Truly Modern

By the 1920s Denishawn had become an establishment, and in the way of establishments, whether in government or in art, it began to be troubled by dissension in its ranks. With a sense of classical symmetry, the two leading rebels were Martha Graham (b.1894), a protégée of Shawn's, and Doris Humphrey (1895–1958), a protégée of St Denis's. Charles Weidman (1901–75), who worked closely with Humphrey, also joined the rebellion. Their secession had historic consequences, for their post-Denishawn careers gave rise to the theatrical dance form that is today known as the modern dance.

When the term 'modern dance' was coined about 1927, it well suited the dancers it described, for they believed that dance should reflect contemporary attitudes and preoccupations. Even when they set their works in other periods, as Graham did with her Greek mythological pieces, they drew upon 20th-century insights in evolving their themes. In later years, however, 'modern dance' came to embrace a broad spectrum of principles and techniques, some with goals far removed from those of the original modern dancers. Today the phrase no longer implies a singleminded commitment to the expression of modern life.

Graham, Humphrey and Weidman began by repudiating the glamour and exoticism that had given Denishawn much of its appeal, for they believed that dance should provoke, stimulate and inform rather than simply entertain. They wanted to confront the problems that real people faced – including, in a post-Freudian era, sex. Audiences often found their works ugly and depressing; not for these choreographers were the comforts of escapism. Their interest in the human condition was manifested in different ways: Graham's works usually explored the individual psyche, while Humphrey was fascinated by the interactions of the individual and the group. Weidman is best remembered for his use of humour and satire to point out human foibles.

As part of their effort to strip away what they saw as the decadent and artificial prettiness of both ballet and Denishawn, both Graham and Humphrey searched for the fundamental principles of movement. Both evolved theories that became the bases of their dance techniques. The basic human function of breathing inspired Graham's theory of contraction and release, which grew into a complex network of associations. Contraction,

78 Pearl Primus used West Indian and African dance as the basis for her powerful works on Negro themes.

which curved the chest inwards and rounded the back, caused the dancer to focus on his own centre; it could be used to suggest fear, sorrow, withdrawal or introversion. Release, which expanded the chest by filling the lungs with air, could signify affirmation, acceptance or ecstasy. When used in conjunction, the two movements heightened each other's effect; also, the emotional states they communicated could be subtly varied: a contraction with the head raised could create the effect of a gasp of joy. The principle of contraction and release could also be applied to other parts of the body. As Graham developed her dance technique she added shapes like the spiral (a basic form in nature) to give a more lyrical dimension to her dancing.

Humphrey formulated the theory of fall and recovery, which she called 'the arc between two deaths'. At one extreme lay the complete surrender to gravity; at the other was the achievement of balance and stability. To Humphrey, neither extreme was interesting in itself; rather, the emotional and physical drama of dancing sprang from the dancer's struggle against the forces of gravity and inertia, and his willingness to take the risk of abandoning equilibrium.

Graham led the exodus from Denishawn in 1923, believing that there could be no scope for her ambitions in a company that already boasted St Denis as its established star. Although the works presented on her first independent dance concert in 1926 bore the Denishawn imprint – the solo *Tanagra*, for instance, featured the manipulation of a billowing veil, a favourite Denishawn device – she soon began to develop her own creative voice. Louis Horst (1884–1964), her musical director, served as her mentor during her formative years as a choreographer. He composed music for many of her early works, encouraged her to commission scores from contemporary composers (Samuel Barber, Aaron Copland, Paul Hindemith and Gian Carlo Menotti have all composed scores for her) and introduced her, through photographs, to Wigman's art.

Heretic (1929), her first important group work, portrayed the pitiless rejection of an individual by a group in generalized terms that made it applicable to many situations. It was danced, however, in a stark, percussive style that baffled many viewers. Simple, uncompromising movements – clenched fists, the thud of heels, the formation of a wall of bodies – combined with severe costumes and the dancers' deliberately unglamorous appearance to create a look quite different from Denishawn's exotic spectacles.

