

AGENCY, EMPATHY, AND SOCIAL  
 JUSTICE: THE FEDERAL DANCE  
 THEATRE, TAMIRIS, AND  
 HOW LONG, BRETHREN?

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INTRODUCTION

The Great Depression was a time of economic despair and artistic ingenuity. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal established jobs for the unemployed and unprecedented government sponsorship of the arts. One relief agency, the Federal Dance Theatre (FDT), has been largely excluded from histories of the New Deal, presumably due to ignorance, brevity, or the opinion that its short tenure indicates insignificance. The development of the FDT, the personal background and work of its primary choreographer, Tamiris (whose real name is Helen Becker), and the social message of her critical dance concert, *How Long, Brethren?* reveal the agency and empathy of the dancers and choreographer. Tamiris stands out as a pioneer of modern dance and social justice in an era of Jim Crow segregation and fear of communist subversion. A further examination of contemporary perceptions demonstrates the artistic, relevant, and subversive nature of the FDT, Tamiris, and *How Long, Brethren?*

## THE GREAT DEPRESSION AND DANCE: THE MAKING OF THE FEDERAL DANCE THEATRE

During the Great Depression of the 1930s, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt instituted a series of “alphabet agencies” to assist in economic relief. On May 6, 1935, Executive Order No. 7034 established the Works Progress Administration (WPA), which developed job opportunities for the unemployed.<sup>1</sup> In contrast to earlier relief efforts, the WPA provided those on relief with jobs in their particular profession.<sup>2</sup> The director of the WPA, Harry Hopkins, sympathized with artists and argued that in addition to mainstream professions, artists of varying types deserved government assistance.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, a number of arts projects were initiated in the spring of 1935, such as the Federal Writers’ Project, Federal Art Project, and Federal Music Project. The Federal Theatre Project (FTP) was developed later that year, with Hallie Flanagan sworn in as National Director on August 29, 1935. These four projects (and eventually the Historical Record Projects) were referred to as Federal Project Number One.<sup>4</sup>

Tamiris, a modern dance pioneer, and other dancers in New York were familiar with the economic plight of dancers and had been organizing to gain relief for some time. A month before the WPA was created, dance critic John Martin wrote in the *New York Times*, “There are hundreds of dancers out of work in New York. Unless they are given a means of keeping their technical training alive, they will shortly be permanently unemployable as dancers.”<sup>5</sup> In 1934, Tamiris and about thirty other dancers voted to establish a union whose goals included “jobs for dancers, dance teachers,

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1 Library of Congress, “The WPA Federal Theatre Project, 1935-1939,” <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/fedtp/ftwpa.html> (accessed 2 February 2012).

2 Kim C. Friedman, “The Federal Dance Theatre in New York City: Legislative and Administrative Obstacles” (master’s thesis, American University, 1992), 2.

3 John O’Connor and Lorraine Brown, *Free, Adult, Uncensored: The Living History of the Federal Theatre Project* (Washington, D.C.: New Republic Books, 1978), 2.

4 Friedman, “The Federal Dance Theatre in New York City,” 9.

5 John Martin, “The Dance: On Relief,” *New York Times*, 14 April 1935: X9.

etc., ... a central theatre of dance where performing units are salaried to put on dance programs regularly, ... [and] immediate cash relief for needy cases.”<sup>6</sup> The newly-established union, the Dancers Union, proved fundamental in the fight for a distinct Federal Dance Project.

In January of 1936, plans for dance to be included within the New York City Federal Theatre Project were revealed, but the dancers refused to be “second-class citizens on this whole thing”; they wanted an independent Federal *Dance* Theatre.<sup>7</sup> Lili Mann Laub, a dancer with the FDT, said, “There were dancers living in attics . . . They were starving, too . . . this is why we had to have the [Dance] Project. We had to. We would all have been dead in the streets if we didn’t.”<sup>8</sup> This urgency led Tamiris and other dancers to lobby Hallie Flanagan for a distinct dance unit. Fanya Geltman, one of the most politically-involved of the FDT dancers, spoke of Tamiris’s skills as an organizer: “She really was a woman who had something to say, and she could speak like no one else.”<sup>9</sup> Along with these personal meetings, the Dancers Union sent a telegram to Flanagan on January 14, 1936, stating, “The needs of the dancers of New York are not adequately covered by the present setup under the municipal drama project. We therefore request the formation of an independent dance project with its own administrative staff and permanent theatre.”<sup>10</sup> Flanagan

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6 “Dancer’s Union,” *New Theatre*, January 1935: 29.

7 John Martin, “The Dance: WPA Project,” *New York Times*, 12 January 1936: X8; Fanya Geltman (Del Bourgo), interview with Karen Wickre, December 16, 1977, p. 1, Works Progress Administration Oral Histories Collection, Collection #C0153, SCA, GMU. (Hereafter noted as WPA OHC.)

8 Lili Mann Laub, interview with Karen Wickre, May 24, 1978, p. 26, WPA OHC.

9 Fanya Geltman (Del Bourgo), interview with Karen Wickre, December 16, 1977, p. 18, WPA OHC.

10 Western Union telegram, January 14, 1936, Library of Congress Federal Theatre Project Collection, cited in Ellen Graff, *Stepping Left: Dance and Politics in New York City, 1928-1942* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 80.

granted the request the next day.<sup>11</sup> In her 1940 memoir of the FTP, Flanagan referred to Tamiris's dancers as "her fiery cohorts" and recalled their endless union activities and picketing with a hint of disapprobation (probably because of the negative publicity this brought her).<sup>12</sup> Clearly, the dancers knew how to organize effectively and acted with agency in successfully institutionalizing and thus legitimizing dance as an art form worthy of government sponsorship.<sup>13</sup>

The FDT, sometimes referred to as the Dance Project, was a serious artistic endeavor as evidenced by the funding, hiring, and production plans. Granted \$150,000 for the first six months' expenses, the Dance Project planned to hire 185 dancers at \$23.86 per week.<sup>14</sup> The five choreographers hired (due to a loophole in funding, which allowed twenty-five percent of funding to go toward non-relief personnel on creative projects) in the New York unit were Gluck-Sandor, Doris Humphrey, Felicia Sorel, Tamiris, and Charles Weidman.<sup>15</sup> Hallie Flanagan appointed Don Oscar Becque as the director. The allotted funds were sufficient to produce eight productions, with "a theatre for performances, orchestras, musical ensembles and choruses where required." The dance concerts were to be new experiments, since Flanagan found it "more desirable to produce many good failures than one conventional success."<sup>16</sup> Flanagan's emphasis on experimentation provided the context for exploring "modern," relevant issues using cutting-edge choreography. Unfortunately, bureaucratic issues slowed the process of auditions and rehearsals just as they were starting.

