**Hawkins, Erick (b. 23 April 1909, Trinidad, Colorado; d. 23 November 1994, New York City)**

**Summary**

Erick Hawkins was a major twentieth-century American choreographer who created a poetic form of modern dance based on free-flowing movement. He also was an early proponent of objectivist or plotless dances that did not attempt to express an emotion or intellectual concept, but existed for their own sake. Hawkins had three distinct phases to his career, the first in ballet as a dancer and fledgling choreographer with Lincoln Kirstein’s inter-war American Ballet and Ballet Caravan, then between 1939 and 1950 as a dancer and choreographer with the Martha Graham Company, and finally, from the 1950s onward as a dancer, choreographer and director of his own company and school. It was in this final and longest phase of his career that Hawkins created a personal movement vocabulary and a sensuous dance whose goal was direct, unmediated experience.

**Training and Early Career**

Erick Hawkins was born in Trinidad, Colorado, and at the age of eight moved with his family to Kansas City, Missouri. An excellent student, he won a scholarship to Harvard where he majored in Classics. While at university, he attended a concert by German modern dancers Harald Kreutzberg and Yvonne Georgi, an experience that convinced him dance would be his career. After graduating from Harvard in 1930, he travelled to Salzburg, Austria, where he studied with Kreutzberg for several months. He moved to New York in 1934, enrolling in the School of American Ballet, founded that year by George Balanchine and Lincoln Kirstein.

Hawkins began his professional career in 1935 as a member of Kirstein’s American Ballet, dancing works primarily by Balanchine. In 1936, he joined Ballet Caravan, another Kirstein enterprise, which specialized in works by emerging choreographers, including Eugene Loring and Lew Christensen. It was for this group that Hawkins created his first ballet. Entitled *Show Piece* (1937), it was a plotless work meant to show off the virtuosity of the dancers.

**Working with Martha Graham**

During the summer of 1938, while Ballet Caravan was at the Bennington Festival in Vermont, Hawkins saw and was seen by Martha Graham. She asked him to become her partner and he joined her company in 1939 as its first male dancer. Hawkins spent the next decade with Graham as her partner in private and professional life. He created a number of leading roles in Graham ballets including *American Document* (1938), *Deaths and Entrances* (1943), *Appalachian Spring* (1944), and *Night Journey* (1947). He also made dances of his own for the company. His best-known works during this time included *John Brown* (1945), in which he depicted the famous abolitionist; *Stephen Acrobat* (1947) that dealt with lost innocence; and *The Strangler* (1948), centring on the Oedipus myth. All three of these dances included spoken word as well as dramatic movement. The New York critics were often negative in their assessments of Hawkins’s dances, perhaps influenced by loyalty to Graham and a feeling that Hawkins’s works had no place in her repertory. Reviews outside New York generally were more positive. During these years, Hawkins did more than dance and choreograph works, often managing the Graham company and raising funds for it. For example, he obtained the commission for Aaron Copland to compose the score for *Appalachian Spring*. He also introduced ballet classes to the Graham school. The Hawkins/Graham partnership was always stormy; they married in 1948, but in 1950 Hawkins left the company and Graham for good.

**On His Own**

In striking out on his own, Hawkins took a path that in many ways was opposed to Graham’s. Instead of works that stressed emotional essences, he emphasised what he called a dance of pure fact that needed no narrative or intellectual concept but existed simply for the wonderment it evoked. Instead of a vocabulary based on percussiveness and the tension of contraction, he developed one of free-flowing movement that he felt had less chance of injuring the performer. This he codified into a technique that anticipated the kinds of release techniques used by a number of postmodern dancers. Hawkins emphasised the sensuousness of the body as a positive moral force, as well as a direct experience of dance, without mediation – a principle found in Zen Buddhism.

Although the majority of Hawkins’s dances were plotless, they often included metaphoric references, particularly to nature. So, for example, the dances in *Geography of Noon* (1964) were named for butterflies, those in *Black Lake* (1969) for elements of the heavens. *8 Clear Places* (1960) included dances dedicated to a pine tree, rain, and, humorously, a squash.

Hawkins also examined America throughout his career, from his solo, *Yankee Bluebritches* (1940) *to Ahad* (1986),the latter inspired by the Herman Melville character in *Moby Dick*. References to America in his choreography were as varied as *Plains Daybreak* (1979), which resembled a ritualized Native American origin myth, and *Hurrah!* (1975), which looked back to Midwestern Independence Day celebrations. Other recurring references in his work were to ancient Greece and Asia, particularly Japanese Noh theatre.

