The Dance Is a Weapon

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Prologue

When I was cleaning out my mother's apartment I came across a program she had saved from the Inwood chapter of the Peoples Culture Union of America. It was one of my first public appearances. Staged in 1949, just before the full force of McCarthyism compelled all the old-line Communists and fellow travelers to drop out of sight and keep their politics to themselves, this "cooperative" was almost certainly a remnant of the Communist Party's cultural program that had flourished in New York City during the 1930s.

The community of Inwood lies at the northern tip of Manhattan, beyond the Cloisters and the gardens of Fort Tryon Park, in an area bounded by the Harlem River to the north and east and by Dyckman Street on the south. In those days it was a working-class community—half Irish Catholic and half German Jewish immigrants, with the occasional bohemian family thrown in. Mr. and Mrs. Kamarck, who lived just down the street from us, ran the Inwood chapter of the Peoples Culture Union. Mrs. Kamarck was overweight and gave piano lessons in her cramped three-room apartment. On warm spring days she used to take neighborhood children across the street to the park to make crepe-paper flowers. In the wildness of Inwood Hill Park I played make-believe games with her daughter, who was a year or so younger than me. Mr. Kamarck was a printer. He and his wife probably were Communists.

My father was also a printer. He belonged to the International Typographical Union, a militant trade union that was home to many radicals, and he was a member of the Communist-sponsored writers' club Pen and Hammer. Among other memorabilia I encountered as I went through my mother's file cabinet were some articles my father wrote for the *Newspaper* of the Printing Trades Union and for the *New Masses*. A piece he wrote about the International Typographical Union was published under his pseudonym, George Sherman, since the Party wanted to create a cloud of mystery around those involved in its activities. My mother had a pseudonym as well; Virginia Ackerley (her maiden name) became Alice Vaughn when she was taking part in Party activities. I remember seeing copies of the Communist newspaper the *Daily Worker* in our home, and I would not be surprised to learn that my family sold copies.

I do not think that my parents actually joined the Communist Party, although perhaps in the 1950s, when I was growing up, they would not have told me even if they had. Instead, they were fellow travelers, sympathetic to the Party's goals. Looking around the streets of New York in the 1930s, they would have seen breadlines, Hoovervilles, "Hard Luck" towns, and squatters living in Central Park. The Party promised social and economic justice, and the Soviet Union, which they visited in 1930 for their honeymoon, was the bold new state lighting the way. "From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs" was a refrain that echoed throughout my childhood.

Idealism and deeply held convictions animated efforts by my parents and many others, during the turbulent thirties. They wanted to make a better world, and for some years, I think, they felt that they could help bring that about. The choreographic efforts of a group of New York City dancers who shared the same vision are the subject of this essay. While some of them were Communists and some were not, each was driven by a kind of moral fervor to respond to the complex social and political issues surrounding them.

In the midst of the Great Depression the United States underwent a period of economic and political upheaval. President Franklin D. Roosevelt spoke movingly about "the forgotten man" and introduced New Deal legislation to ease economic hardship, while demagogues such as Huey P. Long called for plans to "soak the rich." The Communist Party, USA, enjoyed its most influential decade during the 1930s.

In New York City on March 6, 1930, the Party led a crowd of between 35,000 and 100,000 workers—depending on which press accounts you believed—in a demonstration for "International Unemployment Day."[1] They marched from Union Square to City Hall, and the ensuing confrontation with New York's finest left about a hundred civilians injured. A second demonstration for unemployment relief on October 16, 1930, disrupted the proceedings of the Board of Estimate. It must have been effective, because the next day the board designated $1 million for unemployment relief.[2]

