

Reconsidering the Judson Influence

Veronica Dittman Stanich

“Anything discovered in dance percolates into the existing lexicon, and five minutes later no one remembers how it got there.” – Marcia B. Siegel (59)

Dance that is popular in the U.S. today—meaning that with significant audience numbers, such as *So You Think You Can Dance*, musical theater on Broadway, and dancing that appears in commercials—bears the mark of an American hybrid of influences. These include ballet, social dances, and Africanist forms such as hip-hop and jazz. Absent from this landscape of popular dance is work that has inherited characteristics and values from the Judson Dance Theater. JDT was a group of dancers, choreographers, artists, and musicians who collectively gave a series of concerts at Judson Memorial Church in Manhattan’s Greenwich Village in the early 1960s. While the Judson Dance Theater’s innovations are considered seminal by dance scholars and are widely accepted by and incorporated into the work of contemporary (problematically, “postmodern”) choreographers, these dances remain below the cultural radar. They happen primarily in small theaters and alternative spaces in large metropolitan areas, and attract miniscule audiences often made up of people from within dance. There is a general sense that most people aren’t attracted to this style of dance, don’t like it, and don’t “get it.”

There are myriad reasons why the aesthetic of Judson Dance Theater never took hold on a large scale. I will focus here on the geographic and cultural isolation of the Judson Dance Theater. Sally Banes described the audience for Judson Dance Theater as

artists, painters, musicians, dancers, writers, film makers, intellectuals, people who live in the neighborhood of the church, in Greenwich Village. It was an

audience acutely aware of the crises in modern art and knowledgeable about the history of alternatives to art traditions, eager to be surprised, shocked, provoked.

(*Terpsichore* 13).

I propose that the current cultural isolation of contemporary dance is a direct result of the relative isolation in which the Judson dance-makers worked. Their radical, largely formalist ideas, which constituted a revolution against modern dance and its dominant theatrical values in the U.S., were never disseminated to the general public. Average viewers remain unaware of the theoretical underpinnings of the Judson innovations, and the theory beneath them is crucial to their appreciation. As a result, when these innovations, or their 21st-century incarnations, appear in contemporary dance, most audiences have no context for them; they just look like violations of the theatrical norm. They look like bad dance. Siegel's observation becomes critical insofar as recognizing the source of this type of dance is imperative to understanding—and thereby possibly even enjoying—it.

It is necessary to first describe what the ideology of the Judson Dance Theater was, how that ideology was manifested in particular characteristics of their work, and finally, how that ideology and those characteristics are still present in contemporary dance. The Judson Dance Theater had its genesis in the early 1960s with a group of dancers in a composition workshop given by Robert Dunn, who was influenced by the chance procedures of John Cage (Banes, *Terpsichore* 10). This group was to give numerous performances of their work at the Judson Memorial Church. They sought to foreground the medium of dance, rather than its meaning (Banes, *Terpsichore* xvi). For the Judson dance-makers, dance could be a framework for looking at movement for its own sake, an illustration of a theory about dance, the embodiment of a

different perspective on space or time, and a dissolution of the boundary between art and life (Banes, *Terpsichore* 15-16).

These ideas represent a radical break with previous theatrical dance, specifically American modern dance, and in fact that was the goal of the Judson artists: “The early post-modern choreographers saw as their task the purging and melioration of historical modern dance...” (Banes, *Terpsichore* xv). While they accomplished this purging through a variety of means, I will highlight here four interrelated exemplars of the Judson reforms and identify the characteristics and conventions present in contemporary dance that are their legacy.

