



Avodah Dance Ensemble performing Tamiris's *Negro Spirituals*, c. 1996, as staged from the Labanotation score by McPherson. Dancers: Carla Norwood, Lisa Watson, and Kezia Gleckman Hayman, photo by Tom Brazil

An Exploration of the Life and Work of Helen Tamiris (1902-1966)

Elizabeth McPherson and JoAnne Tucker

Introduction by JoAnne Tucker

In the summer of 1958, I attended Perry-Mansfield Performing Arts School and Camp in Steamboat Springs, Colorado, USA where I studied with Helen Tamiris and performed her *Dance for Walt Whitman*. Although just a high school student, the three-week experience was life changing. Tamiris had a profound impact on my dance career as founder and artistic director of the Avodah Dance Ensemble (1972-2004) and more recently in my work in prisons and jails and with domestic violence survivors.

Elizabeth McPherson joined the Avodah Dance Ensemble in 1990. With her experience in Labanotation as well as having studied and performed many dance legacy works of the 20th century, she staged Tamiris' *Negro Spirituals*, which Avodah performed for nine years.

Because of our mutual and overlapping interest in Helen Tamiris, when there was a call for papers/presentations for the "Jews and Jewishness in the Dance World Conference," it was a natural response for us to propose a presentation on Tamiris.

Helen Tamiris: A Biography by Elizabeth McPherson

Helen Tamiris is one of the great pioneers of American modern dance. A dynamic dancer and choreographer, she explored themes central to the American experience. Her diverse career included not only work in modern dance, but also in ballet, nightclubs, and musical theatre. Descriptions of Tamiris invariably include the word "powerful," describing her dancing and the force of her personality that propelled her into a career in which she followed her passion from one dance idiom to another, captivating audiences. She created dances that purposefully reflected her times, but that still

hold resonance today because they speak to what it means to be human. Tamiris voiced: "The vitality of the modern dance is rooted in its ability to express modern problems, and, further, to make modern audiences want to do something about them" (Margaret Lloyd, 1949, 141-142). Tamiris epitomized this defining aspect of modern dance.

Tamiris's Childhood and Early Career as a Dancer and Choreographer

Tamiris was born Helen Becker on April 23, 1902 in New York City. Her parents were Russian Jewish immigrants. When Tamiris was only three, her tailor father became the primary supporter as well as caregiver of his five children. Tamiris was the only girl and by her own accounts ran wild in the streets until one brother suggested to their father that he send her to dance classes. At Henry Street Settlement House, she studied "interpretive dancing" with Irene Lewisohn and Blanche Talmud. In high school, she studied world folk dance. When she was 15, despite never dancing on pointe, she auditioned and was accepted into the Metropolitan Opera Ballet.

After three seasons of work, she joined the Bracale Opera Company for a tour to South America, followed by one more season with the Metropolitan Opera Ballet. During that last season, she studied with the choreographer Michel Fokine, a great innovator of 20th century ballet, but she found his classes not too different from the others. She was looking for a new outlet for her creative energy so she began studying at the Isadora Duncan School, but lasted only three months, saying to herself, "What more can I learn – in schools? Each school develops its own type of dancer – I don't want to be a Duncan dancer – or a ballet dancer – I want to be myself – But what was myself? I was all the things I had learned – I would make some dances – my very own" (Tamiris, 1989-90, 20). She choreographed two dances and auditioned them for a Chicago-based nightclub manager. She was hired, and at this point changed her name to Tamiris whom she knew to be a strong Persian queen, ("like an Amazon," Tamiris said) (Tamiris, 1989-90, 21). She was well-received but found herself making changes in her dances to captivate the nightclub audience. This was not ideal in her mind. Tamiris began to realize that she could not do what she most wanted in commercial theatre and decided to give her own recital.

Working with composer Louis Horst, she choreographed twelve dances which she presented on October 9, 1927, just over a year after Martha Graham's debut concert. An anonymous review in the *New York Times*, noted, "Although her program was confined to the pantomimic and interpretive style of dancing in vogue at the present time, it was varied and interesting, covering a wide range of mood and emotional contrast. The young artist is endowed with many natural gifts, a slender elegance of form, personality of real charm and innate refinement" (1927, 15). The experience was fulfilling, but Tamiris had exhausted her savings. She took another nightclub job to support herself and build up funds for a second concert.

In the program for her concert on January 29, 1928, Tamiris printed her manifesto. Highlights included:

- "We must not forget the age we live in."
- "There are no general rules. Each work of art creates its own code."

