

# Pearl in our Midst

## In Memoriam: Pearl Primus

(November 29, 1919-October 29, 1994)

On October 29, 1994, Pearl Primus succumbed to diabetes. Just five days earlier, she had taught two dances to students in her Anthropology of Dance class at New York University where she was a visiting professor: a warrior dance of the Bakuba from Zaire for the men and an engagement dance from Sierra Leone for the women. Viewing dance as a language, she spoke loudly and bravely until the very end of her life. And through her remarkable, varied career, the dance world flourished as she combined hugely successful roles as performer, researcher, and teacher.

Pearl Primus was born in Trinidad, British West Indies in 1919 but her family moved to the United States when she was two. Her mother's father was a leader of the Ashanti religion in Trinidad and Primus later stated that his interest and involvement in African and Caribbean cultures presaged her own. Receiving her B.A. in biology from Hunter College in 1940, Primus prepared to go to medical school at Howard University. To obtain money she sought jobs as a laboratory technician but did not get any because of racist hiring practices. She ended up in the wardrobe department of the National Youth Administration initially working backstage for "America Dances" productions but she was soon on stage as a performer dancing the latest swing steps. Rather inadvertently, her dancing career began (1).

From then on, Primus had a meteoric rise in the dance field. She received a scholarship with the New Dance Group, benefitting greatly from their goals to bring dance to a greater number of people. She thrived in the diverse atmosphere of the New Dance Group, taking a variety of dance classes. Quite quickly after beginning formal dance training, Primus made her solo appearance on a program with four other solo dancers almost a year later, on February 14, 1943, at the 92nd Street YMHA (Young Men's Hebrew Association). John Martin, the influential dance critic of *The New York Times*, declared Primus to be the best newcomer of the season (2). Reactions from the press focused on her enthusiasm and energy characterized by high, airborne leaps. Many white critics believed that African Americans were structurally incapable of mastering ballet and even much of modern dance. Everyone accepted, however, that blacks excelled in Harlem's ballrooms (3). Primus, on the other hand, performed a diverse program which consisted of modern dance, African dance to live drumming, and swing dances. Her diverse programs and diverse abilities confounded contemporary artistic standards concerning African Americans.

Appearances on Broadway and in nightclubs further confused Primus's "artistic" status. Very early in her career, in April 1943, Primus found a home for a ten-month engagement at Cafe Society in downtown Manhattan, a rather "earnest club" (4) with leftist leanings. While in an atmosphere where white

liberals expressed "their strong color sympathy," Cafe Society also provided Primus with an entry into and support from a community of African American singers and entertainers including Teddy Wilson, Hazel Scott, Lena Horne, Billie Holiday, and Paul Robeson (5).

The political fight for civil rights infused Primus's career with vital importance and relevance. Primus's training at the New Dance Group in the early 1940s had instilled a belief in the political impetus and ramifications of dance. Logically, then, Primus joined Robeson and many other African American performers of Cafe Society in the black political movement for an end to discrimination. The Negro Freedom Rallies during the war years, primarily sponsored by the Negro Labor Victory Committee, promoted the fulfillment of democracy at home as well as around the world. In the June, 1944 program at Madison Square Garden, Owen Dodson and Langston Hughes wrote and directed a pageant entitled "New World A-Coming" in which Primus appeared. Primus remembered the unity of people and purpose involved: "Paul [Robeson] would sing, I would dance, Adam [Clayton Powell, Jr.] would deliver the political statement, the social statement—what it was really *about*" (6). Here, art served a social and political function in promoting a double victory for freedom at home and abroad. As in the 1930s, African American artists of many genres saw racism as one problem among many and focused on the possibilities of broadening American democracy to include blacks (7).

Primus's work at this point in her career resembled this general trend; the bulk of her repertory dealt with the social status of African Americans. For example, a Langston Hughes poem inspired "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" (1943) about the heritage of slave labor from the pyramids to America, a theme taken up again in "Slave Market" (1944). For Primus, however, choreography about sharecropping, lynching, and evocations of Negro spirituals lacked some authenticity because she had not personally experienced these events. Expressing a need "to know my own people where they are suffering most," she journeyed to Georgia, Alabama, and South Carolina in the summer of 1944 where she posed as a migrant worker and picked cotton (8). The revelations of fieldwork in the south formed her awareness of the similarities and differences shaping cultural experiences. Still taking college courses and trying to figure out her future during this time, Primus switched from medical courses to psychology classes and, finally, to anthropology.