The first of these reforms was an attempt to demolish the divide between audience and performer by doing away with theatrical conventions. Yvonne Rainer articulated this strategy in her comparison of her dance and the minimalist sculpture of the time, proposing that phrasing; development and climax; variation of rhythm, shape, dynamics and character; performance; variety; virtuosic feats; and the fully extended body should all be eliminated from or minimized in dance (Banes, *Terpsichore* 55). In this way, Rainer entered into a dialectic relationship with dance, as did her Judson colleagues. Their rejection of theatricality was meant to both recognize the objective presence of the human body and movement, and to repudiate the drama of existing modern dance. Just as John Cage established that any sound could be music, now any movement could be dance. The quest for objectivity is evident in the structure of their works; they incorporate pedestrian movement and objects, and explore Robert Dunn’s choreographic structures such as chance procedures, radical juxtaposition, scores, and rule games (Banes, *Writing Dancing* 212-215). Rainer and others also sought to create objectivity with a non-heroic performance style, a deliberate impassivity employed specifically to avoid eliciting empathy from viewers (Jowitt 328-329).

The Judson Dance Theater choreographers continued to explore these concepts and methods throughout the 1960s, although they and subsequent generations of choreographers did eventually reintegrate theatricality, virtuosity, and all the other black-listed characteristics of dance into their work. The legacy of their pursuit of objectivity is still present in the incorporation of objects, the stillness, the pedestrian movement, and the casual, non-heroic performance style that are prevalent in contemporary dance.

Loosely related to the Judson Dance Theater's pursuit of objectivity is their anti-elitist idealism, their wish to demythologize the dance, and more specifically, the dancer and his or her body (Jowitt 312). Just as any movement could be dance, anybody could be a dancer, and in fact some members of the group were artists and musicians by training. In addition to this democratizing urge, there was a prevailing idea that "the body in all its states was acceptable. Clumsiness could figure in dance as well as adroitness, plumpness as well as trimness. Even weakness could play a part" (Jowitt 318). Thus, hand in hand with the Judson rejection of virtuosity came a rejection of bodies that were, or looked, capable of virtuosity—highly trained and conspicuously muscular. Anything that looked like dance technique was out, and "the bodies tended to look like those you'd meet on the street, rather than those of slim, lithe, well-muscled dancers trained to affirm their specialness with every look and gesture" (Jowitt 308). While in actuality many Judson dancers continued to take ballet class, trained dancers kept a certain amount of physical versatility under wraps (Jowitt 322).

Again, this ideal that rejected virtuosic bodies faded in the ensuing decades, but an acceptance of all body types—not just the dancerly ideal—and the presence of minimally or non-trained dancers onstage persists in contemporary dance. In addition, present in many contemporary dancers' training regimens is a deconstructive element, something that clears away

unwanted debris (i.e., technique) from the body. “The idea is often to pare down, not build up (muscle, habits); to get out of the way (of nature’s better decision), to allow rather than to make something happen; to “listen” to the movement impulse before acting. There is something of the Zen not-doing mentality here, and yet also of the modernist stripping down to essentials” (Bales 15). This 21st-century practice of stripping away technique, and the look of the dancing bodies that result from such a practice, are direct descendents of Judson ideals. Contemporary choreographers such as Liz Lerman, Bill T. Jones, David Dorfman, and Mark Morris hire dancers with a wide range of body types, redefining what a dancer’s body should look like.

Although improvisation had played a part in the processes of some modern choreographers, particularly those of German descent, it was foregrounded in Judson performance. The use of improvisation in performance is certainly in keeping with many elements of Judson ideology: the desire to eliminate hierarchy in dance, the prioritization of human-ness over dancer-ness, the focus on a transparent process rather than a polished product, the use of scores and rule games. In addition, west coast dance artist Ann Halprin had a direct influence on the Judson Dance Theater, as members of the group attended her workshops in California. “...Halprin encouraged improvisation, not as a blind flood of expression but as a means to set loose all conceivable movements, gestures, and combinations of anatomical relationships, ignoring connotation, and bypassing habit and preference” (Banes, *Terpsichore* 22). Rainer, Simone Forti, and Trisha Brown brought Halprin’s theories about and methods of improvisation back to New York and extended them in their own work.

The acceptance of improvisation as a valid mode of performance is undiminished today in contemporary dance.

