African-American Concert Dance

The Harlem Renaissance and Beyond

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Pearl Primus performing *Dance of Thanksgiving* during trip to Zaire. (Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations)

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Pearl Primus

In 1943, Pearl Primus emerged as an important new artist on the New York dance scene. Although she shared some characteristics with the black concert artists who preceded her, in many ways she was a strikingly original artist who brought a new dynamism to the field of dance. Her initial appearance was as a solo performer, one distinction that set her apart from the other black artists discussed here; most of them had first appeared with companies of their own. Perhaps her earliest solo performances caused those who saw her to focus more intently on the individual qualities she brought to the stage.

Early photographs of the young performer convey images that are unique for the period. Unlike the pictorial records of her contemporaries, which capture the earthbound quality of early modern dance, many of the performance photographs of Primus show her suspended in midair, bursting with kinetic energy and seemingly oblivious to the forces of gravity. As critics and audiences constantly noted, she had a special affinity for being airborne.

Margaret Lloyd's description of Primus's performance of *Hard Time Blues* attests to the artist's fascination with flight: "Pearl takes a running jump, lands in an upper corner and sits there, unconcernedly paddling the air with her legs. She does it repeatedly, from one side of the stage, then the other, apparently unaware of the involuntary gasps

from the audience. . . . The dance is a protest against sharecropping. For me it was exultant with the mastery over the law of gravitation."[1]

As a dancer, Primus was distinctive in other ways. When her style is compared to that of the other leading black dancer of the period, Katherine Dunham, it is clear that one of the few things they had in common was their use of dance elements from Africa and the Caribbean. Dunham's performance style reflected a glamorous and sensual persona. Primus, on the other hand, was more elemental, more visceral. When she danced, she wrenched movement from the air and then brought it down to its earthy conclusion. At other times, she imbued stillness with the elegant primal austerity of an African woodcarving.

Dunham surrounded her own striking physical presence with a company of dancers whose beauty seemed to take up where her own left off. Primus's early works did not depend upon a group, and when she did use other dancers during the early days of her career, they were few. Over the years, much of her work continued to be choreographed for herself or for small groups of dancers.

Primus was born in 1919 in Port-of-Spain, Trinidad, and her family moved to the United States when she was three years old. In an early interview, she described her childhood in New York as growing up "in a narrow circle that embraced church, school, library and home."[2] She lived with her family at Sixty-ninth and Broadway, where her father, Edward, was a building superintendent. She considered herself fortunate that the racial prejudice that later became the subject matter of many of her dances did not adversely affect her during her early childhood.[3] As a child, she became keenly interested in Africa and made a vow that she would travel there some day. "I grew up in a home," she said, "where discussions about Africa were everyday occurrences. My father and uncles had been in various countries of Africa, either as merchant seamen or as soldiers."[4]

After attending Public Schools 94 and 136 in New York, she attended Hunter College High School and later received her undergraduate degree in biology and pre-medical sciences from Hunter College. While attending college, she excelled in track-and-field competitions and other sports, displaying the athleticism that would become a unique physical signature of her later performances. From Hunter she went to New York University where she studied health education for a while,

but she returned to Hunter College to work on a M.A. degree in psychology. Finding that she became too emotionally involved in the psychiatric cases she was required to study, she transferred to Columbia University, where she began graduate studies in anthropology.

The first glimmer of recognition that dance would be the guiding force in her life occurred when she became involved in a dance group sponsored by the National Youth Administration, a government job training program for young people. While working in the wardrobe department of a NYA project, she was approached by one of the vocational advisers who suggested that she become an understudy for a program that was in preparation, *America Dances.* Pressed into service for one of the performances, she was outstanding.[5]

The NYA dance experience was inspiring but short-lived. In 1941, after the program disbanded, she moved on to the New Dance Group (the politically activist dance collective and studio that had been founded in 1932), having heard about auditions for a scholarship there. She was the only black student at the time and so inexperienced that when someone suggested she warm up before class she replied, "What do you mean warm up? I'm warm already. It's not hot in here."[6] In spite of her unfamiliarity with dance studio decorum, she impressed her teachers with her outstanding talent and began her studies with fellow Trinidadian Belle Rosette, a specialist in Caribbean dance, and the modern dancers Jane Dudley, Sophie Maslow, and William Bales. She was also encouraged to study with Martha Graham, Hanya Holm, Doris Humphrey, and Charles Weidman. Graham called her a "panther," and Weidman called her "his little primitive." In retrospect, Primus remembered their words as affectionate appellations used to describe the "burst of joy" she was trying to express through dancing.[7]

