

## Dance With Us: Virginia Tanner, Mormonism, and Humphrey's Utah Legacy

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**\*\*\*Note: Figures may be missing from this format of the document**

Dance critic Walter Terry was in the audience the evening of Rosalind Pierson's last, glorious performance with Virginia Tanner's Children's Dance Theatre (CDT). In his review for the *New York Herald Tribune* of that July 1953 Jacob's Pillow performance, Terry discussed the girls' connections to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, described the outdoor performance setting, the program, and the children as "wonderfully disciplined yet gloriously free in movement." He concluded his performance description with this paragraph:

Other children have danced such themes and there are other children ... who have performed with ... far more precociousness of a technical nature but none, I think, have conveyed so perfectly the bright (not pallid) purity of child-dance. It is difficult to describe even the most potent intangibles and the best I can do is to say that the children danced as if they had faith in themselves, had love for those of us who were seeing them, actively believed in their God and rejoiced in all of these. (Terry 1953)<sup>1</sup>

The "potent intangibles" that Walter Terry wanted to describe—those feelings of faith, love, belief, and joy—pervaded the work of Virginia Tanner and her Children's Dance Theatre, especially in the years prior to 1960.

I began my research on Virginia Tanner with an interest in understanding her legacy from Doris Humphrey and her role in building a still visible Humphrey tradition in Utah.

While that interest remains evident in this essay, I found myself, like Walter Terry, deeply struck by the dancing of Tanner's children. I wanted to understand the beliefs and practices that molded and inspired those young dancers, as I, too, experienced Terry's "potent intangibles" while watching a 1954 Tanner teaching film, *Dance With Us*. To explain the children's powerful performances, I explore Tanner's personal life and training, especially with Doris Humphrey, the cultural and religious ideals that shaped Tanner and supported her work with children, her choreography and teaching in relation to the film *Dance With Us*, and finally her role as mentor. This essay might also be seen as an exploration of the engagement in performance that Tanner fostered in a young Rosalind Pierson and that was so evident in all her young dancers.

Pierson and I both seek to explain the magic of and produced by Tanner's teaching, but our texts—a memoir and a research paper—are distinct. Pierson writes from the warmth and certainty of her own experience, her memories perhaps stimulated or affirmed by research (see pp 14-16). Her account makes it clear that a memory is not just a mental picture but a remembering (derived from the Latin *membrum*, rather than *memor*) of experience, a calling up and inner restatement of sensory, somatic, and emotional experience. I write from the more distanced perspective of a researcher struggling with several kinds of documentation. I include more voices in my text, especially those of the Tanner students I interviewed or whose words are preserved in letters to her, now housed in the Virginia Tanner Papers, 1945-1979, in the Special Collections of the Jackson Library at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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Although my text is devoid of personal memories, memory was important to my understanding of the connections between Tanner and Humphrey. I see Tanner's learning of Humphrey dances as pivotal to her work with children, especially to her realization that dancing could be a profound affirmation of community and of spirit. Reading that Tanner learned a particular Humphrey work, or watching Tanner's children perform the leaps and falls of Humphrey technique, conjured up my own knowledge of the close-knit feeling of the group within some Humphrey dances and the physical commitment required to perform her movement. Those moments when I could dance along with Tanner and her children were the most joyous experiences of this research. These were not moments of empathy, but moments when sympathetic feeling triggered an assessment of difference, a consideration of what the dancing might mean if experienced in another era by people whose religious precepts and cultural priorities were different from my own.

In this research, I consider modern dance not only as an artistic practice, but as an American cultural tradition with strong regional variations and a socializing purpose. I have not emphasized Tanner's work as individually expressive, but as expressive of community values and religious belief.<sup>2</sup> Tanner did not disentangle the education of young people from the training of dancers. Dancing was a means of belonging, of learning to cooperate, of giving to community, and, as Pierson suggests, a "testament to growth." Being a Tanner dancer gave children a valued place in the Salt Lake City community, but it also set them apart and connected them to a world beyond the boundaries of home and hometown. Tanner dancers traveled, made connections with other dancers around the country, and enjoyed the example of a nationally recognized professional woman. My conception of modern dance history shifted in this research from a movement initiated by a few avant-garde artists living in New York to a movement nurtured by dancers, choreographers, and teachers living all over America, linked together through summer workshops and touring.

## **Background**

Virginia Tanner first studied modern dance in Washington, D.C., with Evelyn Davis. In 1933, at age eighteen, she had moved to Washington to work as a governess for a family from Salt Lake City. Inspired by Davis's dancing in a production of *Alice in Wonderland*, Tanner began taking classes from her twice a week in the evenings. The studio was located far from her home and Tanner covered the distance by rollerskating two miles to a bus stop, then taking the bus to her three-hour class (Stowe 1978). She began teaching children in Davis's studio and became a member of the Davis Dance Ensemble in 1935. Tanner later remembered Davis's classes as "soul giving" experiences that mended some of her uncertainties about her tall, angular body. She also credited Davis with being her main source of inspiration in teaching children (*Dance and the Child* 1978; Forsberg 1978, E3).

