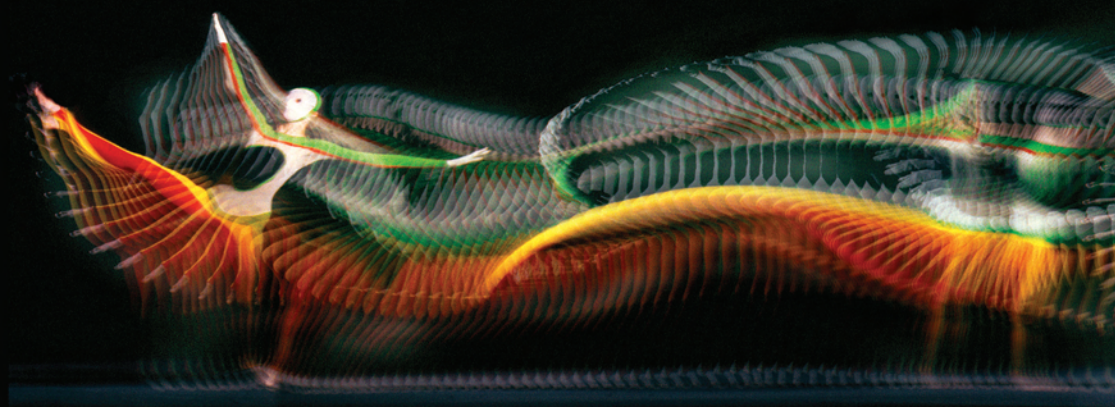
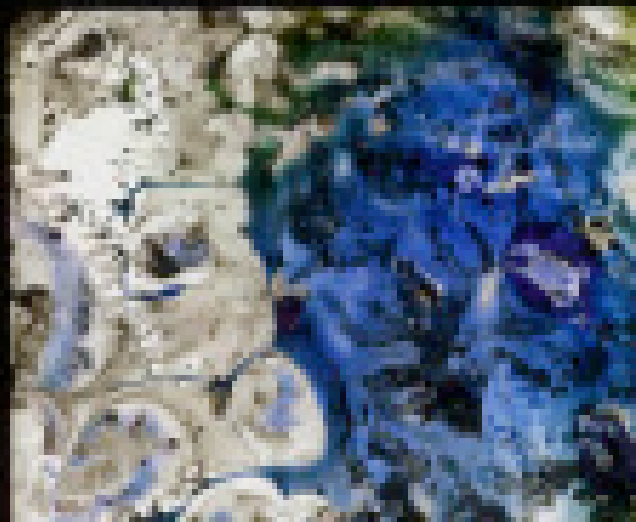
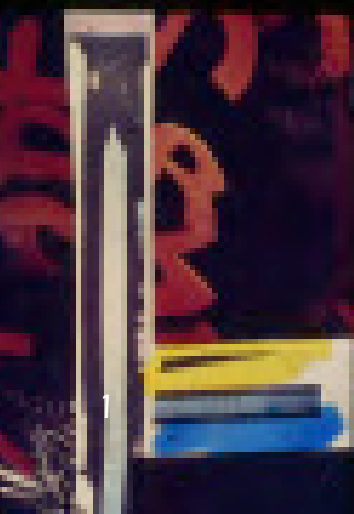
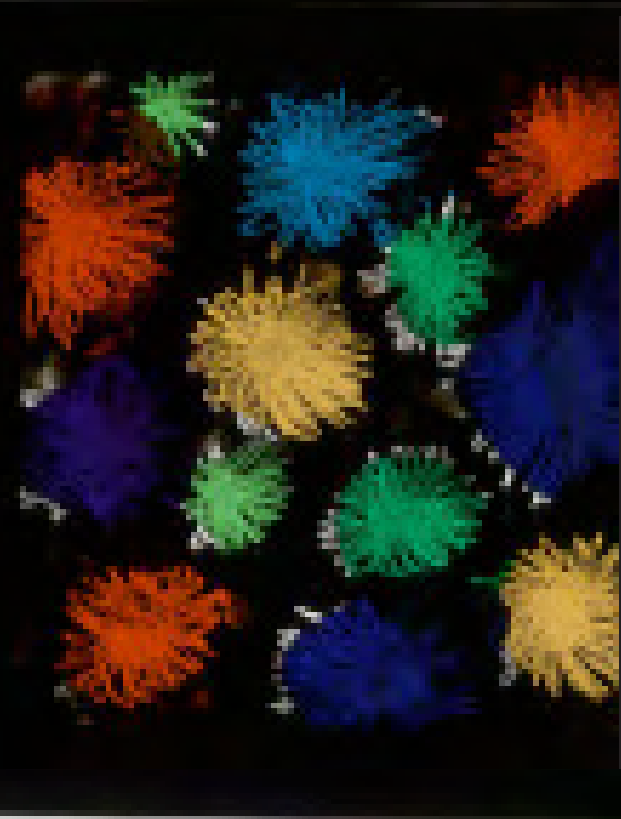
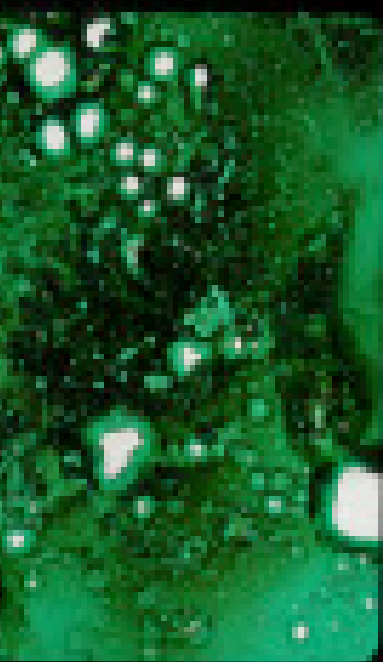


