at heterosexual behaviors, for example, the gay world fares no better. Eddie makes no secret of his disdain for the hypocrisy of his closeted acquaintances; for example, in one scene Newson frames a trio of shadowy figures in a dance of "gents" as they head inside a seedy public restroom, seeking covert pleasure. Like Eddie himself, Newson takes on all comers—exposing duplicity, holding a critical mirror to social conventions, to desire, to the hegemony of scopic systems, to the predatory nature of employment and the multiple complexities of relationship. In the end, however, there is hope in the few friendships that endure, including the central one between Eddie and David. Against the gentle waters that rinse onto the saffron shores of the deserted resort, the two men relax side by side in a pair of beach chairs, then rise to form a final, profound image. Eddie takes to all fours, hoisting David upon his back, and they lumber along together with casual talk of future plans as their profiles combine to fashion the shape of one whole man from two truncated selves.

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Reconstructing Weidman: A Dancer's Perspective

Biography

Charles Weidman wrote the following biography and used it for promotional purposes while directing Expression of Two Arts Theatre and subsequently Charles Weidman and His Theatre Dance Company from 1960 until his death in 1975. The original spelling and syntax have been maintained. Weidman's infamous wit and whimsy are evident and unmistakable even here:

> Born in Lincoln, Nebraska. His father was Chief of the fire department there, and later Chief of all fire departments in the Canal Zone during its building. His mother (from Sioux City Iowa) was, at one time, champion roller skater of the middle west. In Lincoln, he studied with Eleanor Frampton (who later represented Humphrey-Weidman dance at the Cleveland Institute for Music in Cleveland Ohio).
>
> In 1920, he left for Los Angeles to study at Denishawn (school of Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn). His first teacher there was Doris Humphrey. Martha Graham (who he did not meet at the time) was rehearsing a Taltic Ballet of Ted Shawn's—"Xochitl." He didn't finish his summer course because the leading male dancer (Robert Gorham) had an accident and Weidman was sent up to Tacoma, Wash., to replace him.
>
> Was with Denishawn for eight years touring this country, England, and a year and a half in the Orient.
>
> Among successful dances at that time were "The Crapshooter" (solo), "Dance American" (solo), and "Dance Arabe," a duet with Martha Graham.
>
> In 1929, with Doris Humphrey, established their own school and the Humphrey-Weidman Concert Company. Many famous moderns were part of that company—Such as Jose Limon, Jack Cole, Sybil Shearer, Eleanor King, Katherine Litz, Harriette Ann Gray, Ann Halpern, Frank Westbrook, and others.
>
> In 1948, due to Doris Humphrey's retirement as a dancer, he formed his own company. Using narration, he called it "Theatre Dance." Of his dancers and students are Bob Fosse, Toni Charmoli, Lee Sherman, Emily Frankel and Mark Ryder, Peter Hamilton, Marge Champion, Melissa Hayden and others.
>
> And he has worked with Mia Slavenska, Leon Danielian, Viola Essen, Alicia Nikitina, and others.
>
> Besides the concert work and tours, he

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choreographed the following Broadway shows—Norman Bel Geddes'"Lysistrata," also his production of "Hamlet," "Life Begins at 8:40," "I'd Rather Be Right," "As Thousands Cheer," "Sing Out Sweet Land" and "New Faces."

He has danced with the New York Philharmonic, Philadelphia and Cleveland symphony orchestras—then later dancing again with Martha Graham to Strauss' "Ein Heldenleiben" and "Loeffler's "Pagan Poem."

Was for three years choreographer for the New York City Center Opera Company. His choreography contributed to many of the company's successes in such operas as—Prokofiev's "Love for Three Oranges," Puccini's "Turandot," Giordano's "Andrea Cheneau" and Wolf Ferrari's "The Ruffians."Was persuaded by Leopold Sasche to mime the role of Leopold (the bastard son the Baron Ochs) in "Die Rosenkavelier."

Besides retaining his own studio, he has taught in innumerable colleges throughout the country, including Columbia, N.Y.C., Temple University in Philadelphia, Miami University in Coral Gables, Fla., Bennington College in Vermont, and just recently San Francisco City College in California.

Also is a member of the houses of Koshiko Matsumoto and Mme. Fujima of Kubaki—and has his coolie coat to prove it. (Weidman, n.d. a)

It is curious that Weidman chose not to mention his modern choreography. One of the fabled "four pioneers" of the American moderns, Weidman produced modern dance throughout his career. Indeed, his association with Doris Humphrey and the entire Humphrey-Weidman era produced dances of striking beauty and social import that are performed to this day. After the Humphrey-Weidman Company disbanded, Weidman, after a period of personal hardship and introspection, emerged again as a profound artist/choreographer. From this resurgence until his death in July of 1975, Weidman continued to create important works, and some say, not surprisingly, that in his maturity many of his new creations surpassed in composition and beauty the works of his younger years, for which he is most known.

Unfortunately, many of these works went almost unnoticed. Weidman was creating works of modern dance, and postmodernism was predominant in the dance world at the time. The world wanted something new, something untried, and Weidman was making dances in the "old" style, which did not enjoy popularity at the time, though there were many who still believed in him and his ability to create dances. It is the purpose of this article to focus on one of the works he made during this time, *Christmas Oratorio,* an enigmatic work of dance theater that has yet to receive its due. It is a work magnificent in its scope and power and is arguably Mr. Weidman's master opus (Carr 2005, Mee 2005, and Murphy 2005).

