

The Dance Technique
of Doris Humphrey
AND ITS CREATIVE POTENTIAL

ERNESTINE STODELLE

Line Drawings by Teri Loren

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Now is the time for me to tell of the nobility
that the human spirit is capable of, stress the
grace that is in us, give the young dancers a
chance to move harmoniously with each other

Doris Humphrey, *1943*

Chapter 1

THE TECHNIQUE AS PHILOSOPHY

Nietzsche was the catalyst, providing Doris Humphrey with the broad-schemed philosophy that justified and clarified all her preliminary probings into natural movement as a basis for dance technique. Nietzsche was the creative stimulant for ideas not yet formulated but already imbedded in a personality given to studious speculation. For Doris Humphrey, like the great nineteenth-century German philosopher, was a philologist, a scholar. She loved learning not only for its own sake, but also for the illuminations it shed on mankind in general.

A purely personal approach to movement would never have satisfied this extraordinary woman with the enquiring mind. One has only to study the copious notes she wrote in preparation for lectures, classes, interviews, and extended writing to realize how her search into the motivations and behavior of human action went far beyond personal experience. Philosophic in her powers of deduction, scientific in her powers of analysis, and poetic in her powers of expression, Doris Humphrey examined and reexamined the process of life in nature and man:

If we understand in our bodies the various ways that force moves and the various sequences that it moves in we know something about ourselves because we all as an organism follow the same laws.¹

¹ Doris Humphrey Collection. Folder M-66.

Force (energy) is investigated as a creative element in itself:

The desire to move stimulates organic matter to reach out from its center of equilibrium. But the desire to maintain life stimulates a return to equilibrium or another reaching out of matter sufficient to balance the first, and so save the organism from destruction.¹

Equilibrium/destruction. Polar states, which, as Doris Humphrey investigates further, are sustained through the pulsating properties of rhythm:

Hence, rhythm results from the oscillation of organic matter moving away from and back to its point of equilibrium. . .²

Working logically from the same scientific base, she perceives the ultimate effect:

At either end of the movement there is death—the static death or constant equilibrium or the dynamic death in too extreme movement away from equilibrium.³

Static death/dynamic death. We have but to convert the phrase “organic matter” into its human equivalent—Man—to anticipate the inevitable conclusion: Motion between these two “deaths” represents nothing more nor less than the struggle to survive.

Small wonder that Nietzsche’s audacious attempt, in *The Birth of Tragedy*, “to view science through the optics of the artist, and art . . . through the optics of life”⁴ struck Doris Humphrey so forcibly. She, too, was an observer of nature. She, too, peered at science through the lens of her sensibilities; she, too, produced art as a revelation of life. Small wonder that Nietzsche’s analysis of pre-Christian Greek culture, as expressed in his Apollonian-Dionysian thesis of extremes, provided the clue for Doris Humphrey’s philosophy of motion in her concept of “The Arc Between Two Deaths.” The double image served her perfectly.

According to Nietzsche, the art-deities Apollo and Dionysus represented two conflicting, yet intertwining impulses in man: the first, to achieve perfection and stability; the second, to experience

¹ Doris Humphrey Collection. Folder M-65.

² Doris Humphrey Collection. Folder M-65.

³ Doris Humphrey Collection. Folder M-65.

⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Wm. A. Haussmann (New York: Macmillan, 1924), p. 4.

the ecstasy of abandon. Apollo, god of wisdom and light, "rules over the fair appearance of the inner world of fantasies" with "measured limitation . . . freedom from the wilder emotions . . . philosophical calmness . . ." ¹ Dionysus, god of wine, song, dance, and drama, releases man's instinct for adventure, for danger: "Under the influence of the narcotic draught . . . Dionysian emotions awake . . . [and] the subjective vanishes to complete self-forgetfulness." ² No longer plagued by his moral conscience, man "is on the point of taking a dancing flight into the air . . . he feels himself a god . . ." ³

Translate Dionysian licentiousness to the precarious state of off-balance motion, and you will encounter the imminent danger of "dynamic death." Translate Apollonian serenity into the security of symmetrical balance, and you will have the locked-in perfection of "static death." Translate the rhythmic "oscillation of organic matter" into the living arc between these two deaths, and you have the Humphrey principle of "Falling and Recovering."

"Dionysian and Apollonian . . . are different names for the will to grow and the will to balance," ⁴ wrote Doris Humphrey. The psychological counterpoint emerges. Growth is an outward reaching, a tempting of fate, a daring act of exploration leading to self-knowledge or disaster. Balance implies rational behavior, clear judgment, but is in danger of stultification. The psyche vacillates, lured irresistibly in opposite directions.

Falling and recovering is the very stuff of movement, the constant flux which is going on in every living body, in all its tiniest parts, all the time. Nor is this all, for the process has a psychological meaning as well. I recognized these emotional overtones very early and instinctively responded very strongly to the exciting danger of the fall, and the repose and peace of recovery. ⁵

Excitement/repose. Danger/peace. The dichotomy expands. Within the ninety-degree arc between the body upright in fixed equilibrium and the body lifelessly prone lies an infinity of action, emotional as well as physical. Just as there is delight in danger, there is terror in danger; just as there is peace in repose, there is

¹ Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, pp. 23-24.

² Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 25.

³ Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, pp. 26-27.

⁴ Doris Humphrey Collection. Folder M-65.

⁵ Humphrey, "My Approach to the Modern Dance," p. 189.

deathly stillness for the spirit in repose. To fall is to yield; to recover is to reaffirm one's power over gravity and oneself.

. . . forever opposed and existing both in one man and in groups of men, the *Apollonian* and the *Dionysian* are the symbols of man's struggle for progress on the one hand, and his desire for stability on the other hand. These are not only the basis of Greek tragedy, as Nietzsche pointed out, but of all dramatic movement, particularly dance.¹

To dream of perfection, and to court danger. Herein lies the dual nature of man, and the rich creative potential of the Humphrey Technique.

¹Humphrey, "My Approach to the Modern Dance," p. 189.