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Candidate session number			
Candidate name			
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Examination session (May or November)	May	Year	2015

Diploma Programme subject in which this extended essay is registered: Dance  
(For an extended essay in the area of languages, state the language and whether it is group 1 or group 2.)

Title of the extended essay: The Contemporary Influence on  
Modern Dance

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*This declaration must be signed by the candidate; otherwise a mark of zero will be issued.*

The extended essay I am submitting is my own work (apart from guidance allowed by the International Baccalaureate).

I have acknowledged each use of the words, graphics or ideas of another person, whether written, oral or visual.

I am aware that the word limit for all extended essays is 4000 words and that examiners are not required to read beyond this limit.

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It was a pleasure to work with  
She was determined, focused, and organized.  
Her submission was turned in on time  
and properly organized. We both gained  
knowledge through this positive experience.

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**Assessment form (for examiner use only)**

Candidate session number	
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**Achievement level**

<b>Criteria</b>	Examiner 1 maximum	Examiner 2 maximum	Examiner 3
A research question	1	2	2
B introduction	1	2	2
C investigation	2	4	4
D knowledge and understanding	2	4	4
E reasoned argument	2	4	4
F analysis and evaluation	2	4	4
G use of subject language	3	4	4
H conclusion	1	2	2
I formal presentation	2	4	4
J abstract	1	2	2
K holistic judgment	2	4	4
<b>Total out of 36</b>	19		

Name of examiner 1: \_\_\_\_\_ Examiner number: \_\_\_\_\_  
(CAPITAL letters)

Name of examiner 2: \_\_\_\_\_ Examiner number: \_\_\_\_\_  
(CAPITAL letters)

Name of examiner 3: \_\_\_\_\_ Examiner number: \_\_\_\_\_  
(CAPITAL letters)

IB Assessment Centre use only: B: \_\_\_\_\_

IB Assessment Centre use only: A: \_\_\_\_\_

IB Extended Essay

**Subject:** Dance

**Title:** The Contemporary Influence on Modern Dance

**Research Question:**

To what extent do the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, contemporary choreographers share common choreographic styles and impact?

**Word Count:** 3382

Abstract:

Legendary choreographers who molded the genre of modern dance mark the evolution of culture in movement and style during the 20th century. What were the motivating factors in inspiring some of the earliest compositions of modern dance and which individual characteristics distinguish modern choreographers from each other? Choreographers like Martha Graham, Agnes de Mille, Merce Cunningham, Alvin Ailey, Paul Taylor, and Twyla Tharp are of the main focus in this paper as an analysis of their work in correspondence with an evaluation of the cultural and societal values is performed and taken into consideration.

This paper will focus on the backgrounds of each choreographer and how the times and environment led to the creation of their own distinct contributions to the genre of modern dance. Studying the historical context surrounding the choreographers work allows for a better understanding of how they developed key elements of their style of modern dance and how the movement they created shapes intention. The primary analysis of the works of each choreographer will be based on my own experience of viewing these pieces in person or of dancing them personally. To compensate for lack of experience with all of the pieces that I plan to analyze I will watch videos of performances and rehearsal footage to gain some sort of visual familiarity with every piece, as well as use interviews with the choreographers and articles based on their works to add to my analysis.

In conclusion, the goal of this paper is to distinguish the greats of modern dance choreography, define what inspired them and how, and illustrate their influence on each other's works.

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## Introduction:

The pioneers of modern dance emerged from the early to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Choreographers like Martha Graham, Agnes de Mille, Merce Cunningham, Alvin Ailey, Paul Taylor, and Twyla Tharp were the ones to carve out the future of modern dance through experimental movement and creation. The transition from ballet to modern is marked in the revolutionary work of the choreographers who were the visionaries of what modern dance is known as today. Each choreographer has evolved from a classical ballet background to gradually incorporate more modern aspects of movement, time, line and style in their works.

The expansive umbrella of modern dance that is known today exists because of the choreographers who had a vision. These same choreographers each had different motivating factors that brought them each to develop their own distinct styles of modern dance. Properties of dance such as line, shape, rhythm, and movement each played an individual part in influencing each choreographer's style of modern dance. The evolving state of music and meter also plays an integral role in shaping the movement towards the widespread incorporation of modern dance in classical and contemporary ballet.

