**New Dance Group, New York City, 1932-2009**

**Summary**

Established in 1932 by six young Jewish women in New York City, New Dance Group (NDG) trained leaders of the American modern dance. Founded with the desire to combine radical left-wing politics with dance, NDG proclaimed in its first anniversary bulletin in March 1933: ‘Dance is a Weapon of the Class Struggle’. The early NDG included concert dance soloists, a men’s group, ensembles that performed in union halls, and a folk dance unit. By the mid-1930s, the school boasted an enrollment of 300 students, including workers and children. Over the next few years, however, the radical commitments of the faculty and students shifted in tandem with larger political changes. In the 1940s and 1950s. NDG transformed into a leading hub for traditional modern dance training and production. Although some of the faculty and students maintained a commitment to social justice, the threat of anti-communist blacklisting affected many members and threatened the institution. The influence of NDG declined during the 1960s and 1970s with the increasing influence of avant-garde choreographers, yet the studio did not officially close until 2009. NDG significantly impacted the careers of Anna Sokolow, Jane Dudley, Sophie Maslow, Pearl Primus, and Donald McKayle, amongst others.

**Formation and Early Years**

Responding to the Great Depression, NDG founders became inspired by the Workers Cultural Federation (WCF). In 1931, a contingent of artists who had met with Communist Party leaders in Moscow returned to the U.S. and declared ‘Art is a Weapon’. The WCF included writers, musicians, filmmakers, photographers, and Edith Segal’s Red Dancers. The future NDG members trained at the Mary Wigman School directed by Hanya Holm in New York City, where they learned the formative German *Ausdruckstanz* and subject-based improvisation. In 1932 they formed NDG to participate in a rally to mourn the death of Harry Simms, a communist youth who had been shot during a miners’ strike in the South. The NDG existed under the umbrella of the Workers Dance League, alongside Anna Sokolow’s celebrated Dance Unit, Segal’s Red Dancers, and at least ten other groups, including the Harlem Prolets, The Needle Trade Workers Union Dance Group, and the Nature Friends, a group of German communist hikers.

The Group followed socialist practices to execute its plan for a new dance. The NDG school charged 10 cents a class for a three-hour session devoted to technique, improvisation, and discussions of Marxist thought. The performers followed theatrical scripts published in *Workers Theatre* magazine, and collaborated with the Musicians League. The inspiration for works began with dance improvisation based on social themes, which resulted in such dances as *Strike* (1932). The dancers’ political roots led them to create a choreographic collective where individuals were not necessarily credited with specific dance works. These efforts led to pieces such as *On the Barricades* (c.1932), *Hunger* (c.1932), and *Van der Lubbe’s Head* (1934), although the *New York Times* cited founder Miriam Blecher as the creator of the latter work. *Van der Lubbe’s Head* became celebrated both by radical and conventional critics. While garnering first place in the 1934 Soviet-inspired Spartakiad and winning a bronze statue of Lenin, the work also earned strong reviews in the *Times* from the paper’s highly discerning dance critic, John Martin. NDG’s performing units included workers, ‘shock troupes’, and folk dance groups, all of which joined professional dancers to present works and teach in union halls. They embodied the Communist Party’s call to action, ‘Workers of the World Unite!’

**Evolution and Individuation**

NDG changed alongside the culture of revolution. As it became a recognized institution, NDG also began to realize the potency of individual choreographers. Jane Dudley set her first seminal work for the group in 1934, *Time is Money,* to a poem by Sol Funaroff published in the radical journal, *New Masses*. Individuals including Blecher, Dudley, and Sophie Maslow presented their solos on New York City concert stages. Yet these choreographers maintained their collectivist tenets, sharing subjects with filmmakers and musicians who protested sharecropping, the oppression of farm workers, and fascism. In keeping with both revolutionary and radical tenets, NDG choreographers included African American performers in their works. On occasion all-male concerts were produced, featuring José Limón and Charles Weidman.

As some dancers began to leave the Communist Party in 1935 and follow the Popular Front, which declared that Communism was the new Americanism, NDG remained dedicated to presenting works with radical themes. *Workers Theatre* magazine became *New Theatre*, and the Workers Dance League became the New Dance League. Within a few years, however, the Nazi-Soviet Pact of 1939 created an untenable alliance for the Jewish dancers, and many severed their ties to the Communist Party of the United States. Under the direction of Judith Delman, New Dance Group registered itself as a not-for-profit corporation in 1939.

**Institutionalization and its Cultural Implications**

As New Dance Group broadened its reach, it maintained its dedication to social justice. Some members trained under Martha Graham**,** including Dudley, Maslow, Jean Erdman, and Marjorie Mazia. At the same time, Erdman produced *Tenant of the Street* (1938), a work about homelessness. Dancers continued to work with radical musicians Woodie Guthrie, Alex North, and Earl Robinson, and they set works to jazz music and spirituals. Maslow became a pillar at NDG with her board leadership and choreography, including *Dust Bowl Ballads* (1941), with music by Guthrie. NDG became one of the earliest dance schools to support African-American students and choreographers, including Pearl Primus, Donald McKayle, and Jean-Léon Destiné. Primus choreographed dances based on poetry by radical writers, including Langston Hughes in her *The Negro Speaks of Waters* (1944). Her students, including McKayle, continued in her footsteps, protesting the treatment of workers and prison chain gangs with *Rainbow ‘Round My Shoulder* (1959). Calls for people to unite for equality and other seemingly radical American freedoms remained embedded in the NDG institution.

