The Art of Making Children’s Dances:  
A Look Into Doris Humphrey’s Early Choreography and Its Impact on Her Technique  

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Doris Humphrey (1895-1958) was an innovative American choreographer who contributed influential theories of movement to the development of modern dance. In 1917, she started her professional training and career alongside other American modern dance legends such as Martha Graham and Charles Weidman under the direction of Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn, founders of the famous Denishawn School and Company. After leaving the Denishawn company in 1928, she and Weidman founded their own company in New York City. During this time, arguably the height of her artistic output, Humphrey established a technique based on the concepts of “fall and recovery” and a theory of choreography. The Humphrey-Weidman Company disbanded in 1947, and Humphrey was named Artistic Director of the Limón Dance Company. She passed away in 1958 after a battle with cancer.

In 1995, a group of graduate students from Teachers College, Columbia University asked Elsa Posey to reconstruct four Humphrey dances as part of a celebration for the centennial of her birth.1 During the summer of 1953, Posey—currently a dance educator in Northport, New York— took one of Humphrey’s courses at the 92nd Street Y in order to learn about Humphrey’s theories of choreography and teaching. The four dances Posey reconstructed are less well known compared to other works of Humphrey’s repertory, but vastly important to Humphrey’s career as an educator and technician. These were Humphrey’s Four Dances for Children2—dances created for elementary-aged to adolescent children. Titled Will o’ the Wisp, Daffodils, Moment Musical, and Greek Sacrificial Dance, these dances highlight interesting and appropriate movement for young dancers.

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1 From the 1930s through the 1950s, Humphrey taught classes at both Teachers College and the 92nd Street Y.  
2 In this paper, I will be referencing Will o’ the Wisp, Daffodils, Greek Sacrificial Dance, and Moment Musical as the Four Dances for Children. Although these four dances are four distinct works, throughout this paper I will refer to them collectively as “Four Dances for Children.”
The dances are simple and repetitive. This is not to say that they are boring. Humphrey smartly composed variations of simple movements that children can execute with confidence. Because of her teaching ability, she was able to identify what her movement needed to consist of in order for a child to perform it well. Then, as a choreographer, she modified formations and floor patterns in order for the dance to be aesthetically pleasing for an audience. The use of complex patterning is a tool that choreographers often use in pieces made for less experienced dancers. The movement itself is not difficult, but it gives the dance the illusion of being more intricate.

However, at the time of the creation of these four dances, this patterning tool might not have been so common. The descriptions of the dances are published in Mary Wood Hinman’s book, *Gymnastic and Folk Dancing*—five volumes of dances for children that Hinman had collected. The first volume was first published in 1914, the same year that the four dances were created by Humphrey while she was still a student at Hinman’s school.³ The Four Dances for Children were some of the first works that she choreographed. What is even more astounding is that Humphrey created these dances before the existence of the Denishawn School and before her formal training by St. Denis and Shawn.

The Four Dances for Children are important because they give us insight into the brilliant choreographic mind of Doris Humphrey. She choreographed these pieces while she was still a student herself—around nineteen years old. Watching the dances, the sophistication of the structure is clear. The dances have a beginning, a middle, and an end. There are themes threaded into the variations of the movement. There is a sense of balance in both the floor patterns and in the movement. It is amazing to realize that all of these advanced choreographic

concepts are included in pieces choreographed by—at the time—a young, amateur choreographer.

After reconstructing Humphrey’s Four Dances for Children, Posey had students learn and perform them for their value for children. As a member of the Children’s Dance Company at Posey School of Dance between 2001 and 2010, I had the privilege of performing them myself. Using my own experience dancing them, the first-hand account of Posey’s experiences with Humphrey, and other sources, I intend to analyze and elucidate the dances’ importance to the development of Humphrey’s technique and distinct choreographic voice. The Four Dances for Children demonstrate Humphrey’s innate ability as a choreographer. She used advanced concepts at a young age with ease. This is an amazing feat and causes us to look at the four dances more critically. By closely analyzing the Four Dances for Children, I intend to connect the choreography and patterns to the fundamental aspects of Humphrey’s later work and technique. Early forms of fall and recovery can be seen in the four pieces. This can be interpreted as the beginning of her exploration of the rules of movement and the aesthetic she was looking for in dance. Coming at a time before Denishawn, the dances provide insight into Humphrey’s own opinions and experiments with movement—without the influence of what she viewed at a time as a higher authority. They were her own creation and examples of her own thoughts that she wished to develop. Doris Humphrey’s Four Dances for Children demonstrate choreographic theories that she used to later develop her technique.

Raised in the Chicago suburb of Oak Park, Illinois, Humphrey began training in dance at a young age. Her mother worked hard to afford private lessons with the great ballet teachers that would travel through Chicago. As she entered her pre-teenage years, Humphrey began training with renowned dance educator Mary Wood Hinman. It was under Hinman’s guidance that
Humphrey first performed on a stage and choreographed her own works. Humphrey remembers Hinman as “‘a wonderful teacher,’” and someone who “‘had an individual interest in her students.’” The two remained close friends through Humphrey’s professional career, and Hinman was largely responsible for Humphrey’s advanced training as a child.

