

INTERVIEW WITH HELEN ALKIRE

NOVEMBER 27, 2001

Q. My name is Jeanette Sexton. I am interviewing Helen Paula Alkire, who was born on May 30, 1916, in Darby Township. The interview is taking on November 27, 2001, in her home in Darby Township. Helen, when did you first become interested seriously in the dance field?

A. Well, my earliest memory was that of dancing. And when I was about 3 years old, I went to the Ohio State Fair with my folks and saw a little girl dancing. Her name Verna Fulton. And I think I danced every movement with her. So, all I ever wanted to do was dance and know all there was to know about dance. I did the former but didn't do the latter. Still have a lot to learn about dance. My father and grandfather were great Irish jiggers and my grandmother and mother both played the piano. So at family gatherings we all gathered around the piano and sang and danced. And listened to my Uncle Parker play his violin, who wanted to be a professional violinist. And the rest of the time I spent listening to the recordings of Chris Fragler. So, I was serious about dance when I was 3 I think.

Q. What dancing or instruction opportunities did you have prior to your college years?

A. I was fortunate enough to be able to study with Stella J. Becker. She had an excellent school and she kept up with all the newest events and changes in dance because she went to New York every summer. Then she'd come back and give what she had learned to the students.

Q. When you enrolled as a physical education major at the Ohio State University, what dance classes or opportunities were available?

A. Well, it was a very good program at Ohio State. I think it was probably one of the better ones in the country. There were two dance teachers, Geneva Watson, who was excellent. She had her degree from the University of Chicago and University of Wisconsin. And another dance teacher by the name of Hermine Sautoff. And she was also a graduate of the University of Wisconsin. But there were a number of classes offered which included technique and improvisation. Quite a lot of emphasis was placed on improv. And rhythmic analysis which Geneva taught. And a history of philosophy course. And there was Orchesis, which was just a volunteer group of girls who danced together and gave informal performances one or more times a year. And there were several excellent musicians. Eleanor Anawalt, who came from the School of Music. The other musicians that were on the staff included Florence Cafegge and Carol White. And Carol was a student of Eleanor's. But it was an excellent musical staff, which at that time music was very integrated with dance. And it has changed a bit since then.

Q. And it is not true that many of these people were creating the music to go with the movements at that time?

A. I don't think there was too much of that at that time. There may have been in the professional world, but I don't think the colleges and universities were doing that very much. I don't think so but I don't really know.

Q. What sparked your interest in modern dance and if you will, please describe for us really what modern dance is.

A. Well, my early training was in ballet all the way. And the usual studio forms like tap and acrobatics. Everybody taught that I guess. But I found myself drawn to improvisation which was a freer kind of movement and not as restrictive as the formal ballet. So I gravitated to that and besides all that, I hated Pointe shoes. I didn't want to wear them. I liked dancing in my bare feet. And as I said before, I was fortunate enough to study with Stella and she studied each summer in New York and kept with all the new happenings in dance including studying modern dance which was very new then and the German Expressionist approach to dance through Mary Wigman. And when I was exposed to the Wigman technique, I was completely enthralled because it was so free and it was down to earth and changed a lot of levels. So Stella had evidently learned a work of Wigman when she was in New York studying. And she came back and she reconstructed it for us, only from memory and her notes of course. There wasn't any system for that. It was called "Black Shadow." And we had black kind of veiled dresses on and we performed it in the stadium. And I can remember it was quite an event cause it was so different. No one in Columbus had seen anything like it. And they probably hated it. I loved it. So, then through Dance Magazine and through Stella, I became aware of Martha Graham and Doris Humphrey and Jose Limon and all the pioneers in the field. And she also studied with them. So when she was studying with Doris Humphrey, she also learned one of Doris' works, the "Water Study," which is still in the repertory and still done in colleges and universities throughout the country. But she came back and put "Water Study" on it. I was really sold when we did "Water Study." And we did in the spring recital and it went over

big. It was very interesting kind of movement succession piece. And you did it in your back and you began on the floor and you were like waves It was really very interesting. Of course, they were all reconstructed from memory. So, I have to use that word reconstruct very loosely.

Q. What types of courses did you and other faculty members develop to provide a substantial curriculum for dance majors?

A. Well, I didn't get the definition of modern dance which I really don't have one. I don't think I can give one. It was a revolt against the static kind of ballet and to free the body for movement that was not restricted just to the legs and arms. But the whole body was moving. And to dance barefoot and express ideas through symbolic movement. Which of course there are always story ballets, but this was kind of an abstraction of ideas that were put into gestures. It all began with Isadore Duncan. And then it was developed by Humphrey and Graham and Limon. They were all the early pioneers.