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11 Kathleen Ann Lally, "A History of the Federal Dance Theatre of the Works Progress Administration, 1935-1939" (master's thesis, University of Oregon, 1980), 25.

12 Hallie Flanagan, *Arena* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1940), 76.

13 Friedman, "The Federal Dance Theatre in New York City," 24.

14 Friedman, "The Federal Dance Theatre in New York City," 36.

15 Graff, *Stepping Left*, 80.

16 John Martin, "The Dance: WPA Theatre," *New York Times*, 15 March 1936: X7.

“Bureaucratic red tape” diminished the optimism the dancers first maintained.<sup>17</sup> Legislation passed on March 5, 1936 froze hiring in the Arts Projects, leaving the FDT with the eighty-five dancers hired, rather than the promised 185.<sup>18</sup> The dancers and other choreographers soon became upset with Becque, the Dance Project’s director, because of his incessant push for a “common denominator of technique” and his re-auditioning of all dancers in August, 1936, which they viewed as a tactic to get rid of dancers who opposed him.<sup>19</sup> The dancers picketed, made petitions, and organized to remove Becque and hold onto funds, which Congress also decreased. Although Becque resigned in December of 1936, the funds were never returned and the FDT was subsumed under the FTP in October 1937.<sup>20</sup> The Dance Project continued to produce dance concerts until June 30, 1939, when the Special Committee on Un-American Activities closed the FTP due to accusations that it was a “veritable hotbed of communism”.<sup>21</sup> After the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, conservatives in the United States became wary of individuals touting anything resembling socialist or communist ideas. Government sponsorship of programs not traditionally supported with federal funds, by their very nature, raised suspicions of socialism as well. In this context, it is noteworthy that the FDT came into existence at all; that it produced socially-relevant dance, occasionally in conflict with the mainstream views of the day, was quite revolutionary.

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17 Saida Gerrard, interview with Karen Wickre, February 21, 1978, p. 9, WPA OHC.

18 Lally, “A History of the Federal Dance Theatre of the Works Progress Administration, 1935-1939,” 25.

19 Christena L. Schlundt, *Tamiris: A Chronicle of Her Dance Career, 1927-1955* (New York: The New York Public Library, 1972), 40; Graff, *Stepping Left*, 86.

20 Susan Manning, “Black Voices, White Bodies: The Performance of Race and Gender in ‘How Long Brethren,’” *American Quarterly* 50, no. 1 (March 1998): 25.

21 Kim C. Friedman, “The Federal Dance Theatre in New York City,” 110; Radio Address by Sen. J. Parnell Thomas, 12 September 1938, in Kim C. Friedman “The Federal Dance Theatre in New York City,” 98.

The FDT significantly impacted modern dance, social awareness, and the political behavior of dancers. Though not discussed here due to length, the FDT produced twenty-six dance concerts nation-wide exploring social and artistic issues, which received critical acclaim from the *New York Times*, other newspapers, and dance and theatre magazines.<sup>22</sup> The dancers were politically active and agitated for their rights, and many of the choreographers who worked for the FDT became central figures in the development of modern dance in America, including Charles Weidman, Doris Humphrey, Katherine Dunham, and Tamiris.

A review of the oral history transcripts of many New York City Dance Project dancers, an audition board member, and a publicist reveals a complicated set of perceptions of the FDT. For example, most viewed it as a legitimizing force for dance, a vehicle for educating the nation in dance, and a means of gaining solidarity, identity, and power as dancers and women. Conversely, they also viewed it as a frustrating system, filled with “bureaucratic red tape,” little flexibility, and an unclear purpose.

Dancers perceived the FDT as a vehicle for the recognition of dance as art and an upstanding profession. Anne Lief Barlin, a dancer with the Dance Project, stated that dance “was akin to prostitution” at that time, “at least [for] the Jewish European family.”<sup>23</sup> Other dancers echoed this sentiment. Nadia Chilkovsky, a member of the audition board, stated that dance was not a recognized art form and remembered her father saying, “Nice girls don’t dance.”<sup>24</sup> Sue Nadel, another dancer, jokingly said that, “dance was equivalent to basket weaving.”<sup>25</sup> Although the early twentieth century saw an increase in public activity for some

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22 Mary-lynn Son Hilton, “An Investigation of Modern Dance Works Sponsored Between 1936 and 1939 By the Works Project Administration Federal Theatre Dance Project,” (master’s thesis, University of Oregon, 1979), 60.

23 Anne Lief Barlin, interview with Karen Wickre, October 25, 1977, p. 10, WPA OHC.

24 Nadia Chilkovsky, interview with Karen Wickre, May 25, 1978, p. 12, WPA OHC.

25 Sue Remos Nadel, interview with Karen Wickre, October 23, 1977, p. 5, WPA OHC.

women, including “flappers,” who could dance in public for leisure, many women were still constrained by Victorian ideals extending from the nineteenth century that idealized women as private creatures who belonged in the home—not on stage for the “consumption” of an audience. Ostensibly, the framing of dance as government-sponsored work gave it legitimacy as a form of labor, and many of the women in the FDT chose to dance both as a form of artistic expression and a way to gain economic independence.