Hinman was a unique dance educator. She modeled her teaching methods after those of the philosopher and educator John Dewey, working with “ideas about direct experience [and] problem solving.” She opened the Hinman School of Gymnastic and Folk Dancing in 1904 in Chicago with a well-rounded curriculum that not only taught her students dance but also the teaching and analysis of dance. Selma Landen Odom quotes Hinman’s explanation of her curriculum:

[My students] do actual assisting every day at all the big classes, read books and write papers on how this work applies to the education of the child, also learning where each dance comes from, its history, what influences the different countries in their social life, etc., and each carries a class of her own in some settlement. They are trained to be good teachers, good organizers … but they are not trained to be solo dancers and fancy dancers.

It is clear how Hinman influences Humphrey. Humphrey became an organized technician whose technique is largely based in education of the body. She too was influenced by the progressive teachings of John Dewey. Humphrey studied under a woman who “represented the most

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7 Ibid.
enlightened approach to dance education, a pioneering spirit who never ceased searching for new materials and modes of teaching.”

At a time when the analytical and scholarly aspects of dance education was often neglected, Hinman paved the way for Humphrey’s career, nurturing her intellect, always encouraging her choreographic endeavors, and making sure that she had all of the right opportunities. The inclusion of the Four Dances for Children in Gymnastic and Folk Dancing demonstrates Hinman’s faith in Humphrey’s abilities, and it was Hinman who suggested to Humphrey that she should attend the Denishawn School in Los Angeles.

The summer of 1917 was a life-changing one for the young Humphrey. During these months at Denishawn, she received a private lesson from Ruth St. Denis herself. Humphrey recalls St. Denis asking her what she does. She responded that she is a teacher. St. Denis comes back, “You shouldn’t be teaching, you should be dancing.”

Sure enough, soon after Humphrey would tour with St. Denis on the vaudeville circuit, and later she would perform with the Denishawn Company.

Teaching, however, was something from which Humphrey could never escape. After high school and before her days dancing for Denishawn, Humphrey taught dance classes at a studio that her mother opened. Later, she would go on to teach for Denishawn—even for a time after her scandalous break from St. Denis and Shawn. Teaching was something that Humphrey often felt conflicted with her want and need to choreograph. She did not want to focus on teaching in her career, but she could not escape it. But it can be argued that teaching was something that was integral to her development as a choreographer and to the development of her technique. Humphrey passed on to her students an academic approach to dance and

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choreography. Her advanced mind organized the choreographic structures found in her technique. But Humphrey’s students also gave back. The students provided Humphrey with an opportunity to consistently observe movement in a growing body, allowing her to develop a structurally sound and safe technique.

By the 1950s, Humphrey had choreographed a multitude of dances and taught classes at both Teachers College and the 92nd Street Y. Humphrey was widely a highly respected teacher in addition to being a highly respected choreographer. Both teaching and choreography had been a part of her dance experience early on in her training, and this shows in the foundation of her technique. Her movement reflects a creative choreographic mind—a type of instinct that was not necessarily taught but developed within her at a young age. The movement is clear and precise, and is learned through structured exercises in class.

At the 92nd Street Y in 1953, Elsa Posey introduced herself to Humphrey. Posey at the time was a fifteen-year-old student training at the School of American Ballet and American Ballet Theater under the great ballet masters of the time, and decided to open her own school of dance in Northport, New York that summer. Posey sought Humphrey out in order to learn not only about modern dance, but to learn about a child’s dance education. She remembers:

> When I started teaching I knew enough not to give the kids what I was being taught at the ballet school. I knew that would never work. So I had them running and skipping and hopping and jumping and throwing scarves around. I didn’t know it was called modern dance! I didn’t know it was called creative dance! … That’s why I went to the Y: to learn about the creative dance.\(^{14}\)

Posey went to Humphrey in order to learn about physically safe techniques that could be taught to young children. For Posey, this was a tricky area to navigate. This was not the way she was taught, and as a young student herself, she felt like she might have been doing something wrong.

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\(^{13}\) Elsa Posey (dance educator) in discussion with Gina Marie Borden, August 2013.

\(^{14}\) Ibid.
But Humphrey gave her the confidence to continue with her work. Posey states, “She told me that I was allowed to teach … she actually gave me permission to teach, so it just made my mind a lot easier. I wasn’t cheating, I wasn’t doing something against the rules.”

As Hinman influenced Humphrey, Humphrey’s influence stays with Posey to this day, throughout her career as a teacher. This is particularly evident in the idea of safe teaching for children. Ms. Posey always stressed to my peers and me the importance of paying attention to our bodies. We were taught to work in a smart way for our bone structures and shapes, and she would always make sure that we had gained the strength and proper technique necessary before doing any sort of advanced work. Posey cites Humphrey as a source for her ideas of safe teaching for children:

[Humphrey] was very influential in teaching safely. And considering what Graham was doing at the time, Doris was studying movement from every day. Fall and recovery came from that … but it was based on the human movement so they didn’t get hurt doing it … I would never work with kids in a Graham way. I think it’s fine for professional dancers to take class everyday, but I don’t think it’s good for children.

Posey contextualizes the nature of Humphrey’s technique by comparing it to that of Humphrey’s contemporary, Martha Graham. Humphrey was more in tune to what a developing body needed, possibly because she was once a child dancer herself. Graham did not start dancing until her late teenage years. Humphrey had the privilege of beginning dance at a young age, studying American folk dance—arguably a precursor to American modern dance—in addition to ballet under a teacher who was constantly looking to improve her teaching style. In teaching her students, Hinman “took into account age, sex, motor and social skills, [and] time available.”

