

An Early History of the National Dance School

The National Dance School was officially established in 1976 under the auspices of the Ministry of Education and the Cultural Affairs Division under the directorship of E. Clement Bethel. The principal aim of the school was and still is to train Bahamian dancers and teachers. The programme is committed to researching the roots, development and current manifestations of dance forms that are indigenous to the Bahamas both in New Providence and the Family Islands.

According to Mrs Patricia Bazard, Officer at the Cultural Affairs Division, dance was added to the National Arts Festival by the late Clement Bethel who thought it best to have all aspects of the performing arts included in the National Arts Festival. Prior to this there was no form of expressive or interpretative dance in the schools. However, private groups like Hubert Farrington's Nassau Civic Ballet; Patricia Myers Dance Studio; and the Shirley Hall-Bass Dance Theatre all did dance in the local community.

In order to commence with the immediate implementation of dance in the Bahamian schools, The Ministry of Education and Culture brought in Madam Levinia Williams from the Republic of Haiti to train Bahamian teachers. Madam Levinia Williams was well known for helping to develop the Jamaican and the Hatian Dance Companies. It was envisaged that out of this training programme would come a cadre of dance instructors who would be proficient enough to teach dance in the Bahamian schools in the future. The Ministry of Education responded by releasing teachers from their dance classes once a week for training. At this time, the venue used for these sessions was the old post office building on Shirley Street.

This building was used from the school's inception since 1st November, 1976. In May 1978, this venue was changed to the Ranfurly Building at the C.C. Sweeting Secondary School, Oakes Field. Again the venue was changed to the sporting facilities at the Baillou Hill Road Sporting Complex. The school remained at this site until October, 1998 when it was moved to its new location in Centreville.

Madam Levinia Williams remained with the school until October, 1978. Following her departure, Mrs Shirley Hall-Bass was hired as the principal dance instructor and coordinator of the school. She remained with the school until her retirement in 1996.

In 1979, Mrs Neville Bowen, a Jamaican dance instructor was hired to teach ethnic dance at the school. Neville was a former student of the National Dance School who had earlier taken dance classes there. In absence of Shirley Hall-Bass, he supervised the school until his departure in 1985.

In 1982, Ms Noelle Chutkan, another Jamaican dance instructor was hired by the Ministry of Education and Culture under whose portfolio the N.D.S. came. She was responsible for teaching modern and folk dance to students at the school. She remained at with the N.D.S. until 1987 when she left to further her education in the U.S.

As a result of these efforts, a core of dance instructors evolved whose work would impact the lives of Bahamians - young and old alike for many yeas to come. Some of theses instructors were

persons like Ednal Wright, Paula Knowles, and Victoria Mc Intosh-Josey, Christine Johnson, Oswald Mortimer, Lawrence Carroll and others.

These persons were able to further their education in dance by attending dance school in the United States and Canada. The males studied Royal Academy of Dancing (RAD) at the Ryerson Polytec School of Dance, Canada and the females studied at the Sunyi State University of Dance, New York. They all received degrees in dance from these institutions. Many of them have now returned to the Bahamas as dance instructors and are working in the Bahamian schools.