

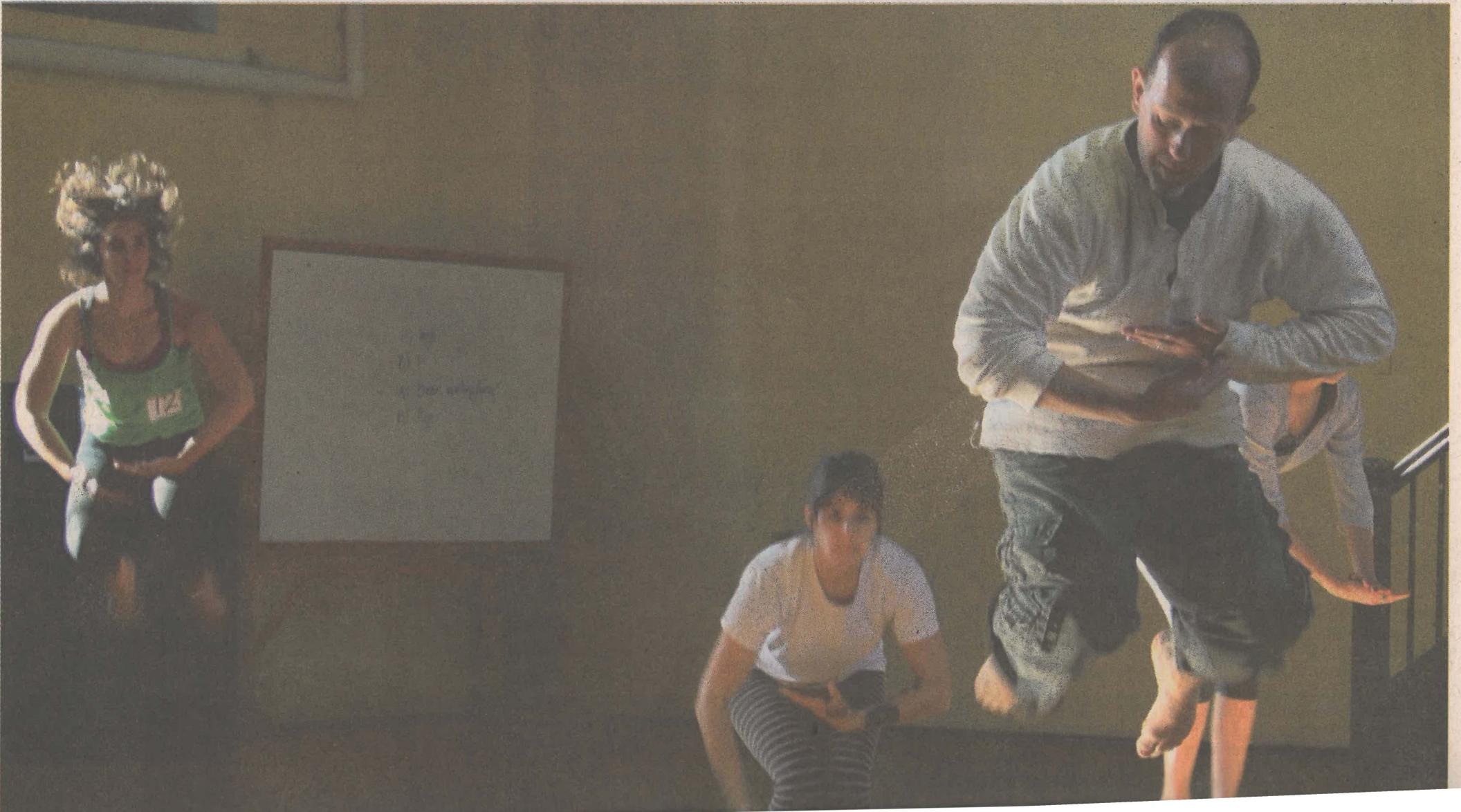
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HOW MODERN DANCE TOOK ROOT IN VERMONT

Pioneering figures helped bring talent, innovation to Bennington

STORY BY

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About 165 years after Ethan Allen gathered his militia to plan an armed revolution, their little southern Vermont hamlet experienced a major cultural revolution.

