Chapter 9

Emerging American Dance: 1930–1944

# Overview

The stage was set for the development of American ballet and modern dance, but World War II put everything on hold. World War II isolated North America from Europe, leaving America to move forward using its own stamina, to be ready for what was to happen when the war ended.

American ballet went through growing pains and many choreographers’ experiments to find its uniquely American characters, story lines, and styles that would give it the foundation from which to develop. The short-lived American Ballet Company started the process of developing an American ballet style, while later in the 1930s, Ballet Caravan choreographers created experimental ballets with unique American characters and story lines. When Ballet Theatre opened its first season, it tried to capture ballet as a contemporary art form while preserving the classics.

The Four Pioneers (Hanya Holm, Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, and Charles Weidman) and Bennington College summer school were milestones in the emergence of a new dance form that John Martin called modern dance. The dancers and the dances they experimented with created the foundation of this new dance form. Modern dance acquired an aesthetic, and it was recognized as an art form as well as stretching into the halls of academia and presenting a dance form in which many could participate to develop their artistic and creative spirits. All of this development that survived the Great Depression came to a stop when America entered World War II.

# Activities and Assignments

The activities and assignments are in three parts: social dance, ballet, and modern dance.

## Social Dance

### Activity 1. Let’s Lindy!

Learn the Lindy, then dance it with a partner. Make a video or write a paragraph in which you identify the basic steps to counts, the music, the style, and other specific examples that make the Lindy unique. Can you find a picture of Lindy dancers that capture this 1930s dance? Save the document. Then add video and a paragraph to your document as you learn other forms of 20th-century swing dance.

### Activity 2. A 20th-Century Dance Epidemic

Research the phenomenon of dance marathons. Compare the dance marathons to one or more other dance epidemics in the history of dance.

Prepare and share reports. The report can be in the form of a retro radio commentary of the event, a live or videoed interview at the event, or an anti-dance speech.

## Ballet

### Activity 1. American Ballet Foundations

This activity can be in four chronological parts (The Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, American Ballet Company, Ballet Caravan, American Ballet Theatre) or it can be done in four groups and then reported to the class. First the class creates a time line and a chart that shows the changes that took place during the 1930s. Synthesize your group’s findings into an oral report with or without a media presentation for the class.

* **Phase 1 or group 1:** The Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo: historical time line. Synthesize the information about the dancers (who), ballets (what), tours of the United States (where), their opening in New York to the closing of the company, and their contributions to defining American ballet. In this group, research the following personalities, dancers, and choreographers as individuals and as contributing factors to ballet:
* Sol Hurok
* Léonide Massine and his symphonic ballet
* Alexandra Danilova
* The baby ballerinas
* Anton Dolin

Sources: Sol Hurok, the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, *The Dance in America* (book by Walter Terry)

* **Phase 2 or group 2:** American Ballet Company. Identify Lincoln Kirstein, Edward Warburg, and George Balanchine.

1. Read Lincoln Kirstein’s *Blast at Ballet* (1937) and other monographs of the period.
2. Create a biography of George Balanchine’s career before his immigration to the United States.
3. Research the American Ballet Company and the School of American Ballet. What was its philosophical foundation? (See Kirstein’s writings.) What happened to the company? What happened to the school? What happened to Balanchine? What happened to Kirstein?

* **Phase 3 or group 3:** Ballet Caravan. What was this idea? Who was involved? Who was the driving force behind Ballet Caravan? What types of choreography were created? Where did they tour? How did this organization begin and why did it end? What was its importance in defining American dance? What happened to the principal dancer and choreographers after Ballet Caravan? Develop a concept map showing how Ballet Caravan was a catalyst for these American ballet choreographers’ futures.
* **Phase 4 or group 4:** American Ballet Theatre. In 1939 Ballet Theatre had its premier season just before the United States entered World War II. What were the roots of this organization? Did this organization define American ballet? What did the organization claim as its mission? What was the structure of the organization (the wings), the choreographers, and the major dancers? Part of the group develops a concept map showing the breadth of this organization. Part of the group develops a chronology of the works presented during that first season and determines whether the organization met its mission and whether it defined American ballet.

**Extensions**

Other emergences of American dance through art took place during this same period:

*1930s and Early 1940s Photography and Music*

Find photographs that were taken during this era and study the style of the dancers and the subject matter. What do the photographs tell you about the dances and the times?

