

HELEN TAMIRIS: Re-Visioning Modernism in Modern Dance

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Introduction.

In her autobiography, modern dance pioneer Tamiris (1928/89), neé Helen Becker, recounts her childhood upbringing in New York City. The daughter of Russian-Jewish immigrants, she began her professional dance career in ballet at the Metropolitan Opera. Tamiris toured America, Europe, and South America before giving her first solo concert on 9 October 1927 at the Little Theatre in New York City. Some of her choreographies are *Walt Whitman Suite*, *Harmony in Athletics*, and *Negro Spirituals*, the latter for which she won *Dance Magazine's* first award in May 1937 for outstanding group choreography (Schlundt, 1972).

Tamiris began working with actor/dancer Daniel Nagrin in 1941 and were married in 1946 (Schlundt, 1997:20). They continued to work on Broadway together for the next ten years, she as choreographer and he as leading dancer and her assistant in shows such as *Up in Central Park*, *Show Boat*, *Annie Get Your Gun*, and *Plain and Fancy* (Nagrin, 2001:10 & 13). After leaving Broadway, they formed the Tamiris-Nagrin Dance Company from 1960-63, and then professionally and maritally separated (Gruen, 1975 and 1988). In 1966, Tamiris very privately passed away (Schlundt, 1972) from cancer (Evans, 2003). I consider Tamiris my grandmother in dance genealogy, gleaning her choreographic methods through my teacher and mentor, Daniel Nagrin.

Contextualisation.

Tamiris challenged the formalist notions of modernism by rendering content rather than form as the primary structuring device, which problematises and calls for a re-examination of the definitions of modernism and modern dance. A close examination of these is made using the aesthetic theories of Sheldon Cheney (1946) and John Martin (1939), author and *NY Times* dance critic during Tamiris' career. Further historical understanding is given through scholars Mark Franko (2002), Susan Manning (2004a), and Stacey Prickett (in Garafolo, 1994) who have contextualized the complex underpinnings of American modern dance in the 1930s. Through the writings of dance scholar Janet Adshead (1988) and historiographer Keith Jenkins (1991 and 2001), an attempt is made to situate Tamiris within this framework by examining the relationships between her choreographic methods and the philosophical and cultural underpinnings of the times. Due to the continued discourse over the rigid definition of dance modernism surrounding the Banes/Manning debate (Banes, 1987 and Manning, 1988), the formalist definition of modernism is used throughout this paper. Therefore, what is a formalist narrative of modernism, and what is its relationship to Tamiris and her dances?

Sheldon Cheney (1946) defined modernism as a mid 19th Century Kantian Enlightenment concept of *l'art pour l'art* or art for art's sake, method or process is object- and form-based, and expression, new forms, and change are present. John Martin associated modernism with classical Greece and Rome and features order, beauty, form, set rules, set technique, codified vocabulary, and a balanced, symmetrical design. It is aristocratic, mental and reflective, minimalist, primitive, process oriented, individualistic, takes delight in things made, and features the industrial age and

technology. However, its antithesis, Hellenism, also was privileged in ancient Greece. Hellenism features emotions and feelings, subjective experience, content, the popular, spontaneity, exploration, and delights in things discovered rather than made (Martin, 1939/75). Both strands contain abstraction which is stripped of decoration, distorted but not mutilated, based in reality, and features materials (1939/75). However, just as ancient Greece had both Classicism and Hellenism, Cheney (1946) further defined modernism's abstraction as containing two strands, both *l'art pour l'art* (Classicist) and feeling/content (Hellenistic). The ideas of both Cheney and Martin coincide with Tamiris' and Nagrin's philosophy and work. Mark Franko, reflecting on this period from his postmodern viewpoint, explains that the term 'modernism' covers complex "aesthetic procedures currently under intense critical scrutiny" and asserts that "all modern dance is not modernist" (Franko, 1995:145). Although many classical characteristics are present in modernism and modern dance, clearly the works of Tamiris and Nagrin do not fit these ideals as they privileged popular culture, experimentation, metaphors, finding rather than making, and content over form.

Influences and Philosophy.

