

An Interesting Experiment in Eugenics

Strange Marriage, 1914

Shawn arrived at St. Denis's 89th Street apartment near Riverside Drive in Manhattan with the expectation that the international dance star would give him a private lesson in Oriental dancing. As he waited for someone to answer the door, he thought back to a conversation with Laura Sawyer, one of St. Denis's former dancers, who performed in his *Dances of the Ages* film. Sawyer told Shawn a well-kept secret—that offstage, St. Denis had a head of prematurely white hair, a fact that belied her status as an exotic stage beauty. Shawn braced himself for the possibility that he might not recognize the star should she happen to answer her own door. She did not. Instead, a servant welcomed Shawn and led him into a sitting room where he waited for St. Denis to appear. When Shawn heard heavy footfalls nearing him, he assumed it was another servant approaching, but around the corner appeared Ruth St. Denis herself. “Barefoot, she walks like Helen of Troy; in high heels, Helen of Troy, New York,” Shawn thought.¹ From head to foot, St. Denis was all illusion.

Ruth Dennis was the daughter of Ruth Emma Hull, “a freethinker and a feminist” and the second woman to graduate from medical school at the University of Michigan, and Thomas Laban Dennis, a veteran of the Civil War and a machinist.² She was raised on the family's farm in Somerville alongside her father's son from a previous marriage and her parents' youngest son whom they named “Brother.” Though the farm was in relative physical isolation, young Ruth was exposed to a world of ideas from contact with the many bohemian travelers who came through the farm's boarding house. Through her mother, she was introduced to “diverse cultural influences of Methodism, utopian socialism, Swedenborgianism, phrenology, and mesmerism.” Mother Dennis also introduced her daughter to Delsarte technique and had her study ballroom and skirt dancing with local teachers.

By age fifteen, the young New Jersey farm girl had begun traveling to New York City to perform acrobatic routines and skirt dances on vaudeville and variety stages. Within five years, she was contracted as a “bit player” by

theater impresario David Belasco, who “canonized” the young Ruth Dennis as “Ruth St. Denis.” With his acting company, she performed throughout the United States and Europe for over five years, all within the watchful eye of Mother Dennis who traveled with her daughter as chaperone and stage manager. In 1904, she had yet another transformation, this one initiated by an experience in a drugstore in Buffalo, New York, where she saw an image of the Egyptian goddess Isis in a cigarette advertisement. Throughout her life, St. Denis repeatedly told the anecdote of how this image inspired her to create her own goddess dances. Her vision came to fruition on January 28, 1906, when she performed a program of solo “Oriental” dances of her own creation at the Hudson Theater in New York—the first ever program of solo dances by a single artist on a Broadway stage. Her success begat a string of sold out performances on concert stages and high-profile appearances at society functions. Her sensuous, mystical dances catapulted her to international recognition allowing her to perform extensively stateside and abroad, and once even for King Edward VII.

St. Denis’s streak of successes came to a sudden halt in the spring of 1912, when her major financial supporter, the Broadway producer and theater owner Henry B. Harris, died on April 15, in the sinking of the Titanic, dashing her “hopes for a highbrow career, her financial security, her most valued professional friend.”³ Eventually, Harris’s estate pulled its financial backing, unwilling to add to the \$30,000 debt that her previous tour, *Egypta*, had accrued. She was left stranded. Through her new manager Harry Bell, she finally contracted a vaudeville tour in the South. However, she needed to diversify her program for audiences less inclined to sit through a program of solo Orientalist dances, so she recruited Brother (appearing as René St. Denis) and Miss Alice Martin to perform ballroom dances. Still, St. Denis needed a distinctive edge to her program. Enter Ted Shawn.

When St. Denis set her eyes on Shawn, he struck her as sad and defenseless. Years later she clarified the perception, noting that she immediately sensed an insecurity related to his homosexuality, or as she put it, she felt that he was burdened by “all of the great problems and desires and perplexities of his own nature that were yet to come.”⁴ After sharing a few pleasantries, the two delved into an engrossing conversation. Shawn was vibrating with St. Denis’s interest in him, his life in the ministry, and especially his bold decision to leave the church to pursue a life in dance. She had never before met a man who shared her devotion to both dance and the divine. Plus, he was young and had beautiful eyes. She invited him to stay for tea, then dinner. It

became increasingly evident to Shawn that he would never receive that dance lesson. He called Norma Gould to ask her to cover his evening class so he could spend more time with St. Denis, which he did until midnight, then left with the promise that he would return the next day to demonstrate his dances.

When he returned, Shawn gave her a poem he had written in the style of the Sufi mystic Omar Khayyám. It was called "Adolescent." St. Denis found it morose, yet cried, moved by Shawn's earnestness. Finally, he performed his *Dagger Dance*, in which he played a young Aztec warrior valiantly resisting his capture that would certainly lead to sacrifice. The dance must have confirmed St. Denis's initial feeling about this young man, who devised a dance that would allow him to display his physical struggle for survival against the invisible yet certain forces of religion and tradition.

Days after Shawn's audition, St. Denis talked over the possibility of inviting Shawn to join her next tour with Brother, who served his sister's career in various capacities over her long career: stage manager, photographer, performer. At her sister's request, Brother met with Shawn to offer him the opportunity to join her upcoming tour as her dancing partner. It struck Shawn as odd that the renowned St. Denis would invite a newbie dancer to share the stage with her. He learned, however, that St. Denis had an ulterior motive. She now wanted to add Shawn's *Dagger Dance* to the lineup. When he initially refused out of a sense of obligation to Norma Gould, they extended an offer to Gould as well to join the tour and perform their "modern dances." They offered Shawn \$40 per week, which actually amounted to less than what he was earning as a teacher once he factored in the cost of hotels, meals, and laundry for which he would be responsible on tour. Still, he figured, the prestige of the position was worth the sacrifice. Shawn went back to his apartment in the West Forties to tell Gould about the offer. She was surprised, but for a different reason. Gould was expecting a marriage proposal, not a touring contract. She begrudgingly agreed to go on tour, but just a few days before taking to the road, she had "a complete nervous breakdown" and headed back to California.⁵

Shawn spent the next few days training a dancing partner to replace Gould. Hilda Beyer was a former member of St. Denis's *Egypta* cast. She was a young beauty, not a trained dancer. "Blond and Swedish" is how St. Denis described her. One critic gushed that she was "considered by sculptors the most perfect formed girl in America and selected to pose for the statuary decorations for the Panama exposition, also for the country home of John

D. Rockefeller.” Shawn worked around the clock to teach her Gould’s roles. One of the first reviews of their performance remarked, “How magnificently Miss Hilda Beyer danced, ably supported by Mr. Ted Shawn.” Shawn found the critic’s observation ironic: “He didn’t know how ably supported, because I was still talking out of the corner of my mouth, ‘Come here, go there, one-two, get into it kid!’”⁶

The tour was scheduled to open on April 13, 1914, in Paducah, Kentucky, the first time St. Denis and Shawn ever shared a stage. For decades to come, they would rehearse the story of how they fell in love in Paducah. Despite St. Denis’s promise to Shawn to share billing, top billing went to St. Denis, who was “assisted by Hilda Beyer and Ted Shawn.” The program also included Miss Evan B. Fontaine, a Chicago society girl who had studied with “the best dancing masters of Petrograd and Paris,” society and ballroom dancing partners Norwood and Mitchell, and Mlle. Psychema (aka Desiree Lubovska, née Winniefred Foote), who with her brother formed a ballroom dance team in Los Angeles. “Discovered” by St. Denis, Lubovska spent a season with her on the Orpheum Circuit as a leading dancer before she joined the tour of the Southeast performing Shawn’s *Danse Egyptienne*.

Most reviewers paid respect to St. Denis, noting her storied past from Passing Shows to the world stages with Belasco, or played to the shock of her being an American who captured the essence of the exotic. They also recognized that her “classical” dances were of a bygone era and that her assistants were the future of dance. A critic in Indiana noted that no one “went wild over her” and her “classical” dances. “The few say it’s art—and the others acquiesce and they try to make themselves believe it.” Another Hoosier flat out claimed that Shawn and Beyer’s routine was the cleverest. It might have been the comparisons to the younger dancers and the descriptions of her as “something of a Cubist” who created “bizarre effects” on stage that led St. Denis to experiment with her well-defined stage image by considering dancing a pretty duet with Shawn. For the remainder of the tour, they worked together to create the dance, the first of many collaborations.⁷

One Sunday evening after a rehearsal in Norfolk, Virginia, Shawn and St. Denis enjoyed a romantic dinner at a dining room on the top floor of a posh hotel. After their meal, they stepped out onto the terrace to continue their conversation about dancing together. Moved by his infatuation with his new artistic collaborator, Shawn spontaneously proposed marriage to her. She did not accept the proposal. St. Denis had never intended on becoming someone’s

wife, and even if she had been tempted by Shawn's spontaneous gesture, she knew that she would first need to get her mother's blessing, which would not be easily won. Instead, they enjoyed the remaining weeks of the tour creating dances and plotting an impossible future together.

The tour concluded with a two-week engagement at Ravinia Park in Chicago. At the popular amusement park and music festival, St. Denis premiered a new solo, *The Peacock: A Legend of India*, in which she portrays a vain Indian princess whose soul is condemned to life as a peacock that haunts the courtyard of her former palace, which involved St. Denis preening and manipulating a bejeweled train to her costume's dress to convey the majesty of a peacock's tail. Shawn and St. Denis also premiered their first artistic collaboration, *Arabic Suite* (later called *Ourieda, A Romance of a Desert Dancing Girl*).⁸ Set in North Africa, the dance evoked the heat and mystery of two lovers in the desert. It introduced what would become one of the couple's signature moves—Shawn loosely embraces St. Denis from behind and in profile, they walk across the stage, reaching toward a visible yet distant oasis. (See Figure 2.1.) One critic noted that the most successful part of the pantomime was when the dancers were silhouetted against the backdrop of the moonlit desert and the sound of the insistent orchestra was replaced by a Victrola—"surely the most effective use to which that instrument has been put on stage."⁹ Based on the review of the dance, and the concert program that contained advertisements for both Schmelzer's Victrola and Victor Dance Records, it seems likely that this first St. Denis-Shawn collaboration was largely created to demonstrate how modern technologies of the Victrola and phonograph could be used to create the experience of the theater at home. It certainly was not the last time they employed their art for commercial means.

St. Denis left Ravinia to join her mother on the shores of Marblehead, Massachusetts. Shawn stayed in Ravinia but wrote to her daily to report on his successful performances. Addressing her as "My T-Ruth," his letters expressed his devotion to her and her art, along with scenarios for new dances that they could perform as husband and wife. He pressured her for a response to his marriage proposal by casually mentioning how Chicago socialites promised to raise funds to send him to Russia to study at the Imperial School. Addressing him as "Eager Boy," she politely declined his proposals by blaming her reluctance to accept his proposal on her mother's disapproval. But Shawn persisted, prompting St. Denis to write Shawn a twenty-six-page letter that spelled out her marital expectations.¹⁰ Using the language of the



Figure 2.1. Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn in their first duet, *Ourieda, A Romance of a Desert Dancing Girl* (1914). Denishawn Collection. Courtesy of the Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library.

“Divine Science” (she had testified before Marblehead’s Christian Science congregation the night prior), as well as through a meandering discussion of Walt Whitman and D. H. Lawrence’s book *Rainbow*, published in 1915 and prosecuted on grounds of obscenity for its explicit treatment of sexual desire, she elucidated her anxieties about entering a “new and other state of marriage.” St. Denis asks for “an all around living, progressing, experimenting partnership—in which sex in its particular sphere is a part but not the

whole—this is my sense of love + loyalty + fidelity—first of all a friend, then a lover.”

From the outset of their relationship, St. Denis demonstrated a disarming transparency and empathy in regard to all matters sexual. To her mind, “an experimenting partnership” had to endure trials of all kinds, including sexual ones. In the letter she mentions her remorse for her violent reaction when Shawn confided in her about a sexual episode he experienced with “Frank Something”:

An experience had come to you, that you were not responsible for, you did not start it, you did not make it, yet because . . . the general thought of the world on any sex attraction—you felt uncomfortable, you had no real desire to deceive me, you came to me, and I did the usual thing, I reacted violently in pride and fear! It was a long time before I could crawl out from under the universal epidemic—I knelt down under it—like I did with the flu—nothing to be proud of—something to destroy and come up from, into the sunshine.¹¹

When they reunited in New York, Shawn rented a boarding room at St. Denis’s house. As expected, Mother Dennis expressed her disapproval of Shawn’s presence and the threat he posed to the life and career of her daughter. Shawn was not familiar with the dynamics of parental manipulation, so he confronted her forthrightly, during a six-hour showdown. Mother Dennis ultimately determined that Shawn was no serious threat to St. Denis’s image as a chaste goddess, a carefully controlled illusion that she herself helped to develop in distinction to Isadora Duncan.

On August 13, 1914, Edwin Myers Shawn married Ruth St. Denis.

“That statistical statement, while quite true, is completely misleading in its simplicity,” wrote Shawn in his memoir.¹² He recalled that there were “cloak and dagger overtones” to the entire marriage. Though she agreed to marry Shawn, the institution of marriage upset St. Denis’s sense of herself as an independent “free woman.” Thus, she refused to play the part of a blushing bride. Instead, she put on a wrinkled serge suit and a cheap straw hat, then followed Shawn to city hall for a marriage license “to get this thing over with,” as St. Denis trivialized their union. With marriage license in hand, they went uptown to Aeolian Hall, a concert hall built in 1912 for the piano manufacturing company, where a retired minister turned Christian Scientist named Dr. W. F. Ottarson solemnized the intimate ceremony. Brother St. Denis and

his newlywed wife Emily served as witnesses. St. Denis refused a wedding ring and insisted on striking the word “obey” from their vows. After the ceremony, the newlyweds went home to break the news to Mother Dennis but could not find her anywhere. They went looking for her and eventually found her down the block by the Sailors and Soldiers Monument on Riverside Drive. St. Denis recalled, “The defeated, hopeless gesture of her body told me more than any words that she accepted our marriage as the end of her long devotion to my career.”¹³

St. Denis insisted that Shawn keep their marriage a secret. There were professional reasons for the secrecy. St. Denis’s appeal as a mysterious and exotic beauty was based in part on concealing the realities of the conditions by which she lived and labored. There were also profoundly personal ones. Through she had a reputation for being seen on the town with powerful men in cities across the globe, the thirty-five-year-old St. Denis was a virgin. By her own admission, her fear of pregnancy and motherhood kept her from developing romantic intimacy. Years later, St. Denis would affirm as much in a letter to Shawn: “Some day you will realize that I appreciated your virginity so much—that I married you for it!”¹⁴ For the first few months of the marriage, their union was never announced, never celebrated, never consummated. Indeed, St. Denis admitted that theirs was a “strange marriage.”¹⁵

Instead of a romantic honeymoon, the pair embarked on a grueling seven-month tour of one-night stands starting in Saratoga Springs and heading westward to San Francisco. The program featured some of St. Denis’s most famous dances alongside “a mix of Oriental, Greek, Classic and Modern dances.” The reviews of the program were favorable. Audiences clamored to see St. Denis’s *Radha: The Mystic Dance of the Five Senses*, alongside more modern fare of ballroom dances and burlesque-style routines, such as the *Ta-Toa: A Chinese Minuet* performed by Brother (once again as René St. Denis) and Evan-Burrows Fontaine.

Though news of their marriage had not yet leaked to the press, early notices raised excited curiosity about Shawn’s presence on the tour, forcing questions about his identity. He quickly became called the “American Mordkin,” though Shawn rebuked the association with the Russian ballet star. He began to get favorable notices for his dancing if not his physical presence: “Mr. Shawn dances not with very much of what used to be called steps but with a grace and suggestion of physical force that commands admiration.” Another reviewer went as far as to say that he “was even as great as Miss Denis, when

one considers his remarkable physique, and his usual gift of grace. He occupied the stage even more than the real star and his earnest support was of great value to Ruth St. Denis.”¹⁶

Shawn seized the attention to launch what would become his lifelong defense of the male dancer. In early interviews on the topic, Shawn concentrated on the argument that dancing is “a manly sport.”¹⁷ Some writers ran with the relatively novel comparison between dance and athletics based on physicality and strength, whereas others fixated on the comparison between dancing and another type of competition: beauty contests. In the early months of the tour, a few writers playfully if not sardonically speculated on the outcome of Shawn’s participation in a hypothetical male beauty contest. “No Contest Here” wrote one reporter in Akron, declaring Shawn “The Most Beautiful Man in the World.”

The issue with the title was that it already had been associated with “Greek dancer” Paul Swan, a figure with whom both Shawn and St. Denis were very familiar. In February 1913, Swan appeared as a Greek slave on stage with St. Denis before 400 guests at an Egyptian pageant hosted by Louis C. Tiffany. Shawn had gone to see Swan perform his version of *Dying Swan* and *Narcissus* in New York City just months earlier. Shawn claimed to have been revolted by the performance and began to model his own stage persona against Swan’s. In practice, however, there were striking similarities between their stage acts as well as their personal backgrounds. Both were raised Methodists in the Midwest. As a result, reporters could barely tell them apart, some never realizing that Shawn and Swan were actually two different people, inconceivable as it was for there to be two interpretative male dancers on the scene. One writer offered a foolproof way to distinguish between them by noting that whereas Swan’s pink complexion made him look feminine, Shawn’s greasepaint gave him “a healthy sunburn hue,” making him appear masculine, perhaps even ethnic.¹⁸

Shawn revolted against the comparison, especially when the association with Swan’s unapologetic display of male beauty placed Shawn’s masculinity in question. For instance, in the real estate section of a New York newspaper ran an advertisement for a “beautiful gentleman’s home to let,” a living option described as perfect for men such as Paul Swan, Ted Shawn, or female impersonators Julian Eltinge or Martelle. Curiously absent from this list was the famous Russian dancer Vaslav Nijinsky, who also was referred to as the “Most Beautiful Man in the World” and about whom a book had recently been published in the United States.¹⁹ Inasmuch as Shawn’s beauty placed

him in the company of effeminate men and female impersonators, he resisted, gladly accepting “World’s Most Handsome Man” as a conciliatory title.

