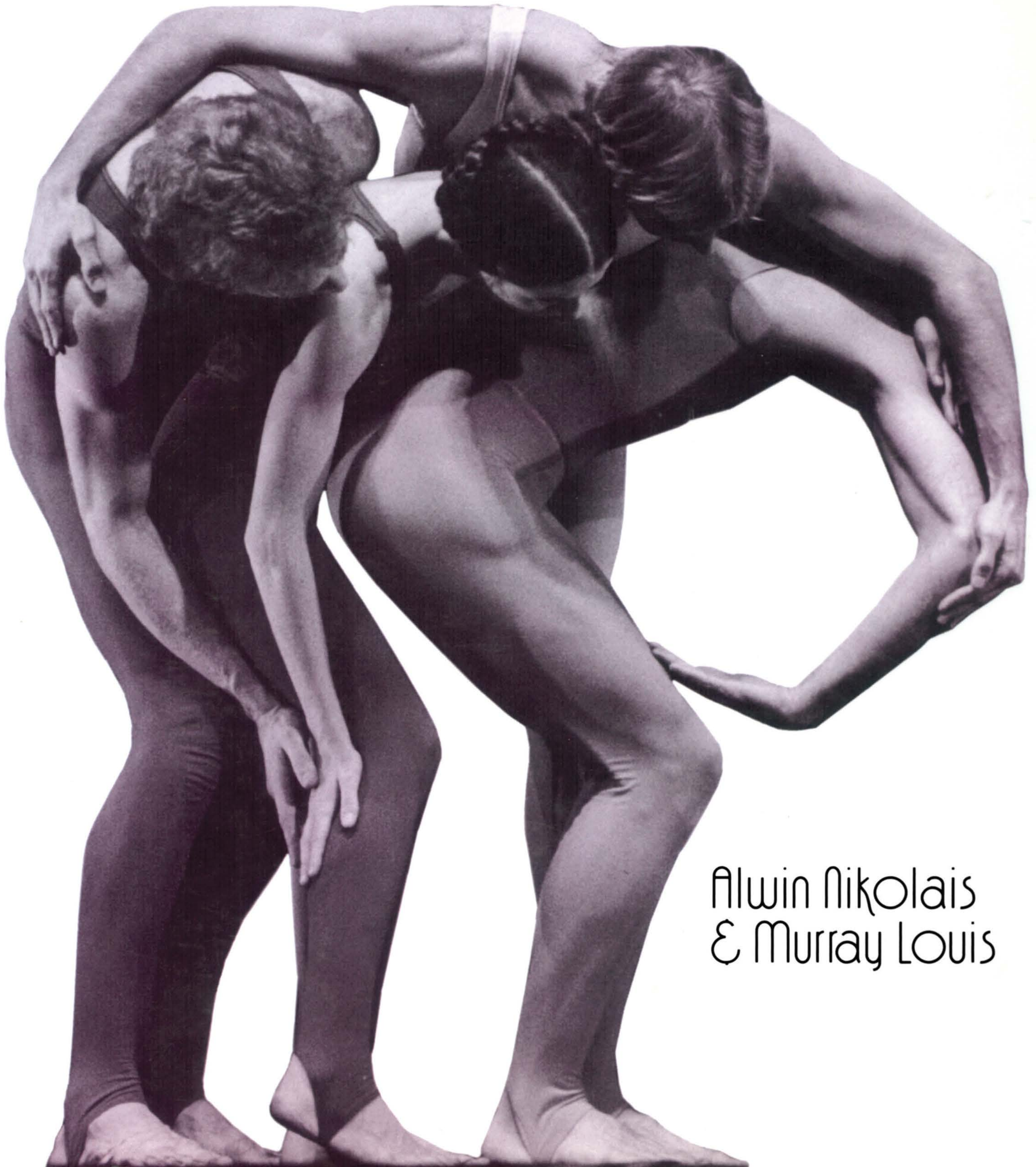
The Nikolais/Louis Dance Technique

A Philosophy and Method of Modern Dance



Alwin Nikolais
& Murray Louis

The Nikolais/Louis Dance Technique

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The Nikolais/Louis Dance Technique

A Philosophy and Method of Modern Dance

including *The Unique Gesture*

Alwin Nikolais & Murray Louis

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
NEW YORK AND LONDON

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PREFACE

The Nikolais/Louis technique is a composite technique. It deals with the total person—physical, mental, and spiritual—for who is to say which part learns easiest or is of greatest importance. Over the past fifty years, the principles and vocabulary of this technique have become a part of standard dance teaching methods everywhere. As a result many readers will find that they already have a familiarity with the Nikolais/Louis technique. Others may be encountering it for the first time. Readers, dancers, and teachers alike should feel free to use this book however it might apply to their own unique situation.

The teaching of dance is not an exact science. However, where specifics of movement are concerned, the technique is exacting. Many factors are involved in teaching the simplest movement phrase. These include the manner and character of the teaching voice, the clarity of the ideas, the use of devices to stimulate motivation, the necessity of insightful criticism, and the maintenance of spontaneity and energy during repetitious corrections. In addition, the teacher must account for such things as the physical size and temperament of different students. All of these factors are at play in the classroom, often simultaneously.

Verbally describing an improvisation or dance is a difficult, often hopeless task. When, after Nik's death, I was faced with the prospect of writing a book to provide a guide to the Nikolais/Louis technique, the task seemed insurmountable. I had Nik's own philosophy of dance, *The Unique Gesture*, in manuscript form, but a complete approach demanded a step-by-step manual as well. I wanted to be true to Nik's vision and also to highlight the collaborative nature of both our dance technique and our pedagogy. To accomplish this, I kept Nik's words intact but interspersed my own insights when I felt inspired or called to do so. I organized the chapters thematically, but allowed the play of dialogue to suggest itself by retaining the unique voices of two speakers. So as not to jar the reader, the two speakers are indicated simply in the design of the book. Nik's writing has all been retained as he wrote it and is signaled by a bold font throughout. My own musings are in a regular typeface. Through this arrangement, I hope our individual voices ring clearly, as well as our shared approach to dance.

One method Nik and I employed in the classroom to overcome the difficulty inherent in speaking about dance was to use the various written notes that students had made for themselves. These usually consisted of comments and criticisms made in class by us as teachers after they were funneled through a student's mind and put in their private notebooks. This was how the students remembered and recreated the dance studies for themselves. Since these notes and "crits" worked for them, I used the same device here in the hope they would evoke in the reader a similar tangible understanding.