Q. Now we'll go back to the question about developing curriculum for the dance major.

A. When we developed the curriculum for the dance majors, there had been several levels of modern technique and a couple levels of ballet technique, composition, Laban notation, beginning, intermediate and advanced with the Laban notation. And reconstruction of a dance score. And reparatory which was a reconstructive dance in class which is performed in a concert. It was either done reconstruction of a score done by one of our people or somebody coming in as a guest artist did it. Then we had history, movement analysis, dance production, lighting design,

seminars in teaching, minor problems in almost all aspects of dance, music for dance, and the University dance group which had credit. And then we offered ethnic dance classes when it was possible to do that.

Q. What other learning and teaching experiences did you have to enhance your leadership role at Ohio State?

A. Well, I studied in summers from the time I was about a sophomore in college. I went to Bennington College and was in Hanya Holmes Company and performed in her work "Trend," which is the first production she had done in this country. She was one of Wigman's students. And I went to the University of Wisconsin to study with Berta Ochsner and was in her piece called "Media Comment," which she later took to New York. But I didn't go with her because I was still in school. I was invited. And that was a work called "A Media Comment" and it was very off the wall and interesting. It was very good. Ahead of itself. She was a professional dancer who spent most of her life in Europe dancing. She was the daughter of the famous surgeon. I think Austria is where she's from. Well, then I did my Masters and I taught at OSU and was given a graduate assistantship when I was a senior, which was I don't know how they did that one, but I was very flattered about that and loved my teaching there. And went to Columbia University and worked on a Doctorate and took classes downtown and tried out for the musical. And then I taught at Columbia for about five summers and of course also studied downtown. Then I taught at the Cape Code Theatre School in Massachusetts. And that was an interesting experience. So, I guess all of those things contributed to what I ... After Bennington I went to Connecticut College

to study in the summer. And then of course the musical productions began on campus which I think was in the late 50's I think we did those, we started them. And that was a very different and new experience and an opportunity to choreograph in ways that I had not had experienced before. I guess all of that contributed.

Q. Tell us about the early days of Orchesis and how it differed from the University dance group.

A. Well Orchesis was a group that was developed at the University of Wisconsin under _____ who was head of that program. And it was again a group of women who met once or twice a week to dance and to give performances. But they were very informal and not highly produced. The University dance group, which later became the Company, was organized as performance group with professional standards. And people had to audition to get into it. And it was a highly skilled group, as highly skilled as we had in college at that time, which was pretty good. And the whole idea was that this was experience for them because they were going into professional dance. It was pre-professional training group, I think you would call it. But the dances we did, original choreography by faculty and sometimes students who were highly skilled or talented. And then artists in residence provided works that we did. They were performed in Mershon Auditorium. 1960 was our first performance in Mershon and they didn't want to open the balcony because they said you'll never fill it. I've forgotten the man's name who ran that. Anyway, he said we would not fill it. Well, it filled up and somebody came to me and said, "What do we do? There aren't anymore seats?"

And I said, “Well, open the balcony!” So they opened the balcony. And we had half the balcony filled. So that was the big milestone I think for the University Dance Company.

Q. Tell us about the unusual and successful collaboration with the Symphonic Choir in the School of Music.

A. Well that began with Geneva Watson and Louis Diercks who was the Director of the Symphonic Choir. And he wanted to produce “Juggler of Notre Dame.” And Geneva I guess was interested and they did it with the dancers and the Symphonic Choir voices and I played the role of the juggler. And I was still in school. I was still a student, so it had to be before my senior year sometime. And the drama turned out to be of some length. And it was performed in the old U Hall. And it was really a challenge because it had a raised stage. So when you were dancing, you had to watch your balance because it was pretty easy unless you were sure footed, you could lose your balance. But the collaboration was most successful. And they did it I think about three or four years. Every Christmas they did it and that’s how it began, the dancers working with the choir. Then later on, I guess because it was so successful, Louie came to me and asked if I wanted to work with him. So I thought, “Well, sure, I’ll try it.” So I organized what I called an experimental group which was not the University Dance Company but it was a group in addition to that. Because I just wanted to experiment. I didn’t really know what I was doing. So we began that and that turned out to be quite successful and we toured every spring quarter and it was a rather extensive tour. We went in Ohio and Pennsylvania and New York State. And in 1955, we went

to Europe to participate in a festival in Wales. And on the way we gave performances in England and France and Germany and Holland and Brussels. And that was a long tour. And we had to sometimes do our own lighting as well as doing the performance. And prior to that, we performed in New York City at Town Hall and in Washington, D.C. at the Lisner Auditorium. But the collaboration, I think, ended when I got too busy and was doing the musical productions, trying to build a department.