This research is problematic as Tamiris (1928 and 1951) never penned in her autobiography exactly what her choreographic methodology is, but rather its philosophical underpinnings. Attempts have been made to record her techniques and devices by Daniel Nagrin (1989; 1994; 1997; 2001); Christina Schlundt (1972); and the Tamiris Conference at Arizona State University (Adler, 1986). Through telephone calls, Nagrin provided pertinent information to weave together aspects missing in my

intellectual and corporeal understandings of her method. From Tamiris, he learned to work from improvisation and impulse rather than technique. She used movement metaphors instead of words and would often pose the Stanislavski-like question, “Who are you and what do you want?” (Gruen, 1975 and Nagrin, 1988a:100-101). Nagrin admitted that his work and method are an inseparable fusion of her ideas and theories, and he cannot articulate where her teaching stops and his begins (Nagrin, 1989, 1994, 1997, and 2001). They both borrowed from Stanislavski, and I gathered threads of her method through Nagrin.

Constantin Stanislavski (1863–1938) was director of The Moscow Art Theatre (MAT). Isadora Duncan and Stanislavski mutually influenced each other regarding emotion, expression, and inner truthfulness (Layson, 1987 and Stanislavski, 1924/48).ⁱ How Tamiris first encountered Stanislavski’s work is uncertain (Nagrin, 1989 and 2001), but in her autobiography *Tamiris* (1928/89) stated she briefly studied at the Duncan school in the 1920s. In addition, Stanislavski’s work appears to have appealed to actors and dancers of Eastern European Jewish heritage who largely embraced its ideas of amelioration. Several Jewish actors who studied under Stanislavski and/or his pupils in Moscow came to New York, such as Benjamin Zemach of the YMHA (Jackson, 2000) where both Tamiris and Nagrin performed. Most of the Stanislavski-based Group Theatre members of the 1930s were Jewish (Nagrin, 2004f), concentrating on themes of social value of the average person rather than on royal or military heroes. Both Tamiris and Nagrin worked with several of them, such as Lee Strasburg whom Tamiris brought in to some of her earlier choreography classes “to teach her dancers” Stanislavski’s methods (Nagrin, 2001:11). Thus, the similarities in their works are

evident. Prickett (in Garafolo, 1994a) pointed out that the Group Theatre was left-wing, and this association further problematises Tamiris' marginalisation.

Tamiris' (1928/89:51) philosophy of dance was developed early as seen in her *Manifest*, printed in her second solo concert programme of 29 January 1928. She stated that "Art is international, but the artist is a product of nationality and his principal duty to himself is to express the spirit of his race." Her aim was to create American dances to American music using American themes, such as her Negro spirituals, sports, and jazz. Her desire for a national dance was not unlike Mary Wigman's (Manning, 1993). Nagrin (1994:143) said that "jazz was in the very bones of how she defined America." She worked with jazz music and dance and on Broadway, because this was the dance of America and her understanding of what she should be doing (Nagrin, 2001). However, most dance critics of the time did not treat jazz with seriousness or respect (Roses-Thema, 2003). In contrast to Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, and Hanya Holm, her trajectory into non-formalist methods included blurring the boundaries between high art and the vernacular.

Tamiris' *Manifest* also states: "There are no general rules. Each work of art creates its own code" (Tamiris, 1928/89:51). She did not impose her own movement style or technique onto dancers but believed the body knew how to move, developing movement out of them improvisationally (Nagrin, 2004f). As a young actor, Stanislavski discovered improvisation by working alone to develop his character roles (Stanislavski, 1936/59 and 1961b). Tamiris offered neither theories nor codified technique, just that the body was allowed to move in whatever way was natural for each (Nagrin, 1989 and 2001; Schlundt, 1972; and Siegel, 1985). Therefore, her dancers had no recognisable

Tamiris style or technique (Schlundt, 1972), which contributed to her marginalisation (Franko, 1995). This contrasted with Graham, Humphrey, and even de Mille, as critics deemed Tamiris' works mediocre and amateur. In retrospect, Nagrin stated that

history has sort of slipped by Helen, but she was one of the founders. She was self defeating in terms of history and schools, because what she was doing was working from the moment. Each class was different. There was no schema, only that you were constantly thrown into yourself.
Nagrin cited in Dunning, 1982

Choreographic Methods.