Graham's early works were determinedly austere both in movement and costume; she later called this her 'long woolens' period. She designed the costumes herself and did without scenery. The solo *Lamentation* (1930) displays her skill in exploiting the qualities of fabric: the dancer's grief is expressed through the angular lines of tension she creates in the long, tight

79 Martha Graham's early works, among them Primitive Mysteries *(1931), were deliberately austere in choreography, scenery and costume. Graham (in white) played the Virgin, the focus of a ritual of the American Southwest.*

tube of stretch jersey she wears. With the passage of time, however, Graham began to make greater use of scenery, costume and lighting. A frequent collaborator was the Japanese-American designer Isamu Noguchi, whose stylized sets well suited the nonliteral style of her choreography.

Although Graham's repertory is highly varied, two major themes recur in her work. The first is based on the American and Amerindian experience. She choreographed *Primitive Mysteries* (1931) after a visit to the American Southwest, utilizing the region's unique blend of Spanish Christianity and Indian culture in a powerful re-enactment of a ritual in honour of the Virgin Mary. The three sections of the work recall the principal events in Mary's life: the birth of Jesus, his crucifixion, and her own assumption into heaven. The simple, staccato movements emphasize the dancers' connection to the earth; at one point the white-clad soloist, who represents the Virgin, lies on the floor. Graham's exploitation of the force of gravity and her development of floorwork (falling, sitting, lying, kneeling and so on) were diametrically opposed to the ballet's attempts to create an illusion of weightlessness.

In the solo *Frontier* (1935), danced to music by Horst, the woman's conquest of space becomes a metaphor for the courage and determination of America's first settlers. Graham used scenery for the first time in this dance: Noguchi's simple set consists of a section of fence and two ropes arranged in a

80 In a joyous moment from Martha Graham's Appalachian Spring *(1944), the Bride (Graham) and the Husbandman (Erick Hawkins) dance together.*

v-shape that extends upward into infinity. The fence provides a 'home base' for the dancer, whose fearless advance with high kicks and jumps alternates with quieter passages, including one in which she appears to cradle a child.

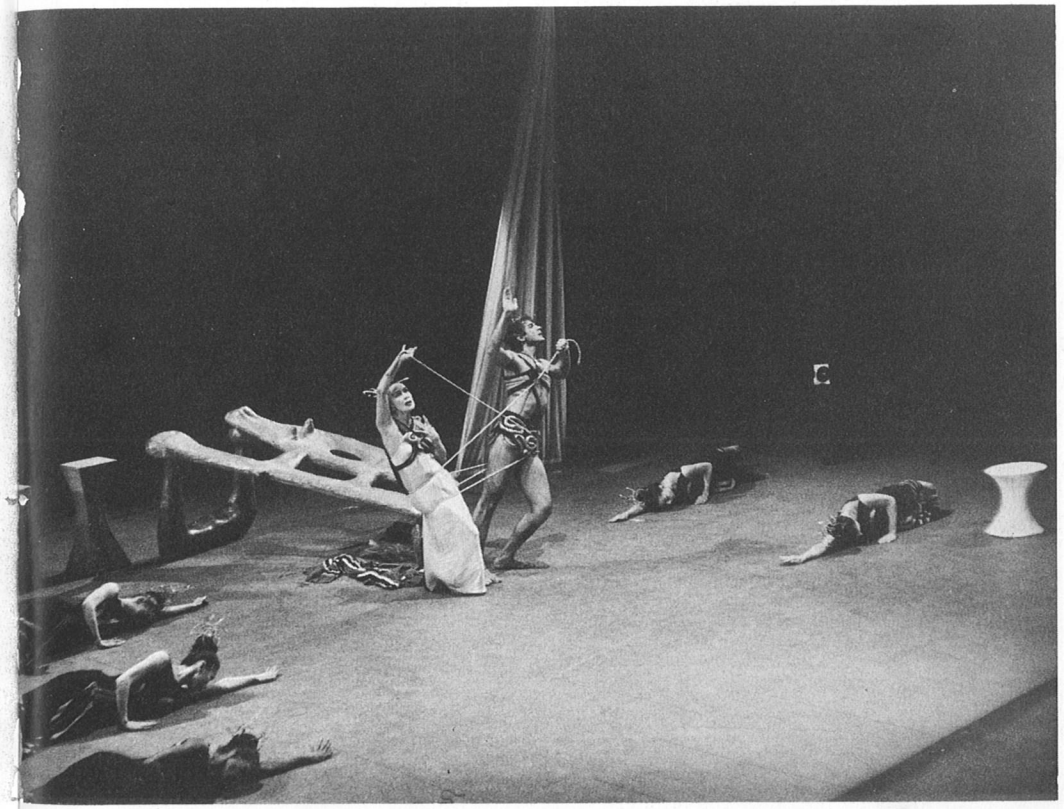
Graham's early company was entirely female; her first male-female duet appeared in *American Document* (1938), an encapsulation of American history. In the section 'Puritan Episode', which treated the subject of sexual repression, she danced with Erick Hawkins (b.1909), a former ballet dancer who became her husband, partner and leading male dancer for many years.