**ALWIN
NIKOLAIS'**
TOTAL
THEATER OF
MOTION

**VINCENT ASTOR GALLERY
OCTOBER 21, 2010 -
JANUARY 15, 2011**





ALWIN NIKOLAIS' TOTAL THEATER OF MOTION

Choreographer Alwin Nikolais (1910-1993) is known as a master of stage illusion. He has been called a Merlin of theater and one of the most versatile, innovative and influential artists of the last century.

In his centennial year, choreographer Alwin Nikolais is being honored with an exhibition developed by The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts that explores a career that influenced dance, theater, television, and dance education throughout the 20th century and into the 21st. This exhibition has two aims, to acquaint the public with the person, Alwin Nikolais, and to introduce viewers to an environment of Total Theater of Motion. The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts holds an impressive amount of material by and about choreographer Alwin Nikolais. The Jerome Robbins Dance Division holds the bulk of the material, while theater and recorded sound are also represented, as would be expected of an artist who considered sound, set, costume, and light design – indeed all production resources – to be integral and indispensable elements of his theater of motion. Articles Nikolais wrote and interviews he gave are abundant in print, audio and videotape media, as are films and videos of his stage and television productions. Library holdings represent the six decades of Nikolais' career and extend to reconstructions of his work in the 21st century.

In the early 1950's Nikolais startled the performing arts community with a nonliteral approach to choreography and with staging that employed resources of the theater in a way that had not been seen before. Dance is the generative source with which he energizes light and shadow, sound, color, and material objects. His interdisciplinary choreography, the sum of all these elements, results in a Total Theater of Motion.

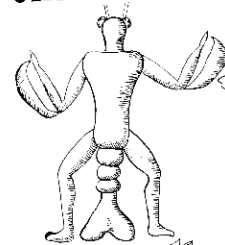
Nikolais introduced a pedagogic method based on attention to space, time, shape, and motion and led students to discovery through deliberately structured classes in improvisation. Iconoclastic at the time, he was prophetic in asking dancers to collaborate in the creative process, a practice many choreographers came to use by the late 20th century. He pioneered stage technologies that are in wide use today, preparing audiences for multi-sensory perception in 21st century dance and dance theater.



