Introduction to the issue

The papers in this theme issue of Dance Research Journal originated as conference papers and keynote addresses for the conference Doris Humphrey: A Centennial Celebration, Celebrating the Past, Envisioning the Future, held in New York City from October 18 through 22, 1995. We hope this publication will preserve and further disseminate some of the ideas put forth at the conference and provoke further dialogue. For us as conference coordinators it provides an opportunity to reflect on the events.

The centenary of Humphrey’s birth—she was born October 17, 1895—was widely celebrated. Els Grelinger hosted a Humphrey conference and performance in London. The Summer 1995 issue of the Belgian journal Nouvelles de danse examined Humphrey’s legacy. The Doris Humphrey Society sponsored a summer technique workshop and held a memorial program and reception in her birthplace—Oak Park, Illinois. Mino Nicholas produced a concert series in New York. Northern Illinois University held a conference. Our New York events included summer technique and repertory classes and a new course integrating Humphrey’s work and ideas into K-12 teaching, in addition to the conference and several performance events.

We began plans for our Humphrey celebration in 1993, working together with Ilene Fox, Executive Director of the Dance Notation Bureau, Caroline Brackett, a Teachers College graduate student, a large advisory board and representatives from New York dance companies, libraries and schools. Michelle Mathesius, Chairperson of the Dance Department at Fiorello H. LaGuardia High School of Music and Art and the Performing Arts, hosted the workshops, lecture demonstrations and performance events. The keynotes, panels and reception were held at Teachers College, Columbia University.

In our call for papers, discussions with keynote speakers and panel planning, we emphasized four aspects of Humphrey’s work, life and legacy: her dance composition and movement technique, her teaching, her writing, and her role as a leader in the dance community. Humphrey’s teaching and community service, in particular, had not been fully explored in other venues. We hoped conference presentations and discussion would also get at the nature and problems of dance history as it is performed, celebrated and written. The following papers—a portion of those presented at the conference—suggest these concerns. The papers do not reflect other aspects of the celebration.

One of the most rewarding parts of conference planning was finding out new information about Humphrey and her influence. Among our correspondence were letters from Australian dancer, writer and educator, Coralie Hinkley, who studied with Humphrey as a Fulbright scholar from 1958 to 1960 and from Dr. Peter Wisher, a student of Humphrey’s at Connecticut College, who credits Humphrey as a major influence in his work with dance for the deaf and dance for male physical education majors and varsity athletes.

Performances, workshops, technique classes and lecture demonstrations were an important part of celebration activities. Some of these involved expanding our use of historical materials in educating performers, dance makers and viewers. For example, Elsa Posey and
Stephanie Clemens presented Posey’s young students in early Humphrey works and discussed their experiences working with children, and Alice Teirstein facilitated a workshop demonstrating her improvisation to composition work, based on The Art of Making Dances, with middle school students.

The conference concert series included a pre-conference studio performance by the Limón Dance Company, two performances of Humphrey, Weidman and Limón works performed by a variety of companies and an afternoon lecture-performance by Ernestine Stodelle and dancers. These performances were remarkable for the amount and variety of work shown, from Humphrey’s earliest dances to her later works for the Limón company, and for the variety of performers, including dancers from age twelve to seasoned performers from the Limón company and Repertory Dance Theatre. Among the offerings were new dances made from Humphrey’s compositional ideas, re-envisionings of well-known Humphrey works and completions of works with only partial documentation.

The importance of Labanotation to Humphrey’s legacy is not represented in this theme issue. The conference included a keynote presentation on Humphrey’s association with the Dance Notation Bureau and panels that included discussion with notators and reconstructors Muriel Topaz, Ray Cook and Lucy Venable. Papers and video showings by reconstructors of Humphrey choreography working in Australia and China and several workshops using Labanotation to explore aspects of Humphrey’s choreography were vital in realizing the potential of her legacy.

One of our goals during the conference was to create a level playing field on which Humphrey’s life and works could be re-viewed and discussed. We wanted to bring together people who are engaged with different aspects of Humphrey’s legacy: past and current per-

JuYong Kim in front of Charles Woodford's collection of Humphrey images, displayed at Teachers College.

Photo: Roy Mittelman

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Introducing authors at Humphrey reception and book-signing party, Barbara Hausler (for Nona Schurman), conference co-coordinator Loren Bucek, Ernestine Stodelle, Deborah Jowitt, Marcia B. Siegel, Selma Jeanne Cohen and Barbara Pollack.

formers, educators, scholars and dance notators and directors. While we wanted to respect people’s affiliations with and affections for Humphrey, we didn’t want to give preference to any particular kind of relationship, through family, dance family, scholarly or artistic product. We hoped this would allow people to work together cooperatively. More importantly, we hoped, by bringing together so many different people who “own” Humphrey’s legacy in various ways, that we could get at some of the more interesting issues in dance history, including the special slipperiness of authority and authorship in dance, and our need to mythologize about and iconize choreographers and dancers.

One of the impacts of this focus was that we celebrated not just Humphrey, but also those people whose writing, notating, teaching, directing and dancing are most often our means of knowing about Humphrey. This realization of the passage of time, coupled with our investigations of her life and work, created an uncomfortable distance from Humphrey. Our need to iconize Humphrey, to label her a great choreographer and a founder of modern dance instead of thinking deeply about her life and work, covers up that distance and loss. It’s a regrettable trade-off.

Realizing our distance from Humphrey also helps us know the difficulty and importance of preserving and using her works and ideas. We need her clarity, her thorough thinking about the basics of movement and dance composition as we move into the future.

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