For Shawn, the burden of being hailed as “beautiful” was that it drew attention away from his dancing and heightened the scrutiny of his physique. One reporter went to great lengths to emasculate Shawn through an infantilizing description of his body: “Ted’s limbs are delicate, smooth and rounded. His arms are childlike, his features ethereal in their chiselmint and his hair one of those thick, crinkly masses that you want to crop off and put in a football. There are no knobs of honest toil about his figure and he altogether looks like a fellow just good enough to put on a cat’s hide and pose before crowds of sensual society dames in the name of Art.”²⁰ The perception that Shawn’s brand of physical beauty was of interest to “society dames” was astute, especially given that during this time, Shawn was the subject of a sketch by society portraitist John Singer Sargent (1856–1925). (See Figure 2.2.) In the portrait, Shawn is depicted lounging naked but for a draped cloth, gaze averted, with



Figure 2.2. Portrait of Ted Shawn (c. 1915) by John Singer Sargent. Courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution.

palm primed at his groin. Sargent summoned the very narcissistic homoe-roticism against which the writer railed, prompting him to suggest that instead of a male beauty contest what was needed was a “male homely contest” for “men working with the very devil for seven children and a wife.” St. Denis rose to Shawn’s defense against depictions of him as an aesthete or man of leisure, once telling a reporter, “My husband and myself are nauseated by this newspaper talk that he is a pretty man. Pretty nothing—he’s a manly man. Big, brawny and full of the old Nick. Please correct the foolish rumor that Ted is a human doll with pink lips and chic complexion.”²¹

These queries opened up topics about the nature of art, beauty, and masculinity—often quite literally. “When Is Art Art?” asked the *Chicago Herald*, prompted by a public uproar surrounding the display of photographs depicting a scantily clad Shawn and Beyer in the windows of an Evanston, Illinois, photographer’s studio. The incident required the involvement of the commissioner of public safety to mediate the impassioned debates among reporters and local leaders about the line between art and “indecent.”²²

When the publicity surrounding Shawn’s beauty showed no signs of stopping, St. Denis violated her own vow of secrecy by letting it slip to a reporter that she had married “the world’s most beautiful man.”²³ St. Denis denied that her admission was a self-interested ploy to siphon Shawn’s newfound celebrity. Her innocence was plausible, given that just days before the interview the newlyweds finally had consummated their summer marriage on Shawn’s October 22 birthday. Shawn said it was St. Denis’s birthday present to him.²⁴ Both were virgins at the time.

A blind item in a St. Louis newspaper on October 30 announced their union: “St. Denis Married.”²⁵ In the following days the news about the dancing couple’s “secret marriage” was reported in local papers across the country. Within a month’s time, the short news item developed into complete features on the couple, now characterizing their marriage as “an interesting experiment in eugenics.” On November 22, 1914, the *Washington Post* announced the marriage between Shawn and St. Denis in a satirical article entitled “Students of Eugenics Closely Watching this Marriage: Union of the Splendidly Developed Dancer Ruth St. Denis and Edwin Shawn, ‘the Handsomest Man in America,’ May Produce Results of Great Value to the Science of Race Betterment.” (See Figure 2.3.) The writer mocked the couple’s “eugenic charms” and speculated that the medical community will scrutinize these “perfect specimens of humanity” given their great promise to produce a “eugenic baby” and to “improve our poor, deformed race.” Shawn and St.

when, in fact, during his junior year of college, he was hospitalized with temporary paralysis from the waist down, a reaction to medicine he was prescribed for diphtheria. Ultimately, the writer's exaggerated descriptions of the couple's superiority dramatize the "unusual" nature of their union, especially their twelve-year age difference and unconventional profession as dancers. "Eugenic science would not approve of this," quips the writer, who also mentions the inexplicable gap in time between the couple's August wedding and its November announcement, pointing to a potential crack in the veneer of their eugenic luster.

Eugenics—a nineteenth-century neologism derived from the Greek, meaning "wellborn" or "good breeding"—was a "pseudoscience" or "an epiphenomenon of a number of sciences, which all intersected at the claim that it was possible to consciously guide human evolution" toward a physical, intellectual, and moral ideal through selective breeding.²⁶ By the 1920s, the United States had become a "eugenical world."²⁷ From the courtroom to the cinema, the scientific laboratory to the museum, eugenics permeated nearly every sphere of American culture, spreading its promise of "race betterment" and anxiety about American degeneracy. This eugenic creed would form the basis of Shawn's own conviction that dancing was "the supreme method for becoming identified with cosmic forces and through that identity being able to shape those forces towards the benefits of one's own tribe and self."²⁸ For Shawn, eugenics and dancing were affined "methods" for (re)producing ideal bodies.

The term "eugenics" was coined by Sir Francis Galton, a British scientist who developed the theories of evolution and natural selection made famous by his cousin Charles Darwin. By taking a statistical approach to the study of heredity, Galton inspired a social movement aimed at improving the genetic gene pool (what he referred to as "germ plasm") through "selective breeding."²⁹ This end was most often sought through two means: "positive eugenics," which promoted higher rates of fertility among the most socially and physically able members of society, and "negative eugenics," which sought to improve the gene pool through the restriction, segregation, or elimination of undesirable traits of the "unfit," including the "feeble-minded," insane, poor, and terminally ill. Rarely applied neutrally, these measures carried out a broad range of policies that cut across the ideological and political spectrum. Eugenics influenced a host of progressive reforms, including the development of sex education, the legalization of birth control, labor reform, and women's suffrage. However, eugenic theories also advanced discriminatory

attitudes and policies based on race, ethnicity, class, and sex. For instance, it provided a “scientific” rationale for sterilization programs and anti-immigration policies. The most extreme manifestation of negative eugenics was the Nazi Party’s “Final Solution,” a program that justified involuntary sterilization and euthanasia of the mentally retarded and terminally ill, and, subsequently, the systematic extermination of Jews, blacks, and homosexuals in order to promote the “Master” Aryan race. As its genocidal implications became painfully clear in the aftermath of the Holocaust, the international eugenics movement lost its momentum.

In the United States, the eugenics movement gained momentum at the turn of the century through the establishment of scholarly organizations and research institutes. Three of the most influential centers of eugenics research, publishing, and teaching were the American Breeders’ Association, which was founded in 1903 and published *American Breeders Magazine* (later, the *Journal of Heredity*); the Eugenics Record Office, which opened in 1919 in Cold Spring Harbor, New York; and the American Eugenics Society, which formed in 1922 in New Haven, Connecticut, and counted among its members J. P. Morgan, Miss E. B. Scripps, and Dr. John Harvey Kellogg, who delivered the welcoming address to the First National Conference on Race Betterment in January 1914.³⁰ With financial support from philanthropic organizations such as the Carnegie Institute, eugenics research was conducted at leading universities, including Yale, Harvard, Columbia, and Stanford.³¹ Eugenics also found an influential spokesman in former US president Theodore Roosevelt, whose 1914 article “Twisted Eugenics” warned against the threats of “race deterioration.”³² Ideas about “race betterment” were disseminated to the American masses by “combining entertainment with art and education with recreation” via “better baby” contests and hygiene exhibitions at public fairgrounds.³³ For example, the Eugenics Record Office trained young eugenicists to perform field studies and gather information for the institute’s degeneracy studies. In 1913, one of its first tasks was to write a play titled *Acquired or Inherited?*, a “eugenical comedy in four acts.”³⁴ In 1913, Wisconsin was the first of thirty-five states that eventually adopted eugenic marriage legislation. States began to require that couples earn marriage certificates based on successful completion of medical exams, which often included tests for sexually transmitted diseases.³⁵ It was in this context of marriage reform that Shawn and St. Denis wed.

Despite the public fascination with eugenics, especially in the year leading to their marriage, Shawn and St. Denis initially rejected their eugenic status

in an interview with the *San Francisco Bulletin*. “Eugenics was not our motive when we married. Was it, Ted?” St. Denis led.” Shawn nodded in agreement, then added: “Of course, if it turns out that way we would be delighted.”³⁶ Though they understood their union in terms of religion and not science, they eventually welcomed the association with eugenics if it meant helping the public to better understand their art. The burden of their eugenic promise infiltrated the way they understood their unconventional relationship as well. Writing to Shawn, St. Denis described how their life would lead them to create a type of eugenic art that brought faith and science together:

I go back not naturally to your first long letter about your tragically starved state—sensationally and emotionally and I agree to its right to be satisfied—you are so constituted that it throws your whole being out of harmony—when your need for joy in sensation is denied—it may be that it is the urge of unborn children crying to be born—that gives us this longing for delight—it doubtless is—yet it is equally plain to me that we are endowed with the capacity to born other children—other forms of creation = art + science and labors of all kinds—and that or these we need also the joy of conception.³⁷

Almost immediately following the spate of articles declaring their marriage an “interesting experiment in eugenics,” St. Denis and Shawn began adopting the language of eugenics to promote their artistic vision, namely, that dancing was a means toward attaining social and physical health. This much reflected in the title of an article St. Denis and Shawn published in *Mercury*: “Dancing Real Factor in Developing Strong and Virile Race of Men.”

Following the tour, Shawn and St. Denis set out to establish a school in Los Angeles so that they could fulfill their eugenic promise—or as St. Denis wrote so “that parentage which it was our destiny to achieve began to gestate.” “The School” invaded most of their underlying thoughts as they completed the tour. As with all matters in their “experimenting relationship” they had to negotiate all the details of their personal and professional lives, including the name of this venture. To bolster ticket sales in each city, St. Denis was routinely roped into various marketing gimmicks. In Houston, Texas, for example, she was asked to auction bales of cotton, the proceeds from which were to be donated to a local charity. In Portland, Oregon, a theater manager organized a competition to rename *The St. Denis Mazurka*, a dance that meant

to capture the excitement generated from the popular *Pavlova Mazurka*. (See Figure 2.4.) Reportedly, over 300 Portlandians submitted an entry. The selection committee (including two local dancing teachers) selected the offering of a young girl named Miss Margaret Ayer who suggested the title *Denishawn Rose Mazurka*. If her innovative contraction of the artists' last names were not enough, her reference to "The Rose" City, an emblem of Portland, tipped the scale in her favor.



Figure 2.4. Ted Shawn and Ruth St. Denis in *St. Denis Mazurka* (1915). Photograph by Hartsook. Denishawn Collection. Courtesy of the Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library.

Long gone from Portland, St. Denis and Shawn received word of the winning title in San Francisco during the final days of the first tour. The “Denishawn” name came just as they were plotting to settle on the West Coast with a school. It was an ideal name for the school, though St. Denis insisted on a qualification: “Ruth St. Denis School of the Dance and Its Related Arts.” Indeed, nearly nine months from their wedding night, the Denishawn School opened its doors.

Birth of a Dancing Nation, 1915–1917

The Denishawn School was established in the spring of 1915 at the Parkinson Estate, a craft house that sat high above the intersection of Sixth and St. Paul Streets in Los Angeles. The house accommodated a few residential students, but the first cohort of Denishawn students were local young women, mostly former students of Shawn’s, who paid the \$1 daily rate, which covered class, lunch, and a lecture. All activities took place within the walled-in grounds of terraced lawns and eucalyptus trees. A 40' x 80' dancing platform with a gabled roof was erected to serve as an outdoor studio; this turned out to be a far better alternative than the original idea, which was to conduct class on the lawn. (See Figure 2.5.) The house also had a small pool, where students cooled off after hours of dancing under the intense summer sun, and a spacious living room for private lessons in the afternoon for those with professional ambitions. In brochures and interviews, Shawn and St. Denis boasted that the property was ideally situated in relative isolation but a short walk to the shopping district; like the dances they created there, Denishawn house was idyllic yet never too far from the commercial path.

Shawn launched a recruiting campaign directed at dance teachers and exhibition dancers. He printed brochures about the school’s philosophy and curriculum, promising that within two lessons students would master the *St. Denis Mazurka*, “the Shawn step,” the barcarolle, and the Hawaiian hesitation. He also advertised private lessons for children at \$5 per hour, as well as \$1 open classes in the late afternoon “for mothers and Club Women” and another for “business women and older school girls.” Evening options included a class for “young women who are employed during the day” and an evening men’s class. The brochure also advertised Shawn’s services as a talent agent to place dancing acts in vaudeville. The school hosted its first Friday night supper dance on March 28, hosted by a roster of patronesses followed



Figure 2.5. Tented dancing platform at the Denishawn School, 600 St. Paul Street, Los Angeles, California. 1916. Photograph by Putnam and Valentine. Courtesy of the Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library.

by a full day of classes the next day. Shawn hired a capable secretary he had known from his days at the water department to help market the school and collect tuition in a cigar box.

Shawn was the main instructor. Each morning for an hour and a half to two hours he led students in stretching and breathing exercises, a ballet barre, lessons derived from Delsarte and Duncan, national and folk dances, and sometimes unspecified “experimental exercises.” Shawn also lectured to aspiring young artists about dance as a profession and art. St. Denis would join for the last hour to teach an Oriental dance or a “silent dance” (what she called dancing with percussion only). Shawn was proud of the curricular inclusivity: “This was the summer of 1915, and practically every important principle of movement was in use at Denishawn that summer, a curriculum that the ‘modern’ German school claimed to have discovered and first promulgated five to ten years later.”

For publicity purposes, Shawn lured cameramen to the property with the promise of capturing his young students prancing about in bathing suits.

He often repeated the rumor that there was a heavy uptick in rental fees for the apartments in the building that faced the Denishawn property. Those peeping Toms, as well as the entire Denishawn enterprise, were lampooned in a large cartoon published in the *Los Angeles Record*. (See Figure 2.6.) The sendup depicts Denishawn students as society matrons in search of their missing figures or blushing maidens anxious to acquire a few athletic



Figure 2.6. "Men are barred from this Modern Garden of Eden." Satirical cartoon of the Denishawn School. *L.A. Record*, May 29, 1915. Denishawn Scrapbook, vol. 3. Courtesy of the Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library.

curves while their husbands crowd on the neighboring rooftops, desperate to find out what their wives and daughters were doing in the “Adamless,” “modern” garden of Eden. Drawn from the point of view of a spy who was crouched just beyond the estate walls, the cartoon also points out the hypocrisy that Denishawn’s “back-to-nature beauty dancing” was accompanied by the modern technology of the Victrola. The press struggled to understand Denishawn and its pretenses—or more nearly, its boldness to blur the lines between the stage and real life. It might be said that the Denishawn student’s most rigorous training was in imagination and audacity. That is not to say that looking exotic and natural was only a matter of the mind. Maintaining one’s appearance also required tremendous talent and resources. Perhaps the best example of the Denishawn dissonance is symbolized by its most distinctive resident, a peacock that Shawn had given to St. Denis as a first wedding anniversary gift. (She gifted Shawn an opal wedding ring, a family heirloom.) Though meant to convey a luxurious exoticism, the peacock was a costly pet, requiring Shawn to spend several days building a cage large enough to contain it. (At first he did not believe that peacocks could fly.) Later that summer, the peacock escaped, forcing Shawn to scale rooftops over a mile from the Denishawn house. Having failed to catch the peacock, he entrusted a twelve-year-old boy with capturing the bird, for which Shawn paid him a dollar.

It is possible to get a glimpse of what those peering neighbors might have seen thanks to an extant three-minute film of Denishawn from the summer of 1916.³⁸ The film leads the viewer onto the grounds, following a group of well-dressed guests, quite likely the patrons of one of the famous supper dances. It then cuts to a scene of young Denishawn students filing in from the dressing room, each pausing before a turbaned servant to disrobe and hand him her kimono. The film also captures a rare instance of St. Denis leading a class, demonstrating a gesture of the arms, as well as Shawn teaching a private lesson to a young girl on pointe. Emphasizing the school’s scholarly aspirations, Shawn sits on the porch with an oversized French costume book. Adding a sense of the glamour and mystery, St. Denis pulls a peacock feather from a vase, while embracing her very own live peacock. The film then captures students cooling off in the pool, a scenario that evokes Mack Sennett’s bathing beauties, which came to the screen in 1915. Although Sennett’s bathing queens were part of his slapstick antics, mostly of lower- and middle-class girls, the Denishawn girl was a socialite or starlet. In the final moment of the film, the Denishawns prepare for an afternoon tea, in respectable formal clothes.

Inasmuch as Shawn promoted Denishawn as a locus of social activity and public interest, it was foremost a center for making serious art and learning. He and St. Denis continued to create work together, though he became increasingly frustrated with how she would turn rehearsals into performances, inviting so many people into the studio that there would be hardly any space to dance. Their effort to create a serious arts school was not entirely lost on the press. By July, the *Los Angeles Herald* pronounced the Denishawn School “An Institution of National Importance” noting that the school was the nation’s only to rival Duncan’s small school outside Paris, the Dalcroze school in Dresden, and the Bolshoi in Moscow. Of course, there already existed several influential dance schools in the United States, though no “great” ones in the estimation of the writer who claimed Denishawn as a tourist destination: “To have been to Los Angeles and not to have visited Denishawn, is not to have seen Los Angeles.”

Denishawn was not the only “institution of national importance” gaining notoriety in Los Angeles. A banner year for both the art of dance and film, 1915 saw the establishment of America’s first school dedicated to the development of a national dance, as well as the release of D. W. Griffith’s epic silent film *Birth of a Nation*, starring Denishawn student Lillian Gish. Film producers and directors took notice of Denishawn. From its very first year as a school it established itself as a go-to place for aspiring motion picture stars to study the art of physical expression. D. W. Griffith, who knew Shawn from his tango tea days at the Angelus Hotel, sent over a group of girls to Denishawn twice a week for dance and movement instruction. Among the aspiring starlets were the two co-stars of his film *Lilly and the Rose*, Lillian Gish and Roszika Dolly (of the Dolly Sisters), for whom Shawn created dances for the film. Though Shawn never devoted himself to choreographing for motion pictures, in the ensuing years he would coach dancers, help to create routines for incidental scenes, and even serve as choreographer for several popular and experimental film projects.

As the first summer session at Denishawn in Los Angeles came to a close, Shawn and St. Denis began to concentrate on their upcoming tour arranged by Harry W. Bell. They subleased the Denishawn house to Lillian and Dorothy Gish’s mother who used the space in the early mornings and late evenings for the young ingénues to practice their lessons. (The Denishawn house made a perfect hideaway for Mother Gish to keep her daughters’ careers in film a secret from the rest of the family.) The tour launched at the Mason Opera House in Los Angeles and concluded at the Hudson Theater in New York, where

on January 28, 1906, St. Denis had made history as the first dancer to present a program of solo dances on a Broadway stage. A decade later, St. Denis appeared with Shawn and the first lineup of “Denishawn Dancers,” a select group of eight young women, including Margaret Loomis, the daughter of the owner of the Angelus Hotel in Los Angeles; Carol Dempster, who later became a star in D. W. Griffith’s *Broken Blossoms*; and Florence Andrews, who rechristened herself Florence O’Denishawn when she joined the Ziegfeld Follies. An accomplished ballerina, Sadie Vanderhoff, joined Denishawn in spring 1915 after St. Denis and Shawn saw her perform at a charity ball at the St. Francis Hotel. She studied that first summer at Denishawn and performed as Vanda Hoff, later becoming the main fixture in Brother St. Denis’s vaudeville dance-drama *The Dancing Girl of Delhi*, and after that, the bride to Paul Whiteman, “Broadway’s monarch of jazz.” Claire Niles, a boyish brunette, performed a baseball dance and later appeared in the “Ruth St. Denis Concert Dancers.” Yvonne Sinnard, married but restless, and Chula Mongon were the only two not to go on to “individual fame.” Another key member joined the company along the tour: accompanist Louis Horst. Shawn and St. Denis met the pianist in San Francisco and immediately recognized that he would be an asset to the company. He started as accompanist and within the year was elevated to musical director. In some measure, Horst provided the foundation the company sorely needed when Brother Denis left the company to study engineering at Columbia University. Though he would later come back into the Denishawn fold, he left the company in fine standing. Based on the success of their Hudson Theater appearance, Brother was able to book the company on a fifty-six-week vaudeville tour starting in the spring of 1916 with time off to run the Denishawn School again that summer. Their Hudson Theater concert was a huge success, attracting Meyerfeld of the Orpheum Circuit to come see for himself. He eventually booked them in the Palace Theatre in New York, “the Ultimate Mecca,” where no other performer apart from Sarah Bernhardt had booked a second week. The Denishawn concerts turned away 5,000 people.