Premiere of *Christmas Oratorio*

On December 8, 1961, Charles Weidman and Mikhail Santaro premiered Bach's *Christmas Oratorio* at the Weidman-Santaro studio at 102 West 29th St., New York City. The choreography was by Weidman, with the sets and lighting provided by Santaro. Partners at the time, they had established the previous year the Expression of Two Arts Theatre, incorporating dance and visual art in their own unique way. The program read: "The story of Christmas told through Dance & Dramatic sequences; through the theme of moving forms and sets." The original cast included Lauretta Abbott, Harry Bell, Lorna Benedict, Elaine Burdick, Roy Fentress, Clyde Gore, Jewell Jacobs, Ed Kalata, Carol Korty, Hilbert Rapp, Max Shufer, Dot Murphy (nee Virden), and Mr.

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Weidman (Program). Writing for the *Dance Observer* in February 1962, Ernestine Stodelle said of *Christmas Oratorio*:

> In an area that is not more than twelve feet wide by twenty feet deep, Mr. Weidman has created a new sense of depth perspective in dance forms, which usually spread themselves width-wise across the conventional stage. Without the use of tiered platforms—except in three scenes, and these for solo characters—Mr. Weidman's company of sixteen move freely and powerfully in the most compactly designed choreography this reviewer has ever seen. The lighting and setting by Mikhail Santaro refreshingly relate to the meaning behind the movement rather than to the changing patterns, thus conspiring with the music and the dance to lift the spectacle out of anchored space. (26)

This early version of *Christmas Oratorio* was at least two hours long and incorporated large group dances, solos, duets, a trio reminiscent of, if not dedicated to, Doris Humphrey, wire sculptures, and pantomime.

The dance evolved throughout the years as Weidman edited it constantly, and it remained in repertory until his death. However, after he and Santaro parted company in the late 1960s, the dance was stripped of its wire settings and only one platform was kept. It was then that Weidman fully achieved his masterpiece. Several of the sections were discarded completely, others were again reworked, and *Christmas Oratorio* came to be considered by many Weidman's masterwork (Carr 2005, Mee 2005, Murphy 2005). It did not stay confined to the studio theater on 29th Street, which Weidman maintained after Santaro's departure, when the company became Charles Weidman and His Theatre Dance Company. In a review from *Back Stage* in January of 1971, Jennie Schulman wrote:

> Bach's "Christmas Oratorio," choreographed by Charles Weidman for members of his Theatre Dance Company, was presented by the cathedral church of St. John the Divine before an audience of over two thousand. While the religious music of Bach has often influenced dancers few have come close to visualizing the magnitude of the Weidman creation. His inspired group of dancers in their movements and facial expressions seemed reminiscent of figures seen in masterpieces of Renaissance paintings. They held a widely diversified audience ranging from the aged down to mere tots at close attention. There were in fact a vast amount of children present and there wasn't a single sign of restlessness. A rare state indeed for a religious presentation. Surely this is the finest tribute that can be paid to the veteran dancer-choreographer-teacher, Charles Weidman. (n.p.)

Weidman did not always present the work in its entirety at the studio theater. On the contrary, he did sections of it in concerts all during the year. The company performed every Sunday evening, followed by a reception or "Wine and Cheese" in Weidman's apartment, which was in the same space but separated from the performance area.

It is worth mentioning that most of the dances he created and/or performed at the studio theater entered and exited from stage left; stage right was a wall that was curtained. One exception was *Lynchtown,* from *Atavisms* (Carr 2005). It was here that the tradition of the dancers greeting and mingling with the audience after a performance began, a tradition carried on even today by some who perform Weidman's works. The atmosphere was intimate, casual, and friendly, giving the audience the opportunity to experience Weidman and his company as people and not just as the enigmas of the stage (Mee 2005). It is

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no doubt at just such a concert that Deborah Jowitt wrote in the *Village Voice:*

> I saw the opening section of a dance set to Bach's *Christmas Oratorio.* I saw it in an impossibly small studio theatre with nine assorted dancers leaping gallantly to within an inch of the walls, but it stirred me . . . when three dancers swing into the recapitulation, you are supposed to see it and say ahhhh—Treasuring your own ability to perceive musical forms applied to dance. That's what it was all about. That, and an earthly kind of joy. (n.d., n.p.)[1]

Bach's Music

Undeniably, the gorgeous Bach score was inspirational to Weidman, so much so that he went on to choreograph two other Bach Oratorios, *Easter Oratorio* (1965) and *St. Matthew Passion* (1973), yet he compiled the actual scores for the dances himself. With *Christmas,* at least, he had six complete versions of the music on vinyl and chose music from each of them according to tempi and vocal qualities to create his score for the dance. They were recorded in the studio theater/apartment on a Wolensak reel-to-reel recorder, from which they were played for rehearsals and performances. Anyone who has ever heard Weidman's compiled score can testify that the appropriateness of the music for each section of the dance is unquestionable and that his taste was impeccable. No single version of the music could have provided him with the proper range and variety he envisioned. In addition, since it was not recorded in a soundproof environment, other sounds were recorded accidentally as well—like the unmistakable sound of a car horn accompanying Bach during the opening dance, and other occasional street sounds throughout the recording. Though they are minimal, these imperfections only add to Weidman's legendary charm, according to those who knew him, and are a testimony to his ability to create great works of art on a shoestring budget (Mee 2005).

