

## Foreword

I never saw May O'Donnell perform live. I knew of her reputation as a leading dancer with Martha Graham and as an educator and a choreographer in her own right. I had heard of her lyricism as a dancer, and her quiet, powerful eloquence. I imagined that she must have been rather like the Pioneer Woman, seated and serenely gazing out past the horizon in Graham's *Appalachian Spring*, one of her most famous roles. She was one of those rare artists who could make stillness sing.

And then I got to meet May. I remember slogging along on shabby East Village streets, past motorcycle gangs and plump Hispanic "mamis" chatting intently on the sidewalk. This is where a famous dancer and choreographer lived? And then there was May, opening the door to my weary ring and advising me to tuck in, as I might in a dance class, because the door didn't open very wide. Inside was the most cozy of homes, complete with an amiable cat and an even more amiable husband, the composer Ray Green.

Here was a tall, slender woman with a delicately beautiful face who threw her head back and laughed like a longshoreman. The steel that helped her survive the Graham experience was evident, but even more evident was the dreamer who created her often mysterious dances and who reached for the depths in the greenest of her young dancers.

She told me the story, one day, of how she created her signature work, *Suspension*. And from that story I drew my image of May: a young woman whose mind and vision had been expanded by the open space and small-town California experiences of her childhood. Once, said, she saw a wartime plane fly by below her as she stood on a high hillside. Most of us simply would have been surprised for a moment by the sight of such a low-flying plane. But May sensed a reversal of expectation, the poetic readjustment of weight and space to be seen in suspended objects. There was dance, she knew, at T. S. Eliot's "still point of the turning world."

*Jennifer Dunning, dance critic, New York Times*

## Preface

*May O'Donnell: Modern Dance Pioneer* is the first book on O'Donnell (1906–2004) as performer, choreographer, and teacher. She was hypnotizing on stage, a prolific choreographer, a distinguished teacher, and creator of her own technique and vocabulary. In conversations with the author over a two-year period, and using her collection of playbills and reviews, O'Donnell traced her journey of discovery from her early training in Sacramento, California; her first performance in 1928; study in New York at the Martha Graham School of Contemporary Dance; success in the Graham company; and the formation of her own choreographies and companies from 1937 to 1988.

O'Donnell instinctively knew that no matter how much she wanted to dance, classes in ballet at home and the form of modern dance she found in the Wigman studio in New York were not for her. She found her place in the Graham school, where Gertrude Shurr, a member of the company, taught, formed, and molded her strong body into a Graham dancer in record time. In 1932, O'Donnell joined the Graham company, performing from 1932 to 1938 in their repertory. But the mountains and sky, the fields and ocean of her native California lured her back. There she began work on her solo choreography (1937). She was immediately successful. O'Donnell established a school and company, married composer Ray Green, and co-choreographed and toured as a duo-concert team with José Limón from 1939 to 1941. The physical beauty of the two dancers, their prodigious technique, and their compelling presence caught fire. They got cheering reviews. World War II separated the team as Green and Limón went off to duty. Against the backdrop of the war, O'Donnell created her signature work, *Suspension* (1943). The hazardous conditions on the West Coast made her return to the Graham company from 1944 to 1954. Recognizing her choreographic ability and strong presence on stage, Graham gave her the privilege of choreographing her own roles. They were memorable: the Pioneer Woman in *Appalachian Spring* (1944), the At-

tendant in *Herodiade* (1944), *Dark Meadow* (1946), *Cave of the Heart* (1946), and other works.

After leaving the Graham company in 1954, she resumed her choreographic career and formed a studio and school with Gertrude Shurr. This highly active period brought a whirlwind of touring appearances with her companies, workshop engagements in the United States and London, teaching at the High School for the Performing Arts, and guest-teaching at summer intensives. Reviews were glowing. She and Green, who wrote most of her music, had worked together since 1937 and would continue to collaborate until 1988.

Yet the fame they deserved eluded them until they both were in their seventies, when the dance world suddenly awakened to their contributions to the legacy of modern dance. Always independent, they admitted that they didn't want a professional press person, patron, or manager to help them or "tell [them] what to do." The late recognition was lamentable, but it had permitted their interdependence to survive.

O'Donnell's house in Manhattan on East Seventh Street is now the center for the O'Donnell-Green Music and Dance Foundation. Ray's foresight in documenting their lives by collecting playbills, reviews, and photos lent this book much factual support. Duplicates are now being distributed to several dance collections in libraries in the United States and in Israel.

O'Donnell, until her death in a peaceful sleep on February 1, 2004, remained beautiful, meeting the assaults of aging with humor, serenity, and dignity intact. It was a privilege to have known her.

Thanks and acknowledgments go to all her family members, students, former company members, and friends, as well as to Rachel Yocum, former head of the Dance Division at the High School for the Performing Arts, who maintained contact with her over the years. Without the support and assistance of Roberto Garcia, acting executive director, and Frank Shawl, president of the O'Donnell-Green Foundation, this book would not have been possible. Journalists George Dorris and Jack Anderson charmed her and earned her admiration, as did Jennifer Dunning, dance critic at the *New York Times*. Neighbors Donna Farrimond and Mark Giammarino were just down the street for her, as was Barbara Barr, who helped organize numerous boxes of memorabilia. Madeleine Nichols, curator of the Dance Division, New York Public

Library for the Performing Arts, Lincoln Center, gave us Patricia Raider to catalog material. Irene Morowski helped with photographs and videos. As always, editor Meredith Babb of the University Press of Florida answered all my questions with patience. And not least, thanks go to computer whiz Nicole Mizrachi, who could delve into my machine and come up with wonders.