Finally, the work of Judson artists disrupted a centuries-long tradition that related dance directly to music, with the music created for the dance or vice versa. They went together, corresponding in rhythm or quality or theme. The American modern dancers, despite their rebellion against ballet tradition, did not question this inherent relationship between music and dance. Louis Horst, musical mentor to Martha Graham and teacher of well-attended dance composition classes, taught that the meaning and shape of the dance, as well as its vocabulary, were dictated by musical genre (Banes, *Writing* 313). By contrast, Dunn taught his students to “transpose more formal music composition problems and concepts (including the use of scores) to movement—rather than making a dance that would mimic a given musical style as part of an expressive package. In Dunn’s class, the music that generated a piece of choreography might not even end up accompanying the dance” (Banes, *Writing* 314).

Judson dance-makers used a wide range of musical styles and a wide range of means to incorporate music into their choreographic processes. Silence, words, popular music, and the dancers’ vocalizations were all legitimate choices for the sound score of a dance (Banes, *Writing* 316). This ideal of total freedom for a choreographer to choose or craft his or her own sound score and relate to it in any way flourishes now in contemporary dance.

These examples of Judson-initiated innovations—the use of pedestrian movement and stillness, the image of the dancer’s body that is neither conspicuously muscular nor conventionally virtuosic, the respect for improvisation within performance, the choreographer’s total license with respect to sound and the dance’s relationship to it—represent not only the manifestations of complex and far-reaching theories about art and dance but also a subversive aesthetic. Viewers who are aware of the dialectic between Judson Dance Theater and the art of dance itself accept the Judson aesthetic *because* of that awareness. The knowledge of the origin

of these particular dance characteristics gives them context; it provides a lens through which they can make sense. Viewers who don't have that dance-historical knowledge—who don't know that the stillness or improvisation incorporated into a current dance are the vestiges of an artistic revolution—lack that lens. They have instead the lens of theatrical dance that came before Judson: ballet, social dance, Broadway and popular dancing, and modern dance. Seen through *that* lens, Judson-inflected dance disappoints; it doesn't meet the standards.

It runs contrary to audience expectations about what a dance should be. Deborah Jowitt, referring to a glowing review of Judson Dance Theater by Jill Johnston, wrote:

Paradox: making art more like life doesn't necessarily make it more accessible or more popular. In fact, the reverse is likely to be true. To Johnston's thrilled response might be countered that of the viewer who believes he/she's being cheated unless the dancers are doing something certifiably difficult: "Call that dance?" (324)

What are these expectations, exactly? What is an audience looking for in a dance performance, that we might ascertain what makes them feel cheated? While "the audience" is obviously not a monolith—being comprised of expert dance-viewers as well as novices, and people of all cultural backgrounds—there are a couple of barometers of what constitutes the popular definition of good dance.

Research on viewer reactions to dance sheds light on conceptions of what a dance performance "should" have. One study, done in 1996 within the context of cognitive anthropology, asked viewers to consider ten videotaped samples of human movement, including clips of fire-fighters in action, a marching band on parade, an aerobics class, *The Nutcracker* ballet, a tap dance scene from a Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers movie, and an MTV video

featuring MC Hammer. Viewers were asked to ascertain the relationship of these activities to dance, stating whether the sample was definitely dance, mostly dance but partly something else, mostly something else but partly dance, or definitely not dance (Francis 52-53). The make-up of the group was not weighted for expertise; some participants had taken dance classes, some had social dance experience, and some had no dance experience at all (Francis 53).

Participants were then asked to define what it was that caused them to respond as they did. In other words, what *about* this movement makes it dance, or not? The factors that most frequently swayed respondents in the direction of a “yes, this is dance” rating (called “plus-dance factors”) were:

1. movement
2. having rhythm/moving in time with the music/moving to the beat of the music
3. music
4. presence of a pattern/choreographed movement/planned movement
5. expressive of self/expressive of emotion/expressive of the music
6. quality of movement, must be flowing/graceful/coordinated (Francis 55-56)

Conversely, the factors that most frequently caused respondents to judge that a given activity is not dance (“minus-dance factors”) were:

1. purpose (e.g., work, sport)
2. inappropriate quality of movement: sharp, jumpy, athletic, jerky, ungraceful, mechanical, boring, too repetitious, rigid, too much like walking, or too violent
3. absence of an expressive element
4. nothing was communicated (no story told through gestures)
5. absence of rhythm

