**Tamiris, Helen (b. 23 April 1902, New York City; d. 4 August 1966, New York City)**

**Summary**

Helen Tamiris was a key figure in the development of American modern dance; along with Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey and Hanya Holm, she helped to forge the art form. Born Helen Becker to an immigrant Russian Jewish family on Manhattan’s Lower East Side, she was introduced to dance at the Henry Street Settlement House. After a brief stint in the ballet world and on the commercial stage, she gained recognition as a concert dancer with a suite of dances set to *Negro Spirituals*. These signature works established her reputation as a choreographic voice for the oppressed; themes of social protest inspired her throughout her career. As a political activist she promoted collective bargaining for dancers, organized collaborative ventures with other early modern dancers, and led the campaign to create a Federal Dance Project for unemployed dancers during the Depression years. She was unusual among early moderns in her desire to reach a broad popular audience, and in the 1940s and 1950s choreographed a succession of Broadway musicals, receiving critical acclaim for choreography in shows such as *Annie Get Your Gun* and *Plain and Fancy.* Her political engagement and her success in bridging the divide between high art and popular culture distinguish her among American modern dancers.

**Training and Early Influences**

Tamiris received her early training from Irene Lewisohn and Blanche Talmud at the Henry Street Settlement House. The classes, described as Interpretive dancing, included a variety of forms, from folk dance to pantomimic gesture. Joining the corps of the Metropolitan Opera Ballet at fifteen, she went on to tour South America with the Bracale Opera Company, before studying ballet briefly with Michel Fokine. But in the mid-1920s she rejected ballet as an artificial form, and along with other early modern dancers sought to create movement forms to express contemporary ideas. A ‘Manifesto’ she wrote in 1928 described her vision of dance as complete in itself, not dependent on music or costume or narrative.[[1]](#endnote-1) She believed the rhythm of the body should determine choreographic choices, and early compositions included dances in silence and musical accompaniment produced by dancers as they performed.

**Major Contributions to the Field and to Modernism**

Tamiris made her debut as a solo dancer on the concert stage in 1927, and in 1928 she premiered *Two Spirituals:* *Nobody Knows de Trouble I See* and *Joshua Fit de Battle ob Jericho*, at the Little Theater in New York, gaining critical recognition and establishing an identification with African-American experience. The following year *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot* was added to the series, which eventually included nine *Negro Spirituals*. She created a School of American Dance in 1929 for the purpose of developing an ensemble, but while she experimented with creating new movement forms to express her ideas, she never developed a unique technique, as contemporaries such as Graham and Humphrey did. Drawing upon her eclectic training, she incorporated folk themes and ballet and expressive gesture in her dance teaching and compositions.

Individualism was important for Tamiris, but she also understood the power of group efforts. She organized the Dance Repertory Theater (DRT) in 1930, collaborating with Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey and Charles Weidman to produce a two-week season on Broadway and to share costs of production. The effort was short-lived, as choreographic rivalries undermined the cooperative aspect of the project, but Tamiris had developed a concert group, and with them she went on to premiere *Walt Whitman Suite* (1934), a set of dances to a jazz score, inspired by the poet’s vision of a democratic American spirit, and *Cycle of Unrest* (1935) and *Momentum* (1936), works that continued her earlier exploration of social and class conflicts. While many critics praised Tamiris as a dynamic and glamorous performer, some critics considered her group choreography repetitious and literal. Less abstract than colleagues such as Graham and Humphrey, her efforts did not always align with the aesthetic favored by her contemporaries.

Tamiris was instrumental in the formation of an independent Federal Dance Project (FDP) in 1936. Part of the Works Progress Administration’s (WPA) arts projects instigated by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt after the Great Depression, the mission of the FDP was to bring art to the masses and to provide work for the unemployed. Major productions choreographed by Tamiris for the FDP included *Salut au Monde* (1936), another exploration of the poems of Walt Whitman; *How Long Brethren?* (1937), asuite of dances set to African-American work and protest songs; and *Adelante* (1939), a dance in response to the Spanish Civil War. In the context of the FDP, Tamiris’s group works were heralded for making modern dance accessible to a broad public. *How Long Brethren?* was the most popular FDP production in New York City.

From the beginning of her independent career Tamiris collaborated with theatre artists, choreographing movement for a play called *Fiesta* (1929) by Michael Gold. In the 1930s she was associated with the Group Theater where she taught movement classes. Returning to her role as an independent artist after her work with the FDP, Tamiris created a Studio Theater and experimented with different theatrical approaches; *Liberty Song* (1941) and *Bayou Ballads* (1942) were based on American songs. With her group, she performed in diverse venues, such as New York’s famed nightclub, the Rainbow Room, and in a 1943 musical revue partly sponsored by the Department of Agriculture production where she danced Lucy, the Black Market Steak.