The pedagogical aspect of inexpensive dance performances was perceived as a fundamental benefit of the Dance Project. Samuel Chavkin, a publicist with the FDT remembered the exhilaration of audiences who had little exposure to live performances: “suddenly these people would be sitting in a place like the Nora Bayes Theatre...and watching a dance performance such as that by Tamiris...and virtually shouted their heads off in appreciation and applauding.”<sup>26</sup> Lili Mann Laub said, “We had—people who were exposed to theatre more than they ever would have been and more than they are now.”<sup>27</sup> The dancers perceived the opportunity to educate the populous in an emerging art form as critical and significant. Mura Dehn found in the FDT an educational tool “that showed that culture can be brought to the masses and to the places where it never reached them before... and that people want and need it.”<sup>28</sup> On the importance of creating and sharing such art forms as a national product, Nadia Chilkovsky said, “I think a country, a culture, is remembered long after senators change...by its cultural product, cultural output.”<sup>29</sup> Paula Bass Perlowin echoed this sentiment, saying that, “This is what remains of the world...the art that a nation produced is

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26 Samuel Chavkin, interview with Karen Wickre, May 22, 1978, p. 2, WPA OHC.

27 Lili Mann Laub, interview with Karen Wickre, May 24, 1978, p. 27, WPA OHC.

28 Mura Dehn, interview with Karen Wickre, April 20, 1978, p. 21, WPA OHC.

29 Nadia Chilkovsky, interview with Karen Wickre, May 25, 1978, p. 22, WPA OHC.

what lives on.”<sup>30</sup> Clearly, these people perceived art education and the support of new art made possible through the FDT as instrumental to a nation’s future.

The FDT provided women with an outlet for meaningful work, and in the process, they furthered their organizational skills to fight for their rights as workers and as women, and for the rights of those facing social injustice, such as African Americans. Fanya Geltman, at the time of her interview in 1977, spoke of how she would still refer to fellow dancers who were getting publicity for their work as “‘my dancers,’ because we were all of the same era.”<sup>31</sup> Many in the Dance Project viewed it as a family. Sue Remos Nadel saw the FDT as a place where more than just dance occurred; it also facilitated political awakening: “We were in a way, the women were, you know, feminists. We were tearing down old traditions, we were asserting ourselves in all kinds of ways as artists and as human beings. So it was . . . we were involved not only in dance but in other things, the political, and organizational things.”<sup>32</sup> Being a part of the FDT brought a sense of solidarity and personal growth on many levels.

In contrast to the positive aspects of the FDT, the dancers, audition board member, and publicist alike found several bureaucratic challenges within the FDT; indeed, Samuel Chavkin said “insecurity” was the only guarantee in the FDT.<sup>33</sup> Anne Lief Barlin perceived the FDT as a siphon on her creativity, since she did not feel like an individual performing, but rather like a body for the choreographers “to work through.”<sup>34</sup> Nadia Chilkovsky ended up resigning from the audition board out of frustration with the guidelines, which were either too open or too narrow.

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30 Paula Bass Perlowin, interview with Karen Wickre, October 23, 1977, p. 64, WPA OHC.

31 Fanya Geltman (Del Bourgo), interview with Karen Wickre, December 16, 1977, p. 11, WPA OHC.

32 Sue Remos Nadel, interview with Karen Wickre, October 23, 1977, p. 10, WPA OHC.

33 Samuel Chavkin, interview with Karen Wickre, May 22, 1978, p. 4, WPA OHC.

34 Anne Lief Barlin, interview with Karen Wickre, October 25, 1977, p. 5, WPA OHC.

Since she believed the program was meant for relief, Chilkovsky did not like having to turn people away. When the other audition board members felt differently, Chilkovsky said, “My humanism couldn’t take it, so I resigned.”<sup>35</sup> Mura Dehn found the conditions to be considered for relief outrageous: “You couldn’t have parents. You couldn’t have a place where you lived. You had to be in some kind of limbo.” Dehn also felt out of the loop as a jazz dancer in a primarily modern dance world, waiting for ages before getting placed with a choreographer.<sup>36</sup> Saida Gerrard referred to the “bureaucratic red tape” of the system and discussed how morale would go down when dance concerts were over-rehearsed, which happened fairly often.<sup>37</sup> The FDT was perceived as a disorganized bureaucratic system that inhibited progress while simultaneously creating opportunities. The dancers within the FDT acted with agency in overcoming and manipulating these challenges.

Although the Hearings of the Special Committee on Un-American Activities reviewing the FTP are not representative of the whole of Congress (there were Senators asking for a permanent national theatre at the time), these hearings framed the dissolution of the FTP and are therefore a critical glimpse into how it was perceived. The primary witness before the Dies Committee (led by Chairman Martin Dies) was Hazel Huffman. Formerly-employed by the WPA mail division, Huffman was fired after she was discovered reading FTP mail without permission.<sup>38</sup> At the outset of the testimony, Congressman J. Parnell Thomas stated that “the purpose of this testimony is to show the communistic activities in the Federal Theatre Project in New York City.”<sup>39</sup> There was no

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35 Nadia Chilkovsky, interview with Karen Wickre, May 25, 1978, p. 11, 13, WPA OHC.

