**Weidman, Charles (b. 22 July 1901 Lincoln, Nebraska; d. 15 July 1975 New York City)**

**Summary**

Charles Weidman had a profound impact on the development of American modern dance. Collaboration with Doris Humphrey initiated his choreographic journey: their movement experimentations evolved into a technique based on the actions of fall and recovery, and breath and suspension. They established the Humphrey-Weidman Studio and the Humphrey-Weidman Company in 1929, with Weidman working individually throughout the partnership, which lasted until the mid-1940s. One of the few American male dancer-choreographers of the period, he explored gender distinctions in dance and enabled the creation of works that delved into male-female relationships when many other major performing groups were all female. The concept of *kinetic pantomime* shaped Weidman’s portrayals of the everyday, such as the film-inspired comedy *Flickers* (1942) and *Lynchtown* (1936), which offered a critical commentary on the horrors of lynching. At the other end of Weidman’s aesthetic spectrum are dances known for a more formalist musicality, such as *Brahms Waltzes* (1961), created for the Charles Weidman Theatre Dance Company. Throughout his career Weidman crossed between the entertainment and high arts worlds, creating successful Broadway shows and nightclub revues while choreographing for opera companies and concert dance stages. Weidman’s legacy has spread through his teaching and work with prominent Broadway and modern dance performers and choreographers.

**Training and Early Career**

Weidman began his dance training in ballet and ballroom with Eleanor Frampton in Lincoln, Nebraska, before moving to Los Angeles in 1919 to study at the Denishawn School, where he was immersed in richly theatrical dances that ranged from music visualisations to impressions of foreign dance styles. Moving quickly into the Denishawn performing company, Weidman toured North America, England, and Asia. He partnered Martha Graham, absorbed non-western musical rhythms, and learned about the portrayal of masculinity in technique through Ted Shawn’s focus on men dancing. Weidman also began working with Doris Humphrey and pianist Pauline Lawrence, eventually running the Denishawn School in New York City.

Breaking away from Denishawn in 1928, Weidman and Humphrey explored the movement potential of the body and choreographed dances in which they set out to ‘dance man and woman in America today’ (*Charles Weidman: On* *His Own*). Established in 1929, the Humphrey-Weidman Concert Company and Studio ushered in a period of vibrant creativity, developing a strong relationship between performance and technique early on, with choreographic structures such as theme and variations forming the basis of technical exercise series.

Weidman’s artistic and domestic circle, which was comprised of Humphrey and Lawrence, expanded with the arrival of lover and creative partner José Limón, with whom Weidman worked for ten years. In 1934 Weidman and Humphrey joined the faculty at the Bennington School of the Dance – an opportunity that exposed them to a broader range of students, many of whom taught dance. Embarking on a national tour of the ‘gymnasium circuit’ at colleges and universities, Weidman and Humphrey introduced their shows with lecture-demonstrations, helping to educate audiences in how to view the new modern dance.

Weidman’s pedagogic principles were developed in relation to choreographic needs, with clear development seen in movement series that extended the dynamic range of the body and where the use of weight emphasised rebound activity. There is a choreographic sensibility embedded in technical studies to the point that some were set into the dance *Classroom, Modern Style* (1951). Weidman taught at universities and colleges throughout his career and offered his own Dance Teachers’ Summer Workshops, and in the 1970s he began working with the Dance Notation Bureau to document his works.

**Choreography and Style**

As one of the few male modern dancers of the early twentieth century, Weidman’s significance extends beyond the diversity and thematic range a mixed-gender cast affords. Weidman’s style developed in conjunction with Humphrey’s, his movement principles evident in a power and angularity of shape with an emphasis on rebound. Developing a danced masculinity through working with Limón, William Matons, and William Bales, his choreography emphasised angularity of the limbs with an aggressive attack, as seen in the Men’s Section of *New Dance* (1935) created with Humphrey. Syncopated rhythms develop with unexpected dynamic shifts; powerful limbs carve through the air and extend the line of the body. Expansive travelling steps consume space punctuated by expansive off-centre turns. Fundamental connections between technique and choreography were established through an emphasis on performance, with shows held on a regular basis at the Humphrey-Weidman Studio. Weidman composed to a rich diversity of composers from Bach and Brahms to Irving Berlin, Aaron Copeland, and Wallingford Reigger.

