

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Thomas Bouchard

Miss Hill: Creating the Dancers of the 21st Century

by Kristen Shahverdian

The green hills and vast sky of Vermont fill the screen, as José Limón's torso arches, his arms sweep overhead, and his toe points to his knee. I feel my breath deepen and a smile plays on my lips. I experience this joy for the entirety of [Miss Hill: Making Dance Matter](#), a film directed by Greg Vander Veer that inaugurates the DanceFilms series at the Performance Garage. Miss Hill, first released in 2014, celebrates the life of [Martha Hill](#), who directed the dance program at Juilliard from its founding in 1951 until 1985. Prior to Juilliard, Hill led the summer dance festival at Bennington College, where Limón danced against the sky. Hill believed in employing dancers in their field, giving them opportunities to perform and teach. Throughout the film, Vander Veer showcases archival footage of Martha Graham, Charles Weidman, Doris Humphrey, and Hanya Holm dancing outdoors at Bennington College.

Miss Hill is a film about a dance community that thrived and grew for most of the twentieth century because of Martha Hill. Director Vander Veer seamlessly weaves from the 1930's at Bennington College to Juilliard from the 1950's through the present. The fluidity of the film moving through time achieves a connection to the past: an understanding of the history of modern dance told through the body. A clip of Hanya Holm in a long red dress, arms percussively moving around her torso flows into a clip of Pina Bausch standing in a circle at a rehearsal studio at Juilliard. Miss Hill is a reminder of modern dance's past and how we all stand on each other's shoulders to move forward. It is also a reminder of those who work behind the scenes and advocate tirelessly, without the applause or accolades of performance.

My favorite scenes in *Miss Hill* were of dancing at Bennington College. The dancers ran across fields, torsos and arms swung down and rebounded up again. The scenery and the movements were expansive; it was mesmerizing to watch modern dance legends' torsos open to the sky as they fell with passion to the ground. I felt the connection to the earth and environment that imbued early modern dance.

Miss Hill loses momentum revisiting a fight over space between Hill, [Balanchine, and Lincoln Kirstein](#), when Juilliard moved to Lincoln Center and the dance program almost closed. However, the story picks up when Dennis Nahat (co-founder Cleveland San Jose Ballet) tells us about helping a lone Hill move herself to Lincoln Center. Upon arriving there, because no one assigned her an office, she wrote “dance office” on a yellow pad, posted the paper on a space, and claimed an office for dance. I sensed that it was this gumption that drove modern dance to succeed under her eye for most of the twentieth century.

I left the film deep in conversation with a friend and a stranger, discussing passionately how to share this film with other dancers. The film is [available on Kanopy](#), a streaming film service that is free with a Philadelphia library card. *Miss Hill: Making Dance Matter* is a gift of a film, not just to relive modern dance’s past, but to imagine how we belong in dance’s future.

[Miss Hill: Making Dance Matter](#), Directed by Greg Vander Veer, DanceFilms by the Performance Garage, Nov. 16.

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