Each class had its own balance of elements. The physical exactness demanded by stretches, alignment, and plies was fueled by a more vague, though no less urgent, wellspring of motivation and imagination. All of this the teacher had to provide. Excepting the photographs used to illustrate the stretches, the accompanying visual materials in this book—the DVD and photographs—do not specifically depict the creative premises. Limiting creativity by illustration with a specific photographed movement would defeat the richness suggested by the technique. Let the DVD and photographs, like the stories and the crits, suggest a mood of creative exploration. Let your imagination roam freely.

The studio spaces we used at Henry Street were unusual in that mirrors were seldom permitted, and if they were, they were off to the side. They

Murray with Cybil at West
Broadway studio.
Photo by Nan Melville.

were never in the front of the room, lest the dancers become absorbed with what they looked like. The mirrors were used for rehearsal purposes so that dancers could check their ensemble accuracy. Again the focus was to remain on the dance itself.

The classes were filled with many stories and references to professional experiences. What also made the studio an especially productive environment was the presence of the studio cats, who lent a calming and constant reminder that there were other life forms who shared space with us, and had other opinions about life.

Overall, the approach of this book does not follow a rigid line, but instead reaches out to encompass a wide and inclusive path. It can be considered a reference book to be consulted for specific information even as it can also be used more broadly, as a place to dip randomly when looking for inspiration. It is, of course, a manual and is not intended to be read all at once.

There is no precise beginning or end with this technique. The training is meant to serve a lifetime. It is continuous and ongoing. The technique intends to broaden the definition and the vocabulary of the dancer's art. How one executes a movement technically is as important as the movement itself. This book's main purpose is to create the ability to experience to the fullest the marvel of the moving body, and to give a voice and vocabulary to this endeavor. It seeks to speak to the dancer in total: as teacher, student, choreographer, and performer.

A final caveat: I must apologize in advance for using the male gender as my pronoun of choice. I am fully aware that the majority of dance students are female but the limitations of grammatical syntax make it difficult to address both sexes at the same time and retain the clarity of one's thoughts. Above all, I wanted clarity. But rest assured, it is all you dancers, dancers of every sex, every stripe, and every size, who were on my mind as I wrote.

Murray Louis
New York
January 2005

BIOGRAPHY OF ALWIN NIKOLAIS

Alwin Nikolais (Nik) was born at midnight on November 25, 1910, in Southington, Connecticut. Geographically this would make him a Connecticut Yankee, but his German mother and Russian father both lent him their national attributes, and he in turn became both methodical and flamboyant.

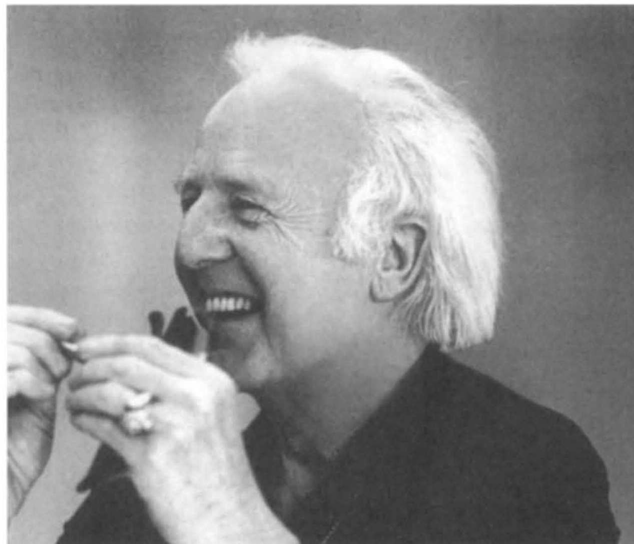
Nikolais's first artistic exposure was to the piano. His mother, who had no artistic inclinations of her own, dutifully felt that all her children should play the piano, and so once a week the music "professor" arrived and the children had their turn "at the piano." This led to his later becoming a skilled organist, and eventually brought him work as an accompanist in silent film houses. His job there was to match music with action, which developed his skill in improvisation. He also became involved with the small theatrical group in his town, where he was more valued as a scenic designer than for his acting abilities.

In 1934, by pure happenstance, Nikolais attended a concert by Mary Wigman, the great German modern dancer. He was profoundly impressed, and with this searing experience, his destiny was forged. At that time, *dance* was hardly a word in common usage in rural America, least of all as an art form. However, Wigman's presence, choreography, and, most of all, percussion accompaniment stimulated and challenged his imagination. Happily, the encounter came at a time when his creative instincts were already awakening.

He visited nearby Hartford frequently and there met Truda Kaschmann, a Wigman disciple. Truda, on hearing of his interest in percussion, said, "Very well, but you must also study dance to learn this musical accompaniment," and thus his first dance training began. Shortly afterward he made his debut with two other young men in a pageant portraying industry arising from the Connecticut River (amid a large chorus of pulsating young ladies, in swaths of blue voile, representing the river).

On one of these visits he met the director of the Hartford Parks Department, who asked him if he knew anyone who could direct their newly created marionette theater. Nik promptly recommended himself and got the job. With these new prospects, he left Southington and moved to Hartford. Nikolais had now expanded his theatrical experiences to include music, drama, dance, and puppetry. This early training prepared him for his later multimedia excursions.

In 1937, he attended his first summer session at Bennington College, where he was directly exposed to the great innovators of modern dance: Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, Charles Weidman, Hanya Holm, Louis Horst, and John Martin. Thanks to



Alwin Nikolais.
Photo by Dan Ziskie.

these overwhelming stimuli, Nikolais's focus on dance was securely affirmed. In 1939, with Truda Kaschmann and composer Ernst Krenek, he was commissioned to create a new modern ballet. *Eight Column Line* was well received and further encouraged his career. He began a school and formed a dance company in Hartford.

The World War II years, 1942 to 1945, found him in the U.S. Army as Sergeant Nikolais. Upon his discharge, he relocated to New York City, where he concentrated his study with Hanya Holm, Wigman's former associate. In 1948, he assumed the directorship of the Henry Street Playhouse, located on New York's Lower East Side. The Playhouse was a beautifully designed theater, but it was in an almost derelict condition when he arrived. With the help of the young people he attracted, he rejuvenated and restored the building and brought it back to the international importance it had originally experienced.

Here, for the next twenty years, Nik and his dedicated young company revitalized the theater and established a major school of dance for both children and professionals. Although he became known as the "Father of Mixed Media," his primary focus was dance. And in dance he was a purist. The training at the school focused on dance, not on the dance theater that he chose for his own creative direction.

During this time his theories of motional qualification evolved, including his belief in giving movement its own sentient intelligence and its own interior identification, and, through the practice of improvisation, equipping the dancer with the skills to perform. He created a vocabulary pertinent to his theories. Judgments and application during the technical training included such concepts as *decentralization, totality, immediacy, presence in stasis, intuitive judgments, sensings,* and *grain*—concepts to which he brought new meaning.