Costumes

The costumes for *Christmas Oratorio* were another testimony to Weidman's thrift. Mary Ann Mee, who danced in the company from 1967 to 1970, described the costumes:

> We wore either all white long-sleeved leotards and (stirrup) tights, all red or all green—standard red or green, straight out of the store, nothing special. Then we all had these green buckram vests, army green, that came to the waist and had a narrow belt-type thing sewn on. One side was stitched and the other had a snap. They had a narrow neck that I would swear had wire in it. Though they didn't have sleeves, the shoulders came out into little points, like some Asian traditional clothes do. God, they were awful. Charles would tease us and call us "his little Cambodian angels." (Mee 2005)

Deborah Carr, who danced with the company from 1973 until Weidman's death in 1975, commented:

> We looked like angels from outer space or rejects from *Star Trek.* We used to beg Charles to change those costumes, but he wouldn't do it. "They're fine," he would say, and just laugh. Some of us even offered to make new costumes, but he wouldn't hear of it—so we wore those hideous green vests. (Carr 2005)

Dot Murphy, who was in the original cast of *Christmas Oratorio,* had a different perspective:

> Those vests, admittedly, weren't much to look at, but for the space they worked. They unified everyone wearing the three different

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colors of black, white, or red, and though very simple, were affective. Anything more than that in that small space would have been overpowering. (Murphy 2005)[2]

Death and Dissolution

Since Weidman's death in 1975 *Christmas Oratorio* and many of the other works he created in his studio theater have only periodically been seen and are not known to today's audiences. After Weidman's death all of his possessions—his records, scores, costumes, and most of the films of his dances—were hidden away from the world for a period of years.[3] Eventually, a few documents and some films were donated to the Dance Collection at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center. After years in which patrons had to have special permission to view anything connected to Weidman, his collections became publicly available (Carr 2005). Among the film archives are Weidman's company performing *Christmas Oratorio, Lynchtown* from *Atavisms, Brahms' Waltzes, Easter Oratorio, St. Matthew Passion,* excerpts of *Fables for Our Time, Two Kinetic Pantomimes, Saints Sinners and Scriabin,* and *Letter to Mrs. Bixby* from *A House Divided* (Carr 2005). Though a few of Weidman's works are recorded in Labanotation, most were recorded on film. Unhappy with performances of Humphrey works he had seen reconstructed from notation, Weidman preferred film (Carr 2005). Though the finale of *Christmas Oratorio* is notated, it is incorrect (Mee 2005). Weidman's works are kept, primarily, through the efforts of his former company members.

Legalities

It is pertinent here to state that all of Weidman's works made during the time of the Humphrey-Weidman Company are in the public domain; those made during the time of the Expression of Two Arts Theatre and Charles Weidman and His Theatre Dance Company are not yet old enough to fall into that category and are in a sort of "no man's land." He died suddenly, after having established a foundation in his name. However, officially, he had not yet done anything to ensure that his body of work was sustained besides giving certain works to dancers who would best perpetuate and maintain their integrity. Among the dancers given works are Dot Murphy, Carol Geneve, Mary Ann Mee, and Janet Towner. Weidman's will, which is not dated, mentions only his personal monies and his legatees—there is nothing in the will concerning his works whatsoever (Weidman n.d. b).

Reconstructions

Deborah Carr's Theatre Dance Ensemble was probably the first group to perform *Christmas Oratorio* after Weidman's death. Carr restaged the entirety of the work primarily from memory, only relying on the archival film at Lincoln Center (which did not provide much help as she was allowed to view it only once) to reconstruct the section "Glory to God in the Highest," or "Running Dance," which is its working title. Since her first production, Carr has relied on her memory as well as video of her productions for reconstructions. It has been performed many times by her company in New York City (Carr 2005). In 1987 she collaborated with Mary Ann Mee to reconstruct *Christmas Oratorio* in its entirety with Dance Central, the company Mee co-directed in Charlotte, North Carolina, for nineteen years. Afterward, Dance Central had the honor of being the only company in the world to offer annual performances of *Christmas Oratorio,* that tradition enduring from 1987 until Mee's retirement in 2003. She relied on memory and her own video

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resources for her yearly reconstructions (Mee 2005). Carr staged excerpts of this work at Skidmore College and at SUNY Geneseo during the late 1980s and most recently at Stephens College in Columbia, Missouri, where she is on the faculty (Carr 2005). In 1995 Mary Ann Mee staged excerpts for Tennessee Dance Theatre in Nashville, which was co-directed by Andrew Krischels and Donna Rizzo. Rizzo, who performed the work one summer season in Weidman's company, remembered very little (Rizzo 2005). The excerpts were performed by Tennessee Dance Theatre periodically from 1995 to 1998. Video resources were used for some reconstructions; the others were from memory. The company disbanded in 2000 (Rizzo 2005).

Description

Christmas Oratorio begins with "Praise, joy and gladness be blended in one," also known appropriately as "Opening." There are three groups on stage, with the exception of a brief introduction of the first two and their themes, which converge to bring on the third group; one group is stage left, one center, and one stage right. The men's group holds the center, while the two trios of women circle the stage to begin the first of the four main canons; the men are downstage and two women's groups are upstage. The men perform the main theme, and the two groups of women perform two different variations of that theme. The stage right dancers are called "singers" or "dee-dahs," while the stage left dancers are called "trumpets." After the second canon, when the men are upstage and the women down, the men exit stage left, as always, and the women create a corridor to begin the "adagio" section.