DANCES FOR
CHILDREN

BALLETS

COLORFUL



GAY



EXCITING



DANCES
FANTASTIC

3

Nikolais was born in Southington, Connecticut on November 25, 1910. He studied piano and, as a teenager, put that training to use by playing the organ in the Westport Connecticut Movie House during the waning days of silent film. While seated in the orchestra pit below the movie screen, he could not discern characters and action distinctly, but by interpreting the dynamics and timing of shadowy forms above him, he was able to improvise appropriate music for romance, mystery, fright, chase scenes, etc. He later said that the experience led him to realize that subject could be created abstractly, without specificity of character and plot.

The future choreographer first achieved celebrity as a puppeteer. By 1934 he was directing a marionette theater, dividing his time between his puppets and the Southington Drama Center, which he co-directed with Michael Adrian. The two men organized a school of theater arts and produced plays in which Nikolais sometimes acted, directed or designed lighting and sets. In 1935 The New Haven Parks Department hired Nikolais to present marionette shows and to teach puppetry. Hartford wooed him away the next year. *The Hartford Daily Times* counted forty-one performances for audiences of more than 12,000 during eight days



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in July. With WPA support his stage was mounted on a trailer so that it could move swiftly from one audience to the next. He performed at every county fair in the state.

Through enhancing his puppet theater Nikolais developed an interest in technology. He installed an amplification system to project the voices of his actor-operators as if from the center of the stage. A specially designed switchboard controlled lighting effects. He molded the heads of his puppets himself and put them through shenanigans that delighted children and adults. In the introduction to an *Index of Puppetry*, which he edited, he confessed that once created, the dolls commanded him, a harbinger of his later assertion that once his concept for a ballet was set, "it tells me where it wants to go." The *Index to Puppetry* is on display along with photographs of Nikolais' marionettes and his "theater on wheels." A charming photograph shows a crowd of joyful and intensely focused children sitting on a hillside watching a puppet show. It can be related to a later photograph of children in the crowded auditorium of the Henry Street Playhouse responding excitedly to a dance drama (10 cents admission).

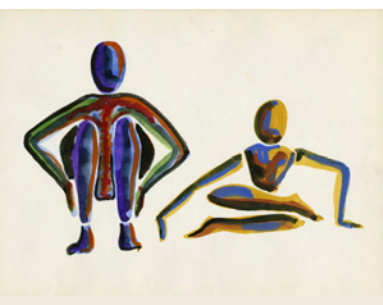
In the early 1930's Nikolais was taken to a performance by the highly acclaimed German dance soloist Mary Wigman. It was his first exposure to concert dance. He recognized the quality of Wigman's performance and was impressed with her use of percussion accompaniment. He sought out Wigman-trained Truda Kashmann to learn about the exotic instruments he had heard. Kashmann insisted that he study dance as well, which, he later confessed to an interviewer, is what he wanted to do all along. From 1936 to 1939 he and Kashmann attended the Bennington Summer School of the Dance in Bennington, Vermont, where he encountered the teaching of Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, Charles Weidman, and Wigman's representative in this country, Hanya Holm.



Nikolais' first contributions to staged theater came in 1936 when he arranged movement and provided sound — a speaking chorus and percussion — for *The Pretty Sabine Women* by the European high modernist playwright Leonid Andreyeff. In 1937 he contributed choreography and percussion accompaniment for *The World We Live In* by the Czech playwrights Josef and Karl Capek. Both works were produced by the Gilpin Players, the WPA Federal Theater Negro Unit. In 1939 he collaborated with Kashmann to create his first major choreographic work, the anti-war *Eight Column Line*, produced at Avery Memorial Theater in Hartford and supported by a group calling itself "The Friends and Enemies of Modern Music." The dance used a newly-composed sixty-minute score by Ernst Krenek, who was expelled from Austria after the Anschluss, and was known for the uncompromising modernity of his musical language. Thus, Nikolais' entrée into professional theater aligned him with the European-American avant-garde.



In 1940 and 1941 Nikolais presented six works with his own company at Avery Memorial Theater and at Hartt College of Music, where he taught dance. He was drafted into the Army in 1942 and served in Europe in the Intelligence Corps. After his discharge in 1946 he continued teaching at Hartt College of Music and choreographed operas directed by internationally known Elmer Nagy. Nagy was also a stage designer, which may have reinforced Nikolais' penchant to create all components of his theater works.