His first works at the Playhouse were programs for children, and his genius for developing the theatrical in dance began to take form. Later, his use of color, costumes, and light became some of his major contributions to dance. He made dance a visual as well as a kinetic art.

In 1956, Nikolais created *Kaleidoscope*, which was based on his principles of dance in terms of space, time, shape, and motion. Its success thrust him into prominence in the dance world, an ascendancy from which he never faltered. *Prism* (1956), which dealt with aspects of lighting and light, followed. Other major works he created at the playhouse were *Allegory* (1959), *Totem* (1960), *Imago* (1963), *Sanctum* (1964), *Galaxy* (1965), *Somniloquy* (1967), and *Echo* (1969). During this period, his experiments in lighting for dance advanced steadily. He created new devices to light and isolate the dancing figure. He restructured projectors to transform the stage with light and color. He created a range of dazzling slides to stimulate the eye and enhance movement, and painted the stage with atmosphere and mystery.

In 1964 and again in 1967, he received Guggenheim fellowships. These enabled him to purchase the electronic and synthesizer equipment he needed to create the sound scores he provided for all his productions. In the spring of 1993, a compact disc of his scores was released by Composers Recording Inc. in New York City.

In 1970, when the Settlement House administration changed, Nikolais left the Playhouse. By then his work had become known and was in demand throughout the world. His productions of *Imago* and *Tent* in Paris in 1968 won him the Grand Prix, and he became an international star. He regularly toured Europe, Asia, South America, and Africa, in addition to the United States, and his became one of the foremost American companies touring internationally. He received the French Legion of Honor and the keys to almost fifty cities throughout the world.

During the seventies he created television programs for British, American, German, Italian, Swedish, Danish, French, and Yugoslavian stations. He also continued to create for his company: *Scenario* (1971), *Foreplay* (1972), *Crossfade* (1974), *Tribe* (1975), *Guignol* (1977), *Arporisms* (1977), and *Gallery* (1978). In 1980, the Paris Opera commissioned him to create *Schema*, a full evening length work for their company. This was followed by more creations: *Pond* (1982), *Mechanical Organ* (1982), *Persons and Structures* (1984), *Crucible* (1985), *Blank on Blank* (1987), *Intrados* (1989), and *Aurora* (1992). Nikolais received five honorary doctorates from American universities, the Scripps Award, the Capezio Award, the Kennedy Honors, and the Presidential Medal of Art, among others.

Alwin Nikolais was not only a philosopher/pedagogist but a multifaceted artist as well. He was a colorful world traveler with a lusty sense of

humor. He was a connoisseur of good wine and good food, and was himself a superb chef. He held opinions about many things. He was a designer of costumes, stage slides, scenery, and lighting, and was a composer and teacher. As an observer of social and political change, he made it his business to be active in the politics of dance in America.

He dined with presidents and workmen. He could play Beethoven sonatas and compose electronic music. He watched the sun rise over the Taj Mahal and went disco dancing in Los Angeles. He was generous and frugal and knew elation and despair. He was naïve and sophisticated, serious and playful. He lived through the Great Depression, World War II, and the awesome explorations of outer space. He lived both ends of everything, including the twentieth century. But most important, he lived fully.

For fifty years, Alwin Nikolais's genius helped shape modern dance in America, giving it an articulate pedagogical basis for training and for creating a multimedia theater of abstraction on stage.

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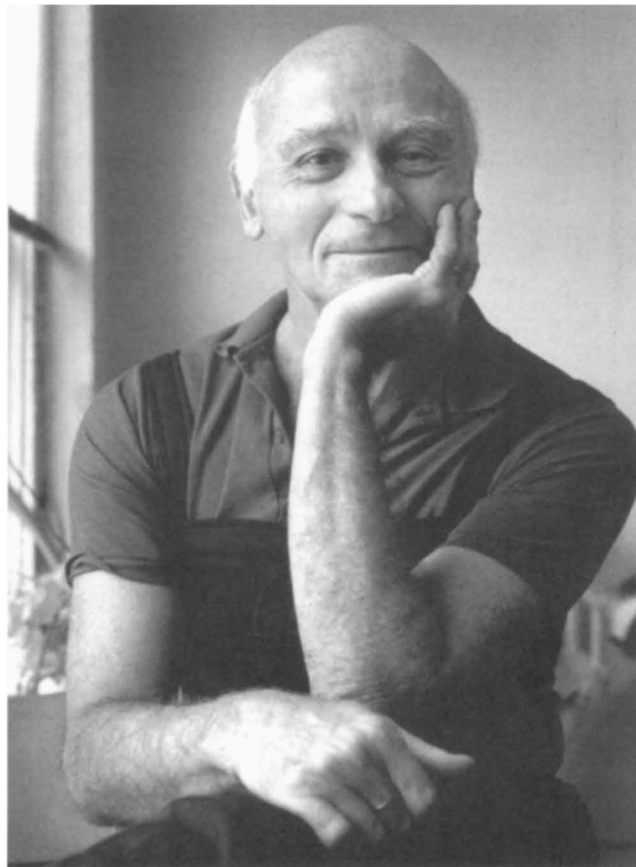
BIOGRAPHY OF MURRAY LOUIS

Murray Louis was born in New York City on November 4, 1926. Upon his mother's early death during the Depression years, he was placed in an orphanage together with his older brother and younger sister while his two older sisters maintained some semblance of a home in the city. At the orphanage, which was built like a turreted palace, he spent some of the happiest years of his life.

Thanks to an older brother who looked after him, and an older sister, Frances, who became a loving surrogate mother, the orphanage years proved to be more of an adventure than a traumatic experience. The orphanage had a large and well-stocked library, which he immediately appropriated. He organized it and over the years read about half the books that it contained. He read everything: the encyclopedia, science books, classics, mystery stories. Words drew him in like a magnet. Social life at the orphanage included "talent" nights, where he invariably won the prize with his abandoned free-style improvised dancing. On Sundays his sisters took him to museums and events. One memorable visit was to the Macy's farm display on the fifth floor of the department store, where he encountered his first cow. It was love at first sight. The visit also provided his first experience with gardens and flowers, which later became a passion.

The "movies" became a major influence during this period. It was here he became addicted to the style and wit of Fred Astaire's dancing, which he emulated at the talent shows. His older sister Frances had become secretary to the director of the W.P.A. Writer's Project, and he was able to see



Murray Louis.
Photo by Nan Melville.

performances of the W.P.A. theater and dance programs. These were his first introduction to modern dance. At sixteen he sat in the music pit and turned pages for a Helen Tamiris concert. He saw several other modern dance concerts, but none made the impression upon him that Astaire's skill and style did. During the orphanage years, the library fed his mind and Astaire's dancing fed his body.