This section is in canon as well, but with only two parts, the women being all together with a very brief exception before the men re-enter. Once the men return, the deep lunging and bowing phrase, characterized by a highly stylized walk, is carried, still in the respective groups, around the stage until all the groups achieve unison. With a falling sweep, the men exit and the two groups of women surge to their original positions. The beginning is identically repeated and continues up until the end of the first, here actually the third, main canon. Following a brief transition that unites the groups, the two groups of women join the men in the main theme. As the final phrase or "bridge" step is completed, with the arms digging up from the sides to an inverted Gothic arch as the feet walk out into a wide second with focus up, the viewer gets a decidedly visceral impression that a bridge has been created between heaven and earth.

The united group rises from the deep *plié*, turning to face upstage in profile. With the inverted Gothic arch in tact, they execute a quiet, gliding exit, and the first of the *tableaux vivant* begins. In "And Joseph went up also from Galilee," a single male figure enters, doing yet another kind of stylized walk and carrying a large walking stick. He moves just past center and then turns upstage to face center with the walking stick directly in front of him. Slowly, he rises and falls into a side lunge left, then back to center, then to the right, back to center, and turning back to the place whence he came, exits doing the same stylized walk with the stick. The movement is simple, yet profound, and we get a brief glimpse of Joseph on his journey out of Galilee.

As Joseph exits, the evangelist appears, charging into center stage and facing front. In "Behold the bridegroom, love divine . . . thy hope is from on high," this single woman dancer pantomimes the coming of the baby Jesus. She rocks an invisible child and then points toward the star that will portend the coming of the Messiah. She does this twice,

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each time rising in a low arabesque to fall backward into a gliding run slightly back. After the second fall, she assumes the center in a two-dimensional shape—her arms raised in the Humphrey-Weidman high fifth, palms front, with the body turned front and in profile, the hips and feet parallel and facing offstage left. As she lifts to lower her arms to her sides, the simple, dramatic gesture imports an air of regal majesty to the dancer and her role.

As the evangelist alters her stance and beckons to off stage left, now facing upstage, three women appear in the same shape facing downstage—the body and head are inclined slightly to the right, arms are by their sides with palms outward, and the forward knee is bent, with the same foot in a forced arch. In this stylized shape, reminiscent of Botticelli angels, all four employ a rhythmic walk, with the evangelist exiting as the three assume upstage center. This dance, formally named after the choral title "How may I best admire thee?" but always in rehearsal referred to as "Trio," is one of the most beautiful and difficult in the whole of *Christmas Oratorio.* Choreographically it is in style more like Doris Humphrey than Weidman and indeed incorporates three phrases from her *Passacaglia*: the leaping step with the torso spiral or "high Passacaglia," the "bless the earth" or "low Passacaglia," and a side suspension falling into a small leap in second, known as "sweep the stage." For this reason, I feel this dance is dedicated to Humphrey, though there is no other evidence that it actually is. The dance requires great strength and technical prowess, as well as a mature sense of phrasing, to create a gentle yet passionate and worshipful mood.

As the "Trio" finishes upstage left, with the center figure leading the triangle (the center figure throughout the dance is featured, with the two others much like her attendants), the ensemble enters behind them, and the whole group charges downstage on the diagonal; a corridor of bodies is created and the solemn "First Chorale" takes shape (the actual title for each of the two chorales is usually not included in the program). This brief, yet impressive, section has shapes from the adagio in the opening dance, but the quality of the movement is not celebratory and is more contemplative (Figure 1). The section concludes with the ensemble gliding off stage, their bodies leaning, arms and focus extended toward the space they are leaving. They seem to speak in sympathy to the *tableaux vivant* that follows.

The evangelist (here sometimes called the prophetess, but it is usually the same person as the evangelist) appears again, and the scene "Because there was no room at the inn," or "Walking Madonna," begins. The evangelist mimes knocking on a door, then spreads her hands and crosses her arms back and forth in

Figure 1. Clay Daniel in a Dance Central production of Weidman's Christmas Oratorio. *Photo courtesy of Dance Central.*



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a gesture that is a decided "No," or here, "No room." She then lowers her head to her hands and exits with a long and sustained lunging walk, as Joseph, Mary, and the three innkeepers appear. The innkeepers walk across the back of the stage and stand, facing upstage, at quarter, center, and quarter. Joseph and Mary come forward on the upstage left—downstage right diagonal. When Joseph lowers Mary to her knees, in a place corresponding to the stage right innkeeper, he creates a cycle of going to each innkeeper and, using the same stylized knock as the evangelist, knocks and pleads for a room. The innkeeper, facing upstage and remaining anonymous, answers with the same knock, and then, spreading out the knocking hand, slowly brings it to his side, and Joseph is turned away. In between each innkeeper, Joseph goes to Mary and gently helping her from kneeling, moves her to another place on stage. Mary has her hands clasped at her belly throughout the section; we all are familiar enough with the story to know she is in labor. After Joseph is turned away from the last innkeeper and walks again to raise Mary, the innkeepers turn and exit in the reverse order that they entered. Joseph helps Mary up and walks with her to downstage center. When they arrive, Joseph gestures for help high and right, then turns and pulling Mary close to him, they walk to upstage left and exit. Though the pageantry is simple and literal, the effect is rewarding and provides a unique contrast to the dancing; it in fact denotes Weidman's consummate sense of good theater.