Graham's most famous Americana piece, *Appalachian Spring* (1944), is danced to a commissioned score that won a Pulitzer Prize for its composer, Aaron Copland. Though the work is set in the nation's early days, it celebrates domestic values rather than the pioneering spirit of *Frontier*. A husbandman (Hawkins) and his bride (Graham) settle into their new home, which is suggested rather than realistically depicted by Noguchi's stylized house-frame. The youthful exuberance of the young couple (shadowed, however, by the doubts and fears of inexperience), contrasts with the steadiness of a pioneer woman (May O'Donnell), while a revivalist (Merce Cunningham) and his four female followers symbolize the religious conviction upon which the nation was built.

The second major current in Graham's work is Greek mythology, which she first began to draw upon in the 1940s. She uses the myths and the characters in them not for their colour or historical interest (as the Romantic ballet or Denishawn might have), but as icons of human, or more specifically, feminine experience. These works confront emotions that everyone has felt: jealousy, fear, guilt, anxiety, self-doubt.

Cave of the Heart (1946) was originally called *Serpent Heart*, a title keyed to the dominant movement motif of the protagonist, Medea. As in Noverre's *Médée et Jason*, Graham's work focuses on Medea's consuming jealousy, which drives her to kill her lover Jason as well as her rival. Her movements evoke a serpent's sinuosity, its writhings and lashings. In a repeated image she crosses the floor on her knees like a snake crawling on its belly. The serpent metaphor implies that in succumbing to her hatred she has become less than human.

Night Journey (1947) retold another famous Greek myth from the woman's point of view. The work begins as Jocasta contemplates the rope with which she will strangle herself; in a flashback she recalls the triumphal arrival of Oedipus, the ignored warnings of the blind seer Tiresias, her marriage with Oedipus and the final revelation that she is his mother as well as his wife. The duet of the lovers on their bone-like marriage bed (designed by Noguchi)



81 As Jocasta (Martha Graham) and Oedipus (Bertram Ross) unknowingly joined in incestuous love in Graham's Night Journey *(1947), they were bound by a rope that also symbolized the umbilical cord. Their bed, designed by Isamu Noguchi, suggests human bones or an instrument of torture.*

suggests the dual nature of their relationship: Jocasta's caresses echo a mother's cradling, and the rope that binds them in sexual love also symbolizes the umbilical cord; ultimately it becomes the instrument of Jocasta's destruction.

Although her capacity for lyricism was revealed in *Diversion of Angels* (1948), a celebration of love, and she proved she could be funny in *Every Soul is a Circus* (1939), Graham is best known for works that probe unflinchingly into the darker reaches of the soul. *Letter to the World* (1940), a study of an individual's inner life, was based upon the life and works of Emily Dickinson. The American poet is represented by two performers, a dancer and a dancer-actress who recites excerpts from her poetry. Dickinson's great appetite for life, revealed by her poems, is inhibited and even foiled by the grim Ancestress, a symbol of duty and obligation, perhaps even of death. In the end, however, the poet quietly reaffirms her faith in her art.