In the 1940s choreographers embraced patriotic sentiment while maintaining their belief in a leftist social agenda under the tenet that protest was deeply American. In 1941 the NDG performed in New York City with a program titled *American Dances*. The evening included Dudley's *Harmonica Breakdown* (1938), which demonstrated the plight of workers and African Americans in a work she called a ‘misery dance’. Maslow lamented the Depression-era farmland Dust Bowl in her depiction of the struggle of farm workers. The *American Dances* season also marked the last performance of a collective choreographic work. However, in the same year as *American Dances*, the NDG board of directors initiated a letter-writing campaign to free Earl Browder, a Communist Party leader in the U.S. During the Second World War. Dudley choreographed a celebratory work about sailors on leave, and NDG offered free classes to soldiers in New York. One dancer remembered, ‘We were not Communists. We just believed everything they believed’.[[1]](#endnote-1)

By the end of the Second World War, NDG became a home for a group of dance companies named for the choreographers themselves. As the institution grew, Dudley and Maslow formed a Trio with William Bales, Hadassa brought works and classes inspired by Middle Eastern themes, and Mary Anthony bravely risked being blacklisted when she choreographed *The Devil in Massachusetts* (1952), which protested the tactics of HUAC hearings and Senator Joseph McCarthy during the Red Scare. Indeed, the publication *Red Channels* named NDG performer and teacher Muriel Manings along with Anna Sokolow and Jerome Robbins for subversive activities. Although the Federal Bureau of Investigation watched NDG and some of its members, a myriad of dancers passed through the NDG studios for rehearsals, as teachers, or for meetings, including Daniel Nagrin, Doris Humphrey, José Limón, and Alvin Ailey. Modern dance luminaries including Graham star Ethel Winter and Bertram Ross, who had no political affiliations, taught technique classes at the studios. The school remained a hub, providing classes for professionals, non-dancers, and children. Choreographers shared dancers who took class there. The curriculum included Afro-Caribbean, modern, Middle Eastern, folk dance, and even ballet.

In 1953, NDG produced its first Broadway season, which included Donald McKayle’s *Games* (1951). In 1955, NDG firmly entered the capitalist system when it purchased a building in Manhattan’s theater district for the school and to house rehearsals for the choreographers. Jane Dudley signed the deed. The institutional transition from communal membership to individual ownership became finalized. NDG’s corporation formed a board of directors with members, not titled officers. The dancers and their companies thrived, and the building secured the group’s place as a New York City institution.

**Decline and Legacy**

By the 1960s NDG’s collective spirit began to wane as leaders left for university positions or opened independent studios. In addition, cutting-edge dance experimentation took new directions. Happenings replaced NDG’s modern dance theatre-based choreographic approach. Financial problems began to plague NDG and members of the board of directors struggled to find solutions, yet the studio remained a creative centre for dissonant dance activities. In 1967, Sokolow used the studios to rehearse dancers for the musical *Hair*, with songs protesting the war in Vietnam and depicting illegal drug use, sexual freedom, and irreverence for the American flag. Although producers removed Sokolow as choreographer before the Off-Broadway opening at Joseph Papp’s Public Theater, graphic black-and-white pictures of Sokolow’s work remain in the NDG archives at the Library of Congress. In 1974 Joyce Trisler’s NDG workshop production of Stravinsky’s *Sacre du Printemps* provided the impetus for the formation of the Joyce Trisler Danscompany. While these productions remained significant, NDG increasingly drew income from dance studio rentals.

Over the next few decades, the board of directors struggled to keep the institution afloat, and financial manipulations failed the institution. Yet when NDG officially closed in 2009, interest in its earliest years had led to programs of reconstructed works, exhibitions, and publications. Dancers and scholars now look back at the socially critical dances of the New Dance Group as a proud legacy from the early years of American modern dance.

**Victoria Phillips Geduld**

**Further Reading and Research**

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**Documentary**

American Dance Guild (1993, 2008) *New Dance Group Gala Historic Concert 1930's-1970's.*

**Paratexts** from New Dance Group Collection, Library of Congress. See jpeg images in separate file.

\*\*\*The photographs are all in "Photographs: Productions." "On the

Barricades" is a section of War Trilogy c. 1934 BOX-FOLDER 1/3; 136/1.

‘On the Barricades’, from War Trilogy (c. 1932), dancers not identified, choreography by New Dance Group collective.

*The Haunted Ones* (c. 1942), choreography and performance by Dudley-Maslow-Bales Trio. Box 1, folder 3, cropped jpeg.

*Games* (1951), choreography by Donald McKayle. Photographer: Philipe Halsman. Box 1, folder 28.

1. Mary Anthony. Interview with Victoria Phillips Geduld. Columbia University Oral History Research Office (permissions required). 2006.

   [↑](#endnote-ref-1)