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15 Ibid.
16 Ibid.
One of her letters is even published in Dr. Luther Halsey Gulick’s book, *The Healthful Art of Dancing.* Humphrey herself experienced a safe childhood dance education and wanted to expand upon these theories. Graham, starting dance at a relatively old age, never had to study dance technique as her body was developing and changing. She jumped into a pre-professional program at the start of her career, never having the benefit of a childhood dance education; her body did not need it. Therefore, she did not see the need to think about developmentally sound body structures in the formation of her technique.

Humphrey, however, takes sound structure and so much more into account. In her book, *The Art of Making Dances,* she divides her technique and tools to build a dance into various categories: design, dynamics, rhythm, motivation and gesture, words, music, sets and props, and form. With these categories in mind, I am able to critically analyze the Four Dances for Children to see whether or not they relate to her later ideas. In order to relate these categories in a unifying theme, and in order to apply them to the early choreography, I will speak about the dances in terms of balance and simplicity—two aspects that I believe demonstrate the advanced nature of the dances, and that are also found in Humphrey’s later work.

I speak about balance in multiple ways: the balance in formations and floor patterns, including repetition and mirroring; the balance of the sequence of movement, such as the repetition of specific steps and movements; and the balance of individual shapes in the choreography. By looking at the balance of the choreography as a whole, one can clearly see the sophistication of the choreography. By looking at the balance of the body, one can clearly see the sophistication of the technique. The simplicity that I speak of has to do with the physicality of the movement. Humphrey works with the body’s mechanics so that her movement is

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18 Ibid.
executed in a natural way—the body does not become overworked or strained. It is physically safe while not being uninteresting creatively. Humphrey knows how to take risks with her movement without putting the dancer in harm’s way, reflecting her natural teaching mentality and demonstrating her technique’s importance in children’s dance education.

In order for the argument to be clear, there must be a visualization of the early choreography. The following is an in-depth description of Humphrey’s Four Dances for Children in the order that they appear in Mary Wood Hinman’s Gymnastic and Folk Dancing: Will o’ the Wisp, Daffodils, Greek Sacrificial Dance, and Moment Musical. I will go through each of the dances and describe them chronologically in order to give a clear picture of the development of the choreography. The descriptions and source credits are primarily taken from Hinman’s book. As I describe the movement, I point out similar patterns of movement among each of them. While each dance is unique and serves different purposes, there are unmistakable patterns in the choreography, and even more astoundingly, there are patterns that are found in her later choreography, including her masterwork, Day on Earth.

**Will o’ the Wisp**

The first of Humphrey’s dances transcribed in Mary Wood Hinman’s book is called Will o’ the Wisp. Set to music composed by Adolf Jensen, the choreography is for eight sixth grade-aged girls. This dance stands out from the other three dances for children because it calls for diagonals and curves, and not only for horizontal or vertical lines and circular formations.

This dance does, however, have its similarities to the other three dances. There is a strong repetitive pattern to the choreography. For example, once the eight girls arrive on stage

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20 It is Posey’s opinion that the editor of Gymnastic and Folk Dancing took liberties with the qualifications of each dance. According to her, there is no reason that boys cannot dance these pieces.
and join hands to form a circle, they first travel in a running step around the circle in a clockwise direction for eight counts. Second, they travel in the same running step in a counterclockwise direction for eight counts.\footnote{Mary Wood Hinman, \textit{Gymnastic and Folk Dancing}, Vol. 3. 5 vols. (New York: A.S. Barnes, 1916), 65.} Humphrey uses repetition in a very upfront way in each of these dances. The dances seem clean and well put together, and this is largely due to the fact that the repetition manifests itself in both the movement and the floor pattern as the dance continues.

After this opening section the diagonals begin to come into play. The eight girls split into groups of four as they had entered. At this moment, the stage left leader runs to the downstage right corner on the diagonal, and then the stage right leader runs to the downstage left corner. Girls numbered two, three, and four follow in this pattern, creating a diagonal movement that brings the dance from upstage to downstage. The structure of the dance is evolving. The entrance and introduction of the piece finishes, and the dancers are brought forward to the downstage section to continue the body of the work.

At this moment an interesting thing happens. As the two leaders interact for four counts, the other six dancers are stationary. Humphrey has them deliberately posed, as if one is whispering a secret to the others. The pantomime gives the choreography a purpose, and allows the people in the audience to form a story in their heads and question the intent: what is this dance about? Moreover, the pantomime and gesture give the children a chance to perform. They are not simply executing the steps; they are learning to discover the intent in a performance. The children discover that it is not just about jumping, skipping, and running around the stage. What makes movement interesting is the reasoning behind it—\textit{why} you are jumping, skipping, and running around the stage. The intent can be fulfilled by a physical goal of movement, or it can be fulfilled by a narrative. Humphrey allows her students to express themselves through dance and story at a very young age.
The story line becomes clear as the dance moves forward. The children are playing. They play games in the movement—swinging around each other, running through each other, and kneeling and jumping over each other’s joined hands. (Fig. 1) The idea of having the children play in the choreography is a simple but clever concept for two reasons. First, it allows for basic movement that children can execute well. Second, the children have a natural enjoyment in play, so they are able to express themselves in a full way and learn how to put expression into their dancing. This later develops into an active intention of the dancer.