In 1933 Davis was twenty-nine, teaching in her own studio and performing with her group in the Washington area. Elizabeth Burtner, a George Washington University dance faculty member who performed in Davis's company for many years, describes her as "a Humphrey-Weidman-Graham peer" (1998). While Davis must have had extensive training, I can establish only some work with Denishawn before this period, and a connection to the Humphrey-Weidman company suggested by the fact that dancers from that company frequently served as teachers for Davis's summer dance program at the Colorado State College of Education in Greeley. Davis would go on to study with Martha Graham at Bennington College and Mary Wigman in Germany, found the Evelyn Davis Dance Playhouse, a pioneering studio theater in Washington, D.C., and establish summer dance programs at American University and the University of Maryland, in addition to her Greeley program (*Dance Magazine* 1984; Scanlon 1941). Davis, who taught all ages in her Washington studio and later published dance books for children, may have been particularly adept at developing age-appropriate movement activities.

Tanner returned to Salt Lake City in 1935 when her father became ill. She studied with Davis, Charles Weidman, and John Martin in Greeley that summer, serving Davis as lead dancer and rehearsal mistress. While in Greeley, she learned that Doris Humphrey was teaching at the Perry-Mansfield summer dance program in Steamboat Springs and took a bus there as soon as her Greeley classes ended. With ten dollars and a bus ticket to Salt Lake in her purse, Tanner had to work in the dining room and sew costumes to study at Perry-Mansfield.

She spent the next three weeks working with Humphrey and performing in Humphrey's *Shakers* and *To the Dance*. In 1936 and 1937, Tanner attended the University of Utah, studying to be a high school teacher, and began to establish herself as a children's dance teacher, teaching at home and at the McCune School of Music and Arts. She returned to Perry-Mansfield in the summers (Forsberg 1978, E3; Manley with Lee She returned to Perry-Mansfield in the summers (Forsberg 1978, E3; Manley with Lee 1991, 214-217; Stowe 1978).

Descriptions and photographs from this time in her life suggest Tanner's professional and personal pulls and give a sense of her personality. In one description, Tanner is a teacher of children and a nice Mormon girl. Mildred Dickinson knew Tanner at Perry-Mansfield:

I remember one summer she brought four or five young girls with her to the camp. She arranged one day for lunch that we go down a steep hill to have sandwiches. We moved the steep rocks around to form a circle and we sat around and sang Mormon hymns. That is just one of the things that Virginia did that was so warm and wonderful.... Some dancers are just dancers and not people. Virginia has always been both. (Quoted in Forsberg 1978, E3)

One image particularly important to Tanner is of her as the consummate 1930s modern dancer: in photographs taken outdoors at Perry-Mansfield she is captured with dark hair and long skirt flying as she spirals through a turn or falls from a long suspension. (plate 1) In other descriptions, Tanner is skating down Washington streets or running between multiple jobs to support her dancing, youthful suggestions of the determination and fearlessness that students would later find absolute and awe-inspiring.

My favorite image of Tanner from this period is not something I have seen but imagine based on my research, an image of her in the dark dress and white mobcap from Humphrey's *Shakers*. I can find no indication that Tanner found her experience of performing *Shakers* that first summer at Perry-Mansfield meaningful. I do not know if she knew of the connections or important differences between the Shakers and Mormons as nineteenth-century utopian communities. My mental image of this Mormon girl dancing *Shakers*, performing the vigorous jumps and falls to the knees of Humphrey's dance, suggests the seeds of what Tanner eventually accomplished with her children. Tanner's dance was not religious dancing per se, but theatrical dancing fueled with a tremendous passion and with the knowledge that dancing can both be its own religion and operate affirmingly within a religious community.

In November 1937 Tanner received a letter from Pauline Lawrence, asking her to find a Salt Lake City booking for Humphrey-Weidman during a cross-country tour. Tanner signed a contract with the company herself, booking them for a performance just months away—February 1938—and guaranteeing them \$1,000. Tanner rented a high school auditorium and mounted a publicity campaign that sold out the house. Impressed by Tanner's industry, Humphrey offered her a standing scholarship at the Humphrey-Weidman studio. After a summer studying in Greeley with Davis and Limón, teaching at Perry-Mansfield under Humphrey's and Weidman's supervision, and working on a special project for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Tanner left for New York.

## **PICTURE IS OMITTED FROM THIS FORMATTED DOCUMENT**

Tanner lived with her sister in Scarsdale and commuted into the city to study at the 18th Street Humphrey-Weidman studio. She took over Humphrey's classes at the Friends School, and assisted Weidman teaching at Bryn Mawr and Temple, taking over for him when the company went on tour. After a two-year stay in New York, Tanner returned home. She reentered the education program at the University of Utah in the fall of 1940 at the age of twenty-five, completing her undergraduate degree and obtaining her teaching certificate the following spring (Forsberg 1978, E3; Manley with Lee 1991, 214-217; Stowe 1978).