Tamiris found a new popular audience for her dances in choreography for a succession of musical comedies in the 1940s and 1950s, including *Up in Central Park* (1945), *Show Boat* (1946), *Annie Get Your Gun* (1946), *Fanny* (1954) and *Plain and Fancy* (1955). In 1946, Tamiris married dancer/choreographer Daniel Nagrin, who had worked as her assistant on many of the Broadway shows, and together they formed the Tamiris-Nagrin Company in 1957. They separated in 1963 and the company was dissolved soon thereafter.

**Legacy**

Of the early modern dancers Tamiris was the most explicitly political in her desire for collective action and in her identification with marginalized populations. Throughout the 1930s, she was active in left-leaning causes, appearing with her group on concerts to raise money for Spain and to protest fascism. When the political climate changed in the late 1930s as Americans prepared for war, these left-wing alliances were often considered suspect. Whether Tamiris was excluded from some of the more prestigious dance institutions, such as the Bennington Summer School of Dance, because she was so outspoken politically, because her early concert work was so poorly reviewed, or because she had not developed a codified technique, is not clear. Yet, in 1958, after some years as an outsider to the modern dance establishment, she was commissioned by a relatively new Dance Department at the Juilliard School of Music to choreograph *Dances for Walt Whitman* (1958).

In that same year Tamiris recorded five of her *Negro Spirituals* on film, and in 1965 she taught all nine of her *Negro Spirituals* to advanced students at the High School for the Performing Arts in New York City. At that point the solos were notated, and since then they have remained in the repertoire of modern dance, often performed by black dancers. Although contemporary scholars have debated the solos’ representation of race in the context of the 1930s, no scholar disputes their canonical status.[[2]](#endnote-2) As scholars recovered the vibrant movement of leftist dance in the 1930s, Tamiris took centerstage. In 1991 Dianne McIntrye recreated *How Long Brethren?,* and this work has confirmed Tamiris’s stature as a dance modernist committed to social justice.

**Ellen Graff**

**Selected Works**

Helen Tamiris

*The Queen Walks in the Garden* (1927)

*Impressions of the Bull Ring* (1927)

*Subconscious* (1927)

*Prize Fight Studies* (1928)

*Twentieth Century Bacchante* (1928)

*Hypocrisy* (1928)

*Two Spirituals:Nobody Knows de Trouble I See, Joshus Fit de Battle ob Jericho (1928)*

(by 1936 seven more spirituals were added)

*Dance of the City* (1929)

*Revolutionary March* (1929)

Helen Tamiris and her Group

*Triangle Dance* (1930)

*Olympus Americanus: A Twentieth Century Ballet* (1931)

*Mourning Ceremonial* (1931)

*Woodblock Dance* (1931)

*Gris Gris Ceremonial* (1932)

*Walt Whitman Suite* (1934)

*Toward the Light* (1934)

*Group Dance* (1934)

*Cycle of Unrest* (1935)

*Harvest* (1935)

*Momentum* (1936)

*Liberty Song* (1941)

*Bayou Ballads* (1942)

*Dances for Walt Whitman* (1958)

Federal Dance Project and Federal Theater Project

*Salut au Monde* (1936) Federal Dance Project

*How Long Brethren?* (1937) Federal Dance Project

*Adelante* (1939) Federal Theater Project

Broadway Musical Theatre

*Up in Central Park* (1945)

*Show Boat* (1946)

*Annie Get Your Gun* (1946)

*Park Avenue* (1946)

*Inside U.S.A.* (1948)

*Touch and Go* (1949)

*Great to Be Alive* (1950)

*Bless You All* (1950)

*Flahooley* (1951)

*Carnival in Flanders* (1953)

*Fanny* (1954)

*Plain and Fancy* (1955)

**Artist’s Writings**

Nagrin, D., ed. (1989) *Tamiris in her Own Voice: Draft of an Autobiography, Studies in Dance History* 1 (1): 1-56.

**Selected Bibliography**

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

Franko, M. (2002) *The Work of Dance: Labor, Movement, and Identity in the 1930s*, Middletown CT: Wesleyan University Press.

Graff, E. (1997) *Stepping Left: Dance and Politics in New York City 1928-1942,* Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Manning, S. (2006) *Modern Dance, Negro Dance: Race in Motion.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Schlundt, C. (1989) *Tamiris: a Chronicle of her Dance Career 1927-1955, Studies in Dance History* 1 (1): 65-154.

**Paratexts in separate file REM.Tamiris.images**

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1. *Tamiris in her Own Voice*, 51-52. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. See M. Franko (2002) and S. Manning (2004). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)