Similar in purpose but more innovative in form was *Deaths and Entrances* (1943), which was inspired by the three Brontë sisters. Linear time is completely abandoned; the eldest sister (Graham), revisits the past in a series of flashbacks triggered by objects in a manner reminiscent of the literary techniques of James Joyce and Marcel Proust. Three little girls represent memories of the sisters' childhood. Two principal men, the Dark Beloved (Hawkins) and the Poetic Beloved (Cunningham), may be two aspects of the same person, the eldest sister's lover. Graham contrasted Hawkins's strong, commanding movement style with Cunningham's more mercurial quality to suggest different personality traits.

In 1958 Graham again turned to Greek myth for the evening-long *Clytemnestra*. In this intense, often difficult work, the ill-fated Greek queen, unable to find peace after death, reviews her life in an effort to come to terms with her guilt. In a series of images recalled in stream-of-consciousness fashion, she sees again her sister Helen, whose beauty sparked the Trojan War; her husband Agamemnon, who earned her hatred through his decision to sacrifice their daughter for the war's sake; her ambitious and grasping lover Aegisthus; and her son Orestes, fated to kill her in revenge for her murder of Agamemnon. As the relationship of events becomes clear in Clytemnestra's mind, she arrives at self-understanding. The work unfolds with the timeless quality of a ritual, with emotional revelation as its ultimate goal.

Graham ceased to perform in 1969, but continues to choreograph new works for her company. Her dance technique is taught around the world, and two important dance companies in addition to her own use it as the basis of their choreography. The Batsheva Dance Company was founded in Tel Aviv in 1963, with Graham as its artistic adviser. London Contemporary Dance Theatre was founded in England in 1967 with the American dancer Robert Cohan (a former member of the Graham company) as its artistic director. Both companies perform works by Graham as well as pieces by other choreographers.

Humphrey's approach to movement took a somewhat different tack from Graham's. Although she too believed in the bond between movement and emotional expression, which she called moving 'from the inside out', she also made a more objective analysis of the craft of choreography, which was published posthumously in her book *The Art of Making Dances* (1958). She frequently worked with abstractions in the sense that she did not always depict specific characters and events. Her dances were metaphors, however, for human situations. She preferred to demonstrate her ideas in movement terms rather than to sum them up in symbols: for example, she believed that the concept of democracy was more convincingly conveyed by a fugue uniting four different themes than by a woman in red, white and blue.

The new direction that Humphrey's work would take was revealed in the first independent concert that she and Weidman presented after leaving Denishawn in 1928. In *Color Harmony* (1928), a silvery figure (Weidman)

82 Religious ecstasy and sexual repression both emerged in the ritual dances of The Shakers *(1931), created by Doris Humphrey (centre), who danced the central role of the Eldress.*

representing the artistic intelligence organizes the mingled colours of the spectrum into a harmonious design. Unlike St Denis's music visualizations, which simply strove to reflect musical structure, Humphrey's choreography always grew out of an underlying idea.

Water Study (1928) was an experiment in discarding what she called the 'cerebral' rhythms of music in favour of the natural phrasing of breathing. Like many of Duncan's dances, it was inspired by the observation of natural phenomena. In a silence broken only by the sounds of their breathing, the kneeling dancers arch their backs to imitate the surging and cresting of waves; rising to their feet, they run together, meeting and falling away from one another like large masses of water crashing and subsiding.