At age eighteen he was promptly drafted into the navy and nineteen months later, when WWII ended, he found himself in San Francisco, free at last to determine his own life. Would he pursue archaeology or exploration? His brother assured him that there was nothing new to discover, but perhaps there were some ancient kings still buried. Should he become a writer or composer? Music turned out to be a very short-lived ambition. He was thoroughly familiar with much of Beethoven, Mozart, and Tchaikovsky, but solfège put an end to that ambition. The list of options grew: gardener or scientist? Everything interested him. With no one to coerce him into a career decision, he finally decided to undertake a profession he would enjoy, one that came easily to him: dance. Dancing was natural for him; it came easily and he had a passion for it. "Why not enjoy work?" he thought. It was a decision he never regretted.

For his remaining time in San Francisco, he enrolled at San Francisco State College, majoring in dance; he worked with Anne Halprin for a summer session. In 1949, Louis set out to return to New York City and Broadway. En route, he enrolled in Holm's Colorado Springs summer session. There he fatefully met Alwin Nikolais. Hanya Holm had been delayed that summer, and so Louis had two concentrated weeks with Nikolais. That was enough time for him to discover Nikolais's genius. The meeting had a profound impression on each man. Here was a young man bursting with energy and a mature mind able to direct that energy.

Nikolais had just been made director of the Playhouse of the Henry Street Settlement, on the Lower East Side of New York. He invited Louis to join him in this new enterprise. Louis looked at this blonde, blue-eyed, New England country boy and thought, "Someone has got to look after him. He can't go back to the Lower East Side alone," and he agreed to go.

For the first five years (1949–1954), the work at the Playhouse was arduous and often grueling. But the vision that lay ahead was so bright and promising that the labor to physically restore the building and develop a school, which peaked at five hundred students both young and professional, was its own reward. Louis contributed to the evolution of Nikolais's philosophy and methods while reshaping his own body and finding his own creative direction. He made his debut in 1953 together with Gladys Bailin. In 1957 with a small group he presented *Journal*, a thirty-minute work, which gave evidence of his performing and creative range. Thus the Murray Louis Dance Co. was born.

Throughout the sixties he presented a new major creation every year, including: *Entre-Acte* (1959), *An Odyssey* (1960), *Calligraph for Martyrs* (1961), *Facets* (1962), *Interims* (1963), *Landscapes* (1964), *Junk Dances* (1964), *Chimera* (1966), *Go 6* (1967), and *Proximities* (1969). His range was considerable, from comic to abstract, dramatic to lyric; his formidable technique and wit served him in all his endeavors.

Up to this point he had been the leading dancer with the Nikolais Company, but with the success and growing prominence of his own company both he and Nikolais decided that he should concentrate on his own work. During the seventies, the school, which had by now relocated from the Henry Street Playhouse to mid-Manhattan, had become a major national and international center. A good deal of the teaching became his responsibility as "Nik" was carried off on international tours. His skill as a teacher of creative dance was honed to a fine point.

During the next years, his own touring took him to five continents, and he played every state in the union. In the early seventies he released a five-part video series, *Dance as an Art Form*, which became a standard for dance departments across the country. He was asked by the U.S. government to undertake a pilot program in dance with young people. The result was so successful that the Artist-in-Schools program was born. He continued producing works, such as *Personnae* (1970), *Continuum* (1971), *Hoopla* (1972), *Scheherazade* (1973), *Index* (1974), *Geometrics* (1975), *Porcelain Dialogues* (1976), *Four Brubeck Pieces* (1984), *The Station* (1986), *Sinners All* (1996), and *Tips* (1997). In total, he has composed 130 works. In 1989 a video, titled *Murray Louis in Concert*, was released.

Louis has received two Guggenheim grants, as well as grants from the Ford, Rockefeller, and

Mellon Foundations. He has been a grantee of the National Endowment for the Arts since 1969. In 1984 he joined forces with Dave Brubeck and together they toured the United States and abroad for four seasons. With Rudolf Nureyev he shared seasons in London, Paris, Madrid, and New York City. He wrote monthly essays for *Dance Magazine*, which led to the publication of *Inside Dance* by St. Martin's Press, later followed by *On Dance*.

The two dance companies were joined when Nikolais's health began to falter; in 1993, a forty-four-year relationship ended with Nikolais's death. Carrying on the work of the company, in 1996 Louis became a lecturer for a Phi Beta Kappa "distinguished lecture" tour of twelve universities and colleges, and he returned to the stage with the acclaimed *Sinners All* and completed a five-part video series titled *The World of Alwin Nikolais*.

In 1999, on the fiftieth anniversary of the inception of their lifelong collaboration, the extensive Nikolais/Louis Archives found a home at Ohio University. Work on the archives will continue for several years and eventually be made available worldwide. The vast collection of films, videos, photos, music, designs, flyers, posters, and manuscripts are also being prepared to eventually go on the Web.

Murray Louis received an honorary Doctorate of Performing Arts from Ohio University in Athens, Ohio, in 1999, and an honorary Doctorate of Fine Arts from Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey, in 2000. November 2001 marked the premiere of his most recent work, *Isle*, with the Jose Limon Dance Co.

As Hanya Holm said of him on the presentation of a *Dance Magazine* Award, "Murray Louis is a dancer, choreographer, teacher, writer. All his parts are the sum of an enormous energy which he spends generously in the service of the dance."

The Henry Street Playhouse.
Photo by David Berlin.

INTRODUCTION

The Nikolais/Louis technique is based on the philosophy that the undertaking of dance training is not a simple or singular event, but a lifelong investment in personal enrichment. It was originally presented as a daily, three-year course at the Henry Street Playhouse in New York City. We always presented the principles of the technique in various combinations and challenges, and adjusted them according to the changing times and social scene. Alwin Nikolais designed the course to begin with a two-hour technique class, followed by one hour of improvisation and, after a half-hour break, a period of composition, percussion, or pedagogy. The criterion for success was the fulfillment of the premise presented in class that day. All classes demanded full participation from the students and a lively, encouraging presentation from the teacher. The overall aim was to impart the skills of performer, choreographer, and teacher to the student, since, practically speaking, the dancer would need all three skills to earn a professional income. More than this, mastering or at least being familiar with all the facets of dance gave the student a richer understanding of the profession.

The Playhouse's success was unique in many respects. The school was housed in a beautiful but rundown theater; as its director it had Nikolais, a man whose genius was primed to flourish in such an environment. It drew on a rich source of possible students in the form of hundreds of children who lived within walking distance and therefore did not need parents to accompany them. It also had a national and international professionally oriented adult enrollment. All of these factors allowed Nikolais, along with his dance company, to build a large school for professionals and children within a short period of time. At the Playhouse, they performed concerts, presented children's productions by both the dance company and the children, restored the theater, and—after seven years of hard and visionary work—built a school and dance company that commanded respect.