Nikolais then settled in New York City and dedicated himself to study with Hanya Holm. He became her assistant in New York and at her summer institute in Colorado. On Holm's recommendation, the Henry Street Settlement and Neighborhood Playhouse on the lower East Side of Manhattan invited him to direct a new dance program in the Settlement's Music School. The tiny proscenium theater on Grand Street became his dance laboratory for 23 years. Nikolais served the community with a thriving dance school for students of all ages and created dance dramas for children. He mentored his advanced students as teachers and choreographers and built a dance company that became world-renowned. The Playhouse Dance Company came to national attention in 1956 with the premiere of *Kaleidoscope* at The American Dance Festival. The opening section of "Disks" can be seen at one of the viewing stations in this exhibition.

CHOROSCRIPT. MOVEMENT ANALYSIS AND NOTATION *by ALWIN*

PERIPHERAL	ROTARY	LOCOMOTOR	FLEX-EXTEND

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MOV. USING

READ UPWARD

LEFT ARM
LEFT LEG GESTURE
LEFT FOOT WEIGHT
RIGHT FOOT WEIGHT

THE



Some other major works of Nikolais' early period are: *Prism* (1956), *The Bewitched* (1957), *Allegory* (1959), *Totem* (1960), *Imago: The City Curious* (1963), and *Vaudeville of the Elements* (1965). International bookings began in 1968 and by the 1980s the company was on the road for as many as 42 weeks a year.

Beginning in 1959, after several performances on the *Steve Allen Show*, Nikolais became interested in the medium of television. In 1968 he created the highly acclaimed *Limbo*. Visitors can watch this "Electronic Experiment for Television" at one of the viewing stations in this exhibition. In interviews shown on a second viewing station, Nikolais speaks about the differences between choreographing for the stage and for television and about the unique opportunities of each medium. He also discusses his break with realism and his abandonment of the Aristotelian model of unity of time and place. He uses as many as 300 atmospheric light changes in one-half hour of a piece.



Thanks to his mentoring, many of Nikolais' dancers became prominent choreographers and performers including Murray Louis, Carolyn Carlson, Phyllis Lamhut, Simona Bucci, Bharat Sharma, and Beverly Blossom. They and their students carry on a legacy of dance training using theory and practice which encourages individual creation.

Today the Ririe Woodbury Dance Company performs full programs of Nikolais' works, reconstructed by Alberto Del Saz, who is associate director, with Murray Louis of the Nikolais Louis Foundation for Dance. They tour extensively in this country and in Europe.





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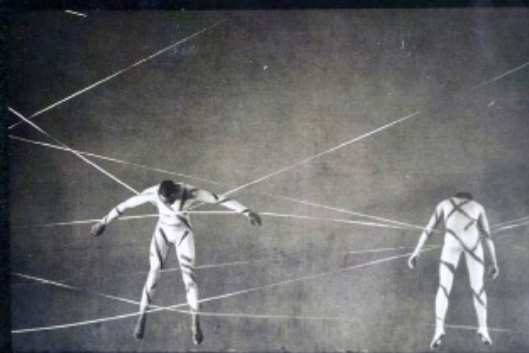
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**BEWITCHED
KALEIDOSCOPE**

**THE PLAYHOUSE DANCE COMPANY
ALWIN NIKOLAIS - DIRECTOR**

PRISM



CREDITS & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Alwin Nikolais' Total Theater of Motion is a project of The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts; Jacqueline Z. Davis, Barbara G. and Lawrence A. Fleischman Executive Director; Barbara Cohen-Stratynier, Judy R. and Alfred A. Rosenberg Curator of Exhibitions. The exhibition was curated by Claudia Gitelman. It was developed and installed by The Library's Performing Arts Museum staff: Barbara Cohen-Stratynier, Judy R. and Alfred A. Rosenberg Curator of Exhibitions; Caitlin Mack, designer; installers Rene Ronda and Herbert Ruiz; Michael Diekmann, Manager of Media Playback and Interactive Design; and Cheryl Raymond, Manager of Public Programs. We are grateful to the many staff members who gave support and assistance to this project.