The next scene, "Sovereign Lord and King Almighty," or "Pictures," combines both pantomime and dance to create a thrilling theatrical effect. On a platform of some kind, usually a box with three steps, a group assembled upstage left creates different scenes in the life of Jesus, while four dancers, who introduce the scene, act as a moving screen to cover the transition between the scenes and subsequently uncover each scene anew. The scenes depicted in order are the baptism of Christ, the expulsion of the money changers from the temple, the rising of Lazarus, and the kiss of Judas. After these first four, a dance interlude sets up the second set of scenes: the crucifixion, the descent from the cross, entombment, and, finally, resurrection. The dance itself is difficult in terms of spacing; the huge rebounds and falling suspensions make it quite a task for the dancers to keep a consistent grouping, and because of different heights and lengths of legs, it is hard for all to travel the same amount. "Pictures" is immediately followed by the second, or "Tendu Chorale," which is characterized by sets of tendus and difficult off-center promenades. The music for this section is undoubtedly a driving force; the result is a noble and beautiful segue into the final *tableaux vivant.*

The final tableaux consists of two parts, beginning with the appearance of the evangelist/prophetess; but here she is an angel who appears to shepherds and tells them to follow the star to the manger in Bethlehem—"And the angel said, 'Be not afraid.'" As the shepherds begin their journey, Mary appears center stage (this can happen in a variety of ways depending on the production) and is seated, playing with the imaginary blessed infant. This section, for Mary, requires more than perhaps any other in *Christmas Oratorio* the great skill of pantomime. She can bounce the babe on her knee, wrap and unwrap the swaddling clothes, and toss the baby playfully—but she is grounded on her spot, completely stationary. While the shepherds move she is still, and, likewise, while she is playing with the infant they are motionless. Her passages are in comparison lengthy, and unless the right dancer/actress is cast, this section can weigh heavy and become dull. The phrase "The Electric Madonna" was coined at Dance Central, though I am not certain

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by whom, once when watching a cast member who did not bring anything to the role and who merely went through the motions. The term stuck, and every subsequent Mary worked diligently to avoid that label. Melissa Ritchie is pictured in Figure 2. She did an enormous amount of research in preparation for the role and she performed beautifully. Shannon Ferrell, however, wears the crown of the Madonna in my experience: she was breathtaking and held audiences in awe. As the shepherds converge on the manger, Mary gently carries the baby and shows him to each of the three shepherds, then returns to center and raises the infant to the sky to show him to the angels as well as his heavenly father. Thus concludes "Slumber, Beloved, enjoy Thy sweet rest."

"Glory to God in the Highest," or "Running Dance," rounds out the act. Accompanied by arguably the most joyous music in the entirety of *Christmas Oratorio,* small groups of dancers run across the stage in decided patterns, rhythmically swelling and charging, driven by the gorgeous music. There is a brief adagio, then the dance moves directly into another celebratory interchange between the men and women. In this section the men are stage left and a line of women are stage right. As the men pitch to the floor and spin on one knee, then begin a stylized walk around themselves with one hand on the floor, the women fall to their knees, with hands clasped in front of them, and begin a line of knee walks that turn and come across the front of the stage. The effect is almost humorous—the men are working ever-so-hard and with this simple walk on the knees and their heads held high, the women completely steal the scene. Next, all converge into a pinwheel that eventually spins everyone out to fill the stage. After a brief repetition of a theme seen earlier, all converge to do the "Weidman fall"—standing in attitude derriere with their hands clasped above their heads—the dancers slowly lower themselves to the floor by a grande plié on one leg, going forward slightly until the standing knee can touch the floor, then bringing the hands to middle fifth as the dancers slide into a front fall, with the leg in attitude extending to arabesque. They recover and finish the dance in a cluster downstage center, rising in second with reverence, reaching for the sky. "Running Dance" is the shortest group dance in *Christmas Oratorio* and is arguably one of the most satisfying.



Figure 2. Melissa Ritchie as Mary in a Dance Central production of Weidman's Christmas Oratorio. *Photo courtesy of Dance Central.*

The last act opens with "And so in dying, thou alone shall be my dearest love" and "Jesus, my delight and pastor," collectively called "Solos." Man and Echo Air appear gradually as the lights fade up during a recitative, with Man upstage center (this was Weidman's

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role) and Echo Air stage left on top of the three-stepped box. Though called "Solos," the dance is actually a one-sided duet, if you will. That is, Echo can look down and see Man suffering on earth and even comes down to comfort him, yet Man cannot see or hear Echo, though he is uplifted by her machinations. Man begins the section and is draped in a floor-length cape. His movement emanates sorrow and despair. He finishes downstage right and is still. Echo Air descends the stair and performs a stunning, six-minute solo that seems to say, "Be still and be comforted." When done, she ascends her stairs backward, no small feat when wearing a long dress, and assumes her beginning shape. Man, comforted and inspired, runs to center and performs a solo similar in movement design to his first, but with a different quality and still in his cape. The two solos are not "darkness and light," or "sad and happy"—nothing as pat as that. The first is despair and the second is hope in the face of that despair—a far greater challenge to the dancer. Man and Echo Air exit, with Man stretching his arms skyward, as if walking into the light, and Echo Air trailing behind, one hand outstretched, as if to guide him.