Humphrey's *Drama of Motion* (1930) attempted to establish dance as an independent art by abandoning music and concentrating on formal elements such as design, rhythm and dynamics, which gave rise to the theme. Although she saw this as an antidote to the emoting and 'self-expression' that prevailed in the work of many modern dancers of the time, one of her best-
82 known dances, *The Shakers* (1931), reverted to the portrayal of emotion. It was inspired by the religious practice of the Shakers, a Christian sect that requires its members to be celibate, and evokes their rituals by segregating the sexes and incorporating shaking movements into the choreography. The trembling of the men and women as they meet suggests their sexual repression as well as expressing the idea of being shaken clean of sin.

New Dance Trilogy presented Humphrey's critique of contemporary society and her vision of the future. Although the three works were never performed together, they were united by the continuity of their themes; also, all three were danced to scores by Wallingford Riegger. *Theatre Piece* (1936) depicts contemporary life as a vicious competition among various members of the community – businessmen, working women, athletes, actors – who are all seeking selfish goals. In *With My Red Fires* (1936), two lovers defy a powerful Matriarch who represents the negative aspects of authority. *New Dance* (1935), which was actually created first, portrays an ideal world in which individuals are able to work in harmony with the group without losing their own identities. This idea is presented in pure dance terms: the soloists and ensemble relate harmoniously to each other, and in the 'Variations and Conclusion' individuals step forward to dance brief solos, then melt back into the group.

In the 1940s Humphrey began to work intensively with her former pupil José Limón (1908–72), refining his skills both as a dancer and a choreographer. After her retirement from performing she became the artistic director of his company and created several works for it. *Day on Earth* (1947), danced to music by Copland, is a simple but eloquent allegory of life. The labours of

the man (Limón) are interrupted by an idyll with a young girl, his first love. A second woman becomes his wife, and they have a child. After the child leaves to lead her own life, the wife grieves, resumes work for a time, then dies, leaving the man to find solace in labour. At the end the child returns, and the three adults, lying on the ground, pull a cloth over themselves.

Humphrey's dance technique was carried on in a somewhat modified form by Limón and his company. Limón's most famous work, *The Moor's Pavane* (1949), distils the Shakespearean story of Othello. Only four characters appear: Othello (Limón) and his bride, the innocent and trustful Desdemona; the treacherous Iago, whose insinuations about Desdemona's infidelity will ultimately lead Othello to murder her; and Iago's wife Emilia, who becomes his cat's-paw. The action is played out within the framework of a formalized courtly dance, its sense of control contrasting sharply with the strong passions of the characters. In one of the dance's most striking images Iago clings leech-like to the back of the reluctant Othello, pouring venom into his ears.

Weidman's lighter touch provided a welcome relief in the serious, sometimes sombre world of modern dance. A gifted mime, he invented what he called kinetic pantomime, which was less literal and more dance-like than its predecessors. He used spoken texts to accompany his autobiographical works *On My Mother's Side* (1940) and *And Daddy Was a Fireman* (1943) and often culled themes from literary sources. *The Happy Hypocrite* (1931) depicted Max Beerbohm's witty tale of Lord George Hell, a roué who is reformed by donning the mask of a saint. *Candide* (1933) was based on

83 The stately formality of José Limón's The Moor's Pavane *(1949) contrasts with the violent passions of Othello (Limón, far left), who bows to Desdemona (Betty Jones, far right) as the predatory Iago (Lucas Hoving) and Emilia (Pauline Koner) look on.*

Voltaire's satire, while *Fables for Our Time* (1947) captures James Thurber's rueful humour in vignettes such as 'The Unicorn in the Garden', in which a man tries to persuade his wife that he really has seen the mythical beast.

Flickers (1941), one of his best-loved works, is an affectionate parody of silent movie themes. In 'Hearts Aflame', villains armed with a mortgage threaten a farmer and his daughter. The vamp of 'Wages of Sin' infects her love-stricken victim with leprosy, giving him a fit of violent scratching. A devastating sheik, à la Valentino, abducts a flapper in 'Flowers of the Desert'; 'Hearts Courageous' depicts a pioneer family besieged by Indians.

Though famed for his comic works, Weidman also had a serious side. *Lynchtown* (1936) depicted the unthinking savagery of a mob bent on the destruction of its chosen victim; the impact of the piece was not negated by the fact that the violence took place offstage.