Find music that was popular during this era and characterize the music. Select excerpts and research the composers and the music of the genre.

*Dance on the Silver Screen*

Find a movie musical that includes the jitterbug. Compare the jitterbug with the Lindy and swing dancing. Demonstrate the differences. Use dance designs as a starting place.

Find an early and late 1930s movie with a tap dance sequence. Describe the differences in style between the African American tap groups and the male and female tappers. Or, make this comparison between Fred Astaire’s styles and some of the African American tap dance groups.

Find a movie with a dance scene by Fred Astaire and one with Gene Kelly. Compare and contrast the two dance styles.

## Modern Dance

With the emergence of modern dance, innovators explored techniques in search of a new dance form. They started schools that produced the next generation of leaders in American contemporary dance through their teaching at Bennington College summer school, their touring, and the movies. In searching for this new contemporary dance form, people and institutions undermined by the economic situation of America were factors in modern dance’s formative years.

### Activity 1. American Modern Dance Foundations

This activity can be in five chronological parts (Graham, Humphrey and Weidman, Holm, Dunham, Tamiris) or it can be done in five groups and then reported to the class, at which time the class creates a time line and a chart that show the changes in dance and society that took place during the 1930s. Synthesize your group’s findings into an oral or media report for the class.

* **Phase 1 or group 1:** Martha Graham. Create a time line of her works from the beginning of the 1930s to 1944. What themes and style emerged during this period? Describe in two sentences each important work of the period. Write a summary paragraph about this period in Graham’s dance and choreographic career and her contributions.
* **Phase 2 or group 2:** Doris Humphrey and Charles Weidman. Create a time line of each of their works from the beginning of the 1930s to 1944. What themes and style emerge during this period for each artist separately and together? Describe in two sentences each work of the period for each artist. Write a summary paragraph about this period in Humphrey’s or Weidman’s dance and choreographic career and their individual and collective contributions.
* **Phase 3 or group 3:** Hanya Holm. Create a time line of her works from the beginning of the 1930s to 1944. What themes and style emerge during this period in her work? Describe in two sentences each important work of the period for Holm. Write a summary paragraph about this period in Holm’s dance and choreographic career and her contributions.
* **Phase 4 or group 4:** Katherine Dunham. Create a time line of her works from the beginning of the 1930s to 1944. What themes and style emerge during this period? Describe in two sentences each important work of the period. Write a summary paragraph about this period in Dunham’s dance and choreographic career and her contributions.
* **Phase 5 or group 5:** Helen Tamiris. Create a time line of her works from the beginning of the 1930s to 1944. What themes and style emerge during this period? Describe in two sentences each important work of the period. Write a summary paragraph about this period in Tamiris’ dance and choreographic career and her contributions.

### Activity 2. The WPA Projects

Research and report about the WPA projects in New York, Chicago, Dallas, and other cities. Who were the dancers and choreographers who participated? What works were created as part of the project? Who directed the project in that city? Create an infographic that shows your findings from your research.

### Activity 3. *The Modern Dance*

Read John Martin’s *The Modern Dance* or Louis Horst’s *Pre-Classic Dance Forms.* Write a three- to five-page book report that contains a brief biographical background of the author and explores the philosophy presented in the book. Explain the relation of the book to what was happening in modern dance at the time, and what was taking place in society and the arts during this period.

**Extensions**

*Comparing Dance Decades*

Review dances of the 1920s, including the Charleston. Then learn or review the Lindy and the jitterbug. Each group performs its dance for the other group. Make a video of each dance. Then the class compares and contrasts the movements, qualities, and styles.

*More Silver Screen*

View movie clips from the 1930s such as a movie musical with Busby Berkeley, Fred Astaire, ballroom dance, or tap dancers (male and female). How does the dancing in the movie mirror the period? What does the movie indicate about that time period?

Why did people go to the movies during these times? Are these reasons different than they are today? How does the dancing in the movies compare to the contemporary dance of the four pioneers?

### Activity 4. Underlying Philosophy of Modern Dance

The philosophy of Nietzsche, psychology, Asian and Greek philosophies, and German expressionism in art influenced modern dance choreographers. Explore how their philosophy and psychological beliefs were a part of these dancers’ or choreographers’ works.