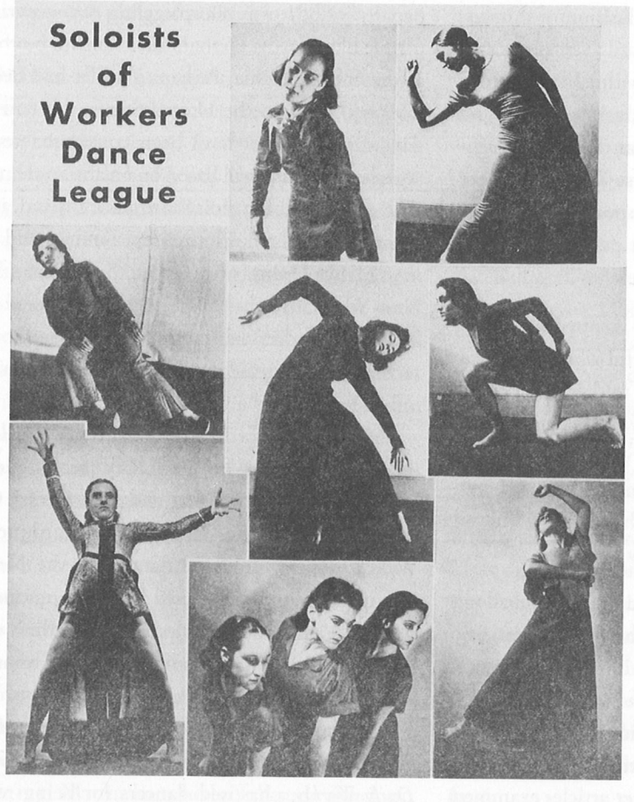
John Reed Clubs, named after the radical American journalist whose body is interred in the Kremlin wall, were organized in 1929 with the goal of creating a proletarian culture; in 1931 a Workers Cultural Federation was formed after a delegation of American artists returned from the Soviet Union with directives for attracting proletarians, intellectuals, and blacks to their ranks, as well as for organizing agitprop theatrical troupes. In New York City 265 delegates, claiming to represent some 20,000 members from 130 different groups, met to endorse the proposition that "culture is a weapon." As the cultural arm of the Communist Party, the federation was expected to faithfully follow the Party line.[3]

Cultural activities were an important part of many Communist demonstrations. May Day celebrations to honor workers were accompanied by workers' choirs, pageantry, and brass bands. On May Day 1930, for example, a demonstration at Union Square was followed by a celebration at Coney Island, which included performances by several workers' cultural groups. Admission was twenty-five and fifty cents—free to the unemployed.[4] Crowds attending May Day festivities like this one proved an appreciative audience for working-class performing groups.[5]

Meeting places for the union groups taking part in these celebrations were designated in the blocks surrounding Union Square, with the Workers Cultural Federation assigning each group to a different section. A parade route was published. In 1932 demonstrators marched south from Union Square along Fourth Avenue to 14th Street. Turning east on 14th Street to Avenue A, the marchers proceeded south to Houston Street, along Houston to the corner of Ridge and Montgomery Streets, south again to East Broadway, and then west to Rutgers Square, their destination.[6]

Union Square at 14th Street and Fifth Avenue was the hub the of radical activity dominated by the Communist Party during those years. In 1930 CP headquarters overlooked the square. The offices of the *Daily Worker* were located on Union Square East, right next to the Workers Book Shop and above the Cooperative Cafeteria.

Not far away, within easy walking distance, another kind of revolution was brewing. The nascent modern dance movement was making its home in and around Greenwich Village. Martha Graham had a studio, first on West 10th Street, then on East 9th Street, and after 1934 at 66 Fifth Avenue, near 12th Street. Doris Humphrey and Charles Weidman taught classes on West 18th Street. In 1934 Helen Tamiris moved from Lafayette Street to a studio on West 8th Street. A brief walk would take a dancer from a class at one or another of their studios to the political hurly-burly of Union Square.



33. Soloists of the Workers Dance League. Clockwise, starting above: Miriam Blecher in *Woman* (center), Anna Sokolow in *Histrionics;* Jane Dudley in *The Dream Ends;* Lillian Mehlman in *Defiance;* Sophie Maslow in *Themes from a Slavic People;* Sokolow, Maslow, and Mehlman in *Challenge (Death of Tradition);* Nadia Chilkovsky in *Parasite;* and Edith Segal in *Tom Mooney.* Photographs by Nat Messik. Chilkovsky photo by Matyas Caldy. Reproduced from *New Theatre,* January 1935.