The pedagogy taught for twenty years at the Henry Street Playhouse and then for the following twenty-five years at various New York City studios created individual dancers and choreographers, not copies of a rigid, singular approach. The Nikolais/Louis technique was taught worldwide, and it still is. Today its pedagogy and principles are represented in many American university dance programs. Many of France's contemporary dancers were nurtured in the three-year program at the school Nikolais created at Angers in 1978 at the request of the French government.

Although it is called the Nikolais/Louis technique, it should be thought of as a *basic* technique, one that is applicable to any dance form. The technique is not limited to technical proficiency alone, but includes improvisational, creative, choreographic, and performing skills. It is an inclusive approach to movement and dance.

The Nikolais/Louis technique is based on many decades of trial and error. Its lineage can be seen covering over 100 years, stretching from Rudolph Von Laban to Mary Wigman, from Hanya Holm to Alwin Nikolais to Murray Louis and beyond. These artists have contributed to the technique as educators, performers, and creators. Each one taught and created differently, but they shared a rich understanding of—and dedication to—dance as an art. They stimulated each other and built on each other's ideas, yet remained individual and unique artists.

The technique covers four areas with which dancers should be familiar because they relate to all facets of the profession: technical training, improvisation, choreography, and performance. A dancer's career will include performing, choreographing, or teaching—or most likely some combination of the three.

Performance is the skill of presenting choreography to its best advantage to an audience. In the Nikolais/Louis technique, by exploring and examining the internal as well as the external nature of dance, the dancer learns how to approach and analyze movement and choreography rigorously. An astute awareness of movement qualities gives a performance intelligence and richness: just as an actor dissects and analyzes a role, the dancer enhances the choreography through clarity of spatial, temporal, and sculptural understanding. Adding nuance and depth to a gesture is the performer's responsibility. Armed with an enriched understanding of movement gained from this technique, the dancer is prepared to meet the demands of the discipline. The technique was created and

refined to reveal the fullness and clarity of form, not to interpret it, as interpretation rests primarily in the domain of the audience.

In the same way that it is important for a musician to understand the nomenclature of his musical instrument, it is also important that a dancer is familiar with the instrument he will employ to make his art: the body. The body is an incredible structure that houses a world of complex beauty. Tangible components like bones, muscles, cells, and nerves mingle with the intangible mysteries of intuition, imagination, talent, and emotion. There is no single definition for the human body, just as there is none for a dance work. The body is designed in different shapes and sizes and is charged with an unimaginable range of emotions that guarantees that no two people are alike. It is with this complicated equipment that the dancer begins his training. So, too, it is the students' variety and uniqueness that most challenges the teacher's imagination.

Although this may sound daunting for both the dancer and the teacher, it is not as difficult as it appears. It is manageable if both teacher and student speak the same language—the language of dance—and not the personal language of ego and personality.

This book, which deals with principles of basic dance, is in a way applicable to any training or creative class because it is about teachers and students and how they communicate with each other. Because dance is primarily a nonverbal art, it is important that the teacher and student develop a rapport—an open, clear avenue of contact. This book aims to clear such a path and to lend perspective to what can otherwise be a confusing and often misunderstood learning process.

Teaching, the process of imparting information from one person to another, challenges both the teacher and student. It involves the intellect and the imagination, although in dance training the physical is usually emphasized over the mental. Dance requires real dexterity in many spheres: attuning the sentient capabilities, paying attention to the feedback of the muscles, and engaging the imagination's large and varied spectrum. At the same time, dancers need to grasp what is being asked of them and teachers need to be sure that dancers understand what teachers are saying. Effective communication is as necessary in dance education as in any other successful relationship.

The Nikolais/Louis technique is a technical and creative method geared toward creating this shared communication. With a focus on presenting the fullness of the dancer's art, the technique does not define movement patterns, but presents material in a conceptual frame. In this sense, the technique employs the nonverbal language of abstraction to help encompass the enormous range of human communication. The Nikolais/Louis technique creates a vocabulary that enables communication between student and teacher that is both precise and flexible.

The mutual understanding of criticism is essential in learning and teaching, and the instructor's verbal skills, his use of the literal and the figurative, must be sharp if he is to minimize the vagueness and ambiguity that often clouds criticism. Words mean different things to different people, and it is difficult to retract an inappropriate word completely. An unclear or confused criticism can stick like glue, defeating the value of a class. For the teacher, it is as important to be able to see and help the student who has not been successful as it is to recognize and encourage the one who has achieved success. For this reason, the book includes a collection of criticisms gathered from our years spent in the classroom. By reading them, one can get a sense of the varied verbal range one should try to employ to fire the imaginations and muscles of many different students as they each engage with the same premise.

SECTION I: DEFINITIONS

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BASIC DANCE*

Man was not the first creature to dance. Long before he appeared upon the evolutionary scene, some animate thing sensed its life and moved solely as an expression of ecstasy. Through its own movement it was transported into an awareness of life beyond its more ordinary functions. This I call dancing.

Man, too, at some early point in his evolution lifted himself in acknowledgement of his endowment with life and motion and of being at one with the mechanism of nature.

It is likely that he did this simply and directly for that purpose. He had no intent of advertising his skill, cunning, or physical endowments for the purpose of either sex or war. Neither did he do this to pursue or exploit his artistic inclinations. Nor did he do it as a catharsis; nor as a means of expressing himself. It was not a way of stretching or warming his muscles. Nor was it a humble acquiescence either to man or to a god.

Dance was a simple psycho-biological statement of his living, moving presence in which he realized a force common to all universal functions coursing through his body. Thus he acknowledged his kinship to all living matter. Within this elemental act there was magic. There was a mystical sense of belonging to nature—a sense beyond his conscious intellectual reasoning.

It is little wonder that, of all the arts, dance became the most vital act in primitive worship. Through dance, man could become the sun, the moon, the earth, fire, and all of the unpredictable occurrences that surrounded him. Through such identification, he sensed a union with nature, which otherwise perplexed him.

In this primary state of dance, for both the early creatures and for man, there was no art. These were actions happening directly in time and space. If beauty occurred (as it must have), it was innocent of artfulness. There was no abstraction or idealization for the conscious purpose of beauty; there was no translation or reproduction into an artifact or action that could contain this wonderment; consequently there was no art. Yet this basic dance contained an elemental power that could be harnessed into an art_one that could serve as a synapse or catalyst from which art could emanate.

Dance in this primal sense is separable from art. However, the art of dancing must retain its contact with the unique motional acts, which trace a lineage back to the primordial dancing creature.

