

In Memoriam ~ *Remembering Wendy Hilton*

APRIL 5, 1931–SEPTEMBER 21, 2002

Wendy Hilton, historical-dance performer, choreographer, scholar, and teacher, made a profound contribution to the international development of early dance, particularly of baroque dance, over the last half-century. As an eminent scholar and author, she wrote the premier book on baroque dance, *Dance of Court and Theater: The French Noble Style, 1690–1725*, a staple of any serious early dance-researcher's library. As a teacher, Wendy gained a leading reputation that prompted both aspiring and accomplished baroque dancers to travel sometimes great distances to study with her. Although her career as a performer ended shortly after her arrival in the United States from England—robbing many of the pleasure of seeing her perform live—we know from reviews and fortunate eyewitnesses that her technique and style were unparalleled.

Wendy's own history in early dance is itself a chronicle of the history of early dance in our lifetimes. Wendy got her start in early dance, like many of us, by accident. In the late 1940s, she was an aspiring ballerina at the Rambert School in London. Through her classes there, she was introduced to early dance through two of her ballet teachers, Anna Ivanova and Mary Skeaping. They worked with Melusine Wood in a class devoted to reconstructing dances from the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries—a class whose members also included Belinda Quirey and Joan Wildeblood. Ivanova invited Wendy and other Rambert students to dance in a lecture-demonstration on ballet, which she opened with a few examples demonstrating ballet's historical roots. Wendy recalled that she danced a few selections from Arbeau. The experience, however, made little impression on her, and she resumed her pursuit of a career in ballet.

Early dance, however, was to reappear in Wendy's life. At a friend's urging, she began studying with and dancing for Belinda Quirey, who was fast becoming the leading teacher of early dance in London. Wendy struck out on her own, developing her own company, the Domenico Dance Ensemble, whose programs featured dance and music from the twelfth to the eighteenth centuries. The company's success opened a number of doors for Wendy, including her collaboration with the great pianist and Bach interpreter Rosalyn Tureck. Tureck lured Wendy to America with her plans to open an early music institute, for which Wendy would head the dance division. While the institute never materialized, Wendy's performances with Tureck in New York received high praise. Her career in America was well on its way. She soon established herself as a gifted teacher, securing appointments at, among other institutions, the Juilliard School and at a summer workshop at Stanford University that was to continue for more than twenty-five years. Her choreography was seen at Juilliard and the New York City Opera

and with numerous early music ensembles. Amid the performances and teaching, she continued her research, which resulted in her book and many other publications.

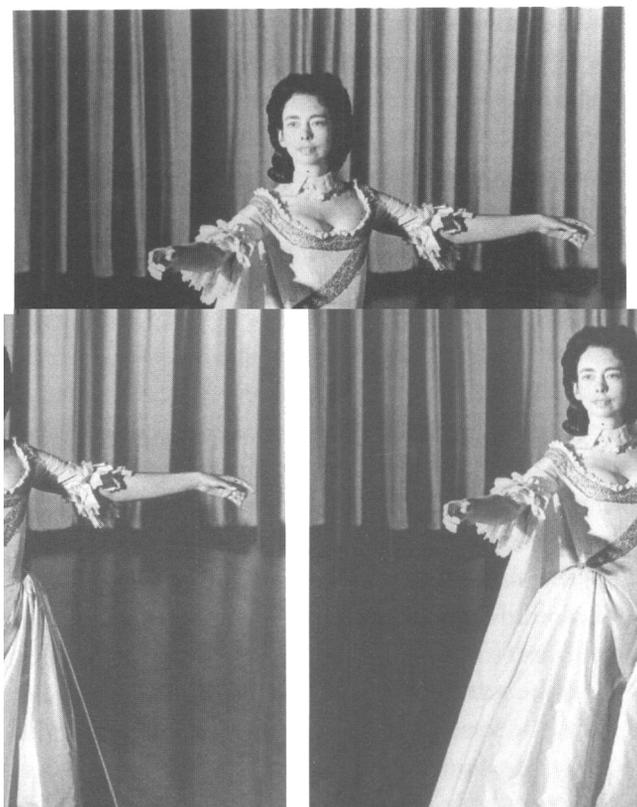
I met Wendy in the spring of 1972, a few years after her arrival in the United States. A modern dance major at Douglass College, I had never heard of her or of baroque dance, but I signed up for one of the classes she was teaching there that year. How could I ever have imagined on the first day of my first baroque dance class that my life was to be changed forever, that I would henceforth be covering my bare and calloused modern dance feet with delicate shoes and be dancing, of all things, minuets? And how could I possibly have known that the reserved but engaging woman who led the class was to become a colleague and a great friend?