This geographic intimacy was convenient for socially conscious dancers, and the collision of the two revolutionary worlds sparked an explosion of choreographic activity. The antiacademy and antielitist basis of modern dance fit nicely within the mission of proletarian culture, just as the proletarian worker proved an eager student and enthusiastic audience for an emergent art. Workers' dance groups sprang up in unions such as the Needle Trades Workers Industrial Union, in recreational clubs such as the German hiking group Nature Friends, and in association with workers' theater groups such as the Theatre Union. A collective known as the New Dance Group delivered affordable dance classes to working-class amateurs.

"Dance Is a Weapon in the Revolutionary Class Struggle" was the slogan of the Workers Dance League, an umbrella organization formed to develop and organize efforts of the various workers' dance groups. The idea for the Workers Dance League seems to have been born at a May Day celebration held at the Bronx Coliseum in 1932 in which eleven of the newly formed workers' dance groups participated. According to the *Daily Worker,* dancers Anna Sokolow, Edith Segal, Miriam Blecher, and Nadia Chilkovsky were responsible for its formation.[7]

The League sponsored concerts and contests among workers' dance groups called Spartakiades and facilitated the exchange of ideas and dance scenarios through *New Theatre,* the workers' theater and dance publication. (*New Theatre* actually replaced an earlier

journal called *Workers Theatre,* a collection of mimeographed sheets reporting on issues and events in workers' culture.) Workers reported to the League from Philadelphia, Boston, and Chicago, asking advice and sharing ideas, but New York City was the thriving center of activity. After seeing the First Workers' Dance Spartakiade in 1933, one delegate responded enthusiastically, determined to improve the performance of a group in Boston:

> I want to tell you that I was very inspired and also ashamed after seeing the wonderful work the dance groups are doing in New York. I told as best I could to the group all I learned from watching and listening especially at the council and we have all resolved to work harder and with more purpose hereafter. I feel that my instructing the group will be better because of my trip to New York.[8]

The extent to which social and political ideology could be integrated or could contribute to the aesthetic framework of a dance was debated in periodicals, such as *New Theatre* and in *Dance Observer,* a magazine, founded in 1934 to promote American dance as an art form. While significant subject matter was the primary issue for revolutionary dancers, other articles examined various formal concerns and urged collaborative methods of dance-making in keeping with the communal ideal. In general, dancers such as Martha Graham and Mary Wigman, the leader of the German Ausdruckstanz movement, were criticized by the leftist press for subject matter that was too personal, too mystical, and too divorced from contemporary social issues as well as too abstract and difficult to understand. The revolutionaries, in contrast, were faulted for lack of professionalism and for the simplicity of their message. The agitprop techniques and heavy symbolism they favored were inconsistent with the goals of modernism.

The history of American modern dance blurred distinctions between revolutionary and "bourgeois" dance in interesting ways. In music and in theater, classical and traditional methods of training and composition were labeled "bourgeois" by the leftist press. In dance, paradoxically, it was the struggling new experiments of people like Martha Graham that came to be considered as the ancien régime. Perhaps if ballet had been an established form in the United States, the new modern dance forms might have been considered revolutionary; they were after all based on an antiacademy and, in that sense, antibourgeois sentiment. Instead, it was the schools of Graham, Humphrey, Tamiris, and the German Hanya Holm (who headed the Wigman School in New York City) that came to be considered as established and traditional training methods, although their techniques predated working-class dance activity by only a few years.

Revolutionary writers and dancers argued over the relative merits of a "revolutionary" technique. Should it be based on communal and folk forms? Or could dancers appropriate "bourgeois" techniques? Grace Wylie, administrator and dancer for the New Dance Group, was one who argued for appropriating technical skills. "[Do] we completely discard their technique and suddenly build our own? We derive whatever is of value to us from the dance as it stands and reject the rest. If the bourgeois dance has anything of value to give us we use it."[9] But Michael Gold, writing in the *Daily Worker,* chastised dancers for being revolutionary in name only. "Do you think you can keep this up forever, this labelling a grey standardized sterile dance by Martha Graham by a hundred different titles—Scottsboro, Anti-fascism, etc., and make us accept the product as revolutionary?"[10]

Other writers argued for an evolutionary approach, suggesting that as revolutionary dancers developed, they would discard the old "bourgeois" technique and create bold new revolutionary forms. They pleaded for critics like Gold to give the dancers a chance.[11]

Debates over technique receded when the Communist Party adopted a new policy called socialist realism, which urged collaboration with bourgeois artists.[12] Dancers in the Workers Dance League were now encouraged to seize bourgeois techniques to make their message more acceptable to audiences. The level of technical expertise may have improved, but the underlying issue—the place of politics in the new art—continued to be controversial.

