

HILL, Thelma. May 26, 1924-November 21, 1977

From "Notable American Women: Completing the Twentieth Century"

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Born and raised in New York City, Thelma Hill became a leading dancer, company co-director, master teacher, and cherished mentor to scores of African American dance artists. Little is known of her childhood or her upbringing. She was an only child, and her parents evidently encouraged her early artistic interests. Hill later said she had always been interested in the arts and had studied music and painting as a child. She turned to dance as a teenager. Her interest in dance solidified when she studied tap dance with Mary Bruce, a noted teacher who ran an important studio in Harlem. She took to dance easily, and according to her contemporaries would occasionally teach class to students her age or older.

As a young woman, Hill worked office jobs during the day, including a stint at the New York City Department of Welfare. She married a man named Doll, but the marriage dissolved quickly, and she rarely referred to him in her adult life. She became serious about dance study around 1949, when she began concentrated ballet classes at the Metropolitan Opera Ballet School. Her passion for the art outweighed her late start in training, and she focused on achieving a professional career in dance. Older than most of the other students at her skill level, Hill was always available for counsel and to offer sage advice. She became a mother figure to the other dancers, and early in her career an affectionate nickname emerged and stuck: Mother Hill.

Despite her late start in ballet, Hill studied assiduously with Maria Nevelska, a former member of the Bolshoi Ballet, and assisted noted Harlem dance studio teacher Sheldon B. Hoskins in his annual dance concerts. She achieved a professional career as a ballerina in the short-lived Les Ballets Nègres, founded in 1955, which became the New York Negro Ballet Company in 1957. Working with company founder Ward Flemmyng, Hill assumed an administrative role with the group, and became rehearsal director responsible for maintaining the group's repertory during its landmark 1957 tour to England, Scotland, and Wales. Well received by surprised critics and audiences, the company's tour proved that African Americans could achieve classical ballet technique, a truth long denied by American balletomanes. Hill's invaluable presence confirmed her prescient ability to remember and coach all the roles, along with the fiery intensity she brought to her dancing. An injury to her tendon precipitated the end of her career as a dancer **en pointe**.

Upon returning to New York, she performed in the pickup companies of several artists who combined ballet technique with modern and social dance idioms, including Jean-Léon Destiné (1958), Louis Johnson (1958), Geoffrey Holder (1959), Talley Beatty (1960), and Matt Mattox (1961). She joined the newly formed Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in 1959, and traveled with that company on their landmark tour of Southeast Asia in 1962 sponsored by the U.S. State Department. She quickly became a confidante to Ailey as his enterprise grew, and in the 1963 season she served as rehearsal mistress for the Ailey company. Although she left the troupe to continue her teaching career in New York, she remained close to Ailey throughout her life and served as an uncredited assistant to him on several engagements, including the Broadway musical **La Strada** (1969), which closed after one performance, and the Leonard Bernstein extravaganza **Mass** (1971), which ran for several performances over two years. Both of these shows included dancers from Ailey's company, many of whom had been Hill's students.

In all of her performances, Hill provided an unassuming emotional maturity, layered with an obvious passion and enthusiasm for the art of dance. She rarely performed leading roles in any of the works she danced, but

choreographers, audiences, and other dancers always noted her authoritative presence, even when positioned on the periphery of the stage space. Her contemporaries often noted that she did not have a conventional dancer's body, according to ballet or modern dance standards, but she created a thrilling physical illusion in motion suited to the theatrical moment.

Hill's most sustained teaching engagement began in 1960 when she collaborated with other artists, including Ailey, Charles Moore, and James Truitte, to found a dance-training program at the New York City YWCA on Fifty-First Street near the Broadway theater district. In 1962, the program became the Clark Center for the Performing Arts. Besides studio and performance space, the center provided classes in a variety of techniques and choreographic approaches. In this productive environment, Hill trained innumerable African American dance personalities in dance etiquette, time management, and, remarkably, the Lester Horton technique. Developed over more than a decade, the Lester Horton technique improves fluidity in dancers through strength-building exercises that focus on the abdomen and thighs. It involves repeated lateral balances and tilting gestures of the torso, often performed in a flat-back position. By 1970, the technique was taught in dance studios around the world. Hill learned the Horton technique from Ailey, Truitte, and others who had studied with Horton in California before his death in 1953. She became an expert in the technique, and at the end of her life she was writing a textbook about it for publication.

After her performing career ended, Hill devoted herself to her students' individual growth and to the progress of African Americans into the mainstream of American concert dance practice. Her open personality tempered her serious demeanor as a teacher, and she was famous for sometimes intimidating her students toward heightened achievement. Although she had no children, some say that all of her students were her extended family, and her sage guidance continues to be felt among dancers who came under her gaze. Her numerous teaching affiliations also included the American Dance Festival at Connecticut College, the University of Cincinnati, and the Davis Center for the Performing Arts at City College of New York. She was also active in the Regional Ballet Association and the Delacorte Dance Festival in New York City.

Hill died tragically of smoke inhalation in 1977 during a fire in her New York City apartment. She was fifty-three. That same year, the Arts Center of Brooklyn was renamed the Thelma Hill Performing Arts Center in her honor.

Bibliography: Notwithstanding her extensive influence, there are extremely few published accounts of Thelma Hill's life or times. Dawn Lille Hurwitz details Hill's influence in the New York Negro Ballet in "The New York Negro Ballet in Great Britain," in Thomas F. DeFrantz, ed., **Dancing Many Drums: Excavations in African American Dance** (2002). Kathe Sandler's evocative, short documentary film, **Remembering Thelma** (1981), available from Women Make Movies, includes still imagery and reminiscences by several dance associates, including James Truitte and Carmen de Lavallade. Some of Hill's contemporaries, including Mickey Borde, Delores Browne, and Betty Ann (Thompson) Hubbard, contributed information by phone interview. Obituaries appeared in the New York Times on November 23, 1977, and in Dance Magazine, February 1978, p. 95.

THOMAS F. DEFRANTZ

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