36 Mura Dehn, interview with Karen Wickre, April 20, 1978, p. 5, 11, WPA OHC.

37 Saida Gerrard, interview with Karen Wickre, February 21, 1978, p. 9, WPA OHC.

38 Elizabeth Cooper, “Tamiris and the Federal Dance Theatre 1936-1939,” 41.

39 U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, Special Committee on Un-American Activities, *Investigation of Un-American Propaganda Activities in the United States: Hearings before a Special Committee on Un-American Activities*, 75th Cong., 3rd sess., 12, 13, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 22, 21 August 1938, 775.

question of showing “if” communist activities were happening—it was a foregone conclusion, and one that would conveniently shut the program down. Huffman proceeded to discuss personal conversations she had with various members of the FTP and provided evidence of “communist activities” through labor union documents that were distributed at rehearsals.<sup>40</sup> She described Flanagan as a Communist sympathizer because of her travels to Russia in the 1920s, and called *How Long, Brethren?* “communistic propaganda.”<sup>41</sup> Huffman stated that Gellert’s *Negro Songs of Protest* had been printed in *New Masses* (a left-oriented publication) back in 1931, and should therefore be considered communist.<sup>42</sup> Despite Flanagan’s many attempts to correct the widespread misinformation about the FTP, she was ignored, and the Dies Committee Report of January 3, 1939 stated that “a rather large number of the employees on the Federal Theatre Project are either members of the Communist Party or are sympathetic with the Communist Party.”<sup>43</sup> Therefore, an act of Congress closed the FTP on June 30, 1939. The members of the Special Committee on Un-American Activities perceived (perhaps “framed” is a more accurate term) the FTP and *How Long, Brethren?* as communist and subversive.

On discussing the demise of the FDT, the dancers said they were not surprised by the turn of events; they were aware of the socially-provocative nature of their dances, as well as the poor receipt of their activism in the midst of an insecure political and economic environment. “We saw the handwriting on the wall,” said Saida Gerrard, “it was guilt by association.”<sup>44</sup> They knew the

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40 U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, Special Committee on Un-American Activities, 776-777.

41 U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, Special Committee on Un-American Activities, 777.

42 U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, Special Committee on Un-American Activities, 784-785.

43 Hallie Flanagan, *Arena*, 335-347.

44 Saida Gerrard, interview with Karen Wickre, February 21, 1978, p. 19-20, WPA OHC.

Dies Committee Hearings were happening, though none of the dancers were singled out to testify, and some, like Fanya Geltman, recalled being on the FBI watch list during the McCarthy Era.<sup>45</sup> Paula Bass Perlowin and Sue Nadel discussed how some people simply did not want support for the arts (Sue called these people “boondogglers”), and others marked people as communist “as soon as they see somebody on a picket line or putting up a battle for something.”<sup>46</sup> Karen Wickre, who conducted the oral histories of the FDT dancers, recalled that in 1977, she still came across people who were reluctant to admit being a part of the FTP for these reasons.<sup>47</sup> Perhaps this legacy of communist subversion resulted in the FDT’s exclusion from histories of the New Deal.

### TAMIRIS: DANCER, CHOREOGRAPHER, ORGANIZER EXTRAORDINAIRE

Tamiris, a modern dancer and choreographer, is credited as the leading force behind the creation of the FDT, and in many ways, her work embodies its goal of providing socially relevant, artistic works for the public.<sup>48</sup> Tamiris choreographed four works during her tenure in the New York City unit of the FDT, including *Salut au Monde*, *How Long, Brethren? Trojan Incident*, and *Adelante*. In order to understand her choice of topics, aesthetic style, and philosophy, it is necessary to review her background and personal growth as a dancer and choreographer.

Helen Becker’s personal background is likely linked to the political radicalism in her dance. Becker was born in New York

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45 Fanya Geltman (Del Bourgo), interview with Karen Wickre, December 16, 1977, p. 7, WPA OHC.

46 Sue Remos Nadel and Paula Bass Perlowin, interview with Karen Wickre, October 23, 1977, p. 61, WPA OHC.

47 Sue Remos Nadel and Paula Bass Perlowin, interview with Karen Wickre, October 23, 1977, p. 67, WPA OHC.

48 Elizabeth Cooper, “Tamiris and the Federal Dance Theatre 1936-1939: Socially Relevant Dance Amidst the Policies and Politics of the New Deal Era,” *Dance Research Journal* 29, no. 2 (Autumn 1997): 24.

City on April 23, 1902 to Russian Jewish immigrants.<sup>49</sup> Her father worked in a garment sweatshop, and her mother died when she was three. Becker grew up in the Lower East Side of New York City, which was considered the Jewish ghetto, in the midst of poverty.<sup>50</sup> Considering that African Americans were often segregated via discriminatory housing, hiring, and education practices (which often contributed to high levels of poverty), Becker likely empathized with this population at an early age. Becker received her first dance training from Irene Lewisohn at the Henry Street Settlement House, beginning at age eight.<sup>51</sup> After graduating from high school at age fifteen, Becker auditioned at the Metropolitan Opera Ballet.<sup>52</sup> Though she was clad in “gymnasium-like practice clothes” and “barefooted,” she went through with the audition and was accepted on scholarship.<sup>53</sup> Becker quickly rose to the *corps de ballet*, demonstrating her technical capability and speed of learning, and danced with the Metropolitan Opera for four seasons. She performed as a guest soloist with the Bracale Opera Company on tour through South America for a season as well.<sup>54</sup> While in South America, an admirer sent her a bouquet of flowers and a poem, whose last line read, “Thou art Tamiris, the ruthless queen, who vanquishes all obstacles!”<sup>55</sup> After completing a final season at the Metropolitan Opera upon her return from South America, Becker left the restrictiveness of ballet and sought a freer movement style. She worked with Michel Fokine and then a Duncan dancer (Isadora Duncan, with her free movement and bare feet, is often

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49 Pauline Tish, “Remembering Helen Tamiris,” *Dance Chronicle* 17, no. 3 (1994): 327.

50 Julia L. Foulkes, “Angels “Rewolt!”: Jewish Women in Modern Dance in the 1930s,” *American Jewish History* 88, no. 2 (June 2000): 242; Graff, *Stepping Left*, 77.