Despite the similarity of their goals, a certain rivalry existed between Graham's dancers and the Humphrey-Weidman group. They met on common ground, however, at the Bennington School of the Dance, established by Martha Hill in 1934 at Bennington College in Vermont. These summer workshops and their associated festivals, presented annually until 1942, gave Graham, Humphrey, Weidman, Hanya Holm (head of the Wigman School in New York) and others an opportunity to teach their techniques and choreograph new works. *With My Red Fires, Letter to the World* and *Deaths and Entrances* were all created at Bennington. John Martin of the *New York Times*, the first dance critic appointed by a major American newspaper, taught dance history and criticism, while Horst taught dance composition. Many students were college or university teachers, who disseminated what they had learned all over the country.

Some choreographers went even further than Graham, Humphrey or Weidman in their search for relevance to modern life. Some based their themes on contemporary political events. The high-minded ideals of the Communists inspired Edith Segal's *The Belt Goes Red* (1930), in which an assembly-line of white-clad workers constructs a 'machine' made of dancers in black, then winds it about with a red banner. Segal's company belonged to the Workers' Dance League, a confederation of dance groups founded in 1933 for the purpose of political activism through dance. These groups often performed at political rallies and labour union meetings, for they wanted to bring their messages to new audiences.

Another member of the Workers' Dance League was the New Dance Group, formed in 1934, which both taught and performed. To fulfil its goal of making dance accessible to all, it offered classes for very low tuition fees and based its theatrical pieces on problems of general concern, such as hunger, unemployment and war. Its leaders included three members of Graham's

company, Jane Dudley, Sophie Maslow and Anna Sokolow, and a Humphrey-Weidman dancer, William Bales. In the 1940s the group's focus shifted to American folk themes and it began to produce works such as Maslow's *Folksay* (1942), which employs folk songs, a text by Carl Sandburg and a deceptively relaxed style of dancing to recreate the genial tone of life in rural America.

American material was also used by Helen Tamiris (1905–66), whose background lay in ballet and musical comedy. She too shared the ideals of social commitment and wanted to bring dance to a wider audience. She is best known for her *Negro Spirituals*, a series of dances that she choreographed between 1928 and 1942. Different aspects of the black experience in America are expressed in these songs and dances, from the weariness and desolation of 'Nobody Knows the Trouble I See' to the aggressive energy of 'Joshua Fit de Battle ob Jericho'; while the power and yearning of 'Go Down Moses' contrast with the frenetic good cheer of 'Git on Board, Lil' Chillun'.

Tamiris's *How Long Brethren?* (1937), danced to Negro protest songs, was produced by the Federal Dance Project, organized in 1935 by the Works

84, 85 As an irresistible sheik in his silent-movie spoof Flickers *(1941), Charles Weidman literally danced his conquest (Beatrice Seckler) up a wall* (right). *Katherine Dunham's* Tropical Revue (left) *introduced audiences to a wide variety of black dances, ranging from jazz-dancing to re-creations of primitive rituals such as 'Rara Tonga' (1942), in which she appears here (centre).*

Progress Administration as part of its effort to alleviate the widespread unemployment of the Depression. This marked the first time that public funds were used in the U.S. to create dance works. The Dance Project was most active in New York and Chicago; among its participants were Humphrey, Weidman, Ruth Page and Katherine Dunham.

The early works of Anna Sokolow (b.1912), a member of Graham's company and the New Dance Group, were appeals to the political and social conscience of her audience. *Slaughter of the Innocents* (1937), for instance, was inspired by the Spanish Civil War. Although her works continued to bear on contemporary life, her emphasis shifted in the 1950s to themes of alienation and isolation. The dancers in *Rooms* (1955) seem to be alone even when they are on stage together; they never make eye contact with one another. Their repetitive movements verge on compulsiveness: a man gives way to the jitters; a woman acts out frustrated sexual longings; three women indulge in narcissistic self-absorption; another man flees invisible demons. Sokolow's vision of the 20th century is predominantly dark and pessimistic; she captures the despair of man in his urban jungles.