Her first performance in a professional atmosphere took place on February 14, 1943, when she appeared at the Ninety-second Street YM-YWHA on a program entitled *Five Dancers,* which she shared with Nona Schurman, Iris Mabry, Julia Levien, and Gertrude Prokosch. Her part of the program consisted of *Strange Fruit,* which portrayed a woman's pained reactions to a lynching; *Rock Daniel,* a jazz-inspired piece; *Hard Time Blues,* a dance protesting the plight of southern sharecroppers; and *African Ceremonial.* To gather material for *African Ceremonial*—based upon a fertility rite of the Belgian Congo—Primus had re-

searched her material by consulting books, looking at photographs, and visiting museums. In addition, she had checked the authenticity of her movement with African students who were attending Columbia University. She also relied upon the expert advice of two percussionists, Norman Coker, who had performed with Asadata Dafora and had coproduced *Bassa Moona* with Momodu Johnson, and Alphonse Cimber, a Haitian artist who accompanied classes at the New Dance Group. Both men proved to be invaluable colleagues during Primus's career.

When John Martin published his review of the YM-YWHA concert the following week, his enthusiasm for the young artist established the positive support that he would extend to her over the coming years. He said, "If Miss Primus walked away with the lion's share of the honors, it was partly because her material was more theatrically effective, but also partly because she is a remarkably gifted artist."[8] He had not been similarly impressed since Katherine Dunham's arrival on the scene three years earlier. In many ways, he was more impressed. He could not think of another Negro dancer who was Primus's equal in technique, composition, artistic integrity, personal vitality, and charm.[9]

Her next performance venue was not a concert hall but a jazz club. In April 1943 she approached Barney Josephson, the manager of Cafe Society Downtown, to audition for his Greenwich Village establishment. When he saw the young woman primly dressed in a pleated skirt, socks, and shoes, he started to send her away; but after she showed him the few newspaper reviews she had received for her first YM-YWHA performance, he said, "Oh, are you that kid they wrote about in the Times? Okay, we'll try you out for ten days."[10]

Instead of ten days, her stay at Cafe Society lasted ten months. During that time, she continued to choreograph new dances, such as *Jim Crow Train*, another of her protest dances, and *Study in Nothing*, a humorous dance to the music of the jazz pianist Mary Lou Williams. She performed two or three fifteen-minute shows each night. The performance space was small and her repertoire of African, modern, and jazz dances was strange fare for the jaded audiences she faced; but she won them over with her talent, her earnestness—and, as Margaret Lloyd described one of the dances she performed, her beauty:

> "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," to the poem by Langston Hughes and music by Sarah Malament, is one of Pearl's best. It is beautiful with undulating rhythms over deep-flowing currents of movement that wind into whirlpool spins. She pivots on one knee or circles the stationary bent leg with the free leg, leaning her body in a long slant away from the traveling foot. The pale soles flash, the brown toes clutch and grasp, the dark fingers spread wide, the whole body sings: I've known rivers ancient as the world And older than the flow of human blood in human veins. . . . My soul has grown deep like the rivers.[11]

While Primus was appearing at Cafe Society, John Martin singled her out as the most important newcomer of the dance season. He remarked that the distinction did not usually go to a dancer who had been on the scene so briefly, but it was warranted because of her "vigorous and authentic" talent.[12] He mentioned only a few limitations in her dancing, which he credited to youth and inexperience. He spoke of her strong points as being her "inward power," her sense of drama, a talent for comedy, and "a really superb technique."[13] The last of these accolades was particularly remarkable coming from Martin, who had never been very generous with compliments concerning the technical abilities of black dancers. "There is no doubt," Martin continued, "that she is quite the most gifted artist-dancer of her race (she is Negro) yet to appear in the field." He concluded—in what surely must have been a first for him—by saying that it was unfair to classify her merely as "an outstanding Negro dancer" since she was, by any measure, "an outstanding dancer without regard for race."[14]

