



RIRIE-WOODBURY DANCE COMPANY TEACHER'S GUIDE

“ILLUSIONS”

A Celebration of the choreography of ALWIN NIKOLAIS

This concert will bring to children of all ages the magical choreography of Alwin Nikolais. Ririe-Woodbury Dance Company is honored to be the World-Wide repository of this famous choreographer's works.

A biography of Alwin Nikolais is included at the end of this teacher guide.

INTRODUCTION/REVIEW

Alwin Nikolais' philosophy is that every movement that exists is made up by using the body as the instrument working with the elements of time, space, shape, and motion. According to Nikolais, "The body is the instrument and Motion is the medium." In other words...it is the motion of the body that is the dance. An understanding of the elements of dance will be very helpful for your students. This will give you a good base for the other lessons suggested in this teacher guide.

Do some experiments with these ideas.

1. Try to move each **body** part by itself. This is called movement isolation. Can you move your head without moving anything else? Your foot, shoulder, hips? Find the joints in the body: wrist, knee, and elbow. How many different places in space (i.e. toward your head, out to the side, up toward the ceiling, down toward your feet) can you put your elbow? You are now moving the body part in space. Try moving it in different times, i.e., fast, slow or uneven? There are many ways to experiment with moving the body. Changing your weight on one or both feet gives all of the locomotion possibilities of walk, run, jump, hop, and leap and ensuing combinations.

2. **Space** can be thought of as large or small, near or far. That could mean that you use a lot of space in the room, or it could mean that the range of space you use in your body is large (like windmill arms making huge circles in space while jumping,) or small (like the tiny movements in space of a finger or an eyelid). Space also has a directional sense, high, low, forward, backward, sideward, diagonal etc. Spatial patterns can be made on the floor with your feet or in the air with parts of the body.



3. **Shape** is really a part of space. Due to our ability to recognize shape and understand it, we treat it as an important element of dance. Numbers and letters are all shapes. Can you spell your name making your body into the shapes of the letters? Do you need a partner to make some letters? When is a shape symmetrical (the same on both sides) or asymmetrical? Can you make each of those shapes with a group of people? Can you make shapes using all curved lines and then all

straight lines? Can your body make a tall, wide, narrow, short, large, small shape? Can you do that same thing with several people in a group?

4. **Time** is a fascinating element to explore with movement. All the time considerations used in music: duration, speed, pulse/beat, accent, meter, phrase, syncopation etc. can be explored with body parts or with the movement of the whole body in space... A simple way to think of time is with speed: fast and slow, and with duration: long or short. When working with music you can clap to the slow beat or twice as fast to the fast beat. In ballroom dancing we say slow, quick, quick, (for example). You can also move quickly or slowly without even thinking of meter.

5. **Energy** or force changes the quality of the motion of the body. If you use a lot of energy you can create strong movement. Very little energy and slow time makes a free-floating kind of movement. Very little tension results in relaxed motion. It is interesting and fun to change your energy to create a change of dynamics in your movement.

6. **Motion**: when you change the time, the use of space, the shape, and the energy of your movement you create dance movement, or as Nikolais would say "You create motion." Here are some of the basic qualities of motion.

- a. Sustained: an even release of energy that stays constant, it can be either fast or slow, but not both. Usually sustained movement feels best when it uses a large range of space and a slow time. But changing any one element changes the quality; so experimenting is fun.... like doing very fast and strong sustained motion.
- b. Percussive: sudden, short bursts of energy that starts and stops quickly.
- c. Swinging: A drop of energy into gravity that sustains and follows through. Swinging first by using gravity gives you the feeling of the quality, then you can explore swinging horizontally through the space.
- d. Suspended: this is the moment of pause at the top end of a swing, before gravity takes over and the drop of the swing begins again. It is a euphoric quality.

- e. Collapsing: a sudden and complete release of energy, like fainting. You can have partial collapse of parts of the body like head, shoulders, arms etc. You can also do collapsing in slow motion. (Of course it is not a true collapse because the tempo is controlled)
- f. Exploding: The opposite of collapse. To explode, gather all your energy then let it burst forth in one huge sudden action, the whole body is involved all at once in the action. Also, you can experiment with smaller body part explosions.
- g. All sorts of permutations in-between i.e.; bouncing, wobbling, undulating, darting, floating, stumbling, and gliding and so on. Each of the dances has visual shaping, and use of space and time and energy that helps to define the movement quality. If your students try these elements before the performance, have them identify which qualities were used in the dances they saw on stage. See if they can re-create some of the qualities of movement used in the dances by themselves.

THE ALWIN NIKOLAIS PERFORMANCE OF ILLUSIONS

The following dances have been chosen from our major collection of the works of Alwin Nikolais. A brief description of each dance follows with suggestions of how you could work with your students using the dance as a catalyst.

MECHANICAL ORGAN

Mechanical Organ is a delightful dance in six parts. The movement material is quick, catchy and fast moving. We will perform four of the dances in this show: a) *Dime in the Slot*, b) *Doll with a Broken Head*, c) *Two Not Yet Together*, e) *Finale*. The Two Edinburgh reviews say: “there’s no dismissing as tricky the meticulous movement vocabulary revealed in Mechanical Organ that sees the dancers pistoning and shunting, joints bending and flexing and ratcheting in celebration of the body’s exquisite engineering”. This choreography brings us “short snaps of dance living for the moment like fire works”.

