923. There, he initiated his dance training under the tutelage of Christine Baer-Frissell at the Hellerau-Laxenburg Dance School, studying eurythmics, *Ausdruckstanz*, *Grotesktanz* (eccentric dancing)and earning a degree in *Körperbildung* (corporeal training). Influential encounters included Rudolf Laban and Mary Wigman. A 1927 visit to Russia offered him his first glimpse of the Bolshoi Ballet, and in Paris in 1933 he first saw George Balanchine, for whom he would become a lifelong apologist.

After declining opportunities to work with Kurt Jooss and Bertolt Brecht, Denby found success as a comic dancer in the *Grotesktanz* style, partnering with Cläre Eckstein at the *Musiktheater* in Darmstadt in 1929. There, his bawdy adaptation of Franz von Suppé’s opera *Die schöne Galatea* (1929) was highly praised, but a projected satirical collaboration with Virgil Thomson provoked a conservative retrenchment in the Darmstadt theatrical community. Eckstein and Denby continued their performances in Munich and Berlin through 1932, although Denby found his position increasingly untenable under National Socialism. He left for Paris in 1933 and composed the first draft of his only novel, *Scream in a Cave*,in Mallorca in 1934.

The same year in Switzerland he met photographer and filmmaker Rudy Burckhardt, his most important friend and lifelong collaborator. They took up residence in New York in 1935, and Denby soon appeared in the film Burckhardt named for their address: *145 West 21st* (1936). A pursuant period of productivity followed, including collaborations with Orson Welles on a WPA-sponsored Federal Theatre production, *Horse Eats Hat* (1936), a libretto with Aaron Copland for *The Second Hurricane* (1937), and the choreography for Kurt Weill’s *Knickerbocker Holiday* (1938). Several unproduced libretti survive from these years, including *Sonntag Gang*, *Miltie Is a Hackie*, and an adaptation of *The Criminals*.

**Dance Criticism**

While Denby did not find enduring success as a performer or choreographer, he had already begun to submit a modest series of reviews to *Modern Music*, and he took over at the *Herald Tribune* when dance critic Walter Terry was drafted into the U.S. army in 1943. His reputation as a preeminent dance critic of mid-century Manhattan grew from this position. His reviews and notices promoted an ecumenical view of dance, from folk and vernacular to modern and neo-classical styles. He advocated for dance defined by the autonomy of movement over narrative, by a persistent concern for the perceptibility of rhythmic phrasing, by the privileging of form and spectacle, and by the aesthetic dynamism of qualities such as clarity, ease, swiftness, pleasure, and gentleness.

It is possible to regard Denby as displaying a preference for ballet (particularly as exemplified by George Balanchine’s ‘large, clear, accurate, and unaffected’ style[[1]](#endnote-1)) over modern dance. Signal essays from late 1940s and early 1950s include ‘Ballet: The American Position’ (1947), ‘A Briefing in American Ballet’ (1948), ‘Against Meaning in Ballet’ (1949), ‘A Letter on New York City's Ballet’ (1952), and ‘Some Thoughts about Classicism and George Balanchine’ (1953). Yet Denby recognized the gifts of Merce Cunningham in an early solo recital (‘extreme elegance in isolation’[[2]](#endnote-2)), and he admired Martha Graham’s *Appalachian Spring*, noting that the dance was ‘no passionate monodrama of subjective experience but an objective conflict united in its theme.’[[3]](#endnote-3) Denby’s use of the terms ‘subjective’ and ‘objective’ is telling here, for he preferred dances that clarified and externalised their movement values, whatever their style.

Denby’s critical style mirrored his aesthetic preference, for he favored a descriptive and explanatory approach rather than an evaluative and prescriptive one. In the title essay to *Dancers, Buildings and People in the Streets*, Denby wrote: ‘One part of dance criticism is seeing what is happening onstage. The other is describing clearly what you saw.’[[4]](#endnote-4) This simple dictum anticipated and inspired several generations of dance critics, whose richly observant prose matched the increasingly formal richness of postwar dance. Hence Denby’s critical style accorded with a more general renewal of modernist cultural values in the postwar United States.