An early interest in architecture informed the spatial qualities of Weidman’s style, while an early interest in history informed the themes of his dances. Weidman is widely known for humorous and vibrant character portrayals of people and relationships developed through *kinetic pantomime*, using recognisable gestural actions that are manipulated or fragmented beyond mere pantomime. Satire, irony and humour peppered creations that poked fun at social relationships and traditions. *Quest* (1936) conveyed the artist’s struggles to gain recognition, with exaggerated manifestations of dance critics and society women. Gestural nuances and postural changes fleshed out historical figures, such as Abraham Lincoln in *A House Divided* (1945), and family members, including *And Daddy was a Fireman* (1943) and *On My Mother’s Side* (1940). Fragmented pantomimic and non-representational movements, performed at times to lively poetic accompaniment, revealed rich stories. Weidman’s choreographic diversity is evident in Broadway work, *As Thousands Cheer* (1933) a revue by Moss Hart and Irving Berlin; *War Dances for Wooden Indians* and *The Professor visits Harlem* (1941) for the Rainbow Room in Rockefeller Center; and dances for Prokofiev’s *Love for Three Oranges* (1949), aNew York City Opera production. A Federal Theatre Project production of Voltaire’s *Candide* shared the stage with Helen Tamiris’ *How Long Brethren?* in 1937. A Guggenheim grant funded *Fables for our Time* (1947), based on James Thurber’s 1940 eponymous poem, the humorous social commentary brought to life through vivid portrayals of animals and people.

*Atavisms* (1935-1936), a trio of short works, included *Lynchtown*, one of the few dances by Weidman that remains in active repertoire. Recalling his childhood experience of witnessing a lynching, Weidman focused on portraying the gathering crowd rather than the act of murder. Entering with powerful strides, the group’s stiffly held arms and straight leg walk convey a strong determination. The dancers’ individuality slowly diminishes as tension builds and a mob mentality takes over. Accusatory fingers point at the end of outstretched arms, hands cover mouths, jumps and leaps have a staccato attack and land heavily into the floor with hunched over torsos. Like a group of zombies, dancers follow their leaders. Voyeuristic curiosity takes over as a lifeless victim is dragged across the stage, the crowd ritually circling him.

After Humphrey retired from performing and the Humphrey-Weidman Company dissolved in 1944, Weidman’s creative output diminished. However, a new choreographic phase began when artist Mikhail Santaro became his creative partner and designer. In 1960 they established the Expression of Two Arts Studio and Theatre in New York where they held regular shows. Weidman’s late group work is marked by a more formalist style, exemplified by *Brahms’ Waltzes* (1961). Dedicated to Humphrey, it conveys a joy and luxurious movement style, rich in dynamic shifts. Explosive leaps, expansive arm gestures and sudden falls to the floor rebound to upright positions while angular arms carve through space to initiate sculptural turns. Other works from the 1960s and 1970s explore the architectural possibilities of group spatial dynamics and a rich musicality, seen in *Christmas Oratorio* (1960), which uses counterpoint, syncopation and theme and variations to explore Bach’s score.

**Legacy**

Weidman’s modern dance legacy is found in his contributions to the Humphrey-Weidman technique, an expressive style based on clear principles of movement. His theatricality is based on vibrant musical and choreographic structures that reveal humanity’s foibles through character development. Few dances remain in performance but those that do (such as *Lynchtown* and *Brahms’ Waltzes*) have a dynamic quality and clarity of movement that continue to challenge new generations of performers.

Weidman’s teaching principles, along with an inquisitive and playful choreographic sensibility, have been passed on to generations of dancers through college and university teaching and summer schools such as Bennington and Jacob’s Pillow Dance Festival. Weidman crossed between the high art concert dance world and entertainment worlds, working with significant dancer-choreographers such as José Limón, Jack Cole, Sybil Shearer, Eleanor King, Bob Fosse and Alvin Ailey.