Out of the serious mood of the former scene comes "Let me but live to tell my story," or "Variations," like a breath of fresh air, and with it, Weidman's wit and choreographic expertise. Based on a gigue, the dance is light yet grounded, weaving group patterns with great dynamic range. As with anything called "Variations," we see previous themes reworked and adapted and new ones deftly brought into the mix. Weidman does this here with the clearest eye; nothing is wasted and nothing is inappropriate. There is a moment, just before everyone pulls up in *relevé* to face offstage left in profile, when the viewer sees nearly every variation revisited simultaneously. Instead of appearing busy or drawing your attention to one variation more so than another, we see all the variations together as parts of the same whole—the experience defies description, but it will bring a smile to all who are watching. "Variations" concludes with the main group repeating a section of the "Opening" theme, though in a different meter, while two runners, doing an earlier theme from "Variations," circle upstage left behind the main group. The group turns and kneels, facing downstage right, while the two runners stand behind them on the diagonal, arms stretched out, as if guardians or heralds. Many dancers and audience members alike consider "Variations" to be their favorite in *Christmas Oratorio,* and musicians almost invariably prefer it.

The final two sections, "What now of the terrors of hell?" and "Now are you well avenged . . . ," or "Quartet" and "Finale," are unornamented and satisfying. The "Quartet" is basically a type of postlude, consisting of four dancers who run out of the wings to make four distinctive shapes, which correspond to the four different voices in the recording. In unison, they proceed to go through all of the shapes, and swelling to a running fall they exit the stage. The "Finale," as it should, contains a summation of movement and shapes seen throughout the entire work. It is structured in canon and is really a series of choreographed bows. As the dancers grow into the final shape, reaching high, and the music swells to its final note, the viewers get a profound sense of being lifted up and of being given something rare, unique, and powerfully beautiful.

Philosophies and Personal History

I have fifteen years of experience with *Christmas Oratorio,* my first experience being as an audience member in March 1988. It never ceases to amaze and inspire me; in fact, my love for and appreciation of this rare and beau-

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tiful work constantly increases. In many ways, this love and appreciation stems from the philosophies behind the Humphrey-Weidman technique. One of the first things a beginning student should learn is that the technique cannot be mastered. It is not finite. There are no specific combinations of muscle groups or alignment practices that, when engaged, will provide you with the "right answer" or ensure a brilliant performance. It is all in the moment of being and about the risks you are willing to take. The belief that dance happens in "the arc between the two deaths," complete verticality and horizontality respectively, is a far more human concept, complete with the human desire for the ultimate in attainability and the inevitable fact of human fallibility. To learn, perform, weave, grow, and become in this arc is to realize the glorious humanity that we all possess. We are not perfect creatures. We cannot be. But to strive with all that you have, to reach for the impossible, to try and fail, and to have the resiliency of body and spirit to get up and try again, each time vowing to be better than the last, makes you a very special creature indeed; it makes you human and it will make of you a dancer.

I am honored to call Mary Ann Mee my mentor and my friend. I have never seen a dancer with the integrity or the ability to command a stage the way she did. She is truly one of the unsung legends of her era, and she is equally as modest about it. I studied with her and performed with Dance Central from 1988 to 1996 full-time, then part-time from 1998 until her retirement in 2003, and I continue to learn from her. In 1997 I was a member of Deborah Carr's Theatre Dance Ensemble, and from 1998 to 2000 I was a member of Tennessee Dance Theatre. I have performed *Christmas Oratorio* for fourteen years. In the fall of 2004 I took on the role of director as well, when as a graduate student I staged excerpts in repertory at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG). I performed there too, in the role of Man, Weidman's solo and duet with Echo Air in Act 3. My respect for Weidman as a choreographer and my admiration and love of his work increased dramatically. Initially, I did not use video resources, but I found the dancers had too much trouble visualizing the patterns and the style, much less embodying them, so I brought in video. I used two different video sources: Deborah Carr's staging of excerpts at Stephens College in 2003 and Dance Central's full-length version from 2001, directed by Mary Ann Mee. Having to analyze the choreography in order to teach it, I realized just how masterfully it was crafted; then, reflecting on my own choreographic endeavors, I bowed my head to a master.

The Beginning

It is unusual for a graduate student to undertake the staging of an historic work, and at UNCG it was unprecedented. It began when I taught a session for a dance history class in the fall semester of 2003. I spoke on the Humphrey-Weidman era and technique, followed by Weidman's work on his own when he and Humphrey parted ways parted ways. I taught the students some of his Classroom Modern Style studies as a warm-up and then phrases from the "Opening," "Trio," and "Finale" from *Christmas Oratorio.* The professor of the class spoke to me afterward about the possibility of staging the work there the following year. I was not aware something like that was an option for a graduate student, even one with my experience, but she assured me that it could and, if I was willing, would happen. She asked me what I would need in the way of preparations; I thought them out and told her, and she immediately went to work. Without the help and support of the UNCG faculty, my first reconstruction would not have been possible.

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I insisted that if I was going to stage the work, a technique class would have to be created and required for all those performing in the work. One semester of Humphrey-Weidman technique is admittedly not enough to prepare someone to perform any of the repertory, but it is a beginning. I held fast to my conviction that I would not attempt a reconstruction without teaching a technique class in tandem. I was fortunate to have a professor go to bat for me and I got my way. The faculty placed tremendous faith in my ability to mount the work. I can only hope that they were not disappointed, though no one has ever given me any indication that was the case; quite the contrary, the concert was praised as "beautiful."