The Denishawn vaudeville tour on the Keith circuit coincided with the first US tour of Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes, the avant-garde ballet company. Escaping war-torn Europe, the Ballets Russes set out to bring its modernist dance, music, and art to seventeen American cities. *The Dramatic Mirror* suspected that Keith’s plan was to have Denishawn trail the path of the Ballets Russes. The intense media attention that gave Shawn the opportunity to distinguish Denishawn from the European counterpart in nationalist terms,

even as it resembled and aspired to some of the most distinguishing aesthetic innovations of the Ballets Russes. As the specter of the war gripped the country and in the presence of the foreign artistic behemoth that was Diaghilev, Denishawn was rebranded as a distinctly American enterprise in the pages of national magazines. As US involvement in the war seemed inevitable, Denishawn's nationalist appeal made it possible for the company to resonate with a diverse and wide range of audiences.

Within a span of fifteen months, Shawn's dancing enterprise leaped from the society pages to the features section of diverse and influential publications with national circulations. Perhaps the most surprising of places was the most visible: Shawn and St. Denis landed on the pages of *National Geographic* in April 1916, the month the United States entered the war—in a special photo-essay called “The Land of the Best,” a celebration of the country's “scenic grandeur and unsurpassed natural resources.” The special issue meant to recalibrate the focus on overseas destinations within travel literature and guide books by inspiring readers to marvel at America's own “hallowed and historic spots.” To that end, the issue featured stunning black and white photos of landmark sites (a snowy Capitol Hill, the Brooklyn Bridge, Old Faithful) as well as a panoply of American “types” (the near-extinct cowboy, a Hopi basket maker, a medicine man). At the heart of this photo-essay was a section of color autochromes, the first to appear in *National Geographic*, including two featuring Shawn and St. Denis in poses from their dance *The Garden of Kama*, a dance they had created the year prior. (See Insert Figures 2.7 and 2.8.) The dance took its title and inspiration from a popular 1901 collection of love poems purported to be English translations of Indian and Persian verse, when in fact they were the eroticized lyrics of English poet Adela Florence Nicolson published under a male pseudonym, Laurence Hope, and with the exoticizing drawings by British illustrator Byam Shaw. The book, and the Denishawn dance it inspired, rode the wave of interest created by Richard Francis Burton's English translations of *Arabian Nights* and the *Kama Sutra*. However, that interest does not explain the confounding presence of St. Denis and Shawn in full Orientalist costume in the mythical garden of Indian mythology, nor how their dance fits into a nationalist vision of American life. The Garden of Kama is not quite Yosemite.

Whereas *National Geographic* established Denishawn's place on the American landscape, the April 17, 1917, issue of *Vogue* increased its glamour quotient with a feature on the school directed at young socialites who aspired to a life on the stage.³⁹ “The Education of the Dancer,” attributed to Ruth St.

Denis, celebrated the school's approach to training dancers using the "individuality system," wherein the teacher builds training around each student's physical and kinesthetic strengths and personality, all determined in a "diagnostic lesson" during which a "prescription" is issued for artistic development. Focused on the individual's "original inclination" rather than imitating another, this no-approach approach is described by St. Denis as distinctly American and thus preferable to any imposed foreign system. "The system of training at 'Denishawn' is, paradoxically, to have no system." Individuality was essential not only to Denishawn's artistic mission, but also its marketing strategy, as Shawn sought to attract aspiring performers in need of unique routines to make it in vaudeville. Artistic differentiation was the building block of a career in dance. Though it heralded an inclusive curriculum, Denishawn was not nearly as focused on teaching its students to dance as in teaching them to be dancers.

The *Vogue* article also features photographs and brief accounts of Denishawn's success stories, focusing on the most dramatic transformations made by the Denishawn method. Chief among them was Ada Forman, who arrived at Denishawn "not a tremendously promising young lady," but her training made her suitable for a paying public—and a star in the Marigold Follies in Chicago with Javanese dances created for her by Shawn. Forman is appropriately pictured performing *The Vogue Dance*. In addition to courting charity ball and pageant darlings, Shawn vigorously recruited aspiring film actresses to Denishawn, including Margaret Loomis, who attended both summers of the school. The article explains how, thanks to the Denishawn method, Loomis began to land leading roles with Lasky Studios, giving her access to work she wouldn't otherwise have ever encountered and thus saving her from becoming "morbidly introspective," a hazard of her family's wealth.

As Denishawn gained notoriety, Shawn, too, emerged from behind the veils of St. Denis. He appeared on the cover of two popular magazines, each featuring articles about his vision for dancing for men. The trade magazine the *New York Dramatic Mirror* featured Shawn as the Egyptian god Osiris on its May 6, 1916, cover. (See Figure 2.9.) The following week the same publication ran his "A Defense of the Male Dancer" in which he espoused dance as a "life of work and a science" as opposed to leisure and art, thus positioning himself in contradistinction to the famous Russian ballet star Vaslav Nijinsky who was soon to embark on a fifty city tour of the United States. With one stone, Shawn took aim at both Nijinsky and the European audiences that celebrated him: "[Nijinsky] represents the decadent, the freakish, the feverish.

In Paris, before the war, only the unusual could interest the sex-tired, blasé city. So Nijinsky conquered.”⁴⁰ Shawn lays down the proverbial gauntlet against the Russian dance star’s sexual ambiguity by declaring that “American demands masculinity more than art.” Shawn’s critiques of Nijinsky would escalate over the years especially when Nijinsky encroached on Shawn’s territory of American dance. During his tour of the United States, for example, Nijinsky went to the press with his ideas for creating an American ballet with American set designs and themes based on the writings of Edgar Allan Poe. Shawn retorted by calling Nijinsky “a wild orchid on a rotting log.”⁴¹ Nijinsky was not Shawn’s only target. He increasingly set out to diminish the artistry of women performers as well, such as Gertrude Hoffman (“Never an artist, always an imitator”), Maud Allan (“not a creative artist”), Anna Pavlova, and Adeline Genée (“not creative or original”). In a curious departure from the glowing strains in which he had previously discussed Isadora Duncan, Shawn leveled a serious criticism against the great dancer, a criticism so pernicious that the article’s author would dare not repeat Shawn’s explanation for how “she failed as a dancer.” Another writer less concerned about slander published Shawn’s claim that “Isadora gave us style but no great dances.”

As Shawn tried to muscle his way into the tight circle of international dance elites, he also began to display his physique in the pages of proto-muscle and fitness magazines. Shawn appeared on the cover of the July 1917 issue of *Physical Culture*, a magazine created by Bernarr Macfadden, a self-branded “kinesitherapist” or “teacher of higher physical culture” who trains in “the use of movements in the cure of disease.” The unofficial magazine of the eugenics movement, *Physical Culture* published its first issue in March 1899 and grew to sell close to 50 million copies between the two world wars. MacFadden’s publication empire grew and to this day is the publisher of record for *Dance Magazine*.

For the cover, Shawn posed regally, barefoot and bare-chested, in a pair of floral bikini briefs and a red cape. (See Figure 2.10.) The accompanying article “Dancing for Men” offers a pithy yet questionable history of dance that chastises the European court for feminizing dance. To counter that history, Shawn extols the virtues of the ancient all-male Pyrrhic dance and includes a sidebar of exercises along with twenty-four bars of music—an excerpt from the *Denishawn Schottische*—so that a man could perform the routine at home to achieve Shawn’s physique. Shawn even suggests that soldiers would benefit from dance training, a comment that, like the magazine’s “War Bread for America” coverline, signals the ongoing war crisis. It was a telling comment,

Drama—Vaudeville—Motion Pictures

THE NEW YORK
**DRAMATIC
MIRROR**

MAY 6, 1916

PRICE TEN CENTS



TED SHAWN
As Osiris in Egyptian Ballet with Ruth St. Denis

From copyright photo by Ira L. Hill, N. Y.

The Theater in All Its Branches

Figure 2.9. Ted Shawn on the cover of the *Dramatic Mirror*, May 6, 1916.
Photograph by Ira L. Hill.

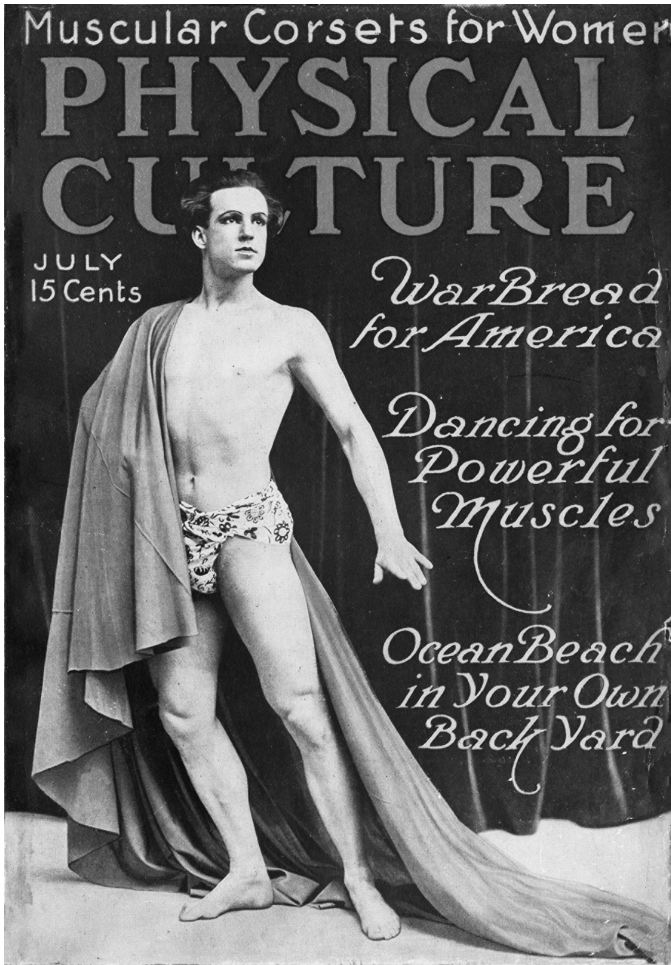


Figure 2.10. Ted Shawn on the cover of *Physical Culture*, July 1917.

seeing that Shawn himself would enlist within months of the magazine's publication.

When Denishawn completed its first vaudeville tour and returned to Los Angeles in summer 1916, it was ready for its second summer school session. Students from across the country were successfully recruited via features and ads in *Harper's* and *Vogue*. Among the new students was a twenty-two-year-old Martha Graham. Horst recalled accompanying her first lesson with St. Denis. Private lessons with St. Denis cost \$50 and included two complete dances lessons as well as costume designs.

Shawn recalled saying to Graham, “‘You have no money for private lessons, but I am so interested. I still believe that we can do something with this. I want to do this on my own. I will work with you, give you all the time I can. I’m interested in seeing what we can bring out of this.’ So we did work together. It came along.”⁴²

Other new personalities at the school that summer included a young sculptor named Allan Clark. A student at the Art Institute of Chicago, Clark wanted to specialize in moving figures. Shawn convinced him that if he wanted to specialize in dancers, he would need to learn to dance himself, so Clark left school for Los Angeles. The two became close friends. At some point, Shawn and Allan Clark spent a few days at “The Honeysuckle Court” at Laguna Cliffs. Clark’s sculpture of Shawn was one of Shawn’s prized possessions.

The highlight of the 1916 season was the historic appearance of Shawn and St. Denis in a pageant at the Greek Theatre at the University of California at Berkeley, to an audience of 10,000 to 12,000 people. A gift from publishing magnate William Randolph Hearst, the Greek Theatre had presented theatrical stars like Sarah Bernhardt and Maude Adams, but never before had the venue hosted a dance performance. A Berkeley English professor named William Dallam Armes encouraged the University Trustees to extend an invitation to Ruth St. Denis, which they did. St. Denis was not unfamiliar with the pageant circuit, herself appearing in a famous pageant for Louis C. Tiffany in New York City. As one reporter put it: “America is masque-mad and pageant crazy.” Pageantry in the early 1900 focused on “process over product” to address unique local community goals. Shawn’s pageants were spectacles but refused the reformist ideology embedded in contemporary pageantry. For this occasion, Shawn and St. Denis created a hybrid performance they called a “dance-pageant.”

It was an arduous three-week undertaking. In addition to composing, teaching, and rehearsing the dances, Shawn had to oversee the sets and costumes, many of which he created himself. Plus, he had to manage a cast of forty performers from Los Angeles and over a hundred more extras from the student body of the university. On top of all that, Shawn underwent massive dental work right before the dance-pageant and was in excruciating pain.

To court the attention of newspaper photographers, Shawn held fully costumed “rehearsals” in public venues throughout the Los Angeles area. He rehearsed the Egyptian section on the beach, transforming the Pacific Ocean into the banks of the Nile. The group practiced their Indian nautch dances on

the Sierras standing in for the Himalayas. And they reviewed Greek dances on the San Gabriel Mountains, with Mount Lowe standing in for Mount Olympus. For this particular rehearsal, they were sponsored by the Hupp Motor Company, whose popular automobile conspicuously shows up in all the press photographs, including a provocatively anachronistic juxtaposition of Denishawn dancers processing as if in an ancient frieze in the background of a photo of the modern Hupmobile. (See Figure 2.11.)



Figure 2.11. Denishawn Dancers in Automobile Feature. *Los Angeles Examiner*, June 17, 1917. Denishawn Scrapbook, vol. 2. Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library.

A Dance-Pageant of Egypt, Greece, and India (or *The Life and After-life of Greece, India, and Egypt*) premiered at the Greek Theatre on the evening of July 29, 1916. By framing the dance-pageant as a representation of both life and the afterlife in three great ancient civilizations (on the Styx, Nile, and Ganges), Shawn and St. Denis opened up possibilities to move between ethnographic realism and spirited mythic exploration, as well as to present dance as an expression of both social science and religion. (See Insert Figure 2.12.) The pageant opened with a duet by St. Denis and Shawn called *Tillers of the Soil*, a noble depiction of physical labor exerted by a couple who plow and sow their land. One critic noted: “The labor is glorified as to take on new meaning.” It was a solemn and restrained way to open a program that would celebrate the highly eccentric customs and rites of the ancient world.

The Greek section included all manner of ancient dance—veil dances, urn dances, a Pyrrhic dance, and a bacchanal. It even featured a compressed dramatization of the Orpheus and Eurydice myth featuring Shawn, Margaret Loomis, and three children, set to music by Massenet and Ada de Lachau and arranged by Louis Horst. *Pyrrhic Dance* was for all-men dancers, including Arthur Buruel, with whom Shawn had a sexual tryst when he had lived in Los Angeles. One critic noted that this dance for men received the greatest response, triggering an encore, which Shawn modestly denied.

In the Indian section of the pageant, Shawn performed the role of a hunter slain by his enemies, then, set to the sounds of Wagnerian Fire Music, cremated on a funeral pyre with St. Denis coming on to perform *suttee*, the custom of a widow immolating herself on the pyre. Then, a snake charmer (played by Edward Kuster) played a flute, inciting six young women to emerge from baskets and perform a writhing and slithering dance. One critic highlighted the importance of the all-men dances in the Hindu and Greek sections, noting this as a valuable contribution (and perhaps more sophisticated as it required a level of imagination): “If women are going to vote, why under the sun should men not dance?”⁴³

The dance-pageant was an unqualified success for Shawn, who enjoyed his largest audiences to date, not only in Berkeley but in encore productions in San Diego on the following Saturday evening (August 5) and before 4,000 people at the original Shrine Auditorium in Los Angeles (September 15)—a “Farewell to LA” performance before they headed off on a thirty-six-week tour.⁴⁴ It generated enough interest and was enough of a society event to fill seats in theaters across America with audiences eager to catch a glimpse into the world of pageants that was once reserved for the likes of Tiffany and

Hearst. The dance-pageant was also an artistic coup in that it required both St. Denis and Shawn to venture beyond creating solo and partner dances into choreographing for groups. The many short ensemble dances they composed for the dance-pageant provided content for Denishawn programs for years to come. Moreover, the experience of performing to the accompaniment of a forty-piece orchestra opened the door for Denishawn to enter the world of orchestral music (even though the musicians who performed for the dance-pageant were displeased by having to perform for dancers.)

The wholesome Denishawn image displayed in the pages of newspapers and magazines was a welcomed relief from the relentless headlines reporting devastating war activity throughout Europe. Denishawn saw its enrollment swell, requiring Shawn to find a new home for its operations. On June 11, 1917, the second Denishawn School opened its doors for its third summer program, this time in a residence of three connected multi-story buildings at 616 S. Alvarado Street facing Westlake Park (now MacArthur Park). (See Figure 2.13.) The new school boasted larger dormitories, several rehearsal floors, and a theater, the first-ever dedicated to dance. A tented dancing platform placed over a tennis court served as the open-air Denishawn Dance

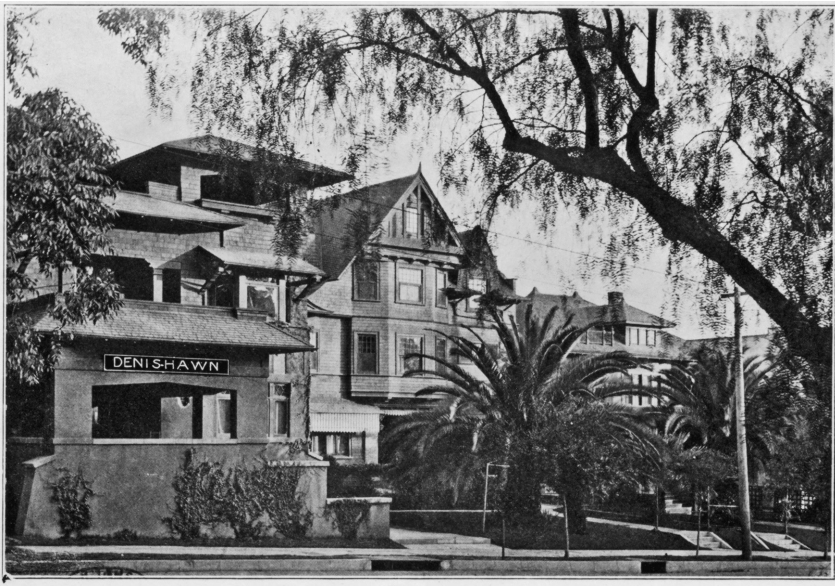


Figure 2.13. Second Denishawn School, Westlake Park, Los Angeles, Summer 1918.