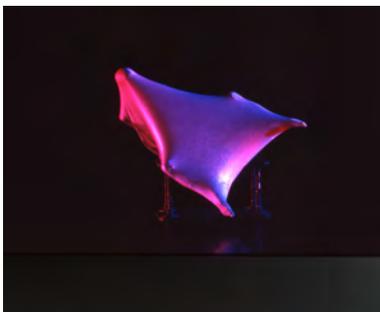


Since the dances are based on movement invention, you can all do some of your own. The following ideas can be executed as written for students who have had experience with dance. If the students are new to dance, the whole class should explore each idea together, then the teacher should choose some good examples and everyone should try those ideas. See Introduction#1 for a good preliminary exercise.

- a. Half the class improvises while the other half watches. Use a drum or some energizing music as accompaniment. Improvise with hands and feet. As an ice-breaker follow these suggestions. “Make circles with your hands and wrists above your head, to each side (2nd position), behind. Make them high, make them low. “ “Do the same with your feet”. “Make a combination of hand and foot circles, change the timing”. “Make short jabs out into space with hands and feet”, “Jab towards your own body”, “Do the jabs
- b. Do Elbow and Knee Dances, Head and Hip Dances, Nose and Heel Dances etc.
- c. Make the variations as in A) by suggesting various qualities such as: “strong-twisting”, “floating-airy”, “quick-flicking”, “thrusting”, “pressing” or “pulling”, “dabbing”, or “gliding”.
- d. As the group explores an action such as a Head and Heel dance with thrusting quality, pick out the inventive solutions and have the whole class try them.
- e. You can continue the exploration by pairing people into duets. These duets can either be assigned or the partners can choose two or three qualities of movement and two or three body part designations. Some very imaginative results can come from these combinations. Whole dances can emerge.

Any of the above lessons can be developed into dances, or the students can simply experience the different ways of combining motion, props, lights and ideas. Certainly as pre or post-concert activities, the performance will be enhanced. Also, there is a highly motivating factor that comes from experimenting with the ideas of a master choreographer such as Alwin Nikolais, particularly when one is familiar with his work.

NOUMENON



One of the oldest dances we perform is Noumenon, created in 1953, which is considered a signature Nikolais work. “Somehow, embedded in Noumenon is a new thought I had about dancing.” Mr. Nikolais recalled of the dance, “in which human forms were disguised by costume, light, and set elements.” The dancers perform inside stretchy “bags” so what you see is moving shapes very sculptural and non-human. This gives the body an abstract form.

You can make your own bags out of stretchy material or they are available for purchase from some physical education companies. Another way to work with shape is to make elastic squares which your students can manipulate to make various shapes.



GALLERY

One intriguing part about this dance is that it is built upon **ILLUSIONS**. The idea for the work came from the shooting galleries in fun houses, and amusement parks such as Lagoon. We are performing four short sections of this longer work. The sections are called *Pinwheels*, *Angels*, *Masks*, and *Triple Duets*. Nikolais was entranced with how Black Light could transform what the audience sees. This dance is performed in Black Light, so the black color of a costume disappears in the viewer's eye when the dancer is facing the audience. The ILLUSIONS in the work are delightful for the observer.

You can discuss with your students what an Illusion is and perhaps remind them of those trick mirrors which make the body look long and distorted or squat and wobbly. Or take about the rides in the little electric cars or walk down haunted alleys or Halloween Parks where floating heads pop out in front of you with no bodies attached. Those are all illusions and oftentimes they can be scary.

Black lights are very inexpensive to buy and can be used in your classroom to create wonderful dances. They are made of glass, so care must be taken not to step on them, for they do break. You have to be sure you can almost completely darken the room for the illusion to work. Purchase ribbons or any other kinds of materials with florescent paint in them and make all sorts of objects to be waived, or worn on black clothes....squiggly lines, circles, squares, lightening signs, distorted faces, etc. When beginning it is important that you have a few children improvise in the lights with other students watching because they will derive many ideas from each other. The ideas for choreography will then come very quickly.





TENSILE INVOLVEMENT

This dance is the other important signature piece in the Nikolais repertoire. Space is redefined with huge elastic bands strung from the ceiling across the stage. The dancers in bright yellow leotards explore the effects of weight and energy as they weave the bands into various patterns on the stage. One reviewer described it as a “dazzling and energetic array of

bodies, elastic bungees and color bursting light designs.” Another describes the “geometric shapes; kind of like an enormous loom”. Others have related it to a big “cat’s Cradle.”

Again to replicate this idea in the classroom, elastics or bungee cords can be used to make designs and to suggest weaving through space. These elastics could be squares which could be manipulated by arms and legs to create designs. This could be done with a partner.

Alwin Nikolais (1910-1993)

Alwin Nikolais was born in Southington, CT. His work as a choreographer spans four decades. In 1948, Nikolais received an appointment as Director of the Henry Street Playhouse. It was this famous little theater in New York’s lower eastside which served the purpose of nurturing his creative genius, enabling him to develop his form of abstract theater and his aesthetic. He served as Director for 22 years teaching and choreographing. While at Henry Street he formed his company, The Playhouse Dance Company, later to be renamed the Nikolais Dance Theater. Alwin Nikolais has a long association with dance in Utah. In 1962, the University of Utah was given a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation for Nikolais to mount his work Totem for department dance majors. He also taught University summer courses between the years of 1963 and 1968 thereby establishing a basis for his philosophy and pedagogical approach. In 1987 the University of Utah honored Nikolais with an Honorary Doctorate Degree. Ten years after Nikolais’ death his long time partner Murray Louis identified the Ririe-Woodbury Dance Company as the only professional dance company in the World to perform full evenings of the Nikolais repertory. The Company is extremely grateful to Murray Louis and Alberto delSaz, Artistic Directors of the Nikolais/Louis Foundation for Dance, New York, NY, for giving us the honor of preserving the legacy of Alwin Nikolais’s works as a part of our mission.