*Will o’ the Wisp* concludes with the eight girls joining hands and weaving back and forth upstage in a skipping step. This skipping step is of particular importance, because it is seen in various forms in three of the four dances for children, and even in some later Humphrey choreography as will be discussed. Here, the step manifests itself as a simple running and hopping. The children run with the right foot, left, right, and then hop with their left legs in a parallel passé. The step is then repeated on the left side.

![Image of children dancing](image.jpg)

*Fig. 1:* Spring 2005 Posey School Children’s Dance Company reconstruction of Will o’ the Wisp. The girls play in the dance as they jump over one another’s arms. Photo © Rhonda R. Dorsett 2005.
Daffodils

The second dance in Hinman’s book is *Daffodils*—a group dance that takes place in a flower garden. With music by Ernest Gillet, the choreography is meant for girls in the third through sixth grade. Humphrey does not specify the number of children needed, only that it must be an even number. This dance encompasses two strong corps parts—labeled “ones” and “twos”—and involves the dancers partnering each other. The children can learn to trust and rely on a partner to accomplish a common goal. *Daffodils* takes place in a garden where, as Humphrey explains, the children “all are flowers with arms for leaves.” The dance begins on the stage with the “ones” in an outer circle and the “twos” in a smaller inner circle. The “ones” “on the outside are visiting their playmates.” Interestingly enough, when reconstructing the piece Posey called the “twos” the flowers and the “ones” the gardeners who tend them.

*Daffodils* uses repetition much like *Will o’ the Wisp*. The “ones” run up to their corresponding “twos” and nod to them in greeting to the right. Then they repeat it to the left. The “ones” take three steps to the left and pause, three steps to the right and pause, and then spiral downward as the “twos” spiral upwards to switch places. A similar sequence occurs, this time with the “twos” on the outside.

The balance in the opening sequence is clear and symmetrical. If the dancers move right, then they move left. As one group moves down to the ground, the other group rises up. These are simple patterns, but fundamental to well-rounded choreography. As a young choreographer, Humphrey already understood this. The opposition of down and up can be easily related to her

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22 Posey’s 1995 reconstruction cast fourteen girls in the piece.
24 Ibid.
25 This is a significant difference in the story of the dance because the gardeners have a sense of responsibility over the flowers. The gardeners care for the flowers, and this sense of superiority and motherliness gives a different feeling from a dance with roles that are all equal in authority. Generally, Posey gave the “one” roles to slightly older girls.
idea of fall and recovery. A crucial clue to this early form of fall and recovery comes from the spiral motion of the transfer of levels. As evidenced by a series of Humphrey warm-up exercises explained by former Humphrey dancer Ernestine Stodelle, the spiral is often used to create that pure but controlled fall to the ground. Likewise, a Humphrey dancer would use the spiral along with the strength of her abdomen to get back up on two feet.\textsuperscript{26} After choreographing the dances for children, there is no doubt that Humphrey experimented with the mechanics of the spiral and its relation to a gravitational pull for the next couple of decades as she formed her theories behind fall and recovery.

The partnering section that comes some moments after the opening is very intriguing as well. “Ones” stand behind the “twos,” gripping their hands, and leading them.\textsuperscript{27} (Fig. 2) The partners prepare by executing a tendu to the right. The tendus then switch left, right, left. The sequence repeats. Though simple, the movements force the young dancers to connect with each other in order for the partners to be in sync.

The important skipping step can be seen in Daffodils as well. It is, however, varied. Instead of three steps and a hop in passé, the choreography becomes more refined. The dancers chassé leading with the right side, and then hop with the left leg in a parallel passé. Again, this is repeated to the left. The slight change in the movement suggests that Humphrey was experimenting with variation in her own movement at the time that she choreographed these dances. It also suggests that Humphrey was particularly intrigued by this simple step, and it is likely that she wanted to experiment with it for an extended period of time in order to discover its full potential.


\textsuperscript{27} Posey would say that the gardeners are leading their flowers to grow.
Daffodils ends in beautiful symmetry in that the choreography reverses. The dancers run holding hands in a circle in a counterclockwise direction. They twirl out and then spiral to retake their beginning places—the “ones” on the outside of the circle, and the “twos” on the inside. This parallel ending gives great satisfaction to the observer. The dance as a whole is balanced, and it concludes in a gratifying manner. The satisfaction that Humphrey gives to her audience is an instance of an experienced choreographer—and a sign of her preoccupation with balance and symmetry. It is highly impressive that she realized advanced choreographic techniques at such a young age. This innate knowledge of choreographic technique sets her up for a brilliant career as a choreographer.

**Fig. 2:** Spring 2005 Posey School Children’s Dance Company reconstruction of Daffodils. The girls partner one another—“ones” in the front and “twos” in the back of each pair. Photo © Rhonda R. Dorsett 2005.

**Greek Sacrificial Dance**

Greek Sacrificial Dance is the most advanced of the Four Dances for Children in terms of theme and artistry. The dance is meant for nineteen high school-aged girls or young women.
Three dancers are featured in the roles of the high priestesses, and there is a corps ensemble made up of sixteen dancers—a Greek chorus. The piece is danced to music by Camille Saint-Saens. This dance is aesthetically different from the other three—more mature, and less playful. Additionally, it is the only dance out of the four that does not make use of a skipping step variation.