John Martin of the prestigious *New York Times* set out to define the relationship between art and politics in American modern dance. In October 1933 the nation's first dance critic had gently chided revolutionary dancers by paraphrasing a folk tale about making hare pie—first you had to catch the hare. To the revolutionary dancers he said, "To use art as a weapon, it is essential to see that first of all you have caught your art."[13] In subsequent columns he alternately praised the dancers for making artistic progress and complained that they did not belong on the stage. For example, a solo concert sponsored by the Workers Dance League in 1934 impressed Martin, and he noted the vigor of movement and intensity of feeling that marked the young dancers' efforts.[14] But a program of group dances presented a few weeks later was met with biting criticism—for the manner of presentation as well as for the quality of many of the dances: "Starting half an hour behind schedule, interrupted by two speeches from the stage, badly stage-managed and lacking in general theater discipline, the recital placed itself pretty definitely in the category of the amateur."[15]

By June 1935 Martin launched a full-scale attack on the Workers Dance League, which had recently changed its name to the New Dance League in an attempt to broaden its appeal. Martin could not deny the audience's enthusiasm or the fervency of the dancers' beliefs, but he lashed out at the superficial thinking and danced generalizations that he felt characterized their performances. In what he called an open letter to the group, Martin pulled no punches. He accused it of soapbox electioneering in the middle of a performance and compared the whole thing to a medicine show.[16]

Martin was not exactly a disinterested observer. As one of the earliest advocates of modern dance, he played an important role as a proselytizer and visionary in its development. His writings aimed at educating a new audience as well as educating all dancers to standards of professionalism. In his columns and in the series of lectures that he arranged at the New School for Social Research on West 12th Street in Manhattan, Martin was defining standards for a new American art form, separating the workers' dance movement from what would become the mainstream of modern dance. *The Modern Dance,* four of his New School lectures given in 1931–1932, was published in 1933 and revealed his concerns with form and technique. But content, the hallmark of any revolutionary art, was not discussed. Nadia Chilkovsky and the Workers Dance League were included on the New School series in 1934, but she was dropped the following year despite the fact that an estimated 34,000 people had seen performances by workers' dance groups that season, according to accounts in *New Masses.*[17]

Reports such as these may have been exaggerated. Still, a lot of workers were exposed to new movement ideas during the early 1930s. The audience for American dance was growing, and critics—revolutionary and otherwise—vied for its allegiance. Even balletomane Lincoln Kirstein joined the ideological fray with an article in *New Theatre,* "Revolutionary Ballet Forms." In it, Kirstein lobbied for the European classicist George Balanchine's inclusion in a new socially conscious art form:

> He knows ballet as ballet is dead. . . . Ballet as innocent amusement is far too little to demand of it . . . the greater participation of the audience as a contributory factor in heightening the spectacular tension, the destruction of the proscenium arch as an obstructive fallacy, the use of negros in conjunction with white dancers, the replacement of an audience of snobs by a wide popular support are all a part of Balanchine's articulate program.[18]

When I began researching this article I imagined my subjects as a radical core of propagandists, not to be confused with the creative dancers who were developing what would come to be called modern dance, but which was then known simply as "new" dance. In my thinking, one group, the revolutionary or radical dancers,[19] was clearly dedicated to a socialist vision that

could be embodied in staged actions, while the other group, dubbed arty and "bourgeois" by the leftist press, was committed to an aesthetic vision that would be experienced as dance. One was movement, the other art. As I began to write, however, it was clear that distinctions between the two camps were considerably less rigid than I initially thought.