# Web Links

1920-1930 dance  
[www.1920-30.com/dance](http://www.1920-30.com/dance)

The Lindy hop: Shorty George  
[www.savoystyle.com/shorty\_george.html](http://www.savoystyle.com/shorty_george.html)

Jazz and big band  
[www.swingmusic.net/Big\_Band\_Playlist.html](http://www.swingmusic.net/Big_Band_Playlist.html)

Rumba  
[www.ballroomdancers.com/Dances/dance\_overview.asp?Dance=ARU](http://www.ballroomdancers.com/Dances/dance_overview.asp?Dance=ARU)

Samba  
[www.ballroomdancers.com/Dances/info.asp?sid=178](http://www.ballroomdancers.com/Dances/info.asp?sid=178)

Conga  
[www.biography.com/people/desi-arnaz-9542545#music-career](http://www.biography.com/people/desi-arnaz-9542545#music-career)

Information about the conga  
[www.youtube.com/watch?v=W5QrGD0oUgY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W5QrGD0oUgY)

Bennington College summer dance festivals  
<http://new.danceheritage.org/html/bennington.html>  
Click on “an essay by Sali Ann Kriegsman” in the options bar on the left.   
<https://ncdancefestival.wordpress.com/2014/11/10/bennington-school-of-dance-1934-1942>

Martha Graham  
[www.marthagraham.org/history/](http://www.marthagraham.org/history/)  
[www.youtube.com/watch?v=wH5fjgrXlzs](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wH5fjgrXlzs)

*A Dancer’s World*, a 1957 film about the Martha Graham Dance Company  
[www.youtube.com/watch?v=aFTNmGBKC2Y](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aFTNmGBKC2Y)

Doris Humphrey  
<http://new.danceheritage.org/html/humphrey.html>

Hanya Holm  
[www.youtube.com/watch?v=iLIOwCSZ07o](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iLIOwCSZ07o)  
<http://new.danceheritage.org/html/holm.html>

Helen Tamiris  
[www.youtube.com/watch?v=jx6sGmGe5Js](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jx6sGmGe5Js)  
<http://new.danceheritage.org/html/tamiris.html>

Katharine Dunham  
<https://www.loc.gov/collections/katherine-dunham/about-this-collection>  
<http://new.danceheritage.org/html/dunham.html>

Federal Theatre Project  
<https://www.loc.gov/collections/federal-theatre-project-1935-to-1939/about-this-collection/>

Online Archive of California  
[www.oac.cdlib.org/search?query=dancers](http://www.oac.cdlib.org/search?query=dancers)

Michio Ito  
[www.oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/c82809hb/?query=Michio+Ito](http://www.oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/c82809hb/?query=Michio+Ito)

Agnes de Mille  
[www.oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/tf4p3005vn/?query=Agnes+de+Mille](http://www.oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/tf4p3005vn/?query=Agnes+de+Mille)

# Review Questions

1. What was society like during this time?
2. Who were the dancers and other contributors to ballet and modern dance during this period?
3. What were the dances, music, and other arts that supported dance during this period?
4. What were the significant dances, ballets, modern dance works, and dance literature of the period?

# Vocabulary

## Ballet

American Ballet Company

Balanchine, George

Ballet Caravan

Ballet Russe

Ballet Theatre

Bolm, Adolph

Chase, Lucia

de Mille, Agnes

Kirstein, Lincoln

*Lilac Garden*

Littlefield, Catherine

Mordkin Ballet

Page, Ruth

Pleasant, Richard

*Rodeo*

School of American Ballet

Tudor, Antony

## Modern Dance

*Air for the G String*

*Appalachian Spring*

Bennington School

*Brahms Waltzes, Opus 39*

*Deaths and Entrances*

Dunham, Katherine

*Fables for Our Time*

Federal Theatre Project

*Flickers*

Graham, Martha

Holm, Hanya

Horst, Louis

*House Divided, A*

Humphrey, Doris

*Lamentations*

*Letter to the World*

Martin, John

*Metropolitan Daily*

*New Dance* trilogy

*Pre-Classic Dance Forms*

*Primitive Mysteries*

*Shakers, The*

Tamiris, Helen

*Trend*

*Water Study*

Weidman, Charles