**Hanya Holm (Johanna Eckert, b. 3 March, 1893, Worms-am-Rhein, Germany; d. 3 November 1992, New York City)**

**Summary**

Hanya Holm, dancer, choreographer, and teacher, is widely considered one of the pioneers of American modern dance, and was one of the most influential figures to transfer German dance philosophies and practices across the Atlantic. In an international career that spanned eight decades, she established herself as an award-winning choreographer of diverse genres, a master teacher, and a tireless advocate for dance. Her approach to kinetic abstraction and the lived experience of movement was foundational to modern dance practice and theory. In particular, she developed elaborate theories of the dancer’s relationship to space. Unlike some of her colleagues, Holm did not develop a codified technique, but instead taught through improvisational exploration of a comprehensive movement syllabus based on natural forces such as gravity and momentum. She insisted that each dance composition have its own form and its own vocabulary – an imperative passed down to her from her mentor Mary Wigman – and Holm, in turn, encouraged her students to develop their own aesthetic. Protégés including Alwin Nikolais, Murray Louis, Nancy Hauser, Valerie Bettis, Eve Gentry, Don Redlich, and Glen Tetley made distinctive contributions to modern dance in the latter half of the twentieth century.

**Early Influences**

Hanya Holm’s early training in 1910s and 1920s Germany shaped her artistic, social, and pedagogical worldview. After first studying music at the Hoch Conservatory in Frankfurt-am-Main, she received a certificate from the Dalcroze Institute and began teaching rhythmic gymnastics to women and children in 1915. The Dalcroze method of teaching rhythm through physical exercises was formative for Holm, and she was inspired by Dalcroze’s proposition that rhythm could create a sense of unified community threatened by changes in modern social life. The Dalcroze method was an important contributor to modernist body culture in early twentieth century Germany; educational reformers, life reformers, anthropologists, and psychologists saw rhythmic gymnastics as a way to address the problems of modernity, including nervousness and alienation. Holm later echoed these ideas when she argued for the value of dance as a social practice and a means to health and vitality.

In 1920, a solo performance by Mary Wigman prompted her to follow her interest in movement into an emerging realm: modern dance, or *Ausdruckstanz* (dance of expression), of which Wigman was a leading exponent. Holm later described Wigman’s conception of dance as ‘a form made alive through the pulsebeat of experience’. Dance makes inner experience visible, she argued, but modern dancers do not dance emotions: ‘we dance the constant change of mental conditions, as they are alive in man as a rhythmic flow’ (Holm 1940/1992). Through the 1920s, Wigman and her close-knit group of students, including Holm, collaboratively developed a curriculum and a repertory of group works such as *Scenes from a Dance Drama* (1923) and *Celebration* (1928), which they toured throughout Europe. By the end of the decade, Wigman was the most famous modern dancer in Europe.

**Major Contributions**

In 1931, Wigman selected Holm to direct a New York branch of the Dresden-based Wigman School, which had grown to over two thousand students. As Wigman’s official representative, Holm attracted enthusiastic students and quickly became a prominent figure in the burgeoning modern dance scene in New York. Despite her limited English, she wrote a number of articles explaining the Wigman method and became renowned for her lecture-demonstrations. In her signature Demonstration Program, her dancers progressed from walking to skipping, gliding, running, and leaping, culminating in their famous roll-over-fall; they demonstrated how movement relates to space through tension, focus, direction, and relationships; they embodied pulse, rhythm, vibration, circles, and momentum.

The Demonstration Program presented the movement concepts that formed the foundation of Holm’s curriculum. At the New York Wigman School — later to become the Hanya Holm School of the Dance — and her summer program at Colorado College, she taught improvisationally, drum in hand, leading students through targeted explorations of concepts such as tension and release, vibration, or elasticity, and the physical possibilities of each part of the body. In addition, she offered a complete dance curriculum that included theory, composition, anatomy, music/percussion, pedagogy, choric forms, and Labanotation. She expected her students to continually work on choreographic studies, shown periodically at ‘dance evenings’.

Holm critiqued an American over-emphasis on virtuosity in dance, and declared that her goal was to ‘make a person’ out of each student. ‘You must search in your own body’, she insisted (1993). In her philosophy, modern dance cultivated the self and created a community bound together by a shared experience. In this way, Holm transferred to the American context the spiritual, sensual, and abstract approach to movement developed by Mary Wigman and her mentor Rudolf Laban. In their work, space was considered a living element; they argued that the dancer must attend to the inner space of the body as well as the external space of the environment in order to be fully present and alive. After her emigration, Holm gradually shed some of the mysticism of German *Ausdruckstanz* but continued to emphasize that each dancer must have a subjective response to movement fundamentals. She proposed that dance happens when the dancer conveys lived experience through an abstract language of the body. As a result, every dance will be different, impelled by the inner impulse of the dancer.