The modern dance movement was fueled by the choreographer's desire to use dance as a means of interpretation, a performance with intent and a distinct audience. The dancer becomes the heart of the performance, technique is pushed to the background and theatrical performance is brought to the foreground. <sup>1</sup>With respect to the times each

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<sup>1</sup> *CBS News Sunday Morning*. 08 Aug. 1999. Transcript. *eLibrary*. Web. 15 Jan. 2014. McDonald, Robin. "HORIZON - TWYLA THARP - 905D-000-001." *HORIZON - TWYLA THARP - 905D-000-001*. N.p., Apr. 1980. Web. 15 Jan. 2014.

choreographer developed a distinctive style that is reflective of the social and cultural influence of each respective time period.

#### Twyla Tharp Background:

Twyla Tharp, born July 1, 1941, is now regarded as a revolutionary in modern dance and crossover ballet. She began her career in dance when she attended Barnard University and worked with the originators of modern dance, Martha Graham and Merce Cunningham. Her career made a sharp turn in the right direction in 1963 when she joined the Paul Taylor dance company. It was with Paul Taylor that she clearly began to develop the distinctive stylistic choreography guided by line and rhythm that she is known for today.

By the end of 1960s Tharp began choreographing her own work beginning with a piece called Tank Dive, a work that incorporated jazz music along with contrasting contemporary pop music <sup>2</sup>. The juxtaposition of these two distinctly different styles of music allowed Tharp to incorporate various rhythms and tempos in her piece, not only creating contrasting movement and shape but also allowing the audience to see the parallelism across different genres of music and dance.

In 1973, Tharp made history when she choreographed the first crossover ballet for the Joffrey Ballet, Deuce Coupe, which was danced to Beach Boy songs. This crossover was vital to the development of modern dance as it established a relationship with modern music and classic aspects of dance, allowing for the mixture of once seen “archaic” dance with “hip” new music styles, in turn allowing this new style of modern dance to become popular in modern society. She proceeded to choreograph independently until 1988 when

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<sup>2</sup> *Twyla Tharp - Dance Composition*. Digital image. *BBC News*. BBC, n.d. Web. 20 Jan. 2014.



she merged with American Ballet Theatre where she was able to expand her modern influence on an international audience<sup>3</sup>.

Analysis of modern works:

In 1971, Tharp produced a piece called *The Fugue*, a completely new style of choreography emerged as Tharp did something never done before, styled a dance without any music. From beginning to end the piece is danced without any music; the only sound present is the sound of the shuffling of the dancer's feet. Tharp's intention was to focus on adapting pedestrian movement into dance; by leaving an absence with the exclusion of music she forces the audience to focus solely on the movement of the dancers<sup>4</sup>. Broken down into twenty sections, the piece primarily uses modern dancers to incorporate different sections and styles of rhythmic motion into a complete program. Inversion and reversal are main themes in piece as Tharp incorporated distinct modern movements that are extremely characteristic of her work, like grounded, repetitive steps and loose, rounded, shoulder movement. The dance became the music, the gracious thump of a pointe shoe hitting the floor or the angelic whoosh of a pirouette. Modern dance would never be the same, for the first time you no longer needed any accompanists, but rather just dancers and a choreographer. Now anyone could dance, regardless of the presence of music.

The piece, *In the Upper Room*, was choreographed and performed for the first time in 1986. This revolutionary piece was regarded as the first of its kind. Previously, it was unheard of for there to be classical ballet dancers and modern dancers dancing on the same

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<sup>3</sup> "Zuckerman. *CBS News Sunday Morning*. 08 Aug. 1999. Transcript. *eLibrary*. Web. 15 Jan. 2014.

<sup>4</sup> *Twyla Tharp - Dance Composition*. Digital image. *BBC News*. BBC, n.d. Web. 20 Jan. 2014.