- "Sincerity is based on simplicity. A sincere approach to art is always done through simple forms."
- "Toe dancing... Why not dance on the palms of the hands?"
- "The dance of today is plagued with exotic gestures, mannerisms and ideas borrowed from literature, philosophy, sculpture, and painting. Will people never rebel against artificialities, pseudo-romanticism and affected sophistication? The dance of today must have a dynamic tempo and be valid, precise, spontaneous, free, normal, natural and human" (Tamiris, 1989-90, 51).

In this concert, Tamiris danced two solos to Negro spirituals: *Joshua Fit de Battle ob Jericho* and *Nobody Knows de Trouble I See*. This was the beginning of her choreographic explorations inspired by black dance and music. Response to the second concert was positive. *The New York Times* (again anonymously written) said, "Tamiris, in her second recital at the Little Theatre last night, established herself unmistakably in the forefront of the younger generation of dancers" (1928, 18). Although Tamiris created a significant body of choreography, the dances that comprise her eventual suite *Negro Spirituals* along with the later *How Long Brethren?* are the works most frequently staged today. These two dances also remain, perhaps, the most controversial.

Questions of Black Culture and Appropriation

As viewed today, one might see Tamiris's choreography inspired by black music and dance as appropriation or even cultural theft, however a full analysis requires examination of context. Tamiris said about *Negro Spirituals* that she wanted "to express the spirit of the Negro people – in the first his sense of oppression – in the second, his fight – and struggle and remembrance." Tamiris had grown up in poverty, and her parents had escaped the severe persecution of Jews in Russia by immigrating to the United States. As well, in the 1920s and 1930s, there was significant anti-Semitism in the United States. Tamiris would have understandably felt a kinship with oppressed people. Susan Manning describes, "Heightened sensitivity to systematic discrimination allied many Jewish activists with the nascent civil rights movement, the labor movement, and the Communist Party. Tamiris's desire 'to express the spirit of the Negro people' sprang from her cultural politics as a Jewish leftist" (Susan Manning, 2004, 2). Being the child of immigrants, she was also exploring the American experience with fresh eyes that were not swayed by entrenched prejudices in the United States.

That Tamiris was in a position of relative power compared to the black community of the 1920s is a point to consider. She was presenting dances on stage in 1927 that they had scant opportunities to present themselves because of existing prejudices. However, it is unlikely that Tamiris profited monetarily through using source material from the black community, as these early modern dance concerts were lucky to break even. That Tamiris would integrate her casts on Broadway (unusual for the time) gives us further information about her desire to bridge communities (Christena Schlundt, 1989-90, 130 and Donald McKayle, 43, 2002). Christena Schlundt observes, "Long before it became fashionable, Tamiris lived integration" (Christena Schlundt, 1989-90,130). I believe that she was inspired by the spirituals and songs of protest as metaphors for all down-trodden people; her intent was not to use material from the black community for her own gain.

Tamiris as a Modern Dance Pioneer

Following her concert in 1928, Tamiris gave successful performances in Paris, Salzburg, and Berlin. In 1929, back in New York, she proposed the idea of Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, Charles Weidman, and herself collaborating to produce concerts to reduce overall costs. The group was called Dance Repertory Theatre and lasted from 1930-31 with Agnes de Mille joining in the second year. Although financially successful, it did not last due to differences of opinion, and probably conflicts of personality. While short-lived, however, it was remarkable for drawing these artists together. By showcasing their work collectively in performance, they were announcing the arrival of a new movement. Individually, they were single artists working on their own, but showcased together, they were something bigger than one person or one choreographer. This is really the beginning of American modern dance as a genre.

Graham, Humphrey, and Weidman along with Hanya Holm would soon be involved in another collaborative venture: The Bennington School of the Dance directed by Martha Hill. Although Tamiris had achieved success, she was not invited to be part of this school and festival that would propel the others into being named “the big four.” Why was Tamiris not invited? One reason was that she had a less formalized technique than the others. She wanted her dancers to find personal modes of expression and not be imprinted with one style. As her husband Daniel Nagrin noted, “To me, Helen was a Taoist without knowing it. No system, no iron theory, only a response to the needs of the moment” (Daniel Nagrin, 1989, 33. Elsewhere in this issue, see article “Daniel Nagrin: On ‘This and That’ and Choreographic Methods as Jewishness” by Diane Wawrejko). A second reason was that Tamiris was working in fields outside of modern dance. Hill said, “...she didn’t just have one aim for her dancing; she was spreading out more, into more fields” (Martha Hill, 1978, 78-79). This must have made her seem less devoted to modern dance. A third reason is that Tamiris’s modern dance choreography was seen as being more popular in style and supposedly having less depth artistically. Daniel Nagrin noted that “The mainstream of modern dance looked askance at her *joie* (joy), her glamour, her devastating physical beauty and her spirit. It looked unruly and possibly not serious” (Daniel Nagrin, 1989, 34). Modern dance has come to mean many things to many people. One of the amazing aspects of the form is its immense diversity. And in this wealth of diversity, Tamiris holds her own and more as one of the great pioneers, even if other dance history makers of the 1930s and ‘40s did not think she would or could.