Q. Appropriate facilities and space often are neglected for artistic expression groups. Can you trace the various “homes” of the dance area?

A. Yea. Well when we were in physical education, we were given 205 Pomerine as the dance studio and that was ours. We also had use of the lounge in Pomerine. And some space in the mens building. And then I did use a third floor space of the old Ohio Union. So I had to around seeking space because as long as dance is in physical education, we offered dance classes to the entire University. So then we had quite a few classes. And they were quite popular. We had to hunt space. When dance became a unit in the College of the Arts, we were housed in the old laundry. They re-did that but we still retained the use of 205 Pomerine Hall. Now a lot of these spaces weren't good for the feet because the floors were not very good. Even Pomerine Hall wasn't the greatest because under that wood there was cement. And that's bad on the body. But the old laundry facilities were quite adequate for the program at that time. They included separate offices for each faculty member, which that was something at that time. Two studios, a costume room, and locker room facilities for the students and for the faculty. And there

was a conference room. So, that was such an improvement over what we had had. But in 1975, we moved to Sullivant Hall, which we still retain. But we still retain 205 Pomerine Hall because we still offer elective classes. In Sullivant, we had five studios and conference room and locker rooms for both students and faculty, and a costume room. Since that, it has been remodeled and there is even more space.

Q. What types of musical accompaniment were and still are used with modern dance classes?

A. The types of musical accompaniment at that time we used any kind of classical music that was appropriate for movement. And most of the time the pianist selected the music. We used some popular music. We used Gershwin. I think we used a lot of Gershwin. Drums and we made our own scores for drums. And with Geneva, we used to write our own scores for drums. And we could use instrumental music, piano music, or anything we wanted to. Sometimes we'd pick a section from a symphony. Not too much unless it was a big heavy work, which we didn't do too much of at that time.

Q. What advantages, if any, were realized when dance became unit in the College of the Arts?

A. Well, when we moved into the College of Arts it was substantially acknowledged as an art form. And prior to that time it was acknowledged only as an activity in physical education. There was a strong emphasis on recreation. So the goals of dance as an art form were being lofted, by the wayside.

Q. Were there any disadvantages being separated from the womens physical education area?

A. Well, they were very upset with us because they thought we didn't appreciate all they had done for us. They had nurtured us and then we moved out. But we had to move out because we had outgrown our goal of there. And we needed to have our own budget, plan our own programs, and do all of that. So, I don't think there are any disadvantages except we lost some friends and some strong supporters in the beginning.

Q. Did you receive support and encouragement from any particular administration?

A. Yes, when Dr. Corbally, I think he was Vice President, one of the Vice Presidents. He was very supportive and I didn't ever feel that I had gotten any kind of resistance from an of the people I talked with, including all the people who helped me plan the old laundry. I had to meet with them to plan that. And I felt I had all kinds of support. Many people that I had talked with who were in a similar situation in other universities said they had so much trouble with their administration. But I never did. I always felt I had good support, particularly from Dr. Corbally.

Q. Well that's great. What factors contributed to the rise of the reputation in the dance area to one of prominence on the national scene?

A. Well, I think it began first on the campus with performances by the University Dance Company which we received pretty good reviews from downtown reviewers, which they don't do today for the amateur productions. But we got some very good reviews. Musical productions brought prominence to dance in

the productions. And then the University Choir and Symphonic Choir Dance Theater we called it. Being in New York and being in Washington and having been abroad brought recognition. And in addition to that, the students and faculty were all active in the New York dance scene. And at Connecticut where we met people from all over the world. And then I think we were all attended local and state and national organizational conferences. And all of that gave us some recognition in competition. And I think that's probably where we became recognized.

Q. After Mershon Auditorium was built some Broadway shows were produced which involved dance, theater and music. What was your role or other dance faculty members in these productions?

A. Well I was the choreographer for about five of them, five productions. And Vicki Blaine, I think "West Side Story" was the last one I did, along with "A Christmas" with Vicki and a couple of other students. Lynn Dally I think and some of the students who were outstanding students.

Q. Do you recall some specific challenging or exciting productions? I remember "Oklahoma," the first one that you did.

A. No, I think "South Pacific" was the first one, if I remember correctly. And then "Showboat," I don't know if that was the second one or not. But that's when the ceiling of Mershon caved in. I said, "Well, they should have put the boat on it." We had to go downtown to the Veterans Memorial. I said, "Just put the boat on the river and go down." "Merry Widow" – see the idea was we were to do popular Broadway shows that go clear up to opera within a four year period. So

you could have an experience in all the various facets and various approaches to musical theater. It was to be all inclusive. But we never made the operas. I think the closest we ever got was the “Merry Widow,” which was designed by George Popoe and he did a beautiful design for the “Merry Widow.” I loved the “Merry Widow.” The only problem was when they reviewed it, they didn’t like the kind of waltz that I did. I did the authentic box waltz moving. They wanted me to do that two step waltz, the critics, whoever it was at that time.