At the opposite pole from these virtually static exhibitions, we find dances of violent physical maneuverings hardly distinguishable from football skirmishes. In the course of history and even in the forms existing today, we find an amazing range of motions designated as dance, from ancient ethnic ceremonies to the gyrations of present-day social dance. One might surmise that the maximum invention of human motion has been reached. Yet it's certain that the future will continue to add new dimensions to the art.

It is in the area of "art dance" that new invention most frequently occurs, and it is here that there is a tendency to lose sight of the basis upon which the art is built. There is usually vehement negative outcry whenever a new form arises. The statement "It is not dance" can be found in profusion in critical writing whenever any new development emerges.

Every period of art creates its own jargon and analytical summations. These tend to establish tenaciously guarded rules, forms, methods, subjects, and so on, which inevitably must be broken or disregarded by the next revolutionary creator. He does this to shatter the peripheral encumbrances so that he may find again the germinal matter that drives his art. Out of this, then, he creates new structures congenial to his time and temper. In effect, he rediscovers and reasserts the naked power of his experiences, out of which he then forms his art—for in its primary form it is not yet art but rather a means through and with which art may occur. So too, in dance: its basic stuff is not art, but without this primary ingredient the resulting art cannot warrant the title of dance. The basis of dance embodies highly volatile factors. If one loses keen, sentient contact

*Throughout this book, the font type indicates the author. The bold font indicates a section written by Nikolais, while a section in the lighter font was written by Louis.

with them, definition, although easily comprehensible, becomes shallow.

In its purest essence, dance is the motion of a neurologically and kinetically endowed body in which the purpose, meaning, or value of that motion is inherent in the motion itself. In ordinary circumstance movement is a means toward another end, and thus does not call attention to itself but rather to a point of interest or achievement beyond it. The unique character of dance is that motion itself is the end; reason is within it rather than beyond it. Dance accomplishes itself.

The word "motion" as used here means something quite distinct from movement. It is used in the sense that movement implies the displacement of matter from one location to another; whereas motion ascribes a particular nature to the action itself. This is a qualitative distinction. We may say, for example, "The object moved through space in spiral motion." It is meant, then, in this definition, that dance refers primarily to motion as the inner detail of movement—implying qualitative content and definable itinerary.

It is the containment of the function or purpose within the action itself that distinguishes dance from other actions. An arm may be moved for the simple purpose of setting it elsewhere. However, when the motion itself supercedes as the purpose over and above the changing location, then dance takes place. If the arm describes a circle solely for the purpose of describing a circle, it does not qualify as dance in the pure sense. However, if the act places value on the inner sentient content of the kinetics involved during that circular execution, then dance takes place. Motion is a consciously engaged action.

In sports, action directs itself toward attainment of a goal or an achievement to which motion is subservient. No matter how carefully practiced and skilled the action may be, it is nevertheless relegated to the function of carrying out a purpose beyond itself.

Basic dance requires a different attitude toward the action, a frame of mind of the performer, a state of being in which relatively all other factors involved become subservient to the motion. It does not matter from the point of view of definition whether the result is monotonous or poetical. Dance is a category of action that basically is unconcerned with degree of interest or artfulness. Like food it can be good or bad, but it is food nevertheless!

When a child skips down the street, it is perhaps a release of excess energies, but it is not necessarily dance. When a child skips in a dance studio, purposefully and consciously executing the motion for its own sake, then the skip becomes dance.

In the art of mime, motions and gestures may be highly ordered and sensitive. Yet mime is distinguished from dance in that it focuses on motion for the purpose of descriptive, literal expression rather than on the values of motion itself. If it goes beyond this purpose, it may become dance. And, in the same way, the dancer who resorts to literal gesture borrows from the art of mime.

From two extreme points of view, then, if a person raises an arm, no matter how slowly, with consciousness of the kinetics as the end value, then the act can be defined as dance. Also, if one moves with great speed and with consciousness of that speed as the reason and focus itself, then that too, artistic or otherwise, becomes dance. Basic dance begins with an awareness of motion.

In its strictest analysis, basic dance in its most complete and purest sense is rarely seen, for in exemplary instances it would embody the intrinsic coincidences of primary laws of motion as a direct language. It would involve the activation of matter in time and space, engaging gravity, centrifugal and centripetal forces, and the infinite interbalances of all these relative factors.

All of these highly volatile factors, when funneled through the human body, bring about that which we call dance.

Basic Dance

Basic dance is arriving at a balance from which creativity can begin, by first disturbing that balance. Basic dance is that state of balance and totality that is considered a norm or starting point. From this point, style, stress, distortion, and other imbalances can and should be emphasized and employed. Basic dance has no personal characteristics.

VISION OF A NEW TECHNIQUE

The most distinctive aspect of American modern dance was what I have called the concept of the *unique gesture*. Ironically this distinction was also its greatest hindrance: the idea of uniqueness would eliminate the practice of the prescribed vocabulary of the many movement forms, which embraced the numerous varieties of dance. To this day, and particularly during the earlier years, it was often erroneously assumed that ballet technique was a basic requirement for art dance. Ballet technique is contrary to the concept of the unique gesture, particularly when that technique is based on the practice of motional rituals, which stifles muscular liberty or leads to glib athleticism. A modern dance technique is possible, but it cannot be based on patterned motional forms. It can be accomplished by an analysis of human motion as an art and by a practiced study of the aesthetic potentials of that medium.

One of the most vivid recollections I have in my dance study was a moment in a class with John Martin, then the astute dance critic of the *New York Times*, who announced to a class at Bennington College that at that moment of dance history we had at last discovered the full potential of the human body. In 1937 this was, to me, a shocking statement. I had previously believed that this knowledge was centuries old. I had yet to learn that modern dance was based on this new realization—not on past forms—that modern dance in 1937 was a contemporary form, at the beginning of its formulation.

For dance to flourish, it needed a technique that would not impose styles or rigid patterns that would lock the body with motional indigestion, but rather return it to the study of motion as the basis of its art. It is possible that in this way techniques can be established that can bring dance training to the equal stature of the more disciplined arts such as music, painting, and sculpture.

Today, patterns rather than aesthetics seem to dominate. Definitions remain vague and a precise training for participation in modern dance is missing. What approach to dance should an aspiring student engage to ensure a technique for his or her expression of the world? Ballet, jazz, ethnic, or modern dance techniques? Most students of dance try them all, and the resulting smorgasbord leaves only an unrelated assortment of the obvious leaps, splits, turns, and undefined gestures.

The first quarter of the twentieth century found the United States deluged with something it had never had before: professional dance. The deluge was not so much in quantity, but in variety. Ballet began to take hold, and Isadora left her mark. The Denishawn filled the stewpot with morsels from all over the world—Spain, Indonesia, China, Japan, and Mexico, in addition to invented concoctions of styles not heard or seen before.