Stanislavski devised a six-step system to inspire the imagination or what he called the magic *if*: who you are, where you come from, why, what you want, where you are going, and what you will do when you get there (Stanislavski, 1936/59). Tamiris, like Stanislavski, developed her own four-steps: “who you were, where you were, what you were doing, and how you were doing it” (Adler, 1986-87:75 and Nagrin, 2001). Nagrin later would develop his six. Just as MAT focused on **popular culture**, **symbolism** (Clurman cited in Marshall, 1977; and Nemirovitch-Dantchenko, 1936/68), and **social realism** (Stanislavski, 1924/48 and 1961a), Tamiris' and Nagrin's works featured these three characteristics as well. We will examine each further. These involve an inner acting technique which does not focus on dramatic form but rather on discovering a truthful core of the character and his actions (Moore, 1984; and Stanislavski, 1961b). It contains the non-formalist notion of form following content, or content-then-form. This distinguishes Tamiris and Nagrin from most choreographers of this time, particularly the Big Four, as this approach is philosophical rather than technical and form-based.

Popular Culture and Broadway. Tamiris blended high art with popular culture in her works. On Broadway, her choreographic method was to be immersed thoroughly in the style, content, and context of the material, “never try[ing] to thrust her own agenda into a script” (Nagrin, 2001:3 and Schlundt, 1997). Walter Terry, dance critic for the *New York Herald Tribune*, noticed that Tamiris did not “sandwich” her dances into musicals but that they were a seamless whole (Schlundt, 1997:19). She believed that the dances should not interfere with the action nor take over from the plot (Schlundt, 1997). An example is the “Wild Horse” dance from *Annie Get Your Gun*. It was woven into the plot rather than being a separate dance; and it highlighted the star, Ethel Merman. Marcia Siegel asserts that Tamiris “paid a price” for her dual career on the concert stage and Broadway and was a “victim of subtle snobbery and clannishness among the ‘in’ modern dancers . . . [who] thought her vulgar” (Siegel, 1985:42). Many of her contemporaries, with the exception of a few such as Agnes De Mille, would not incorporate the popular. This was translated as ‘not artistic’ at the time (Evans, 2002; Siegel, 1987a; Lloyd, 1949; and Nagrin, 1994), which contributed to her marginalisation.

Symbolism and Metaphor. Stanislavski’s (1936/59 and 1961a) symbolism is metaphorical which eliminates artificial actions and feelings, such as the clichés of literal and mechanical gestures and overacting. Tamiris’ concurs in her *Manifest*:

The dance of today is plagued with exotic gestures [and] mannerisms . . . Will people never rebel against artificialities, pseudo-romanticism and affected sophistication? . . . The aim of the dance is not to narrate (anecdotes, stories, fables, legends, etc) by means of mimic tricks and other established choreographic forms. Dancing is simply movement with a personal concept of rhythm.

Tamiris, 1928/89:51

For Stanislavski, Tamiris, and Nagrin (2001), eliminating clichés resulted in achieving the inner life, and this involved finding metaphors which opened new possibilities. Nagrin (2001:11) stated that Tamiris' "*need to discover the inner life that fired*" movements was the most profound insight she gave him. The specific image was central to her later work and brought out a personal movement vocabulary, and she was "merciless" about this (Nagrin, 2001:17). Tamiris handled literal gestures by transferring movement to another part of the body and taking the action inward by saying, "don't illustrate" (Nagrin, 1989, 2001:18, and 2004f). In contrast, many actors and dancers at the turn of the century were trained in François Delsarte's (1811-1871) manual of gestural motions and attitudes that attributed known codified meaning into every little movement.ⁱⁱ For instance, an arm in eleven different angles had a different, specific meaning attached to each, and it was important that the audience knew and read it exactly (Nagrin, 1997:27-28). Tamiris called this literalness as working "too close to the bone" (cited in Nagrin, 2001:82).

To achieve a physical action, Stanislavski (1961b) asked 'what would the character *do*' in certain situations. Every on-stage action must have a specific purpose, as "thoughts are embodied in acts" (Stanislavski and Rumyantsev, 1975:4). He (Stanislavski, 1936/59, 1961a and 1961b) developed a series or system of physical exercises to find internal expression based on inner experiences (Plumlee, 1989). In my work under Nagrin, he never focused on the emotion to find movement as Martha Graham did, but rather on the action or the doing to explore the depth of character and emotion would follow (Nagrin, 2001). For example, Tamiris-Nagrin Dance Company member Phoebe Neville recalled a tea ceremony exercise of Tamiris'. This literal action

of serving and/or receiving tea, sans props, was used to develop an accurate embodied memory. It allowed the dancer to take the physical action and the emotion behind it to develop movement metaphors through the imagination. Stanislavski (1936/59, 1961a and 1961b) suggested that when the logic of thoughts is searched and achieved through actions, emotions will follow. Feeling and emotion come from doing, acting is doing, and therefore feeling and acting “are the same thing” (Kissel, 2000:44). Finding the core of a specific image through doing is a primary feature in the works of Tamiris and Nagrin (Nagrin, 1989 and 2001).

