

BRINGING

MODERN

TO THE

MASSES



Love is in the air at Shirley Ubell's

By Darrah Carr

"I WAS BORN A DANCER AND I WAS BORN A TEACHER.

I just didn't know it for a long time." So says Shirley Ubell, whose lengthy dance career did not begin until she was 19 years old. It is hard to decide which is more remarkable: the fact that she started dancing so late or that today, at the age of 80, she continues to take class three times a week at the school she founded, The Center for Modern Dance Education (CMDE), in Hackensack, New Jersey. "My mother encouraged me to take ballroom dance lessons in the hopes that I would meet a boyfriend," Ubell explains. "But, when the teacher, Maya Kyla, asked me whether I had ever taken a modern-dance class before, something hit me. I went to the library and read everything that I could find about modern dance. I was hooked."

Ubell, who trained with modern-dance luminaries Martha Graham and Mary Anthony, had no plans to open a dance school. Newly married in 1949, she and her husband, Earl Ubell (who died in 2007), bought a house in Paramus, New Jersey. "I was walking around outside barefoot and the neighborhood kids asked me why I had no shoes on. I told them that it was because I danced

barefoot. They were curious and so, in my sixth month of pregnancy, I started teaching in my empty living room," Ubell recalls. "I worked with a friend, and we called it 'Judy & Shirley's Dance School.' I also wanted art and music classes for my kids, but there was nothing around. Paramus was farmland at that point. So I hired Dalcroze teachers to come in from New York City."

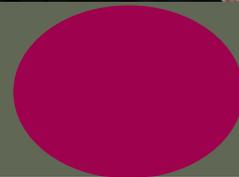
The Ubells eventually bought furniture for their living room and the dance school moved downstairs to the basement. But when the students began to hit their heads on the ceiling, Ubell knew it was time to look for another location. In 1956 she rented a storefront at 815 Main Street in Hackensack, which gave her enough space for her 100 students.

"I was the only modern-dance school in New Jersey for a long time. From the beginning, my philosophy was not to be a commercial school or to enter into competition. My focus was on the individual dancer and on creating as many events as possible at low or no cost for the community," Ubell says. "My dad was a young, enthusiastic communist, in the good sense of the word. I grew up with

Photo by Robert Woudenberg



Center for Modern Dance Education



a feeling of sharing. And the school has that same sense—that everyone should share. I always felt that art should just be done. And that everyone should be able to do it.”

In 1962 Ubell made the unusual choice to incorporate her dance school as a not-for-profit, tax-exempt organization. “I wanted to be eligible to apply for grant money, teach in public schools, and offer scholarships. I wanted to be very community oriented,” she says. The organization has received funding from numerous sources, including the National Endowment for the Arts, The New Jersey State Council on the Arts, The Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, and the Puffin Foundation.

Elissa Machlin-Lockwood, CMDE’s artistic director, who began taking dance classes with Ubell in 1961, describes the decision to incorporate: “It wasn’t in Shirley to want to run a business, but she did want to run a school. For her, it was not about the profit. ‘The profit is in your soul,’ Shirley would say.”

The grants have allowed CMDE to develop a wide array of outreach programs that spread awareness of and appreciation for modern dance. The Moving Into Knowledge

program offers free summer classes for youth at risk, including separate camps for boys and girls as well as a teen program. Dance teachers go into public schools to work in alternative classrooms. Children from group homes and residential treatment centers are brought to CMDE for after-school classes. Students over the age of 60 who are enrolled in Elder Dance classes enjoy half-price tuition. The Real Men Dance initiative encourages men and boys to try dance classes. Support from the New Jersey State Council on the Arts has led to workshops at Gilda’s Club, a support network for people living with cancer and their families and friends. In addition to these modern-dance offerings, a grant from the Bergen County Department of Human Services funds free family classes in African and Latin dance.

Underlying CMDE’s programs is an emphasis on

OPPOSITE: Shirley Ubell takes part in CMDE’s Danceathon, an annual performance celebration and fund-raiser. ABOVE: CMDE teams up with Portables, a dance company in Teaneck, New Jersey, to present Claire Porter’s *From Jobs to Geraniums*, an outdoor piece, here performed in 2004 at Ringwood Manor in Ringwood, New Jersey.



nurturing individual creativity and self-expression. Machlin-Lockwood says, “We’re not in this to only cater to people who want to dance professionally. The idea is that we meet the needs of all kinds of people and see what dance can do for people who are not necessarily going to be dancers. This is the seed that Shirley planted—to bring people together.”

After incorporating, CMDE began adding branch locations throughout New Jersey. Over the next decade, the total enrollment in the school’s 10 locations grew to more than 700 students. The curriculum focused on classic modern dance: the techniques of Merce Cunningham, José Limón, and Martha Graham. Faculty members included Graham dancer Mimi Cole and Limón company member Ann Vachon.

In 1969 and 1970, CMDE presented Graham and Limón in a series of master classes and performances. “We were lucky, given our proximity to New York City,” Machlin-Lockwood says. “Shirley wanted the best, and she was able to call Martha Graham and get her to come to Hackensack!”

