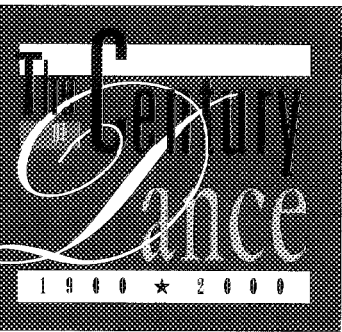


OBERLIN COLLEGE

Modern dance
took its first
steps at a
Midwest
college.



Pioneers in Ohio

BY STEPHANIE WOODARD

Dance first reached Oberlin College in Oberlin, Ohio, couched in a pioneering spirit. Today dance is aligned with the college's theater department, but movement study originally began under the auspices of physical education. When the college was founded in 1833, manual labor was the original source of exercise for most Americans; eventually, the populace would find more time for sports, dancing, and calisthenics. Over the course of the nineteenth century, Americans became increasingly aware of the positive effects of physical fitness. Sports and gymnastics readily became a part of the voluntary extracurricular programs that sprang up in schools and colleges, but dance had a checkered career. It was either praised as conjoining the physical and the metaphysical, or damned as downright immoral. Some schools banned it; others, like Oberlin, allowed it on an informal basis; still others, like West Point, Harvard, and Mount Holyoke, taught it, although sometimes disguised as "aesthetic calisthenics" or "fancy steps."

Oberlinians always believed in the importance of integrating physical and mental activities. With the appointment of Delphine Hanna to the faculty in 1885, this goal began to be achieved. Hanna, a medical doctor with dance training, had studied with teachers trained in the renowned Harvard College physical education program; and she set out to "make the body responsive to the mind and a more deli-

cate instrument of expression." In the late 1890s, she set up one of the first four-year degree programs in physical education, and later she became the first female professor of physical education in the United States. Her curriculum included anatomy, physiology, massage, medical corrective exercises, hygiene, elocution, aesthetic dancing, and fancy dancing, which was comprised of adaptations of ballroom dancing steps. The degree program was coeducational—daring for its time—however, in the early years, dance was reserved for women, many of whom embraced it as fulfilling the new feminist demands for expressive outlets.

At Oberlin in 1885 Hanna not only called dancing *dancing* but she also made it part of the curriculum. This unprecedented step precipitated a complaint from some of the faculty. The college president went to the gymnasium to inspect the goings-on. He declared that no harm was being done, and the dancing continued. Oberlin's history as an innovator may have eased this official acceptance of dance; the college had already been a pioneer educator of women and blacks and a supporter of social and political reform.

Hanna modeled aesthetic dancing on the work of François Delsarte, a Frenchman who, in the mid-nineteenth century, had codified the physical and psychological characteristics of gesture. Delsarte's system for creating natural expressive gesture became a widely popular movement form in the United States. Delsarte's approach fit in with



Delphine Hanna (left), the first female professor of physical education in the United States, made dance an accepted subject at Oberlin College; she is shown with some of her 1890s students in standard dance costume of the time.

Hanna's lifelong desire to use a scientific understanding of the human body to sustain intellectual and emotional life. As a feminist and dress-reform advocate, she approved the long, loose Grecian tunic used for Delsarte work.

In the early 1920's, aesthetic and fancy dancing at Oberlin gave way to the vigorous free flow of natural dancing. By now, the dancers had shortened their Delsarte tunics and gamboled outdoors with diaphanous scarves trailing behind them and garlands of flowers in their hair. By the mid-1930s, they appeared on stark stages wearing plain jersey dresses or leotards. They struck geometrical poses, cut through space with bold leaps and lunges, and called their work modern dance.

Class plans from the late 1920s show the influence of dance education innovator Margaret H'Doubler. Classes began with anatomically based curves, foldings, and rolls that then grew into more complicated movements. Students crossed the floor with variations on folk steps and natural forms of locomotion like walking, skipping, and sliding. They experimented with the relationship of movement to musical rhythms, and they did choreography problems. Although students performed regularly, their teachers were reluctant to emphasize the importance of performance for fear of causing dance to become merely entertainment. Following H'Doubler's lead, they saw dance as an enriching educational experience. (*Dance, A*

Creative Experience, H'Doubler's 1940 classic, has been reissued by the University of Wisconsin Press.)

In 1964, Betty Lind took over from Sally Houston, Oberlin's last main exemplar of the primarily educational dance tradition. In keeping with a growing national trend, Lind demanded recognition of dance as a performing art, and in 1970, she moved dance into the Oberlin theater program. Brenda Way, a former Oberlin student who replaced Lind in the early 1970s, turned the program's sights on the experimental dance world. She and other dance faculty and students formed the Oberlin Dance Collective, and in 1976 the Collective moved to San Francisco.

These days the dance program faculty at Oberlin College teaches modern dance, ballet, anatomy and alignment, choreography, performance, history, criticism, contact improvisation, and theater design. There is considerable emphasis on new dance in its many forms—students can now major in interdisciplinary performance—and the school has a long and impressive list of visitors who have given students more than an idea of what's going on beyond the college level. (Steve Paxton's 1972 residency, for instance, led to the development of contact improvisation). Oberlin has conveyed to them inspiration and insight and a commitment deeply rooted in the college experience. ■

Stephanie Woodard was assistant professor of dance at Oberlin College from 1979 to 1984.