O O O
3 2 1

*Fig. 3:* Greek Sacrificial Dance opening formation sketch by Doris Humphrey. Each O represents a dancer. They are labeled with numbers for notation purposes. Published in Hinman, Mary Wood. *Gymnastic and Folk Dancing.* Vol. 3. 5 vols. New York: A.S. Barnes, 1916.

Humphrey arranged the three priestesses in a row, assigning each a number between 1 and 3. (Fig. 3) They come forward towards the audience in a simple walking and running step—three slow walks, three quick runs on relevé. Like the other dances, Humphrey makes great use of repetition. This stepping pattern is seen throughout the dance. But here, the repetition creates a different power. The simplicity yet precision of the movement gives it a weighted and serious emphasis. You can tell this dance is meant for older, more mature young women, not for little girls.

The gestures in this piece are clear and literal, but artistic as well. The priestesses stand together and raise their arms over their heads. With the insides of the wrists touching and the palms cupped, the hands become bowls that are being raised to the gods as offerings. The

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28 “Priestess” is a word Posey used. Humphrey simply describes them as the three central girls.
expressions on the girls’ faces are solemn and determined. With one gesture, Humphrey establishes both character and story in her choreography.

At this point, the chorus enters the stage—eight girls from stage right, and eight girls from stage left. They travel in the same walking step as the priestesses, and surround them forming a circle. The walking step is continued as the chorus circles to the left. The priestesses eventually join. The remainder of the dance is made up of variations in floor pattern of the walking step and the sacrificial gesture, along with some classic poses from Ancient Greek culture. (Fig. 4)

Greek Sacrificial Dance is perhaps the least obviously demonstrative of Humphrey’s later technique. But this piece is incredibly important nonetheless. It demonstrates an astoundingly advanced choreographical ability through the shape of the movement. Posey explains that it is extraordinary how Humphrey “adapted choreography at such a young age … Her first dances were so well thought-out.”30 This comes back to strength in floor patterns and choreographical technique. Posey elaborates:

The balance … is so distinctive at every point. And that’s reflected throughout her work. It’s not balletic—it’s not eight on this side, eight on the other—but it’s if you go up, you go down, if you go to one side, you go to the other side. It’s very organized, very balanced, and very clean … in the floor patterns.31

All of the elements that Posey talks about are best seen in this dance in comparison to the other three dances for children. It is the clarity in the development and building of the movement patterns that gives the piece a mature, more pre-professional feeling.

30 Elsa Posey (dance educator) in discussion with Gina Marie Borden, August 2013.
31 Ibid.
Moment Musical

*Moment Musical* is a trio for girls with music composed by Franz Schubert. Hinman’s book never specifically outlines the age range Humphrey was looking for, but based upon the tricky choreography and Posey’s reconstruction, the dance is meant for late middle school-aged girls. This piece is the most varied in terms of choreography compared to the other three, and is unique in its small cast size.

The dance begins with a duet traveling in a large circle around the stage, beginning from upstage left. They travel in the familiar skipping step, but this time it is a more advanced variation. The girls skip on the left, skip on the right, take three running steps, and then one last skip. This is repeated around the circle. Humphrey also uses gesture in this opening step. The
girls are playing musical instruments; “hands held well forward as if playing the Pipes of Pan, pipes parallel to the ground on the first two counts and held high on the three running steps.”\(^{32}\) Again, the gesture gives theme and story to the piece.

As the duet continues, the third dancer comes in solo with a different step: a jump on beat one, and three runs. She circles the duet and joins them. The trio dances using the length of the stage and full body movement. The piece is similar to the other three pieces in regard to the floor pattern. Everything is balanced. The variation comes in terms of movement. The skips are still there, but the choreography demands more. The step is repeated towards the end of the piece, but this time the dancers travel backwards. At another point the dancers join hands and *tendu* their legs front, back, front. As they do this they tilt their upper bodies away from the gesture leg. *(Fig. 5)* This opposition and asymmetry in the movement are some of the aspects of *Moment Musical* that demands more experienced dancers. Different parts of the body work in sync with each other, creating a slight increase in difficulty.

The music of this piece also demands more experienced dancers. The steps are quick, and sometimes syncopated with the rhythm. The piece, in reference to its name, demands musicality. Even the simple skipping step is complicated by the music. Humphrey fits five distinct movements into four counts of music (two measures of two-four time). There is a skip on the left on 1, a skip on the right on 2, three runs on 1 & 2, and a final skip on the final & count of the phrase. That last skip is an accented movement, but it is on an & beat. However, the music is accented directly on beat 2. The dancers need to have a well-trained ear and the control over their movement in order to execute this properly.

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Humphrey choreographed for children later in her career as well. *Day on Earth* (1947), one of her most famous works, features a child dancer. It is curious that the child is a female who is seemingly ten or eleven years old. Two of the Four Dances for Children are for girls of this age. This suggests that Humphrey demonstrated an interest in young dancers throughout her career, and that during the thirty-plus years between the Four Dances for Children and *Day on Earth* she developed her ideas about children’s choreography.

In *Day on Earth*, the child dances a simple and playful part. There are many running patterns in this work that are similar to the patterns in the Four Dances for Children. The intriguing skipping step is included as well. The child steps with her right foot, and hops with her left leg in a parallel *passe*—almost exactly as it is done in *Will o’ the Wisp*.

