

2019

How Can We Know the Dance from the Dance?: Exploring the Complexity of Staging Dance Legacy Works

Elizabeth McPherson

Montclair State University, mcperson@montclair.edu

Author Credentials

Elizabeth McPherson, PhD

Associate Professor; BA and MFA coordinator, Montclair State University

Editor-in-Chief: Teresa Heiland

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.uncg.edu/jmal>

Part of the [Dance Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

McPherson, Elizabeth (2019) "How Can We Know the Dance from the Dance?: Exploring the Complexity of Staging Dance Legacy Works," *Journal of Movement Arts Literacy*: Vol. 5 : No. 1 , Article 1.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.uncg.edu/jmal/vol5/iss1/1>

This Feature Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Dance at Digital Commons @ University of North Carolina at Greensboro. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Movement Arts Literacy by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons@University of North Carolina at Greensboro. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@uncg.edu.

How Can We Know the Dance from the Dance?: Exploring the Complexity of Staging Dance Legacy Works

Abstract

Staging works from our rich concert dance heritage relies on determining what the “real” dance is, particularly when the work is no longer currently performed. Because choreographers frequently alter their choreography, creating multiple versions of a dance, identification of a definitive version can be a complex process. Adding to the complexity, there is the involvement of the stager, performers, and the audience who are each active or passive participants in the ultimate performance of a work. Through conversations with prominent staggers, scholarly discourse, and personal experience, the author investigates some of the key concerns and questions regarding staging dance legacy works in concert dance.

Keywords

staging, heritage, identification, conversations, legacy

For dances that were choreographed for live performance, one may have a semblance of the dance from a video or notation score, but the full essence of the dance remains in performance. In a 1984 panel discussion on issues related to staging dances from notation, choreographer and company director Robert Joffrey affirmed, “Without the dancer on the stage, [the dance is] not really there.”¹ Performances of great dance works from the past, seen by contemporary audiences, keep a dance alive as part of the continuum of dance repertory and legacy. Although there is often more of a focus on new work in the dance community, Doris Humphrey scholar and stager Lesley Main points out, “Why should great dance works be considered less worthy of continuing existence than great plays?”² Professor and author James Penrod goes further in advocating: “Those who are in a position to document, preserve, and revitalize historical dance works should be encouraged to do so because those organizations and individuals enable us to understand our past and dream about our future with an enriched and different kind of perspective.”³ Carrying our past with us is important for current practice to remain grounded and contextualized.

However, staging a dance—especially one that is no longer regularly performed—can present significant challenges in determining what version is the *real* dance. Particularly for choreographers who alter(ed) dances every time they re-visit(ed) them, there can be multiple versions. Each video or notation score presents a snapshot in time of how the dance was performed at that given moment (sometimes including mistakes). A stager may also be working with notes on a music score, photographs, and personal recollections of the choreographer and original or later cast members. What happens when these sources conflict? Is the *correct* version of a dance the first one, the last one, or something in between? Or does one make a hybrid version in a quilt-like style? Does this vary with the dance, the performer, the stager, or the choreographer? Do and should previous dancers’ performances in a role affect subsequent performances? Who makes these choices and why and how? In seeking to answer these questions, I found very quickly, that there are not definitive, global answers because there are so many variables between choreographers and even within the choreographic practice of a single choreographer. However, I gathered perspectives that add value to understanding the complexity of staging dance legacy works for performance.

I began my research by reading panel discussions, articles, and book chapters that discuss and debate these or similar questions. I also reflected on my

1. Dawn Lille Horwitz, “Philosophical Issues Related to Notation and Reconstruction,” *Choreography and Dance*, vol. 1, part 1 (1988): 49.

2. Lesley Main. *Directing the Legacy of Doris Humphrey*. (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2012): 7.