**Poetry**

Denby’s two major volumes of poems—*In Public, In Private* (1948) and *Mediterranean Sonnets* (1956)—display a surprising devotion to the sonnet, and in general to fixed forms that were unfashionable among the majority of his contemporaries. Many of these sonnets flaunt queer desires and gay sensibilities (‘A Sonnet Sequence: Dishonor’); others presage the coteries and occasional verse of the New York School. Frank O’Hara admired Denby's ‘specifically American spoken diction which has a classical firmness and clarity under his hand’—the same qualities that Denby extolled in Balanchine's dance.[[5]](#endnote-5) The most memorable poems of *In Public, In Private* pay exterior attentions to the New York urban landscape (‘The Climate’; ‘Elegy: The Streets’) in the manner of the Burckhardt photos that often accompany them. This precisely observed ‘geography of candor’ (in Lincoln Kirstein's phrase) might also be regarded as akin to Edward Hopper, although often with an outrageous flare for simile and synecdoche (as in ‘The Shoulder’). In Kirstein’s estimation, Denby was ‘the clearest lyric voice of Manhattan since Crane,’ sharing ‘Crane’s quirkiness in implosive short circuits of dense, awkwardly precise rhetoric, odd broken rhymes, reckless rhythm, sharpness of physical imagery and incandescent metaphor.’[[6]](#endnote-6) Both the distance and proximity to Crane can be observed in poems such as ‘A New York Face’: ‘The great New York bridges reflect its faces / Personality scoots across one like tiny / Traffic intent from Brooklyn [...].’ *Mediteranean Cities* (1956) translates these urban attentions into a *demi-luxe* sequence of travel sonnets, mostly written during several years in Europe from 1948-1951. While Kirstein regards it as an ‘album of super-postcards,’ O’Hara saw it as a work of post-Romantic seriousness to be distinguished from the postwar American vogue for European tourism. Catherine Kodat, noting the contemporaneity of the *Mediterranean Cities* sonnets with the Marshall Plan, argues for ‘their subtle address of the joys and vagaries of homosexual love within the rapidly emerging Cold War imperium.’[[7]](#endnote-7)

**Legacy**

As a poet, Denby was classed by Donald Allen among a group of the most influential ‘second generation’ modernists who emerged in the 1930s and ‘achieved their maturity’ in the years following the Second World War.[[8]](#endnote-8) Yet his age and his nervous aversion to praise (‘I have always been underground’[[9]](#endnote-9)) factored into his long exclusion from a canon that embraced his New York School champions and imitators. Nonetheless, the wry, mannered intelligence of his dance criticism is etched indelibly into some of the most canonical mid-century lyric poems, such as O'Hara's ‘A Step Away from Them’: ‘Neon in daylight is a / great pleasure, as Edwin Denby would / write.’ Ultimately, it is Denby’s major body of dance criticism that has sustained his enduring place in the history of modernism, but the poetic compression of his critical prose and the attention to the choreographic scene of metropolitan life in his poetry emerged reciprocally from his evolving place in several locations and generations of modernist practice across the arts.

**Harris Feinsod**

**Artist’s Works**

**Criticism**

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----- (1974) *Snoring in New York,* New York: Angel Hair/Adventures in Poetry.

----- (1975) *Collected Poems,* New York: Full Court Press.

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----- (2008) *New York, N. Why?* *Photographs by Rudy Burckhardt*, *Poems by Edwin Denby,* New York: Nazraeli Press, in association with the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

**Fiction**

Denby, E. (1973) *Scream in a Cave,* New York: Curtis Books.

**Filmography (Actor, directed by Rudy Burckhardt)**

*145 West 21st* (1936)

*Lurk* (1964)

*Money* (1967)

*The Climate of New York* (1980)

**Libretti**

Denby, E. (1937) *The Second Hurricane*, with A. Copland and O. Welles, New York: Boosey & Hawkes.