The book serves as a reference for dance scholars and as an inspiration for dancers, teachers, and musicians, filling a missing link in dance history between the early pioneers and today's contemporary dance.



One January 2002

“There was this thing called modern dance,” says May O’Donnell, “and everybody wanted to know about it, especially the gym teachers in the colleges.”

May is now ninety-six years old with a clear memory and excellent health. She laughs easily and welcomes her frequent visitors—former students, dancers, friends. Her straight gray hair is cut short around her ears, and a twinkle remains in her dark blue eyes. Her high cheekbones have kept her face strong and beautiful. She is slender and uses her walker to slowly arrive at a chair near her dining room table, where we like to talk. Her back is straight. Her voice is strong and her speech pattern from the West Coast, where she was born. She answers questions directly, honestly, showing wisdom and unexpected humor. She is herself, the Pioneer Woman she created in Martha Graham’s *Appalachian Spring*.

On December 2 of this year, May will receive a Martha Hill Lifetime Achievement Award. She looks forward more to honoring Martha Hill and Mary Jo Shelley—the founders of the Bennington College summer schools and festivals—than being honored herself.

The sun shines through the tall windows of her brownstone. The red brick house is on Seventh Street at Avenue C in Manhattan and dates from before the turn of the century. The small grand piano that belonged to her composer husband, Ray Green, remains silent now in the living room. Her garden, full of roses in the spring, small trees, and flowers, can be seen from her kitchen window. Next to her books are candleholders, a bowl, small items from her family’s past. The furnishings throughout the house are simple.

Upstairs, on the second and third floors, her programs, photos, and letters are in boxes that date from the 1930s to the 1990s. They are being catalogued for the Dance Collection of the New York Public Library for the Performing

Arts at Lincoln Center and other libraries throughout the United States. Music scores, tapes, and videos are stored in the basement. "Ray," May says with a grin, "saved just everything!"

Pedro, her black-and-white cat, pads around the room. "We're the same age," she quips. "Come, Pedro, come." And the cat, trained to jump into her lap on the count of three, does a deep plié, jumps, lands, and begins to purr.

"It was in old houses like this one, with long living rooms and broad, planked wooden floors, where Martha [Graham], Charles [Weidman] and so many other early modern dancers taught class and gave performances.

"Martha's studio was at 66 Fifth Avenue in just such a building. We had daily technique classes, and Louis Horst taught us composition. Since I had music in my background in California, I took to his classes easily."

In 1934, at Bennington College and Undergraduate Liberal Arts College for Women, modern dance found its momentous exposure at the Bennington Summer Dance Festival. In 1932, before that historic summer when Doris Humphrey, Martha Graham, Charles Weidman, and Hanya Holm performed their techniques and vocabularies, May, Horst, and a small group of Graham dancers on tour explored the possibility of beginning classes at the college. Up to that point, modern dance had been more organized and developed in Europe, mainly under the influence of Mary Wigman (1886–1973), Germany's most famous modern dancer. Louis Horst and May, as his assistant, discovered that there was indeed a possibility for summers of dance at Bennington.

Mary Josephine Shelley was administrative director of student activity at the University of Chicago; Martha Hill, a member of the Graham company (1929–31), was head of the dance department at Bennington College. As founders, Shelley and Hill directed all the programs at the Bennington Summer Festival. In 1951, Hill also founded the dance division of the Juilliard School in Manhattan with the unheard of combination of ballet and modern dance teachers, notably Agnes de Mille, Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, José Limón, Antony Tudor, Louis Horst, and Ann Hutchinson (dance notation).

"I can't imagine how long it would have taken for modern dance to expand without those two women, who provided a place to study, create, and rehearse and even a place to live and cafeteria service for those early artists, students,

dance educators, and gym teachers who taught dance. And because so many of them came from universities, they began to book the modern dance choreographers that they had seen at Bennington. That created an audience, a small income for the companies and lots of exposure.

“Louis lorded over those poor teachers who came for the summer sessions,” May remembers. “They were supposed to bring original dance pieces to class. He would tear each contribution down in front of the entire class. As his assistant, I would find them crying on my shoulder, and I had a devil of a time getting them to calm down. ‘Don’t pay any attention to Louis on that score,’ I’d say; ‘he does that to everybody!’

“But outside of class, they were nice to me and Louis. They had paying jobs, cars, and money to spend, and they would take us out to dinner. Of course, they wanted Louis to like their compositions and wanted to pamper him. If something looked strange, he would say ‘strange is beautiful.’ At the end of the summer, there would be a little group demonstration of their work. That pleased them.”

Martha’s contraction-and-release principle is still in May’s body. She demonstrates the principle while sitting in her chair. “I always think of the release as a lift,” she explains. “I love the feel of it. It’s almost as if I’m going to take off. Every movement you do in dance has to be alive like that.”