Despite the debate surrounding "bourgeois" dance among leftists, most of the leaders of the revolutionary dance movement continued to study and perform with one or another of the established quartet. The cast for a Workers Dance League solo concert in 1934 included Nadia Chilkovsky and Miriam Blecher, former students of Hanya Holm at the Wigman School, as well as Anna Sokolow, Lily Mehlman, and Sophie Maslow of the Martha Graham company, and Jane Dudley who would join the Graham company the following year. In 1935 Marie Marchowsky from the Graham company and José Limón and Letitia Ide from the Humphrey-Weidman company joined the performers in the League.

The radical propagandists, it seems, willingly made themselves into instruments for the fledgling modern choreographers at the same time that they marched in May Day parades, danced in Communist pageants, and struggled to make a place for themselves as independent choreographers in concerts sponsored by the Workers Dance League. More, the populist audience attending revolutionary dance concerts was introduced to modernist concepts of choreography while they soaked up Marxist ideology. Far from being antagonists, the two movements creatively coexisted, exchanging audiences, bodies, and ideas. It was not a question of dance *or* politics; it was dance *and* politics. The revolutionary fervor of dancing modern—using power and force in a fight for freedom and egalitarianism in movement—was joined with the revolutionary vision promised by the Soviet Union. Throughout a critical period in the development of American dance, writers and dancers were engaged in passionate dialogues concerning the relationship of art and politics.

The terms *revolutionary* and *bourgeois* most accurately described ideological divisions existing between American dancers before 1934. Put simply, revolutionary dancers were those responding to Marxist doctrines, while bourgeois dancers were independent of specific political ideology. But while many radical dancers expressed commitment to socialist ideals and sympathy for the new Soviet state, they were not necessarily or always acting on directives issued by the Comintern (the Communist International). They simply set out to change society.

After 1934 the distinction between revolutionary and bourgeois groups became muddy, partly because the Soviet policy of socialist realism influenced revolutionaries to adapt bourgeois techniques and partly because Roosevelt's New Deal and the growth of the Popular Front collapsed some ideological barriers between communism and "Americanism." (Communist leader Earl Browder actually declared in 1935 that communism was twentieth-century Americanism.)[20] Still, performances after that date were clearly influenced by the backgrounds and political commitments that choreographers made earlier. In this respect, the terms remain useful for distinguishing each group's trajectory throughout the 1930s.

In the late 1920s and early 1930s revolutionary dance was characterized by an ideology of participation; workers became actively involved in dancing out their issues. Compositions by choreographers such as Edith Segal, who worked with lay dancers as well as with professionals, enjoyed a ready-made audience generated by the Communist Party. Revolutionary dance was workers' dance—in unions, at summer camps, and on legitimate stages such as the Center Theatre at Rockefeller Center.

While the primarily working-class audience enthusiastically applauded most efforts by revolutionary dance groups, in proscenium theaters critical attention was drawn to the lack of professionalism and technique of some; on the concert stage, reviewed by the mainstream as well as the radical press, many dances and dancers were found aesthetically wanting. "New" dance by this time was gathering its own band of advocates, and only two of the revolutionary groups managed to negotiate the tricky meeting of art and politics. In works produced by the New Dance Group and by Anna Sokolow's Dance Unit, choreographers made dances about working-class causes, but the proletariat was no longer on stage to represent itself.

Beginning in 1936, a populist tradition continued, however, in the work of the Federal Theatre and Federal Dance Projects that employed many revolutionary dancers. Helen Tamiris, always an advocate of dancers' rights and liberal social policies, was the most important figure here, although many other choreographers worked for the project, including Doris Humphrey, Charles Weidman, and Anna Sokolow. The collision with New Deal policies turned the debate from one of workers dancing or dancers dancing about workers into one about dancers working; artists were suddenly actively involved as the issue of collective bargaining in the arts took center stage. This issue was complicated by the dancers' relationship to their employer, the federal government.

