



Gladys Bailin: The Life of a Dance Legend

By Bailey Fink

Gladys' stage presence as an outstanding performer can be felt by the viewer—even in still photographs of her.

Perched on a red couch in her Athens, Ohio, home, Gladys Bailin starts to laugh as she begins telling the story of her dance journey.

"How much time do you have? I'm almost 90."

Bailin grew up on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, where as a young girl, she was surrounded by the arts because she took piano, theater and movement classes at the Henry Street Settlement in its Playhouse. However, from a young age, she knew she loved dance the most.

"I was very fortunate. I lived in a terrific neighborhood in New York City where that was available to me at practically no cost," Bailin said. "I guess that was a charmed life ... living on the Lower East Side in an immigrant neighborhood was perfect."

She began taking three dance classes a week while in high school, one of which was taught by a professional from Doris Humphrey's company. Humphrey, now considered a pioneer of American modern dance, was a member of the Denishawn school in 1917 and later left to form a company with her friend Charles Weidman, which was active until 1944.

She is known for her innovative theories on movement itself creating meaning and her dramatic use of gravity.



Alwin Nikolais (center back), Murray Louis (third from left in back), Gladys Bailin (center standing), and many other dancers and company members pose for a group portrait in front of the Playhouse of the Henry Street Settlement (HSS) in New York City. The HSS was originally founded in 1892 as a nonprofit social services, arts program and health care services agency open to all ages in the Lower East Side of New York City.

Additionally, Bailin took classes from other dance legends like José Limón, another member of Humphrey's company known for his particular dance style, who later formed the José Limón Dance Company. She also studied with Martha Graham, whom Bailin calls one of the "mothers of dance" because she gave dance a new depth with intense and forceful expression of primal emotion during the '20s, '30s and '40s.

"Modern dance was still young, but there were companies around and there were people still trying to do their artistic thing, and it started to get a little more popularity, I'd say, maybe through the '50s and there were a lot of classes you could go to," Bailin said.

Then in 1948, an instructor came to New York City from Connecticut to be the new director of the dance and



In this 1951 flyer, the inside text has this written about The Playhouse School of Dance, which was announcing its fourth year: "An integrated curriculum of study extended over a period of three years...[and which] is designed to equip the student for professional work as dancer, teacher and choreographer...the professional students register for a minimum block study of three technique, two theory and one notation class weekly. Composition, percussion and ballet classes are optional."

theater program at the Henry Street Settlement. That instructor was Alwin Nikolais, now credited as a major figure in modern dance and often has been called the Merlin of modern dance.

"Mr. Nikolais came to Henry Street and that literally altered my life," said Bailin. "Nikolais, I can't praise him enough; he was just a creative genius. I don't call people geniuses often, but he rates that because [he] had such a creative mind, and he was so gifted in so many ways."

While at the Henry Street Settlement, he formed the Playhouse Dance Company, later known as the Nikolais Dance Theater, of which Bailin was an original member.

Nikolais, whom Bailin calls "Nik," was known for his theatrical approach to dance; he didn't just look at the movement, but also at the costumes, lighting and stage.

Bailin says he also encouraged each dancer to choreograph their own movement based on their bodies and understanding of the style, and he had them work on improvisation.

"Nik didn't come with a style so much as a theoretical approach, so you studied elements of time, elements of space [and] elements of dynamics, and they became not specific movements, but ideas and then you could invent movement to illustrate the ideas, which was very freeing," said Bailin. "So, there was just a lot of opportunity to find your own voice, and that's what he encouraged. Everybody is so incredibly individual and that was the key to find out ... what do you think, what do you feel, how do you express it."

Bailin performed and toured nationally and internationally as a member of the Alwin Nikolais Dance Company for more than a decade where she originated many principal roles in notable Nikolais works, including "Kaleidoscope" and "Noumenon." She was also a member of Murray Louis' dance company during his time.

"It wasn't unusual for dancers to be members of [two] companies especially if they shared the same studios and theaters," she said.

Eventually, Bailin left Nikolais' company in the '60s and joined her friend Don Redlich's company, where it was just the two of them. She toured around colleges in the Midwest with him for a few years and represented the U.S. at the Paris International Dance Festival in 1969. However, touring began to get too difficult, so she told Redlich she would only perform in New York.



Pictured is a 1948 exterior view of the Henry Street Playhouse. Written on the back of the photograph are notes about the Saturday 3 p.m. show, "... at 3:00 p.m. there is a 'live' show for children. Admission is 10 cents. Adults [are] not welcome without children...Price [is the] same for 10 years [of age for] marionettes, plays, dance programs, music programs, educational features, etc."



