

Dance Pioneer Hanya Holm Was First to Register Choreography

JUDITH NIERMAN

The 1976 Copyright Act was the first U.S. law expressly to make choreography a copyrightable subject matter. However, prior to the Act's effective date—January 1, 1978—choreography made its appearance in the records of the Copyright Office. The first person to register a claim to copyright on a choreographic work was **Hanya Holm** in 1952. The work—the choreography for the Broadway musical *Kiss Me Kate*—was registered as a drama.



Hanya Holm

Hanya Holm (1893–1992) was one of the so-called Big Four of modern dance. The other important dancers included Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, and Charles Weidman. An immigrant from Germany, Holm came to the United States in 1931 to launch a New York branch of the Wigman School. Mary Wigman, born Marie Wiegmann (1886–1973), was a German dancer and pioneer in modern dance as well as a teacher and mentor to Holm. The institution taught the elements of dance as a profession, but also offered classes to amateurs. However, with the rise of Nazism, Holm bought the school in 1936, changed its name to the Hanya Holm School, and became a U.S. citizen.

Holm was a founding faculty member at the Bennington College Summer School of the Dance, which premiered her most well known work, *Trend*, the first modern dance to be accompanied by prerecorded sound. She started a summer dance program at Colorado College in Colorado Springs where she taught summer classes. And she established a performing company, which disbanded in 1944.

Holm was offered the opportunity to choreograph Cole Porter's musical *Kiss Me Kate*, which was performed in 1948. This break led to commissions to choreograph 12 other musicals, including *My Fair Lady* and *Camelot*. In 1960 she directed an adaptation of the tale of Pinocchio for television.

“Choreographic works published prior to January 1, 1978, cannot be registered unless the work tells a story, develops a character, or expresses a theme or emotion by means of specific dance movements and physical actions. Choreography was not mentioned in the 1909 Act, and as a result, dances movements could be registered only if the work qualified as a ‘dramatic work.’”

*Compendium III, Chapter 800,
Section 805.2(D)*

In 1952, Holm registered her copyright claim for the *Kiss Me Kate* choreography, becoming the first choreographer to receive such a registration. The work was registered on February 25, 1952, and received the registration number DU30088. The deposit arrived on microfilm in the form of Labanotation, a written dance notation system that records precise movement using abstract symbols [[Compendium III D805.3\(D\)\(1\)](#)]. Labanotation was developed by **Rudolf Laban**, who was Mary Wigman's teacher.

Copyright law revision study number 28, [Copyright in Choreographic Works](#), written by attorney-advisor Borge Varmer and prepared for the Subcommittee on Patents, Trademarks, and Copyrights as part of the move to revise the 1909 Copyright Act, quotes Holm. Invited to comment, Holm submitted a letter dated January 2, 1960, in which she makes three points: choreography should be subject to copyright; choreography should be named as a separate category of copyrightable matter; and the term “choreographic works” should include dramatic concert pieces, lyric-dramatic concert pieces, satirical concert pieces, and dance in operas, musical comedies, and revues. She concluded, “I realize that the issue is of greatest importance, and I hope that a protective law can be worked out.” ©