The splintering of the leftist movement toward the end of the decade, catalyzed by the Russo-German nonaggression pact, and the disillusionment of some activists with the Communist Party—coupled with the impact of Roosevelt's New Deal, which co-opted some facets of the CP agenda—deflected the early militant thrust of the revolutionary dance movement. Issues of American identity now began to define political activity within the dance world as the looming threat of fascism galvanized artists. Martha Graham made several dances in response to the Spanish Civil War and in support of historical American ideals. The vision of the "people"[21] that Martha Graham put forth in *American Document* (1938) joined workers and bourgeois in a panorama of American history; immigrants and minority populations, the downtrodden and the discriminated against, shared space with the Puritan Fathers on Graham's stage.[22] In the aestheticized folk culture of choreographers Sophie Maslow and Jane Dudley, the ideological construct of the "people" continued throughout the 1940s. Leftist dancers as well as other artists, however, seemed to turn their backs on the gritty world of urban life, appropriating instead songs and dances gathered from rural America; the image of the worker was replaced by an idealized agrarian counterpart, the "folk."

Two things are clear. First, while the revolutionary dance movement united many dancers in a shared goal, each dancer also was different—in physical characteristics, in family background, in educational choices, in religious and political commitments, and in choreographic talents and aspirations. Second, because this art movement was really democratic, because so many participants gave themselves, however briefly, to this ideal, because so little concrete evidence remains of how this vision was embodied, it is not possible to document all of the period's activity. Instead, then, I have sought to understand the ideas and forces that helped shape the era, to identify specific approaches and elements that could be characterized as revolutionary, and, most importantly, to provide a voice for dancers who were part of what is now a forgotten movement.

Notes

1. Harvey Klehr, *The Heyday of American Communism: The Depression Decade* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 33–34.
2. Ibid., 53.
3. Ibid., 71–74.
4. *Daily Worker*, April 29, 1930.
5. Throughout, *working class* is used to refer to "all those whose primary means of making a living is through the sale of their labor power for wages or salaries and who, as a consequence, exert little or no control over the institutions in which they work." Bruce McConachie and Daniel Friedman, eds., *Theatre for Working-Class Audiences in the United States, 1830–1980* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1985), 4.

6. *Daily Worker*, April 27, 1932.

7. Stacey Prickett in "Dance and the Workers' Struggle" and the *Daily Worker* cite the 1932 date, but an editorial in *New Theatre* placed the date early in 1933. Prickett, *Dance Research* 8, no. 1 (spring 1990): 52; *Daily Worker*, June 8, 1935; *New Theater*, September–October 1933, 20.

8. "From Our Correspondence," *New Theatre*, September–October 1933 (unsigned), 23.

9. Grace Wylie, "A Reply from the New Dance Group," ibid., 22.

10. Michael Gold, "Change the World," *Daily Worker*, June 14, 1934.

11. Edna Ocko, "Reply to Michael Gold," *New Theatre*, July–August 1934, 28. Also Ezra Freeman, "Dance: Which Technique?" *New Theatre*, May 1934, 17–18.

12. Douglas McDermott, "The Workers' Laboratory Theatre," in McConachie and Friedman, *Theatre for Working-Class Audiences*, 124. Significantly, *Workers Theatre* changed its name to *New Theatre* around this time (September 1933).

13. John Martin, "The Dance: The Far East," *New York Times*, October 15, 1933.

14. John Martin, "Success Scored by Dance League," *New York Times*, November 26, 1934, 12.

15. John Martin, "Workers League in Group Dances," *New York Times*, December 24, 1934.

16. John Martin, "The Dance to the NDL," *New York Times*, June 16, 1935, 4.

17. Edna Ocko, "The Revolutionary Dance Movement," *New Masses*, June 12, 1934, 27–28.

18. Lincoln Kirstein, "Revolutionary Ballet Forms," *New Theatre*, October 1934, 14.

19. I have used the descriptive terms *radical* and *revolutionary* interchangeably.

20. Quoted in Klehr, *Heyday of American Consumerism*, 222.

21. Cultural historian Warren I. Susman points to the pervasiveness of the image of the "people" during this decade. See his *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 172.

22. But as Susan Manning points out in "American Document and American Minstrelsy," Graham staged the white body as the universally American body, a convention common to many choreographers of the 1930s. Manning, *Moving Words: Rewriting Dance*, ed. Gay Morris (London: Routledge, 1996), 183–202.