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Dance and the New Deal

Samantha Schmeer

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Dance, like all art, acts as an important factor in social change. Dancers and choreographers have frequently sought to challenge the status quo, whether by removing women's corsets and incorporating natural movements into pieces as Isadora Duncan did, or by creating dances with political subject matter, like in Kurt Jooss's *The Green Table*. Despite the clear importance of the arts, securing funding has always been and continues to be an uphill battle. The period of the Great Depression in the 1930s saw huge growth in many artistic spheres through the implementation of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal. The art projects and programs of the New Deal acted as a harbinger of the National Endowment for the Arts and laid the foundation for dance to be recognized as its own genre separate from theatre. This paper will explore the history of dance and dance funding, beginning with and focusing on the Federal Theatre and Federal Dance Projects. It will go on to discuss the National Endowment for the Arts and engage with larger ideas about artistic funding.

Art is an important factor in social change, and dance is no exception. Dancers and choreographers have frequently sought to challenge the status quo, whether by removing women's corsets from wardrobes and incorporating natural movements into pieces as Isadora Duncan did, or by creating dances with explicit political subject matter, like in Kurt Jooss's *The Green Table*. Despite the clear importance of the arts in society, securing funding has always been and continues to be an uphill battle. During the Great Depression of the 1930s, the arts saw immense growth through the implementation of President Roosevelt's New Deal. The art projects and programs of the New Deal acted as a harbinger of the National Endowment for the Arts and laid the foundation for dance to be recognized as a genre separate from theatre (Dils, 2012). Though dance is a little-discussed facet of the New Deal, it is of incredible importance to the history of dance as a whole. The Federal Dance Project—a part of the New Deal—allowed for dance to distinguish itself as its own art form in the United States, provided a basis for future funding of dance, and demonstrated how influential dance as an art can be when even a small effort is made to fund it.

The New Deal clearly demonstrates the progress that can be made by giving adequate funding, power, and voice to the arts. When Roosevelt took office in 1933, he faced the hurdle of helping the country recover from the Depression. Thus, the New Deal was born (Dils, 2012). This series of programs and projects aimed to restore prosperity to Americans, and though it did not end the Great Depression, it restored confidence and spirit to many Americans, brought relief to millions, and provided a basis for more long-term structural reform. Among these projects were programs specifically aimed at supporting artists, as well as "promot[ing] American art and culture and to give more Americans access to…'an abundant life'" ("A New Deal for the Arts," n.d.). Many New Deal artists were politically active and were "united by a desire to use art to promote social change, these artists sympathized with the labor movement and exhibited an affinity for left-wing politics" ("A New Deal for the Arts," n.d.). This sparked controversy and ultimately played a role in the programs' destruction, as could be seen within the Federal Dance Project.

When the Federal Dance Project (FDP) was created in 1936, it acted as a "semi-autonomous unit" within the Federal Theatre Project. Dancers brought the Project to life after months of advocacy, most notably Heather Tamiris, who wanted a Works Progress Administration program specifically for unemployed dancers (Cooper, 1997, p. 28). At this time in the United States, dance had not completely distinguished itself as its own art form, and was instead almost always grouped with theatre. Under the FDP, dance units were set up in New York City, Chicago, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Tampa, and Portland, Oregon, and unemployed dancers "were hired under four categories: ballet, modern dance, vaudeville, and teaching" (Dils, 2012, p. 1). Don Oscar Becque was hired as the first director of the FDP. However, the FDP was fraught with tension from the time of its creation.

Low funding caused many struggles for the FDP. Becque claimed that "excessive political activity, the virtual impossibility of getting scenery, costumes and theatres for dance productions [prevented] any sort of professional standards being set up" ("Federal Dance Project," n.d.). Some audiences and political figures did find the organization unprofessional, partly due to the politics that took place within it. The Dancing Teacher's Business Association did not like the prevalence of progressive attitudes within the FDP, which is perhaps odd or hypocritical considering that the New Deal itself was rather progressive. The Association stated, "The association deplores the obvious lack of respect for taxpayers' money… [and the] masking of political and propagandistic drivel under the guise of 'unite against war and fascism'… [I]t is high time that dancing was removed from the hands of the long-haired boys and girls who represent the 'modern' movement…" ("Federal Dance Project," n.d.). Though the use of political commentary within FDP dances rubbed some people the wrong way, it was also seen as a strength by others, and artists within the FDP were unwilling to relent and soften their subject matter simply to assuage the discomfort of others. Helen Tamiris, for one, was not shy about her intent to highlight unemployment, racial inequality, war, and other social ills in her work: "The validity of modern dance is rooted in its ability to express modern problems and, further, to make modern audiences want to do something about them" (Tish, 1994, p. 331). Though modern dance did later enter a period of abstraction, Tamiris' idea continues to be at the core of modern dance today.