It was out of the dance cuisine of Denishawn that new American dance arose. Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, and Charles Weidman toured as members of Denishawn Company and performed everything from glitzy Aztec rites to Japanese sword dances, from fake Chinese rituals to glamorous Broadway musicals. A lot of art mixed with a lot of showbiz, and one didn't know where one ended and the other began. The miracle was that out of this mad stew emerged a single focused idealism. It happened without anyone's conscious intention. It emerged from the morass as clean as Arthur's Excalibur arose from the lake. With incredible innocence a tenet was formed that could serve dance. This was the idea of the *unique gesture*.

Free people and creative minds are not prone to following patterns. Patterns preconceived by others are the security blanket of the unadventuresome spirit whose timidity requires the protection of predigested forms.

In coining the phrase *unique gesture*, I have described a principle that opposed the existing processes that had obliged the creator to pin his dance communication upon already existing techniques and patterns of movement. Unlike ballet, for example, where an arabesque can be forged into the violent scream of a witch or the ecstatic love of a princess, modern dance, at its best, refused to follow a template. It chose instead to mold the motion directly out of the impulses of the creator's emotions, tailoring them specifically to his or her particular view.

This meant that the design of action was not serviceable for other expressions. It could serve only one master.

The idea of the unique gesture was not deliberately conceived; it was simply born. Its only discipline was to envision a pathway into the landscape of the mind and then lead the spectator vicariously into that vision. Individual artists hacked through their mystical forests with their own makeshift machetes and created motions to conform to these individual paths and visions. Each trip was different, and although movement styles were created, these were characteristics of the dictates of a particular mind, rather than generalized techniques. This individualism created confusion, frustration, and pedagogical difficulties.

Fundamentally, technique refers to a method used to achieve an end. Because each end result of modern dance was devoted to unique ventures created by individual artists, a generalized technique was always in a state of flux.

Each artist attempted to create his or her own motional forms, derived directly from the individual's unique sources. It was the marriage of mind and motion. The wide inventory of motion was as infinite as the myriad facets of the mind. Was there a technique? Absolutely. The technique was the skill of releasing the body to the service of the aesthetic mind, by passing the temptations of the narcissistic ego and the pathways of muscular habit.

The concepts inherent in such an ideal contain a key to the meaning of humanism. Mankind had at its service the limitless source of its own genetic endowment. This places the responsibility and glorification of life upon the spirit and vitality of the individual. His motional statement of life is his own unique expression as the forces of life course through him and engage his huge accumulation of personal references. This was not vague symbolism or copied patterns, but gestures of such revelation that one could affirm the very fact of life itself. This was modern dance at its best.

This was also a time when many artists mixed political and social activism with art. Often political protests became significant aesthetic ventures. Some succeeded mainly because compulsions to produce art are also primal moralistic forces.

The idea of the unique gesture, as it was originally practiced at Bennington's Summer Dance programs, changed the whole concept of concert dance. In particular, it separated dance from virtuosic displays pinned upon a skimpy story line. The newest trends in music also made agreeable companions to modern dance. Dissonance and erratic conglomerations of pulse and meter were easily within the comprehension and aesthetics of the modern dancer.

But above all, the concept of the unique gesture is ideally a profound *dance* concept in that it combines the human body, mind, and spirit. This is a most fragile linkage. The challenge is to maintain the moral stamina required to remain wholly faithful to the impulsions of the deeper self. Man's attraction toward the easy life—his tendency to fall back on pattern—is so forceful and contagious that it must constantly be guarded against.

All great statements of life emerge from this deep conviction. One can benefit from another's genius, but the genius itself cannot be shared. It is one thing; to halve it is to destroy it.

DECENTRALIZATION

German modern dance was less affected by personalities than was American modern dance, and it was closer to general skill and craft. This was mainly due to the impersonal analyses promoted by Rudolph von Laban. His technique too, however, was a "centralized" one based on precise spatial, architectural orientations surrounding the body. On this he also based his system of notation.

In the United States, modern dance became established as a free creative process. The geniuses of modern dance generated powerful styles, which emanated from their own bodies. In effect, their "techniques" were actually personal styles, albeit ones that were somewhat scientifically based, imposed upon questions of movement.

In the concept of decentralization, the ego is to dance what the anchoring "do" note is to music. Too often the ego becomes the point of focus or centralization, and motion becomes subservient to it. Consequently, the first goal in the practice of decentralization is to contrive methods of releasing the body from the limiting vortex of the ego, the self.

For an art dominated by the exhibition of the human body, this is not so easy. The method for success is to distract the onlooker's eye away from the performing ego by making the body the instrument of other visions through the use of choreographic and performing sleight of hand. This process of shifting the onlooker's attention is what I call decentralization. By this I mean the process of focusing one's dynamic force away from the self and allowing it to reach out and bring other concerns under control. This process presents a hornet's nest of difficulties, and the idea of decentralization invariably cause resistance, especially as our primal instincts forever bring us back to our protective cores, to our atavistic instincts.

A constant state of pulling in, of centralization, can serve as a refuge from the whirlwind of the society that surrounds us, but when it dominates all of our responses, it becomes restrictive. Decentralization becomes necessary to participate in the knowledge of our time, and that means extending out of our center, which had offered us a huge advance in our freedom to experience. It may not offer us secure creative footing, but it does offer an abundance of thrilling, unanchored adventures.

The strongest force in centralization is egocentricity, and the strongest force in egocentricity is sexuality; therefore, I believe it is necessary in a classroom situation to break this down first. We have progressed to a point where we realize that the battle of the sexes is no longer the essential subject for dance.

Breaking down the polar distance between the male and female, for instance, led me to begin using unisex costumes in 1953. This also allowed greater freedom in assigning roles in the dances. In most cases, in my work, the male and female roles could be interchanged. I rarely singled out the sexes.

Relieved of the overemphasis on sexual differences, I concentrated more intensely on the motion itself. Motion could more easily become the subject rather than being an adjunct of the dancer. The most positive result of working from this perspective was the emergence of a stronger definition of dance: dance became the art of motion, freed from literal subjects. Motion was no longer the servant of the individual; it became the master.

I watch carefully as I direct class activity. I implant a motivation and then examine very carefully the route to its outcome. After summarizing the results, I initiate corrective activities to clear the path of psychical interference or unresponsive body parts—all very simple as an idea, but discouragingly difficult to achieve. The centralizing "me" factor is extraordinarily powerful, and performers are reluctant to relinquish the exhibition of self in favor of the act.

In searching for a new technical approach, I gradually developed my definition of dance and began to conceive of a new creative direction for myself. As I explored, my main objective was to identify the role of the dancer and the nature of his motivation. I then sought a manner of teaching that would best develop the technical ability of the body as the instrument.

