



Self-expression through movement and music, from Alys Bentley's "Some Higher Aspects of the Modern Art Movement," in *Vanity Fair* (April 1914).

“We did trees, clouds, storms, waves” Jerome Robbins’ Creative Dance Training with Alys Bentley by Hiie Saumaa

In “How I almost did not become a dancer,” an August 16, 1976 entry in Jerome Robbins’ Personal Papers housed in New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, the choreographer reflected on how and why he decided to try dancing as a child. Robbins wrote, “I knew I had something in that department thru the few classes I had taken with my sister’s teacher, Alys Bentley.”¹ In the entry the next day, he continued, “I liked it—there was no technique of body exercises & ...running taught. We did things like “folding” (slowly collapsing in an embryonic heap on the floor), prancing (a deerlike lifting of the feet from the floor). I think we did trees, clouds, storms, waves + used silk scarfs, ... & anything airy & diaphanous. What it gave me immediately was the absolute freedom to make up my own dances without inhibition or doubts.” Who was this remarkable educator over whose teachings Robbins reminisced more than fifty years later? How did she teach dance and create a classroom that nourished creativity and freedom of expression?

Alys Bentley (1869–1951) was born in Chateaugay, New York, in 1869, daughter of John and Eunice Bentley, and sister of J.E., George, and Charles Bentley. She began teaching music in the Washington, D.C., public school system in 1891 and became the Director of Music for the Washington public schools in 1900. She oversaw music education in more than two hundred schools and gave highly successful concerts with children’s choirs. In 1911, Bentley resigned and began teaching at the Ethical Culture School in New York, a center of progressive education, where she developed “rhythm in connection with the play songs and games of little children.”² She organized summer dance camps at her lodge at Chateaugay Lake in Merrill, New York. Camp Owlyout promoted healthy living, free movement forms, nutrition, and yoga. The “studio” was a clearing in the woods, surrounded by birches. As one critic put it, “There they would dance or improvise while Miss Bentley, winding away and shouting encouragement, played Beethoven and Brahms on the Victrola. ‘Let go! Let go!’ she would cry, as her pupils moved and assumed poses that they thought expressed the rhythms of their feelings.”³ There was no fixed choreography and group dancing was informal. The camp was initially designed for women from the age of sixteen up, although, later, campers also included children. Writer Sherwood Anderson and his wife Tennessee Mitchell and actor and singer Mary Ellis also studied at Bentley’s camps.

In New York, Bentley started offering music and dance lessons at Studio 61 in Carnegie Hall, where she taught from 1912 to 1938. Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, Ruth St. Denis, Ted Shawn, and Mikhail Mordkin all used Studio 61,

for years the largest dance rehearsal space in New York City. Ethel Peyser, in her 1936 account of Carnegie Hall, noted that Bentley called her dance studio a “soul laboratory,” a place to develop the mind, body, and soul through dance.⁴ Peyser added, “In her work she has stressed the value of sandals, life, relaxation, and even a vegetarian diet!” At this studio Robbins came into contact with Bentley: his sister Sonia, who studied ballet with Michel Fokine, took classes with Bentley and also attended her summer sessions at Camp Owlyout. Robbins would sit on the floor in Bentley’s Carnegie Hall studio and watch his sister practice or take classes with Bentley. He also took a few classes himself.

Robbins called Bentley “a spin off of Isadora Duncan” but immediately admitted, “how the relationship worked I’m not sure.” In Robbins’ view, Bentley used “Duncan’s choice of music, costume, and ‘feel’ dancing, i.e. one ‘expressed’ the music as one felt it & it could go joyously or tragically, lightly or monumentally.” Sonia excelled in free movement forms and admired Duncan’s work. Robbins wrote, “My sister was very good at this pseudo-Duncan technique when she was there ... She had talent, & I’m not sure why she finally stopped unless it was due to her maturing into a wonderfully busom [sic] not tall woman.” Duncan might be the best-known proponent of expressive or interpretive movement who decidedly set herself apart from ballet and popular dances of music hall and vaudeville at the beginning of the twentieth century. However, scholars have pointed out that she was not the only one. As Rachel Fensham notes, “[T]here were many others who embraced notions of the ‘natural’ as an underlying philosophy for art.”⁵ Rather than immediately assume that Bentley was trying to imitate Duncan, it is more important to figure out what was distinct about her methods.