A close-up of Gladys Bailin in costume during a performance of "Village of Whispers," which premiered on February 13, 1955. According to an early flyer from Queens College, City University of New York that dance "...was one of the dance plays based on a repertory of children's works in which poetry was more emphasized than a plot." In works like "Village of Whispers," "Nikolais first used 'extensions'—props attached to the dancers' bodies that would make them project themselves heroically into space."

"[Touring] was not [as] glamorous as people think," she said. "I can remember times being exhausted after a program, and then everybody goes home, and the only person left is the janitor, and you're starving because you haven't eaten, and there's no place to eat because you're on a campus someplace, and it's a little town, and everything's closed at 10 o'clock. We would call a cab, and say 'What's open?' and he'd say, 'Well there's a bar that's open,' and we'd say, 'Do they have food?' and he'd say, 'Probably pizza,' and we'd say, 'Okay.' So, you'd eat pizza, which you didn't really wanna eat, and maybe have something to drink."

She left the Don Redlich Dance Company in 1970, but by then had already been offered a part-time teaching job at New York University's School of the Arts, now known as Tisch. Bailin says NYU's School of the Arts was one of the first of its day to offer a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Dance, but the dance program was still very demanding and taught in a conservatory-style.

"NYU is still going, and they have turned out some really wonderful students, and Jean [Erdman], in being the first director of [the dance program], understood that they needed not just to become technicians, but they needed to become creative people too, so that was a very important part of the school," she said.

While she was teaching at NYU, she received a call from Shirley Wimmer, the then director and founder of the OHIO School of Dance, asking her to be one of its first faculty members.

"I'd never lived in the Midwest ... Athens, Ohio, it was like going to a foreign country. I mean when you're a city-bred person, a little town struck me as something odd," Bailin said.



Bailin, her husband and son visited Athens in 1972 to meet Wimmer, and Bailin said she immediately liked her and her ideas on how to develop the program. Additionally, she said her son loved it because he stayed with the family of Pat Welling, a School of Dance faculty member, and they had a dog, which he always wanted, so he was convinced immediately that they needed to live in Athens.

Her family moved to Athens in 1972, got a dog and she began teaching choreography classes at Ohio University that fall.


"It was just a total change of lifestyle living in the country, I mean, I call this the country. People would laugh at me, 'You live in Athens,' and I'd say, 'No, no, no there are lots of trees and grass to mow. It's the country.' It's not like city life at all," she said.

When Wimmer stepped down as director of the School of Dance in the '80s, Bailin stepped up. She became the director of the School of Dance in 1983 until her 1995 retirement where she continued to develop Ohio University's dance program into what it is today, one of the most important schools of modern dance in North America.

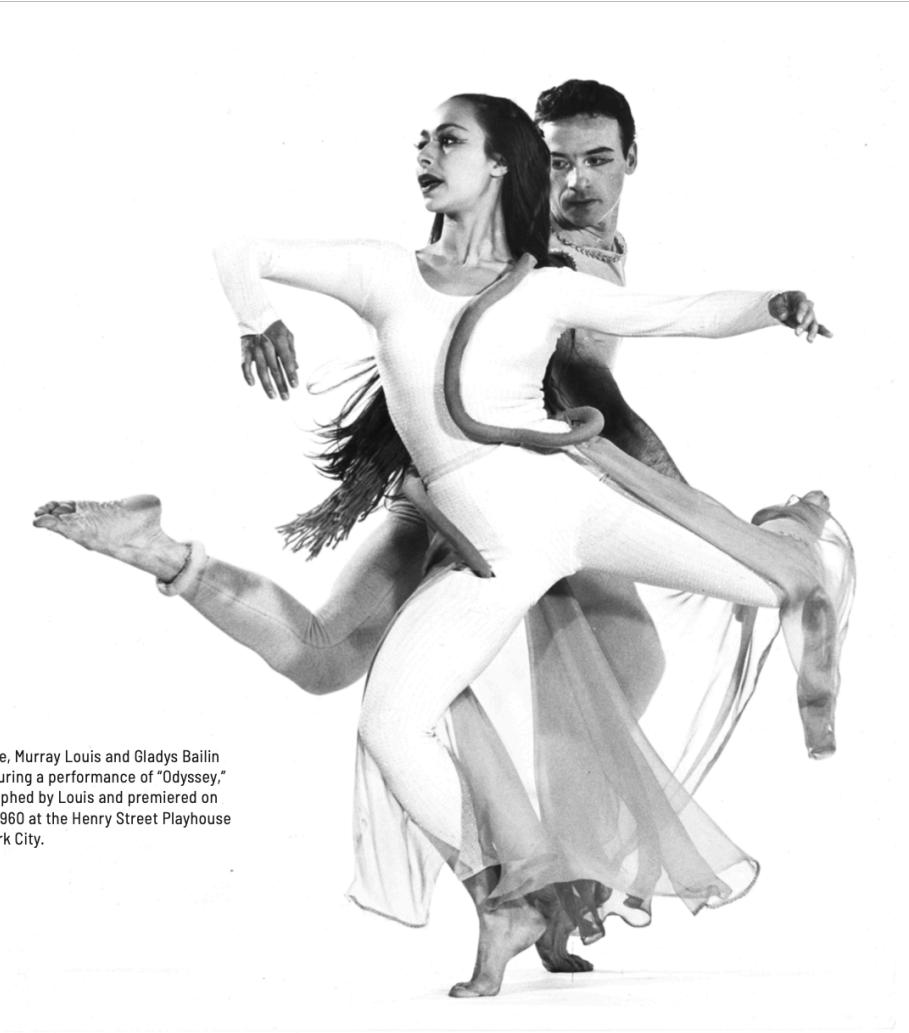
"Gladys has been such an important part of the School of Dance [because] she brought Nikolais' approach to dance composition, which is a perfect fit for a college dance program because it trains the whole artist and not just dancers in the studio," said Dr. Tresa Randall, associate professor of dance.

