

Pearl Primus (c.1919-1994)

by Peggy and Murray Schwartz

Pearl Primus transformed the landscape of American and African dance in many ways. In the 1940s, as a member of the [New Dance Group](#), whose motto was “Dance is a Weapon,” she created powerful protest dances – including *The Negro Speaks of Rivers*, *Strange Fruit*, *Hard Time Blues* -- that decried the evils of racism and inequality, and she assembled the first mixed race group to perform throughout the American South. Traveling in west and central Africa from 1948 to 1950 on a grant from the Julius Rosenwald Foundation, she was received as an ancestral spirit, mastered the dances of native villages in their cultural contexts, and was given the name “Omowale” (“child returned home”), in recognition of the authenticity of her achievements. She became a *griot*, a voice of the cultures in which the dances were embedded.

In 1953, Primus assembled a company of women to revisit her native Trinidad, where she absorbed, among many other dances, the dances of the Shango rituals in the hills surrounding Port of Spain. In Trinidad, she met Percival Borde, with whom she came to share her career in the United States, Europe, Israel, and Africa. Together they formed a school in Liberia, Konama Kende, where they taught African students to transpose the performance of their own dances on urban African and Western stages. In the United States, Primus became a major force in the teaching of African dance in schools at all levels, creating curricula and performance materials for what came to be the field of dance anthropology. One of the first African-American women to earn a PhD, she wrote a groundbreaking dissertation on the dancing masks of west Africa, revealing how dance was the expression of what she called “dance as a ‘form of life,’” (Schwartz, 146) not mere entertainment. This conviction pervaded her work as a dancer,

anthropologist, educator, and living embodiment of the dignity and beauty of African cultures. Throughout her life, Pearl Primus was recognized as a master teacher and a stunning performer, and she received myriad awards, including the Presidential Medal of the Arts.

Early Years

Born in Laventille, a poor section in the hills above Port of Spain, Trinidad, Pearl Primus was raised in New York. She excelled both academically and athletically at Hunter High School and Hunter College, writing eloquent prose and poetry and dancing, even as she aspired to become a medical doctor. At the summer camp Wo-Chi-Ca, she became engaged with both black and white leftists, including Paul Robeson, who recognized and encouraged her talent. Deflected from medicine because of her race, she quickly achieved prominence as a dancer of enormous energy and grace, despite her stocky physique. Though she was influenced by the examples of [Asadata Dafora](#), Beryl McBurney (also known as Belle Rosette), and [Katherine Dunham](#), her unique abilities earned critical acclaim. At the downtown nightclub Café Society, she astonished audiences with the strength of her leaps, and at the first Negro Freedom Rally in Madison Square Garden in 1943, she mesmerized an audience that included Langston Hughes. But along with widespread acclaim for her powerful artistry, her politically engaged work brought FBI surveillance that lasted well into the 1950s, inhibiting her career and taking its toll on her personal life.

Mid-career

Pearl Primus’s first African journey consolidated her identity. “Myself was transformed,” she wrote (Schwartz, 76), and thereafter she wore only African dress. In the villages of Africa, she was declared a man, so that she could learn dances

assigned only to men, and she mastered the dances central to African cultural life, including “Bushasche (War Dance)” and “Fanga.” Her frequent travels abroad in Europe and Africa included command performances for King George VI in London, the mayor of Tel Aviv in Israel, and the inaugural ceremony of President Tubman in Liberia. When she returned to the United States, she refined the lecture demonstration format, combining her anthropological narratives with dancing, and she performed and taught in a great array of theatrical and educational settings throughout the 1950s and 1960s, including the Museum of Natural History in New York and countless public schools, especially in New York. She and Borde re-opened the 17 West 24th Street studio and founded the African-Caribbean-American Institute of Dance Arts as part of Earth Theater, but her efforts to fund a permanent institute for teaching African dance and cultures were not successful. In the late 1970s, she and Borde returned to the stage, performing to packed houses and critical acclaim at the Riverside Church and Perry Street theaters in New York. Among their performances were their signature pieces, *Fanga* and *Impinyuza*.