We are grateful to Phyllis Lamhut, Murray Louis and Alberto del Saz for their support and assistance with the exhibition and the Nikolais Centennial.

Material in the exhibition is from The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts' Jerome Robbins Dance Division, Billy Rose Theatre Division, and Rodgers & Hammerstein Archives of Recorded Sound. We are grateful to the Robert E. and Jean R. Mahn Center for Archives and Special Collections, Ohio University Libraries, for loans of material and digital images. In addition, the Paris Opéra, the National Center for Contemporary Dance in Angers, France, the American Dance Festival, and the Library of Musical Instruments at University of Michigan lent items or digital images. The Nikolais/Louis Foundation for Dance provided material and cooperated in assembling the exhibition.

Some individuals provided items from their private collections. They are Marc Lawton, who donated documents and photographs of Nikolais' extensive work in France. Trista Redavid and Pamela Levy gave items related to Frank Garcia, who constructed costumes and helped with their design over a period of four decades. Intern Judith Estey gave her time and clear thinking to preparation of the exhibition. Photographer Tom Caravaglia generously provided many color images for the exhibition and he will enrich the library's holdings with a gift of his photographs.

We are grateful to the following for permission to excerpt and display media content in the gallery:

Murray Louis and Alberto Del Saz, Co-Directors, The Nikolais/Louis Foundation for Dance, and Judith Connick, Special Collections Librarian, Mahn Center for Archives and Special Collections, Ohio University. In addition, we are grateful to François Bernadi for his video editing work.

FUNDING

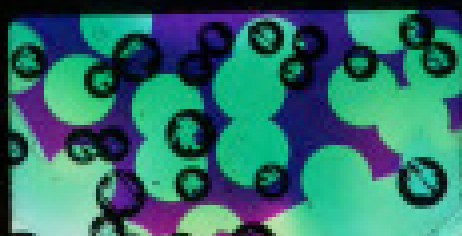
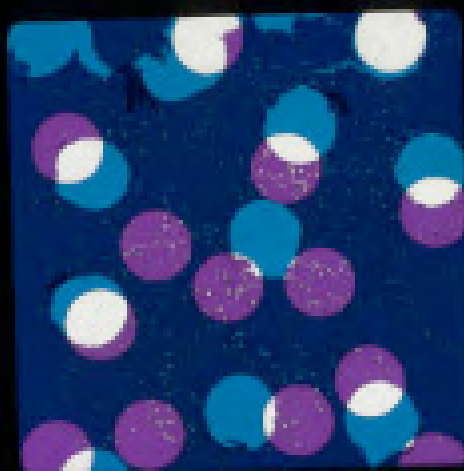
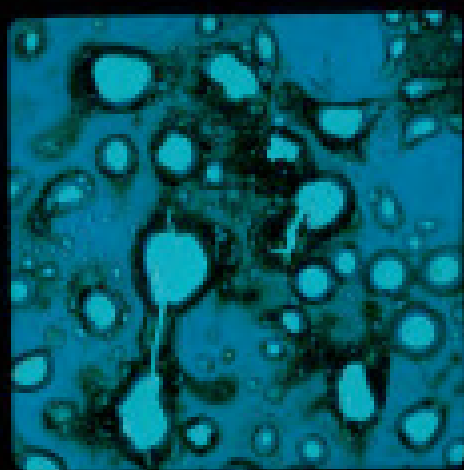
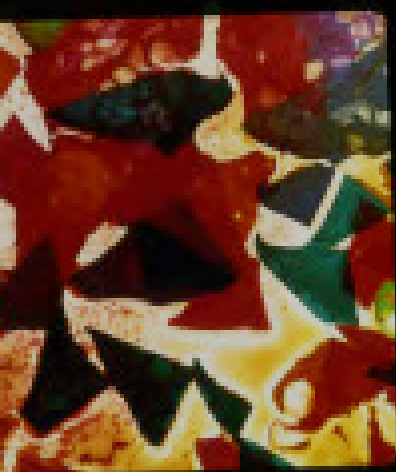
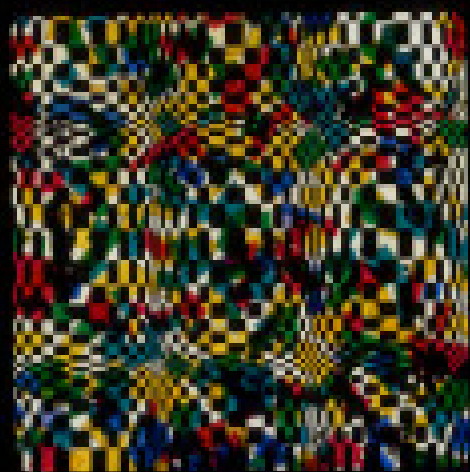
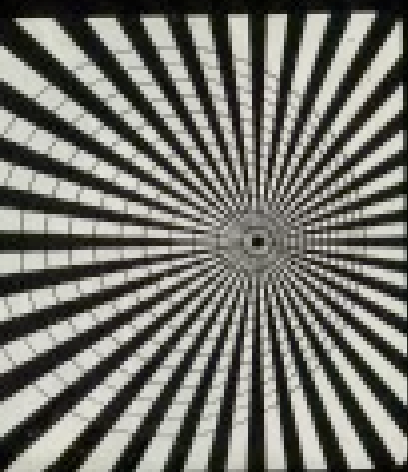
Primary funding for *Alwin Nikolais' Total Theater of Motion* has been provided by:

St. Aton Foundation, Inc.

Mr. & Mrs. Edward Nicoll

The Nikolais/Louis Alumni and Friends.

The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts gratefully acknowledges the leadership support of Dorothy and Lewis. B. Cullman. Additional support for exhibitions has been provided by Judy R. and Alfred A. Rosenberg and the Miriam and Harold Steinberg Foundation.



PUBLIC PROGRAMS

Monday, November 1, 2010 at 6:00 p.m.

The Progeny of Alwin Nikolais: From Digital to Analog Technology

Contemporary media artists Eric Dunlap, Mimi Garrard, Tim Glenn, and Lisa Naugle discuss Nikolais' influence on their own work and will present examples. Moderated by Claudia Gitelman.

Thursday, December 2, 2010 at 6:00 p.m.

Alwin Nikolais: Preserving the Legacy

Performance of Nikolais' *Noumenon*, danced by Peter Kyle; followed by discussion with Alberto (Tito) Del Saz, Peter Kyle, Murray Louis, and Joan Woodbury. Moderated by Anna Kisselgoff.

Thursday, January 6, 2011 at 6:00 p.m.

Screenings: Alwin Nikolais on Film

Screenings of works by ground-breaking choreographer Alwin Nikolais (1910-1993). Introduced by dancer/choreographer/dance historian Claudia Gitelman, co-editor of *The Returns of Alwin Nikolais: Bodies, Boundaries and the Dance Canon* (Wesleyan University Press, 2007).

IMAGE CREDITS

Front cover: Multiple exposures of dancer costume for the Alwin Nikolais' ballet *Temple*. Photograph by Tom Caravaglia.

1. Projection slides designed by Alwin Nikolais.
2. Alwin Nikolais in the Henry Street Playhouse workroom. Photograph by Ken Kay.
3. Details from a children's holiday performance at the Henry Street Playhouse, 1949.
4. Photograph of Nikolais' Marionette Theater, 1936.
5. Children watching a puppet show at a Hartford Park, c. 1936
6. Designs for masks and costumes by Alwin Nikolais.
7. Cover of *Choreoscript*.
8. Nikolais student Pascal Raygass performing for her class at the Ville Neuve les Avignon, summer 1978.
9. *Temple* (1974), with studio lighting and special effects. Photograph by Tom Caravaglia.
10. *Scenario* (1971). Photograph by P. Berthelot.
11. Murray Louis in *The Betwitched* (1957). Photograph by David S. Berlin.
12. Composite photograph of the Playhouse Dance Company repertory, 1958.
13. Projection slides designed by Alwin Nikolais.



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