51 Lloyd, *The Borzoi Book of Modern Dance*, 133.

52 Amter, “Tamiris: the One Exception,” 29.

53 Walter Terry, *The Dance in America* (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1956), 120.

54 Lloyd, *The Borzoi Book of Modern Dance*, 134.

55 Amter, “Tamiris: the One Exception,” 31.

considered the progenitor of modern dance in America), but still found the movement constraining, so she worked in nightclubs and performed with the *Music Box Revue* in order to gain income. At this time, Becker adopted her namesake, Tamiris, from the poem discussed earlier—presumably because she was fiercely confident in herself, but also because adopting “exotic” names was a common practice of performers at that time.<sup>56</sup> After earning enough money to survive for a year and a half, Tamiris quit her job working for the *Music Box Revue*, found a dance space, and devoted that time to discovering her own movement style.<sup>57</sup>

On October 9, 1927, Tamiris, sponsored by Daniel Mayer, Inc., presented her first modern solo program, *Dance Moods*. Accompanied by Martha Graham’s musical director, Louis Horst, Tamiris performed what she felt were legitimately American themes and styles. This concert included creative innovations, such as *The Queen Walks in the Garden*, the second silent dance in America, and *Subconscious*, which she performed in the nude. At this time, dance was connected to music rhythmically, stylistically, and often thematically, so an exploration of movement free of music broke significant barriers. Tamiris’s dance in the nude also revealed interest in Freudian theories, which were revolutionizing psychological and sexual mores. Though there is little information regarding *Subconscious*, the fact that Tamiris titled her dance this demonstrates her awareness of contemporary scholarly developments.

Tamiris’s second solo concert, performed on January 29, 1928, was comprised of two sections: *American Moods* and *Moods Diverse*. In this concert, Tamiris performed *Nobody Knows the Trouble I See* and *Joshua Fit de Battle ob Jericho*, works that would be central to her repertoire and were the beginning of her

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56 Lloyd, *The Borzoi Book of Modern Dance*, 134.

57 Amter, “Tamiris: the One Exception,” 33-34.

close association with black spirituals.<sup>58</sup> In her program, Tamiris laid out her “Manifest” on dance: “Art is international, but the artist is a product of a nationality and his principal duty to himself is to express the spirit of his race.... There are no general rules. Each original work of art creates its own code. The aim of dance is not to narrate... by means of mimic tricks and other established choreographic forms. Dancing is simply movement with a personal conception of rhythm.”<sup>59</sup> It is evident that Tamiris equated the idea of “race” with nationality; she had no qualms about performing to black spirituals with themes related to the African American experience, because she believed that African Americans were part of the American nationality and history, which Tamiris also became a part of after her parents immigrated to the United States. These statements also reflect Tamiris’s philosophy of personal expression, rather than reliance on or codification of a particular technique, as opposed to the other modern dance pioneers, like Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, and Charles Weidman, who are each associated with a clear method of dance and choreography. Perhaps Tamiris’s legacy was harder to trace and record in the annals of dance history because there was little in her works that was quantifiable or distinctive.<sup>60</sup> In the fall of 1929, the Mozarteum Society invited Tamiris to tour Europe and perform at the Salzburg Festival. After becoming an “instantaneous success” in Europe, she returned to America and performed to rave reviews.<sup>61</sup>

Acknowledged as a concert dancer of merit, Tamiris engaged in two artistic ventures upon her return: she developed the idea of a cooperative dance program to defray production costs

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58 Lloyd, *The Borzoi Book of Modern Dance*, 134-135.

59 Joanna Gewertz Harris, “From Tenement to Theater: Jewish Women as Dance Pioneers: Helen Becker (Tamiris), Anna Sokolow, Sophie Maslow,” *Judaism* 45, no. 3 (Summer 1996): 262.

60 Schlundt, *Tamiris: A Chronicle of Her Dance Career, 1927-1955*, 75-76.

61 Olga Maynard, *American Modern Dancers: The Pioneers* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Company, 1965), 160.

and sought dancers to build her own dance company—both of these activities place Tamiris at the forefront of the modern dance movement and demonstrate her agency. The Dance Repertory Theatre was the brainchild of Tamiris, and she succeeded in attracting Martha Graham, Charles Weidman, and Doris Humphrey for two seasons, and Agnes De Mille for the second. Tamiris's organization and collaboration with these pioneers of modern dance situates her as a choreographer of merit and similar ability. Tamiris choreographed solos for herself and group works for her company, the School of the American Dance, which they performed for the Dance Repertory Theatre. Although the concerts were successful enough to pay production expenses, the other choreographers bailed from any future seasons. Apparently, "Disputes within the group over the distribution of box office proceeds, management, and production arrangements, as well as rivalries and factionalism, brought an end to this collective."<sup>62</sup> Ostensibly, the individualistic approach of modern choreographers in the 1930s did not lend itself to cooperative efforts.

Tamiris continued to put on concerts with her dance group (which by 1934 went by the name, "Tamiris and Her Group") throughout the early 1930s, expanding her repertoire to include the *Walt Whitman Suite*, *Cycles of Unrest*, *Harvest*, and *Momentum* among others. These works exhibited Tamiris's growing concern for social issues, such as opposing war and the economic depression.<sup>63</sup> These dances were important thematic precursors to her work with the FDT.

As mentioned earlier, Tamiris was the key organizer of the FDT. Additionally, she was the only choreographer who gave up her own company and studio to immerse herself in the work of the Dance Project.<sup>64</sup> Producing four original works for the

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62 Cooper, "Tamiris and the Federal Dance Theatre 1936-1939," 25.