Q. I believe that there were some firsts created or developed on this campus. Particularly, please explain dance notation.

A. Yea, well when I studied at Bennington College in 1937, we had to take notation. And it was taught by Franciska Boas, whose father was the famous anthropologists. And we had a drumming class and we also had the notation. At that time, there were no books. So we had to make our own books and learn all the symbols and how to write them and how to put them on the score. So that’s where I began to be interested in notation. And then later on, when I was teaching at OSU, I decided I wanted to study notation in New York. So I took a quarter off and went up to the Dance Notation Bureau and studied. And then I came back and decided I wanted to try this out on the students. I tried it out in technique classes. Want me to write like you just danced? So I would do that. And they were fascinated with it. So, I thought well it’s going to work. So I’ll try to put it in some choruses. So I did that and the committee that reviewed the chorus outline were most interested because they had not heard anything about it, notation before. And one of the people on the committee said, “Well, this ought to be in

linguistics.” Anyway, they were most supportive of it. And I got two courses in without any problem at all. And that’s when we all got to be interested in it.

Notation is just a system of writing movement. And it’s written on an inverted scale with the center line being the center of the body and the support system on either side, like the feet would be outside the line on either side. Then it moves out with lines where the hip is moving, the arm is moving, and it includes everything including the eyes. So you can move out horizontally but to read vertically. And then the rhythmic patterns are all on the sides. So it’s a complicated system. But it worked.

Q. When a faculty member or a student choreographs a dance which is performed on campus, is it sometimes repeated here or borrowed by some other dance department?

A. Well, the notation people would go out to colleges, on the campuses, and reconstruct these scores from dances of Humphrey and all those people. And then some of the dances are done by companies, like one of Vicki Blaine’s pieces was done on the Harry Company, which was _____ company’s. I think Lynn Dally has done some tap pieces on other companies. Occasionally it will happen with a graduate student and he’ll go out to another university and do a work for other people. Students are not that much involved in doing that yet.

Q. I hadn’t asked you this question before. Are these dances often filmed or is there a film library?

A. I filmed, I had three dances filmed. The “Brandenburg Concerto” and “Shakers” and “Odes.” “Shakers” was Humphrey _____. “Brandenburg” was Humphrey. And “Odes” was Anna Sokolff. And they’re in the film library.

Q. How was the notation that you developed utilized or received by other faculty?

A. One interesting development was some of the people in physical education were interested in it and they took some of the courses, including Ann Lilly, who taught synchronized swimming and she was working on her Masters at the time. And she decided she wanted to note take her routines in swimming. So, she thought she would write her thesis on that which was approved. But she came across a rather unusual problem. Because when you swim you’re on your back or on your stomach or whatever, side, and she didn’t have any foundation support system in swimming as you do in dance. So she had to solve that problem in writing, which she did. Don’t ask me how cause I don’t remember anymore. But then she did it so well she went to New York and presented the whole thing to the Dance Notation Bureau. And that was certainly a first with I guess notation anyplace. And then in 1967, we made plans to move the D&B extension to OSU. It was so successful. And I was asked would I be interested in having the program at OSU. And I said, “Oh my yes.” So, I went to Corbally and he provided funds and the extension was moved along with quite a large library and library holdings. And one faculty moved to Vanderbilt to run the Bureau. And a five year plan that would include one or more other faculty members and one or more graduate students and a secretary. And we did accomplish it, but no secretary. They were hard to get. So the Bureau came.

- Q. Who were some of the well known visiting dance teachers?
- A. We had a lot of well known teachers, but we were one of the first universities to bring the young artists and some who were more established into the department for a period of time, like a quarter or a month, or as much money as we could get. And we began with Jack Moore who was our first senior resident. And we had here a quarter. He was Louis Horst's assistant at Connecticut. And his work was very well received. It was performed in Merseon. And following Jack, there were many. Viola Darber, who was one of Merce Cunningham's dancers. Judith Dunn, Anna Sokoloff, Luther Toving who worked with Jose, and Anna Sokoloff was one of the original grand dancers. Plus Peter ____, a younger person, James Cunningham, a younger person, Gus Solomon, Twyla Tharp, and Jose Limon. So we had quite an array. Then some of our own students were brought back as residents. They included Lynn Dally, Senta Driver, Sharon Kinney, Diane McIntire, and recently Davey Miller.
- Q. No doubt you were responsible for building and enlarging the dance faculty. Did you bring such people Odette Blum and Lucy Venable, Vicki Blaine or Karen Bell to OSU?
- A. Yes, I brought them all.
- Q. What were their specialties or their contributions?
- A. Odette was appointed as far as the Dance Notation Bureau because of her expertise in reconstructing scores and teaching. She was raised in Scotland and did not have an American university degree. But she was head and shoulders above many who did have them. Vicki Blaine was appointed to teach technique,

