

Spirit in Dance



Three contemporary expressions: Santee Smith, Ronald K. Brown, and Deborah Abel and Lee Perlman

by Kimerer L. LaMothe

n North America since colonial times, many Western scholars and practitioners of dance have regarded religion with suspicion and hostility. That's not surprising. From the 16th to the 20th centuries, Christian missionaries, supported by the empires of Britain, France and Spain, fought to eliminate indigenous dancing from what is now Canada and the United States, especially when that dancing occurred in contexts that appeared to the invaders as "religious."

Nevertheless, through fierce resistance, indigenous ritual dance has persisted. And early in the 20th century, North American modern dancers turned to previously demonized dance traditions from religions around the world and close to home, seeking inspiration in their quest to make significant, effective art for the stage.

New Jersey-born Ruth St. Denis, for example, spent hours in libraries across the United States researching the cultures of India, Egypt and the Middle and Far East in order to make solo works like *The Yogi*, *Incense* and *Radha*. She sought to become "an instrument of spiritual revelation" through dance, rendering visible and visceral an all-embracing love for the divine. Martha Graham found inspiration in the Pueblo Indian rituals of the American Southwest for art that would communicate participation in an "affirmation of life through movement."

Beginning in the 1930s, dancer/anthropologists Katherine Dunham and Pearl Primus, themselves African American, learned the techniques of African dance traditions to create powerful art pieces that reverberate with African rhythms and religious sensibilities.

Some of these artists also had occasion to take their work to countries whose practices had inspired them. In several cases, as with St. Denis on tour with Ted Shawn in India, their dancing served as a catalyst for those who were seeking to revive their own dances in the wake of colonial prohibitions.

These early modern dancers shared a common mission: to resist and reform the values of Christianity that had justified crusades against the dance traditions by which they were inspired. The ongoing hostility of Christian authorities toward dancing did not deter them; it motivated them. They sought to revalue dance by creating art that was, as Graham de-

scribed, "divinely significant." When the evangelist Dwight Moody told St. Denis that she would be damned for dancing onstage, she retorted that she knew she would not. She and her mother had prayed about it! All of her dances, St. Denis claimed, were "religious."

Toward the middle of the 20th century, subsequent generations of modern dancers rejected approaches to choreography that relied heavily on narrative and symbolic meaning. At a time when indigenous dance traditions had finally secured protection under U.S. law as "religion," the art-dance community was seeking pure movement, stripped of cultural and religious forms. Even so, the vision of "dance itself" that im-

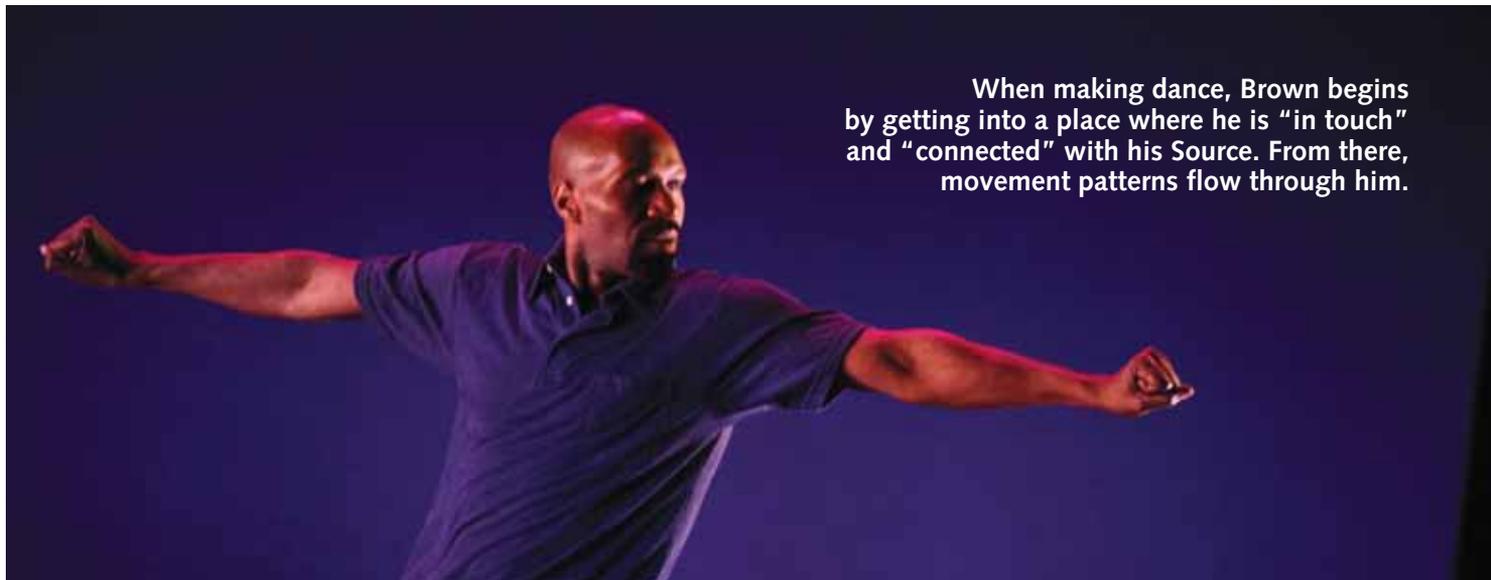
pelled many postmodern artists could hardly disguise its own spiritual impulses. Religion returns to dance and dance returns to religion, with a rhythm as old as humanity itself.