63 Lloyd, *The Borzoi Book of Modern Dance*, 140-141.

64 Schlundt, *Tamiris: A Chronicle of Her Dance Career, 1927-1955*, 39.

FDT, Tamiris was also the project's most prolific choreographer, and she identified this as the "happiest period of her career."<sup>65</sup> Unfortunately, the moment would pass, as the Special Committee on Un-American Activities found the FTP communist and shut it down in the summer of 1939. When the FTP closed, Tamiris was both poor and "considered 'red.'"<sup>66</sup> In a performance on July 29, 1939 (shortly after the FDT dissolved), Tamiris chose to go by the title, "The American Dancer Helen Tamiris." Perhaps Tamiris did this to emphasize her Americanness, rather than the exotic appeal she was going for earlier in life, in the context of growing fear over foreign powers steeped in Communism and Nazism.<sup>67</sup>

When the FTP dissolved, Tamiris had to start over from scratch, since she gave up her own company to devote herself to the work of the Dance Project.<sup>68</sup> Tamiris's work in this period reflects both a distancing from social issues (perhaps in response to the conservatism of the World War II era) and the growing optimism of the period. Tamiris engaged in a new venture: musical theatre. John Roy, the Radio City Rainbow Room director, saw Tamiris's *Liberty Song*, performed in her basement studio, and was so taken with it that he brought it to the Rainbow Room for six weeks in 1941. From there, Tamiris's career as a Broadway choreographer took off.<sup>69</sup> Tamiris is most famous for her choreography in *Touch and Go* (for which she won the Antionette Perry Award for Best Choreography), a revival of *Showboat*, *Annie Get Your Gun*, *Inside USA*, *Plain and Fancy*, and *Up in Central Park*. Tamiris reportedly changed the image of the Broadway dancer from someone pretty to look at to someone with serious dance skills.<sup>70</sup>

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65 Lloyd, *The Borzoi Book of Modern Dance*, 147.

66 Gewertz Harris, "From Tenement to Theater: Jewish Women as Dance Pioneers," 263.

67 Cooper, "Tamiris and the Federal Dance Theatre 1936-1939," 43.

68 Amter, "Tamiris: the One Exception," 67, 80-82.

69 Lloyd, *The Borzoi Book of Modern Dance*, 147-149.

70 Amter, "Tamiris: the One Exception," 84.

Tamiris's final contributions to the dance world involved a return to concert dance and social issues. In 1960, Tamiris and her husband at the time, Daniel Nagrin, formed the Tamiris-Nagrin Dance Company. Tamiris no longer danced, but she choreographed for the company, including the works *Memoir*, which is an exploration of "her Jewish roots," and *Women's Song*, "about women's societal roles and the havoc of the Holocaust."<sup>71</sup> On August 4, 1966, Helen Tamiris died of cancer at the Jewish Memorial Hospital at age sixty-four. The title of Tamiris's obituary in the *New York Times* on August 5, 1966 was "Helen Tamiris, Dancer, Is Dead: Choreographer Put a Stress on Social Responsibility."<sup>72</sup> Along with this legacy of social responsibility, Tamiris bequeathed a third of her estate to further the cause of American modern dance, leaving a monetary legacy, which was used to open the Tamiris Foundation.<sup>73</sup>

A review of the oral history transcripts of dancers from the Dance Project reveals a common perception that Tamiris was a great speaker, organizer, and performer. Anne Lief Barlin even credited her with "keeping the WPA Dance Project alive."<sup>74</sup> Samuel Chavkin perceived Tamiris as a "prima donna," but claimed that this was "forgiveable" since she was such a talented person.<sup>75</sup> Lili Mann Laub provided an excellent description, calling her "a vigorous, very lusty, earthy, pantheistic personality and her work was like that. It was full of verve and a kind of a personal joy of movement. . . . she wasn't afraid to take up a cause.

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71 John Martin, *John Martin's Book of the Dance* (New York: Tudor Publishing Company, 1963), 162; Rebecca L. Rausch, "Personal Information for Helen Tamiris," *Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia*, March 20, 2009, Jewish Women's Archive, <http://jwa.org/archive/jsp/perInfo.jsp?personID=594> (accessed 23 February 2012).

72 "Helen Tamiris, Dancer, Is Dead," *New York Times*, 5 August 1966: 24.

73 Liz Sonneborn, *A to Z of American Women in the Performing Arts* (New York: Facts on File, Inc.: 2002), 210.

74 Anne Lief Barlin, interview with Karen Wickre, October 25, 1977, p. 9, 11, WPA OHC; Nadia Chilkovsky, interview with Karen Wickre, May 25, 1978, p. 16-17, WPA OHC.

75 Samuel Chavkin, interview with Karen Wickre, May 22, 1978, p. 7, WPA OHC.

And she did it well . . . with a great deal of zest.”<sup>76</sup> Sue Nadel called Tamiris “articulate and sophisticated and brilliant.”<sup>77</sup> The conglomerate of these comments reveals a perception of Tamiris as a strong leader, speaker, and dancer.

Tamiris appears in *America Dancing: The Background and Personalities of the Modern Dance*, by John Martin, the *New York Times* dance critic of the day. This book, published in 1936, essentially codified modern dance. Martin devoted a chapter to “The Independents” of modern dance, whom he defined as dancers who have made significant contributions to “the distinctively American dance as a fine art.” Tamiris is one of eight choreographers whom Martin categorized as independents, and he placed her in the beginning of the chapter to emphasize her prominence. Although the FDT had not been established at this time, it is significant that Martin chose to place Tamiris in this section, rather than in a separate chapter, as he did for Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, and Charles Weidman. Since Martin is considered the originator of the term, “modern dance” and developed much of the established opinion on choreography, this placement of Tamiris may be definitive.<sup>78</sup> Later dance historians may have simply copied this categorization without considering the groundbreaking work Tamiris did in the FDT as worthy of giving Tamiris a distinct chapter. Despite this placement, Martin found in Tamiris “a talent to reckon with.” He described Tamiris as “striking” and said that she had “a rare and innate gift for beautiful movement.”<sup>79</sup> Martin suggested “Negro dance” was an orientation befitting Tamiris, and indeed, this would be realized in *How Long, Brethren?* From this early writing in 1936, it is clear that dance critic, John Martin, perceived Tamiris as important to

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76 Lili Mann Laub, interview with Karen Wickre, May 24, 1978, p. 24, WPA OHC.

77 Sue Remos Nadel, interview with Karen Wickre, October 23, 1977, p. 33, WPA OHC.

78 Foulkes, “Angels “Rewolt!,” 251.

79 Martin, *America Dancing: The Background and Personalities of the Modern Dance*, 244.

the modern dance movement, energetic and passionate, but not on par with Graham, Humphrey, and Weidman.