Bolstered by Martin's glowing comments, Primus continued her appearances at Cafe Society and also appeared as a soloist with Asadata Dafora and his company at Carnegie Hall on December 13, 1943. The following month, she shared a YM-YWHA program with another newcomer, Valerie Bettis. Edwin Denby spoke of this January 23, 1944, performance as being "the most dramatic recital that any young dancers have given this season."[15] He found the meaning of Primus's dance gestures completely clear and the "dramatic form and the dramatic point" of her dances appropriate within the limitations of her technique.[16] Lois Balcom, the reviewer for the *Dance Observer*, did not share his positive point of view; she said, "As a choreographer, her weakness is in a naive literalism of gesture and an unrestrained, undisciplined throwing of herself about."[17]

After presenting other concerts in New York (a YM-YWHA return

engagement in April 1944 and a performance at Hunter College in June that she shared with Randolph Scott), Primus began a phase of study that led her closer to the anthropological roots of her dance material. Putting aside her performing for a few months, she spent the summer of 1944 living among rural blacks in the South. There she became more acutely aware of the economic oppression, fear, and degradation that resulted from racial prejudice. She also found rhythmic patterns, songs, and movements that were akin to their African antecedents. Though cultural retention from Africa was generally weaker in the United States than in other parts of the Western Hemisphere, she found that it was very much alive in the dozens of small churches she visited in Georgia, Alabama, and South Carolina. The experience affected her deeply and added new dimensions to works like *Strange Fruit* and *Hard Time Blues.* Vivid, first-hand knowledge began to replace intuitive feelings and information gathered from books.

As described in Jean Ruth Glover's account, Primus disguised herself as a migrant and picked cotton with the local workers; she spent time reflecting on her demeaning experiences as she traveled from one job site to another on Jim Crow trains and buses. In addition to providing material for her notebooks, her travels also supplied her with material for dances that she would later create, such as *Slave Market* and *Steal Away to Freedom.*[18]

After returning to New York, she became more actively involved than ever in concert work. For her Broadway debut, on October 4, 1944, at the Belasco Theatre, she supplemented her solo repertoire with dances she choreographed for four men—Joe Comadore, Thomas Bell, Albert Popwell, and James Alexander. She used them in *Ague,* an African ritual, and in *Slave Market.* There was also a duet, *Mischievous Interlude,* featuring Popwell, whom Denby called "very brilliant."[19] As for Primus, the critic had some reservations about her overall dancing. Though he still found her "exceptionally gifted" and "thrilling," he also found her to have a self-conscious tendency to "ham" her protest dances—compromising their dramatic integrity.[20]

One of the most interesting commentaries (actually a series of articles that was published in two consecutive monthly installments in the *Dance Observer*) was written by Lois Balcom. One or more New York critics, it seemed, wrote an annual status report on black dance

and dancers. It was Balcom's year, and, as reflected in her earlier reviews of Primus, she seemed determined to oppose the generally positive views taken by other critics. She took on all comers who classified Primus as a "great Negro dancer" and said that it was a pity the young artist would never achieve the potential she showed because she had been seduced by trying to fulfill audiences' (and some critics') preconceptions about what a Negro dancer should be.[21]

According to Balcom, Primus was playing to the expectations of a particular type of audience by giving them the African, jazz, and black protest dances they expected. This same type of audience was infatuated by Primus's "natural skill and good intentions." And they did not have the foresight to temper their enthusiasm with an awareness of "the disciplined eloquence of which she might be capable after seasons of artistic growth."[22]

But there was another type of audience (which was, of course, where Balcom positioned herself). This audience was aware that a good modern dance artist should make an individual statement in which each dance assumed its own form without depending upon preconceived formulas.[23] To please this audience, to reconcile good Negro dancing with good modern dancing, Primus would have to stay away from stereotypes.

Balcom placed Primus in a position where she had very few places to turn to validate her aesthetic existence. Balcom dismissed her African dances because they were not authentic. They were stereotypical approximations, and they were derivative. She dismissed her jazz-influenced dances because they reflected the "forced gaiety" white audiences had come to expect from black artists. And her black protest dances (which were of the modern dance genre) were undisciplined; they were not taut and economic in expressing the emotional richness of her race. In other words, she simply wasn't a good modern dancer. With all these doors closed to her the only narrow space for Primus to squeeze through in her search for artistic identity was—as Balcom vaguely put it—to blend her racial memory and individual awareness, to realistically understand audience preconceptions, to speak for her race in contemporary terms with passion and discipline.[24]

In an interview prior to the Broadway debut that inspired Balcom's lengthy commentary, Primus spoke of the deep places where she sought

her inspiration. Her words revealed the particularly poetic and spiritual sensibility that would characterize her writing and her artistry throughout the years.