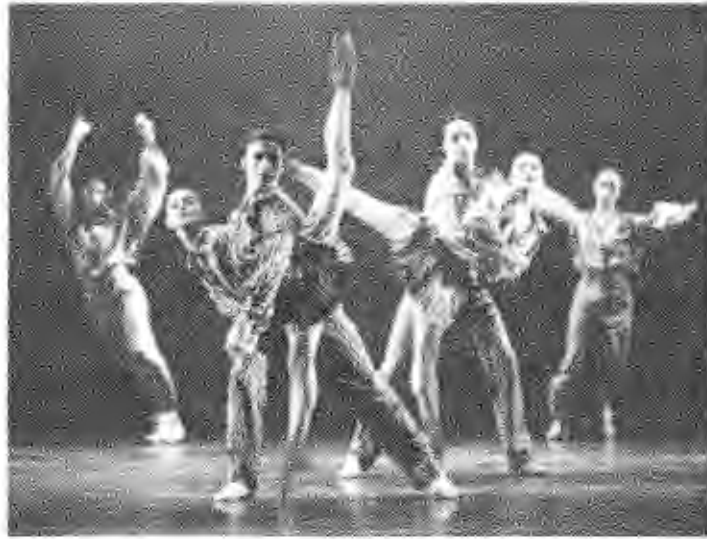
stage. The piece focuses on the juxtaposition of sounds and rhythm created by the different dancers. In the upper room is danced with dancers wearing pointe shoes, called "bombers," and with dancers wearing sneakers called "stompers". The piece consists of solos, duets, trios and full ensemble sequences<sup>5</sup>. Monotonous movement is created in sequences as the stompers and bombers take the stage separately, leading to the climactic sequence where they merge and dance together. The piece is marked by dramatic pause and use of sharp extension and flexed feet. The dancers move in a fluid, repetitive manner that exudes a dreamlike feel. The bombers and stompers dance in cycles, and do not acknowledge each other until the climax, creating a removed feel to the piece and builds to unity.

The staging of the piece is very specific. The background is black, and there is light fog coming up from the stage. The dancers wear different variations of black and white striped costumes with red accents; the pointe shoes worn are also red. The similarity and slight differences of the costuming creates unity between the bombers and stompers while at the same time keeping clear distinction between the two<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> "TWYLA THARP'S IN THE UPPER ROOM." *Contemporary Dance Videos RSS*. Contemporary Dance Videos, 9 Apr. 2013. Web. 20 Jan. 2014. "Chamber Dance Company Collection Â ." *Home*. N.p., n.d. Web. 7 Mar. 2014. <<http://guides.lib.washington.edu/content.php?pid=279245&sid=2379370>>

<sup>6</sup> Dunning, Jennifer. "College Outside the Class: Advanced Studies in Tharp." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 13 May 2007. Web. 7 Mar. 2014. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/05/14/arts/dance/14thar.html>>.



-The female bombers are in the foreground of the photo, wearing the red pointe shoes. The male stompers are in the background, wearing white sneakers.<sup>7</sup>

The distinct bareness of this piece in connection with the disconnect of the dancers can be interpreted as a representation of the disconnect of society from each other during the technological revolution. Critics have performed analysis on the piece, and Tharp has clarified during interviews that the piece is geared to not only present the disconnect produced by the increase of usage of technology but the general disconnect of people with differences. The climatic moment of the piece is when all the dances come together and dance in unity, representing the breaking of the divide between people in society<sup>8</sup>. My own personal experience with the piece, *In the Upper Room*, is reflective of Tharp's intention. As

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<sup>7</sup> Bierut, Michael A. "Designing Twyla Tharp's *In the Upper Room*." *Designing Twyla Tharp's In the Upper Room*. The Design Observer Group, 2011. Web. 22 Feb. 2014.

<sup>8</sup> McDonald, Robin A. "HORIZON - TWYLA THARP - 905D-000-001." *HORIZON - TWYLA THARP - 905D-000-001*. Horizon, 1 Apr. 1980. Web. 04 Apr. 2014.

an audience member I felt the movement through the moments of silence and bareness as well as through the moments of cacophony emitting from the soles of the dancers feet hitting the ground.

The message emitting from Tharp's work speaks on diversity and unity. The bareness created on stage in conjunction with the segregation creates a feeling of division. As the tempo picks up and 'stompers' and 'bombers' begin to dance closer and closer together the feeling of division starts to fade until all of the dancers come together and there is no more segregation what so ever. It is at this climactic moment in the piece where Tharp's message is resonated most clearly. Not only is she blurring the lines between different disciplines of dance, but she is also blurring the lines between the differences of the audience members viewing her work. Not only just in "In the Upper Room," but it all of her pieces, it is this aspect of universality that so deeply connects the dancers and the message they carry with the audience.

Martha Graham:

Martha Graham, born 1894, can be regarded as the mother of modern dance. She was practically the first one to branch out into the realm of contemporary and modern movement, a visionary who started a revolution in the world of dance. In 1926, she established The Martha Graham Center of Contemporary Dance, in New York City, the center is now regarded as the oldest dance company in America. Once Graham established herself the head choreographer of a dance company she began to work on seriously developing a style of her own. As Graham began to create her own pieces she accredited the Denishawn School of Dancing for much of her inspiration, the Denishawn School of Dancing is famous for its incorporation of Spanish style, ballroom dancing with classical ballet technique<sup>9</sup>. The school is known for its extreme discipline in technique training as well as its roots in experimental modern dance. Graham was once a student at the school and used the discipline and stylistic technique she learned there to inspire and guide her own choreography.