### *HOW LONG, BRETHREN?: BODIES AND VOICES*

Perhaps the work for which Tamiris is most well-known is *How Long, Brethren?* The archival evidence, popular publications, and secondary sources discussing *How Long, Brethren?* far exceed that of many of Tamiris's other works; therefore *How Long, Brethren?* stands as the most emblematic of Tamiris's choreographic career and as the best option for unearthing her philosophical and aesthetic approach, as well as underscoring her social justice. The world premiere of *How Long, Brethren?* was May 6, 1937. Presented first in the Nora Bayes Theater along with Charles Weidman's *Candide* through July 4th, and then revisited later that year, from December through January of 1938 at the Forty-ninth Street Theatre, *How Long, Brethren?* ran for a total of forty-three performances to a total audience of 24,235 people.<sup>80</sup> According to dancer Pauline Tish, the performances "always received a standing ovation that continued long after the curtain fell." Additionally, *Dance Magazine* honored *How Long, Brethren?* with its first ever Dance Magazine Award for modern group choreography on June 10, 1937.<sup>81</sup> The receipt of such widespread acclaim by audiences and the elite dance community alike demonstrates that Tamiris created a relevant, artistic, and resonating work.

*How Long, Brethren?* was performed by twenty dancers accompanied by the twenty-member Federal Theatre Negro Chorus and a small orchestra. The cast of dancers were all female and white (many were also Jewish), and their work with the Negro Chorus marked one of the few instances of racial integration in the FTP. Hallie Flanagan exalted *How Long, Brethren?* as "hold[ing] to the democratic principle of racial equality"—both

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80 Tish, "Remembering Helen Tamiris," 352.

81 Tish, "Remembering Helen Tamiris," 344, 352.

in subject matter and in the bringing together of the dancers with the Federal Theatre Negro Chorus.<sup>82</sup> Tamiris selected seven of Lawrence Gellert's transcribed "Negro Songs of Protest," which he collected from African Americans in the South. Genevieve Pitot, Tamiris's long-time accompanist, arranged the songs, and Tamiris ordered them to produce her desired effect.<sup>83</sup> The seven songs Tamiris chose included the following, in performance order: "Pickin' Off de Cotton" (performed by the ensemble), "Upon de Mountain" (performed by Tamiris and the ensemble), "Railroad" (performed by the ensemble), "Scottsboro" (performed by the ensemble), "Sistern an' Brethren" (performed by the ensemble), "Let's Go to de Buryin'" (performed by Tamiris and the ensemble) and "How Long, Brethren?" (performed by Tamiris and the ensemble).<sup>84</sup> These songs spoke of "poverty, starvation, injustice, and death" and called for action opposing racism.<sup>85</sup> Samuel Chavkin, a publicist for the FTP, said "there were very few things that actually stirred me as much really and seeing the audience being so stirred, people actually crying when they saw *How Long, Brethren?* because the music was so stirring. The orchestration was extraordinary. . . . I must have watched it a dozen times, never tired of it."<sup>86</sup> Dance can be a powerful medium for providing awareness, and Tamiris and her dancers chose to highlight the social injustice of racism in America, which leads one to believe that they felt a measure of empathy with the African Americans.

Tamiris's choreography powerfully expressed the brutality of racial suffering. John Martin commented on the challenge of surpassing such moving music with dance, saying, "under such circumstances, choreography becomes almost superfluous," yet

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82 Flanagan, *Arena*, 199.

83 Manning, "Black Voices, White Bodies," 26, 28.

84 Schlundt, *Tamiris: A Chronicle of Her Dance Career, 1927-1955*, 54.

85 Christena L. Schlundt, *Tamiris: A Chronicle of Her Dance Career, 1927-1955*, 46.

86 Samuel Chavkin, interview with Karen Wickre, May 22, 1978, p. 22, WPA OHC.

he believed Tamiris succeeded, at least in a few of the songs, most notably “Upon de Mountain” and “Let’s Go to de Buryin’.”<sup>87</sup>

The second dance of the series, “Upon de Mountain,” is centered around a mother, Tamiris, and her three children. Tish said the three children were “cry[ing] for food,” and “Tamiris’s arms reached out to protect the children as they moved from side to side.”<sup>88</sup> Opposite this grouping, another group of dancers was in a formation across the back of the stage. Each “stepped out of the line, raising an arm as if demanding food.”<sup>89</sup> In the midst of the Great

Depression, images of hunger were fairly common and would have crossed racial boundaries. In this piece, Tamiris sought recognition of the humanity of African Americans and their economic plight, which was often considerably worse than others, due to job discrimination.

The dance accompanied by the song, “Scottsboro,” protested the famous Scottsboro case, in which seven African American boys accused of raping a white woman were hung. Martin felt this was a weak section, due to “the excitement of the group manifest[ed] . . . largely by personal emotionalizing.”<sup>90</sup> One can imagine the disturbing nature of this scene, where the seven dancers—some on boxes and others on the floor—had a black covering over their faces and were clearly representing the process of being hung: “their jerky torso movements indicating a modicum of life left in them.”<sup>91</sup> Although Martin may have found “Scottsboro” lacking from an aesthetic approach, Tamiris made a strong statement about the injustice of executing the African American boys wrongly accused of rape. Tamiris’s inclusion of

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87 John Martin, “Dances are Given by WPA Theatre,” *New York Times*, 7 May 1937: 29.

88 Tish, “Remembering Helen Tamiris,” 347.

89 Tish, “Remembering Helen Tamiris,” 347.

90 John Martin, “The Dance: WPA Theatre: Tamiris and Weidman Stage Productions at the Bayes,” *New York Times*, 16 May 1937: 171.

91 Tish, “Remembering Helen Tamiris,” 347.

“Scottsboro” underscores her sense of a social mission in the midst of Jim Crow segregation.