From a political concern for the rights of African Americans, Primus ended up in anthropology. The anthropological focus did not diminish her interest in the social status of African Americans; ultimately, it served to enhance it. The end of

World War II brought an abrupt and rude end to the hopes for a “double victory” against racism at home and abroad. The fight for civil rights experienced a loss of momentum in the face of intransigent racism, reinforced by returning white soldiers winning back jobs that African Americans had finally had an opportunity to hold. While the political fight for civil rights would not be revived until the mid-1950s, Primus and other African Americans looked elsewhere to understand persistent racism and strengthen African Americans against it. As ethnographer and artist, almost inevitably, Africa—“primitive,” “dark,” and “other”—lured Primus with its possibilities of a timeless connection that would offer definitions for herself and all African Americans.

Primus had absorbed information about Africa and recreated African dances from books. But, in 1948, the Rosenwald Foundation offered her the opportunity to test her book learning, giving her its last and largest grant (\$4000) to go to Africa. Armed with DDT and a gun, Primus, unaccompanied, headed for the Gold Coast, Angola, Liberia, Senegal, and the Belgian Congo(9). This first trip to Africa gave Primus a potent focus which was going to define virtually all of her work thereafter. Her performances became more like lecture-demonstrations in which she would explain the significance of certain rituals before dancing them. A major part of her transformation included a new understanding of certain “myths” which she wanted to expose to her audience. She emphasized that African dancing was not “primitive” but “basic,” noting that she would never again use the term “primitive” when speaking of African dance (10). For her, African dance rested on fundamental principles of body motion. Expressing universal beliefs, African dance provided a foundation of movement which could be understood by all. Similarly, Primus made an effort to describe the jungle as a richly musical and peaceful place instead of dangerous and frightening, acknowledging that she soon left behind the unneeded DDT and exchanged her gun for a more useful knife (11). Perhaps most telling, Primus changed the title of an article of which she wrote a draft before she went to Africa from “Out of Dark Africa” to “Out of Africa,” vaguely explaining to Walter Sorell, the editor, “the word dark implies many things that are not so” (12). In identifying so closely with Africans, Primus felt compelled to challenge pejorative or naive assumptions.

Primus reveled in the spiritual intensity which pervaded African dance and life and considered this the greatest bond between Africans and African Americans. In a letter from Kahnplay, Liberia, Primus described the revelations she experienced about the link between blacks.

If the preacher was the voice of the drum in southern Baptist churches, in Africa the earth is the voice of the dancer. The dancer is the conductor, the wire, which connects the earth and the sky....I have been amazed and overjoyed, for when the spirit entered me the reason for the dance became my reason to move. I danced as I have never danced on the stages of America. Myself was transformed. (13)

In her new transformation, Primus combined her many interests and experiences. She performed, studied, and taught, her-

alding dance as a language and as a vital bridge linking peoples and cultures.

Primus benefitted from the rise of anthropology and archaeology in the first half of the twentieth century which encouraged and supported American and European interest in Africa and African art. Modernist painters in fact replicated the primacy of form they saw in “primitive” objects. Primus, however, consciously concentrated on using Africa as an educative tool for blacks and whites. Thus, she promoted this attitude which some have now come to criticize and which the literary critic Marianna Torgovnick describes: “to study the primitive brings us always back to ourselves, which we reveal in the act of defining the other” (14). In some ways, however, this view toward Africa offered African Americans a different way in which to shape their identity. Primus advanced the idea that African Americans had a particularly authentic connection to African traditions and even a right and an obligation to uncover this tie. For whites, Primus’s promotion of Africa represented an “other” by which to define themselves. For blacks, however, Africa was not so clearly an “other”—as an oppositional category—but a fundamental base to be built upon in defining themselves.

Primus continued to promote African dance in America and Africa. She returned often to Africa with her husband and collaborator Percival Borde in the 1950s, a decade in which she continued to work toward a Ph.D. in anthropology at New York University. When funding for a project to salvage tribal dances in Liberia fell through in 1962, Primus returned to the United States and the burgeoning civil rights movement and commented on the role of dance in the continuing political struggle for African Americans. Primus emphasized the universal significance of dance during this period. Stressing that “African dance can be a part of the heritage of every American,” she sought to use dance as a way in which to understand the “basic conditions under which we all live” (15). But, in 1968, she also described her need to dance in a prism created by the contemporary political turmoil:

[Dance] is the scream which eases for awhile the terrible frustration common to all human beings who, because of race, creed or color are “invisible.” Dance is the fist with which I will fight the scheming ignorance of prejudice. It is the veiled contempt I feel for those who patronize with false smiles, handouts, empty promises, insincere compliments. (16)

Universality may have been Primus’s hope and goal but it could not be realized without also showing the racism which she had to get beyond.