**Stacey Prickett**

**Selected Works**

1928:

*Rhythmic Patterns of Java*

*Singhalese Drum Dance*

*Israel* (Irene Lewisohn concept for Neighborhood Playhouse, co-choreographed with Doris Humphrey and Martha Graham)

1929:

*Ein Heldenleben* (Irene Lewisohn concept for Manhattan Opera House, co-choreographed with Doris Humphrey)

*Rumanian Rhapsody No. 1*

*Etude No 2*

1930:

*Lysistrata* (co-choreographed with Doris Humphrey)

*Two Studies* (co-choreographed with Humphrey)

1931:

*Three Studies*

*The Happy Hippocrite*

*String Quartet* (concept by Irene Lewisohn, co-choreographed with Doris Humphrey)

1932:

*Americana*

*Danza*

*Dance of Sport, Dance of Work* (co-choreographed with José Limón & William Matons)

*Studies in Conflict*

*Prologue to Saga*

*Danzon*

1933:

*Candide*

*L’Amour à la Militaire (Piccoli Soldati)*

*As Thousands Cheer* (revue)

*The School for Husbands* (co-choreographed with Doris Humphrey)

1934:

*Alcina* *Suite* (co-choreographed with Doris Humphrey)

*Kinetic Pantomime*

*Life Begins at 8:40* (revue)

1935:

*Traditions*

*Duo-Drama* (co-choreographed with Humphrey)

*Rudepoema* (co-choreographed with Humphrey)

*New Dance* (co-choreographed with Humphrey)

*American Saga*

*Stock Exchange* (from *Atavisms*)

1936:

*Quest: A Choreographic Pantomime*

*Atavisms: Bargain Counter, Stock Exchange, Lynchtown*

*Promenade*

*Theatre Piece* (co-choreographed with Humphrey)

1937:

*I’d Rather Be Right* (revue)

*Candide* (revised under auspices of Federal Theatre Project)

1938:

*This Passion*

*Studies in Technique for Men*

*Opus 51*

1939:

*The Race of Life*

*To the Dance*

1940:

*On My Mother’s Side*

1941:

*Decade: A Biography of Modern Dance from 1930-1940* (co-choreographed with Humphrey)

*War Dance for Wooden Indians (Rainbow Room)*

*The Professor Visits Harlem* (Rainbow Room)

*Portraits of Famous Dancers*

1942:

*Flickers*

1943:

*And Daddy Was a Fireman*

*The Dancing Master*

*Rumba to the Moon* (Rainbow Room)

*New Faces of 1943* (revue)

1944:

*The Heart Remembers*

*Sing out, Sweet Land* (musical revue co-choreographed with Doris Humphrey)

1945:

*A House Divided*

1946:

*If the Shoe Fits* (musical)

1947:

*Fables of Our Time (After James Thurber)*

1948:

*Panamic Suite*

*Box Plastique*

1949:

*Rose of Sharon*

*Song of Solomon*

*Love for Three Oranges* (New York City Opera)

1950:

*Dance of the Streets*

1951:

*Classroom, Modern Style*

1954:

*The War Between Men and Women*

*The Littlest Revue*

1957:

*Portofino* (musical)

1960:

*Christmas Oratorio*

1961:

*Brahms Waltzes*

1965:

*Easter Oratorio*

1973:

*St Matthew Passion*

1974:

*Visualization – Or From a Farm in New Jersey*

**References and Further Reading**

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Siegel, M.B. (1993) *Days on Earth: The Dance of Doris Humphrey*, Durham and London: Duke University Press.

**Film Documentaries**

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Rosenberg, D. (1996) *Flickers: Conversations with Contemporary Masters of American Modern Dance*, Madison WI: ADF Video.

**Paratexts**

Weidman’s *Lynchtown* (1936)*,* photo by Barbara Morgan

<http://www.vintageworks.net/VintageWorks_Images/Full/9932_Barbara_Morgan.jpg>

Weidman in *On My Mother’ Side* (1940), photo by Barbara Morgan

<http://www.iphotocentral.com/Photos/VintageWorks_Images/Mid/9946_Barbara_Morgan.jpg>

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