Bailin also became the first female distinguished professor selected at Ohio University in 1986.

Murray Louis and Gladys Bailin pose for publicity photography for the modern dance piece titled, "Facets," choreographed by Murray Louis and premiered November 23, 1962 at the Henry Street Playhouse in New York City.



Dancers, Bill Frank and Gladys Bailin perform Alwin Nikolais' "New Dances," also known as "Cantos," which premiered December 27, 1957 at the Henry Street Playhouse in New York City.



In costume, Murray Louis and Gladys Bailin dancing during a performance of "Odyssey," choreographed by Louis and premiered on March 11, 1960 at the Henry Street Playhouse in New York City.



"I remember taking a class with you [Ballin] and... you teaching an improvisation class. You would walk in and say, 'Sovens!' and we'd all go, 'What?' ... and [then] we would work with you to create a whole class based on seven-four time," said Madeleine Scott, emerita director of the School of Dance. During that same class, Ballin would say to the dancers, "I like that. Let's do that," or "That's terrible, let's not do that." For Scott, those remarks helped her in understanding "the essence of improvisational exploration.... [and] the beginning of understanding the creative work."



"I heard a lot about Gladys just through the department [of dance], in general, and... I've met her once before. She's just a powerhouse. I really enjoy listening to her stuff, because there's so much in her head [and] I'm very intrigued by people's minds. I'm just drawn to her. She's not as personally attached to any of us, but I feel like I am whenever I just listen to her," said Madison Bouza, a sophomore in the School of Dance.

UNIQUE GESTURE: EXPLORING THE CAREER OF GLADYS BAILIN



Bailin, who performed and toured nationally and internationally with both the Nikolais and Louis companies and who brings decades of experience and significant importance as a professional dancer, choreographer and dance educator, recently donated her collection of dance materials from her expansive career to the Libraries' Archives and Special Collections. A presentation and reception was held October 11, 2019 to celebrate her donation, and her support of the Nikolais/Louis dance collection.



All photos by James Yearl (The University Libraries)

Flora Carey, a sophomore in dance, takes notes while Gladys Bailin speaks during "Unique Gesture: Exploring the Career of Gladys Bailin" at the Music and Dance Library in Glidden Hall. "It's really interesting to see the connections between this exhibit [Nikolais/Louis] and the dance world, [and] that it is so close to home," remarks Carey during the reception following the event Friday, October 11, 2019.

This past fall, the Libraries hosted a conversation between Gladys Bailin, emerita distinguished professor of Dance, and Tresa Randall, associate professor of Dance, in a presentation titled, "Exploring the Career of Gladys Bailin." The talk was part of two exhibit openings showcasing the diversity of dance materials in the Libraries' Alwin Nikolais and Murray Louis Dance Collection—and the newly donated Gladys Bailin Papers.

Bailin, who performed and toured nationally and internationally with both the Nikolais and Louis companies, brings decades of experience and significant importance as a professional dancer, choreographer and dance educator.

Captured here are images and audience comments from that Oct. 11, 2019 presentation in the Music and Dance Library in Glidden Hall on the Athens campus.



"Nik [Alwin Nikolais] would not come in with stops; he never came in with stops. What he would say is, 'I'm looking for this kind of a feeling' or 'I'm looking for this kind of effect,' or he'd throw a prop at you, and he'd say, 'What can you do with it?' Or, he'd put a barrier on the stage," said Bailin during her presentation on the Athens Campus October 11, 2019.

And then he would say, "What would you do with that? Sometimes, we would play for weeks [creating a dance]. I'm not talking about a day or two—WEEKS. Then suddenly, he'd say, 'I got it [knew what I'm looking for] but it [his choreography] was really [explored] through our play.'"