What were these other fields or avenues that Tamiris found for her work in the 1930s? The United States was in the depths of the Great Depression, and the Works Progress Administration was formed to provide jobs. Tamiris lobbied successfully, along with others, for



Helen Tamiris in *Salut-Au-Monde*, 1936, photo by Thomas Bouchard

the Federal Dance Theatre. She was named chief choreographer for the New York City Federal Dance Theatre and choreographed four major works from 1936-1939. Grant Code wrote in the *Dance Observer* that Tamiris, “has done more than any other one person to hold the whole project together and keep it going” (Code, 1940, 34). The most acclaimed of her works for the Federal Dance Theatre was *How Long Brethren?* which was based on seven songs of protest by black Americans and won the 1937 *Dance Magazine* award for group choreography (Elizabeth Cooper, 1997, 35). Pauline Tish, who worked with Tamiris in the Federal Dance Theater, describes Tamiris as “a terrific jumper, one who leaped into space, pushing off the ground, a maenad, chthonic, emotional. She was all curves but very strong” (Pauline Tish, 1994, 339). Tish remembers specifically that *How Long Brethren?* was a

“stirring masterpiece of tremendous urgency for people everywhere,” and that the performances always received a standing ovation (Pauline Tish, 1994, 344).

Tamiris as a Broadway Choreographer

Tamiris and her group performed consistently through the early 1940s, when Tamiris set her sights on Broadway. Between 1945 and 1957, Tamiris choreographed fourteen Broadway shows, including *Up in Central Park* (1947), a revival of *Show Boat* (1946), *Annie Get Your Gun* (1946), and *Touch and Go* (1950), for which she won the Tony Award for Best Choreography. Many dancers who performed in her shows forged new ground in dance over the next several decades, including: Mary Anthony, Talley Beatty, Valerie Bettis, Dorothy Bird, Pearl Lang, Donald McKayle, Pearl Primus, and Bertram Ross. Tamiris, along with Agnes de Mille, Jerome Robbins, and Hanya Holm, worked successfully to make dance more integral to productions rather than just an isolated interlude. Her other great innovation was integrating her casts of dancers. Instead of having a dance for the white dancers and another for the black dancers, in Tamiris’s shows the dancers all danced together, chosen for their dance ability, not their skin color. Dancer and choreographer Donald McKayle explained, “...Tamiris had gone against the traditional color line practiced on Broadway and had racially integrated the dance ensemble” (Donald McKayle, 2002, 43).

Dancer and Labanotation expert Ann Hutchinson Guest performed in the Broadway musical *Great to be Alive!* in 1950, with choreography by Tamiris. Guest described Tamiris as having “style, a natural flamboyance with her slit skirt, high-heeled shoes, and mass

of curly, strawberry blonde hair, a strand of which she would curl around her finger when deep in thought" (Ann Hutchinson Guest, 1993, 358). Of her choreography, Guest recalled, "Tamiris's movement style for this show balanced a dramatic approach with a sense of 'romp.' Her own style of modern dance was of no 'school,' but stemmed from her natural affinity with weight and with the use of space as an element to be 'invaded' by the body, usually with force and power" (Ann Hutchinson Guest, 1993, 359-60).

Joseph Gifford danced in two musicals choreographed by Tamiris: *Up in Central Park* and *Bless You All* (1950). He remembered Tamiris's working style: "What was good about [Tamiris] in these musicals, was that she wove everything together. She didn't separate things



Helen Tamiris teaching at Perry Mansfield in 1958. Dustin Hoffman is in the background, photographer unknown

in an isolated way. Except for the musical revue which was different, she wove the dances out of what was going on in the musical as an entirety.... They weren't ballets dumped onto the thing as a whole" (Joseph Gifford, 2014).

Daniel Nagrin also danced in several of Tamiris's shows and worked as her assistant. They married on September 3, 1946. (See Diane Wawrejko's article "This and That: Implied Jewishness in the Dances of Daniel Nagrin" elsewhere in this issue). Nagrin and Tamiris formed a new company in 1960 which they called the Tamiris-Nagrin Dance Company. Though the group received positive reviews, it dissolved

around 1964. Shortly thereafter the couple separated. Tamiris got ill with cancer and died at sixty-four in New York City on August 4, 1966.

Legacy of Tamiris as Teacher

In addition to being a respected choreographer, Tamiris left a lasting legacy as a teacher. Her students speak of her positive effect on their lives, but that they never carried her imprint physically as Tamiris did not teach her own specific technique. That's because Tamiris encouraged her students to work from their inner selves, expressively seeking whatever movements would work within a given objective. In some ways this was considered a lack of style, but it was no less important in the legacy of early modern dance for our current times. Carol Dunlap wrote about Daniel Nagrin's discussion of Tamiris at the American Dance Symposium: "Nagrin said it was difficult to describe her technique because it stemmed from what Miss Tamiris called 'inner action.' Inner action, he said, was the artist's response to three basic questions – Who am I? Where am I? What's in my way? Since the artist's response to these questions, when applied to a dramatic situation, determines his actions 'it was impossible to talk about a Tamiris line or a Tamiris leap,' Nagrin said. 'We also didn't know what we would be doing from one time to the next....'" (Carol Dunlap, 1968, 8D).

Pauline Tish recalled, "Tamiris was never interested in developing a technical system or in teaching technique as such" (Tish, 1994, 330). Christena Schlundt concurs that Tamiris "never developed a technique back in the thirties when she was working with 'Her Group' but rather made suggestions and brought out reactions from her dancers" (Schlundt, 1989-90, 129). Tamiris had her own school called the School of the American Dance in the 1930s (John Martin, 1960, X7). She also taught at various colleges including New York University and at the summer festivals at Connecticut College School of Dance and at the Perry-Mansfield School of Theatre and Dance in Steamboat Springs, Colorado.

Further thoughts by JoAnne Tucker

I saw an advertisement for the Perry-Mansfield School of Theatre and Dance in *Dance Magazine* in the fall of 1957, and it indicated that Helen Tamiris would be teaching in the summer of 1958. I knew of her reputation in both modern dance and musical theater and that was a strong draw for me in wanting to study at Perry-Mansfield. My parents agreed to send me for a three-week session in July of 1958. On the second day of camp, Tamiris held auditions for her *Dance for Walt Whitman*. We were told to put together a short dance to perform on the stage. I put together some of my favorite phrases from the classes I attended regularly at home with my modern dance teacher Jeanne Beaman. I ended it with a sliding fall that I had learned in class. Tamiris asked me to please do the fall again. So, I did. The next day I was thrilled to see my name on the cast list for *Dance for Walt Whitman*. Martha Clarke and I were the only high school students; the rest of the dancers were college age. Having been selected to perform it meant that I would be in the advanced class and able to take Tamiris's composition class as well.

The composition class focused on taking everyday gestures and using them as a way to build choreography. I remember we did studies based on clapping, yawning and screaming. It made a big

impression on me that she coached one of the dancers to make sure that her scream was totally “real” before she could go on to create her scream movement. With yawning, we were encouraged to put a yawn into different parts of our bodies. I remember yawning with my foot and with my shoulder.

These classes inspired me later, too. I began the Avodah Dance Ensemble in 1972, with our base in the NYC area starting in 1978. I remained the director and primary choreographer until 2004. For the company, I created pieces that were inspired by liturgy, Biblical text, and history. We, as a company, also developed interfaith and multi-cultural projects, including residencies in correctional institutions. I often turned to ritual movement to develop dance pieces. Circling the flames and covering the eyes when lighting Sabbath Candles, wrapping oneself in a *tallit*, or pounding the chest on Yom Kippur are examples of ritual movement that I explored for choreography for Avodah's repertory. I would hear Tamiris's voice in my head saying “make sure it is real” or “how can you expand it by slowing it down, putting it in another part of your body, or repeating it in different ways?”

Today in movement workshops with mainly non-dancers, I often use gestures at the beginning of a class as the way to introduce a dance experience. Sometimes it is simply asking each person to say one word about how they are feeling and then find a gesture that fits that word. I then might coach them to put the gesture into different parts of their bodies. Usually we build a movement phrase based on the gestures, and it serves to both enter into the dance experience and build a sense of community quickly.

