(CONVERGING MOVEMENTS)

Modern Dance and Jewish Culture at the 92nd Street Y

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Precisely because we believe that the Jews constitute a liminal border case, neither inside nor outside—or, better, both inside and outside—they have the capacity to open up multicultural theory in new and interesting ways.

David Biale, Michael Galchinsky, and Susannah Heschel[1]

INTRODUCTION

Democracy, Diversity, Dance, and the Jewish Encounter with America

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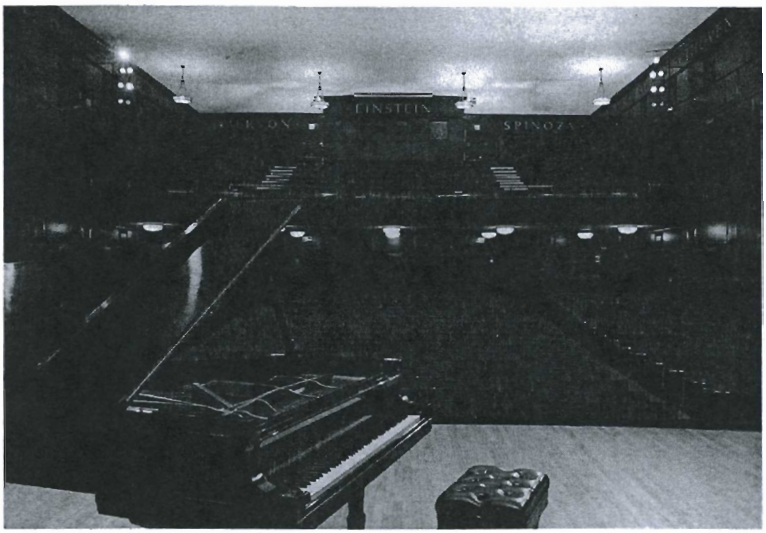
The Ninety-Second Street Young Men's and Young Women's Hebrew Association (familiarly referred to as the 92nd Street Y or simply the Y), which stands at the corner of Ninety-second Street and Lexington Avenue in New York City, marks the intersection of two historical trajectories: it is a symbol of the accomplishments of American Jewry, and it is a reminder of the remarkable achievements of modern dance. Initially a community-oriented institution that catered to a local membership, from the mid-1930s through the 1950s the Y was a major home for dance in New York. The Y's active Dance Center offered classes in technique, choreography, and appreciation and an extensive performance series featuring both prominent and lesser-known dancers. Among the famous works premiered on the Y stage were Anna Sokolow's *Rooms* (1955) and Alvin Ailey's *Revelations* (1960). In 1945, Doris Humphrey was named director of the Dance Center and was active in overseeing many of the program's affairs until her death in 1958.

The 92nd Street Y's influential and pioneering work in the contemporary arts is widely recognized. During this century the institution's Kaufmann Auditorium became known as a celebrated concert hall, where the Budapest String Quartet performed, along with Isaac Stern, Nathan Milstein, Rudolf Serkin, Nadia Reisenberg, and other distinguished soloists. The Y is also remembered as the place where Dylan Thomas's *Under Milk Wood* received its American premiere in May 1953 by staff members of the Y, who proved

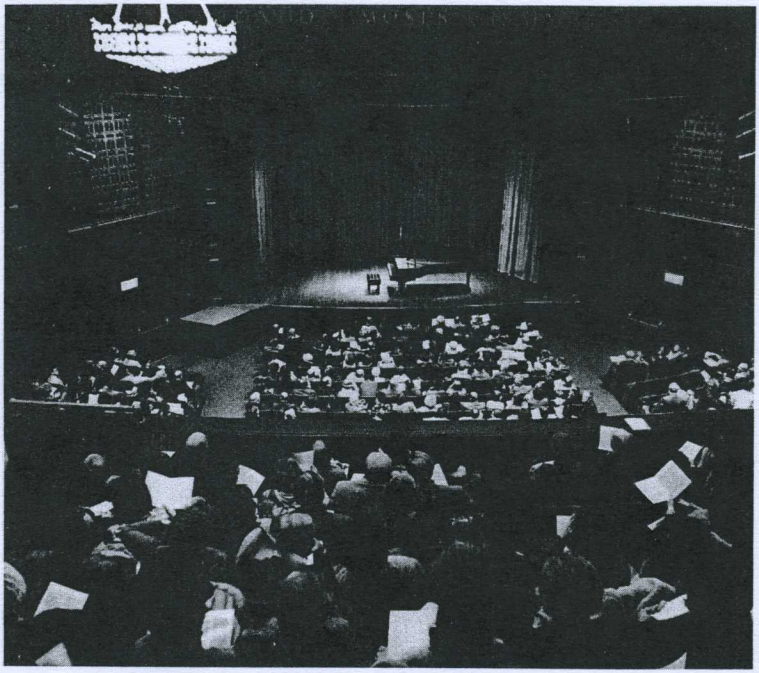
The 92nd Street Y Today.
92nd Street YM-YWHA Archives.



Kaufmann Concert Hall.
92nd Street YM-YWHA Archives. Photographer: Steve Williams.

height of its fame, from the 1930s through the 1950s, both by considering what happened at the Y with its dance programming (the historical question) and what this can tell us about the way we might reconceptualize dance and Jewish and American history (the historiographic question). The work challenges standard modern dance history as a genealogy of great individual American innovators. Instead, the case of the Y situates modern dance at the heart of the Jewish encounter with America, revealing that not only were specific institutions central in validating and stabilizing the form but also that diverse individuals and ethnic groups, especially Jews, contributed to shaping contemporary American dance. Such a perspective suggests that struggles over the meaning of American culture that occurred during the 1930s and 1940s involved what might today be called multiculturalism.

This book, therefore, not only strives to right the historical record, but it also highlights, as much as possible, the theoretical issues raised by the material. While I hope that the story of the Y evokes the excitement of the institution as a long and active gathering place through dance, it is my primary intent to foreground the details of the programming and their implications for our understanding of American culture, both past and present. The rest of the opening chapter consequently lays out in broad brush strokes how the



Kaufmann Concert Hall, 1970s.
92nd Street YM-YWHA Archives.

themselves talented actors. T. S. Eliot, Robert Frost, William Carlos Williams, and W. H. Auden, among others, read their work at the Y, and the renowned playwright Arthur Miller made appearances there well into the 1990s.

Despite this rich history little has been written about how or why the arts program developed and exactly what it signifies for dance history or the fields of Jewish, American, and cultural studies.[2] Although numerous generations have flocked to the Y to attend the concerts, poetry readings, and lectures, many have remained unaware of the Y's Jewish affiliation, let alone known of the institution's original and lasting contributions to American culture. Meanwhile, scholars struggling with the meaning of postmodernism and multiculturalism have yet to benefit from examining the Y and its richly conceived conceptions of identity, ethnicity, and community, which might greatly contribute to current debates in the humanities.

The following study aims to redress this imbalance by considering the initiation, growth, and broader significance of the Y's dance component at the

particular way that Jewishness was defined, spoken of, and performed at the Y, in relation to American culture, affected both the evolution of American Jewry and the modern dance world. I also consider how what happened at the Y foreshadowed many of the concerns surrounding diversity today and how it provides a possible model for thinking (and dancing) about multiculturalism in today's context.

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WHY THE Y?

One of the first questions that springs to mind when considering the vast legacy of dance at the Y is, why did it occur there, at an institution founded in 1874 by prominent German Jews intent on promoting harmony and good fellowship among Hebrew young men? The answer lies in the particular historical moments in which certain Jews and modern dancers found themselves in the 1930s and 1940s. The Jews who frequented the Y at that time were mostly affluent and middle-class, from both German and Eastern European backgrounds, who lived in the ethnically mixed surrounding area of Yorkville or in new Jewish neighborhoods that had sprung up in the 1920s in Queens, the Bronx, and Brooklyn.[3] For second- and third-generation women and men from these communities there was a strong desire to be engaged in general American life yet retain a link to Jewish culture. What this translated into was a particular manifestation of Jewishness in which traditional sources of identification, such as religion and custom, were largely replaced by institution, constituency, association, and patronage.[4] Within the walls of the Y, one studied, socialized, attended recitals, and danced with other Jews. At the Y the use of leisure time became the primary means of maintaining Jewish solidarity within the new urban American context. Moreover, and most interestingly, at the Y hundreds of Jews found a comfortable way to manifest their Jewishness, largely through participation in nonparochial American culture. While sectarian programming did occur and was treated with great seriousness, central emphasis was placed on designated "general" activities. For the Y's members, expressing one's Jewishness through the general, contemporary arts became the acceptable and preferred way of being Jewish in America.