3. Amy Ginsburg and James Penrod, “New Work and Reconstructed Work in the Context of Dance Repertory,” *Dance Research Journal*, vol. 29, no. 1 (1997): 4.

own experiences as a dancer and stager. The core of my research, however, was interviewing colleagues who stage dance works from the past. They are: Paul Boos (George Balanchine Trust), Janet Eilber (Martha Graham Dance Company), Lauren Grant (Mark Morris Dance Group), Jim May (Sokolow Theatre/Dance Ensemble), and Amanda McKerrow (Antony Tudor Ballet Trust). My central question for each conversation was: “When there are multiple versions of a dance, how do you decide what version to stage?” I then let the conversations (in person, by telephone, and by email) evolve, related to the individual respondent’s initial answer. The colleagues whom I interviewed are people I know from my professional work as a dancer, writer, and university professor, and one also happens to be a neighbor. They are expert practitioners in the professional dance field, but also scholars in knowledge of specific choreographic practice. Their bodies are rich archives of their years performing work by the choreographers whose choreography they stage. Bill Bissell and Linda Caruso Haviland elucidate this “body archive” concept:

. . . It is important to remember that “archives” throughout most of Western history has alluded to material objects: important documents and records intended for long-term retention, as well as the sites constructed in which to hold them. The body’s mortality has disqualified it from consideration as an archive, in either sense of the word. Today, our notion of the archive is changing, and scholars, curators, and artists understand the body as a cognitive system that draws on its own experiences and memories.⁴

Dancers and people working with dancers understand the importance of the body as a holder of memory, in fact often calling this concept “muscle memory.” The dance experience of “muscle memory” is frequently the foundation of choreographic transmission even though “muscle memory” can sometimes be inaccurate and/or lacking. Former New York City ballet dancer Bettijane Sills relates that the New York City Ballet dancers in the 1960’s used to joke about Melissa Hayden saying in rehearsal, “It was never like that!”⁵ She was referring to the choreography she was being asked to do not being what she remembered, and this was when George Balanchine was alive and overseeing all of his work. Was Hayden correct that the choreography had changed (very possible) or had she misremembered? It’s difficult to know for sure because memory is so complex. Related to this complexity, the idea of the body as archive goes beyond the dancer’s specific “muscle memory,” including all prior experiences that then affect any

4. Bill Bissell and Linda Caruso Haviland, “Introduction: A Body Comparable,” in *The Sentient Archive: Bodies, Performance, and Memory*, (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2018), xv.

5. Bettijane Sills with Elizabeth McPherson, *Broadway, Balanchine, and Beyond: A Memoir*, (Jacksonville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2019- forthcoming), 95.

subsequent experience, whether directly relevant or not and whether fully conscious or not. The stagers I interviewed for this article use a variety of tools (such as video, photographs, notes, and diagrams) to bolster and support their memories in acknowledgement of the multi-faceted nature of memory.

“Morphing” of Dances

A crucial issue that the stagers must deal with is that differing versions exist of almost every dance that has been performed for a period of time. This is often because of the choreographer re-addressing the dance for varying casts or performance situations. It can also be that the performers gradually “morphed” the choreography, intentionally or unintentionally and then held on to those muscle memories.

In the case of Vaslav Nijinsky’s *L’Après-midi d’un Faune*, Nijinsky notated his ballet, but it also continued to be performed without using his notation or receiving approval by him.⁶ Because of this, there ended up being two distinct and differing versions: one, the version passed down from body to body, and the other, the version preserved in Nijinsky’s notation. In Nijinsky’s notated version, the interactions between the nymphs and faun are more gentle, subtle and very human, in contrast with the more exaggerated “word of mouth” version.⁷ Nijinsky’s notation of *L’Après-midi d’un Faune*, recorded in his own system, was decoded in the late 1980’s by Ann Hutchinson Guest and Claudia Jeschke⁸ which is when the two differing versions were clearly identified and compared.

As another example, famed ballet dancer Alexandra Danilova discussed performing the role of Firebird, in Michel Fokine’s ballet of the same name, with Colonel W. de Basil’s Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo in 1934, noting that she mixed Fokine’s choreography with that of Fyodor Lopukhov’s: “In the de Basil company’s production, there were lots of blank spots in my role, because no one exactly remembered the choreography. So I used to mix the two versions, adding some Lopukhov steps here and there, and they blended well. No one seemed to notice.”⁹ In those times of looser copyright for choreography, Danilova apparently felt free to blend versions of the ballet that carried Fokine’s name as choreographer. One wonders if Danilova’s alterations remained a part of Fokine’s ballet or not. Because of the nature of how ballets were transmitted (largely by “word of mouth”)

6. Ann Hutchinson Guest, “Symposium on Nijinsky’s Faune,” *Library News from the Dance Notation Library*, vol. 7, no. 3 (Spring 2018), 2.