The FDP was created at the insistence of modern dancers, so it mostly served that community. Ballet was already an accepted form of fine art in Europe and in many parts of the United States, and theatre flourished during this time (Kraus, 1997). It had not yet gained the footing it would have in the twenty-first century, so it ruffled the feathers of many traditionalists. These negative attitudes were then even further aggravated by the political nature of modern dance choreography, as controversial themes were not nearly as common within traditional ballet (Krauss, 1997). Despite the backlash, modern dance made a name for itself through the FDP. Many of the famous trailblazers of modern dance were members of the FDP at one point. For example, Doris Humphrey, Charles Weidman, Heather Tamiris, and Roger Pyor Dodge all acted as choreographers (Dils, 2012). Many of these important figures also acted as the directors of individual units, such as Ruth Page and Bentley Stone who led the Chicago unit for a time. After Becque's departure, Lincoln Kerstein, who is now well-known as the co-founder of the New York City Ballet, took over. Tamiris followed after him (Dils, 2012). These figures are all well-known to any person studying dance, but their roles in the FDP, which helped them to gain notoriety, are scarcely discussed.

As the 1930s neared came to an end, many New Deal programs faced cuts. This was true for the FDP, which was absorbed back into the FTP in 1937. The Federal Theatre Project, and therefore FDP, was then terminated in 1939 when Congress blocked funding over fears of wasteful spending, racial integration, and communist agitation as the U.S. hurtled into World War II ("Federal Dance Project," n.d.). Despite the tensions and the fact that it was relatively short-lived, the FDP was successful. It produced many original works that depicted social injustices, some which received high praise, critical acclaim, and awards. Tamiris' work *How Long Brethren* depicted the privation of unemployed African Americans in the South, and it won her *Dance Magazine*'s annual award for excellence in 1937 (Tish, 1994). Additionally, the FDP provided hundreds of jobs, brought dance to many Americans who otherwise may not have experienced it, and solidified dance, especially modern dance, as a genre in and of itself (Lancos, 2018). Dance gained its own distinction separate from theatre, which undoubtedly allowed for dance to become the art form it is today. It also demonstrated what was possible when arts were funded, as this was "the first national program dedicated to the support of dance and dancers," and "never before or never since has the government so extensively sponsored the arts" ("A New Deal for the Arts," n.d.). This set the stage for later programs, such as the National Endowment for the Arts.

After the dissolution of the New Deal programs, dance did not receive consistent federal funding for a period of many years. Modern dance continued to grow and evolve through this period, but it was not until the Eisenhower presidency that the dance and arts community received funding at the national level (Kraus, 1997). Dance was gaining prominence as an art form that could demonstrate "American excellence" (Dils, 2012, p. 2). During the Eisenhower presidency from 1953 to 1961, the American Ballet Theatre, the New York City Ballet, Jose Limon Dance Company, Martha Graham Dance Company, and the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre were each sent overseas as a method of cultural diplomacy during the Cold War. Later, The FDPs most direct successor was born, the National Endowment for the Arts (Dils, 2012). Created in 1965 by Congress and President Lyndon B. Johnson, the NEA was part of a set of domestic programs launched by Johnson, often known as Johnson's Great Society. These programs also funded the National Endowment for the Humanities and Public Broadcasting. Under the NEA, dance is its own genre, a factor that can be largely attributed to the progress made within the FDP and FTP, despite the gap in time between the programs (Dils, 2012). Just as the WPA, and therefore FDP, faced backlash, largely from those with conservative political ideology, the NEA faces similar criticisms. There are, however, crucial differences between the NEA and WPA programs. The NEA's funding is not as extensive, as it does not provide wages for dancers in the way the WPA did (Dils, 2012). Today, dancers in large companies and commercial venues are often represented by unions that were created during the 1930s and motivated by New Deal policies.

The battle for funding the arts, despite what artists, citizens, and researchers know that funding accomplishes continues to be an uphill battle. Primary and secondary schools do not prioritize arts nearly to the level that would be possible given more funding. Art programs within higher education institutions often face cutbacks when budgets are reduced. Many of these programs rely heavily on donors to support them (Flannery, 2019). Outside of education, the NEA is a particularly vital resource for institutions in smaller, underrepresented communities that don't necessarily attract the attention of wealthy philanthropists. Sadly, some people see the agency, and its counterpart the National Endowment of the Humanities, as examples of frivolous government spending on programming that serves only a small fraction of the population. This opinion is not a new one. It was seen even when these programs were in their infancies during the New Deal. However, an examination of the history of funding for dance clarifies how important this funding is. When the arts are funded, creativity flourishes, people become more well-rounded, and all citizens—even those not involved directly in politics—can take part in and understand political discourse. Upon signing the NEA, President Johnson said, "Art is a nation's most precious heritage. For it is in our works of art that we reveal to ourselves and to others the inner vision which guides us as a nation. And where there is no vision, the people perish" (Lependorf, 2017, para. 2).

Though not often discussed, the Federal Dance Project was essential to creating the art form as we see it today. The FDP allowed for dance to continue to change and evolve, something that may not have been possible otherwise, or at least may have taken considerably longer. Modern dance may have originated in Europe, but the United States quickly became the focal point for dance experimentation with new movement styles, and it is hard to imagine what dance would look like today without the New Deal.

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