6. absence of music (Francis 56)

For viewers with a cross-section of backgrounds then, the configuration of requisites for what a movement must do and must not do to be considered dance compares tellingly with Rainer's list of what to eliminate or minimize in dance. The very elements that she and other Judson artists sought to expunge from their work are the ones whose absence elicits Jowitt's "Call that dance?" response. An audience who takes the risk of attending a performance billed as dance (risky, as opposed to the variety of entertainment options available electronically, at no cost, in the comfort of home) is understandably disappointed and exasperated to find so much on stage that refutes their concept of dance.

In another study from 2009 investigating neuroaesthetics, researchers used fMRI and MEG technologies to explore the neural correlates of implicit aesthetic responses to dance. Brain responses in participants with no formal dance experience were measured while they watched isolated dance movements. The movements were chosen from classical ballet and capoeira and classified on the bases of speed, body part used, direction of movement, and vertical and horizontal displacement (Calvo-Merino 5-6).

The study revealed "two specific brain regions showing significant neuroaesthetic tuning. These regions were more activated when subjects viewed movement that (on average, in the consensus) they liked, compared to movements that, on average, they disliked" (Calvo-Merino 7). By tracking the activity in this part of the brain, researchers were able to make generalizations about which movements stimulate an aesthetic response:

Because movements were selected on the basics of four criteria, we can now produce a physical description of those dance movements that preferentially target these aesthetically sensitive areas. This suggested that, on average, these aesthetic

sensitive areas preferred whole body movements, such as jumping in place or with a significant displacement of the entire body in space (e.g., horizontal jumps) (Calvo-Merino 8).

While it is problematic to assert that we are biologically predisposed to like certain movements better than others, this study does provide a useful nugget of information: novice viewers in an isolated and controlled environment preferred and were more stimulated by the sight of bodies doing big movements, particularly big movements that travel through the air. Taking into account the limits of this finding, it is notable that the movements that most excited the brains of those viewers were those which require a degree of virtuosity to perform. Absent the gross motor movements and spatial displacement that signal virtuosity, as is the case with some Judson-influenced dance works, there is the potential for dissatisfaction. Some itch that likes to be scratched is left unattended.

The results of these two studies indicate that novice viewers like dance that is musical, choreographed, expressive, flowing or coordinated, and virtuosic. This rough composite sketch of what the audience prefers—limited as it is by its assumption of a homogeneous audience—corresponds with the characteristics of dance that is popular in the U.S. now: *So You Think You Can Dance* and commercial styles. Those popular forms provide another barometer of what represents “good” dance for many people; ticket sales and advertising dollars speak volumes. Dance artists whose work calls into question the inherent value of musicality, expression, choreography, and skill in dance may be able to fill the 500-seat Joyce Theater in New York for a week, but could they sustain a months-long, eight-shows-a-week run in a Broadway Theater? Could they tour successfully through the large downtown theaters in mid-size cities across the country that host *Riverdance* or *Stomp*?

Along the way, Judson Dance Theater and the choreographers and dancers who followed in their footsteps shifted the definition of what constitutes dance to one that is inconsistent with the commonly accepted one. It is appropriate to adopt for dance a version of Arthur Danto's institutional theory of art: that in order to accept some contemporary art *as* art, a knowledge of both art theory and art history is necessary (Danto 581). An ignorance of the fact that at some point any pedestrian movement became a valid choice for dance, and of the ideology behind that revolution, will lead a viewer to reject a dance that incorporates pedestrian movement.

Why is that ignorance so widespread? Why do so many educated, arts-friendly people across the U.S. remain unfamiliar with the name Judson Church, let alone the principles associated with it? I suggest that it is because the entire Judson Church phenomenon—the theories, the performances, the innovations—were isolated within the community of artists in downtown New York City.