Lester Horton (1906–53), who did most of his work in California, was initially inspired by Amerindian dances and customs, but expanded his interests to include other cultures. His company, founded in Los Angeles in 1932, was among the first to include black, Hispanic and Asian dancers as well as whites. He evolved a dance technique that incorporated movements adapted from ethnic dance forms and trained the body to move with intricacy and fluidity. A complete man of the theatre, he often composed the music and designed the sets and costumes for his own choreography. His flair for drama is demonstrated in *The Beloved* (1948), a savage tale of a man who murders his wife.

Black dance was recognized in the 1930s and 40s as an art form worthy of serious consideration. The two leading lights of this movement were Katherine Dunham (b.1912) and Pearl Primus (b.1919), both of whom earned doctoral degrees in anthropology and did field work in Africa and the Caribbean. Both were magnetic performers and creative artists as well as scholars, and both used their research as the basis of exciting theatrical pieces.

Like Graham, Dunham had a special interest in ritual, which she used as the theme of several dances. *L'Ag'ya* (1938), first produced by the Federal Dance Project, depicts a love triangle on the island of Martinique. The rival suitors resolve their conflict with a traditional duel in rhythmic form, accompanied by singing and drumming. *Rites of Passage* (1941) recreates a young man's initiation into adulthood and the courtship of a young couple. Dunham's lively, colourfully costumed works, presented in popular programmes such as her *Tropical Revue* of 1943, introduced black dance to many new audiences. 84

She also developed her own technique, which is based on the isolation of body parts (that is, the movement of different parts of the body independently of the others), a characteristic of many African dance forms.

Primus, who made her debut as a dancer in 1943, developed a less glamorous performing image than Dunham. Her powerful dances are often inspired by the vicissitudes of black Americans: *Hard Time Blues* (1943), for example, protested against the gruelling life of sharecroppers. Like Dunham, she has re-created African and Caribbean dances and rituals in works such as *Fanga* (1949), a West African greeting dance. 78

La Meri (Russell Meriwether Hughes, b.1898) studied and performed ethnic dances in Asia, Africa, Spain and Latin America. She strove to make her dances as accurate and authentic as possible, although she understood that some nuances could only be captured by a native. Her research was published in *The Gesture Language of the Hindu Dance* (1941) and *Spanish Dancing* (1948). In 1940 she and St Denis opened the School of Natya (Hindu dance) in New York City; this was later absorbed into her Ethnologic Dance Center, which operated from 1942 to 1956. One of her most successful dances was a translation of *Swan Lake* into Hindu dance movements, choreographed in 1944. She retained the ballet's music and plot, but added a prologue explaining how the Hamsa Rani (Swan Queen) was enchanted, and a danced fight between the Prince and the Enchanter.

The efforts of Dunham, Primus and La Meri helped establish the artistic value and integrity of ethnic dance. By demonstrating the richness of authentic forms, they encouraged other dancers and audiences to view and study ethnic dances with new respect.

Modern dance of the 1930s and 40s truly lived up to its name. It embodied many of the complexities and contradictions of the modern world. It was forward-looking and propounded visions of the ideal society with a crusader's zeal, but it could also be introspective, intensely personal and engrossed with the past. It confronted the grim realities of life, but also found places for lyricism and humour. It sought to express the American heritage, yet it also recognized the ethnic diversity of Americans and tried to convey this too through dance. Despite the diversity of its characteristics and purposes, however, modern dance was unified by its emphasis on the expression of feelings through dance, as opposed to a purely decorative display of technique.

Perhaps the term 'modern dance' has persisted because of its close association with the idea of innovation. Certainly the 1930s and 40s introduced new ways of moving, new subject matter and new ways to express an idea or structure a narrative. These innovations provided the groundwork for future achievements both in modern dance and in ballet.