In 1930, Graham's choreography took a major turn as she adjusted her style from that of which she was trained in to a more relaxed, experimental modern style. She used this mentality of relaxed movement to create a whole new method of dance that she called contraction and release. In this style of dance an extreme contrast of movement is created as the dancer moves between periods of flexed contraction and fluid, released, movement. As Graham's style evolved and developed in her choreography her work began to take on a development of its own, as it was characteristically dark. The movement tended to be

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<sup>9</sup> "<http://www.balletaustin.org/education/documents/HistoryofModernDanceStudentHandout.pdf>." *History of Modern Dance*. N.p., n.d. Web. 18 Apr. 2014. <<http://www.balletaustin.org/education/documents/HistoryofModernDanceStudentHandout.pdf>>.

heavy, and was heavily grounded. This is a sharp contrast from her initial inspiration of Denishawn, whose work tended to be more smooth and lyrical in nature<sup>10</sup>. It is the manner in which she drew her inspiration from Denishawn that allowed Graham to create fluidity without isolating moment that is deficient of sharp lines and contrasting shape.

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"<http://www.balletaustin.org/education/documents/HistoryofModernDanceStudentHandout.pdf>." *History of Modern Dance*. N.p., n.d. Web. 18 Apr. 2014.  
<<http://www.balletaustin.org/education/documents/HistoryofModernDanceStudentHandout.pdf>>.

## Analysis of works:

One piece that Martha Graham choreographed, Letter to the World, was performed for the first time in 1940. The piece is characterized by sharp, angular movement that is typical with the contraction and release method that Graham had begun to work into her choreography. The new style that emerged because of the new technique that Graham created not only shaped the legacy of modern dance but also completely altered the way that dancers were built.

*"I wanted to begin not with characters or ideas, but with movements . . . I wanted significant movement. I did not want it to be beautiful or fluid. I wanted it to be fraught with inner meaning, with excitement and surge."- Martha Graham<sup>11</sup>.*

This method called for the dances to have an extremely strong muscular build to be able to support long, dramatic, extensions that were typical with the style of choreography that Graham was producing. Dancers were getting further away from the lanky yet toned build of a ballet dancer, and were moving towards the more built athletic build of an athlete. Dancers now had builds that allowed them to create more intense angular movement, varying lines and shapes were now possible, changing the typical expectations of what a dancer could create with their body. Examples of this evolving style of movement and intent can be seen in modern day adaptations of classic pieces, which often substitute classic and more subdued movement for more athletically demanding and angular movement.

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<sup>11</sup> PBS Masterpiece. "Martha Graham." *PBS*. PBS, 16 Sept. 2005. Web. 14 Feb. 2014.

Graham's additions to the genre of modern dance revolutionized the way that dancers trained and developed technique, many of the same moves that Graham used in her choreography is used today and modern dance is now highly characteristic of athleticism and sharp, bold movement. Any developing dancer of today is familiar with Graham's style of contemporary choreography because that is what the norm has evolved to at this point. Athleticism in jump, leaps, and turns is expected in a modern dancer, and it is because of Graham that these common choreographic elements that strong dancers are expected to execute is considered the norm today.



Analysis of works:

De Milles' career peaked in 1943 when she choreographed the musical *Oklahoma!*, a completely new type of musical which distanced itself from the showgirl, ensemble style of classical musicals and was focused on creating a dream ballet within the musical. The actors needed the ability to sing, act, and have classical ballet technique as well as the ability to keep up with high-energy modern dance choreography. The musical was a huge hit and de Mille was in high demand for choreography of musicals in 1947 she even won a Tony for her work in *Brigadoon* and *Finian's Rainbow*.