Theater, which seated 400 people. The inaugural performance series in the new theater attracted socialites and celebrities, which led to coverage of their attendance in the *Hollywood Inquirer*. The first was a benefit for the Red Cross.

The curriculum, program, and faculty were also expanded to match Shawn's grander vision for the school. The twelve-week semester cost \$500 and included private lessons with St. Denis, room and board, lectures, and craft arts (set design, costume design, prop design) under the supervision of a master craftsman as well as visiting sculptors, photographers, and painters of note. The school offered a special course in Synthetic Stagecraft taught by Maxwell Armfield (husband of the novelist Constance Smedley). Henrietta Hovey, an exponent of the Delsarte method, also joined the faculty to teach "the motion and science of gesture." Hovey had seen Shawn perform in Los Angeles and approached him backstage to both compliment and scold: "Young man there was once you walked across the stage like a God—as for the rest of what you did—rot!" Shawn began to take private lessons with her and quickly realized the many similarities between the principles and exercises she taught under the rubric of Delsarte and the "Uni-Trinianism" of Mary Perry King and Bliss Carman. This was not a coincidence; Shawn learned that King was a former pupil of Hovey's. The lessons in Delsarte method transformed Shawn's approach to choreography, offering him a theory for harmonizing mind and body. Also on the roster was Miss Marion Kappes, who had received her training from the Dalcroze Institute in Hellerau and studied Eurhythmics, a highly physical approach to music training, with Émile Jaques-Dalcroze himself. The Denishawn brochure listed supporters and other pupils of the Dalcroze method, among them Mark Twain and William Butler Yeats.

The brochure boasted the acquisition of motion pictures of "real native dancing" from Burton Holmes (1870–1958), the "World's Most Famous Traveler." Famous for "bringing the world home," Holmes made excursions into the exotic, unknown, and hard-to-reach corners of the world, later incorporating his hand-painted photographs on glass slides and motion pictures of his travels into lecture presentations he called "travelogues." Many of Holmes's motion pictures are the first ever taken in certain countries, several including examples of dance. Shawn purchased some of those films with dances from Malaysia, Korea, Java, Spain, and beyond. Holmes's films signaled an important distinction between Denishawn and other schools, or at least it made that impression upon young dancers, including new student

Doris Humphrey. In fact, in her autobiography Humphrey notes that the brochure announcing the Holmes films was one of the reasons she decided to study at Denishawn.

At the outset of the summer of 1917, the plan was for the Denishawn School to run a thirty-six-week course starting in September and continue with its performance series, while the company would embark on a thirty-week tour starting in October. Despite the success of the summer program and the great exposure from the press, the war negatively impacted their touring prospects. St. Denis implausibly announced to the press her intention to take a hiatus from performing to focus on the development of the school, a clear signal that there was no work. The suggestion that St. Denis would choose teaching over performing was so incredible that rumors spread that she might be pregnant.

"I am not going to be a Mother!" St. Denis protested, then defended her right to take a break from the stage."⁴⁵ To affirm her devotion to the school, she disclosed her campaign to raise \$500,000 to purchase a twenty-acre property to form an artist's colony with an amphitheater and swimming pool. Whatever her intentions were for making these public proclamations about her life and career, St. Denis was privately hoping for a way out of the business. In her diaries she expressed that she wanted Shawn to finish his college degree, while she minded the school.

Drills and Demonstrations, 1917–1918

In October 1916, Shawn went public with an idea for composing a dance liturgy, by which he meant performing a full church service entirely in movement. To the local papers, he likened the idea to the popular "rousing tent services" conducted by Billy Sunday "the baseball evangelist." The most popular proponent of Muscular Christianity in the United States, Sunday, like Shawn, had suffered from childhood frailty and had rebuilt his body as an athlete for Christ.⁴⁶ Shawn spoke of the idea as a way for him to heed his original calling to be a minister. A dance liturgy would also nicely balance a Denishawn program, tempering St. Denis's Buddhist and Hindu dances with a sobering dose of Christianity. He contextualized the concept of a dancing service by explaining that dancing was part of the Christian liturgy until the dawn of asceticism in the Middle Ages or Dark Ages when beauty and pleasure were condemned, then elaborated a larger vision for reestablishing

the church liturgy, complete with a photo of himself in a religious vestment with arms open.

By the fall of 1917, this idea had evolved and with meager prospects for touring, Shawn took advantage of the lull in his schedule to deliver a “devotional dance service.” By this time, his idea had begun to focus on a liturgy that demonstrated ideas of Christian Science. In fact, the press surrounding his dance liturgy briefly touched on the news that he and St. Denis had joined the Christian Scientists because of its emphasis on happiness. Shawn’s liturgy offered “reverent, suitable movements to express all of the subtle relations between man and Maker” and required a fully responsive congregation in “vital expressive motion” rather than the usual perfunctory involvement of congregations.

The liturgy premiered on September 18, 1917, at the Scottish Rite Auditorium in San Francisco, to an audience of 300 women and a sprinkling of men, by one reporter’s estimation. The performance started with an “invocation” from the Reverend Henry Frank, leader of the First Interdenominational Church, who received criticism for his support of the event. The choreography mimicked a complete service: an opening prayer, the twenty-third psalm, a hymn, the Doxology, the Gloria, a sermon, and a benediction. The Reverend Frank came in at intervals to explain the program, though a skeptical attendee thought the prayer seemed addressed to Delsarte rather than to the Lord. Most of Shawn’s movement was pantomimic: breaking free from shackles (which inspired humorous comparisons with Houdini), walking in the desert, and listening to a choir of invisible angels.

News of Shawn’s unorthodox liturgy made front-page news in San Francisco in an article about local clergymen’s opinion of religious dancing (or at least dancing in church) as a “new method of worship.” Apparently, a reporter asked the clergymen if they would attend the liturgy. Most responded with indifference, though a few vehemently opposed the idea, calling it a “sacrilege” that threatened to turn “a church into a dancehall.” Another prepared to sermonize against it, using Shawn’s performance as an occasion to emphasize that dancing might be a sign of worldliness but not godliness. The press even solicited a response from the Reverend Dr. Christian F. Reisner, the theatrically inclined minister from Denver who initially inspired Shawn to join the clergy. Reisner responded ambivalently, calling Shawn a “dreamer” who was “mistaken about the relationship between dancing and church.”

Shawn returned to his idea of a dance liturgy several times throughout his career. When he performed parts of the liturgy in his theatrical program in 1921, he received even greater praise, with critics clamoring that audiences were held “spellbound by the dignity and exaltation of the service.” With greater praise came fiercer criticism from both the clergy and the press. The performance even drew an informal protest at the First Methodist and Congregational churches in Riverside, California, which led to a resolution to ban all “sacrilegious entertainment.” At least one of the congregants, however, came to Shawn’s defense by writing a letter to the editor of the local newspaper to point out that the Doxology, Psalms, and Gloria have been represented in music and art literature, and thus asked “why not dance?”⁴⁷ In time, Shawn effectively transformed the negative press, protests, and bans into grounds for his artistic martyrdom: “You know the man who translated the Bible into the English language was unceremoniously burned at the stake, so under the circumstances, I feel lucky that I wasn’t tarred and feathered at least.”⁴⁸

Throughout the fall of 1917, Shawn volunteered as a Four-Minute Man, part of an effort established by President Woodrow Wilson to deliver brief pro-war messages to the public. He also participated in benefit performances that raised thousands of dollars for the Red Cross. Several were performed at Camp Kearny, a mobilization and training camp near San Diego, one of the thirty-two new military bases created in 1917, the same year that the Selective Service Act was implemented, another sign of the size the military would need to achieve in order to win the war overseas. Shawn, twenty-six, realized he would eventually be drafted from the stage to one of the camps. He weighed the possible benefits of enlisting versus getting drafted, namely, the possibility that he would be able to get transferred to the unit of his choosing, preferably the nearby Kearny, which would make it possible for him to remain close to Denishawn operations. In December 1917, he enlisted and petitioned the general to be stationed at Kearny in the ambulance corp with which he had become familiar. He wrote: “I pictured myself, I guess, a sort of male Florence Nightingale, putting the cool hand on the fevered brow—a He-angel of mercy.”⁴⁹ Shawn was all too eager to enlist in a “constructive rather than destructive” branch of the army. Plus, he genuinely liked the men at Kearny and looked forward to the possibility of living alongside them.

Always pragmatic, before heading to Camp Kearny Shawn took out an insurance policy for St. Denis and an additional government insurance policy for \$10,000, which would have left her \$35,000 in case of his death. He also

quickened his pace on completing a manuscript that became *Pioneer & Prophet*, a two-volume book dedicated to the art and career of Ruth St. Denis. The idea for the book originated in 1915 when he found bundles of clippings in St. Denis's home on 89th Street in New York, which he immediately organized into scrapbooks. He acted on the idea upon the publication of Arnold Genthe's *The Book of the Dance* (1920), which featured the photographer's portraits of dancers with "modern dance tendencies," including St. Denis, as well as Isadora Duncan, Maud Allan, Loïe Fuller, and Anna Pavlova. *Pioneer & Prophet* was a labor of love. It was also an insurance policy of sorts, as Shawn was counting on its proceeds to support his wife should he not return from war.

His concern for St. Denis's welfare intensified when on December 4, 1917, St. Denis's seventy-year-old father Thomas Dennis died. A Civil War veteran, he was buried at Soldier's Home. During the week of her father's death, St. Denis gave birth to a new idea while watching Isadora Duncan dance at the Shubert Theater on December 7, 1918, in Los Angeles. She coined the term "music visualization"—a type of dance she would later define as "the scientific translation into bodily action of rhythmic, melodic and harmonic structure of a musical composition, without intention in any way to 'interpret' or reveal any hidden meaning apprehended by the dancer."⁵⁰ Shawn, too, began to experiment with composing dances wherein the movement faithfully followed the musical dynamics. He wrote to St. Denis about his progress on creating a music visualization piece to a Bach "Two-Part Invention" and the Denishawn students' excitement for it. He admitted that during working hours, he missed Louis Horst more than St. Denis. He had to postpone his work on the music visualizations until after the war. In the meantime, he prepared the school for his eventual absence; he planned for it to run through the year at a profit, with Shawn teaching whenever possible to give students their money's worth.

Before he left for Kearny, Shawn indulged in leisurely lunches planning future projects with Arthur Buruel and Allan Clark and swimming lessons with surfer Vance Veith. He also began to search for a new house where he and St. Denis could nest after the war.

The night before he left for Kearny, the faculty and staff at the school threw him a farewell party. "I didn't know I was so loved as tonight," he wrote to St. Denis.⁵¹ Unwilling to sit idle as Shawn began military training, St. Denis decided to join the war effort by launching a vaudeville tour to raise money for the Liberty bonds.

On February 1, 1918, Shawn arrived at the 158th Ambulance Company, 115th Sanitary Train at Camp Kearny near San Diego. The press had a field day reporting that the “Most Handsome Man” who had become famous performing ancient martial dances from far off places was now wearing fatigues for the United States while his wife hit the road to raise money. The press exaggerated the circumstances with headlines such as “Ruth St. Denis Dances Husband’s Composition, While He Fights.” Of course, St. Denis did not actually perform any of Shawn’s dances on that tour (or any tour for that matter) nor did Shawn ever “fight” or even see a battlefield.

Shawn and St. Denis maintained a near-daily correspondence during his time at Kearny; these letters convey his relative easy adaptation to military life, much of which he genuinely enjoyed. He was proud to realize that he was able to match if not exceed many of the other soldiers in terms of physical strength and endurance when performing military drills, pouring concrete, or carrying sacks of potatoes. He found pleasure even in marching in line formation for over two hours in the oppressive heat and in full uniform. Shawn took it as a lesson in choreography: “The ultimate aim of this training is a body which responds immediately to the orders of the brain and handles itself with the least waste and jar under all circumstances.” He also enjoyed the camaraderie and fraternity he found with other soldiers, even with a twenty-two-year-old illiterate bohemian man who called himself “Nigger Jensen.” Shawn tried to justify his unlikely new friendship by explaining how Jensen was “a real person—with a real solid, substantial, character and a most likable personality and he has been good to me.”⁵² He assured St. Denis that his developing friendship with Jensen would not be a repeat of his relationship with “Frank Somebody” that turned sexual: “It is not a ‘Frank’ case at all. Divine Love always has met and always will meet. Perhaps the right real man friend will come in Jensen.” Jensen would go on to become an important person to Shawn, someone who years later would perform in one of his most successful vaudeville ventures. By every measure, Shawn seemed to be thriving. He bragged: “Everyone here seems ecstatic over me in uniform—say I look marvelous, ten years younger—well rested beyond belief. This whole thing has been a blessed demonstration.”

By “demonstration,” Shawn was referring to his war experience using a favorite term of Christian Science founder Mary Baker Eddy to indicate a human act or expression that affirms belief in Divine Love. Shawn’s letters to St. Denis were full of language and principles of Christian Science—or what they referred to as “CS.” They were even written on stationery from the

Christian Science Camp Welfare Room, a beautiful space on the main street in San Diego that he had discovered during his first week at Camp Kearny.

Shawn was initially exposed to Christian Science years earlier from a woman he met in the worker's camp in Colorado. When he arrived in New York from California, before his marriage to St. Denis, he sought out more instruction from Lillian Cox, a once highly regarded member of the CS organization who had since relinquished her post as Second Reader at the Fifth Church. A strong, individual, progressive soul, Cox left the organization when she divorced her first husband Charles Charter, an unorthodox decision for a woman of her time. She eventually remarried, this time to Eugene R. Cox, chairman of the Publication Committee for the Christian Science Church, but remained a force of CS outside the fray. Shawn had met Cox before he married St. Denis, and she fast became his spiritual guide and teacher and remained so for many years. He consulted Cox a year earlier when he suggested a break from his Methodist upbringing to create a complete ballet based on the principles of Christian Science (CS). Cox helped Shawn use CS to guide his artistic vision.

For Shawn and St. Denis, the CS language of Spirit, Divine, Truth was a vehicle for expressing their love. He even addressed his wife as "My T-Ruth." They applied the CS belief that thought and prayer could correct the physical, sensual, material existence and desire to understand their interpersonal relationship and to give religious significance to their sexual attraction or lack thereof. CS offered a practical means to becoming more in the likeness of God. It emphasized a technique for becoming more godly, "a system of self-help domestic healing or as a religion of private contemplation."⁵³ For St. Denis, CS founder Eddy was a powerful feminist role model, especially as she privileged women's experience as a form of spiritual knowledge over the law of man. CS was a system that valued the creative power of thought and meditation over indoctrination, a "technique" that affined with Denishawn's own individuality system.

Before too long, Shawn had introduced CS to several soldiers. And at their request, he started to lead lessons, first with four and then six per week. When Jensen suffered from a very bad stomach ulcer that the doctor in the base could not readily heal, Shawn performed a faith healing and cured him. News of Shawn's healing powers brought more followers to help him to build a CS reading room at Kearny despite the deep antagonism from military brass. St. Denis sent him a copy of "First Church and Miscellany" for the library.

Woven throughout their exchanges about their shared devotion to divine concerns of Spirit and Truth were knotty threads concerning matters of flesh and sex. Shawn told St. Denis that the sexual frustration he experienced in the marriage was somehow resolved by the “primal manliness” of military life:

I am going to speak of something inside which I am sure will interest you. You know how constantly my mind has been filled with sex in the past—sometimes to a torturing degree. Well, in the past three weeks I have thought less and felt less in this direction than any similar three weeks in over ten years. This is no emasculation but open air, hard work, a full brain, and a total lack of aesthetic surroundings.⁵⁴

Less than a month later, he wrote St. Denis with an altogether different portrait of military life. Specifically, he described to her a traumatic dream he had involving other soldiers subjecting him to sexual images from which he needed St. Denis’s protection:

A fellow showed me some rotten, dirty pictures—the vilest things I have ever seen—beyond my powers of imagination. I felt like someone had thrown much all over my ideals of body, sex and all things sacred and beautiful. I wanted you to pick me up and wash me clean—but I had to do it myself—so I did.

This herding together of these thousands of men is an unnatural condition and things [abhorrent] are bound to develop under these circumstances so it behooves me to stand guard at portals of thought.⁵⁵

Shawn’s upsetting dream—about a man forcing him to witness disturbing sexual images that shattered his sense of self—came at a time when he had rekindled his relationship with Frank “Something”—a man with whom he had had an affair years earlier. Frank “Something” was Frank Losee, a movie actor Shawn had met when he first moved to Los Angeles from Denver. He reconnected with Lossee when he returned to Los Angeles, despite St. Denis’s skepticism about Shawn’s inviting him back into his life—now theirs. She especially was upset by the idea that Shawn invited Lossee to board at Denishawn, sympathetic to the fact that his mother was terminally ill. Shawn ruminated on the irony that Lossee would be living at their marriage home, especially given that Shawn’s affair with Frank was the cause of one of their first marital woes: “Truly this is a queer world.”⁵⁶

St. Denis did not tolerate the confession well. She wrote directly to Lossee, diagnosing his spiritual problems and detailing CS healing lessons she suggested he perform. To Shawn, she wrote hurtful responses about her desire to be independent from him both artistically and romantically. Her frankness tortured Shawn. Her explicit talk of her other romantic interests, her disparaging tirades against the institution of marriage, her flippantly entertaining the thought of bearing children were crushing to Shawn and she knew it. She shouldered her own guilt for finding herself in a failing marriage. St. Denis seemed to need the space to prove to herself that she could survive on her own, especially without her recently deceased father, her married brother, or even Belasco. With Shawn at Kearny, she now had the opportunity to take the risk. To the public eye, they were an ideal American couple—St. Denis was using her art to raise money for the war effort, Shawn at the army base protecting the freedom they enjoyed as artists. Within months, they were unraveling, jealous over the return of Shawn's male lover and St. Denis's return to her status of solo performer. Shawn knew the only way to salvage the marriage—and Denishawn—was to be in St. Denis's physical presence, to use his charm to persuade her to stay, though he had no idea when that time would come.