In 1934, Bennington was hopping. And, luckily, dancing.

Four of America's most prominent choreographers — Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, Hanya Holm and Charles Weidman — helped launch the Bennington School of the Dance at the fledgling college there. It quickly attracted 103 students and many celebrated creative spirits of the era.

The Green Mountain Boys were pioneers on a New England frontier, but Graham and her colleagues pioneered new frontiers in an ancient art form. Self-expression eclipsed the more rigid rules of classical ballet and individual recitals gave way to concerts as modern dance, first championed earlier in the 20th century by the likes of Isadora Duncan, gained respect.

This transformation took root in Vermont eight decades ago, the beginning of a substantial terpsichorean presence that continues to flourish in one of the country's most rural states.

In her 1991 autobiography, "Blood Memory," Graham described what became a regular summer sojourn of teaching and performing at Bennington, "a wonderful place where we were given the freedom and possibility to make our dance."

unfurled on the Vermont campus; he had joined the Martha Graham Dance Company while studying at Bennington's short-lived California satellite program in 1939.

This bohemian aspect of academia shocked local folks, who reportedly suspected the Vermont college was operating a nudist colony when dancers were spotted in flesh-colored leotards.



ABOVE: Paul Besaw teaching a University of Vermont dance call last fall with, from back left, students Michelle Marlon and Jamie Nicks.

LEFT: Martha Graham at Bennington College in August 1938 during her premiere of "American document."

It also gave her the freedom to drive around town “in a little Model-T Ford with no license and no fear.”

Wild behavior in an automobile may have been contagious. In 1935, Alexander Calder came to Bennington by car “wearing nothing but his undershorts,” recalled Graham, who incorporated the sculptor’s acclaimed mobiles into her work. They collaborated on “Panorama,” which premiered at the college, as did their joint venture a few years later titled “Horizons.”

The controversial Graham, dubbed “the Picasso of Dance,” often tapped into a variety of other artistic fields. “We were all experimenting,” she explained in the memoir.

William Carlos Williams, whose poetry inspired Graham’s “American Document” in 1938, was another influential figure at Bennington.

Graham’s desire to feature original music drew avant-garde composer John Cage, whose “Credo in Us” debuted at the school in 1942. That’s also the year his partner Merce Cunningham’s first choreographed piece was

MIMICKING A MOBILE

Alexander Calder also popped up in the career of Sharry Underwood of South Burlington. She remembers that one of her lucky breaks was an opportunity to choreograph performances based on three of his mobiles when he was a guest artist on “The Gloria Swanson Hour.” The television talk show was broadcast on New York’s WPIX in 1949, the same year that the Hollywood actress filmed her most famous role as a fading movie star in “Sunset Boulevard.”

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*Photo courtesy of the
Martha Graham Center*

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But how does a dancer mimic a mobile? "I watched the way they moved and tried to move with them," Underwood said.

As a youngster who wanted nothing more than to move, she could not convince her parents of its importance. "I was forbidden to be a dancer, not allowed to have any lessons," Underwood lamented. "In the 1920s and '30s, most people equated dancing with vaudeville or the follies."

She defied them by spending three weeks in 1942 at the Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival, launched by instructor Ted Shawn in the Berkshires. His Denishawn Company, formed with Ruth St. Denis, had once employed many of the dancers who later wound up at Bennington.

During her first summer in the festival, Shawn gave Underwood a full scholarship for the 1943 session and said, "I have great expectations for



neurons in the human brain "are self-organizing, and their patterns are emergent phenomena."

To go deeper into this topic, in April Sgorbati will commute to a six-week creative research fellowship at the Experimental Media and Performing Arts Center at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, N.Y.

'WE'RE HERE TO DANCE'

"Judy's aesthetic was, Take us as we are," surmised the man Dunn had married in 1975, Peter Lackowski of Jericho. "It was a feminist attitude: We're real women. This is how we look. We're not here to be beautiful. We're here to dance."