Costume Evolutions

Costumes were donated by Dance Central; their costumer, Kathryn Schlee, was brought on board to handle alterations. Schlee's costumes were works of art in themselves, and I was determined she would be the one to alter them. Her costumes were quite a departure from Mr. Weidman's original vests: all the costumes were made of heavy moleskin, dyed either deep indigo blue or dark claret red. The women wore full-length long-sleeved dresses suggestive of the Baroque era, unornamented except for a gold inlay at the chest and gold brocade trimming. The men wore a unitard that appears as a tunic and tights, with a contrasting chest inlay and the same brocade trimming as the women's costumes. For the *tableaux vivant* sections, Schlee created biblical-inspired robes in rich colors and textures. In short, the costumes were exquisite. The performers got a taste not only of what it is to learn and perform a demanding historic work but also what it is like to work with a professional costumer as well. They certainly had not experienced this before as student dancers.

Possibility and Practicality

Going into the fall semester, I had no idea how much of the *Oratorio* I was going to present. I had only worked with one of the students in a class of twelve; I had to see what they were capable of technically before I made any decisions. For the first month I made no casting choices. I worked sections of certain dances—"Opening," "Variations," and "First Chorale"—to determine where each dancer best belonged. That way, too, everyone would learn the sections, and when I finally did make casting choices, it would not be problematic to finish the dances. I also had to make decisions about which dances to do based on our amount of rehearsal time (we had a total of three hours per week) and the best utilizations of the dancers. For instance, I had originally hoped to set "How may I best admire thee?" or "Trio." The dance is one of the most difficult in the whole *Oratorio;* it would require an extensive amount of rehearsal time but utilize only three dancers. I knew additional rehearsal times would not fit anyone's schedule; it did not seem fair to the rest of the cast as well as the dance itself as a whole to try and set it under these circumstances. Ultimately, I decided not to include it and chose sections that continued the storyline and featured as much of the group as possible. I also felt it was vitally important to present a section of the *tableaux vivant,* as they are as important to the work as the group dances and require of the performers the dramatic skill of pantomime, for which Weidman is legendary. His company members were required to be as adept at acting as they were at dancing, so I included the section "Because there was no room at the inn," or "Walking Madonna," in the performances. I also wanted to show some of the variety of work that is inherent in *Christmas Oratorio,* so I chose sections from each of the three acts.

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Excerpts from **Christmas Oratorio** (1961)

Choreography: Charles Weidman
Music: J. S. Bach
Staged by: Clay Daniel
Lighting design: R. Mitch Fore
Costumes: Kathryn Schlee

From Act I. The angel's joy, anticipating the coming of Christ

"Praise, joy and gladness be blended in one"

Katie Zimmer, Danielle DeBisshop, Kari Leake, Kathy Kerner, Rachel Manconi, Samantha Strong, Gregory Rhodes, Josh Mitchell, Matt Howard, Aymen Robertson

From Act II. The birth of Christ and prophecies depicting important events in the life of Christ

"Because there was no room at the inn"

Prophetess: Erica Griffith (Friday evening and Saturday matinee)
Lashiska Richardson (Saturday evening)
Innkeepers: Matthew Brookoff, Lashiska Richardson or Erica Griffith, Jamal Black

Joseph: Matt Howard

Mary: Samantha Strong

Chorale
Ensemble except Matt Howard and Samantha Strong

*pause

From Act III. New hope is given to mankind

"And so in dying thou alone shall be my dearest love" and "Jesus, my delight and pastor"

Man: Clay Daniel
Echo Air: Karla Coghill

*pause

"Let me but live to tell my story"

Ensemble

Figure 3. Program from UNCG's production of excerpts from Weidman's Christmas Oratorio.

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Ultimately, we presented five sections of *Christmas Oratorio* in the Fall Departmental Concert at UNCG. On the program we were placed last, encompassing the second half of the concerts which ran December 3–4, 2004. The sections were presented in the following order: From Act 1, "Praise, joy and gladness be blended in one," or "Opening"; from Act 2 "Because there was no room at the inn," or "Prophetess and Walking Madonna" and "1st Chorale" (actually from Act I); from Act 3, "And so in dying, thou alone shall be my dearest love" together with "Jesus, my delight and pastor," or "Man and Echo Air" or "solos," and we concluded with "Let me but live to tell my story," or "Variations" (see Figure 3).

Considerations

Undoubtedly, teaching the students the technique was the hardest task for me as a teacher/director, followed closely behind by the style of this particular work and the spacing. The dancers struggled with the Humphrey-Weidman concepts of weight and breath, suspension, and dramatic expression. Rhythms, a particular peeve of Weidman, had to be honed doggedly, and spatial concepts were a problem even through the performances. Nonetheless, the work was well received, and the most common description given by the audiences was that it was refreshing to see such a work kept alive and done well.

I continued the tradition of the dancers meeting the audience by having the dancers go out after bows in costume to greet their public. Though a few faculty members frowned, the audiences loved getting to meet the dancers that had just given them a rare gift, and the dancers got to hear lauds and acclamations for all their hard work. In this work of Weidman's, in particular, I feel that greeting the audience is especially significant, as the dance conjures the most exuberant of emotions and those emotions deserved to be shared.