For comparison, consider the American modern dancers of the beginning of the twentieth century. The Big Four of modern dance –Graham, Humphrey, Weidman, and Holm—also rebelled against the dance that had come before, created their work in the crucible of the New York dance world, and challenged their audiences initially. However, their vision of dance was able to exceed the narrow boundaries of that concert/art-dance world and trickle out to a broader audience. While modern dance can't claim to ever have been truly popular—lucrative or widely accessible—it did enter the popular consciousness to some extent, especially in the figure of Martha Graham, in a way that Judson Dance Theater did not. Put crudely, how many more people know the name Martha Graham and have even a vague idea of what she did than know the same about Yvonne Rainer? While the subversive aesthetic of Judson Dance Theater was,

with a few exceptions, contained within lower Manhattan, American audiences had multiple means of exposure to the aesthetic of modern dance.

First, through its active association with the political left in the 1930s, modern dance reached an audience that would probably not otherwise have been exposed to concert dance. Founded in 1932, the Workers Dance League was headquartered in New York City but had branches in other cities as well. The League organized classes for workers and their children, and for anyone interested in radical social change, as well as sponsoring performing troupes in shared concerts (Manning 62). Dance writer Paul Love writes of one of these shared concerts in 1934 that “The groups are reaching classes of people who previously had no interest in the dance or in the values it might contain for them” (43).

The scope of the Workers Dance League’s outreach was immense:

By June 1934 the Workers Dance League boasted eight hundred dues-paying members, twelve amateur groups, fifty classes and a number of ‘performing units’ in New York City...According to the League’s own estimates, its dancers performed before thirty-four thousand spectators in a single season. This 1933-34 season included major concerts at City College Auditorium, the Brooklyn Academy of Music, the St. Nicolas Arena, Madison Square Garden, and the Bronx Coliseum as well as more than a hundred other engagements before leftist groups (Manning 62).

While Love and other critics noted the amateurish, untrained nature of some of these performing groups, there was a considerable level of professionalism as well and in many cases, League performances were a direct link to the work of the Big Four:

Leftist dance and modern dance were overlapping practices and formations, for many choreographers and dancers participated in both movements...all trained at the studios of Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey and Charles Weidman, and Hanya Holm and continued to perform with their mentors' companies while taking leadership in leftist dance. Thus modern dancers and leftist dancers shared training methods, movement techniques, and compositional strategies (Manning 62).

In this way, the modern dance aesthetic reached masses of people who would not have seen it otherwise.

There is little evidence that Judson Dance Theater was involved as systematically and as deeply in any effort outside their own artistic pursuits as the modern dancers were with leftist politics. Ann Halprin's work resonated with New Left political agendas, but "her aesthetic ideals and experimental dance events reveal an artist who was not so much politically as stylistically in tune with her time" (Ross 35). In the late 1960s and early '70s, Judson choreographers made dances with political themes and participated in programs of protest (Banes, *Terpsichore* 15), but these seem to have been isolated events that did not reach far beyond the usual Soho venues—nothing to compare with the scope of the Workers Dance League outreach.

Second, there was the possibility for modern dance choreographers to gain exposure in popular venues. For instance, after her 1944 season, Sol Hurok began sponsoring Martha Graham on national tours. "The Hurok organization had a reputation for handling only the most important names in the performing arts, and his willingness to represent Graham was not just a plum for her but another step upward in the acceptance of modern dance...modern dance was now being sought by the commercial world" (McDonagh 185). Meanwhile, choreographers such

as Agnes de Mille (a ballet choreographer, but heavily influenced by modern dance) and Hanya Holm choreographed on Broadway, finding tremendous success there. “Popular attention struck modern dance like the plague” (McDonagh 186).

Finally, modern dance had a presence in the press, not least because of the big personalities of its practitioners. Graham in particular received attention in newspapers and popular magazines. Between the years 1932 and 1957 the *Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature* finds Graham constantly present, featured in magazines such as *New Republic*, *The Nation*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Life*, and *The New Yorker*, with illustrations. (The *Readers' Guide* began to include *Dance Magazine* in 1956). By contrast, Yvonne Rainer's name appears only sporadically between the years 1961 and 1971, and always in *Dance Magazine*. Readers need to hunt creatively to find mention of “Judson Dance Theater”—it is present as a sub-heading under “Dance Concerts” or “Dance Companies”—and these too are all in *Dance Magazine*.