This emphasis on movement fundamentals and subjective, constantly changing responses enabled Holm to create diverse choreographies adapted to different aesthetics and conditions of production, from open-air festival productions in Europe to American concert dance to Broadway musicals. Her choreographic works addressed the problems of modernity (*Trend*, *Metropolitan Daily*, *City Nocturne*, *Windows*), celebrating community and primal ways of being together (*Primitive Rhythm*, *Dance of Work and Play*), American folk sources (*Namesake*, *From This Earth*), classical mythology (*Orestes and the Furies*), grief (*Kindertotenlieder*), play (*Jocose*), and other themes. She had a great sense of humour, which she could express as easily in pure movement as she did in *My Fair Lady* (1956).

From 1936 to 1944 Holm directed a modern dance company that was celebrated as a ‘company of principals’; she often created her work in collaboration with her dancers, who each had a distinctive style. Holm extended the range of modern dance beyond the concert format, bringing her modernist approach to opera, theatre, musical theatre, and other large-scale productions, such as her choric work *Trend* (1937). *Trend* featured an innovative set, lighting design, and sound score, with the music surrounding the audience in new ways.

Holm thrived in collaborative situations, and she earned accolades in commercial realms like musical comedies, television, and film for her ability to weave dance and movement into a unified, multimedia whole. Along with her brilliant comic sensibility, her abstract and improvisational approach to movement enabled her to adapt to any theatrical setting, mood, or narrative. Radical in the high-pressure environment of the commercial theatre, she used improvisational exploration during the creative process in order to connect movement ideas to themes. She became a highly sought-after choreographer on the international stage with *Kiss Me, Kate* (1948), *The Golden Apple* (1954), *My Fair Lady* (1956), and other musicals, as well as experimental theater productions like *The Insect Comedy* (1948) and with opera, such as the version of *Orpheus and Eurydice* that she staged in Vancouver in 1959.

**Legacy**

Although Hanya Holm did not leave behind an active repertory or company, she did leave a substantive philosophy of dance and a model for how to understand movement and train dancers. A dancer trained in the Holm method was sensitized to movement and its possibilities – sensual, abstract, narrative, or formal. The benefit of this approach can be seen in the range of styles developed by her former students: the kinetic multimedia spectacles of Alwin Nikolais, the physical eloquence of Murray Louis, the contemporary ballet style of Glen Tetley, and even the cool, minimalist circles of Lucinda Childs.

Holm’s pedagogical approach, theories of movement, and uncompromising emphasis on creativity in movement have become so integrated in modern dance practice that they can easily go unrecognized. Many aspects of her approach have continued to the present: improvisation as a primary way of generating movement discovery; collaborative creative processes; emphasis on holism and mind-body connections; percussion accompaniment for classes; the use of supplemental physical training such as the conditioning system created by Joseph Pilates; the importance of understanding human anatomy; and the use of Labanotation as a way to record choreography and to identify it as intellectual property.

**Tresa Randall**

**Selected Works**

*Euripides’ Bacchae* (1928)

*The Farewell* (1928)

*L’Histoire du Soldat* (1929)

*Drive* (1935)

*In Quiet Space* (1935)

*Primitive Rhythm* (1935)

*City Nocturne* (1936)

*Salutation* (1936)

*Sarabande* (1936)

*Dance in Two Parts: A Cry Rises in the Land, New Destinies* (1936)

*Four Chromatic Eccentricities* (1936)

*Festive Rhythm* (1936)

*Trend* (1937)

*Dance of Joy* (1937)

*Dance of Introduction* (1938)

*Dance of Work and Play* (1938)

*Dance Sonata* (1938)

*Metropolitan Daily* (1939)

*Tragic Exodus* (1939)

*They Too Are Exiles* (1940)

*The Golden Fleece* (1941)

*From This Earth* (1941)

*What So Proudly We Hail* (1942)

*Namesake* (1942)

*Parable – with reference to the popular incident of the Wise and Foolish Virgins* (1943)

*Suite of Four Dances* (1943)

*Orestes and the Furies* (1943)

*What Dreams May Come* (1944)

*Walt Whitman Suite* (1945)

*Dance for Four* (1946)

*Windows* (1946)

*Ozark Suite* (1947)

*“And So Ad Infinitum”* (1947)

*Xochipili* (1948)

*The Eccentricities of Davey Crockett* (1948)

*The Insect Comedy* (1948) (play)

*E=MC2* (1948) (play)

