

history: lesson plan

Lester Horton

The social conscience of the modern dance world

One of the first choreographers to have a racially integrated dance company, Lester Horton (1906–1953) developed a series of movement exercises that have now been codified as the Horton technique. He also introduced modern dance to the West Coast: His Dance Theater in West Hollywood was the first modern dance venue for performance and teaching in Los Angeles.

The Indiana native's introduction to dance might have occurred with a Denishawn performance, a touring Wild West show with Native American dancing or Anna Pavlova's company, depending on what story he chose to tell. (Horton had a flair for the dramatic.) After briefly studying ballet, he teamed up with director Clara Bates to choreograph, star in and design the costumes for *The Song of Hiawatha*, which put him on the dance map while still a teenager. A short stint with Japanese dancer Michio Ito led to the formation of the first of Horton's several dance companies, the Dance Repertory Group.

As a choreographer, Horton was known for broaching unusual topics, like political strife and multiculturalism. He welcomed Alvin Ailey, Bella Lewitzky, James Truitte, Joyce Trisler and Carmen de Lavallade, among others, into his fold, all of whom would go on to create their own work. Today, Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater is most famously rooted in his technique.

—Rachel Rizzuto

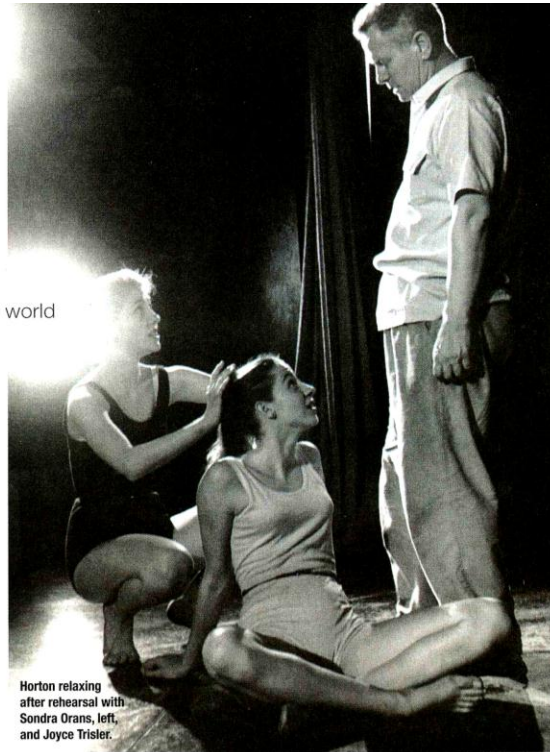
The Work

Horton introduced a new genre of performance: the **choreodrama**, which skillfully intertwined dance movement and theater. Though his choreography is seldom performed today, notable works include:

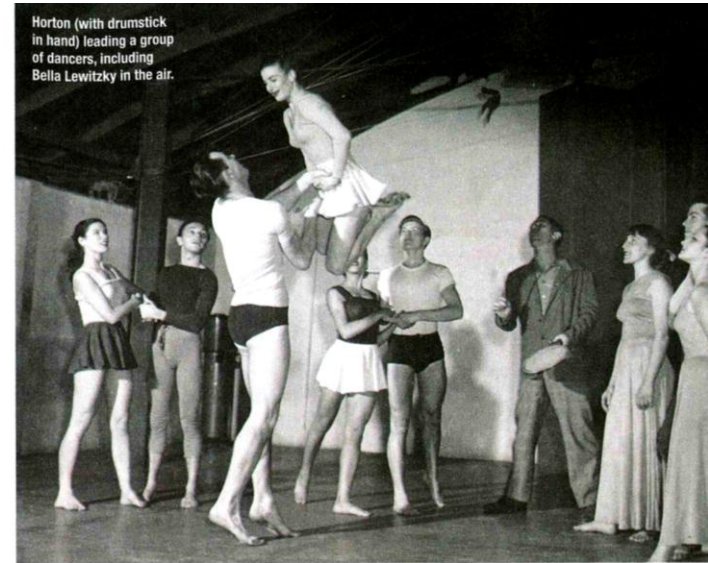
■ **Salome (1934):** Based on Oscar Wilde's salacious play of the same name, this piece exists in at least six different versions—Horton liked to keep it fresh.