Critics Louis Horst and John Martin engendered Tamiris’ work as doing-acting and considered it inferior (Schlundt, 1972 and 1997). This is important as scholar Angela Kane (2002) states that critics constructed a view of modern dance based in formalism. Horst, founder of *Dance Observer* in the 1930s and author of his choreographic primer, *Pre-Classic Dance Forms* (1940), helped shape American modern dance along with Martin who supported Horst’s structural theories (Schlundt, 1997 and Jackson, 2000). They favoured the works and ideals of those choreographers who used Horst’s or Laban’s formalist, traditionalist principles such as Graham who was Horst’s personal partner, Humphrey, Weidman, Wigman, and Holm (Kane, 2002). Tamiris and Nagrin appropriated non-formalist acting theories to dance instead. By her second concert in January 1928, Tamiris sensed Horst’s feelings toward her had changed since she did not embrace his structured formalism and therefore no longer discussed dance theory with him (Nagrin, 1989 and Tamiris, 1928/89). Martin recommended the Big Four to initiate and establish both the dance programmes at the YMHA and at the Bennington summer dance workshops from 1934–1942. Bennington

inspired the formation of American college and university dance programs that today continue to be based in structured formalism.

Agency. In her *Manifest* (1928/89:51), Tamiris stated that “We must not forget the age we live in.” She focused on speaking to the masses regarding social concerns and issues of the oppressed (Schlundt, 1972). Her social realism was similar to Sokolow’s and Wigman’s in which the purpose of dance, particularly after WW I, was the enmeshment of man with political and economic issues (Sorell, 1966). She also incorporated Marxist ideologies evident in the MAT such as privileging the human condition, seen in her 1935 work on Spain’s civil war and her 1942 concert to aid Russia (Schlundt, 1972). Schlundt wrote that she

was more modern than any in that essence of modernity: responsiveness to the unformulated will of an epoch, a drive to do what a time required.

Schlundt, 1972:34 & 7

Nagrin (2004f) confided that Tamiris frightened people with her social, political, and artistic views which distanced and alienated them. Socially relevant, non-formalist “proletariat art” was seen as conflicting with the “bourgeois” art of the Big Four (Franko, 1995:27). As a result, she was not invited to Bennington and was dismissed by the American Dance Festival until Nagrin was invited to teach and perform in the late 1950s. At this time, Franko (1995:27) asserts that the most “hotly contended issues” were the politically intertwining, complex notions of “form versus content and heritage versus innovation.” As a result, socially-oriented, content-based works, an aspect of Marxism (Laing, 1978) favoured by the leftist revolutionaries, were not privileged. Critics such as Martin and Horst eschewed the leftist revolutionaries, and Martin omitted them, including Tamiris, in his books during the 1930s (Martin, 1936 and 1939; and

Nagrin, 1989). Therefore, the erroneous red label due to social action stigmatised her and contributed to her marginalisation both at that time and in the present construction of dance history.

Conclusions.

The above three features of Tamiris' work led to her marginalisation from dance history by critics and writers for four reasons. The first reason is her controversial social action. A second marginalisation factor is that she did not use Horst's choreographic principles. A third reason is her theatrical embracement of popular culture, Broadway, and American Negro experiences including jazz music and dance. And fourth, another possibility is that Tamiris worked within a different strand of modernism that privileged content rather than form. As this was eschewed by critics who were mostly formalist, their choices historically positioned the Big Four at the exclusion of non-formalist choreographers such as Tamiris and Nagrin.

The value of this analysis is to provide another way to re-think modern dance within a re-visioned modernist framework that contains the two strands of form and content, and to provide a rationale for the inclusion of non-formalist dance artists such as Tamiris and Nagrin into modern dance history. This calls for a continued critical re-examination of the definitions of modernism and American modern dance.

ⁱ Stanislavski and Duncan did not work directly with emotion, but emotion was a by product as a result of exploring and analysing the depths of a role (Layson, 1987; Nagrin, 1994; and Stanislavski, 1924/48, 1961a and 1961b).

ⁱⁱ Nagrin quotes the line from the musical *Madam Sherry*, which is associated with Ted Shawn: "Every little movement has a meaning all its own, Every thought and feeling by some posture may be shown" (Nagrin, 1994:99).

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