CMDE’s commitment to modern dance was recognized by the newly formed New Jersey State Council on the Arts. The council encouraged Ubell to start The Repertory Dancers, the state’s first professional modern-dance company (now defunct).

In 1970 the Ubells spotted a church building for sale in Hackensack. They renovated the building to include two studios as well as office space. After two decades of fundraising, the center paid its last mortgage bill in 1989 and celebrated with a “Burn the Mortgage Cabaret.” “The fact that we own our space is a large reason why we still exist,” Ubell says. “So many not-for-profits have gone out of business because they couldn’t afford their rent.” Owning the building enables CMDE to further its outreach mission by sharing the space with resident dance companies and community groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous.

The late 1980s saw another turning point for CMDE. Ubell received her master’s in movement therapy from Hunter College, and CMDE began the Learning Through the Arts program for people with disabilities. “I always believed that modern dance was so unique that anybody’s body could do it,” Ubell says. “Having a half-brother with cerebral palsy also made me more open to offering classes for people with disabilities.”

Machlin-Lockwood explains, “A big part of the studio is acceptance. You might be in a class where one student has Down syndrome while another student is a professional dancer. Everyone is expected to be gracious and open. In all of my years at CMDE, I can only think of one or two times when people weren’t comfortable.”

The Moving Experience Dance Company for teens and young adults with disabilities is an outgrowth of CMDE’s classes and an example of the center’s belief in the importance of self-expression and performance. “Dance is a performing art,” Ubell says. “If you just take dance classes all the time, then you don’t feel like a dancer. You may not be

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TOP: *River of Many Bends* (the literal meaning of “Hackensack”), a piece with an environmental theme, was staged in conjunction with Hackensack Riverkeeper, a preservation group, in a park along the Hackensack River.

ABOVE: According to Ubell, performance matters; if you just take class, you don’t feel like a dancer. Here, CMDE with Portables in *From Jobs to Geraniums*.

Top photo by Matthew J. Kulengosky; bottom photo by Alexandra Pais; opposite left photo courtesy of Modern Dance Education; opposite right photo courtesy of New Jersey State of New Jersey

on Broadway, but in this place you are always a dancer.”

In addition to performing at parks, senior centers, and schools, Moving Experience takes part in CMDE’s annual Danceathon, a performance celebration and fund-raiser held at Bergen County Community College.

“The Danceathon is more like a class demonstration than a typical recital. We try to keep it shorter and more casual. We don’t want to spend half of the year preparing for the recital,” Machlin-Lockwood says. “The dancers sit in the audience so that everyone can watch everyone else. The younger kids don’t come to dress rehearsal. It is more of a ‘show up and dance’ kind of thing. We keep the costumes simple and use our closets. We don’t want to make it about a parade of costumes. We want it to be about the people.” All of the students are given the opportunity to take part in the Danceathon, which also features the CMDE Senior and Junior Repertory Companies.

A scan of the program biographies for a recent performance reveals that many of the center’s teachers and staff began their dance training as children at CMDE. Describing the alumni network, Machlin-Lockwood says,

as a guest teacher, has been affiliated with the center for more than 30 years. “CMDE is an amazing place. They are on their own path. I don’t think there is another place like them. They never turn anyone away. They include everyone—any size, shape, or ability. The technique is there if someone wants it in terms of pursuing a dance career, but you can also go through the school without that focus. The emphasis on creativity is in every class, no matter what the style,” she says. “It is a very loving place. You see a kid walk in all nervous and then you see that it’s like jumping into warm water. It’s OK once you jump in. You are never made to feel anything but spectacular.”

In 1995 Mensch opened The Moving Company Modern Dance Center in Warwick, New York, with Ubell’s blessing. “Shirley never made us feel like we shouldn’t be teaching elsewhere. She believes that we should go spread dance to the world,” Mensch says. “I brought their philosophy with me when I opened my own school. We are on the same page in terms of how we work with kids and how we want them to feel. What I learned there and what I bring to my own school is that the student can never do it



LEFT: Shirley Ubell in 1958 at her first studio, a storefront in Hackensack, New Jersey. Before setting up shop there, she taught in the basement of her house. ABOVE: Elissa Machlin-Lockwood, CMDE’s artistic director, receives a Citation of Excellence for CMDE from the New Jersey State Council on the Arts.

“It is almost like a web. People get entrenched here and don’t want it to end. I got stuck here in a good way. It is a great place and it comes with the satisfaction of doing something with a purpose. The staff keeps ideas percolating. We go with the strengths of who is involved at any given time. When things work, they usually work well.” Today, CMDE’s large and diverse staff offers ballet, jazz, musical theater, hip-hop, Afro-modern, Middle Eastern, and yoga classes in addition to modern dance.

CMDE alumna Linda Mensch, who returns frequently

wrong. No one is made to feel like they shouldn’t be dancing. You dance because it feels good.”

In Ubell’s assessment, good feelings account for the longevity of the center. “I never hired anybody unless I felt bonded to them. And I only hired people I respected. It has always been a communal school. The staff has lots of input. The door to my office is always open. I say, ‘Oh, you know how to do that? I don’t know how to do that. Will you teach that?’ ” she explains. “It creates an environment where you walk into the building and you just feel love.” ♦