

Book Review

Modern Bodies: Dance and American Modernism from Martha Graham to Alvin Ailey.

Julia L. Foulkes. University of North Carolina Press, 2002, \$35 (272p) ISBN 978-0807853672

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The relationship between dance and the dancing body is inseparable. Since the dance artist physically embodies their art, the opinion formed of the dance is closely linked to the audience perception of the one who performs it. *Modern Bodies: Dance and American Modernism from Martha Graham to Alvin Ailey* by Julia L. Foulkes, published in 2002, is an engaging text which discusses the development of modern dance during the 1930s and 40s alongside the social and political dynamics that helped shape American modernism. Foulkes highlights the contributions of Jewish white women, gay men, and African American men and women as they explored new ways of moving their bodies which were shaped by their place in society.

The trajectory of modern dance is rooted in the bodies that began expressing modernist ideas through movement in the early part of the twentieth century. While literature and art are well recognized and identified for modernist ideas during this era, American modern dance is not as overtly studied for its collective contributions to the modernist movement. Foulkes gathers the individual names of such artists as Ruth St. Denis, Helen Tamiris, Ted Shawn, Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, Charles Weidman, Asadata Dafora, Katherine Dunham, and Pearl Primus and connects them to their place in American society during the Depression Era and World War II. She brings a much-needed context as to why “modern dance began and remains a place where people on the edges of society congregate and express themselves” (5).

Foulkes acknowledges that until the mid to late 1960s dance performances were not readily recorded by video camera and that much of what was created during the breadth of this book’s focus was lost to time. While her research relied on “photographs, reviews, choreographic notes, remembrances, and small snippets of film that have survived” (6), the crux of this book is to honor the bodies who lived these experiences of creation and place the knowledge of these living beings in a context where the reader can better understand their journey. As a history faculty member at the New School University in New York City, Foulkes connects dance and social history in a way that is engaging and will appeal to collegiate students studying dance and/or dance history.

The author discusses the prominence of women in the foundation of modern dance as it was a socially accepted place for women to collectively participate, a place where women could articulate a voice that was only beginning to be recognized in the wake of the women’s suffrage movement. But Foulkes clarifies that during the first half of the twentieth century the perception of women in dance was “as the main spectacle, a convention that assumed that female bodies were the desired sexual objects of heterosexual male audience members” (27). Women’s place in society was seen as inferior to men; the same was true of their place in the arts. White women modern dancers turned to individualism as a means to transcend the low-art objectification of their bodies, they began to question the beauty in art and “emboldened their status as American artists by downplaying female sexuality” (50). Foulkes presents themes of sexuality and politics in the arts that are still observable today; “women choreographers” and “women artistic directors” have a gender clarification not readily used for their male counterparts, and men remain as the primary occupants of current dance leadership roles.

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Foulkes' feminist perspective paints a vivid picture of how gay men could move in the powerful realm of perceived heterosexuality with the potential of attaining leadership roles, while the bodies of women were not afforded the same opportunity. There was a social desire for symbols of traditional gender roles as modern dance began to take shape in the 1930s during the Great Depression. Foulkes highlights the contributions of Ted Shawn as he promoted men in dance – the observable strength of the male body was celebrated during a time when the image of 'man as provider' was being challenged by "newsreels and Farm Security Administration photographs of saddened, resigned men in battered shacks and long unemployment lines" (94). During the same era, New York City passed legislation prohibiting homosexuality; gay men joined the modern dance movement as an acceptable refuge where the masculinity of the male body was celebrated. The author articulates that though modern dance began primarily as a female art form, Shawn and other white gay men sought to bring more men to modern dance in an effort to legitimize it "in the predominantly male arts world seething with the innovations of modernism" (80).

Of all of the discussions Foulkes presents in *Modern Bodies*, her choice of the chapter title "Primitive Moderns" is a bold statement of how African American contributions to the foundations of modern dance were initially framed by American society. She underscores the importance of Asadata Dafora and his 1934 production of *Kykunkoras* "the arrival of black choreographers commanding artistic authority on American stages" (64), yet it was not until later that the anthropological work of Katherine Dunham and Pearl Primus helped "mold and legitimate an African American aesthetic in a dance field mostly populated and supported by white Americans" (77). As gender traits informed the foundation of modern dance, Foulkes articulates the stark differences in the treatment of white versus black dancing bodies in the 1930s and 40s. She argues it was only socially acceptable for the black dancing body to portray a black dancing body, yet there were examples of white dancing bodies performing works depicting themes of African American oppression, such as Helen Tamiris' *How Long Brethren?* where whites were seen as a universal representation for all. While the post-Great Depression era ushered in a time of democratic principles which benefited African Americans in art, literature, and music, the bodies of these artists were not displayed as overtly as they were in dance. It was possible for white arts appreciators to consume paintings, books, and musical scores made by people of color and "ignore the physical presence of African American artists themselves – an impossibility in dance" (54). Foulkes calls attention to the importance of African American concert dancers taking the stage, which in turn "aggravated and pushed against the racial preconceptions that divided American society and indelibly shaped the course of their artistry" (54).

Foulkes builds an effective modern dance history discussion spanning 1920-1960, without necessarily adhering to a strict timeline which might have muddled her points. There are a few moments where she seems to be overreaching in her interpretation of choreography to support her connections to social dynamics – primarily in her discussion of the treatment of male versus female central characters in Doris Humphrey's *Shakers* compared to Ted Shawn's *Ponca Indian Dance*. However, her treatment of the contributions of African American men and women, as well as the themes of Native Americans used to depict a romanticized idea of the American West, support her argument that as modern dance developed "divisions of art into high and low went unchallenged and perpetuated class and racial prejudices" (184). *Modern Bodies* is an engaging read and highly recommended for those interested in the foundations of modern dance in the United States.

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