**Winfield, Hemsley (b. 20 April 1907, Yonkers, New York; d. 15 January** **1934, Yonkers, New York)**

**Summary**

An early initiator of Black modern dance, Hemsley Winfield first gained recognition as an actor and director of the New Negro Art Theater in New York City. Galvanized by his success, Winfield founded the New Negro Art Theater Dance Group in 1931. Like other emerging African-American exponents of the new dance, including Edna Guy, Alison Burroughs, Ollie Burgoyne, and Charles Williams, Winfield consciously drew on the philosophy of the New Negro movement, which promoted the use of art to advance racial consciousness and heritage during the Harlem Renaissance. Despite his premature death at age twenty-six, Winfield set a significant starting point for Black modern dance at the crossroads of the Harlem Renaissance, American modernist primitivism, and the emergent modern dance movement. In so doing, Winfield modeled new possibilities for male dance artists, along with his contemporaries Harald Kreutzberg and Ted Shawn.

**Early Career**

While he had some dance training in his youth, Winfield began his professional career in the arts as an actor and director. With the New Negro Art Theater he staged several successful plays, including *Wade in De Water* (1929), written by his mother Jeroline Hemsley, and Oscar Wilde’s *Salome* (1929)*,* in which he danced the lead role in drag.[[1]](#endnote-1) In March 1931Winfield debuted his predominantly male dance company as the Bronze Ballet Plastique—his use of the term ‘plastique’ emphasizing his emulation of Ted Shawn’s Delsartian posing exercises and musical visualization techniques. That same year, with the company now eighteen members strong and renamed The New Negro Art Theater Dance Group, Winfield and Guy co-directed the First Negro Dance Recital in America. The concert was presented at the Chanin Building’s Theater in the Clouds in Manhattan. Among the works Winfield presented was *Life and Death*, which portrayed an existential struggle between ‘death’ (a chorus of men) looming over ‘life,’ portrayed by Winfield.[[2]](#endnote-2) Other dances he presented were more ethnically specific, such as *African Themes*, *Negro*, and the duet *Jungle Wedding*, while still others were more abstract, such as *Plastique,* his solo *Bronze Study,* and a duet with Guy, *Songs Without Words*. Guy presented two solos, *A Figure from Angkor ‘Vat* and *Temple Offering*, which were choreographed by Ruth St. Denis.

Writing a mostly favourable review of the concert, critic John Martin first noted that the dancing space of the theatre was inadequate and then called the concert ‘the outstanding novelty of the season.’ But less favorably, he described Winfield’s *Bronze Study* as ‘merely the exhibition of an exemplary physique,’ and suggested that focusing on ‘Negro’ themes was more suitable than works associated with ‘an alien race,’ referring to Winfield’s and Guy’s solos, which were influenced by Ted Shawn and Ruth St. Denis, respectively.[[3]](#endnote-3) Other reviews were more enthusiastic. The larger significance of Martin’s remarks was that the auspicious evening presented new modes of representation and new interpretations of modernism that implicitly and explicitly challenged mainstream ideals of American dance and presented an alternative vision and worldview. Indeed, the First Negro Dance Recital in America raised a crucial question that would not be resolved for decades to come: how to understand and evaluate what Black bodies and Black aesthetics brought to a largely progressive but exclusively white artistic space.

During the early 1930s Winfield and his company continued to make an impact in several organized dance concerts, as well as in the Broadway revue *Fast and Furious* (1931) and in Louis Gruenberg's opera *Emperor Jones* (1933) at the Metropolitan Opera, where Winfield created a sensation dancing the witch doctor. After Winfield’s death, noted Harlem Renaissance sculptor Augusta Savage unveiled a portrait of Winfield, and a colleague noted: ‘Mr. Winfield was the pioneer in Negro concert dancing. In that field, he attained for his race and eminence comparable to that of Paul Robeson in the musical field. He achieved amazing results in such a short time.’[[4]](#endnote-4) Prominent company members Ollie Burgoyne and Randolph Sawyer would go on to make important contributions to African-American modern dance. Not only they but also generations of future artists were indebted to Winfield’s example.

**Carl Paris**

**Selected Choreographic Works**

*De Promis’ Lan’* (1930) a pageant, which included “Life and Death”

*African Themes*  (1931)

*Jungle Wedding* (1931)

*Ritual* (1931)

*Negro* (1931)

*Camp Meeting* (1931)

*Bronze Study* (1931)

*Plastique* (1931)

*Dance of the Woods* (1932)

*Sundown* (1932)

*St. Louis Blues* (1932)

*Slave Ballet* from *Salomé* (1932).

**References and Further Reading**

DeFrantz, T. (1996) ‘Simmering Passivity.’ in *Moving Words: Re-writing Dance*, ed. G. Morris, New York, Routledge: 107-20.

Foulkes, J. (2002) *Modern Bodies: Dance and American Modernism from Martha Graham to Alvin Ailey,* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Manning, S. (2004) *Modern Dance Negro Dance: Race in Motion*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Nash, J. (1988) ‘Pioneers in Negro Concert Dance: 1931 to 1937,’ in *The Black Tradition in American Modern Dance*, ed. G. Myers, Durham: American Dance Festival, 11-14.

Perpener, J.O. (2001) *African-American Concert Dance: The Harlem Renaissance and Beyond,* Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

**Suggested Paratexts**

Hemsley Winfield and Frances Atkins in *Jungle Wedding,* Joe Nash Collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts

<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/freetodance/timeline/pop/pop_1>

Winfield and dancers in *Life and Death*, see page twenty-three of Richard Long, *The Black Tradition in American Dance*, Joe Nash Collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts

Notes

1. This production of *Salome* has occasioned much interest among scholars, especially in relation to the images by openly gay artist Bruce Nugent. See E. McBreen (1998) ‘Biblical Gender Bending in Harlem: The Queer Performance of Nugent’s Salome,’ *Art Journal* 57 (3): 22-28 and M. Poueymirou (2011) ‘The Race to Perform: *Salome* and the Wilde Harlem Renaissance,’ in *Refiguring Oscar Wilde’s Salome*, ed. M. Bennett, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 201-19. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Qtd. in J. Perpener (2001) *African-American Concert Dance: The Harlem Renaissance and Beyond.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 42. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Qtd. in S. Manning (2004) *Modern Dance Negro Dance: Race in Motion*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, Press, 34-5. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Qtd. in J. Perpener (2001) *African-American Concert Dance: The Harlem Renaissance and Beyond.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 54. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)