Unlike painters and musicians, the dancer bears within himself a potent force in the form of his own material presence. It is not only his physical presence that matters, but also his psychical force and the strong tendency to impose his presence upon the onlooker.

The more closely I tried to observe the body's motion, the more impatient I became with the ego's intrusion upon the action. I found myself using all sorts of devices to try to eliminate, or at least minimize, the ego's dominance.

German theories lent themselves well here, particularly Laban's concepts of dimension. Like Laban, I conceived of the body as a three-dimensional entity empowered by the mind. Looked at in this way, a simple abstract motivation, such as forward, backward, up, or down, quickly revealed the failure of any body part or the whole body to fully engage itself. Mannerisms, negative idiosyncrasies, timidities, aggressiveness, and all other hindrances to executing the act were quickly revealed, and corrective processes toward decentralization were initiated. Laban's theories were precise: they stated that specific architectural radiations emanate from centralization. Despite my opposition to centralization, the Laban theories furnished a fine initial corrective for technical study. Their precise architectural design revealed very clearly the student's inadequacies in controlling the union of intent and achievement. Consequently, they offered guidelines for improving one's skill in executing the dictates of decentralization. Laban's system of notation was also a great aid to looking at motion objectively rather than subjectively. Consciousness and clarity of dance structure increased.

By this time in the development of my ideas at the Henry Street Playhouse, Murray Louis had established a large children's division that was attended by hundreds of children. Through him the four- to eleven-year-olds accepted my methods; they were also enchantingly eloquent in their creative expressions. These youngsters had not yet reached puberty, so they were not bugged by sex. Consequently, it was not difficult for them to explore abstract motion as an event on its own merits. Their *direct* doing helped to assure me that primal gestures still existed inherently within us, no matter how sophisticated our society had become. Prepubescent children naturally accept abstraction and nonliteral imagining. Puberty is the classroom of centralization and sexual fixation from which many do not graduate.[1]

Relieving oneself of centralization allowed motion to open up a vast new area of metaphoric expression. Clearly this was my path to travel. I found that this new world of dimensions beyond the seeing eye was truly a contemporary world to be experienced on its own terms. Eventually, I concluded that the message resided in the motion itself. *My definition of dance was now fixed: dance is the art of motion, not emotion, and it carries its own intelligence within itself.*

In 1953 we presented our first concert in this new vein of releasing the focus from self and self-image. The piece was called *Village of Whispers.* It was composed of many dances—group works, solos, and duets—which we prepared in composition classes. The main theme was based on images that rested beyond or behind the façade of a village. The titles were *Glade, Creech, Dark Corner, Styx, Hex, Gemini, Tournament, Tensile Involvement, Evil Eye, Monarch, and Lorilei.* The dance attempted to enact an entire statement via an abstract structure instead of pursuing it through characterization or situation. Its concept was more closely related to a musical elaboration than it was to a dramatic one.

I was aware that this process was a familiar one in acting. But in acting it was used as a device to develop characterization, and I was attempting to evolve abstract choreography. Still, I was not wholly satisfied with the dancers' success in decentralization, which suggested they were just embodying things other than themselves. I wanted them to transcend themselves entirely.

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[1]Nikolais did not teach children's classes at the Playhouse. His office, however, was on the same floor as my classroom studios, and he would often come in and watch the improvisation and composition studies. Yes, at six years old the students were composing for each other.

Decentralization refuted several early theories of motion, which stated that motion originates in the region of the solar plexus. With the new awareness of decentralization, one could now place the origin of force in or on any surface of the body, even a pinpoint of flesh. The concept quickly developed a new potential for nuance in motional expression. Its main advantage was that it released the choreographer/dancer from the centralized gut action, which had strongly chained the dancer to characterization and situation.

Decentralization attracted praise and interest, but it also received an equal amount of negative response from the establishment. The criticism came particularly from those whose self-identification with modern dance archetypes left them with no other peg on which to hang their egos.

Cries of "dehumanization," "coldness," "puppetry," and "mechanicalness" arose. The outcries were reminiscent of the early days of abstract painting. With no figurative or representational vision offered as a portal into the painting, literal-minded people failed to get the message. Abstraction requires a multifaceted and lively frame of reference from both the creator and the viewer. Depth of aesthetic perception is measured by the degree to which one responds to the abstract. The detail of the abstract components in a work aesthetically define its quality. In this vision of decentralization, the less aesthetically oriented person is left in a dither because the obvious external form, the dancer's personality, is subdued.

Unfettering dance from its centralization not only allowed the smallest kernel of force to appear at any point in or on the body, it could also cause a force to arise from any source in the space surrounding the body. It was not a matter of eliminating the center but of relocating it to other parts of the body or other points in space. When one is released from centralization, one becomes more completely aware of an infinite environment.

No longer dominated by personality and ego, the dancer now was able to merge into an environment of which he was a part. He found himself a contributing member rather than a dominating dweller. Space became more than just a hole in which to kick or spin about; it evolved into an architecturally fluid companion. Time was no longer a metrical, reiterated beat that restricted the dancer's step; it was a malleable measurement adapting itself to the shaping of the art subject, flowing with the subject's needs rather than forcing the action into rigid steps. Motion became the vital pulse of the human structure, not a classical decorative posture or a skillful movement cadenza that merely decorated the figure. Shape, too, was no longer just a static attitude or pose. It transcended its literal function to become whatever the choreographer proposed.

I am well aware that the practice of decentralization seems to contradict the very core of personal assertion. After all, performing makes high demands of the human ego. Yet the artist must go beyond himself. Great performers are willing to transcend themselves to live within the substance of their art.

In decentralization, the dancer goes even beyond this point: his head may not be a head, his arm not an arm. The dancer may have to give up his identity to place himself at the service of something that bears no resemblance to his physicality. By the magic of motion, he will illuminate the poetic substance of something entirely new. Shaking off the shackles of the fleshy identification, the body may become the eloquent motional spokesman of all things within the reach of man's most mystical visions. He may then inform us of things beyond ordinary vision and comprehension. He can tell us of the wonderment of life itself, beyond any thing previously felt or observed, by reaching to the farthest limits of imagination.

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In order to vitalize areas that have no means for self-vitalization, the dancer must project his own neuro-muscular system into points of interest around him. This calls for a strong conceptual ability and a selfless willingness to share. With a fluid generative source, the dancer can vitalize and give identity to spatial and temporal concerns. His designs in space, his sculptural forms, can now exist in their own right, and no longer need to be centrally dominated and ego-infused.

Being able to fill abstractions with their own life force expands the performers' range enormously. It also allows the dancer to achieve heroic proportions. No longer limited to what the body