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The spirals in the child’s part are curious because they can be directly compared to the spirals that the three adult dancers execute. The spirals of the child are similar to those in *Daffodils*—simple spins to the ground that are safe for a child. The adults perform the spirals at a greater scale, and execute a fully developed concept of fall and recovery. Seeing the fully developed version and the simple safe version of the spiral to and from the floor gives a sense of evolution to the movement. The juxtaposition of the two variations creates an image of how the technique developed over time and with age.

*Day on Earth* is important because it demonstrates that Humphrey thought that movements for children and adults are separate from each other, but they are nevertheless related. Humphrey has the child work with her technical concept—the idea of a change in level, executed with the use of a spiral—but keeps it simple. The child is not throwing herself to the ground, and bringing herself back up to standing using muscles that have not yet developed. The Four Dances for Children prove similar ideas. The children are playing with technical concepts—ideas of Humphrey that would later become full-fledged—without complicating the movement so that it becomes unsafe. The children do not have to execute a full fall and recovery, but they are able to have a bodily balance that plays with concepts of fall and recovery. The balance of the body is crucial in Humphrey’s development of fall and recovery, and this development depended upon the discipline of the body.

For Humphrey, movement is “the giving into and rebound from gravity”34 and life is thousands of fall and recoveries. She used the metaphor of age to relate her movement philosophy, and articulates that we go through more falls and recoveries throughout our lifetimes than we can count because of the forces of gravity. Our relationship with gravity is constantly in flux, and we respond to it differently at different points in our lives based on our current state of

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balance.\textsuperscript{35} When we are born and are young, we are balanced and able to resist gravitational forces, recovering from the force that pulls us down. But as we age, this resistance becomes less possible. We succumb to the force, falling down from the pull of gravity, and throwing ourselves off-balance. She explains:

Youth is “down” as little as possible; gravity holds him lightly to earth. Old age gradually takes over and the spring vanishes from the step until the final yielding, death. There are two still points in the physical life: the motionless body, in which the thousand adjustments for keeping erect are invisible, and the horizontal, the last stillness. Life and dance exist between these two points and therefore form the arc between two deaths.\textsuperscript{36}

Her dance technique is founded in the natural behaviors of humans, and our resistance and acceptance of the forces surrounding us. The “arc between two deaths”\textsuperscript{37} is a metaphor for our ever-changing state of balance.\textsuperscript{38} Birth and death create a complete arc of fall and recovery, and there is a multitude of other smaller-scaled falls and recoveries within the arc, right down to the ultimate example: walking.\textsuperscript{39} Each of us makes thousands of little fall and recoveries each day. As we walk, we push off with the ball of our back foot causing us to fall, only to recover and catch ourselves with our front heel.

Fall and recovery becomes more technical once the full body becomes involved. The fall is more dynamic; a dancer generally leads with the hip or the upper body to land completely on the floor. Recovering takes a huge amount of core strength—especially considering that choreography generally requires a seamless movement from the low to the high level, rather than jolted, laborious movement. Humphrey incorporated the use of the spiral into her concept of


\textsuperscript{37} Ibid.


recovery because the physical structure of a spiral makes it mechanically possible to return from the ground. A dancer gets up by engaging her abdominal muscles and pulling into herself, while allowing her limbs to float into an oppositional position—lower limbs countering upper limbs—to visually create a spiral. This motion allows the dancer to reach a sitting position. The dancer continues to circle her upper body past her lower body, continuing the spiral while allowing her legs to get to a position to push up into a stand. The dancer stands, while maintaining the circling and spiraling around herself. She has completed the recovery.

While it seems complex in writing, the recovery becomes simplified when executed physically. Humphrey broke down the movement to its most simple state, making it as natural as possible, and as safe as possible. Instead of building a recovery movement by focusing on the musculature of the lower limbs—putting a dancer’s quadriceps and hamstrings under an enormous amount of strain—Humphrey uses a large, centralized group of muscles within the body. The abdominal muscles make up a dancer’s core, and their use gives a dancer stability and greater sense of strength. The use of the abdomen requires the dancer to use her whole body, lessening the strain in one area. The spiral is created to be physically safe.

The basic concept of fall and recovery is seen in an early form in one of the Four Dances for Children. As mentioned, in the beginning of Daffodils, half of the dancers begin on the floor. They are in child’s pose, and while they are not completely lying down on the ground, they are at a low level. In their first movement, they rise to their feet by standing and rotating around themselves. The rotation is more of a circle than a spiral, but a relationship is clear. Humphrey was fascinated with the idea of rising and simultaneously rotating—a spiral would develop with older, more experienced dancers.

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When speaking of the design of choreography, Humphrey divides it into five parts, the first being symmetry and asymmetry. The symmetry and asymmetry concept of design is most closely related to the steps a dancer performs in a dance. The other parts lend themselves more to the design of the dancers in relationship to the stage and to one another. Symmetry and asymmetry play a crucial role in the shaping of movement, and of course have a role concerning floor pattern as well.

Humphrey notes that there is an “innate sense of structure” in humankind. One can see this in visual art, architecture, and anything man-made. Humphrey suggests that the job of a choreographer is to discover the appropriate times to use symmetry as opposed to asymmetry, and vice-versa. (Fig. 6) She goes on to say, “Choreographers are apt to use too much symmetry, however, … and this will spell monotony and death for a dance.” While symmetry is stable, it is generally without risk, and there must be a reason for it.

Fig. 6: Spring 2005 Posey School Children’s Dance Company reconstruction of Greek Sacrificial Dance. The symmetry of the formation is pleasing to the eye, but also gives the dance a feeling of strength and togetherness. Photo © Rhonda R. Dorsett 2005.

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The Four Dances for Children, as mentioned previously, are full of symmetry—perhaps too much symmetry for the older Humphrey who wrote of the dangers of a monotonous dance. Looking to her writing late in her career, it is clear that Humphrey learned from her mistakes—or at least what she would have considered to be mistakes. It is quite possible that the Four Dances for Children would have looked different if choreographed by an older, more experienced Humphrey. The child’s part in *Day on Earth* is more varied than the parts in the four dances. Still, the four dances prove that symmetry was something that Humphrey was thinking about as she choreographed when she was young. Though she may have over-used it, she realized its importance in a dance.

Symmetry (and asymmetry) are both concepts within balance. Perhaps the Four Dances for Children remain impressive because they are well balanced—not just in movement and succession of movement, but in floor pattern as well. In *Will o’ the Wisp* the dancers cross in an X-formation—one group coming from upstage right to downstage left, the other from upstage left to downstage right. *Daffodils* includes a circle within a circle. The inside circle is at a low level while the outside circle is at a high level. Additionally, the dance begins and ends in the same formation, giving it a complete arc. *Greek Sacrificial Dance* portrays a series of lines. The chorus enters in two groups from opposite sides of the stage, visually balancing the three soloists already at center stage.

*Moment Musical*, however, better represents asymmetry than symmetry. Here, Humphrey does a wonderful job playing with asymmetrical—yet still nicely balanced in structure—choreography. Namely, this asymmetry stems from the fact that the dance is choreographed for three children. *Greek Sacrificial Dance* is the only other dance choreographed for an odd number, but since the chorus has an even number of dancers and the
uneven number of soloists remains in the center for the majority of the piece, the asymmetric quality is not realized. In *Moment Musical*, the trio plays with unevenness in an obvious way. A single dancer begins from stage right, while a duet begins from stage left. One notices a segmentation of the stage while watching the dance, and it is not until the three dancers dance together that the tension resolves. Humphrey used asymmetry wisely in this piece in order to build up a tension and an arc that eventually resolves to a satisfying unison.

The musician in Humphrey shows herself as she explains the importance of rhythm in choreography. Humphrey believed that “rhythm is the most persuasive and most powerful element” in dance. She categorizes rhythm in four ways: phrase rhythm, rhythm of function, motor mechanism rhythm, and emotional rhythm. Phrase rhythm, or breath rhythm, comes from the human pattern of survival. Humphrey argues that the rise and fall of breath should be used on other parts of the body in dance. From the breath, variation in timing and pattern can occur, leading the dancer to new uses of space. Rhythms of function are related to breath rhythm, encompassing the heartbeat and the contraction and release of muscles. Emotional rhythm is by far the most used in dance, but Humphrey states, “If used properly, its chief characteristic is its truth.” Humphrey explains that emotion in dance must be authentic, not artificial. Otherwise, the audience would be unmoved. Further, the emotional rhythm must be dynamic. Humans do not maintain a steady emotional spectrum, so why should a dancer? The rhythm must change intensity over the course of a piece.

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48 Ibid.
Humphrey writes that motor mechanism rhythm is the most important of the four. She passionately comments:

Here is where the original dance began—with the feet—and here is where it still carries on, in the main. Not only that, but I think the awareness of accent, energy punctuated by beat, stems only from this change of weight in dance, and would not exist in music or language or visual arts had it not been established by the feet of men.49

Motor rhythm is what most people think of when they hear the word ‘rhythm’ in terms of dance. It is the establishment of a beat and pattern by the use of a propelled body. It is the motor within a dancer that drives the dance. A simple example is a change in weight, such as walking. As a dancer walks, the preceding step propels the next step, along with gravity. Motor rhythm is very important to fall and recovery.

The Four Dances for Children clearly have an established sense of rhythm. It had always been important to Humphrey, who feels saddened by the fact that “rhythm is one of the least used and least appreciated tools in dance.”50 Motor rhythm is clearly established in each dance with the use of the skipping variations. The skip propels the young dancers, and the variation shows the dynamics of the rhythm. Young Humphrey wanted to experiment with different rhythms and challenge herself in the choreography. Humphrey notes later that audiences “like the unexpected in rhythm … against a ‘solid’ background of steady beat, it becomes delightful and comprehensible.”51 In *Moment Musical*, a more advanced dance, the rhythm is certainly unexpected. Against a solid score in 2/4 time,52 the solo dancer’s first movements divide the beats. In one measure of music, she does an assemblé jump (I) followed by three running steps (& 2 &). She repeats this. The jump is unexpected—it breaks up what could potentially be four

even steps, a symmetrical completion to the pattern. Humphrey keeps things interesting, playing with motor rhythm and asymmetry.

Humphrey concedes that most dancers of the day (at the time the 1950s) are excellent technicians. That is why she believes that there has to be something more to “make [the] display worth while.” Humphrey states that a dancer must have the motivation behind the technique to be considered to be great. But this was something difficult to teach to students who were striving for perfection:

They all want to achieve a mythical ideal—that of a youth, male or female, not more than twenty years old, with perfect physical coordination, supple, strong, health, happy, confident, beautiful, not subject to nerves or depression or fatigue. As a background for progression into a dance-drama, a piece of work calling for a range of experience and emotion, this standard is fantastically unrealistic.

Here Humphrey emphasizes that not only is it impossible to be perfect, but that dance is not meant to be perfect. The modern dance is used to portray a huge range of emotions. There are times to be light and happy, but often a piece will call for real emotion—a sadness or anger from deep within that is ready to burst out through the dance.

Greek Sacrificial Dance is a piece that is not about happy, light, frivolous movement. The dance has a seriousness to it—a god-fearing and yet thankful tone that demands motivation, or intent, from the dancers. Humphrey taught her young students about the drama behind the dance—an experience she was well acquainted with because of tours on the amateur vaudeville circuit late in her high school career. There had to be a purpose for executing movement; the movement had to answer questions about the story. What are the girls giving to the gods? Why are they giving it to them? What will happen after the gift is given? The drama of the piece

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54 Ibid.
comes from these motivational questions, and is supplemented by a gesture of the hands upward—the giving of the sacrifice. (Fig. 7) But Humphrey did not only teach the importance of motivation for serious dances—she taught the importance of motivation for light pieces as well. This is clear in Will o’ the Wisp. The children play games in the choreography. The children learned to take the motivation and feeling they had from their everyday play, and used it to discover a performance quality.

Motivation is often supplemented with gesture in Humphrey’s choreography. In fact, she considers gesture “as a branch or division of motivation,” and defines it as “[a pattern] of movement established by long usage among men, a sort of language of communication or function which has been going on since the beginning of time, and which is most useful because it is so recognizable.”56 This is what makes the gesture of giving so strong in Greek Sacrificial Dance. The cupping of the hands and offering of a gift up towards the heavens is universally recognized as a sacrifice. It would be recognized as such even without the word “sacrifice” in the title of the piece.

Fig. 7: Spring 2005 Posey School Children’s Dance Company reconstruction of Greek Sacrificial Dance. The girls offer their hands up to the gods as a gesture of sacrifice. Photo © Rhonda R. Dorsett 2005.

As she does with rhythm, Humphrey divides gesture into four categories. First is social gesture—such as a bow, a handshake, or an embrace. Second is functional gesture—scrubbing, sewing, running, or anything that suggests work. Third is ritual gesture, which encompasses any act of a well-established occasion, such as court proceedings, inaugurations, and religious ceremonies. The sacrificial gesture seen in *Greek Sacrificial Dance* would fall into this category. Last is what Humphrey believes to be the most important type of gesture: the emotional gesture. These gestures shape the body into positions that suggest a certain feeling—“patterned emotions.” Grief is one such patterned emotion—it is clear when a dancer grieves because of the shape of her body.

Humphrey does admit, however, that emotional gestures are often difficult to convey, especially by adults. “Other patterned emotions can be observed better in children than in adults,” she says, “who are corrupted in their actions by overdoses of etiquette. Joy, for instance, is invariably accompanied in children by jumping up and down, and sometimes spinning around.” In *Will o’ the Wisp, Daffodils, and Moment Musical*, the joy in the children is expressed. All have use of the skipping step—an up and down pattern that suggests light-heartedness. As mentioned, *Will o’ the Wisp* includes gestures of play—the girls run and leap over each other’s outstretched arms. The flowers in *Daffodils* spin and twist around each other, jumping up after a rest in the garden. The girls in *Moment Musical* mime playing musical instruments as they skip and play with one another. The patterned emotion of joy is what gives these children a motivation to dance, and nineteen-year-old Humphrey already realized its importance.

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59 Ibid.
61 Ibid.
The Four Dances for Children are fully realized because of all of the advanced choreographic tools used to build them. Humphrey plays with symmetry and asymmetry, rhythm, and motivation and gesture in each of the four dances. These are concepts that she deemed important later in her life. As a teenager, she smartly produced her choreography, which allowed her to study the concepts she used later in her career. She did not neglect to include any of the elements of a well-realized dance, whether she was conscious of this or not. She innately created well-constructed work. Inspired and encouraged by Hinman, she used her knowledge to develop and play with her own movement. Being such a dedicated student, she was able to use these early experiments to help her realize a professional choreographic technique. Her experiments were impressive—coming from a time before the existence of the Denishawn School and the sway of Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn. Because of the early development of the Four Dances for Children, other professionals surrounding Humphrey had not yet influenced her ideas. The concepts of choreography found in the four dances are truly Humphrey’s and Humphrey’s alone.

Doris Humphrey has had a tremendous influence on modern dance. She created a technique and theory of choreographic structure that emphasizes the importance of a healthy body and an expressive body. The foundations of her technique lend themselves to the creation of a strong and confident dancer, and therefore are excellent structures for teaching children. As one can see, the Four Dances for Children are early examples of Humphrey’s innate talent for teaching young students, and they provided a starting point for her technique. Humphrey was able to watch the children she taught in order to learn about the movement of the growing body. Her technique is derived from natural movements of the body, allowing it to be safe for developing children. Through the Four Dances for Children, one can see the beginnings of her
theories founded in the relation of the human body to the earth and its gravity: fall and recovery. Fall and recovery is now a fundamental idea in modern dance. Humphrey discovered how to use the structure of the body in alliance with a geometric spiral in order to manipulate gravity’s effect. Doris Humphrey was a brilliant educator and innovator through her movement, and the modern dance would be lost today without the legacy of her choreography and technique.
Works Cited


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