Sally Banes acknowledges:

Except for sympathetic reviews by Allen Hughes at the *New York Times*, the press generally ignored or disapproved of the goings on at the Judson, at least in the early years. Another notable exception was Jill Johnston at the *Village Voice*, an enthusiastic partisan who championed the cause of the revolution and explained it in her columns in the *Voice*, reviews in *Art News*, panels, talks, and “action-lectures.” (*Terpsichore* 13)

While Johnston was an ardent supporter of Judson Dance Theater and choreographers associated with it, the *Village Voice*, and even *Dance Magazine*, did not have a national circulation or profile like *Newsweek* or *Life*.

These channels through which the modern dance aesthetic reached a broad cross-section of people—leftist political groups, performances on commercial stages, and the popular press—add up to a spreading system of branches that reach out of the insular New York concert dance scene. Add to this the increased presence of ballet around the country and on TV in the middle of the century (Hagood 179-180) as well as the ubiquitousness of social dance, and it becomes a cultural juggernaut of traditional dance values in the face of which the oppositional Judson values are practically invisible.

Almost fifty years after Judson Dance Theater, this is still the case. Judson-inflected dance remains a pleasure reserved for those “in the know”—people who are aware of its conceptual underpinnings and of its dialogue with and subversion of existing dance hierarchies. The vast majority of Americans who do not know Yvonne Rainer’s name or the thinking behind her work have no choice but to view it through the lens of the dance that came before, the lens of ballet and popular dance and modern dance of the Big Four.

Insofar as it requires this audience of connoisseurs, and with its overlap of defining properties, Judson-inflected dance is analogous to Formalist art. Aesthetician Terry Barrett describes Formalism as that which “allows and encourages artists to explore, experiment, eliminate subject matter, and delight in abstraction and sensuousness of artistic materials and how they can be handled” (141). While other aspects of Formalism in art do not apply to the Judson aesthetic, this particular definition fits it handily.

Barrett also writes, “To those viewers unfamiliar with recent art history and art theory, Formalist art is a challenge. Much art through time and across cultures provides even uninitiated viewers with aspects to appreciate, whether that is narrative content, skill of representation, preciousness of materials, or insight into a time and place” (141). Similarly, dance that retains

traditional values of expression and skill has greater currency with audiences. Where such characteristics are absent, the work “generates cynicism about art and an artworld that perpetrates such seemingly nonsensical, unskilled, and visually unattractive ‘paintings.’ Formalist art requires of the viewer knowledge of art history, art theory, and notions of artistic progress” (Barrett 141).

Unfortunately, Judson-inflected dance has the same requirements of its viewers, substituting “dance” for Barrett’s “art” and “artistic,” and often invokes cynicism and disdain from viewers who are unfamiliar with its theoretical foundation. Many viewers today, when confronted with stillness, pedestrian movement, improvisation, or silence in a dance piece, lack the background, the knowledge of dance history, to recognize these as the spoils from a dance revolution. They cannot contextualize the pedestrian movement as a victory over dance hierarchies, or a democratization, or a nose-thumbing at overblown, histrionic dance styles. Recognizing themselves on stage does not create a sense of the proscenium boundary breached or of a connection to an Everyman performer. Instead, it creates a minor outrage—why pay money to see something I could do myself?

Choreographers who accept the Judson innovations as givens must be aware of this fact: that many people will not “get” their work because they lack the dance-theoretical background to contextualize it. There is nothing wrong with the audience; they just never got the memo that any movement can be dance. Without this information, contemporary dance fails their expectations and is confusing and frustrating.

It is unlikely that a massive campaign to enlighten the general public about Judson’s rebellious, playful, and formalist concerns and how they manifest themselves in contemporary dance will take place. It is equally unlikely that contemporary choreographers would want to, or

even could, purge these elements from their dance to make it more popular. Then the contemporary dance world must accept its narrow and fairly impermeable boundaries.

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