One other major defining characteristic of de Milles choreography was the strong, yet airy feel that emerged due to many leaps and lifts<sup>12</sup>. De Mills' close relationship with Martha Graham contributed greatly to heavy influence of contraction and release that was present in de Mills' work. De Mill apprenticed under Martha Graham and learned much of what she knew about modern dance and choreography from her. The two remained very close for a long time and de Mille even wrote a book detailing the strong influence Graham had in her own life as well as the legacy of dance. The combination of these two forces in the world of dance is extremely prominent today, as *Oklahoma!* is performed all over the world with the same exact choreography that de Mille created, and dancers experiment with new ways to use the contraction and release method to create more intense and dramatic dance performances. *Oklahoma!* revolutionized dance within musicals, proving that it was possible to have beautiful dance within intense stories. *Oklahoma!'s* success would lead to many more famous successes by other choreographers such as Bob Fosse's

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<sup>12</sup>"<http://www.balletaustin.org/education/documents/HistoryofModernDanceStudentHandout.pdf>." *History of Modern Dance*. N.p., n.d. Web. 18 Apr. 2014.  
<<http://www.balletaustin.org/education/documents/HistoryofModernDanceStudentHandout.pdf>>

work in *Cabaret* or later on in *Chicago*, shows that - although a completely different style of dance than *Oklahoma!* - would not be possible without the foundation De Milles' paved in *Oklahoma!*. My own experience performing in *Oklahoma!*'s, and actually being able to experience the choreography gives me the opportunity to draw the connection of Graham's influence on de Mills' classic work.

De Mills' high-energy choreographic style, which fuses together the classic structure of ballet along with the more angular, modern shape that is characteristic of contemporary dance, is indicative of the developing genre of theatrical dance. De Mills' utilized her classical background and infused her impeccable technique to create a choreographic style whose main purpose is to tell a story.

Merce Cunningham:

Born 1916, in Washington State, Merce Cunningham began his dance career in classical ballet. Like many dancers of the time, classical ballet training was precedent to all other genres of dance it wasn't until people like Martha Graham became more popular that the genre of modern dance was exposed to a more expansive audience. Intrigued by polar differences between modern and ballet styling, Cunningham moved to New York to join the Martha Graham Dance Company.

*"Cunningham's controversial choreographic methods and technique, which emphasized balletic leg action and flexibility of the back and torso, influenced generations of dancers and choreographers, beginning with the Judson group."<sup>12</sup>*

The balletic influence present in Cunningham's work allowed for a guided transition into a wider spread adaptation of modern choreography in a traditional ballet setting. The guided narrative form of characteristic Cunningham work allows for a deeper audience, performer connection and in return facilitates easy plot development of a dramatic idea. This new form of storytelling using the line and form of the human body broke away from the more traditional storytelling of dramatic classical ballet. For the first time, choreographers could use subtlety in themes and in setting and still be able to create a dramatic plot that an audience could not only follow, but also be affected by on a physical and emotional level.

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<sup>12</sup>"<http://www.balletaustin.org/education/documents/HistoryofModernDanceStudentHandout.pdf>." *History of Modern Dance*. N.p., n.d. Web. 18 Apr. 2014.

<<http://www.balletaustin.org/education/documents/HistoryofModernDanceStudentHandout.pdf>>.

## Conclusion:

As a whole the works of Martha Graham, Agnes de Mille, Merce Cunningham, Alvin Ailey, Paul Taylor, and Twyla Tharp can each be cited in a parallel relationship between the innovations of their respective works and the modern and contemporary works that are being created today. Although each choreographer can clearly be distinguished by vast differences in style, they all share the common characteristics of choreographic creativity as they shaped classic elements of dance into new, contemporary stylistic works.

Through the analysis of individual works this paper is able to facilitate the analysis of how various elements of dance such as shape, direction of movement, line, timing, sound and repetition can be manipulated by each choreographer in a way that creates a whole new style of their own. These very same choreographers who have been called the mothers and fathers of modern dance are accredited with what we associate modern dance with today, as well what can be observed as the faint and sometimes dramatic influence on more classical forms of dance such as traditional ballet. Despite the obvious success that we observe today all of these choreographers rejected to conform to the traditional styles of dance of the times and in return faced adversity for the creativity of their choices. Without their tough spirits and dedication to the art of dance we would not see their respective influences on what we associate modern dance with today.

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Dunning, Jennifer. "College Outside the Class: Advanced Studies in Tharp." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 13 May 2007. Web. 7 Mar. 2014.  
<<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/05/14/arts/dance/14thar.html>>.

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<<http://www.juilliard.edu/about/newsroom/2008-09/juilliard-dance-presents-classic-works-mark-morris-twyla-tharp-and-lar?destination=node/11999>>.

Research question is expressed in two ways; however the focus to consider motivating factors, shared common choreographic styles, distinguishing characteristics are not fully outlined. Brief descriptions of choreographers' lives & selected works are described briefly. There is no comparative discussion or in depth analysis as suggested in the research questions.