*Kiss Me, Kate* (1948) (musical comedy)

*History of a Soldier* (1949)

*Ionization* (1949)

*Blood Wedding* (1949) (play)

*Concert Royal* (1950)

*Five Old French Dances* (1950)

*The Liar* (1950) (musical comedy)

*Out of This World* (1950) (musical comedy)

*Prelude* (1951)

*Quiet City* (1951)

*Kindertotenlieder* (1952)

*Concertino da Camera* (1952)

*My Darlin’ Aida* (1952) (musical comedy)

*Ritual* (1953)

*Temperaments and Behavior* (1953)

*Preludes I and II* (1954)

*Presages* (1954)

*L’Histoire du Soldat* (1954)

*The Golden Apple* (1954) (musical comedy)

*Desert Drone* (1955)

*Pavane* (1955)

*Sousa March* (1955)

*Reuben, Reuben* (1955) (musical comedy)

*Partita No. 3* (1956)

*My Fair Lady* (1956)

*The Vagabond King* (1956) (motion picture)

*The Ballad of Baby Doe* (1956) (opera)

*Chanson Triste* (1957)

*You Can’t Go Home Again* (1957)

*Where’s Charley?* (1957) (musical comedy)

*The Dance and the Drama* (1957) (TV)

*Pinocchio* (1957) (TV)

*Orpheus and Eurydice* (1959) (opera)

*Christine* (1960) (musical comedy)

*Camelot* (1960) (musical comedy)

*String Quartet No. 21* (1961)

*Six Psalms* (1961)

*Music for an Imaginary Ballet* (1961)

*Figure of Predestination* (1963)

*Toward the Unknown Region* (1963)

*Dinner with the President* (1963) (TV)

*Theatrics* (1964)

*Anya* (1965) (musical comedy)

*Spooks* (1967)

*Rota* (1975)

*Four Nocturnes* (1980)

*Sonata for Piano and Violin* (1980)

*Cantata Profana* (1981)

*Ratatat* (1982)

*Jocose* (1984)

*Capers* (1985)

**Writings by Artist:**

Holm, H. (1993) ‘A Philosophy of Dance,’ in Hanya Holm: the Life and Legacy; special issue of *The Journal for Stage Directors and Choreographers* 7 (1).

Holm, H. ([1940] 1992) ‘The Mary Wigman I Know,’ in *The Dance Has Many Faces*, ed. W. Sorell, Pennington, NJ: a capella books: 18-27.

Holm, H. (1938) ‘*Trend* Grew Upon Me’, *Magazine of Art* 31 (3): 136-137.

Holm, H. (1935) ‘The German Dance in the American Scene,’ in *The Modern Dance*, ed. V. Stewart and M. Armitage. New York: E. Weyhe: 127-134.

**References and Further Reading**

Gitelman, C. (2000) ‘Finding a Place for Hanya Holm’, *Dance Chronicle* 23 (1): 49-71.

Gitelman, C., ed. (2003) *Liebe Hanya: Mary Wigman’s Letters to Hanya Holm*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

Manning, S. (2007) ‘*Ausdruckstanz* across the Atlantic,’ in *Dance Discourses: Keywords in Dance Research*, eds. S. Franco and M. Nordera, London and New York: Routledge: 46 – 60.

Randall, T. (2012) ‘Hanya Holm and an American *Tanzgemeinschaft,’* in *New German Dance Studies*, eds. S. Manning and L. Ruprecht, Chicago: University of Illinois Press: 79-98.

Sorell, W. (1969) *Hanya Holm: The Biography of an Artist*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.

**Documentaries**

Cristofori, M. (1988) *Hanya: Portrait of a Pioneer,* Dance Horizons.

Sullivan, K. (2011) *Hanya Holm: A Retrospective*, Insight Media.

**Paratexts**

Photograph of Holm by Gerda Peterich (permission required)

[http://collections.currier.org/Obj11140?sid=30609&x=44901](https://collaborate.northwestern.edu/owa/redir.aspx?C=V-DTn9yoTEiM-137Ss0Gfb_uaY0W2dAIspzjJ7mM8Cv9QzdbBnAtl9HZJ1COQz5Ei5ADs3gVktQ.&URL=http%3a%2f%2fcollections.currier.org%2fObj11140%3fsid%3d30609%26x%3d44901" \t "_blank)

Barbara Morgan photo of *Trend* (permission required):

<http://museum.marquette.edu/eMuseumPlus?service=ExternalInterface&module=collection&objectId=6507&viewType=detailView>

Please note that photographs by Barbara Morgan are now at UCLA. Photographs from this source should be credited as follows:

Barbara and Willard Morgan Photographs and Papers, Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, UCLA