Shawn was given special weekend leave from Camp Kearny to perform at benefit performances. In his first three months alone he performed at eight Red Cross benefits that raised over \$15,000. This service generated tremendous goodwill from Kearny brass that translated into granting Shawn permission to leave the base to attend to other professional projects. Even as early as a month into his time at Kearny he was off to Busch Gardens in Pasadena, to choreograph a dance for a film titled *Wild Youth* (1918), a period piece based on a novel by Sir Gilbert Parker. Shawn created a number of "allegorical scenes" to dramatize the novel's plot about the marital woes between a young wife and the older man she was forced to marry. Shawn was especially well suited for the task, given his own May–December marriage, and created group dances meant to convey to freedom and frivolity of youth. He later incorporated photo stills of his dancers frolicking in a glade with garlands into an advertisement for motion picture trade magazines, alerting producers that "no high class film production is complete without the Denishawn dancers" and promising the ability to deliver "dances correct as to country, period, and costumes."

"There is only one place in the United States where one can get a perfectly trained dancer and that is at Denishawn," said silent film actress Theda Bara,

the star of *Cleopatra* (1917).⁵⁷ She might have come to that understanding by working alongside Denishawn dancers on the making of the film, one of many cast with Denishawn dancers.⁵⁸ Part of Denishawn's reputation as a starlet factory was based on the persistent falsehood that St. Denis and Shawn choreographed or were otherwise associated with D. W. Griffith's silent film *Intolerance* (1916). Though the film involves many Orientalist dancing scenes and thousands of dancers, neither St. Denis nor Shawn was part of the production.⁵⁹

Within a month's time as a private in the army, Shawn formed a Christian Science reading group, created a dance for a motion picture, and reconnected with a former lover, all the while proving he was officer material. His captain recruited him for a training program for physical educators. Shawn was flattered and immediately agreed to take the examination, which he passed. For this specialized training, he was sent to the Fourth Officers' Training School. For the first time in a long while, Shawn felt out of his league—"an aesthetic nut" training alongside "hard boiled types" like sergeants, pugilists, rough guys generally. He started a rigorous ten-day program of exercises and drills. During a race he trampled over a fallen trainee, skinned his knee, and tore his pants, which reminded him of his "Old Dagger Dance days!"

St. Denis was impressed with his promotion. By June 1918, she had finished her tour and was back in Los Angeles, spending time with the Denishawn students she felt she had abandoned. In time, she even came around to understanding Shawn's determination with all matters related to Denishawn: "I had again such a clear sense today that what you are doing is making it possible for us to have our being + life + harmony—every hour of peaceful activity in dance is paid for, now—by your sweat and loneliness and drudgery—and that service—dear—cannot be lost."⁶⁰

Later that month, St. Denis and Margaret Loomis joined Shawn to perform a benefit performance for the Red Cross at the Knights of Columbus Building near Camp Kearny. Shawn created buzz for the benefit by releasing to the press a letter he had sent to the US Secretary of War that outlined a proposal for integrating dance technique into military training for combat soldiers. In the letter, Shawn offered his expertise as dancer and soldier to implement the proposal, one that would modernize military training. Of course, Shawn's point was that dance training could instill efficient principles of motion such as coordination, agility, and strength. He clarified that he was not advocating that "American soldiers should fox-trot to Germany's capital or waltz with Hindenburg at his famous line in north France."⁶¹ However,

the press had a field day with Shawn's disarming idea, publishing photos of him in costume as a Greek warrior (complete with saber, shield, and Trojan helmet) alongside bombastic headlines such as "Terpsichore More Deadly Than Mars" and "Ted Shawn Would Lick Germans with Rhythm."

Later that summer, St. Denis came to Kearny to headline a benefit performance, the first of several visits she made to entertain the troops. (See Figure 2.14.) The concert was attended by 5,000 officers and civilian men, the largest audience ever assembled at the base. One reporter claimed that the hall was so full that some eager spectators took to the roof to watch the stage through a skylight. On opening night, the dancing couple delivered rousing patriotic speeches for which they were enthusiastically applauded.

For three nights later that fall (October 28–30, 1918), St. Denis performed specifically for the 32nd Infantry, the unit to which Shawn had been yet again promoted, leaving behind his "Florence Nightingale" ambulatory unit for an artillery unit. The concert featured St. Denis and her dancers. Miss Mary



Figure 2.14. Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn near Camp Kearny, 1918. Photograph by Harold A. Taylor. Denishawn Collection. Courtesy of the Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library.

Caldwell performed a military takeoff called “On Parade.” At some point in her routine, an excited soldier stood on his seat to get a better view of the stage. When another soldier shouted “Get down!” Miss Caldwell dropped to the floor as if she had been shot. Shawn very much wanted to perform in uniform with his wife for his fellow soldiers. Unfortunately, an active quarantine policy against the threat of Spanish flu restricted Shawn from getting within ten feet of St. Denis, but they performed nonetheless, mirroring each other’s moves on opposite sides of the stage. One writer was impressed by the military precision with which Shawn maintained distance yet accuracy.

Shawn was discharged within weeks of Armistice Day, November 11, 1918, making it possible for him to attend the closing program of the Denishawn School. To mark the special occasion, he premiered a new duet with Doris Humphrey titled *Cupid and Psyche*, which dramatized the revenge that Cupid, the winged son of Venus, sought to inflict on Psyche for surpassing his mother’s beauty. Leveraging his new military status, he credited himself as “Choreographer Lieut. Ted Shawn.”

After closing the school, Shawn traveled to Detroit to meet St. Denis’s tour. On the morning of her performance, he invited the press to a rehearsal he conducted in uniform with St. Denis’s company. The *Detroit News* wrote that “Lieut. Adonis Drills Nymphs,” running an interview with Shawn in which he uses his military status to further his cause for men in dance: “You know, the hardest work in the army is child’s play when compared to dancing. In our athletic activities I have seen 200 men panting and exhausted after dancing around in a circle twice.”⁶²

Shawn tried to convince St. Denis to stay with the school by telling her of his plans to rebuild Denishawn. St. Denis once again insisted that she wanted no part of the school or company. Accepting defeat, Shawn returned to Los Angeles to confront the aftermath of both the war and Denishawn. He gave up the lease on two of the three buildings that made up the Westlake Denishawn School. Though the school had not been fully operational during the war, he hoped to run one more summer session. Instead, Shawn had to dismantle Denishawn: “I felt warlike killing my own child.”⁶³

Afternoon of a Shawn, 1918–1922

Just weeks before Armistice Day and his discharge from the army, Ted Shawn took a special leave from Camp Kearny to appear in the silent feature film

Don't Change Your Husband (1919) directed by Cecil B. DeMille. The film stars Gloria Swanson in her first featured role, as Leila Porter, a forlorn wife whose vibrant imagination helps her to cope with the ennui of married life. In one of her many escapist daydreams, Leila conjures herself as a woodland nymph who is chased by a faun played by Shawn, who is near naked save a few strategically placed vines. (See Figure 2.15.) The faun sidles beside the nymph near a stream, then seduces her by plucking a bunch of grapes from a nearby vine, and squeezing its juice into her mouth before kissing her for a full twenty-eight cranks of the camera. As the mythical creatures lose themselves in their passionate kiss, the scene cross-fades to the reality of an upper-class drawing room where Leila awakens to the unwanted advances of her husband. DeMille claimed that he had created the role of the faun specifically for Shawn, no doubt as a vehicle to showcase his exceptional looks and physique. Little could DeMille have known how well suited Shawn actually was to play a sexual misfit who relentlessly pursues an otherwise disinterested wife.



Figure 2.15. Ted Shawn in “Vision of Love” sequence from Cecil B. De Mille’s film, *Don’t Change Your Husband* (1918). Denishawn Collection. Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library.

About the time of the film's release, a music critic conveyed his resentment for having to cover one of Shawn's live stage performances. Dumbfounded by Shawn's spectacle of physical beauty and emotional expressivity, the music critic wondered why "a man, the pink and hairless brother to the ape insists on going naked to his raptures."⁶⁴ He might as well have been writing about Shawn's melodramatic turn as a faun. Indeed, the writer titled the review "Afternoon of a Shawn," a disparaging reference to Russian ballet dancer Nijinsky's controversial *L'Après-midi d'un Faune* (1912), which shares a premise similar to the one in Shawn's scene in the DeMille film. In the Nijinsky ballet, a faun awakens on a boulder somewhere deep within the woods, then pursues a nymph, who escapes, but leaves behind her scarf, with which he attempts to sexually gratify himself. Of course, these are not the same fauns. Whereas Nijinsky's faun discovers a narcissistic, homoerotic resolution to his drama, Shawn's faun complies with the heteronormative logic of the romantic comedy. The difference matters little to the self-described "sober and baldheaded music critic" who mocks both displays of male sexual desire. In fact, the review's jab at the trope of the faun in modern theater receives its filmic expression in Charlie Chaplin's short film *Sunnyside*, also from 1919, wherein the great physical comedian lampoons Nijinsky's faun. In Chaplin's care, the faun is reimagined as a tramp who is thrust into motion when he accidentally sits on a heavily thorned cactus, which propels him to unintentionally chase a chorus of tunic-frocked maenads across a dewy glen. One hardly needs to know about Nijinsky's radical choreography of male sexual pleasure to appreciate the humor in the film. However, less apparent is how these scenarios limn related yet opposing views on dance, masculinity, and sexuality in the post-war years. Ted Shawn found himself negotiating the space between the stylized abstraction of Nijinsky and the populist pantomime of Chaplin.

"Afternoon of a Shawn" is perhaps the best way to describe the period of time between Shawn's discharge from the army in late 1918, a time when it appears that Denishawn had run its course, and 1922, when Denishawn regroups and embarks on its unprecedented years of critical and commercial success. Shawn described the four-year period as "a great rebirth" that brought forth his "richest period of creation and achievement." During this time "America's Most Handsome Man" was artistically prolific and created some of his most significant solo dances, as well as his most successful vaudeville acts. He also emerged as a leading man in a string of plays, benefit performances, pageants, and exhibitions that brought him closer to the

type and quality of artistic dancing he was yet determined to create.⁶⁵ It was also a period of Shawn's sexual exploration with men. For most of this time, he was estranged from St. Denis, who no longer would share her limelight with him, choosing instead to tour with a small ensemble of dancers and to distance herself from Shawn and the Denishawn machine. Though Shawn would make appearances with ensembles billed as the "Denishawn Dancers," the celebrated company that had formed before the war no longer existed. The economic and professional obstacles of the post-war years were exhausting but nothing near as harrowing as the personal trial between him and St. Denis. Shawn said he spent most of the period of the armistice and years following barely surviving St. Denis's "streak of sadism." "It was hell, unadulterated ghastly suffering such as I've never known."⁶⁶

When Shawn returned to Los Angeles from his crushing visit with St. Denis in Detroit in December 1918, he was determined to change her mind about pursuing a professional and personal life without him. He leased two of the three buildings on the Westlake property, retaining a small building with a studio to create work and teach private lessons. He also kept a skeleton staff to teach a "special Red Cross" class that offered students instruction in two complete dances with the designs for the costumes to participate in benefit performances. He also invited Martha Graham, who had been teaching children's classes, to teach an adult class in the studio. The invitation was something of a quid pro quo, as Shawn once again needed a new dance partner to explore possibilities to rebuild his career and was very aware how Graham's talent and determination could help him in that pursuit.

In an attempt to save his marriage to St. Denis and their Denishawn company, he set up a home to which she could retire from her "farewell to vaudeville" tour. He leased a house belonging to Edwina Hamilton, the former Denishawn School manager. It was a modest ranch in Eagle Rock City near Pasadena, California, with none of the glamour of the Denishawn house with its roaming peacocks and pools, but Shawn exercised his mind-over-matter Christian Scientist sensibility and rechristened the bungalow "Tedruth." Whereas Denishawn was a symbol of the couple's business partnership and artistic aspiration, Tedruth was a personal retreat, a "charming simple country home" for private reflection and a place to store their growing collection of dance prints, music scores, books, and sets and costumes. Awaiting his wife's return, Shawn remodeled the home. He even erected a wooden fence and platform between two enormous pepper trees for creating and rehearsing new Denishawn dances, or so he had hoped.

Their chance for a professional and personal reunion came even before they moved into Tedruth. They were presented with an irresistible offer to perform once again at the Greek Theatre at the University of Berkeley. This time, St. Denis was cast in the leading role in *Miriam, Sister of Moses*, a biblical play written especially for her by her long-time friend Constance Smedley with an original score by Berkeley music professor E. G. Strickland. Conceived as a “synthetic drama,” the production was an experiment in integrating drama with movement, color, and sets. In her first speaking role since her David Belasco days, St. Denis was tasked with uniting her dancing with a dramatic script to retell the biblical story of the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt through the experiences and emotions of Miriam, misunderstood sibling of Moses. Shawn was initially engaged to create the group choreography for the play and later assumed the role of Moses to replace the actor who was originally cast but unexpectedly quit. The pageant brought St. Denis and Shawn together on stage for the first time in two years, at the site of their successful 1916 pageant at that—all the makings for a successful personal and professional renewal.⁶⁷

To accommodate the summer rehearsals in Berkeley, Shawn arranged for him and St. Denis to live in a guest house at Wildwood, the Piedmont estate of Mrs. Frank C. Havens, recent widow of the real estate developer and patriarch of one of the founding families of Shelter Island. Shawn also rented out the garage with the intent of offering a six-week dance course. Though he advertised the classes without using the Denishawn name, he announced that registered students would automatically be cast in the *Miriam* production, and thus share a stage with St. Denis and himself. Though there was still buzz in the air from the previous Berkeley pageant, Shawn did not expect the high level of interest generated by the advertisement to perform in a Bible drama. Over a hundred young women registered for the class, most of whom were young socialites willing to give up their summer social calendars for the Denishawn experience. In advance of the play’s opening, Shawn and St. Denis did some of their best publicity work. With strong enrollment, Shawn found himself with extra money, enough to buy a second-hand Packard limousine and hire a chauffeur to drive him and St. Denis between home and the theater. The drive was so rocky between Piedmont and Berkeley that St. Denis was routinely ill. She wondered, to the press, whether the symptoms suggested morning sickness. The chauffeured drive and its resulting pregnancy scare were part of a larger effort to intensify interest in Denishawn in the Bay area. As local newspapers were running ads for the pageant, they

began to leak stories to reporters about St. Denis's refusal to appear in films, claiming that she had been besieged with offers for the past five years, one from Fox for \$10,000 to appear in just one scene! These reports, of course were meant to ramp up tickets sales to see the legend on stage, where she exclusively performed. To underscore the value of St. Denis's physical body, early that summer reports circulated that she had insured her fingers and toes for \$1 million, though there is no proof that such a policy ever existed.

Shawn further fueled their public relations machine by promising reporters that the biblical drama would feature a chorus of dancers performing the popular shimmy. Headlines ran with the shocking and blasphemous claims that "Miriam Ballet Girls Do Shivery Dance" or "Naughty Dance in Biblical Play." In the fine print, however, Shawn stridently shared his opinion that the ragtime dance is "disgusting and disgraceful when danced in a ballroom," but was choreographically justified in the play's dramatization of the Golden Calf scene, where utter licentiousness is supposed to be expressed through dance.⁶⁸ Thus Shawn found a way to exploit the popularity of the shimmy without moral consequence.

If the promise of a chorus of shimmying sisters of Miriam was not enough to attract a sizable audience, Shawn also carefully staged photos of him and his troupe of bathing-suit clad socialites splashing about in a pool in the style of Mack Sennett's bathing beauties. In 1915, the comic actor and film producer Sennett organized a bevy of beauties to perform antics wearing risqué modern bathing suits in silent film shorts. The "Beauties" also appeared in magazine pinups, a favorite of the army doughboys, and spawned several knockoffs. Shawn, not one to pass up the opportunity to exploit a fad, invited local papers to cover his daily trips to the beach with his dancers in tow to proclaim that dancing and swimming were good for one's health. These various publicity ploys worked: an estimated 7,000 people attended each of their performances on August 1 and 2, 1919. (See Figure 2.16.)

Critics applauded St. Denis's interpretation of Miriam as a rousing if not subversive spiritual prophet and leader. Shawn, too, received mostly positive notices, though he did not think highly of his own performance. "I made a very bad Moses. I was supposed to be 80 years old, and I didn't walk or move that way, even with all the whiskers in the world on my chin."⁶⁹ The scale of the amphitheater and its theatrical trappings did not suit Shawn's expressive talents. He recalled the failed highpoint of his performance when he, as Moses, had to scale an iron staircase to a platform high above the stage from which he had to hurl the Tablets of the Law inscribed with the Ten



Figure 2.16. Ted Shawn and His Dancing Beauties, featuring Pauline Lawrence (*left*) and Eugenia Vandever (*right*). Photographs by McCullagh (July 1919). Denishawn Scrapbook, vol. 2. Courtesy of the Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library.

Commandments. When he released them to the stage, they bounced. The audience was forgiving. St. Denis, less so, unleashed criticisms that “at no time did he rise to dramatic brilliance” and that Shawn was hampered by “a little too much hand and foot work.”⁷⁰ He at least came away from the experience content with his choreographic effort, which was roundly praised.

After the play closed, Shawn and St. Denis retreated to their bungalow Tedruth. As summer turned to fall, the couple nested, rehearsing a life of domesticity as they independently pursued separate careers. However, on November 8, Tedruth burned to the ground. Shawn suffered minor burns and scrapes from his attempt to save items from the burning house. He was devastated over the loss of his growing library of dance books, orchestrations, and costumes as well as original photographs, paintings, and sculptures from the early years of his career. He especially mourned the loss of a sculpture of him in “Death of Adonis,” which crushed under the heat of the fire. His dance library was valuable for a variety of personal reasons, but most of all, it was the basis upon which he promised film companies dance recreations “correct as to country, period, and costume.” Shawn estimated they lost \$50,000 in property for which they recovered only \$7,500 from insurance. For St. Denis, the fire symbolized the end of their domestic life. They moved back into the

city, to a property on Sixth Street called “The Compound,” adjacent to the former Denishawn School.

Shawn’s creative work stalled in the aftermath of this personal setback. He was reduced to create buzz for a concert at a nearby ostrich farm, where the troupe performed a new novelty dance called the *Feather Dance*, wearing costumes made entirely of ostrich feathers.

Before the proverbial ashes of Tedruth settled, Shawn opened yet another dance school on April 6, 1920. This time, he entered a six-year lease for an irresistible price on a property on Grand Street in Los Angeles, where he opened the Ted Shawn Studio. Though the school was an independent venture, the sign hanging between the building’s columns and the school’s new letterhead indicated it was under the auspices of “Denishawn Dance Productions.” The neoclassical building was “gruesome, and depressing” but had a studio of 5,600 square feet with a stage at one end and a balcony at another. Shawn commissioned artist Edward Buk Ulreich to restore the dilapidated building’s glamour with designer furniture, light fixtures, and a frieze in the auditorium. Ulreich decorated one hall with black carpet and black lacquered walls.