Diagnosed with a brain tumor in 1977, she asked Sgorbati to take over some of her Bennington responsibilities and moved to Burlington for treatment. Judith Dunn died in 1983 at age 50.

The inevitable arc of existence is implicit in Cradle

for the 1943 session and said, "I have great expectations for you."

Although there would be numerous disappointments before she could fulfill his prediction, Underwood finally realized her dream of going to Manhattan. In 1947, she was hired for "Bloomer Girl," a Broadway musical choreographed by the legendary Agnes de Mille about women left behind when their men fought in the Civil War.

While teaching dance at a Vermont summer camp, Underwood met her future husband. They settled in Middlebury for 22 years and raised five kids. She organized the Vermont Dance Company, which toured schools.

In 1979, Underwood relocated to Burlington, where she was a freelance dance critic for the Burlington Free Press and began contributing articles to the prestigious Dance Magazine. Its editor, Wendy Perron, is a 1969 Bennington alum.

Underwood got a grant in 2000 to revive 27 lost Denishawn dances, a task made possible because she had kept careful notes while still at Jacob's Pillow. The pieces were performed there and at Burlington's Flynn Center, which had a history of supporting local dance largely thanks to then-executive director Andrea Rogers.

To mark how much Underwood has achieved despite her family's disapproval, this spring she'll self-publish a 500-page memoir, "No Daughter of Mine is Going to be a Dancer."

FROM MODERN TO POSTMODERN

Bv 1968. when Judith Dunn



Photo by Judith Dunn

The late Judith Dunn (right), who taught dance at Bennington College in the late 1960s and early '70s, with an unknown partner.



Photo by Erik Borg

Penny Cambell teaches dance at Middlebury College.



Photo courtesy of Susan Sgorbati

Susan Sgorbati teaches dance at Bennington College.

to Grave Arts, the non-profit Hannah Dennison began in 1991. The Chelsea choreographer's approach is sociological and anthropological for work that tends to be almost cinematic in scope. She has presented large groups dancing in immense abandoned factories or entire sections of a metropolis, instead of on a single stage.

A 1995 production, "The Mill Project," examined the industrial legacy of Winooski's defunct textile manufacturers. In 1999, for two segments of Dennison's "The Neighborhood Project," she even took over the so-called Sister Streets of the Queen City's South End and the shopping mall that had replaced most of Burlington's residential downtown in the name of urban renewal.

"That piece was about home when homelessness was on the rise," Dennison said of the latter site-specific event, which was done in partnership with the Burlington Community Land Trust. "I like putting art in out-of-the-ordinary spaces."

So much so that, in late June, she'll bring 30 dancers to the Breeding Barn at Shelburne Farms to participate in "Dear Pina." It's an homage to Pina Bausch, the German neo-expressionist choreographer who succumbed to lung cancer in 2009.

To benefit the Dennison effort, the Flynn Center will co-sponsor a Thursday screening at Williston's Majestic 10 of "Pina," an Oscar-nominated 3D documentary by Wim Wenders.

Dennison had traveled to Germany in 1983 specifically to see Bausch's ensemble. "I was emotionally drawn to her work and felt I also could make pieces that fell under the umbrella of dance theater," she said.

With a hint of poetic justice, non-dancers Peter Lackowski

came to Bennington to teach collaboratively with trumpet virtuoso and composer Bill Dixon, modern dance was evolving into postmodern dance. She had been with the Merce Cunningham troupe — which eschewed many of Martha Graham's notions — and co-founded the collective Judson Dance Theater in Greenwich Village, from 1962 through 1964.

Vermont's lackluster diversity began to improve with the arrival of Dixon, an African-American who rejected the word "jazz" in favor of "advanced black music" and remained as a Bennington professor for 26 years.