Such things were unimaginable because I hated that first baroque dance class. Wendy and I laughed about this many times over the years. As a dedicated modern dancer, I found the style boring—all those tiny steps when I longed to be leaping across the floor. I attended classes grudgingly and celebrated my freedom at the end of the semester. I returned to baroque dance class in the fall of 1974, but only because the carrot of performing the following spring in a production of Purcell's *The Fairy Queen*, choreographed by Wendy, was dangled before my eyes. To perform, one had to enroll in Wendy's class.

What had happened to me in the intervening year that led to the exhilaration I felt on the first day of the new class is a mystery. Everyone else in the class had been studying with Wendy for at least a year, I for only a semester, and I had made no effort to remember anything about it. I couldn't recall the difference between a pas de bourrée and a pas de minuet. Wendy didn't wait for me to catch up. I had to relearn all the basic steps and learn all the new ones she was teaching. I felt helpless, but soon cared deeply about those small steps and less and less about leaps across the floor. I loved the class and lived for its once-a-week meeting.

I studied about dance with a number of distinguished teachers, but I feel that I truly learned about dancing from Wendy. In the private sessions that I was so privileged to have with her, we explored the nuance and expressions possible within the boundaries of the form. She was particularly interested in the expressive possibilities of the instep, the thorough understanding of which, she taught, is vital to the mastery of the technique.

One of my most cherished memories of dancing with Wendy comes from a week-long set of such private sessions. I was preparing for a performance in which I was to dance a number of solos. I recall being very frustrated at my inability to master the detail she sought in each dance. In performance, after all those hours of practice with her, I forgot part of L'Abbé's "Minuet Danced by Mrs. Santlow" barely a minute into the three-and-a-half minute dance. So much for nuance! I wandered around the space with a series of pas de minuet à deux mouvements hoping I would soon recover. I did, but it was of little comfort. I wanted to run when I saw Wendy coming toward me afterward but waited for her comments. She pointed her index finger at my face and said, "Right!" and turned and walked away. I reminded her of my memory lapse. Without looking back, she shook her head and waved one of her arms as if to dismiss me and said, "It doesn't matter." I have never received higher praise for my work.



Hilton in Performance.
Courtesy of Susan Bindig.

Similar memorable stories of Wendy abound. A collection of such memories from around the world were gathered in a tribute booklet for a celebration of Wendy's life and work at the Juilliard School on May 30, 2003. A selection of the tributes are reproduced below to give voice to others who, like me, found their lives so enriched by their association with Wendy. They bring a personal and intimate touch to Wendy's extensive professional achievements and show how deeply she is missed as a mentor, a teacher, a colleague, a friend.

—Susan Bindig

John Broome, Stratford, Ontario, Canada—

I first met Wendy Hilton many, many years ago when she was working with Belinda Quirey in London. It was at that time that she was forming the group which became known as the Domenico Dance Ensemble. As I recall, there were just three of us in the early stages—Wendy, Molly Kenny, and I (it was a little later that Timothy Hext joined us). The program presented the major dances from the Italian Renaissance through to the English and French eighteenth century. The In Nomine Players accompanied our performances (in fact the majority of rehearsals were held at the studio-home of the group's director, Maxwell Ward), joined on many occasions by Julian Bream. One of Wendy's passions was tea, and at the break, in would come the elegant tea-trolley loaded with cups and saucers and interesting cakes. Our costumes were

beautiful, made I believe by the professionals at Glyndebourne. Wendy demanded perfection in everything down to the last detail. The performing space was important, and I remember some lovely recitals in ideal surrounds with the audience seated all the way round and chandeliers glittering from above. Once we performed by candlelight, which was quite magical.