In some ways, taking part in the art world was a means of displaying upward mobility and acceptance into genteel middle- and upper-class American life. However, the Y's Jews were far from being involved in a simple assimilation process. Rather, along with other minorities from socially conscious

backgrounds, they were passionately engaged in redefining these entities, even as they joined them. Theirs was an active reshaping of art and society in line with long-held progressive and humanistic views rooted in the moral tenets of the Jewish religion as well as Jewish trends since the Haskalah, a period in Jewish history known as the Jewish Enlightenment, when Jews began transferring their intellectual and creative energy away from religion to contemporary arts and ideas.[5] Overall, taking classes and attending lectures and performances on the contemporary arts allowed Jews to actively participate in and contribute to the making of modern American culture while evolving definitions of ethnicity within the Jewish community that would allow them to retain specific group identification.

Meanwhile, modern dancers in the 1930s were struggling to gain respectability. Faced with poor performance conditions and overall lack of facilities, many dancers were searching for new places to teach and perform. Unlike classical music, for instance, which was already an established discipline with a set of accepted performers, repertories, and stages, in the 1930s modern dance was striving to find institutional bases beyond the individual studios of its founders. While Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, Charles Weidman, Hanya Holm, Helen Tamiris, Esther Junger, and Sophia Delza were already establishing themselves as serious exponents of the modern dance, there were many others eager to present work, such as Anna Sokolow, Edna Guy, Eleanor King, and Lillian Shapero. For all these dancers, a dance center in a prestigious institution would come as a welcome offer.

The easy convergence of modern dance and Jewish culture at the Y consequently occurred for a variety of reasons. For the Y's Jewish members and modern dancers of the time there were ideological as well as practical reasons for a smooth merging of interests. Both, for instance, shared a humanistic outlook on the role of the arts in modern life. Influenced by the various progressive movements of the time, they thought the arts and humanities uplifted men's souls, making them better individuals and citizens in a democratic society. Jews at the Y were seeking fulfillment through contemporary art, and many modern dancers saw themselves as providing just such emotional and spiritual nourishment to themselves and their followers. On the practical level, many early modern dancers needed decent stages on which to perform their work and audiences to view it. As of 1930 the Y had the institutional support to offer both. Since its inception the Y had provided a wide range of educational activities to its members. During the early 1930s in particular the Y boasted elegant modern facilities and proved itself committed

to classes in philosophy, music, art, drama, and dance, along with more standard recreational activities involving sports and physical fitness.

The Y's long-standing support of progressive education provided the foundation for an extensive cultural program. However, it was the effort of one man, William Kolodney, who was educational director of the Y from 1934 to 1969, that brought about the specific meeting of the dance and Jewish communities that proved so fruitful. Under Kolodney's guidance the basic interests of the Y's progressive leadership were focused and expanded into a full-fledged program of classes and performances that emphasized contemporary

William Kolodney, 1954.
92nd Street YM-YWHA Archives.

art and ideas. It was as part of this broader program that dancing made its first large-scale appearance at the Y in the mid-1930s and remained of central importance throughout the next two decades. Kolodney's role in the establishment and direction of the Y's cultural program, including the dance component, remains fascinating and complex. With a strong background in education, psychology, and Jewish center work, he was a remarkable individual of great intelligence and integrity. His choice of advisers, teachers, and performers was dictated by a variety of concerns that grew from his being a lover of art, a social activist, an entrepreneur, and a leader of Jewish causes. These concerns included his basic belief that the arts enrich the human spirit, his interest in things contemporary, his desire to promote the less- as well as more-established artists, and his wish to foster creativity in Jews.

Kolodney's manifold concerns were united by an overarching desire to bring together the Jewish and non-Jewish worlds. He fervently believed that within the American context, with its potentially pluralistic society, this difficult act of integration could be achieved with joy and mutual benefit. Repeatedly, his message was that non-Jewish and Jewish creativity could be synthesized to improve everyone's experience. As Carl Urbont, a longtime executive of the Y, observed, "Kolodney was a unique man. There are relatively few people in the community who have the knowledge and the interest and commitment that Kolodney had both to the universal as well as the Jewish as sources of human enrichment."[6] To this end, Kolodney brought to bear his business acumen and talent for traversing borders. To carve out a special niche for the Y, he assessed the tastes of the Jewish community and matched them with the needs of the wider artistic community. In terms of dance this meant recognizing an interest in modern dance on the part of young, predominantly female Jews and being aware that, in the broader dance world, modern dance was a struggling art form, lacking institutional support and recognition. Here was a golden opportunity to fill a gap in the general culture and satisfy a sector of the Jewish community. The result of Kolodney's efforts was the successful establishment of the Dance Center and a performance series featuring many famous dancers.