Looking back on her decision to leave New York, Tanner would tell interviewers that she knew that her gifts lay in teaching, or that she disliked the poverty of the New York dance life, or that she was frustrated with a body that could not be made "brilliant" (*Dance and the Child* 1978; Forsberg 1978, B3; Stowe 1978). But other

Utah dancers have offered an explanation that seems truer to the mark. For Tanner, Salt Lake City must have provided a sense of community and an opportunity to go forward in dance in her own way. A professional dance career was probably as suspect in Salt Lake City as it was elsewhere in America in the 1930s. When Tanner was in New York, one of her aunts recommended that Tanner's father "get that girl home, she's going to be a disgrace to the family" (Stowe 1978). But Mormons pride themselves on a history of social dancing and involvement with the arts. The fact that Brigham Young built a theater in Salt Lake City before he completed the temple is a favorite piece of local lore. The citizens of Salt Lake City may have been more open to community-based modern dance than many places, especially a modern dance that recognized their own values and interests (Smith 1997).

Tanner worked briefly as a high school teacher, but her real work was in dance. She became director of the children's dance program at the McCune school, danced with Modern Dance Theatre, an adult company based in Salt Lake City, taught at Perry-Mansfield in the summers, and choreographed dances for local shows.<sup>3</sup> Children's Dance Theatre, a performing company drawn from her McCune school students, was formed in 1949. Doris Humphrey was guest of honor at CDT's premiere, coming to Salt Lake City a week early to watch classes.

In a December 1949 article in *Dance Magazine*, Tanner reports that the children "danced about beautiful and simple things contained in their own worlds, taking ideas from both the real and the fantastic" (Tanner 1949). The evening began with forty children, dressed in simple tunics, in a technique demonstration. Smaller groups danced to poetry and to music composed for the group by Ernest Bloch. Other works included an adaptation of a folk tale, entitled *My Mother is the Most Beautiful Woman in the World*, and an adaptation of Margaret Wise Brown's *A Child's Good Night Book*, entitled *Good Night for Children*. The cast included Lola Huth, future member of the José Limón Dance Company, Linda C. Smith, future artistic director of Utah's Repertory Dance Theatre, and Rosalind Pierson, future dance faculty member at Ohio State University. Tanner's children appeared on the issue's cover.

When Humphrey returned to New York, she sent Tanner a note of congratulations, stating that "your children offer a wonderful proof of the power of the young artist, guided wisely, untarnished by dogma or routine, unstereotyped and lovely. This source of fresh ideas in dance-art is a treasure house to which you have found the key" (quoted in *Tribute* 1978). Humphrey later sent Tanner a children's book, *The Buttermilk Tree*, suggesting that Tanner use it as the basis for a dance. That work became one of Tanner's most successful, choreographed in the 1950s and redone for a Tanner celebration in the 1970s.

The dancing that Humphrey must have seen emerging in 1949 was in full bloom by the 1953 trip east and the 1954 filming of *Dance With Us*. A mixture of cultural and religious factors, a particular approach to moving, and Tanner's gifts as teacher, choreographer, and mentor nurtured the young dancers.

### **Dance and Mormon Belief**

Six aspects of Mormonism—religious and cultural—help to explain the spirit conveyed by Tanner's dancers. The first is the expectation that religious principles be acted upon in everyday life. When they went to Utah in the 1800s, the Mormons set up a political kingdom, one they literally thought would be the kingdom of God. There was no separation of church and state, religious and secular life, or political, intellectual, and religious thought. Everything moved from LDS teachings, including the collective economic system and the practice of plural marriage. While Salt Lake City grew increasingly pluralistic in the twentieth century, Mormons still organized their lives around religious principles in a particularly open and culturally expected way.<sup>4</sup>

While Mormonism was not Tanner's teaching focus, some dancers found her beliefs apparent in the studio. A student named Suzanne remembers a fairly direct connection between Tanner's teaching and religion. In a note to Tanner, she states, "Thank you so very much for providing an atmosphere for all children, but especially, for the smaller number of us who spent such a large portion of our formative years in your care, where Gospel principles were not only

honored, but surely taught. Where prayer was relied upon, faith exercised, where kindness and generosity could unfailingly be found, and where integrity and purity abided" (1978). Marilyn Berrett, a faculty member in the Dance Program at Brigham Young University and Tanner student, sees strong connections between LDS ideals and Humphrey's and Tanner's work:

I think the ideals of faith, hope, charity, service, and reverence are implied and demonstrated in both Humphrey and Tanner choreography. Humphrey's *Passacaglia* and Tanner's *Woman the Pioneer* are two examples. The ideals of kindness, the worth of the individual, and the steadfast belief that we are all children of a loving Heavenly Father and therefore brothers and sisters were inherent in the Tanner studio. They weren't preached as religious doctrine but they were there, a part of the atmosphere in every dance class.