More memories come crowding back. I remember being especially grateful to Molly for dancing such a protracted sarabande that it gave me adequate time to change from my slow-courante King Charles wig and costume into the powdered finery of my eighteenth-century attire—this for the minuet and the final gigue, which I danced with Wendy. And this is perhaps my most endearing memory of her—moving at speed but with such relaxed dignity. She was, like Molly, an exquisite dancer and moved with what I can only describe as a beautifully fluent precision. I think the past flowed in her veins more vividly than the present. Supreme in mind and body, she towered above us all. I remember her with affection and respect.

Leah Kreutzer, New York, New York—

Wendy Hilton was my teacher twice—and both times were turning points in my career as a modern dancer.

A guest teacher at Purchase College in 1972, she enchanted this “ballet girl” from Missouri with musical forms and dance vocabulary from a mysterious, magical, but very real world of the past. I was, at that time, in the early stages of negotiating the transition from Sugar Plum Fairy to the exhilarating though intense and penetrating demands of Graham and Sokolow. Her class was a restorative. Wendy’s world was one of grace and coherence and form, symmetry and containment, humanity and imagination, the likes of which I had never known. And joy! Like Wendy herself. Wendy and her work centered me, made me happy. A bourrée was about moving forward, comforting in its simplicity and inviolability.

Twenty-five years later she welcomed me into her intimate weekly class in New York on Tuesday evenings—a kind of dancing seminar. I was in the early stages of founding my own modern dance company. A different kind of anxiety, concern, and exhilaration permeated my existence as a dancer. Once again, amid this complexity of feelings, Wendy’s class healed and consoled.

With her unerring eye, she corrected my placement: the right hip (Wendy could spot a hip lifted a millimeter too high from fifty yards), the arms, the fingers, the head, the feet. Like all masters, she scrutinized and offered her criticism without sentiment or ridicule. Her pure powers of observation were sensitively honed after decades of devoted obsession with the French noble style. Once again, Wendy’s world was clear, engaged, joyful, and deeply human.

Like all great teachers, she used her mastery of the form to lead her students deeper into themselves. Balance, equilibrium, opposition, proportion—the heart of her art—were organizing and galvanizing principles of dancing and of life, all the more persuasive because she exemplified how to use them to sustain her in work, illness, and friendship.

My admiration for and gratefulness to Wendy Hilton run deep.

Clare Melley Smith, Brooklyn, New York—

When I think of Wendy, I'm fortunate to be able to think almost exclusively of fun—great gobs of it—long weekends at the Egan house in Rye, or in the B & B in Palo Alto, or just playing cutthroat Scrabble and cribbage in our city apartments. We shared a connecting suite in a derelict walk-up building for many years—at least it was “connecting” for the cat, who was able to walk through a hole in the wall behind the shower stall. The weekends away at the shore with Wendy were shared by Dino Cassolas and Miriam Cooper, and we were an outrageous quartet, determined to have a high old time. We had fierce Scrabble matches, we swam in summer, and we enjoyed Mary's “Mile-High Pie.” Those weekends now seem like delightful little islands in time.

I was part of Wendy's cooking team during the first rounds of chemotherapy, but I didn't see her during her last year or so, as I spent more and more time away from the city, and she narrowed her circle of friends. That she was able to choreograph her last illness so completely was remarkable, as were the friends who helped.

Wendy asked me on several occasions to get her started on the melody of “Gute Nacht,” the first song of *Winterreise*. I'm not now able to listen to that song without tears, and I'll always think of Wendy when I hear the last line, “An dich hab ich gedacht.”