The peak of *How Long, Brethren?* was Tamiris’s performance in “Let’s Go to de Buryin.” Pauline Tish recalled that Tamiris, with characteristic energy and power, “chewed up the space in full-bodied movement phrases, not dancing to the music so much as embodying it ... Tamiris’s chugs and struts moved as quickly as if on air, while digging into the ground at the same time. She seemed to say, ‘Here I am. Come and join me wherever I go.’”<sup>92</sup> Although the lyrics of this song are not revolutionary, Tamiris’s movement quality urged spectators to use their energy and power in response to the pain, suffering, and injustice they witnessed in earlier songs.

*How Long, Brethren?* concluded with its title song. According to Susan Manning, Tamiris began the number on stage alone. She reached out with her arms and lunged, but never moved far from her original position.<sup>93</sup> Pauline Tish recalled that Tamiris was the leader, and as small, tight groups of four entered the stage, the dancers kept their gaze focused on her.<sup>94</sup> Eventually, the dancers joined together into one line, facing Tamiris to their right. With their hands clenched tightly, they exited “marching into a red dawn.”<sup>95</sup> Tish recalled that “this piece in its simplicity was a call for direct action.”<sup>96</sup> The social context of the time made the red lighting an obvious signal for international socialism and change through group action.<sup>97</sup> As mentioned earlier, *How Long, Brethren?* received standing ovations each night and was highly acclaimed. The articles John Martin wrote for the *New York Times* on the FDT, Tamiris, and *How Long, Brethren?* show a changed

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92 Tish, “Remembering Helen Tamiris,” 349.

93 Manning, “Black Voices, White Bodies,” 33.

94 Tish, “Remembering Helen Tamiris,” 350.

95 Manning, “Black Voices, White Bodies,” 33.

96 Tish, “Remembering Helen Tamiris,” 350.

97 Manning, “Black Voices, White Bodies,” 31, 33.

perception of Tamiris. For example, Martin wrote that *How Long, Brethren?* may be her “best group work to date,” and found the overall structure “eloquent.”<sup>98</sup> *How Long, Brethren?* exhibited Tamiris’s aesthetic approach, sense of social justice, and boldness in the midst of segregation.

Although *How Long, Brethren?* was not discussed much in the oral history transcripts, the available testimony indicates that dancers and publicists perceived it as a politically moving and emotionally powerful piece. Anne Lief Barlin touched on *How Long, Brethren?* saying that she did not recall it being controversial with audiences. Barlin had “mixed feelings” about the performance, because, as she said, “It was something borrowed” from another group’s tradition.<sup>99</sup> Saida Gerrard, on the other hand, said that while it was not “agitprop . . . It really made you have a real empathy for the tragedy [of racial injustice].”<sup>100</sup> Several of the dancers and the publicist commented on the audience’s ecstatic reactions to *How Long, Brethren?*<sup>101</sup> Chavkin clearly perceived the power of the Negro Choir, because he thought there were sixty to seventy voices, when in reality, there were only twenty.<sup>102</sup> Overall, the choreography and performance of *How Long, Brethren?* appear to have produced a stirring effect.

## CONCLUSION

Though not widely recognized, the Federal Dance Theatre, Tamiris, and *How Long, Brethren?* made significant contributions to American art, culture, and society. The dancers and Tamiris

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98 John Martin, “The Dance: WPA Theatre: Tamiris and Weidman Stage Productions at the Bayes,” *New York Times*, 16 May 1937: 171; John Martin, “Tamiris is Soloist in Ballet Revival,” *New York Times*, 22 December 1937: 32.

99 Anne Lief Barlin, interview with Karen Wickre, October 25, 1977, p. 12-13, WPA OHC.

100 Saida Gerrard, interview with Karen Wickre, February 21, 1978, p. 16, WPA OHC.

101 Samuel Chavkin, interview with Karen Wickre, May 22, 1978, p. 8, 22, 23, WPA OHC; Saida Gerrard, interview with Karen Wickre, February 21, 1978, p. 10, WPA OHC; Fanya Geltman (Del Bourgo), interview with Karen Wickre, December 16, 1977, p. 19, WPA OHC.

102 Samuel Chavkin, interview with Karen Wickre, May 22, 1978, p. 8, WPA OHC.

exhibited agency and political organization in the making of the Federal Dance Theatre, which then helped legitimize modern dance as an art form in America, provided a venue for artistic endeavors by modern dance pioneers like Tamiris, and educated some of the nation on cultural and social issues. Though it was perceived as subversive by the Congressmen on the Special Committee on Un-American Activities, the FDT was also viewed as an important medium for jobs and national art, and became a sort of family for many dancers. Tracing Tamiris's life demonstrates how her personal experiences as a poor, Jewish woman caused her to empathize with others similarly situated. Tamiris rose above her personal challenges to become a key mover in the modern dance movement and the fight for social and racial justice. Tamiris was perceived as a strong leader, great speaker, and beautiful dancer by her contemporaries. It is likely that her philosophy of personal interpretation of movement (rather than codification of technique) resulted in her general absence from dance history. *How Long, Brethren?* was a masterpiece of modern dance and was widely acclaimed as a socially relevant, artistic, and emotionally powerful piece. Tamiris and her dancers exhibited empathy and boldness in their call for racial justice in an era of Jim Crow segregation and fear of communist subversion; they deserve recognition for this transcendence.



Tamiris in Joshua Fit de Battle of Jericho, from Negro Spirituals. Photograph from Helen Tamiris Collection, Helene Dance Division, the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Astor Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

**Figure 1:** A powerful photograph of Tamiris in *Joshua Fit de Battle ob Jericho* from her *Negro Spirituals*, 1928. Reprinted from Susan Manning, *Modern Dance, Negro Dance: Race in Motion* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 14.

**Figure 2:** A focused photograph of Tamiris in *Crucifixion* from her *Negro Spirituals*, 1931.

Reprinted from Susan Manning, *Modern Dance, Negro Dance: Race in Motion* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 13.