> I see Africa as the continent of strength; it is a place with ancient civilizations, civilizations wrecked and destroyed by the slave-seekers. I know an Africa that gave the world the iron on which now it moves, an Africa of nations, dynasties, cultures, languages, great migrations, powerful movements, slavery . . . all that makes life itself. This strength, this past, I try to get into my dances. . . . And when I think of my people here in America too, I see something that they have to see clearer, that whites have to know about. I see the long road we have trod, the movements for freedom we have been in, from the slave revolts that dot our early history, up to our participation in the Revolutionary War.[25]

Shortly after her Broadway debut, Primus presented a concert at the Roxy Theatre in December 1944. She re-choreographed her solo *African Ceremonial* for an expanded group of fourteen dancers. Martin found the opening passage for the ensemble so "striking and vital" that he was all the more impressed with Primus's ability to match its dynamism in a solo section for herself.[26] Primus used the Roxy's huge stage effectively by having her dancers move up and down ramps and by performing a solo for herself atop a high altar from which she dramatically descended at the conclusion.

During the next year, Primus collaborated with several other artists on joint concerts. *India-Haiti-Africa* was a multi-ethnic program that she shared with Hadassah and Josephine Premice at Times Hall in January 1945; and in February she appeared with her former teacher, Charles Weidman, in a joint concert at the Central High School of Needle Trades.

Her first appearance in a Broadway musical took place the following year in a revival of *Show Boat*, choreographed by Helen Tamiris. Adapted from a novel by Edna Ferber, with memorable music by Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein, this American musical classic had been produced in 1927 and again in 1932. When it opened to glowing reviews at the Ziegfeld Theatre in January, Primus was a featured soloist in two production numbers—*No Shoes* and *Dance of the Dahomeys*. The show ran for most of that year and then began touring. During the early part of the tour, at a time when Tamiris was unavailable to re-stage the choreography, Primus successfully took over the job.

Primus was not able to give her full attention to her concert appearances while she was working on *Show Boat*. Consequently, she left the show to begin a national concert tour. Beginning in November 1946, the tour took her to southern, northeastern, and midwestern colleges and concert halls. Her repertoire included several new dances such as *To One Dead*, a solo for herself, and *Myth*, based on a Melanesian version of the Pygmalion story. The latter dance was performed by Joe Nash and Jacqueline Hairston, the other two members of Primus's small touring company. She also re-choreographed her solos *Afro-Haitian Play Dance* and *Caribbean Conga* for Hairston and Nash. Both dancers complemented Primus by reflecting her vital energy and dramatic style. During the tour, when the company performed in Boston at Jordan Hall on January 17, 1947, the two were spoken of as "dancers of grace, style and variety, able, like Miss Primus, to go from capricious foolery to impressive symbolism."[27]

After concluding her tour, which consisted of some twenty-five concerts, Primus was invited by Ruth Page to dance in a 1947 revival of the opera *The Emperor Jones*. She danced Hemsley Winfield's witch doctor role, and Lawrence Tibbett recreated his role of Brutus Jones.[28] She also appeared at Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival in early August of the same year and presented several new works—an Afro-Cuban *Santos* and two spirituals, *Goin' to Tell God All My Troubles* and *In That Great Gettin'-up Mornin'*.[29]

Primus tried her hand at choreographing a Broadway show in late 1947. Between its October previews in Philadelphia and its opening at New York's International Theatre on December 5, the show went through several name changes. First it was called *Calypso*, then *Bongo*, and finally *Caribbean Carnival*. The indecision about the show's title apparently paralleled the indecision about what it was supposed to be. Brooks Atkinson said the production (which was billed as "the first Calypso musical ever presented") could not make up its mind whether it was a musical show or a dance recital.[30]

Atkinson praised the dancing in the show for being "accomplished and original." He particularly liked the Haitian ritual dances that comprised most of the second act.[31] The show had a strong cast led by Primus and Claude Marchant, with additional support from Josephine Premice, but its weak libretto kept it from achieving much success. *Caribbean Carnival* closed after only eleven performances.

