



Kevin Fung and David McCauley of Omega West Dance Company rehearsing “A Time to Mourn” for the memorial of Allan Tung at the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine. Tung had been a professional dancer in New York City and also a main member of the Omega group in the east. The rehearsal was at Old St. Mary’s Cathedral in San Francisco. (GTU Archives)

16. Dancing in the Face of Death

CDS: St. John the Divine is at 112th Street and up the street (116th) is Columbia University. I attended a weekly Mass [held in a beautiful chapel used by various religious groups connected with Columbia. The Mass was] organized by the Jesuits and a lay community. Someone in the lay community died, and I was asked to dance for her funeral liturgy. I remember feeling that now I was really part of the community, that it was an affirmation of the role of dance in liturgies when [I was] asked [to dance] for such important occasions as baptisms and funerals, life-and-death occasions. And then there is also the real significance of dancing in the face of death. I have witnessed this in different ways over these many years, for both sacred and secular occasions. One particular dance I am thinking of as especially beautiful was choreographed by José Limón. [It was] called “There Is a Time,” based on Ecclesiastes. I am recalling, of course, the section “a time to mourn, and a time to dance.” Years later, here at the GTU in Berkeley, a member of CARE (Center for the Arts, Religion, and Education) presented the question of how you go from mourning into dancing to a class on religion and the arts. And he thought of the processions in New Orleans that accompany the deceased from the church to the grave site.

There is a cathartic movement that the body and soul undergo with the marching, singing, and [the] band music that fosters a sense of resurrection. We all experienced this when Doug Adams, the professor who founded the Center for the Arts, Religion, and Education at the GTU, died. He personally gave me instructions as to what he wanted in his funeral liturgy. [He said] that he was hiring a New Orleans band, and I was to create, among other dances, a closing processional dance to “Just a Closer Walk with Thee.”

So, I did that. I created a movement pattern for the Omega dancers and everyone else followed in a simpler way out of the church, across the street, and ending at a whole other part of the campus. It was indeed a wonderful experience, and we moved from mourning into dancing. I loved doing it as well as researching it. I saw white handkerchiefs used in the New Orleans processionals, being waved back and forth, and it was included as part of our dance ritual.

We repeated the same dance when my husband died. I mentioned creating a solo dance for him, but we also had a memorial service both at St. Gregory of Nyssa Church in San Francisco, as well as a second service at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, where he had built the studio for the dancers so long ago.



Omega West Dancers at the memorial of Arthur Eaton, De Sola's husband. (De Sola Collection)

Allan Tung was a wonderful choreographer associated with Omega Dance Company at St. John the Divine. Allan choreographed a part of the [*Missa Gaia*]/*Earth Mass* as I mentioned before, as well as many other wonderful dances. When he died, I was already in California, but his parents flew Omega West back to New York City, and I created a dance for him called “A Time to Mourn.” It begins at a barre, such as dancers use to warm up. And we used a portable barre from the studio. The dance began with pliés at the barre. Allan was a wonderful

dancer and teacher. One of my dancers in Omega West was also Asian-American, and he represented Allan in the dance. As he drops from the barre, the other dancers rock back and forth, the barre spins, and there is grieving and mourning.

There is a part of sacred dance history that describes what is referred to as “the dance of death.” This was done in medieval times as a response to the plague and people dying in huge numbers. The dance ritual involved parts for all levels of society as the plague could touch anyone. I first saw a dance version of the dance of death through a creation of Judith Rock, a sacred dance choreographer at that time, and she had people move in a circle dance formation to medieval music. Her characters included a candlestick maker, the baker, the butcher, queens and kings, and all sorts of people. A figure enters, cloaked in a monk’s robe, who draws everyone to the dance, but suddenly he comes into the center [and] takes off his cloak with a flourish to reveal a skeleton costume. He chases everyone, pulling them out of the circle to die. I added to the dance a sort of resurrection. Another figure comes who lifts up those who have died, and so we go from terror and death into a new circle dance of life. Thank you for your title [for this section} “Dancing in the Face of Death,” thank you.