■ **Le Sacre du Printemps (1937):** Horton's rendition of Nijinsky's original work, set to Stravinsky's music, was the first the West Coast had seen of this iconic piece at its Hollywood Bowl premiere.

■ **The Beloved (1948):** Horton's inspiration for this duet came from a newspaper article in which a man bludgeoned his wife to death with a Bible.



Horton relaxing after rehearsal with Sondra Orans, left, and Joyce Trisler.



Horton (with drumstick in hand) leading a group of dancers, including Bella Lewitzky in the air.

MOVEMENT VOCABULARY

Essentials of Horton technique include:

- **FORTIFICATIONS:** 17 movement studies (such as the Achilles stretch and lunge stretch), designed to strengthen and stretch the muscles; each targets a specific body part or quality of movement.
- **LATERAL T:** Hallmark movement of Horton technique; correct execution of this movement resembles the letter T. While standing on one leg, tilt torso 90 degrees, extending opposite leg for counterbalance.
- **DIMENSIONAL TONUS:** Also known as the "yawn stretch," this combination includes parts of all 17 fortifications and acts as a warm-up summary, with ascents, descents and dramatic directional changes.

The Legacy Lives On

After Horton's death, the Lester Horton Dance Theater in West Hollywood continued to exist for seven more years. When Ailey moved to New York in 1954, several dancers followed him, and Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, rooted in Horton's style, was soon born. Companies and schools that utilize Horton technique include:

- Alonzo King LINES Dance Center
- The Ailey School
- Philadanco
- Dayton Contemporary Dance Company
- Dallas Black Dance Theatre
- Cleo Parker Robinson Dance

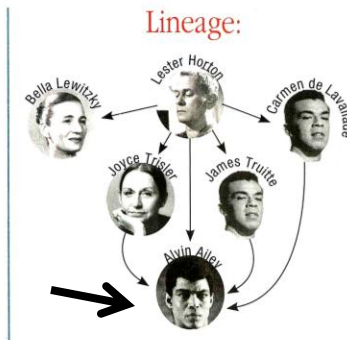
Fun Facts:

■ Horton served as the choreographer for over a dozen films, including 1943's *Phantom of the Opera* and *South Sea Woman* (1953).

■ Horton's studio on Beverly Boulevard in L.A. had no mirrors, to instill that movement should be a kinesthetic education and not based on one's reflection.

■ Whenever *Salome* was performed, Horton would bring paint and brushes with him for touch-ups to the set, in case the lighting design didn't quite capture the shadowing he needed.

Lineage:



Resources:

- PRINT:**
Lester Horton: Modern Dance Pioneer, by Larry Warren, Dance Horizons/Princeton Book Company, 1991
 "Lester Horton," by Janice LaPointe-Crump, *Dance Teacher*, February 2006
 "Technique: The Hows of Horton," by Rachel Straus, *Dance Magazine*, February 2007
 "Technique: Ana Marie Forsythe: How I teach Horton's lateral T," by Jenny Datzell, *Dance Teacher*, September 2011
- VIDEOS:**
Lester Horton Technique: The Warm-Up, dir. Jeanne Suggs, Kultur International Films, 2005 (DVD)
The Dance Technique of Lester Horton: An Advanced Beginners Class, with Ana Marie Forsythe and Marjorie B. Perces, Dance Spotlight, 2006 (DVD)
- WEB:**
Dance Heritage Coalition: "America's Irreplaceable Dance Treasures: the First 100": danceheritage.org
Kennedy Center's "Explore the Arts Online": kennedy-center.org/explorer