Shawn lived in the building’s third floor apartment. In the studio, he created and rehearsed new vaudeville acts to fulfill an arrangement he entered with legendary producer Alexander Pantages, who commissioned Shawn to create headlining acts for his circuit of theaters, the largest in the country at the time. Shawn gladly accepted the commission, proud to give work to Denishawn dancers who were left jobless because of St. Denis’s refusal to tour with the company. Moreover, with his vaudeville earnings, he planned to finance a solo concert tour and further his career as America’s foremost male dance artist.

Vaudeville turned out to be one of his only options at the time. Shawn’s high art ambitions were somewhat thwarted by fierce new competitors in the post-war theatrical market: former Denishawn students and company members, many of whom leveraged their association with the popular troupe to establish their own solo careers. Just as St. Denis and Shawn recounted their own origin story, so too did each Denishawn dancer fabricate fantastic explanations for their transformation from ordinary American girls into artistes. St. Denis continually recounted an anecdote about sitting at a drugstore counter in Buffalo, New York, when she saw an image of the goddess Isis on a poster for Egyptian Deities cigarettes, which divinely inspired her to perform Oriental dances. Shawn had two related backstories

he told in alternation, depending on the circumstance, to explain his most unusual decision to become a professional male dancer. The first story centered on dance as a physical practice, emphasizing how through studying dance, he transformed himself from a young man afflicted with paralysis to a cover model for physical and health magazines. The other was a vocation story, about his calling to leave divinity school to pursue his spiritual path through dancing, using his practice to restore the lost art of movement to the Christian service and simultaneously bring faith to the art of dance.

Among the former Denishawners on the circuit was Miss Beth Becker, who was once rendered frail and sickly from a cyclone accident in her hometown of Omaha, Nebraska, but whose health was fully restored at Denishawn thanks to a combination of physical movement, the proximity to the seashore, and time spent in a bathing suit. Margaret Severn appeared in a “mask” routine in the Greenwich Village Follies in 1919. When asked how she conceived of her unique dance, she modestly answered, “It just happened” when one day she visited the studio of W. T. Benda, the New York-based Polish illustrator and designer whose masks summoned her. Although the masks were sold for \$2,000 each, she determined that they were a good value, seeing that wearing them meant “You don’t have to makeup at all.”⁷¹ Then there was Margaret Loomis, the wealthy socialite daughter of the Loomis hotel empire, who was still living with her wealthy parents even after touring with Denishawn and a few rounds on the pageant circuit. She adapted her art for the domestic sphere with a cooking class titled “The Application of the Art of Dancing to Housework.” Though Loomis was a talented dancer, she most likely knew nothing about housework.⁷²

If the broad strokes of the former Denishawn dancers’ career stories seemed familiar, so too were the dance routines they performed. Over the years, Shawn taught the same dances to hundreds of students in various cities across the country. As these routines made their way into reviews and pageants, he had to retroactively devise policies to govern the right for students to use his dances and the Denishawn affiliation in their publicity and advertisements. Similar to the circumstances that yielded the name “Denishawn,” Shawn held a contest for the best proposal to “brand” former students in a way that allowed for individuality but clearly linked them to Denishawn.⁷³ The most successful case of a student assuming a stage name that reflected the Denishawn pedigree was Florence O’Denishawn (née Florence Andrews), one of the students in the first cohort at the Denishawn School. According to Shawn, he gave her the stage name “Florence of

Denishawn” along with a series of dances and costumes after she had performed with the company for two years. Another account suggests that Florence did not want her family name in the program, likely in deference to her father, a prominent Los Angeles businessman. However, the name “Florence of Denishawn” was changed to “Florence O’Denishawn” in a program by an incredulous printer. However attributed and printed, the name stuck, and Florence went on to a successful career. Known as the “Pavlova of America,” she danced in some of the most prominent musical reviews of the day, including three Broadway editions of *Hitchy-Koo* with music by Cole Porter and Jerome Kern, the opening company of the *Music Box Review*, and the *Ziegfeld Follies of 1921*.

In addition to protecting the equity of the Denishawn brand, Shawn found himself increasingly defending the originality and authorship of his own choreography. During the Denishawn run at the New York Palace in 1916, one *Variety* writer observed a similarity between a dance choreographed by Shawn and performed by Lubowska and a dance performed months prior by Ada Forman, a member of the first Denishawn cohort, both set to “March Indienne” by Adolphe Sellenick. A convincing litigator, Shawn explained that he had been previously accused of stealing this dance and so attempted to set the record straight with a history of the dance, pointing to its presence in the *Dances of the Ages* film as irrefutable evidence of his authorship. If that were not enough, he explained that the dance from the film was subsequently restaged as *Zuleika* on Norma Gould in Los Angeles, then again as a *Danse Egyptienne* for Evan Burrows Fontaine during the first 1914 trans-continental tour, and then finally for Lubowska (then known by the name “Psychema”), who had told reporters that she created the dance at the actual tombs in Egypt. Shawn explained that he recostumed and retooled the very same dance into a Javanese number especially for Ada Forman.⁷⁴

The complaint was tried again in the pages of *Variety* magazine where Forman published a letter to protest Shawn’s allegation that he had taught her the dance “step by step.” She instead explains how the dance was part of her repertory from her pre-Denishawn days in Chicago, though admits that under the guidance and suggestion of St. Denis and Shawn, she changed some steps, the music, and costume.⁷⁵ Though her damages seemed negligible, Fontaine apparently suffered greatly from Shawn’s public “attack” and thus recruited Brother St. Denis to serve as an expert witness. By this point, Brother had bitterly distanced himself from the Denishawn enterprise and took the opportunity to express his resentment for his sister’s

unhappiness toward Shawn. Brother submitted a brief yet damaging letter to support Fontaine's claim concerning "the originality of the greater part of her Egyptian dance." Ultimately, Shawn was not necessarily accused of "stealing" choreography so much as he was of lacking artistic originality, a common charge on the vaudeville circuit but a grievous violation of Denishawn's artistic code.

Shawn and St. Denis also found themselves in court to protect their own interests against other dance school competitors. St. Denis served as star witness in a trial against so-called dancing master Ivan de Marcel who was brought up on false advertising charges by the Portland Ad club for using photos of other masters in his ads. On May 8, 1918, before a packed courtroom, filled mostly with Denishawn students, many dressed in stage costumes, St. Denis convincingly testified that Marcel had plagiarized her writings in his publicity materials. The jury found Marcel guilty, though the judge was lenient in terms of sentencing, given the lax laws around plagiarism and the otherwise "flamboyant practices of the theatrical world."⁷⁶

The post-war show business landscape was a minefield that was difficult to maneuver, even for a trained soldier like Shawn. His first effort as a work-for-hire vaudeville choreographer was a three-act dance drama inspired by a minor character from the *Arabian Nights*. Though Shawn insisted the idea was inspired by his childhood fascination with Orientalist folk tales, he likely took his cue from Michel Fokine's 1912 ballet *Schéhérazade*, which US audiences came to know when the Ballets Russes toured in 1915–16 with Léonide Massine (who replaced the recently terminated Nijinsky) in the starring role. Shawn created a three-act drama (involving four different elaborate sets!) about a peripheral character named Julnar, "The Seaborn." Taking liberties with the narrative, Shawn devised a scenario involving an earthly prince who travels to the ocean's depths to woo Julnar, a plot that is elucidated in words by the narrator Scheherazade. The reviews were uniformly enthusiastic though predominantly about the exquisite set designs by Maxwell Armfield. The major sets included "The Bronze Palace," where Scheherezade perched on a divan, narrating the story to an invisible shah; "The Bottom of the Sea," where the earthly prince encounters sea creatures such as a shark and an octopus lurking in the cavernous abyss; and "The Slave Market," where the hero finds Julnar amid a chorus of odalisques. With its cast of seventeen, *Julnar of the Sea* premiered in Los Angeles on November 3, 1919, with Lillian Powell in the leading role, earning \$75 a week when most dancers were paid \$35. The production then enjoyed a successful run of

1,250 performances and earning an impressive \$1,600 a week for over a year on the road with Louis Horst serving as accompanist and company manager. (See Figure 2.17.)

The other major act Shawn created for Pantages was *Xochitl*, a dance-drama based on a Toltec legend about the origin of *pulque*, the indigenous alcoholic libation created from fermented juice of the maguey plant. The drama centers on the beautiful Toltec maiden Xochitl, whose farmer father discovers the secret of brewing pulque. In the first scene, she watches her father as he stumbles about intoxicated for the first time, a discovery he decides must be shared with the Emperor Tepancaltzin. In the second scene, the maiden and her father present a gourd filled with pulque to the enthroned emperor. After imbibing the strange elixir, the emperor asks Xochitl to dance for him, and she obliges. (Shawn was planning a Salome ballet in the months before creating *Xochitl*, which might account for this familiar scenario of a young woman dancing before a ruler.) The emperor then, as Shawn delicately



Figure 2.17. *Julnar of the Sea* (1919) with Miles Smith as the Prince. Photograph by Putnam and Valentine. Denishawn Collection. Courtesy of the Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library.

phrased it, proceeds “to pursue the innocent.” Taken back into the throne room, Xochitl frantically cries as she attempts to protect her virginity. To defend his daughter, Xochitl’s father attempts to stab Tepancaltzin, but Xochitl intercedes and rescues the emperor from her father’s impassioned attack.

More “art” than an “act,” *Xochitl* was a favorite on the Pantages circuit. Its theme of intoxication resonated with audiences, given that the 1919 Volstead Act prohibiting alcohol consumption had only recently gone into effect. Newspaper reporters loved the connection, calling it a “home brew” ballet.⁷⁷ *Xochitl* was the most involved and perhaps most successful collaboration of Shawn’s career up until that point and arguably beyond. To create the work, he commissioned two noted artists. Composer Homer Grunn, best known for his interpretations of Southwest Native American music, composed the score. Mexican visual artist Francisco Cornejo created the daring sets and costumes (“a la Léon Bakst” noted one critic, linking the production to the designer of Fokine’s *Schéhérazade*).⁷⁸ Cornejo arguably devised the scenario as well, though Shawn never conceded as much. Instead, Shawn claimed that he drew inspiration for *Xochitl* from American historian William Hickling Prescott’s epic history *Conquest of Mexico* (1843). When discussing his inspiration for *Xochitl*, Shawn repeatedly mentioned a stirring visit to the library at the University of Texas, Austin, where he had a personal tour of its extensive collection of Aztec artifacts. However, that visit took place on November 7, 1921, well after the premiere of the dance-drama.⁷⁹

Xochitl remained active in the Denishawn repertory for five years, and as such, saw many different dancers cast in the leading role, including Louise Brooks at one point. Shawn created the dance as a star vehicle for Martha Graham, a role that would eventually serve as her ticket out of Denishawn. Shawn wrote glowingly about Graham, who not only was teaching in earnest at his new school but also contributing on every front, most especially by racking up positive reviews in the press. He wrote to St. Denis with a loving description of how Graham passed time on the train resewing the sequins on Cornejo’s elaborate headdress, drawing the attention of all the other passengers.⁸⁰ The official preview of *Xochitl* was in Graham’s adopted hometown of Santa Barbara, California. She took advantage of the opportunity to distance herself from Shawn, as well as establish a tone for discussing her standards as an artist: “So far the only value of my work—if it has art value—is absolute sincerity. I would not do anything that I could not feel. A dance must dominate me completely until I lose sense of anything else. Later what I may do may be called art, but not yet.”⁸¹

German music critic and scholar Bruno David Ussher gave *Xochitl* serious consideration in a music journal. He recognized the dance as “one of the best presentations . . . by the disciple Ted Shawn.”⁸² To develop his analysis, he visited one of Shawn’s classes, offering a rare perspective into Shawn’s approach to training. Ussher encouraged Shawn to reflect on Francis Bacon’s essay “On Beauty” and its central premise that “the principal part of beauty is in decent motion.” He criticized Shawn’s use of musical accompaniment as “mechanical” and “primitive” and thus undermining the purported goal of Shawn’s technique to increase expressivity. He encouraged Shawn to refine his use of musical phrasing in his training.

The opening of the Ted Shawn Studio and the success of his independent vaudeville dances highlighted the obvious separation between Shawn and St. Denis, though they occasionally appeared together for special events and concerts. St. Denis pursued her own solo career, pouring her energies into a chamber dance group she toured with and a handsome actor named Craig Ward with whom she performed poetry and song. She did not miss an opportunity to write Shawn about the budding romance between her and Ward, which incensed Shawn, if not for his professional jealousy that St. Denis shared a stage with someone other than himself then for the skepticism Ward’s presence cast on the validity of their marriage and Shawn’s sexuality by extension. Indeed, rumors began to swirl about their impending divorce.⁸³ They deftly deflected these rumors on the occasion of their sixth wedding anniversary by renewing their vows before a crowd of reporters and photographers. Shawn reminded the press that he and St. Denis had entered into their marriage on a trial basis, intending to renew their vows every five years, pending their individual happiness. He also defended their living arrangement by stating that as artists, he and St. Denis maintained separate studios for professional reasons. (Shawn rehearsed at his Los Angeles studio and St. Denis in the dome of a nearby hotel more appropriate for her chamber group). Shawn insisted that they came together on weekends as man and wife. To convince the skeptical crowd, Shawn asked the press corps “Does this look like a divorce?” before planting a prolonged kiss on his wife in front of a battery of still and motion cameras, not unlike his famous on-screen moment with Gloria Swanson.

“Cut!” shouted one cameraman in the crowd, concerned, perhaps that the prolonged kiss violated the rules imposed by the Board of Censorship. More likely, he was calling attention to the very self-conscious theatricality of this staged public display of affection. Their marriage renewal was perfectly timed

to coincide with the publication of *Ruth St. Denis, Pioneer and Prophet, Being a History of Her Oriental Dances* (1920), a beautiful two-volume book with photographs of St. Denis in her most celebrated roles and brief contextualizing essays written by Shawn. A private press printed 350 copies, of which Shawn could secure advance sales for only a hundred. The publicity event took place just weeks before the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment on August 18, 1920. St. Denis never felt more out of step with the suffrage movement than when she partook in this duplicitous charade as Shawn's personal goddess, especially as accounts of his sexual escapades with other men circulated within the Denishawn circle.

It was during the time that Shawn was creating *Xochitl* that he had developed a romantic relationship with Robert "Bob" Gorham who played the role of the emperor. Graham and Horst both bristled at Shawn's infatuation with Gorham, which distracted him from work in the studio. Moreover, Brayton "Nigger" Jensen, Shawn's former tent mate at Camp Kearny, was a member of the *Xochitl* cast, resulting in what Shawn described as "a queer series of affairs."⁸⁴ Horst recalled some of the sexual high jinks that ensued when the show was on the road, describing how one of Shawn's lovers "kidnapped" another of his "boyfriends" in the cast, who left the touring troupe and forced Shawn to find a substitute male dancer. A young dancer named Charles Weidman was sent out to fill the spot.

On New Year's Eve, Shawn wrote to St. Denis to recap his professional and personal highs and lows of 1920. It is a painfully candid letter in which he confirms his struggles to understand his own sexuality: "The fact which stands out above all things is the experience I have had in my emotional sex-love nature. I am afraid this is still unclassified to me—partaking of both good and bad—and will have to be taken up later."⁸⁵ He goes on to address his infidelities, not only with Gorham but also with Arthur Buruel, the man with whom Shawn had an affair when he first moved to Los Angeles.

The year opened wrong. As the year began I was with Bob and Arthur. Arthur was very unhappy . . . and my underlying motives were wrong and I was held conscious of this. The whole lie of my being of a homogenic sex nature—like a boil—was gathering all of its pus (foreign matter which had no real place in the clean body of my love life)—sorely into a head. Another boil once before began to gather—but was driven back into the blood only gathering to come to a head in this experience with Bob.⁸⁶

Here Shawn denies his “homogenic” sex nature, using British poet and social activist Edward Carpenter’s preferred term for “homosexuality.” He then describes a biological process through which his body had cleansed itself of his homosexuality, figured as a boil. To ensure his body’s “purification” of any homogenic sex desire, Shawn also sought spiritual cleansing. He explains to St. Denis how he had been deeply engaged in Havelock Ellis’s writings about St. Francis, especially his ideas about ascetism, which enabled him to recognize his reliance on the “strongly sensuous,” be it with food, beauty, or sex. Following the example of St. Francis, Shawn pursued a path of “abstinence from gratification.”⁸⁷ He expressed contrition to St. Denis: “Surely I have been going through a great rebirth. But evidently the end is not yet. All of the self I have let go of my art consciousness is only a part. The purification of my sex life in relationship to my wanderings is only a part.”⁸⁸ In exchange for her forgiveness, he offered himself: “You know you can enjoy me physically to the utmost whenever it strikes your fancy—and the whole world approves it.” Indeed, Shawn focused intensively on his work in an attempt to avoid the confusion and distraction of his homosexuality. He also spent some nights awake until dawn writing to St. Denis, declaring his devotion to her and their marriage in penitential tones.

Shawn was aware of the correlation between his sexual confusion and his choreographic clarity. In fact, that year he was acknowledged as an artist of importance by one of the most elite and powerful fraternities in the nation: the Bohemian Club, the exclusive all-male club that hosts an annual midsummer retreat on its 2,700 acre grove of majestic redwood trees on the northern outskirts of San Francisco. Founded in 1872, the Bohemian Club’s charter members included artists, poets, actors, and newspaper men, but by 1920 the membership grew to attract the most powerful and influential men in finance, politics, and business.

Shawn was a welcomed addition to the Grove, as the ten-day encampment centered around theatrical entertainment and esoteric rituals. Shawn served as “Director of Dance” for the annual Grove play, the main stage production for which Bohemian Club members always serve as playwright, composer, and performers, often *en travestie*. In that role, Shawn created and performed in dances for a play by Charles Caldwell Dobie titled *Ilyu of Murom* based on tales of Little Russia.⁸⁹ For this production Shawn created several numbers including a “Russian Peasant” ensemble dance and a “Demon-Bird Dance” in which he performed a featured role. Shawn posed in one of the signature

poses from the dance for sculptor Joseph (“Jo”) Mora (1876–1947) who was among the artists at camp that year. (See Figure 2.18.)

