



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:

