

The Chinese University of Hong Kong

Physical Education Unit

Modern Dance

What is Modern Dance?

In the early 20th century, some American dancers disregarded ballet dance theory and rejected the strict and vertical ballet movement. They disagreed to dance under the limitation of human body with the restriction of angle, posture, the anti-gravity constraint, the structured techniques, along with the unified costume like corsets and pointe shoes. In seeking the freedom of dance, modern dance came out in presenting people's inner self, thoughts, feelings and emotions. It focuses on dancers' own interpretation and favors a more relaxed and free style of dancing. The obvious characteristic of modern dance is the deliberate use of gravity. When classical ballet dancers strive to be light and airy on their feet, modern dancers often use their body weight to enhance movement with bare feet and revealing costumes.



The Major Modern Dance Technique

- Graham Technique
- Humphrey Technique
- Limon Technique
- Horton Technique
- Release Technique

The development of Modern Dance

(A) The 1st period:

In the early 1900s, the pioneers of modern dance like Isadora Duncan and Ruth St. Denis contributed a lot in the modern dance field.

I. Isadora Duncan used Greek sculpture, folk dance, natural forces and human livelihood movement etc. as her “Free dance” movement sources. She danced with bare feet, loose hair and free flowing costumes and developed a concept of natural breathing that identified with the ebb and flow of ocean waves. She deemphasized scenery and costumes in favor of a simple stage setting and simple costumes. She suggested that watching a dancer dance was enough.



Isadora Duncan

II. Ruth St. Denis turned to the dance styles of India, Egypt and Asia, as the basis for her compositions. She created dance that expressed the mysticism by the goddess’s image conveyed and full of dramatic elements. She founded Denishawn Company, the “cradle of American modern dance”, with her husband Ted Shawn. It increased the popularity of modern dance throughout the United State and nurtured the leaders of the second generation of modern dance like Martha Graham and Doris Humphrey.



Ruth St. Denis

(B) The 2nd period:

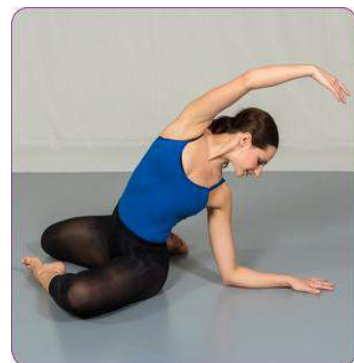
At the end of the 1920s, numbers of notable dancers and choreographers like Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey and Lester Horton set up their own modern dance techniques and style. They developed clear and recognizable dance training systems that are still taught worldwide nowadays.

I. Martha Graham – Contraction and Release

Martha Graham found the breath pulse is the primary source of dance. Contractions and release technique focus on the contraction of the abdominal muscle to gather the energy. With the release of this energy, dancers can exaggerate their movement extension. The floor work includes the sitting, kneeling and lie down positions. Standing movement focus on the weight transfer, balance and extension. Dance routine includes running, jumping and turn with triple rhythm. Graham believed that the fall is the acknowledgment of the power of gravity and she required the dancer to fall powerfully into the floor repeatedly. It is part of the emotional content of the technique.



Martha Graham



Martha Graham Technique – Contraction and Release

II. Doris Humphrey – Fall and recovery

Doris Humphrey believed gravity is the source of the dynamic instability of movement. With her fall and recovery theory, the power comes from the swing of the movement and the transfer of weight, to create the arc “start, hold, fall and restart” looping movement. Her student, Jose Limon, is also a famous modern dancer. His technique is based on Humphrey’s theory. **Limon Technique** is more emphasis on the connection of the movements and also the training of different body parts.



Doris Humphrey



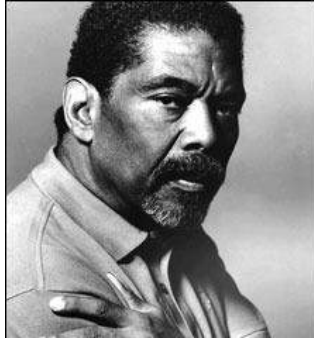
Jose Limon



Fall and Recovery Technique

III. Lester Horton

Horton technique includes limbs extension, flexibility, strength and balance. In the exercise, there are a lot of body and limbs extension to different directions with only one supporting point. Horton's inspirations are mostly came from tribes and ancient remains like Egyptian wall painting and tribe dance. The later famous modern dancer, Alvin Ailey, continues his theory and Ailey School is still running in America.



Lester Horton



Horton Technique

(C) The 3rd period:

After the World War II, American dancers such as Merce Cunningham and Paul Taylor combined and fused techniques from different dance style like social dance, ballet and folk dance etc. and started to create dance that had no theme, expressed no emotion and the reflection of people daily life and the society.

I. Merce Cunningham freed dance from spatial restraints, eliminating strong central focus from choreographic patterns and devising dances that can be viewed from any angle. He also released dance from traditional musical constraints by using electronic music and other compositions. His work revealed individual dancers experiencing their relation to present time and abstract space by using chance, such as throws of the dice, to determine the order in which sections of a work should occur.



II. Paul Taylor incorporated everyday gestures rather than dance moves. Through his body language, he was able to convey his emotions and imagination. His work tended to be about people, focusing on their feelings and interaction with others. He used dancers to illuminate some profound issues like war, spirituality, morality and mortality.



(D) After 1960s, modern dance grew diversified while many new ideas came up, as a response to earlier dance forms and to social changes. Artists rejected the formalism of modern dance and they choreography with different elements instead of pure technical dance movements and releasing technique, contact improvisation and improvisation were included.

I. Release Technique

Release technique is about exploration and a test of the body movement potential, and it comes from contact improvisation. Movement power is created in a moderate way, not the strongest and not the weakest, to form a continuous power so that movement can go from one body part to another or more. With the help of breathing, dancers can move in a smoothing way with all the body parts connected. Contact improvisation is based on this theory. Dancers explore and create movement with people or objects.

II. Improvisation

Dancers create their movement by body exploration with the influence of the environment around. It is unstructured and not limited by dance technical movement. Improvisation is not only about dance but also the process of freeing the body to feel and find the reaction and response of the body with dancers actual feelings and inspirations.



Rules

- Bare feet
- Comfortable clothes but not too loose
- Clean hair
- No accessory like ear rings and watches
- No chewing gum

Modern Dance Class Sequence

1. Warm up

A continuous exercise from head to feet with stretching, twisting and bending of body joints to make sure every parts of muscle and dancers' mind are ready to have the intensive technical training afterwards.

2. *Series of modern dance technical training exercises*

- [Plie](#)
- [Limbs extension](#)
- [Body control](#)
- [Swing and weight transfer](#)
- [Fall and Recovery](#)
- [Floor work](#)
- Jump

3. *Dance Routine/Improvisation/Choreography*

Dance Routine:

A continuous routine by using the modern dance technique combined with the use of space and emotion.

Improvisation:

Inspired by the space, sound and people around to find and create dancers own movement.

Choreography:

Students are divided into groups to create and choreograph their dance piece.

References

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