Her lack of success as a Broadway choreographer was soon overshadowed by the turn of events that would lead Primus into the next phase of her career. She had applied for a Rosenwald Fellowship in hopes of acquiring funds to help her keep her company together and continue to build a repertoire. Her application had been turned down because the foundation had recently ceased its philanthropic activities. Just by chance, after a performance at Fisk University, Primus was approached by Dr. Edwin Embree, the president of the Rosenwald Foundation. He asked her when she had last traveled to Africa. Amazed to find that she had never been there, he initiated a chain of events that rectified that situation. In spite of the organization's dormancy, he arranged to make an exception for her so that she could receive a grant—the foundation's last and largest—to study and live in Africa for approximately a year.

After a return engagement at Cafe Society, Primus began a journey in December 1948 that took her to Nigeria, Liberia, Senegal, Angola, the Gold Coast, the Belgian Congo, and French Equatorial Africa. A young black woman (she was twenty-nine years old) traveling through Africa alone in search of her spiritual and aesthetic roots must have been an exceptional sight. Primus studied the dances of more than thirty ethnic groups. Since beginning her studies of anthropology at Columbia University several years earlier, she had become familiar with field research techniques, which included the use of still photography, motion pictures, and line sketches. When she was permitted, she took part in the tribal dances and studied with experts in the countries she visited.

The most striking validation of the kinship between her own dancing and the dances of Africa could not, however, be detailed in the languages of the body sciences, or ballet, or modern dance, which she also used to help record her observations of movement. It could not be measured by the techniques of the social scientist. It was most accurately reflected in the personal responses she received from the people with whom she lived and studied. The people she visited were amazed at the similarities between her dancing and their own; they believed her to be an ancestral spirit. In Nigeria she was called "Omowale" (child returned home). Her approach was heralded from village to village by talking drums that announced, "Little Fast Feet is on her way."[32]

In her own mind, the questions detractors such as Balcom posed concerning the authenticity of her dancing soon faded as she discovered the tremendous variety of movement in African dance. Although there were some dance patterns that were common in many areas, she found that there were also major dance distinctions among ethnic groups that existed within a few miles of each other.[33] There was no all-inclusive African dance style or technique that could be used as an easy reference to summarily include or exclude a dance as being "authentic" or not. To do so was simply inaccurate.

She found that the people of Africa used their bodies to convey every conceivable emotion and to amplify the major events of their communities as well as the minor occurrences in their everyday lives. "The result," she said, "is a strange but hypnotic marriage between life and dance."[34] There were "abstract ceremonials, fertility dances, dances of the aristocracy, children's dances, and dances of birth, puberty, death, and motherhood. Acrobatic, social, hunting dances were to be found, as well as ballets narrating story and legend, ecstatic dances, humorous dances and many others."[35]

She learned the distinctions between the traditions of trained African performers and those individuals who "just danced." The latter group included villagers who had learned ritual dances when they were children; later, they continued to dance because they enjoyed "speaking with their bodies."[36] Professional dancers, on the other hand, had been trained from childhood and apprenticed to master dancers. They learned traditional dances with exact precision and then were encouraged to elaborate upon the tradition through their own individuality: "The young dancer is taught his purpose, his function. He is told that he is not one, but that he is the entire tribe. His body is an instrument with which he can speak for his tribe and through which God can speak. This body must not be abused, but must be kept in readiness at all times."[37]

Through corresponding with John Martin, Primus was able to convey her impressions of Africa to people back home. Several months after she had departed, he published excerpts from one of her letters in the *Times*. "Their dancing," she wrote, "is losing the strength and freshness which they claim my dancing has." After reporting that many of the traditional dance forms were dying out, she continued: "I am for-

tunate to be able to salvage the still existent gems of dance before they, too, fade. . . . In many places I started movements to make the dance again important. . . . I saw dances which had not been done for twenty-five years; I saw some which will not be seen again for twenty years."[38]

Primus's travels in Africa had significant effects on the direction of her career. When she returned to America, her activities such as teaching and conducting lecture-demonstrations took on a new importance as she began sharing her rich experiences. In lecture-demonstrations such as *Dark Rhythms*, she used a small ensemble of performers to present Caribbean and African dances, gave informative talks about the cultures they represented, and spoke of the cultural continuum of the black diaspora. This format became an important part of her programming throughout the balance of her career.[39]

On the concert stage, she returned to using a male ensemble to capture the vitality of the dances she had seen, and she used her firsthand experiences of African dancing to create new works. There was *Fanga*, based on a dance of welcome from Liberia, *Egbo Esakpade*, which reflected the elegant court dances of Benin, and a dance that featured tribal masks, *The Initiation*. She also began combining individual dances into suites, such as *Excerpts from an African Journey*; these made stronger statements as theater pieces than the shorter, unrelated dances she had formerly presented.