----- (1973) *Miltie is a Hackie: A Libretto*, with R. Burckhardt and K.Elmslie from 1941, Calais, Vt.: Z Press.

----- (1981) *Four Plays,* New York: Eye and Ear Theater.

**Adaptations**

Denby, E. (1929) *Die neue Galatea,* Mainz: B. Schotts Söhne.

----- (1936) *Horse Eats Hat*,with O. Welles, New York: Federal Theatre.

**Editorial**

Denby, E. with Y. Jacquette (1981) *Aerial: a collection of poetry,* New York: Eyelight Press.

**Translation**

-- (1993) *Edwin's Tao,* a translation of Lao Tze's Tao Teh Ching, PLACE: Crumbling Empire Press.

**References and Further Reading**

Dunas, W. (1984-85) ‘Edwin Denby Remembered’ in four parts, *Ballet Review* 12 (1): 7-42; 12 (2): 18-31; 12 (3): 87-95; 12 (4): 81-93.

Katz, V. (2010) ‘Visiting Edwin Denby’s Mediterranean Cities,’ in *Hidden Agendas: Unreported Poetics*, ed. L. Armand, Prague: Litteraria Pragensia Books.

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O’Hara, F. (1957) ‘Rare Modern,’ *Poetry* 89 (5): 307-316.

**Paratexts**

***Audio***

“Edwin Denby,” *PennSound*, http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Denby.php

Dial-a-Poem Poets., Edwin Denby, et al. *Biting the Tongue of a Corpse*. New York: Giorno Poetry Systems. 1975  <http://www.ubu.com/sound/corpse.html>

Giorno Poetry Systems (GPS-005) 1975.  <http://www.ubu.com/sound/corpse.html>

***Visual*** (in separate file named REM.Denby.images)

**Fig 1:**

Edwin Denby in New York, Photograph by Rudy Burckhardt. Estate of Rudy Burckhardt.

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**Fig 2.**

Edwin Denby and Claire Eckstein in Regimentstochter (Gaetano Donizetti), Theater am Schiffbauerdamm, Berlin 1930. Photo by Ellen Auerbach for ringl+pit.

URL: http://www.flickr.com/photos/kraftgenie/4978777655/in/photostream/.

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**Fig. 3.**

Edwin Denby, Orson Welles, *Horse Eats Hat* (1936)

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URL: <http://hdl.handle.net/1920/3871>

**Fig. 4.**

Edwin Denby (seated) and Gerard Malanga. Image by Andy Warhol

*"C": A Journal of Poetry*, 1.4 (1963). ed. Ted Berrigan

URL: high resolution TIF file in author’s possession, scanned by Northwestern Special Collections. The image is the cover of a mimeograph magazine.

**Fig. 5**

Alex Katz, American, b. 1927, *Edwin Denby*, 1964, oil on masonite, Gift of Walter K. Gutman, Class of 1924, 1966.30 (Bowdoin College Museum of Art) RIGHTS: Contact artist's son, poet/curator Vincent Katz (vincentkatz@mac.com). Author knows Vincent and can reach out as necessary.

**Endnotes**

1. E. Denby (1986) *Dance Writings*, 510. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. E. Denby (1986) *Dance Writings*, 208. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. E. Denby (1986) *Dance Writings*, 314. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. E. Denby (1986) *Dance Writings*, 548. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. F. O’Hara (1957) ‘Rare Modern,’ *Poetry* 89 (5), 313. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. L. Kirstein (1983) ‘On Edwin Denby,’ *The New York Review of Books,* 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. C. Kodat (2012) ‘Reviewing Cold War Culture with Edwin Denby,’ 54. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. D. Allen (1960) *The New American Poetry 1945-1960*, New York: Grove Press, xi. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. E. Denby (1986) *Dance Writings*, 32. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)