Gladys Bailin's "...influence on our curriculum, and on the later careers of our graduates, has been incredibly important for OHIO and for the dance field," said Dr. Tresa Randall, associate professor of dance. "I think that ... her stature in the community, both in Athens and in the University, has raised the profile of dance, and the fact that she was the first [OHIO] female distinguished professor was a great honor. She just has been very engaged in the arts community for a long time and helps to reinforce the importance of dance within the larger arts world."





Pictured is a flyer announcing "An Informal Concert of Music and Dance" at Denison University with Bailin and musician, Richard Syracuse, pianist and Ohio University professor emeritus.

"I came here, and I just didn't expect that it would turn out the way it did," she said. "I loved the school, and I loved the students who came here. They didn't seem to have a lot of outside influences, which were constantly at you, they made themselves available to what was here, and I think some really nice things happened."

In 2019, Bailin donated a collection of items documenting more than 50 years of her career to the Ohio University Libraries, entitled "The Gladys Bailin Papers." Her collection includes photographs, newspaper clippings, posters, programs, choreography notes and much more from her lengthy career. The collection complements

the Alwin Nikolais and Murray Louis Dance Collection, which Louis donated to the Ohio University Libraries in 1999.

Additionally, Bailin established the Alwin Nikolais/Murray Louis/Gladys Bailin Archive Fund to preserve the collections and promote access to them in the Mahn Center for Archives and Special Collections. This fund is important for the Libraries because it will allow researchers, faculty and students access to view all of the collections for years to come.

"I think [Bailin's collection] really builds on the Nikolais/Louis collection and therefore extends it in time," said



A December 1972 program from, "Gladys Bailin in Concert," which was presented by the Ohio University School of Dance at 8 p.m. listing not only pieces danced by Gladys, but also danced by OHIO students in dance.



Bright colors mark the artwork from this 1978 cover of a program announcing a benefit dance concert for Ohio University's Putnam Studio and Theater with Gladys Bailin and Richard Syracuse.



The Christian Science Monitor, which featured this image of "Imago" being performed in the Henry Street Playhouse, wrote this on March 20, 1963, "Incredible and genius are words that come to mind while watching the latest dance theater creation of Alwin Nikolais." Gladys is pictured in front farthest to the left.

Program from The Detroit Institute of Arts featuring "Imago" dated March 22, 1967.



This nine-inch wooden costumed figure, used for the creation of the "Imago" costumes, is one of several "dolls" belonging to the Libraries' Nikolais/Louis Dance Collection and were constructed by Frank Garcia, the distinguished costumer who worked closely with Nikolais and Louis for decades.

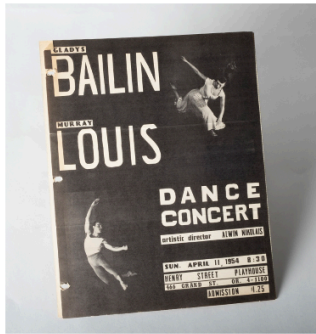
Gladys Bailin and Murray Louis during a performance of "Imago," which premiered Feb. 24, 1963 at the Hartford Jewish Community Center in Hartford, CT. Notice how the costumes have continually evolved.

Randall. "It gives us a really wide-ranging view of this legacy within modern dance, but it also connects more directly to Ohio University and to the work that she did not only in New York, but also here."

To celebrate the addition of Bailin's collection, the Libraries hosted an event entitled "Unique Gesture: Exploring the Career of Gladys Bailin" on Oct. 11 in the Music and Dance Library. The presentation was a question and answer session with Bailin and Randall, and the Library was filled with students, faculty, staff and friends who were eager to hear what Bailin had to say about dance and her history, a testament to the impact she's had on the School of Dance.

"[Gladys is] such a vibrant person and, in terms of dance, she's a legend. She really is a lifelong expert in our field





Gladys Bailin started her career very young as an aspiring dancer performing with the Henry Street Playhouse and teaching children in workshops and at institutions like the Riverdale Country School for Girls in the Bronx, New York, among others.



Captured here is Gladys' grace and poise as a dancer as she balances on-half point in a perfect execution of a dance movement.

and helps the students to make those connections to the professional world," said Randall. "We just have many generations now ... of dancers [who] have gone out into the professional world with their own unique sense of themselves as artists. Our students don't all look alike, and they don't all make the same kind of work, whereas at some other institutions there tends to be more of a cookie cutter kind of approach and people fall in to imitating their teachers. Gladys teaches in such a way that it brings out each individual student's creativity."

Sitting on her red couch, Bailin cracks a huge smile as she continues to reminisce.

"It's an interesting life; I don't regret anything. Isn't that nice to be almost 90 and to say you don't have a lot of regrets." 🌻



Pictured is an image from the Gladys Bailin Papers: Gladys as a young girl frolicking along the shoreline.