She reserved one of the dances she had learned in Africa, *Impinyuza*, as a solo for herself. The dance was usually performed by towering Watusi warriors, but performing it had a special meaning for her because it had been taught to her by the king of the Watusi, who adopted her as his chief dancer. In a later interview, she described the religious significance of the stately dance that reenacts how the Creator strode upon the earth: "Where He walked, the earth, being soft and new, sank in. What stayed up were the hills and the mountains. Where His feet went were the valleys; the rivers sprang behind Him. . . . And that is what they are dancing about."[40]

In 1951, Primus embarked on a series of international tours. That year, again appearing with an ensemble of male dancers, she performed in London at the Prince's Theatre in November. The critic Cyril Beaumont found her dances ethnologically interesting but less successful as spectacle.[41] While in London she appeared before King George VI,

and her European tour also took her to France, Italy, and Finland. In 1952 she toured Israel, where she and her company danced in theaters, for the armed forces, in settlements, and in immigration camps.[42]

After touring, Primus returned to her solo concert work and her anthropological studies, which took her to the West Indies in 1953. The time she spent in Trinidad was fortuitous in several ways. She was able to reestablish her ties with the Caribbean dancer and teacher Belle Rosette, with whom she had studied at the New Dance Group ten years earlier; and she met Percival Borde, a strikingly handsome Trinidadian dancer whom she married the following year. Together they began a long and fruitful collaboration that combined their artistic, educational, and administrative skills.

Primus spent the late 1950s appearing with her husband in their dance company, giving solo concerts from time to time, and continuing her work toward a doctoral degree that she had begun in 1953 in the Department of Educational Sociology and Anthropology at New York University's School of Education. During the next decade, she made several more trips to Africa; the most important of these was a two-year stay in Liberia that began in October 1959.

Under the sponsorship of the Joint Liberian–United States Commission for Economic Development, she and her husband were asked to establish and direct the African Arts Center in Monrovia, a project that was the first of its kind in Africa. They engaged in collecting and preserving dance material, teaching, and organizing professional performances.[43] Even though Primus had spoken of a tradition of professional dancers in recounting her earlier African experiences, there was no established performance tradition in the Western theatrical sense; consequently, part of her job was to create audience interest in indigenous art forms. Where these forms still existed, they were often taken for granted because they were such an integral part of the fabric of the people's lives. Primus felt that African cultural traditions had to be revitalized, nurtured, and recast in a Western theatrical mode so that they could survive the growing Westernization of African society. Primus and Borde were given free reign to structure the arts center as they saw fit. They gave their first public performance in March 1960 at the Monrovia City Hall where they performed along with dancers, drummers, and mimes from different Liberian ethnic groups.[44]

After ten months in Liberia, Primus returned to New York briefly, and John Martin published a lengthy article about the work she and her husband were doing. Quoting from a Monrovian newspaper, he stressed the fact that the Liberian government was behind the project completely:

> Africa has declared in no uncertain manner her avowed determination to speak for herself in all political affairs. Now, more than ever in the history of Africa, the need arises for the expression of her cultural heritage. This Liberia was wise enough to realize, for only through a people's culture can they really be understood. . . . As the oldest republic in Africa, Liberia is justly proud of her pioneering role and rightly deserves the honor of inaugurating this symbolic trend of interpretative expression of the human body.[45]

Upon completing their work in Africa, Primus and Borde returned to New York and opened the Primus-Borde School of Primal Dance on West Twenty-fourth Street. During the late 1960s and the 1970s, Primus taught at several educational institutions in the New York area and became involved in a number of special projects. One such project, sponsored by the U.S. Office of Education and the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, introduced hundreds of elementary school children in New York City to the dances, music, and culture of Africa. The program stressed the importance of movement and dance as an educational tool that related to young people's overall learning abilities. This particular program was one of her special loves, reflecting her lifelong interest in conveying the importance of black culture to her own generation and to ensuing generations. It was also part of her final requirements for completing her Ph.D.

