**Beatty, Talley (b. 22 December 1919, Cedar Grove, Louisiana; d. 29 April 1995, New York City)**

**Summary**

Talley Beatty, whose career began in the mid-1930s and extended six decades, was a leading modern dance artist. He was a prolific choreographer, exquisite dancer, and exacting teacher. As a performer, he played a significant role in the establishment of Katherine Dunham’s company, and as a choreographer he played a crucial role in the establishment of Alvin Ailey’s company. Building on Dunham’s example, his works anticipated the stylistic fusion and musicality of Ailey’s repertoire. Yet, as a dancemaker, he addressed issues of social injustice and racial inequality more directly and more forcibly than did Dunham and Ailey. His works set the stage for the modernist dance lexicon that is central to the Black tradition in American concert dance, and his masterworks survive in repertoire as a cornerstone of Black dance.

**Training and Early Career**

Beatty grew up in Chicago and crossed paths with Katherine Dunham while he was playing with friends near her dance school, Studio De La Danse. Dunham invited him to watch her in rehearsal for a Ruth Page ballet for the Chicago Civic Opera. He subsequently began to study dance with Dunham at age fourteen and developed enough proficiency to be included in the Opera’s 1934 season. Thus Beatty’s professional dance life began without the benefit of years of training.

During his teenage years, Dunham groomed Beatty to be one of the original members of the Dunham Company. He learned Dunham Technique from its inception and took notice of its fusion of ballet, modern, jazz, and Afro-Caribbean dance forms. In addition to Dunham Technique, Beatty studied ballet with Kurt and Grace Graff in Chicago. He came of age as a professional dancer in the Dunham Company, appearing with the company on Broadway in *Cabin In the Sky* (1941) and onscreen in the Hollywood films *Cuban Episode* (1942), *Flamingo* (1942), *Carnival of Rhythm* (1943), and *Stormy Weather* (1943).

After leaving the Katherine Dunham Dance Company in 1943, Beatty performed with emerging dancer Janet Collins on the West Coast nightclub circuit. During the mid-1940s he decided to move to the East Coast to study at George Balanchine’s School of American Ballet in New York City. In New York he also studied technique with Martha Graham and honed his choreography skills with Doris Humphrey. Beatty’s expertise included ballet, modern dance, Dunham Technique, Caribbean dance, and social dance forms.

During the 1940s Beatty was a sought after performer. In 1945 he was featured in experimental filmmaker Maya Deren’s groundbreaking *A Study in Choreography for Camera*.[[1]](#endnote-1) The following year he danced opposite Pearl Primus in Helen Tamiris’s revival of *Show Boat*, and in 1947 he appeared in Lew Christensen’s minstrel ballet *Blackface* (1947) for Ballet Society, a company formed by George Balanchine that was a precursor to the New York City Ballet. In 1948 he performed in another Tamiris production on Broadway, *Inside U.S.A*.

**Major Contributions to the Field**

Beatty admired Graham, Dunham, and modern jazz dance proponent Jack Cole. Their dance vocabularies influenced his evolving choreographic palate. In 1945 Beatty established himself as an independent dance artist. His first major dance work, *Southern Landscape* (1947), was created after reading Howard Fast’s *Freedom Road*, a historical novel about Reconstruction. Commenting on the plight of African Americans in the South after the Civil War, *Southern Landscape* encompassed five sections, the second of which, *Mourner’s Bench*, a signature solo performed by Beatty, has become a modern dance classic. Set to the traditional spiritual ‘There is a Balm in Gilead,’ the dancer rolls, contracts, and reaches upward on a wooden bench expressing the sorrow of a community overcome by racial conflict. The work received critical acclaim and Beatty began to be considered a major figure in modern dance. In 1949 he established his own company, Tropicana, which toured the United States and abroad for six years until it disbanded in 1955.

In the late 1950s Beatty turned his attention from performing to teaching and making dances. He met Alvin Ailey in 1958 while teaching at the dance studio of former Dunham dancer Syvilla Fort. Ailey revered Beatty and enlisted his assistance in the early years of the formation of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. Beginning in the 1960s, Ailey’s Dance Theatre became a repository for six of Beatty’s noteworthy dances: *The Road of Pheobe Snow* (1959), performed to the music of Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn, is the saga of a disenfranchised community near the Lackawanna Railroad line. *Come and Get the Beauty of it Hot* (1960) fuses elements of Africa, the Caribbean, and classical dance in a sizzling and sultry suite of jazz ballets set to the music of Charles Mingus, Dizzy Gillespie, and Miles Davis, among others; two of its sections, ‘Congo Tango Palace’ and ‘Tocatta’ are often performed separately. *The Black Belt* (1968), with music by Duke Ellington, depicts a day in an urban disenfranchised Black community. *The Stack Up* (1982), performed to a 1970's beat (including music by Earth, Wind & Fire), depicts a crowded disco and its patrons with attitude, sass, and fierce despair.

