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# Lester Horton: A Revolutionary

Emma Holtzman

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*sponsored by* Jonette Lancos, MFA

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## ABSTRACT

This essay details the influence of Lester Horton, a prominent dancer and choreographer of the 1950s, on the cultural influence in modern dance. Horton was influenced by the work of the Denishawn School of Dancing and Related Arts, whose traditions stressed an inherent drama and movement inspired by Native American form. Horton is notable for founding the first racially integrated dance companies in the United States, the Horton Dance Theater, and his use of stories like Oscar Wilde's *Salome* and parables from the bible to make his coreography narratively focused as opposed to focusing on dance alone.

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The decade of the 1950s saw the advent of many new black concert dance companies, including those directed by Lester Horton, a dancer and choreographer credited with launching the modern dance movement in Los Angeles. With his choreography, Horton established the country's first integrated dance company (Kraus et al., 1969, p. 250). In his short career, he developed a dance training technique that continues to be relevant in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Horton's interest in movement was inspired by a performance he saw of the dancing company Denishawn School of Dancing and Related Arts. The inherent drama in the choreography caught his eye and inspired him to create a unique style of movement. Denishawn's take on cultural dance forms, specifically the Native American form, maintained the traditional style while dancers had a ballet and modern technique driving the movement. This then motivated Horton to study ballet, modern dance, and choreography.

Horton became one of the most innovative artists of his time, creating "one of the first racially integrated dance companies in the United States" (Lapointe-Crump, 2006, p. 64). Horton combined theatre and dance with the use of elaborate costumes, expressive arm and body gestures, and the use of props, developing the new genre known as the choreodrama. This new form of dance allowed the flow of the choreography and theatrical drama to unite (Lapointe-Crump, 2006, p. 65). Most notably, Horton's dance company—Horton Dance Theatre—performed Oscar Wilde's play *Salome* as a choreodrama. Horton's dances were not only unique in that they included a theatrical aspect, but they also encouraged conversation around the themes of the dances. This includes gender roles, inequalities, racism, culture, and political engagements of the 1930s. One of his most influential works, 1948's *The Beloved*, captures the life of a husband and wife in which the husband kills his wife with a Bible as he accuses her of infidelity (Lancos,

2019). This work was among the most powerful pieces he created; soon after, he established the West Hollywood Dance Theatre (Lapointe-Crump, 2006, p. 65). Lester Horton and his technique still impact the modern world today because of his use of social activism and storytelling through his dances such as *The Beloved*.

Horton's goal was to "develop strong, fearless and richly emotive dancers who were unafraid of their sensuality" (Lapointe-Crump, 2006, p. 66). He was so impressed by dancers' innate storytelling abilities that he felt it was vital for the development of *The Beloved*. This dance was later performed by the Dance Theatre of Harlem, which was founded and directed by Arthur Mitchell, thus expanding the profile of this highly acclaimed dance. This dance was performed by one male and one female dancer, set in Puritan New England, as it portrays themes of bigotry, intolerance, jealousy, and rage (Lancos, 2019). Archival film shows the dance performed on stage, with a set consisting of a table and two chairs. A Bible is also used a prop that the male figure uses to beat his wife with. This dance shows several new themes that audiences had never seen on stage before in a type of theatrical dance (Horton, chor. 1948).

*The Beloved* begins with a husband and wife sitting still in their chairs on opposite sides of the table. The quick, intricate choreography adds to the onstage energy the dancers present with their body language and facial expressions. From the beginning of the piece, the dancers' movements tell the story. The female dancer uses her partner as a crutch as she develops her legs, shifting her weight placement each time. Her energy and body language show the audience that she is begging her partner for mercy. The male dancer is very stiff and serious in all of his movements. He almost shows no soft emotions at all, which is very intriguing to watch. The two dancers go back to the table and the male dancer stretches his hand out to his partner. This part of the dance is tense, but it also shows the hard and soft dynamic of their movements. Both dancers have similar attacks and intentions in this piece that cannot be taught, reflecting Horton's desire for his dancers to portray characters with their entire body and mind. This is one quality of the combination of the way his dancers tell the story he envisioned. One of the main reasons Horton created this piece is to show the domestic violence that mostly occurs away from the public eye, especially in the home, and it can even be within the highest socioeconomic class. Horton not only had strong technical dancers, but he showed important themes and raw human emotion through his choreographies.

Horton's dance techniques were based on Native American dances, anatomical studies, and other movement influences. In addition to creating his technique and choreographing several works, Horton established the Lester Horton Dance Theater, one of the first permanent theaters dedicated to modern dance in the U.S., in Los Angeles in 1946. He was also among the first choreographers in the U.S. to insist on racial integration in his company. Horton's art was much more important to him than the race of his dancers. Now, his legacy is perhaps most visible today in Alvin Ailey's work, where the Horton technique is the foundation for masterpieces, including *Revelations* and *Cry*.

*Cry* was created to first portray African American women's struggle throughout the slave trade. However, as the dance goes on, we see the woman's strength for enduring all that she has. In the end, *Cry* intends to show how women, who have been enslaved and treated like property, can still manage to be free. In the first section of the dance, we see the expressive emotion shown in the dancer's use of contractions, arched movements, and curves to express her pain. Soon after, the dancer throws a fabric cloth to either side, where she stretched over to the opposite horizontal showing a curve in her torso. Throughout *Cry*, we see many contractions mainly all linking to the stomach. Angular and parallel movements can be seen where the dancer balances on one leg and lifts her other leg into a right angle. This movement is common in many of Ailey's other dances, including parts of *Revelations*. In fact, all three of these movement styles can relate to Martha Graham's modern techniques. Lester Horton built his technique from modern styles and created his own distinctive style from there. When Lester Horton established his dance studio in Los Angeles, California, he became a major part in Alvin Ailey's life.

Alvin Ailey met Lester Horton in 1947 at his studio in Hollywood, which began their teacher-student relationship and the birth of the preservation of one of the greatest modern techniques in the United States (LaPointe-Crump, 2006, p. 66). Horton was Ailey's mentor, teacher, and friend. Ailey was drawn to the fact that Horton ran the first multi-racial dance school in the United States, in which one could study classical ballet, jazz, and Native American styles of dance (Lancos, 2019). In continuing Horton's technique, Ailey was determined to maintain a similar interracial dance company for America. Ailey "insisted on celebrating the human spirit...artist and humanist rolled into one" (Kraus, 1969, p. 211). Horton's role in producing "African style movement" within his choreography was something new for audiences to see. The movement was "...blatant and bold, startling with bursts of ethnic energy" (LaPointe-Crump, 2006, p. 66).

Horton's technique allowed a dancer's body movement to do the talking. His inclusion of other styles of dance, such as Native American and Indian Tribal, contributed to his holistic and multiracial approach in dance (Lancos, 2019). Overall, Horton truly paved the way for future modern dance innovators, especially Alvin Ailey and Garth Fagan. Not only did Horton produce this great technique that can be used to train dancers all over the world, but he showed that dance can be available to all backgrounds of people and cultures.

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