

IN MEMORIAM

Bonnie Bird

(1914-1995)

Bonnie Bird, dancer, choreographer, educationalist and activist for dance, died in April at the age of eighty. Born in Oregon in 1914, Bonnie Bird's life was intricately bound up with the development of contemporary dance in this century, and she played a key role in widening the understanding and applications of dance in both America and Britain.

Bonnie Bird grew up on a ranch in Seattle. She studied dance at the nearby Cornish School of Fine and Applied Arts. With a scholarship arranged by Martha Graham she entered the Neighborhood Playhouse School in New York in the early 1930s. She was quickly taken into the Graham Company, dancing with them until 1938, and becoming Graham's principal teaching assistant and one of the first accredited teachers of the Graham technique. Aged only twenty-four she left Graham to pursue her own creative work and to head the dance department at the Cornish School where one of her first students was Merce Cunningham. It was here in Bonnie Bird's classes that Cunningham first met John Cage who was at the time collaborating with her on a number of experimental projects.

However, as an educationalist Bonnie Bird was concerned not only with professional dance training but with the teaching of dance at all levels. Her seminal work with children began when she was appointed head of dance at the 92nd St. YMHA, where she developed a programme of dance for young children through to teenage years. Here Bonnie Bird took on many of the problems that have beset dance education; above all, she found a lack of progression in the classes and a staff of artists who were not necessarily committed or gifted teachers. With Doris Humphrey as her artistic advisor, she began by introducing firm contracts and regular faculty meetings, seeking to put the teaching on firmer foundations. Encouraged to integrate their teaching and creative work, the faculty formed a touring educational dance company, the Merry-Go-Rounders, which explored new co-operative working methods as well as new possibilities in dance education. Bonnie Bird was artistic director of the Merry-Go-Rounders for thirteen years but the company ran very successfully for over twenty and involved a remarkable group of choreographers including Lucas Hoving, Sophie Maslow, La Meri and Robert Joffrey.

Bonnie Bird went on to co-ordinate the first conference on the creative teaching of children, which evolved into the American Dance Guild, of which she was a founding member and president for several years in the 1960s. Although not a writer or academic herself, Bonnie Bird was an important catalyst for the development of dance research in the United States. When the National Endowment for the Arts was formed, naming dance for the first time as an independent art recognised by the Government for funding, Bird was the prime mover in bringing artists together with funders to investigate and discuss possibilities. This was an exciting first look at what was going on in dance research. In part out of this endeavour the Committee on Research in Dance, now the Congress on Research in Dance (CORD), was established, with Bonnie Bird as the first president.

One of CORD's first conferences was concerned with the emerging area of dance therapy. Bonnie Bird rooted her teaching of children not simply in technique, but in an understanding of child development and how training could develop not only the body but also the inner attitudes and responses of the whole person. This led her into working in more directly therapeutic environments with emotionally and physically disabled children and eventually to the

Dance Notation Bureau where, in the early 1970s, Irmgaard Bartenieff was beginning to train movement analysts.

While working with Bartenieff, Bonnie Bird came to admire the work of Marion North, who had been Rudolf Laban's research assistant and who had developed a system of assessing personality through movement. North had just been appointed head of the Laban Centre in England which had been given to London University and had moved onto the campus at Goldsmiths College. This was the only college in Britain at the time where dance was part of arts and humanities as opposed to physical education. North was determined to make a number of crucial changes to dance teaching in British education. Above all she wanted to recentre the teaching in the art form, bring back an emphasis on technique and establish choreography as an integral part of all programmes. North recognised in Bonnie Bird the person who could help her realise her vision and invited her to come to England as head of the Dance Theatre programme. It was to be a partnership that linked American and European traditions in the development of contemporary dance and broke new ground for dance education in Britain.

Although Bonnie Bird did not join the Laban Centre until she was sixty, she was able to put into practice many of her ideals and see them come to fruition. Together, she and Marion North led the fight to get dance recognised in Britain as a valid subject for B.A. and M.A. degree study. Later they were able to include an M.A. in dance therapy, and the Centre became the first British institution to offer the study of dance for M.Phil. and Ph.D. research degrees. It has not been usual in Britain for the best aspects of university education, including internationally recognised research, to exist in the same institution as high calibre professional dance training and performance. In this respect the Laban Centre continues to occupy a unique place in British dance education and training.

Amongst her many initiatives while at the Centre two were perhaps closest to her heart, Transitions Dance Company and the Bonnie Bird Choreography Awards. She established Transitions in 1982; it is formed each year from students on the Centre's Advanced Performance Course and the group tours internationally. In 1984 the Bonnie Bird Choreography Fund was launched with donations from friends and colleagues to mark her seventieth birthday. The fund makes annual and biannual awards to encourage emerging choreographers in the U.K., North America, and Europe. Through this fund, Bonnie Bird was also able to commission a variety of new creative talent from around the world to work with Transitions, and in so doing has left the company with an enviable repertory.

Throughout her life Bonnie Bird strove to develop the creative teaching of dance and to find the means for a creative interplay between teaching and performance. She was committed to the belief that children and students of all ages ought to learn skills rather than just attend dance as a playful medium; in her educational work she was constantly evolving this balance between creativity and skills training. She was equally devoted to the ideals of an interrelated arts training. She recognised the importance of exposing students to a wide range of ideas, artists and art forms.

Fortunately Bonnie Bird's rich contribution to the development of dance on both sides of the Atlantic does not die with her. Many of her initiatives are still in place today, supporting a vibrant exchange of ideas, creativity and educational opportunity through dance across the world.

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