Primus turned her attention to education in the latter part of her career, finally finishing her Ph.D. in anthropology in 1978. The education field allowed her to continue to combine her many interests and talents and to work towards combatting prejudice and opening minds—a goal she kept until the very end of her life. She held residencies at various colleges, usually teaching both dance and anthropology classes. She also restaged her works for companies, including the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre.

Primus received wide recognition in the education field and

beyond, including a Rosenwald Foundation grant (1948); appointment as Director of a Performing Arts Center in Monrovia, Liberia by the President of Liberia, Dr. William V.S. Tubman (1959); the first appointment to the Balasaraswati/Joy Ann Dewey Beinecke Chair for Distinguished Teaching (1991); the National Medal of the Arts (1991); and the Master Teacher Mentor Award from the National Endowment for the Arts (1995).

Confounding the cultural hierarchy of the times, inevitably forced into thinking about the political ramifications of her work, and using anthropology to legitimize and disseminate

African traditions, Pearl Primus shaped and participated in the changing status of African Americans in American society. Calling attention to the only simple unity amid the diverse experiences of African Americans, she exposed Africa as a cohesive origin. Working as an anthropologist, dancer, and educator Primus forged a life of remarkable impact. Marcia Heard, her assistant for her final course at New York University, commented that everyone in the class—people from Korea, Japan, South Africa, the United States—felt that she was their grandmother. For all eager to absorb, she gave warmth and wisdom. There is no doubt she leapt brilliantly into heaven.

## ENDNOTES

1. Four dissertations discuss Primus: Beverly Anne Hillsman Barber, "Pearl Primus, In Search of Her Roots: 1943-1970," Florida State University (1984); John O. Perpener III, "The Seminal Years of Black Concert Dance," New York University (1992); Leah Creque-Harris, "The Representation of African Dance on the Concert Stage: From the Early Black Musical to Pearl Primus," Emory University (1991); Felix O. Begho, "Black Dance Continuum: Reflections on the Heritage Connection Between African Dance and Afro-American Jazz Dance," New York University (1984). See also: John Martin, *John Martin's Book of the Dance* (NY: Tudor Publishing Company, 1963), 182-3; Margaret Lloyd, *The Borzoi Book of Modern Dance* (NY: Knopf, 1949), 268; *Current Biography* (1944), 551.

2. *The New York Times* (5 August 1943).

3. As one African American dance instructor of the Hampton Institute put it: everyone recognizes "the existence in abundance of great native capacity [in dance] among Negro youth" (*Dance Observer* v.4 #8 [October 1937]: 97-8). White critics more often qualified African Americans' "natural" dance capacity: for instance, "Everybody who knows the Negro at all, knows that he is a master of the cruder forms of dancing" (Michael Lorant, "Hampton Institute: Negro's Unique Dancing Academy," *The Dancing Times* [October 1938]: 20-1). See John Martin op. cit. for an example of a critic's view about African Americans attempting ballet.

4. Edwin Denby, *Looking at the Dance* (NY: Pellegrini & Cudahy, 1949), 377-8.

5. *Dance Observer* vol. 11 no. 9 (November 1944): 110.

6. Program of the 1944 Negro Freedom Rally in the Archives & Manuscripts Division of the Schomburg Research Center for Black Culture, New York Public Library; Primus quoted in

Nicole Dekle, "Pearl Primus: Spirit of the People," *Dance Magazine* vol. 64 no. 12 (December 1990): 62-5. Italics original.

7. Dudley Randall, "The Black Aesthetic in the '30s, '40s, and '50s," in *The Black Aesthetics*, ed. Addison Gayle, Jr. (NY: Doubleday, 1971), 220.

8. *Dance Magazine* (April 1946): 30-1, 55-6; Lloyd, 274; *Ebony* vol. 6 no. 3 (January 1951): 54-8. Quote, *Ebony*: 56.

9. *Dance Magazine* vol. 24 no. 7 (July 1950): 21-3.

10. Primus, "Africa Dances," *Dance Observer* vol. 16 no. 10 (December 1949): 147. This is a letter from Primus, dated 28 September 1949, from Kahnplay, Liberia.

11. Pearl Primus, "African Dance," in *African Heritage*, ed. Jacob Drachler (NY: Crowell-Cllier Press, 1963), 172-80; *Dance Observer* vol. 17 no. 9 (November 1950): 138; *Dance Magazine* vol. 24 no.17 (July 1950): 21-3.

12. Personal correspondance from Primus to Walter Sorell, dated 30 March 1951, from New York City. Manuscript, Dance Collection, NYPL.

13. *Dance Observer* vol. 16 no. 10 (December 1949): 147.

14. Marianna Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 11.

15. *Dance Magazine* vol. 38 no. 10 (October 1964): 20-1.

16. Primus quoted in *Dance Magazine* vol. 42 no. 11 (November 1968): 56-60.