During the 1970s, Primus revived one of her dances, *The Wedding*, for the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre. In 1979, though basically retired as a performer, she danced on a program—also produced by Ailey—that honored black dance pioneers. In 1981, she appeared in one of her last concerts at the Theatre of the Riverside Church. A version of *Impinyuza* that was adapted for the men of the Ailey company was performed in 1990.

In some ways Primus's career seems enigmatic. At the height of her concert appearances, she was considered one of the most exciting dancers of her time. Her dynamism, dramatic flair, and kinetic magnetism were incomparable. The swiftness with which she caught the attention of critics and audiences indicated a special talent and charisma that distinguished her from other dancers of the 1940s. Yet she did not establish a long-lasting school or company. Perhaps the reasons she did not can best be found in the austere nature of her personality. In her approach to her work over the years, one perceives an extremely serious individual focused upon an artistic intent and engaged in a journey of cultural self-discovery that must be primarily undertaken alone:

> My career has been a quest . . . a search for roots. The journey has taken me deep into the cultures of many people in many countries of the world.
>
> Dance has been my vehicle. Dance has been my language, my strength. In the dance I have confided my most secret thoughts and shared the inner music of all mankind. I have danced across mountains and deserts, ancient rivers and oceans and slipped through the boundaries of time and space.[46]

One senses that she was a woman of a solitary, uncompromising nature who was not prepared to bend the integrity of her work to fit the exigencies of passing trends. On the other hand, neither her race nor her subject matter permitted her work to fit easily into the definitions of modern dance that were current during the 1940s and 1950s.

Through her unique personal and artistic style, however, Pearl Primus did create modern dances that captured the contemporaneous concerns of African Americans. She created West Indian dances that reflected another aspect of her heritage, and she created dances that were ultimately informed by her deep and loving involvement with the people of Africa.

In a sense, the movement in black concert dance from the 1920s through the 1940s had come full circle. There had been artists who had discovered their African and Caribbean dance roots either through research in whatever resources were available (books, photographs, museums) or by studying with Africans and West Indians who were in the United States. Dunham and Primus explored these roots by submerging themselves in the cultures where the dances were still a living tradition. There had also been a native African, Asadata Dafo-

ra, who brought his continent's rich cultural heritage to America and actively disseminated its elements to the American public. There had been African Americans who struggled to find kinship with the American modern dance movement. Most of the artists discussed here drew upon the vernacular roots of urban and rural American black dance traditions to enrich their choreography.

The resources these artists used in establishing their individual aesthetics were intertwined in elaborate ways. Artists' interpretations of African dances were informed by movement styles that could be traced to their African heritage. Afro-Caribbean dances drew part of their structure from European court and folk dances. Modern dance influences contributed their own kind of primal movement explorations.

In Primus—born in Trinidad, steeped in African-American and European-American culture, long a resident in Africa seeking the creative and spiritual font of the black diaspora—we find a fitting symbol of the circuitous ways in which black artists validated their individual existence and the existence of their people, their heritage, and their culture.

8

1950s–1990s: An Overview

THE ARTISTS DISCUSSED IN THE PRECEDING CHAPTERS made their marks on the concert dance stage as individual performers and choreographers, and each made distinctive contributions to the early development of African-American concert dance. Yet, when we look back on their achievements, from a perspective broadened by the intervening years, we can see more clearly the interrelationships between their individual works and the pattern that they form. We can also begin to assess their influences as a group of seminal artists whose innovations contributed to both art and culture in America. These artists established an ongoing tradition of their own while advancing the broader traditions of theatrical concert dance.

Among the distinctive features that define these artists as a group, their uses of thematic material, movement vocabularies, and music gleaned from the cultures of the African diaspora stand out as important aesthetic elements that these dancers brought to the concert stage for the first time. As innovators in this area, they developed syncretic processes of presenting vernacular, ritual, and folk material within a framework of European-American theatrical practices in an attempt to change perceptions about the aesthetic value of black dance and to focus positive attention on the beauty of the cultures they drew upon. In this respect, the artists shared an additional distinctive approach to

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