Shawn was enraptured by the opportunity to choreograph for the main stage at the camp, with its many leveled platforms nestled between trees and with natural paths serving as its “wings.” Framed by a backdrop of rolling hills, the natural setting was a model for the performance spaces Shawn would later establish at Jacob’s Pillow. In addition to his performance duties as Director of Dance, Shawn entertained the campers during the day, catering to the camp’s culture of myth and fantasy. An existing film from the encampment captures some of Shawn’s activity at the Grove.⁹⁰ One clip shows him participating in a campfire throwing back drinks, a favorite pastime at the retreat, then combing back the hair of one of his drinking buddies. In another clip, he is fully costumed for *Invocation to the Thunderbird*, a solo dance he created years prior but premiered at the “High Jinks” performance at the Grove’s Field Circle. Wearing only a feather war bonnet, a beaded belt, and moccasins, Shawn emerges from a hollowed cavity in the trunk of a mighty



Figure 2.18. Ted Shawn as “Demon Bird” from the play *Ilya of Murom*, Bohemian Club, 1920. Denishawn Collection. Courtesy of the Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library.

Redwood, then slowly raises his arms in salutation to the sun. In yet another clip, he dashes from the grove to the river, darting his head from side to side as if on the lookout for stray arrows. (See Figure 2.19.)

Shawn served as Bohemian Grove's Director of Dance for the following two summers. It proved to be a good training ground for his work with all-male casts later in his career, especially as he had to shepherd untrained bankers, insurance salesmen, and politicians, most of them inebriated, into



Figure 2.19. Ted Shawn in *Invocation to the Thunderbird* at Bohemian Grove, 1920. Ted Shawn Papers, Additions. Courtesy of the Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library.

dresses (for those taking on the women's roles) and Hungarian folk dance formations. For one scene that called for a flight of angels, Shawn had to squeeze the soft flesh of middle-aged captains of industry into harnesses with wings.

He also continued his association with Bohemian Grove playwright Charles Caldwell Dobie that following winter, when he appeared once again as Moses alongside St. Denis, this time in a play called *Ramati, Seed of the Lotus*, an "Egyptian play" that Dobie wrote for St. Denis based on one of her favorite childhood novels, *Idyll of the White Lotus*.⁹¹ Shawn had the opportunity to redeem his interpretation of Moses, this time as a suitor to St. Denis's *Ramati*, a young Egyptian girl. It was also an opportunity for Shawn to reconnect with St. Denis and prove his fidelity to her. Following their brief reunion in *Ramati*, Shawn joined St. Denis that next summer at her *thés dansants*—social events at leading resort hotels on the Pacific, which attracted well-heeled audiences from Los Angeles, Pasadena, and San Diego. Billed as the "highest salaried dancer," St. Denis appeared under the sponsorship of piano manufacturers Wm. Knabe & Co. The performances were an artistic departure for her, an experiment synthesizing the "trinity" of word, music, and movement in the ancient mode. She performed these events with poet Craig Ward who served a narrator of sorts. Of course, she also presented her Oriental dances for good measure. Shawn performed his solos, including a new dance called *Le Contrabandier*, an image of which accompanied an article extolling masculine grace in an issue of *Physical Culture* magazine.⁹² Drama critic and art connoisseur John D. Barry gave a serious review of the performance. Far from dismissing the experimental performance as indulgent confections for the society audiences, he praised their unique stage instincts—St. Denis's capacity for impersonation and Shawn's to "underact."⁹³

Shawn also joined St. Denis in her vaudeville act at Hoyt's in Long Beach, making it the first time the couple had shared a vaudeville stage in over two years, since Shawn had been enlisted in the army. St. Denis announced it as her final week in vaudeville, thus making it a record breaker in Long Beach theatricals. Another review declared that the reunion "put Long Beach on the theatrical map." The brief reunion rekindled the personal and professional light between them, so much so that they began to swap sentimental letters where they once again address each other by their pet names. St. Denis agreed to return to teaching at Denishawn and admitted to taking an interest, even pleasure, in the school and supporting Shawn in his effort to make it successful: "This is the best time I have ever had in the school," she insisted.⁹⁴

The truce was short-lived, as Shawn wanted to turn the brief reunion into a Denishawn encore. One night Shawn called St. Denis in the wee hours of the night for a rare discussion of their emotional life—a “bubbling up” he called it.⁹⁵ A discussion of sex and monogamy sent their summer high into a downward spiral. He asked her to end her relationship with Ward. St. Denis responded with “cruel and ruthless” letters that pulled harder than ever at their strained bonds of marriage.⁹⁶ Decades later Shawn remarked how the tone of their letters reflected their “arrested development” both emotionally and sexually.⁹⁷ As if to get revenge for Shawn’s own homosexual transgression the year prior, St. Denis sent detailed letters of her sexual wanderings. The path toward a regrouping of Denishawn was once again dashed, a circumstance that proved to be both a blessing and a curse, as it prompted Shawn to take a leap of faith into his own solo career.

Earlier that year in 1921, Shawn met Harry Hall, a tall handsome man who proclaimed himself to be both an impresario and a Christian Scientist. He convinced Shawn of his interest in him as a person and artist and offered to fulfill Shawn’s goal of mounting a solo concert tour. Not since before the war had Shawn had theatrical representation. For the prior two years in vaudeville, Shawn had negotiated all the deals himself with Pantages and was justifiably nervous about putting his career in someone else’s hands, but he eventually succumbed to handing over the control. Hall appeared capable, immediately putting together a route list for the 1921–22 season and advertising the tour widely in places such as *Musical America*.⁹⁸

Billed as “American Man Dancer,” Shawn initiated his solo tour in September 1921 in Los Angeles. It was not so much a “solo” tour as it was a tour without St. Denis or Denishawn. Moreover, it featured several small ensemble dances, including a pared down version of *Xochitl*, starring Shawn as the emperor and Charles Weidman as the father. The program showcased his versatility as a choreographer and performer. On the program he included his “interpretative” dances, which he had just started to call “music visualizations,” accompanied by an Ampico player piano onstage. He also included his religious dances, Spanish dances, solo dances, and group dances. The range was not lost on the reviewers, nor was Martha Graham’s star presence.

Spear Dance Japoneseque (1919) was one of his most popular dances on the program. (See Figure 2.20.) Based loosely on the traditional dance-dramas of Japan, the solo depicts a samurai warrior in the throes of battle with an invisible enemy. When the warrior falters, he pulls a tourniquet from his

waistband and a fan, then whirls his spear. Though Shawn claimed the dance was inspired by the sibling sword duel from St. Denis's Japanese-inspired *O-Mika*, in all likelihood it was also influenced by Japanese choreographer Michio Itō, particularly his *noh*-style *Sword Dance*, presented in New York in 1918.⁹⁹ Itō's *Sword Dance* shared the program alongside his adaptations of *noh* plays, such as the Ezra Pound and Ernest Fenollosa translation of *Tamura* at the Neighborhood Playhouse, both in 1918 and 1921. Shawn might have been inspired by Itō's modernist adaptations of traditional dance-dramas. As Shawn clarified to reporters, his dance was an "Occidental adaptation": "I evolved my *Japonesque*—not Japanese—but *Japonesque* because it has taken the essence and the spirit of the Japanese dance while making it a less blood curdling affair."¹⁰⁰ Shawn said that before the war, he bought at auction an antique six-foot spear with curved blade, which he used to study for an entire season with Anzai, whom he identifies as the "ballet master of the Royal

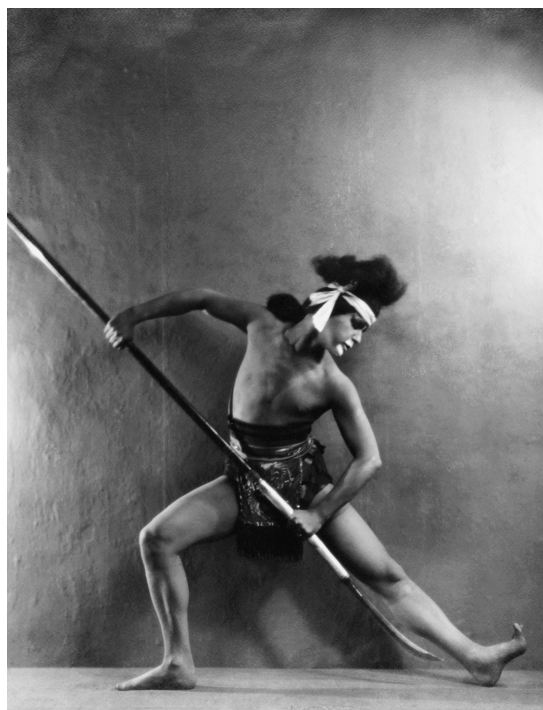


Figure 2.20. Ted Shawn in *Spear Dance Japonesque* (1919). Photograph by Arthur Kales. Denishawn Collection. Courtesy of the Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library.

Opera House of Tokyo” and thus “the greatest authority on Japanese dance.” Following his discharge from the army, Shawn choreographed the dance based on the training he had received from Anzai. For the music, Louis Horst made a special arrangement of British composer Granville Bantock’s “Songs of Japan.” Shawn performed the dance throughout his entire performing days, including his final appearances on stage and screen.

Another feature on the program was Shawn’s *Invocation to the Thunderbird*, which was set to John Philip Sousa’s brassy and propulsive “The Red Man.” Depicting a native medicine man, Shawn scatters cornmeal while moving along a series of pathways that trace the silhouette of a thunderbird, the symbol of the rain god. The dance ends with the exultation of pouring rain. On his knees, facing away from the audience, Shawn hinges backwards, shoulders to floor, his body splayed to the audience. Shawn choreographed the dance in 1917 at the request of a student who wanted a fiercer dance than Shawn’s other Native American dances, though Shawn did not perform it regularly until Bohemian Grove. He strategically narrated the story of the dance’s origins, careful to avoid the appearance that he stole the idea from Michel Fokine, whose own *Thunderbird* had its New York premiere as part of the Dillingham revue *Get Together* at the New York Hippodrome on September 3, 1921. Based on an Aztec legend, Fokine’s *Thunderbird* is more akin to his popular *Firebird* than Shawn’s ethnographic dance, yet Shawn was concerned about the appearance of plagiarism and how it might impact his New York performance, especially as Shawn had borrowed heavily from scenarios of ballets that Fokine had created for the Ballets Russes, including the Arabian Nights themed *Julnar of the Sea*. Shawn also choreographed a quartet to Chopin’s fiery “Revolutionary Etude” (op. 10, no. 2). A music visualization, the dance featured him and Graham moving in correspondence to the chaotic melody embodying the “red reign of terror of the French revolt” while Dorothea Bowen and Betty May, covered in swaths of red chiffon, symbolized the “hectic kinematics” of blood and flame.¹⁰¹

Critics praised Shawn’s range more than his performance in any individual dance, so much so that reviews expressed fascination with the mechanics of his performance itself—about rationale of programming, the logistics of makeup and costumes, the selection of music. One reporter wrote: “It is difficult to credit the truth that the barbaric Emperor of ancient Mexico could be personated by the same dancer who had done the divine in the Church service.”¹⁰²

Shawn also performed his Christian dance liturgy on the road. When the tour brought him to Shreveport, he picked up the morning edition to check on any advance press and advertising. He came across a letter to the editor written by the local ministerial association condemning Shawn's performance of his church service. The letter implores the chief of police and mayor to enjoin his performance and threatened "tarring and feathering the dancer if he dared to put his church service number on."¹⁰³ One Baptist minister, "in keeping with the peaceful teachings of the Gentle Nazarene," Shawn noted ironically, threatened harm with his army of "a thousand men who will spring up and tear that opera house to the ground if he tries to do that Church service."¹⁰⁴ More than 150 members of the ministerial association descended on city hall to protest Shawn's caricature of the Protestant Bible. Shawn explained his ordeal at a lunch in his honor hosted by the family of Ruth Estes, a former Denishawn student. She cautioned Shawn about the threats to his safety, describing lynchings as "the favorite out of door sport of the native Lousianian."

Shawn went to the theater surrounded by the entire Shreveport police force, about thirty in total, which gave him some measure of confidence to go through with the performance. He resigned himself to the possibility that there might be violence, which he hoped to avoid, but if not, reasoned he would at least have strong standing to sue the city for over \$100,000. Shawn's finances were at an all-time low and he was acutely aware of the breadlines as he traveled across poverty-stricken, post-war America: "The country is in a worse panic and financial depression than any time for over 20 years." More valuable than any court settlement, the news of his potential lawsuit "would break into the front page of every newspaper in America, which would be worth approximately \$1,000,000" in free advertising.

The matinees were poorly attended, but the mayor and other local officials showed up and warmly responded to the service, visiting Shawn backstage to convey their embarrassment at the religious fanaticism. Following the final evening performance, Shawn and company rushed to the train and boarded for a grueling four-hour trip in the upper berths. The adrenaline of the Shreveport fiasco waned, and soon came an unavoidable slump. To make matters worse, the tour had gone bust, an inevitable consequence of mismanagement. Harry Hall turned out to have entered a series of illegitimate contracts with local managers, leaving Shawn and company stranded on the road.

Shawn desperately wired his Aunt Kate to ask for a loan of \$2,000 to cover his debts and the company's transportation to New York where he was determined to produce his solo concert. She obliged. It was a favor that Shawn never forgot and credited all his subsequent successes to her generosity. To bolster box office on the road, Hall advertised that the tour would end with a "dance concert" at the Metropolitan Opera House. However, Shawn soon learned that Hall never secured the date at the venue, thus jeopardizing his ability to produce his solo concert in New York, the heart of the market for theatrical and concert bookings. Shawn knew he needed to present his concert there if he were to take his career beyond the vaudeville and pageant circuits. Committed to presenting his solo concert program in the city, he scrambled to rent the Apollo Theater for a Saturday matinee on December 2, 1921.

Shawn was anxious about this gamble and hoped to receive a sign of support from his wife, but the big day arrived without a word from her. He wrote to St. Denis from his dressing room at the fifteen-minute call for his first solo appearance before a New York audience since 1917: "I am dressed made up and ready to go on. . . . I want you to know my last thoughts are for you—and that I feel your loving Spirit brooding over me. I had hoped for a wire from you but none has come."¹⁰⁵

Shawn was genuinely surprised that the matinee attracted a standing room only audience, even without papering the house. (*Musical Courier* described the turnout as a "good sized audience.")¹⁰⁶ Shawn was similarly taken off guard by the greatest applause of his whole life and "a real ovation" that prompted encores for nearly every dance on the program and seven bows for his *Spear Dance Japoneseque*. He was so moved by the reception, in New York of all places, that he struggled to compose himself enough to reset the piano roll on the player piano to accompany his encore, so he called Horst on stage to play live.

After the performance, more than thirty former Denishawn students came backstage to greet him. The photographer Arnold Genthe, whose discriminating eye always vexed Shawn, had only praise to lavish on his performance, especially for *Gnossienne* (1919), a solo set to the music of Erik Satie that conjures an ancient Minoan priest performing rituals in honor of the Snake-Goddess. Genthe called the dance "a genuine contribution." Paul Swan, too, came to Shawn's dressing room. Though the lives and reputations of these two dancers were intimately linked, they had never before met. Shawn was aloof toward Swan, likely because he knew

it would be a liability to be associated with the outlandish Swan, with his black velvet jacket, stage makeup, and bleached hair. Shawn had little sympathy for Swan, who continued to perform in a Carnegie Hall studio for “a ghoulish few” who largely attended to ridicule him. Shawn focused his attention instead on the string of potential agents and managers who came backstage, including representatives from the UBO (United Booking Office) as well as the Shubert and Ziegfeld organizations. The Shubert representative pitched the idea of building a midnight show around Shawn’s concert as a permanent production at the Century Roof, a glassed-in theater overlooking Central Park.

The most consequential of his visitors came at intermission. Producer Daniel Mayer, the “Great Orchestrator,” was one of the leading musical impresarios in all of Europe. He had made a name for himself managing artists such as pianist and composer Ignacy Jan Paderewski and ballet star Anna Pavlova. The stealthy Mayer was eager to add Shawn to his roster, so at intermission, even before seeing the second act invited him to a meeting at his office the following afternoon. It was the precise opportunity he had hoped to create by gambling on the solo tour and the Apollo Theater performance. He went to Mayer’s office the next day and signed a contract on the spot for a fall concert tour. Mayer initially offered Shawn \$1,000 a week for six weeks, less 20 percent of gross receipts. Shawn’s share had to cover all other expenses: advertising, print, press-agent, postage, telegrams, production costs, and salaries. It was a decent deal, but Mayer dangled a second, more lucrative offer before Shawn involving a three-and-a-half year contract on the condition that he convince Ruth St. Denis to join the bill.

Without initially mentioning Mayer’s offer, Shawn repeatedly reached out to an unresponsive St. Denis: “No letter from you for three days, and no wire for my matinee yesterday, and no answer to my wire telling of success.”¹⁰⁷ He eventually did receive a congratulatory response from St. Denis on his return to the New York stage and for finally becoming an “art dancer.” Shawn eventually came forward with the complete Mayer proposition and suggested that she travel east to meet face to face with him and Mayer in Greensburg, Pennsylvania, to discuss logistics and test the waters with a trial concert. St. Denis opened negotiations on this professional venture with a personal proposal: an open marriage. In a letter to him, she justified her desire for an open marriage on the basis “that harmony can only be between [them] in a basis of honesty and freedom . . . each of [them] feeling reasonably satisfied that his own soul is his own and not another’s.”¹⁰⁸

Shawn neither accepted nor refused St. Denis's proposal for an open marriage. Instead, he tried other ways to seduce her into the arrangement. First he wrote her a letter in which he mourns the loss of his youthful, queer self and suggests that she accept the "new man" that he has become, a man that has resurrected from his dead queer body:

Life is a constant dying—a constant dying to make room for other things to be born. And last night, as I lay awake all night after sending my hysterical wire to you, something more died in me—more of the boy who was Teddy—making room for this strange new man who is being born. He was a lovely boy this Teddy, and I loved him very dearly, and so of course I grieve every time he dies—and when he is completely dead I shall be very sorry indeed, although no doubt much better equipped for the battle of life without his impulsiveness, his passion, and his sentimentality.¹⁰⁹

A few days later he tried to dispel any of her concerns about his homosexuality in more explicit terms: "I have not had so much as a flicker of romantic interest in any other person, male or female, since I left you and I have no expectation of having in the near future."¹¹⁰ While trying to convince her that he has reformed, he blamed her for not fulfilling her wifely duties, leaving him to contend with unresolved sexual desire: "I am sex hungry for you in a bitter and terrible way. . . . It has gotten so that I walk the floor hours at night like a fever for the very abstract desire of Woman. I cannot see my own naked body in a mirror without inflaming my sex instinct, and nude pictures in art magazines are like a knife thrust in a wound."¹¹¹ He tells her how he goes to bed at night with a Christian Science pamphlet that he hopes would "kill" his sex desire.¹¹² His "date" with the Christian Science pamphlet is interrupted by noisy neighbors who were "singing their own version of the Song of Solomon." Shawn swears he could hear "flesh entering flesh."