Bentley came to teaching dance through her background and pedagogical practice in music. She left behind extensive writings on music pedagogy and songbooks for children, as well as articles on dance and movement, offering insights into her educational methods. From these writings it is clear that Bentley aimed at educating the “whole” person. For example, in *The Song Primer* (1907), she described her songs: “These, then, are not the songs which children may or ought to love to sing, but they are the songs which children do delight in, and from the singing of which we get the largest spontaneous participation of the whole child, of his body, his mind, and his spirit.”⁶ She taught music through embodiment: for example, to develop students’ voices and allow them to physically experience the musical concepts of crescendo, diminuendo and ritardando, she asked them to imitate the wind and the waves in their movement and sounds:

Let the arms, representing tree branches, sway lightly at shoulder height, the whole body moving rhythmically back and forward. The nostrils are open, and alive. The different sounds of the wind, its sighing, moaning, crying in the pines are imitated as accompaniment of the rhythmic swaying of arms and body—the arms swaying always upward for the incoming breath, downward for the outgoing breath.

Then we can imitate the gentle blowing sound of the wind in the poplar leaves, and our hands can be the leaves which flutter and move in the soft breeze. The sound of the storm in the mighty elm or birch tree, will suggest a twisting or bending and swaying of the whole body. This time the tone is a whistling sound. The wind will blow some of the trees over, unless their roots are firmly planted in the ground. The children will readily catch the spirit of this.

This exercise will bring poise into the whole body, and will establish the habit of constitutional breathing. The feeling and color generated by this work may be used in the child's songs now, and in all his subsequent musical training, whether it be vocal or instrumental.⁷

Bentley underlines that music and movement work together: "The whole child enters into this training, and his tone is fed by natural and rhythmic action, the motor activity of the big muscles, which action frees the vocal mechanism, making it possible for the child spontaneously to express his individuality, day by day, according to his own moods and desires. This work need never be considered as drill but rather as technique, as the artist considers the art of technique."⁸ Attending to the physical self, the self in movement, attentive to music and sounds, brought out individuality in children and constituted an art in itself. Robbins highlighted in his autobiographical notes that in his early experiences with acting, writing, painting, and dancing, he was encouraged to create. He said, "It was important to understand that I was always led toward creating—in dance with Bentley... and all the modern dance teachers with whom I studied." Bentley's choice of music was also influential. Sonia later thought that in Bentley's classes, Robbins came to admire the mazurkas and waltzes by Chopin that audiences for *The Concert* (1956) and *Dances at a Gathering* (1969) would later laud.⁹ The fact that Robbins felt encouraged to pursue dance classes because he knew he had "something in that department" through "the few classes" he had taken with Bentley is a testament to the impact of Bentley's teaching. With just a few classes, Bentley was able to engage Robbins's creative imagination and give him confidence in his abilities with movement. This type of physical, imaginative, and emotional connection is not to be taken for granted in a creative movement class, as children might often "go through the motions" without the assignments and movement explorations being meaningful and imaginatively engaging to them. Bentley must have built an environment in which students felt vitally and fully connected to what they were doing. "Playing" and "imitating" must have felt real to them. Alys Bentley, this inspiring educator who has been largely neglected in the history of dance, gave Robbins a gift most valuable to a choreographer—"the absolute freedom to make up my own dances without inhibitions and doubts."

1. All quotations by Robbins come from Jerome Robbins Personal Papers, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Jerome Robbins Dance Division. 2. "An Unusual Treat to Be Given in City Opera House," *Chateaugay Record and Franklin County Democrat*, August 15, 1913, 1. 3. Kim Townsend, *Sherwood Anderson* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1987), 127. 4. Ethel Peyser, *The House that Music Built: Carnegie Hall* (New York: Robert M. McBride, 1936), 137. 5. Rachel Fensham, "Nature, Force and Variation," in *Dancing Naturally: Nature, Neo-Classicism and Modernity in Early Twentieth-Century Dance*, eds. Alexandra Carter and Rachel Fensham (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 1. 6. Alys Bentley, *The Song Primer: Teacher's Book* (New York: A. S. Barnes Company, 1907), Preface. 7. Alys Bentley, *Tone Plays for Children* (New York: A. S. Barnes Company, 1910), 2. 8. *Ibid.* 9. Deborah Jowitz, *Jerome Robbins: His Life, His Theater, His Dance* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 5.

Hiie Saumaa, Ph.D., is a postdoctoral fellow and lecturer at Columbia University. She writes about dance history, somatics, and kinesthetic imagination. Her article on Alys Bentley was recently published in *Dance Chronicle: Studies in Dance and the Related Arts*, and her article on Annie Payson Call is forthcoming in *Dance Research Journal*. Hiie is also a certified instructor of Nia dance, the BodyLogos® Technique, and JourneyDance™ and teaches classes in sensory-based dance modalities, meditative strength training, and somatic awareness.



Dancing in nature, from Alys Bentley's "Some Higher Aspects of the Modern Art Movement," in Varsity Fair (April 1914).



Robbins took classes with Bentley at Studio 61 at Carnegie Hall, which eventually became Ballet Arts. In this photo, Yeichi Nimura, with whom Jerome Robbins also studied, stands outside Ballet Arts. Photo: Lisan Kaye, Nimura Collection, Carnegie Hall Archives.