

Bessie Schönberg: Making Sausages

by Sally Hess

In the course of little more than a century, American modern dance appeared and evolved through the genius of its dancers and choreographers, who have been nourished by equally genial teachers. They have pushed our culture forward. Among them, [Doris Humphrey](#), Louis Horst, Bessie Schönberg (1906-1997), and Robert Ellis Dunn each developed a precise approach to teaching dance composition. Unlike Humphrey and Horst, Dunn and Schönberg left no published writings. Their teachings live on in the work of artists and educators, many now in their peak years of creativity. At least provisionally, they (we) are Bessie's books.

The following remarks outline briefly Schönberg's teaching methods, with an aim to suggesting a future comparative study of the work of these four great teachers from the 1940s to the 1980s. Possible areas of exploration for Bessie (as we all knew her) include "What makes a teacher memorable; what were her beliefs, the force of her character, her insights into art and people, her view[s] that dance-making was a practical matter but could reach far, wide and deep, and that choreography was on a par with (...) other better appreciated arts" (Keen, 9/17/11).

After her education in Dresden, Germany, where her taste was formed by the city's fertile mix of the traditional and *avant garde* in music, art, architecture, and the newly emergent dance work of Emile Jaques-Dalcroze and Mary Wigman, Bessie came to the U.S. and danced in [Martha Graham's](#) company from 1929 until 1931, when her performing career was cruelly arrested by a knee injury. With despair and determination, she turned her creative energies to teaching, first at [Bennington College](#), later at Sarah Lawrence (1941-1975), where she established herself as a pioneer in the field. Ever fresh and eager,

she died at 90 in what must be called her prime, still carrying a winter's teaching load at Juilliard and [Dance Theater Workshop](#) (DTW) and continuing during the summer at [Jacob's Pillow](#), Wave Hill, and The Yard. With her unflagging good humor and her cane, Bessie traipsed up and down many stairs in many lofts; she came to see our work in dingy rehearsal studios and bright theaters. She never asked a penny for her time. If we pressed her with expressions of gratitude, she modestly deflected our words of praise and admiration with gentle nonsense dismissals: "Poupou pou! Ouffouffouff!" She was teacher, mentor and friend to at least four generations of dance professionals.

Bessie did not teach choreography – she often said, "You can't do that." She famously called herself a meddler, a traffic cop. For her, theory meant action, developing kinesthetic thinking through doing: "How many ways can you fall or run or turn?" (Schoenberg, Eginton, and Howell, 114-115). True to the Bauhaus principles that so impressed her as a student, she directed choreographers to the essentials, repeatedly asking, "What do you see? What is there?"

She insisted that we were not to call ourselves artists: "You make sausages" (Parker, 3/17/11). Dance-making was a matter of craft, and Bessie could help us produce the richest, spiciest sausages ever. If your dance was goofy, that was fine. If it was sticky-sweet, you should make it most excellently so. Her standards were very high and she always told the truth. Though she could seem harsh, she did not seek to control the unfolding process, and while she was unquestionably an authority, she was not authoritarian. She urged us to be fearless and outrageous, and she was hungry to set out with us "on voyages of

strangeness and discomfort.” (Pennebaker and Hegedus).

The classes Bessie conducted had definite rules. These served a protective purpose and were a means of deepening self-reflection: each week, choreographers showed material; aside from a short introduction, they did not speak. This relieved them of the need to defend (explain, apologize for) what had been presented. Discussion was reserved for the observers. When they spoke, they should have something to say, and if they were not ready to speak, they should wait. We were learning to become articulate.

The play between language and movement, speech construction and dance construction, allowed the observers to participate with objectivity (as much as we could muster), and through suggestion rather than personal statement. Bessie banished the personal pronoun from our comments – it’s not about you, she would say, it’s about *her* work (pointing to the choreographer facing us). This proved a useful device in promoting focus on our colleagues’ dances. It helped us avoid “quarreling” from our own aesthetic point of view and instigated healthy debate. Bessie had thought at length about how to “de-personalize movement teaching” (Schoenberg et al., 114).

By sharpening our verbal self-consciousness, the no-I rule kept us from being diverted into our own wishes for another choreographer’s piece. We were not to intrude on the choreographic experiments underway, nor did Bessie inject herself into the work.

Since Bessie wanted us (at least in the DTW workshops) to speak freely about performers -- where they were off, what might help them -- the dancers left after presenting the work. It was up to the

choreographer to decide what portion of the subsequent discussion to share with them. The corollary and final rule: choreographers did not perform in their own dances.

Underlying these rules was the understanding that it was necessary to create awareness, not only of physical and theatrical space but also of psychological space. Comments delivered without this awareness can do real damage. The class understood: “It’s our job to help this [choreographer] pursue better what s/he’s already pursuing” (Hook, 4/1/11). In this respect, Bessie’s classes and workshops were a course in maturity. Bessie was logical, unsentimental, eminently coherent. Pragmatic, yes, and conjointly, “her strength as a teacher was that she could see into the heart of the matter, but she could also see into the heart of the student” (Keen, 2/21/11). So, although we agonized and cried (“don’t you dare cry,” she would say), we laughed a lot. Bessie was a very funny woman -- “calm, dry, playful” (Forster, 36-37).

Bessie knew that the tenacious grappling required to make dances could be lonely and dark. She was a mentor and long-term friend to many who sought her advice and were buoyed by her perseverance and enthusiasm. Always and above all, Bessie was a friend to the work.

“‘Why do we dance?’ Bessie once asked a group of young dancers. Silence. ‘Because we have to’ ” (Keen). In the implied drive-and-need of this exchange, the “we” is important. Bessie said at various junctures, “I was always dancing,” and also, “some of us have always danced,” and again most tellingly, “some of us dance always...” We haven’t forgotten her entering the studio eagerly but with reserve; we still hear her saying, “I want to see things. Show me something. What can I see?” It was always

about making dances; about the dancers, sainted and raw, who “carry the choreographers’ ideas in their bodies” (Schönberg in Pennebaker and Hegedus); and also, poignantly (“oh, poupou pou”), about The Dance.

NOTE

This essay condenses the contributions of Sarah Hook (Telephone interview 4/1/11), Randy James (Interview 3/9/11), Elizabeth Keen (Interview 2/21/11, email 9/17/11), David Parker (Interview 3/17/11) and Laura Staton (Email 9/18/11, telephone interview 9/19/11). None had been interviewed about Bessie before. I believe their remarks are representative of Bessie’s presence from at least 1963 until her death. I offer my thanks to each of them for the heartfelt enthusiasm and insight they brought to our conversations. I have included my own recollections of Bessie’s words, which appear in the text as unsourced quotes.

For full references to works cited in this essay, see [Selected Resources for Further Research](#).

Sally Hess began dancing at the 92nd Street Y with Bonnie Bird. She has performed with José Limon (The Child in *Day On Earth*), Lucas Hoving, Dan Wagoner, Remy Charlip, Donna Uchizono, Christopher Caines, and Jill Sigman. She worked with Bessie Schönberg at The Yard (1992, ‘93) and DTW (1993). Sally is a Professor Emerita at Swarthmore College and a certified Iyengar Yoga instructor.