Hawkins always used live music, feeling that recorded music dulled the senses. He commissioned scores from composers such as Bohuslav Martinu, Henry Cowell, Toru Takemitsu, Lew Harrison, and Virgil Thomson, but his major collaborator was Lucia Dlugoszewski, his second wife. They began working together shortly after he left the Graham company, continuing their partnership until his death. In the 1970s, Hawkins began to collaborate with symphony orchestras in an unusual arrangement in which he placed the orchestra and conductor on stage with the dancers performing in front of them. Among the major orchestras he worked with were the Detroit, San Francisco, Cleveland, Baltimore and St. Louis symphonies.

Hawkins also was known for making imaginative use of masks, sculptural sets, and costumes, many of them created by artist Ralph Dorazio. Among Hawkins’s most controversial moves was introducing near nudity into some of his dances. In works such as *Of Love* (1971), *Angels of the Inmost Heaven* (1972) and *Greek Dreams, with Flute* (1973), the women and men wore only g-strings.

**Legacy**

Hawkins created a modern dance that was objectivist and hence at the forefront of the field at a time when the mainstream was devoted to expressing emotional essences. This placed him in line with other vanguard modernist choreographers in the 1950s, such as Merce Cunningham and Alwin Nikolais, who rejected an expressional model for one that favored dance for its own sake. In addition, Hawkins developed a vocabulary and form that no longer defined American modern dance in terms of bodily and emotional tension, but in terms of sensuousness and spiritual harmony.

**Gay Morris**

**Selected Works**

*Show Piece (Ballet Workout in One Act)* (1937)

*Yankee Bluebritches* (1940)

*Trickster Coyote* (1941, revised 1983)

*Liberty Tree* (1945)

*John Brown,* later titled *God’s Angry Man* (1945)

*Stephen Acrobat* (1947)

*The Strangler* (1948)

*Openings of the (Eye)* (1952)

*Here and Now with Watchers* (1957)

*8 Clear Places (1960)*

*Sudden Snake Bird* (1961)

*Early Floating* (1961)

*Spring Azure* (1962)

*Cantilever* (1963)

*Geography of Noon* (1964)

*To Everybody Out There* (1964)

*Naked Leopard* (1965)

*Lords of Persia* (1965)

*Dazzle on a Knife’s Edge* (1966)

*Tightrope* (1968)

*Black Lake* (1969)

*Of Love* (1971)

*Angels of the Inmost Heaven* (1971)

*Classic Kite Tails* (1972)

*Dawn Dazzled Door* (1972)

*Meditation on Orpheus* (1974)

*Death Is the Hunter* (1975)

P*arson Weems and the Cherry Tree* (1975)

*Hurrah!* (1975)

*Agathlon* (1979)

*Plains Daybreak* (1979)

*Avanti* (1980)

*Heyoka* (1981)

*Summer-Clouds People* (1983)

*The Joshua Tree, Or Three Outlaws (1983)*

*Ahab (1986)*

*Today, with Dragon* (1986)

*God the Reveller* (1987)

*Cantilever Two* (1988)

*New Moon* (1989)

*Killer of Enemies: The Divine Hero* (1991)

*Intensities of Space, and Wind* (1991)

*Each Time You Carry Me This Way* (1993)

*Many Thanks* (1994)

**References and Further Reading**

Franko, M. (2012) *Martha Graham in Love and War*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Hawkins, E. (1965) ‘Pure Poetry’, in *The Modern Dance: Seven Statements of Belief*, ed. S.J. Cohen. Middletown CT: Wesleyan University Press.

---- (1992) *The Body Is a Clear Place and Other Statements on Dance*. Princeton NJ: Princeton Book Company

---- (1993) ‘Machines Versus Tools’, *Ballet Review*  21 (4): 54-59.

Mason, F. (1993) ‘A Conversation with Erick Hawkins and Lucia Dlugoszeski’, *Ballet Review* 21 (4): 47-53.

**Documentaries**

*Erick Hawkins’ America*. 1992. Erick Hawkins Dance Company. DVD. Dance Horizons.

*Erick Hawkins’ Dance Technique*, 2 volumes. Produced and Directed by Renata Celichowska. Edited by Nadra Holmes. DVD Dance Horizons.

**Paratexts**

*Erick Hawkins in the first production of Appalachian Spring. In the background, left to right: the four Followers, Martha Graham, May O'Donnell, 1944.* (Library of Congress)

[http://www.loc.gov/item/copland.phot0117](https://collaborate.northwestern.edu/owa/redir.aspx?C=V-DTn9yoTEiM-137Ss0Gfb_uaY0W2dAIspzjJ7mM8Cv9QzdbBnAtl9HZJ1COQz5Ei5ADs3gVktQ.&URL=http%3a%2f%2fwww.loc.gov%2fitem%2fcopland.phot0117" \t "_blank)

Erick Hawkins in *Early Floating* (1961), from iconography file for Erick Hawkins \*MGZEA at New York Public Library for the Performing Arts (NYPL-PA); see image here, but note that image must be ordered from NYPL-PA

<http://www.joesuniverse.org/images/ERICKearlyfloating.jpg>