Something else I learned that summer from Tamiris's composition class was how critical it is to stay fully focused on what you are doing to be believable. In one class, the assignment was to come to the front of the room and just stand there. When some students took the space, there was a stillness in the room, and it was clear we all were with them. Others who were self-conscious and wondering what to do lost our attention. This simple exercise helped me in selecting dancers. Could they totally put themselves into the movement? I coached the dancers that even a very simple movement done with total focus and intent is very powerful.

Conclusion

The so-called “big four” - Graham, Holm, Humphrey, and Weidman -- somewhat eclipse Tamiris in textbooks. Tamiris, however, with her focus on dancers exploring their own expressive capabilities unbound by imposed technique structure, was no less influential. We believe Tamiris deserves increased attention for all she contributed to the dance and theatre communities. She should be investigated more fully to understand how her influence continues until today.

Bibliography

Code, Grant. “Dance Theatre of the WPA: A Record of National Accomplishment, Part III.” *Dance Observer* (March 1940): 34.

Cooper, Elizabeth. “Tamiris and the Federal Dance Theatre 1936-1939: Socially Relevant Dance Amidst the Policies and Politics of the New Deal Era.” *Dance Research Journal*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (Autumn 1997): 23-48.

Dunlap, Carol. “History of Dance Explored.” *Wichita Beacon*, Aug. 22, 1969, 8D.

Gifford, Joseph. Interview by telephone with Elizabeth McPherson, March 19, 2014.

Guest, Ann Hutchinson. “The Golden Age of the Broadway Musical: A Personal Reminiscence.” *Dance Chronicle*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (1993): 323-371.

Hill, Martha. *Reminiscences of Martha Hill*. Columbia University Oral History Collection, 1979.

Lloyd, Margaret. *Borzoi Book of Modern Dance*. New York: A.A. Knopf, 1949.

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

Martin, John. “The Dance: New Company: Helen Tamiris and Daniel Nagrin to Form a Modern Concert Group.” *The New York Times* (March 6, 1960): X7.

McKayle, Donald. *Transcending Boundaries: My Dancing Life*. New York: Routledge, 2002.

McPherson, Elizabeth. “Helen Tamiris (1902-1966).” Dance Heritage Coalition, 2012. http://new.danceheritage.org/html/treasures/tamiris_essay_mcperson.pdf (accessed June 27, 2019).

Nagrin, Daniel. “Helen Tamiris and the Dance Historians.” *Society of Dance History Scholars Conference Proceedings*, Twelfth Annual Conference, February 17-19, 1989: 15-43.

Schlundt, Christena. “Tamiris: A Chronicle of Her Dance Career: 1927-1955.” *Studies in Dance History*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Fall/Winter 89/90): 65-157.

Tamiris, Helen. “Tamiris in Her Own Voice: Draft of an Autobiography.” Edited by Daniel Nagrin. *Studies in Dance History*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Fall/Winter 89/90): 1-64. *The New York Times*, “Tamiris: ‘Dance Moods’: Gives a Program of the Pantomimic and Interpretive.” (Oct. 10, 1927): 15. *The New York Times*, “Tamiris: Dancer, Scores: Shows a Breadth of Technique in Second Recital Here.” (Jan. 30, 1928): 18.

Tish, Pauline. “Remembering Helen Tamiris.” *Dance Chronicle*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (1994): 327-360. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1567892> (summary accessed June 20, 2019).

Elizabeth McPherson is professor and Director of Dance in the Department of Theatre and Dance at Montclair State University and has staged numerous works from Labanotation (such as Helen Tamiris's *Negro Spirituals*). She is the executive director of the journal *Dance Education in Practice*, editor of *The Bennington School of the Dance: A History in Writings and Interviews*, and co-author of *Broadway, Balanchine, and Beyond: A Memoir*. She holds a Bachelor of Fine Arts from Juilliard and a Ph.D. from New York University. mcperson@mail.monclair.edu

JoAnne Tucker, Ph.D., founded and directed the Avodah Dance Ensemble from 1973-2004. Avodah performed and conducted workshops in synagogues, community centers, colleges and prisons throughout the United States. She is co-author of *Torah in Motion: Creating Dance Midrash*. Living in Santa Fe, New Mexico, she continues leading dance workshops in jails and with domestic violence survivors. Jotuc122@gmail.com