Dunn and Dixon apparently sparked enthusiasm. "Oh, baby! It was the new way," suggested Penny Campbell, a 1970 graduate. "When Judy danced with Bill playing, I could not believe what I was seeing. I thought, 'Are you allowed to do that?' They were both so brilliant, charismatic and politically engaged that they scared me, but it was like a moth to flame. I decided, 'This is it. This is liberation.'"

On the Middlebury College dance faculty since 1985, as a Bennington undergraduate Campbell witnessed a democratization in the Dunn-

Dixon period. "Martha Graham was like the diva queen," she said. "Even after her reign, students made dances and had to do them for the faculty, who would choose which ones could be performed and then 'fix' them. Judy pushed for everyone's work to be showcased."

The results were much more adventurous. "It was the sixties, for godsakes! And Bennington was the mecca for dance and music," mused Campbell, whose incoming students now are generally under the influence of digital technology and hip-hop.

At Middlebury, she corralled a range of musicians — former Bennington teacher Arthur Brooks on trumpet and Michael Chorney on sax — who collaborate with dancers much the way Dixon had with Dunn. To reflect the improvisational nature of the dance, Campbell said, "the idea is to create original music in the moment."

THE LAWS THAT GOVERN MOTION

Dunn recruited Steve Paxton, a dancer friend from both her Cunningham and Judson days, to Bennington from 1972 through

1976. He'd already been living in Vermont for a year and still calls the Northeast Kingdom home.

The village of East Charleston seems far from the epicenter of postmodern dance for the guy who developed Contact Improvisation, an edgy process that became a worldwide sensation. The Massachusetts-based Contact Quarterly describes it as a "spontaneous physical dialogue between dancers that ranges from stillness to highly energetic exchanges," exploring the laws that govern their motion: gravity, momentum and inertia.

Raised in bone-dry Arizona, Saxton wrote in a recent email that he perceived his new surroundings as Eden "when I saw the water of Vermont in lakes and streams, tasted it, swam in it."

A former gymnast and martial-arts aficionado, his initial Bennington methods flopped. "I tried to teach Aikido principles but within a year the students were rebelling. Many wanted to have conventional techniques, so I stopped and began to teach what became Contact Improvisation in a not-for-credit workshop."

Susan Sgorbati, a Pennsylvania resident, enrolled

at Bennington in 1969. She studied with Dunn and Paxton: "It was a very exciting time. I remember improvisation sessions lasting late into the night."

For Sgorbati, herself a dance educator at Bennington since 1983, the place has always been forward-thinking. "It was the first college with a dance major in the U.S. and the first to give dance an equal footing with literature and science," she noted. "From the start, the basic tenet was: We're not looking back. It was about the creation of new work, which is still our mission."

With that in mind, Sgorbati started to fashion her own innovation, Emergent Improvisation, about 20 years ago. Paxton introduced physics into the mix; she has been investigating neurological systems to understand forces that make order out of what could be chaos — but also with an eye on water.

After observing minnows swim in a lake near her house, Sgorbati wrote in a 2005 essay: "They create endless swirling patterns, sustaining a coherence that is striking, with no apparent guidance." In extrapolating the concept, she learned that

and his second wife, Sharyl Green, will appear in "Dear Pina," as "a tall, dignified couple."

Another member of the cast is Paul Besaw, in his sixth year at the University of Vermont as an associate professor and dance coordinator. At the moment, his program is in the Department of Music, which will be rechristened as the Department of Music and Dance come September.

Two weeks ago, UVM, Middlebury and Marlboro were among 10 regional schools — out of 45 hopefuls — selected as finalists in the American College Dance Festival. Consequently, in May, a piece devised in Besaw's choreography class will compete in Washington, DC: English major and December 2011 UVM grad Dan Yablonsky is slated to perform his seven-minute solo, titled "Non-Mechanical Tools of Human Advancement," at the Kennedy Center.

"I'm on Cloud Nine," acknowledged Besaw, who marvels at the state's wealth of talent as new generations savor its heritage. "The hills of Vermont are filled with significant dance artists."

Susan Green is a contributor to ARTSbvt.