choreography and the choreographed works to be performed in concert and the work in the dance education program. And Lucy was appointed Director of the MB extension and Lucy was a former member of the Lamone Company. And Odette had danced professionally with a company, whose name I can't remember. And Vicki danced professionally when she was in New York, but it is a company that I can't recall the name. And Karen Bell, I hired before my retirement. She came from _____ and had a little different approach to things. And she was hired to be technique and choreography and work in performance. The school was pretty much performance oriented because without the dancing, what do you have? I have to mention along with those people some others that I appointed. Vera Maletitch, who was very knowledgeable about the Laban on notation studies in many directions. And she studied with Laban himself, as well as her mother. And she's a very creative thinker and writer. And Angelika Gerbes, who was there for history. I had appointed her to teach history and she also had a very interesting renaissance performance group. She worked with somebody in the School of Music with that, I think, whose name, I think she's retired now. Louise Guthman, who started the production program and the lighting and design. She had toured with _____ Ballet all over Europe and Mexico and very able person. And I think that's it. And Rosalind Pierson who came to teach ballet, excellent ballet teacher, and also modern and a very good choreographer and director. They were all hand picked.

Q. Please give a rough estimate of the number of graduates who joined dance companies for careers versus those who pursued teaching careers in dance on the college campus.

A. I would say there were about 40% of students who went professional, joining companies or developing their own. And 60% I would say went into teaching or forming schools of their own, in universities and high schools and also opening their own schools.

Q. When I look through your biographical files I was surprised to see the name Robin Williams. Why was the movie "Popeye" included in your file?

A. Well that was included because Sharon Kinney did the choreography for "Popeye" and Melva Murray, who now calls herself China White, was also in the movie "Wizard of Oz." They did a re-make of the Wizard, not like the TV version. But China did that.

Q. So she would be another graduate who had experience similar to Sharon Kinney?

A. Yes. Right. I think that question was asked sometime.

Q. In addition to your years of dancing, teaching, creating, administering, you were busy in professional organizations. What were they and what were your responsibilities in them?

A. I was on the committee to plan the first American Dance College Festival Association for the National Festival at the Kennedy Center. That organization ACDFFA, American College Dance Festival Association. And I served on the National Educational Testing Service panel for the Scholars and the Arts and the President's Commission on the Arts in Education.. And I served as Vice-

President of the American College of Dance Festival Association. And then I was Founder and Treasurer of the Council, one of the Founders and Treasurer of the Council of Dance Administrators, CODA, from 1976 to 1980. And then I received the _____ award from the National Dance Association. And the Educators Award from the Greater Columbus Arts Council, the Ohio Arts Council, and the Association of Ohio Dance Companies. And I was one of the founding members of the National Association of Schools of Dance, NASD. And a member of the NASD Commission on Accreditation. That's about it unless you want to know something else.

Q. Well you and your Dance Department have received many well-deserved honors from OSU, other institutions and organizations. And you particularly have received some honors. Could you tell us about those?

A. Well I told you about those.

Q. But from OSU?

A. The largest honor I received was honorary degree in Doctor of Education in 1990. That was very memorable and very flattered to receive it. Two years ago, the Department of Dance voted the most outstanding dance department in the country. And was a poll taken by Dance Teacher Now, which is a magazine on which I was on the editorial board about five years, sometime ago, when the magazine was first published. Now Vicki has that spot. The other honors I think I've gone over already. But I think the honors go to those students who have been successful and they're the ones who really are advertising the program. One year we spent the whole year bringing back the graduates who had been successful in

New York and elsewhere. And they came back and gave performances. And then we had a big party after each one. And so that was lots of fun. And another celebration we had was in New York City. I think that was organized by Senta Driver and a few more of the arts people to honor me. It was through the Alumni Association, the New York Alumni Association. So it was a very exciting kind of event.

Q. Well your students have remembered you and you have remembered your students. And that's so important. So thank you for sharing your memories of the growth, development and success of modern dance at Ohio State University. You were the pioneer and the impetus of the outstanding department that exists today.