Choreography "After" Weidman

I must speak on the subject of the choreography for Man, in "And so in dying thou alone shall be my dearest love" and "Jesus, my delight and pastor." These were always danced by Weidman and largely improvised, according to both Mee (2005) and Carr (2005). When restaging *Christmas Oratorio* with her company, Carr relied on movement that was like what Weidman did but took into account that the dancer, here Roberto Garcia, was much younger than Weidman was while he danced the role and Garcia was capable of more profound technical prowess. Also, arguably no one has dramatic skill equal to Weidman, and that was taken into account as well. The solo she created for Roberto is in the Humphrey-Weidman technique and Weidman style and is appropriate to the work, but the actual choreography is not Weidman's, though many of his elements, such as the open mouth cry, pointing high left on the word "Wunderbar," the rocking with the cape, and some of the floor work, are included. Mee took into account the same things when she set "Man" first for David Huestess and later for me, then even later for Andrew Krischels from Tennessee Dance Theatre. She also considered the different skills each of us had as a performer. When she felt we truly understood the role, she allowed each of us to take certain personal liberties of improvisation with the choreography and timing. Carr has done this to an extent as well. Of the four of us who have danced Man since Weidman, no two solos were alike.[4] We all, however, wore a full-length cape reminiscent of the two-paneled fabric draping that Weidman wore. The cape, for me, had a life all its own, and because the one I wore was fastened at the neck only, it limited the amount of shoulder movement incorporated into the two solos. David Huestess wore the

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same cape as I did, yet his Man was very different from mine. David, very tall, dark, and majestic, chose to minimize the movement underneath the cape and to travel very little, letting his face and simple gestures and use of weightedness tell the story. Mine was quite the opposite. I traveled a great deal more and treated the cape as a blackness trying to engulf me, fighting it within the confines of the limited shoulder movement. Later, in the second solo, I kept it behind my shoulders as much as possible, to show I was winning the battle with my foe. I integrated many more complete turns to keep the cape billowed out as much as possible and seemingly alive. I have only seen Roberto Garcia's Man once, but I was powerfully impressed by his ability to embody the depths of the character and to command the stage. I have never seen Andrew Krischels perform Man, but knowing him and his dancing well, I can imagine the range he would bring to the role.[5]

Carrying On

It is vitally important to the world of dance that *Christmas Oratorio* and the rest of Weidman's works are kept alive and available to today's and tomorrow's audiences. Just as important, they must be staged by someone who will strive to keep the integrity of the works intact and never be attempted by someone who is not trained in the technique and familiar with the style inherent to each of the dances. I have seen reconstructions of Weidman's works without these considerations; they were deplorable and barely recognizable. This is decidedly unfair to both the works themselves and to Weidman, as well as his legacy. The works are technically demanding and require great strength, musicality, and an unlimited dynamic range. In other words, no one can just jump in and "do" Weidman; the works insist on extensive study and a unique maturity, daring, and a subtlety inherent in the Humphrey-Weidman technique and Weidman style.

I do not feel that there are actually two techniques within Humphrey-Weidman, one belonging to Humphrey and the other to Weidman. Admittedly, there is as distinct a Humphrey style as there is a Weidman style, yet they both worked within the same technique of fall and recovery and breath-induced suspension: both defy and yield to gravity. The sense of weight in movement is demanded. In my opinion, Limón is yet another style of Humphrey-Weidman, unique to Limón and his particular voice; it was not "his" technique but the technique in which he worked.[6]

The dance world today is perhaps unlike any other time in history. It seems that it is more open and accepting than it has ever been to all different types of dance, and it is beginning to look to the not-so-distant past for inspiration. In the last few years there has been a resurgence of older works, and the students of today are looking at them in a new light. What postmodernism sought to overthrow, they are lifting up, and the masterworks of modern dance are finding new bodies and new voices to bring them back to the stage once again.

We are not of the time of Charles Weidman, Doris Humphrey, Hanya Holm, or Martha Graham. The world has changed, certainly, since they blazed across the annals of new history, but it has not changed so much that artistic explications of life, love, death, and humanity are no longer of interest. Our truths are still the same. We can only hope to achieve the successes that they did and to follow their example and advice with complete awareness of our unique time and purpose is perhaps the only way that will be possible. There is an old saying: "To know where you are going, you must first know where you have been." I do not know who

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said this first, but I would wager that it was someone reflecting on a long, happy life and a successful career, with the hope of inspiring future generations to achieve just as—much or more.

Clay Daniel

Notes

Editor's Note: I hope that readers and future researchers will be intrigued by Daniel's account of *Christmas Oratorio* and by the still-functioning Weidman dance community on which his report relies, leading to more research about Weidman and his legacy and further reconstruction of his work. Where possible, full citations have been restored for items found in the personal collection of Dot Murphy.

1. My understanding of *Christmas Oratorio* differs from Jowitt's account. There are no leaps in the opening dance of *Christmas Oratorio.* While Jowitt reports that "three dancers swing into the recapitulation," the entire cast participates.

2. Mee, Carr, and Murphy reported three different colors besides red and white leotards and tights. In Murphy's time (the original cast) the costumes were black with red and white; in Mee's, green, red, and white; and in Carr's, dark blue, red, and white.

3. To my knowledge, the despicable circumstances following Weidman's death and eventual burial are not public knowledge but circulate among Weidman's company members and friends.

4. Mary Ann Mee performed Man during the 1989 concerts, and the choreography was changed considerably. Also, both Melissa Ritchie and Aaron Nichols have performed Man with Dance Central, each getting one performance in 1997. The choreography was in the style of Mr. Weidman, but the dance was actually choreographed by Mary Ann Mee.

5. Rebecca Gose also performed Man with Tennessee Dance Theatre in 1998. She was given one performance and was coached by me. She did not wear a cape.

6. Limón was a student of both Humphrey and Weidman, as well as a dancer in their company, who later had Humphrey as artistic director of his own established group. Naturally, he incorporated into his work elements from both of his great teachers.

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