

Global Encounters and Imagined Communities in Modern Dance
compiled by Susan Manning
for Reggie Wilson

When Reggie Wilson worked with Ohad Naharin in New York City during the late 1980s, they seemed to come from very different backgrounds: Naharin, born in 1952 on an Israeli kibbutz, trained in the Graham tradition and at the School of American Ballet; Wilson, born in 1967 in Milwaukee, trained in postmodern techniques at New York University. Naharin developed a movement technique called Gaga, which emphasizes fluidity and flow, and a choreographic style that integrates the virtuosity of ballet with the flexibility of modern dance, a style widely disseminated by contemporary dance companies in Europe. Since 1990 Naharin has served as artistic director of Batsheva, an Israeli company founded by Martha Graham in 1964. Wilson has pursued a different approach in his choreography, juxtaposing and combining postmodern strategies with dance and ritual practices of the African diaspora. At times calling his approach “post-African/Neo-Hoodoo Modern dance,” Wilson has undertaken extensive ethnographic research and collaboration with artists in the Caribbean and across Africa. Since 1989 Wilson has led his own company, Fist & Heel Performance Group.

Despite their apparent differences, however, Wilson and Naharin share a common lineage that descends from the development of modern dance during the 1920s and 1930s in Europe and in the United States. In Europe artists such as Rudolf Laban and Mary Wigman developed improvisational methods for exploring the spatial, temporal, and dynamic qualities of movement. Rejecting the classical music favored by Isadora Duncan and her peers earlier in the century, the German dancers developed spare percussive scores as accompaniment, performed by piano or drum or, on occasion, a percussion ensemble. In the United States artists such as Martha Graham and Katherine Dunham developed movement vocabularies based on a mobile torso, vocabularies derived in part from German methods (the principle of tension and release, *Abspanning* and *Anspannung*), in part from Asian techniques (Denishawn had adopted the seated position and the focus on breath from yoga), in part from observations of Native American dancing (Graham traveled to the Southwest to observe Pueblo rituals), and in part from Africanist principles (Dunham traveled to the Caribbean to document the transmission of African practices to the New World). While Dunham intensified and complicated drumming as dance accompaniment, Graham moved from the percussive piano compositions of Louis Horst to orchestral scores commissioned from Aaron Copland, among others.

Although there were differences in the modern dance practices developed in Europe and the United States, there was constant interaction, as dancers traveled to study, perform, and teach. In 1930 a large-scale dance congress in Munich brought together modern dancers from across Europe and the United States. In 1931 Hanya Holm opened a branch of the Mary Wigman School in New York, later renamed the Hanya Holm Studio. Along with Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey and Charles Weidman, Holm taught at the Bennington Summer School of the Dance from 1934 to 1939, thus ensuring that

“German” methods combined with “American” vocabularies as students further disseminated the practice of modern dance. Especially influential among Holm’s students was Alvin Nikolais, who became part of a generation of male choreographers, including Merce Cunningham and Paul Taylor, who reacted against the expressive aesthetics of their female mentors and developed a range of formalist aesthetics. Nikolais in turn trained Phyllis Lamhut, who later became a teacher and mentor to Reggie Wilson.

The rise of fascism in Europe decisively altered the circulation of modern dance. Dancers trained in Germany migrated to Mexico, Brazil, Columbia, Argentina, Chile, Japan, and Australia, among other destinations. In 1935 Gertrud Kraus, an Austrian dancer who had worked with Rudolf Laban, settled in Palestine. Adapting modern dance to Zionist principles, she undertook the development of a national style that was a balance of European models and Arabic influences. One year after Israel was established in 1948, Kraus traveled to New York to observe the further development of modern dance, and she brought what she learned back to the new nation-state. Fifteen years later, Batsheva was founded in 1964, based on training in Graham technique. Thus as modern dance developed in Israel, German methods were layered with American vocabularies. Continuing this layering, Ohad Naharin studied briefly at Batsheva before going to New York to explore the range of modern dance techniques there, and he also connected with Maurice Bejart and Jiri Kylian in Europe, who had recovered the earlier impulses of European modern dance and integrated them with ballet.

Thus, when Reggie Wilson danced with Ohad Naharin in the late 1980s, both artists were working in an intercultural and transnational form, which had originated in the years between the two world wars and absorbed a myriad of cultural influences in its global circulation. They also were working in a tradition where charismatic leadership had been a given since its inception. Rudolf Laban, Mary Wigman, Martha Graham, Hanya Holm, Katherine Dunham—all inspired devoted followers, who derived their legitimacy from their affiliation with their mentor and in turn became mentors to subsequent generations of disciples. In part, the charismatic leadership of modern dance reflects how the form developed outside established structures for arts patronage. It also reflects the awkward fit between the oral and kinaesthetic transmission of dance and the dominance of print and media in modern Western culture.

In Germany Rudolf Laban and Mary Wigman did not work in the opera house, where theatrical dance had flourished since the eighteenth century, but rather founded networks of schools, where their disciples taught their methods and developed varieties of *Tanzgymnastik* (dance gymnastics) aimed at amateur students. These students in turn formed eager audiences for tours by Laban’s and Wigman’s professional ensembles and their most talented disciples. (The dual focus of Naharin’s Gaga technique, developed as a system accessible to professionals and amateurs, recalls the German precedent.) In the United States too Martha Graham, Hanya Holm, and their contemporaries supported their concert work through teaching. The amateur demographic that supported the dissemination of their practice was mostly female college students, who first encountered modern dance through physical education departments and only later through dance departments. French theorist Pierre Bourdieu might say that, given its paucity of

economic capital, modern dance relied on alternate forms of cultural capital and derived its legitimacy through the relationship of mentor and disciple. This history too is relevant to the development of Reggie's *(project) Moseses Project* and his questioning of how we lead and why we follow.

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