Today, once again, a varied collection of modern artists are drawing inspiration from religious traditions in which dance plays a central role. They are doing so not to document these phenomena as historical artifacts, but to participate in their ongoing life. Choreographers with native roots and artists with years of cross-cultural training are creating pieces that reveal the contemporary relevance of these lineages for matters of birth and death, love and the divine — pieces designed to catalyze experiences of wonder and insight. Scholars, too, are taking note, as seen in the creation of the *Journal for Dance, Movement, and Spiritualities*, founded in 2014, and the hefty 2014 anthology,

Dance, Somatics, and Spiritualities (Intellect).

Ronald K. Brown, who calls his 25-year-old company Evidence, not only intends his dances to provide evidence of something; he intends for his dances to count as evidence themselves — as proof of what he calls the "Great Mystery." As Brown described recently at a panel on his work, he is an "obedient boy." When making dance, Brown begins by getting into a place where he is "in touch" and "connected" with his Source. From there, movement patterns flow through him. His dancers watch him move, and recreate those patterns in themselves. Back and forth, Brown and his dancers tease forth the shape of a dance.





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The movement patterns that flow through Brown are those he learned from years of training in African-based spiritual traditions. As an African American raised in Brooklyn, he did not study African American dance; he studied modern dance. Yet he later travelled to Africa and the Caribbean, studying Yoruban, Cuban, Haitian and other African dance forms in which, he affirms, the intention is to open a relationship with the Great Mystery. It is what he intends his work to do as well — for those who dance and those who watch.

In September 2015, Brown’s company performed a site-specific piece called *Journey of the Great Mystery* as part of a two-year residency at Williams College in Williamstown, Massachusetts. On a blue-sky, sun-filled autumn day, more than 60 people gathered in the courtyard of Williams College Museum of Art; the dancers held hands in a circle and bowed their heads. Brown turned to the audience and taught sign language for the phrase: “I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.” The dancers then led us into the museum where the piece began, later moving inside a church and finally to a grassy outdoor space.

In each setting the sequence was similar. Brown’s dancers entered with pulsing, undulating movements from African sacred traditions. They clapped, stamped and gestured toward the earth, one another and the sky. The group sat down in a circle, as individuals from the community stepped forward into the ring to “tell” their stories of spiritual journey in movement.

In taking us from one site to another, the piece as a whole enacted a spiritual journey of dancing itself: the dance, birthed in a round womb of a museum gallery, then squeezed its members inside a church (where pews made it nearly impossible for the audience to see the dancers except from the waist up), before breaking free into the open air. There, the repeated movement patterns made sense as the work of a community gathering together in a circle to affirm and celebrate life. In this *Journey*, Brown’s fluid forms revealed themselves as evidence.