Last years

After Borde’s sudden death in 1979, Primus accepted an appointment as the head of Cora P. Maloney College, a black studies residential and academic unit of SUNY/Buffalo, where she displayed fine administrative skills, and in 1984 she became a professor in the Five Colleges consortium in Amherst, Massachusetts, where she reunited with the actor Gordon Heath in a production of Wole Soyinka’s *The Lion and the Jewel*. She continued to set dances on the [Alvin Ailey](#) American Dance Theater and elsewhere. The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater paid tribute to her with the Dance Pioneer Award in 1978. By the early 1990s, even as her prodigious

energies began to wane, she transmitted her most groundbreaking dances, such as *Shango*, *Strange Fruit*, *Negro Speaks of Rivers*, *Hard Time Blues*, and *Impinyuza* to younger performers. During her last years, she became devoted to the Spiritual Baptist Church and Archbishop Granville Williams in Barbados, and when she died in 1994, her ashes were scattered in the Caribbean currents traveling to Africa.

Historical and cultural context

Pearl Primus’s influence on the development of African dance as a concert form was profound, in the United States as well as in Africa. She was devoted to the authenticity of its representation, a stance that sometimes caused controversy in both realms when her intentions were misunderstood. A woman ahead of her time as an artist, intellectual, and academic, her work cut across so many disciplines that even though she received many awards and honors in her later years, she is often not afforded the long-lasting acclaim her rich life deserved. From being among the first to wear African dress in a daily way in New York to influencing students who then established distinguished careers from Israel to Cuba, her impact on the development of dance and culture world-wide is only now beginning to be adequately assessed, though the power of her physical expression cannot be overestimated. She had a subterranean influence on the development of what has become known as “world dance,” and paved the way for artists and academics, for dance educators and performance superstars. The resonance of her work extends from the design of UCLA’s degree in World Arts and Cultures to the Pan-African movement in the Caribbean nations, from the classic modern dance work *Revelations* by Alvin Ailey to the contemporary Broadway musical *The Lion King*, and to the success of many touring companies within Africa itself.

Pearl Primus was a woman who loved to give gifts, the right gift at the right moment. Her gifts of African sculpture, masks, fabrics, instruments, and plants evoke her memory for hosts of friends, dancers and colleagues. Her greatest gift, however, is the legacy of courage, authenticity, and the creative energies of her dances. Her response to human oppression was, "The dance is life!" (Schwartz, 155).

For complete citations to works references in this essay, see [Selected Resources for Further Research](#).

Peggy Schwartz's career spans more than forty years. She developed a rhythm and movement program for the Pilot Program for Head Start in Berkeley, California (1960s); she was the founding Chairperson of the Buffalo Academy for the Visual and Performing Arts Dance Department (1970s); she joined the Five College Dance Department first at Hampshire College (1983) and then the University of Massachusetts Amherst (1991). She served as Chair of the FCDD and Director of the Dance Program at UMass Amherst and was the founder and artistic director of the Sankofa Dance Project: Celebrating African Roots in American Dance. Peggy has published, lectured, conducted workshops and consulted in dance education, curriculum design, national standards in arts education, and the work of Pearl Primus. A founding member and board member of NDEO and Founding Associate Editor of the JODE, she served as the National Representative to daCi and was a guest artist at the Rubin Academy of Music and Dance in Israel, the Claremont Colleges and New York State Summer School of the Arts.

For over forty years, **Murray Schwartz** has taught Shakespeare, psychoanalysis and

Holocaust literature. His writing spans a wide range of interdisciplinary interests and includes essays on Shakespeare's last plays, the work of Erik Erikson, applied psychoanalysis, modern poetry, and trauma studies. He has also co-edited several anthologies, including [Representing Shakespeare: New Psychoanalytic Essays](#) (1980), [Memory and Desire: Psychoanalysis, Literature, Aging](#) (1985). He is President of the PsyArt Foundation and edits the online journal, [PsyArt](#) (www.psyartjournal.com). Murray was Dean of the Colleges at SUNY/Buffalo (1979-83), Dean of Humanities and Fine Arts at UMass Amherst (1983-91), Provost of the Claremont Graduate University (1991-97) and Academic Vice President at Emerson College (1997-99). He is a scholar member of the Boston Psychoanalytic Society and Institute, and has participated in studies of the effects of the September 11, 2001 attacks, and the writing of psychoanalytic history. Currently, he teaches at Emerson College in Boston.