"I have given you my youth, my virginity, the one great love of my life," he wrote, hoping to manipulate her into believing that the only defense against his homogenic nature was for St. Denis to join him on tour. St. Denis knew she had little chance of refusing Shawn in person, so instead she offered the flimsiest of excuses: "I am ready neither in mind nor clothes."¹¹³ Though he recognized they were both in debt, he argued they have borrowed money for lesser things and thus sent her a paid ticket and \$200 to unburden her financial concern. He also appealed to her ego: "I think you are the greatest artist the dance has ever known. I am willing to appear with you, even if I were not

billed at all.” Finally, he appealed to her more material desires, emphasizing that the tour would likely mean they would “clean up \$50,000” each.

It is hard to know which line of appeal cinched the deal, but St. Denis finally agreed to meet in Greensburg, Pennsylvania, to test out a program and iron out the logistics with Mayer. They met on February 24, 1922, the first time the couple had seen each other in months, and performed eight consecutive nights to great ovation. The chemistry was apparently excellent offstage as well, as the ensuing letters between them reflect a renegotiation of their sex lives: “Today I don’t know where sex comes in at all! I’m just chuckling as I remember some things—a not long ago bridal room (for us anyway) at the Blackstone! But today if you please I have the feeling of a child or a sage! The fact of the matter is the more perfect our sex life the less noise it makes!”¹¹⁴

They agreed to a preliminary tour of the South that April, a tour in London in June, and another of the United States in the fall. In her autobiography St. Denis remorsefully reflected: “Why, after all my rebellions and resentments against the school and joint performances, I leaped to the idea of a long-term contract under Mayer is difficult to analyze.”¹¹⁵

They signed a contract with Mayer to appear under the billing “Ruth St. Denis, Ted Shawn, and their Denishawn Dancers” for three and a half years. For the first time since before the war, Denishawn was back again. Shawn wasted no time to act on the news. He rechristened the Ted Shawn Studio in Los Angeles as Denishawn and welcomed back St. Denis to the faculty. In typical fashion, they rushed into plans well beyond their resources and readiness. They explored a real estate agreement with developer and future US senator Ed Fletcher to establish a Denishawn School on his Grossmont estate in San Diego. He was especially eager to support their idea for an America Synchronic Ballet, a national dance school with students from each state in the union. Fletcher promised to help finance the school, so long as they could come up with the initial \$25,000 for the building plans and construction. Unfortunately, they did not even have the \$200 to hire an architect to do the initial land survey.

Mayer and Fletcher were not the only ones interested in investing in Denishawn. Miss Mabel Beardsley, a successful manager of society balls, charity benefits, and private parties, presented Shawn an irresistible offer to establish a branch of the Denishawn School in New York. A well-heeled woman with purple highlighted hair, Beardsley agreed to manage his teaching enterprise, taking charge of advertising, organizing, and managing the school. The offer required no expense on his part, though Beardsley

withheld \$300 per month for subleasing an apartment to him at the Hotel Beaux Arts (8 West 40th Street), facing Bryant Park, from which he taught the occasional private lesson. They eventually found a permanent headquarters for the Denishawn School, a penthouse and studio at the Chatsworth Hotel at 72nd Street near Riverside Park. *Vogue* announced the school's debut twelve-week course, which began on February 1, 1922. The first day of class was covered by the press, which ran one of the only images of Martha Graham in Shawn's class, though she was a fellow faculty member at the time.¹¹⁶ (See Figure 2.21.)

Most of Shawn's days in New York were spent with Horst and Graham. They ate meals, attended performances, and created dances together. Shawn was surprised by how his relationship with Horst had developed during the tour. Writing to St. Denis, he remarked: "Louis's spirit on this trip is the finest I have ever known him. He is younger and sweeter in his nature than I could have imagined. He has been splendid to me, and says that I have won his complete admiration and respect for the way I have acted under these



Figure 2.21. "Ted Shawn Opens Dancing School Here for Busy Bookkeepers and Tired Typists," with Ted Shawn and Martha Graham (*front right*). Denishawn Scrapbook, vol. 9. Courtesy of the Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library.

repeatedly difficult situations. He has a very sweet friendship with Martha that is absolutely respectful and harmless.”¹¹⁷

Shawn relied on them to successfully run the school and did whatever he could to keep them gainfully employed. He leveraged Mrs. Beardsley’s connections to get him and Graham hired at the Gold Room of the Hotel de Beaux Arts for \$200 a week. Shawn was impressed with the offer. Over lunch at a restaurant close to the school, Shawn later proposed the idea that Graham work with department store managers to give a recreational dance class to clerks and salesgirls. Graham outright refused, declaring that she was an artist and found his proposition degrading. Shawn was dumbfounded, unable to reason how she could refuse him while he was supporting both of them. According to Shawn’s account of the ensuing fallout, “Her royal highness stood up from the lunch counter and screamed ‘You can’t talk to me that way.’ She grabbed the whole white tablecloth, pulled it off onto the floor, silver, glassware and all, and ran screaming out of the restaurant. And of course poor fat waddly Louis merely got up and ran after her, and left me there with the irate proprietor and the customers looking.” Shawn followed them to the cab and told them he never wanted to see them again. But the next morning, according to Shawn, Graham showed up at his penthouse door at the Chatsworth, dropped to her knees and started crawling across the floor. “‘Oh, Ted can you ever forgive me? I’m so mortified. I’m so ashamed of myself. Can you ever have the heart to forgive me and take me back into your love—I owe so much to you’ and so on and so on.” Shawn responded: “Oh, for God’s sake get up and dry your tears and we’ll start again fresh.”¹¹⁸

And start again they did, with an innovative project that brought Shawn back to his early experiments with film. He was hired to work on the first “music film,” the brainchild of Broadway theater owner Hugo Riesenfeld, the former music director at major film theaters in New York City. The innovation of the “music film” was to synchronize onscreen action with live musical accompaniment. This was achieved by displaying the head and arms of a musical conductor within the field of the screen, thus allowing live musicians to follow the baton of the pantomimic director permanently wedded to the action. The father of a dancer, Riesenfeld figured the best way to demonstrate his innovation was through dance, thus he filmed twelve music-films in Prizma Color featuring Shawn’s choreography and dancers.¹¹⁹ The dances included *Danse Arabe*, *Valse Ballet*, *Bubble Dance*, and *Egyptian Dance*. Over the course of twelve weeks in spring 1922, the films played at several New York theaters, such as the Rivoli, Rialto, and Criterion. A critic in the

New York Times counted them “among the year’s most significant and satisfying works.”¹²⁰

In the midst of opening the New York school and preparing for the Mayer tour, Shawn developed another vaudeville act, *Javanese Ballet of Masks* for a week’s run at the Grauman Theater in Los Angeles. He also focused on his dancing by taking private lessons with Spanish dance master Manuel Otero at Unity Hall. He also spent a good deal of downtime networking within New York’s artistic and social circles. By day, he modeled for sculptor Allan Clark. By night, he escorted friends to the theater and parties, and other cultural events, including an exhibition at various art clubs throughout New York City that featured a life-sized portrait of him by Max Wieczorek.¹²¹ He also went several times to see the vaudeville-style Broadway production of *Shuffle Along*. He regularly attended the Metropolitan Opera to see and be seen with his friend the opera diva Amelita Galli-Curci. Shawn met the coloratura soprano in 1915 and had remained in touch ever since. He occasionally accompanied her and her husband to dinner. He also appeared on stage at the Metropolitan Opera, as a member of a “farewell committee” convened to honor Anna Pavlova on the occasion of her farewell US tour. On April 25, 1922, at an intermission of Pavlova’s appearance in *Giselle*, the committee of prominent patrons and artists joined the great ballerina on stage to present her with a silver cup. St. Denis purportedly knelt down and kissed the Russian dancer’s hand, while delivering the following message: “We will never see anything in her line so perfect as Pavlova.” Embarrassed by the display, Pavlova yanked St. Denis up to her feet.¹²²

Despite the considerable professional opportunities he created for himself, Shawn was still dealing with overwhelming feelings he described as “depression.” Some days he reserved for traveling out to Great Neck, Long Island, to seek Lillian Cox’s spiritual counsel. Cox had recently given him a copy of the *Bhagavadgita*, which he took with him everywhere, reading it with hopes of instilling the “kill out the attachment” philosophy. His upset worsened as he and St. Denis began to rehearse for their London engagement. As they prepared to reunite their professional lives, they hoped to resolve the seemingly irreconcilable differences in their personal relationship. With the opportunity to travel to London, they made arrangements to seek the counsel of the one man whose experience with dance and the pressures of an unconventional and childless marriage rivaled their own: Havelock Ellis, the great “Saint of Sex” and one of the most outspoken proponents of the eugenics movement.

Unconscious Eugenics, 1922

In the scientific world, Havelock Ellis was best known for his pioneering role in “sexology,” the science of sexuality. With J. A. Symonds, Ellis wrote the first English-language medical book on the topic of homosexuality, *Sexual Inversion* (1897), which posited that “inversion” is an instinct or “congenital element” as opposed to one that is “acquired”—a critical distinction to the depathologization of homosexuality.¹²³ Ellis’s ideas for sexual reform were influenced by the eugenics movement. He corresponded directly with its leading proponents, including its founding figure, Galton, with whom he actively participated in devising strategies to shape public opinion that would eventually lead to legislative reform.¹²⁴ For example, in 1906, Ellis declared St. Valentine the “patron saint of sexual selection” so as to convey the impression that “eugenics had an eminently respectable, romantic, and importantly national past.”¹²⁵

Ellis’s eugenic ideas extended beyond “selective breeding” into the domain of “social hygiene,” or the methodical application of scientific principles to reform the spheres of sexuality, education, and labor. In his book *The Task of Social Hygiene* (1912), he famously argues that “it is the task of this hygiene not only to make sewers, but to re-make love, and to do both in the same spirit of human fellowship, to ensure finer individual development and a larger social organization.”¹²⁶ For Ellis, “re-making love” included advocating women’s suffrage, birth control, and sexual education. It also meant challenging the prevailing Victorian view that dance was a form of moral degeneracy and instead promoting dance as a eugenic means toward sexual and religious fitness.

Shawn and St. Denis initially became aware of Ellis through his article “The Philosophy of Dancing,” which was published by *Atlantic Monthly* in 1914. The article formed the basis of Ellis’s book *The Dance of Life* (1923), his most successful publication in the United States, in which he argues that dancing and architecture are the two “primary and essential arts.” Ellis’s ideas about dance were meant to expand a parochial Victorian view of dance as sexually illicit and culturally degrading. In fact, for Ellis, dancing is the “supreme symbol” of sex and religion.¹²⁷ For example, he explains that the human impulse to dance activates during the “process of courtship,” wherein the males compete not only with other males in a contest of sexual selection but also with females whose “imagination” they must capture.

For Ellis, dancing is an unconscious reenactment of a choreographed battle for individual and racial survival. The “strenuous school of erotic dancing” teaches humans the skills of sexual discrimination. Just as dancing reenacts a primal scene of sexual conquest, so, too, does it propagate religious beliefs by representing sacred myths. Inasmuch as religious dancing reenacts “divine drama[s],” Ellis maintains that dancing is a sign of a religion’s fitness.¹²⁸

In an article about Ellis’s *Dance of Life*, Judith Alter points out that choreographers and writers uncritically embraced his broad and unconditional validation of dance as an art form. She observes the influence that Ellis had on John Martin, Walter Sorell, and Roderick Lange, among others. She also mentions that Shawn had an “admiration” for Ellis, which is an understatement at best.¹²⁹ Shawn completely idolized Ellis with a devotion he often expressed in religious terms. In the inaugural issue of *Denishawn Magazine*, Shawn refers to Ellis as “St. Havelock,” the “Saint of Sex,” and “one of the greatest messiahs” and to Ellis’s article “The Philosophy of Dancing” as “the dancer’s bible.” Shawn even described the experience of meeting Ellis “as holy as the Last Supper” and likened his contact with Ellis to touching “the hem of the garment of Jesus.”¹³⁰

In 1922, St. Denis and Shawn were completing a four-week engagement at the London Coliseum. Shawn received rave reviews for his performances, which catapulted him out from St. Denis’s limelight and made him an internationally acclaimed dancer. Shawn considered the London performances a great artistic and professional achievement, even though the success was somewhat eclipsed by his sadness and jealousy over St. Denis’s public liaisons with other men. Shawn was tortured by St. Denis’s search for “‘romance’ in all directions” and commiserated with Martha Graham, who was similarly heartbroken. Graham was in love with Louis Horst, the Denishawn musical director, who not only refused to divorce his wife but also brought her along with the company to London. Shawn recalled walking with Graham near the theater and thinking: “Here we are in London, the Strand, Fleet Street, Piccadilly Circus, Westminster and it doesn’t mean anymore to us than if we were in Coffeyville, Kansas or Kankakee, Illinois. We were just two miserable souls and we couldn’t have cared less about being in London, and for the first time too.”¹³¹

It was during this trip that St. Denis and Shawn separately met with Ellis at his home in the London suburbs. Shawn recorded the date of the meeting in his diary: Tuesday, June 3, 1922, at 11 A.M. St. Denis had visited Ellis a day earlier, which minimally suggests the highly personal nature of their

talks. In their respective autobiographies, St. Denis and Shawn describe these meetings as philosophical salons on the topic of dance. In reality, they were more like marriage-counseling sessions. In fact, months before these meetings, Ellis mailed Shawn a paper on the topic of “childless marriage,” which strongly suggests that St. Denis and Shawn had already begun to communicate with Ellis about their marital problems.¹³² In a 1969 interview, Shawn exposed additional details about his meeting with Ellis, explaining that he had hoped to meet Ellis above all other Brits, including King George, and that he had imagined the meeting would be like “a charming garden party.” It was quite the contrary.

Well it was a memorable meeting. I went out to his strange bleak, suburban apartment. I don't know what I expected, but this noble head, snow white hair, long patriarchal white beard, and sort of very rough, smelly tweeds. Tweeds always seem damp when they're thick. He sat back in a chair, sort of concave, hands folded, and this strange, high-pitched little voice that I was totally unprepared for. But if I ever came into the presence of a saint! This man, to me, rates as one of the greatest messiahs, one of the avatars. I was—with him, every moment, I was aware that I was in the presence of divinity itself. It was a thrilling, ennobling experience.¹³³

Despite the unexpected sterility of the surroundings, Shawn opened up to Ellis: “Since he was the great saint of sex, and had preached on the beauty and rightness of sex, the art of love—how marvelous, how ecstatic, how right, how wonderful it can be—I began to pour out my heart, the agonies and sufferings that I was going through.”¹³⁴ Shawn must have felt confident talking with Ellis about the state of his marriage, particularly the great shame and embarrassment he felt owing to St. Denis's affairs. Ellis would have been an ideal person to address Shawn's concerns, since he was also in an unconventional and childless marriage. Ellis's biographers tell us that he was impotent. Moreover, like Shawn and St. Denis, Ellis and his wife Edith lived apart for long periods of time, as she preferred the company of her lesbian lover.

As the foremost medical authority on the topic of sexual inversion (a nineteenth-century term for “homosexuality”) and the husband of a lesbian, Ellis was, in some measure, the ideal person to counsel Shawn, who confided in Ellis about his homosexuality. Moreover, Shawn might have confided in Ellis about his suspicion that St. Denis was herself a lesbian.¹³⁵ However, Ellis's response to Shawn's “agonies and sufferings” was not as sympathetic

as Shawn might have expected from his “Saint of Sex.” Ellis replied: “Well I have always maintained that two artists should never marry.” Consequently, Shawn asked Ellis whether he should consider divorcing St. Denis, to which Ellis gave the following contradictory advice: “Once a marriage has been made, it becomes a thing itself. It is a living entity, and . . . once you have created that entity you’ve created something that if you tried to kill it, it would be like murder. This is now your karma. You work it out.”¹³⁶

Shawn was not entirely persuaded by Ellis’s advice to remain married to St. Denis—a decision that would have kept him from ever realizing his eugenic promise. In fact, Shawn questioned the reliability of this advice when he met another of his idols just a few days after meeting with Ellis. At Ellis’s insistence, the British philosopher and poet Edward Carpenter (1844–1929) attended a matinee performance of the Denishawn company at the London Coliseum. Shawn and St. Denis had written in glowing terms about Carpenter and his collection of poems *Towards Democracy* (1883–1902). Shawn likened him to Walt Whitman, especially for his bold declarations of sexual freedom. Comparing Carpenter to Whitman was not entirely coincidental, as Shawn might have known that the two literary giants had once been lovers. In fact, Carpenter wrote *Homogenic Love* (1894), whose neologistic title gave Shawn the language to identify his own same-sex desire. “The Little Green Book” about homosexuality circulated in private. Assisted by a younger man, the frail eighty-year-old Carpenter met Shawn backstage after the performance. They dined together, and, according to Shawn, “a beautiful rapport was established.”¹³⁷

During their meal, Shawn asked Carpenter about the integrity of Ellis’s marriage to Edith, to which Carpenter cryptically responded: “Edith Ellis believed that if society would totally and completely recognize and accept homosexuality as simply one form that is right and normal in the way of a sex expression, give it such complete acceptance that it is never even questioned or thought about as anything but the ordinary experience of life, she believed that this would release enormous stores of creative energy for the benefit of mankind.” After a pause he said very simply, “And so do I.” Shawn described Carpenter’s response as an “epic making statement” that validated his own sexual views: “Of course it was so sweet, so tender, so utterly simple for him to say.” Shawn went on to call his meeting with Carpenter “the most tremendous human contact I ever had.”¹³⁸

Notwithstanding Shawn’s proclivity to exaggerate, his time in London was a life-defining experience, both professionally and personally. That said,

he left London with conflicting advice about the state of his marriage and his desire to procreate from, of all people, an impotent eugenicist and a homosexual poet. Evidently, Ellis regretted the advice he had given Shawn. A month after their meeting, Ellis wrote to Shawn, empathizing with Shawn's "complicated situation."¹³⁹ Ellis rescinded his advice to stay married to St. Denis and instead encouraged Shawn to "be true to his own nature or else suffer the difficulty in attaining harmony between one's own ideals and the facts of life one is up against."

Though Ellis encouraged Shawn to accept his homosexuality "as right and normal," Shawn remained married to St. Denis, at least on paper.¹⁴⁰ He could not easily "murder" his marriage for reasons that were as much financial and artistic as romantic; yet remaining married to St. Denis also meant that he needed to find an alternate way to leave a legacy befitting "the handsomest man in America." If he was not going to fulfill his eugenic promise as a husband and father, then he would fulfill it through his art.