Santee Smith, of Haudenosaunee (also known as Iroquois) descent, creates modern dances with her Toronto-based company, Kaha:wi Dance Theatre, which pulse with narratives, spatial forms, symbols and movement patterns drawn from Haudenosaunee culture. Kaha:wi is Smith’s grandmother’s name and her daughter’s name, meaning “she carries.”

Smith’s training is varied, including Canada’s National Ballet School and several years participating in the aboriginal dance program at the Banff Centre. Smith explains that her motivations for sharing her culture through modern dance are rooted in her native tradition. She notes on her website, “As a Haudenosaunee person I believe that song and dance were gifts given to us by the Creator, to celebrate our lives on Mother Earth. It is what we do, it is what we know, since first we heard our mother’s heartbeat and her muffled voice, and moved along with the sway of her hips. Song and dance together are the ultimate expressions of who we are ... [They link] us to each other and to the Creator.” For Smith, dance is living. She intends to reveal the living dance of her tradition as an ongoing source of spiritual, female wisdom.

Smith’s breakthrough piece in 2004, *Kaha:wi*, does so. As described by scholar Jacqueline Shea Murphy, Smith tells a Haudenosaunee story of creation in which women feature prominently. The piece begins with Smith curled in a circle of light, slowly unfolding, reaching, squatting, stretching and coming to stand. The soundtrack features spoken prayers that begin a Haudenosaunee ritual. She is Life itself, giving birth to Herself.

Three men emerge and three women, as humans on earth. They do a shuffle-dance, arching, bending and spiraling in four directions. As Smith explained in an interview with Shea Murphy from 2007, even though some audience members might perceive the upper body patterns as modern dance, Haudenosaunee would recognize the steps of the shuffle as their own — as sounding out a connection to Mother Earth, source of life.

The dance then circles around one of the women as she attracts and enjoys a man. When her grandmother dies, she and her lover mourn, as an Ancestral Spirit moves around them. The woman gives birth to a daughter, who inherits the grandmother's name. Mother and daughter frolic in a joyful duet, touching, hugging, rolling apart and coming back to one another again.

The dance ends as the daughter, now a young woman, discovers the pleasure of her own bodily movement. Smith's work thus celebrates the vitality of her own tradition in its ongoing ability to affirm women's pleasure and power as central to Creation.

A third example of spirit in dance appears in the work of Deborah Abel and Lee Perlman, married directors of the Boston-based Deborah Abel Dance Company. In their latest piece, *Calling to You*, Abel and Perlman juxtapose scenes enacting a Hindu tale of lost love and spiritual seeking with scenes of a modern-day couple who are disconnected from one another, and yearning to reunite. Here, Abel and Perlman invoke the Indian aesthetic theme of *nayaka nayika bhava* — the idea that desire between man and woman may be an effective metaphor for the devotion of a human soul to the divine. The movements of this dance, while rooted in modern dance vernacular, evoke the sinuous aesthetic and clear lines of South Asian dance.

Perlman, who teaches philosophy at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, has studied Hindu meditation since 1976; Abel

earned a bachelor's in dance from Connecticut College and studied at England's Laban School of Dance since 1980. Their interest in spiritually potent dances is an expression of *bhakti* — a Sanskrit word referring to emotion, to a longing for the divine. They call what they do *bhakti modern dance*.

Devotion permeates every aspect of Abel and Perlman's collaborative partnership. When working on the music, Perlman reaches for something that fills him with the sense of beauty and desire he wants to convey. Abel finds movements inspired by the music, and suggests developments. Along the way, they each engage in practices of meditation to help them enter the spaces of receptivity they want their work to communicate.

Through this process, dance and music emerge together in a varied, multi-layered expression of Abel and Perlman's own devotion to one another, to their Hindu sources and to the transformative potency of art. When the audience arrives, what awaits them is an experience of exquisitely rendered shapes — sonic, visual and kinetic — that frequently move people to tears. Abel and Perlman are grateful for this response. Their highest aim is to awaken people from all walks of life to whatever love lies at the heart of their individual existence.

The work of these artists, as well as that of Brown and Smith, is not religion; it is art. Yet it aspires to catalyze experiences of the human relation to the Great Mystery, the divine and Life itself. In such work, dance appears as an activity that defines what "religion" is and should be — faithful to the earth in and around our moving bodily selves. *DI*



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