Although many of Beatty’s dance works created after 1950 are classified as ‘jazz dance,’ he disliked the label. This classification was probably the result of his affinity for using modern jazz music as accompaniment. His dances carry messages of social change through expressive, explosive, and nuanced movement. Dance phrases and sequences are cradled, guided, and driven by the music of jazz greats Davis, Strayhorn, Mingus, Gillespie, Evans and, most notably, Duke Ellington. Beatty and Ellington collaborated on several ventures, including television specials *A Drum is a Woman* (NBC 1956) and *Black, Brown, and Beige* (CBS 1974). Beatty’s last work, *Ellingtonia*, premiered at the American Dance Festival in 1994.

Beatty’s choreography is urgent and unyielding in energy, and calls for performers with technical proficiency in both modern dance and ballet. He is known for his musicality and ability to create drama through abstract design rather than narrative gesture. Often referred to as a humanist, his dances feature loose scenarios of hardship and survival from the African-American experience as evidenced in *Mourner’s Bench*. His admiration for traditional Black folkways as authentic ways of knowing was similar to the perspective of Harlem Renaissance poet Langston Hughes, who, like Beatty, frequented urban night clubs and relished the honest vibrancy of jazz music and rhythms of black social dance.

In the 1970s Beatty served as an artist-in-residence for the Elma Lewis School of Fine Arts in Roxbury, Massachusetts. His close association with theatre director Vinnette Carroll resulted in Tony-nominated Broadway shows *Don’t Bother Me I Can’t Cope* (1972) and *Your Arms Too Short to Box With God* (1976).

**Legacy**

Beatty left his imprint by creating works for several dance companies including Batsheva Company of Israel, Birgit Ballet Stockholm, Ballet Hispanico of New York City, and Boston Ballet. He set his works on Dayton Contemporary Dance Company, Philadanco (Philadelphia Dance Company) and the Cleo Robinson Dance Company.

Virtuosity and perfection are hallmarks of his style, and dancers consider performing Beatty’s choreography a major achievement.

Over time, Beatty’s dances seem more, not less, significant to the development of Black concert dance. The American Dance Festival initiative to reconstruct black modern dance—and the related film documentaries *Free to Dance* and *Dancing in the Light*—highlight Beatty’s works. More recently, Philadanco collaborated with Temple University Libraries and Bryn Mawr College to reconstruct *Southern Landscape*. The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater continues to revive Beatty’s work, most recently *The Road of Phoebe Snow*. Beatty’s musicality, social commentary, and humanist abstraction remain as relevant in the twenty-first century as ever.

**Melanye Dixon**

**Selected Works**

*Southern Landscape*, (1947)

*Mourner’s Bench* (1947)

*The Road of Pheobe Snow* (1959)

*Come and Get the Beauty of it Hot* (1960)

*Congo Tango Palace* (1960)

*Tocatta* (1960)

*Migration* (1964)

*Montgomery Variations* (1967)

*The Black Belt* (1968)

*Nobody Came* (1968)

*Bring My Servant Home* (1969)

*Antigone* (1969)

*Caravanserai* (1973)

*A Rag, A Bone, and a Hank of Hair* (1975)

*Beauty is Skin Deep, Ugly is to the Bone* (1976)

*A Month of Sundays* (1979)

*The Stack Up* (1982)

*Blues Shift* (1984)

*Ellingtonia* (1994)

**References and Further Reading**

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**Film documentation**

Deren, M. (2002) *Experimental Films, New York: Mystic Fire Video*. Includes *A Study of Choreography for Camera* (1945).

Jacob Pillow’s Interactive. Includes historical footage of Beatty in *Mourner’s Bench* from 1948.

Lacy, M.D. (2007) Dancing in the Light: Six Dances by African-American Choreographers, coproduction of American Dance Festival and Educational Broadcasting Corporation. Includes a revival of *Mourner’s Bench* performed by Jerome Stigler of the Dayton Contemporary Dance Company.

Lacy, M.D. (2001) *Free to Dance*, coproduction of American Dance Festival and John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. Contextualizes Talley Beatty within history of Black modern dance.

**Paratexts**

Talley Beatty in Maya Deren’s *A Study of Choreography for Camera* (1945)

<http://arttattler.com/Images/NorthAmerica/NewYork/MoMA/Maya%20Deren/10-Deren_AStudyInChoreography.jpg>

Talley Beatty in *Southern Landscape* at Jacob's Pillow, 1948. Photo by Eric M. Sanford, courtesy of Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival Archives

<http://www.brynmawr.edu/news/2005-06-30/dance.shtml>

Notes

1. Several scholars have argued that Beatty’s contribution to Deren’s film were so significant that he could be considered a co-author. See H. Durkin (2013) ‘Cinematic “Pas de Deux”: The Dialogue between Maya Deren’s Experimental Filmmaking and Talley Beatty’s Black Ballet Dancer in *A Study in Choreography for Camera* (1945),’ *Journal of American Studies* 47(2): 385-403 and M. Franko (2001) ‘Aesthetic Agencies in Flux,’ in *Maya Deren and the American Avant-Garde*, ed. B. Nichols, Berkeley: University of California Press, 130-49. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)