7. Ann Hutchinson Guest, “Symposium on Nijinsky’s Faune,” 2.

8. Ann Hutchinson Guest, ed., *Nijinsky’s Faune Restored*, (Philadelphia: Gordon and Breach, 1991), 8.

9. Alexandra Danilova, *Choura: The Memoir of Alexandra Danilova*, (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1986), 124.

in that time period, each performer's additions could easily become part of the ballet that was passed down.

Mark Morris dancer Lauren Grant gave an example of a ballet "morphing" from recently setting Mark Morris' work *A Lake* on the Mark Morris Dance Group. As she explains it, the video showed a phrase being repeated, but with an altered, and not as complex, spatial pattern by a different group of dancers. The second spatial pattern was much easier for the dancers to do. In knowing Morris' choreographic style so well, Grant doubted that the spacing in the repeat was supposed to be altered to be less complex. Morris confirmed that the phrase should be repeated exactly the same. This is just one example of how dances can get diluted over time. The dancers had unintentionally gravitated to what was easier. In this case, Grant was able to go to the choreographer and find the answer. What happens when the choreographer is no longer alive to answer these kinds of questions?

Determining and Honoring Choreographers' Intentions

The organizations that preserve and protect a choreographer's work and that license the works make distinct choices in determining which version of a dance gets reproduced. This may include carefully selecting the particular video used, clearly identifying multiple versions, and checking with the choreographer when possible. Paul Boos, former New York City Ballet dancer who now works for the George Balanchine Trust, conveyed that the Trust mostly uses videos for staging that were made before 1983, the year of Balanchine's death. This is an effort to be as accurate to the choreographer's vision as possible. Otherwise, if they worked with the most current film, say from 2017, they could be playing a game of telephone in a way, where each subsequent filmed version might get slightly altered until, in a decade or two, the dance will have significantly changed. The general assumption is that Balanchine's last version was his preferred, and so they repeatedly return to this version as the starting point. With Balanchine, the assumption that his last version is his preferred version generally makes sense in the context of his career. He was working almost entirely with a select group of his personal choice of dancers who were groomed in his school. Other choreographers may have made changes over time because the groups of dancers they were working with varied greatly—for instance a professional ballet company versus college students. However, even when working with videos from prior to 1983 for staging Balanchine's work, there may still be differences. Balanchine would change small steps here and there. He was known for adjusting or modifying steps for a new dancer particularly in soloist and principal roles, but occasionally made significant changes to the overall structure of a ballet.

A specific example of Balanchine changing a ballet, very pointedly, is with *Apollo*. Nancy Goldner describes that in 1979 "Balanchine cut the first scene (the

birth of Apollo) and altered the ending. Scene 1 is only four minutes and some seconds long, but it is important. Showing a newborn god, it creates the narrative context for the ballet to come. As performed in most productions (2012), Apollo begins in medias res, with Apollo poised to play the lute.”¹⁰ Balanchine clearly changed the ballet, but not everyone agrees that the altered version improved the ballet. This creates somewhat of a dilemma in staging. Honor the choreographer’s later changes or go back to an earlier version? In this instance, the George Balanchine Trust allows companies to choose which version that they license: either both scenes or just the second scene.¹¹

Boos related that he will look at a variety of videos when he is staging to take in the dance as fully as possible and make note of where there might be variations. Perhaps the film was done on a stage that required a longer or shorter entrance for instance. Then it might be very important to look at other films or videos and see what the musical cue was for an entrance.

Another important aspect Boos conveyed regarding staging Balanchine’s work is the importance of spacing and spatial patterns. Boos uses photos often to show the exact spacing and lines a cast of dancers should be achieving. He mentioned that this attention to line and shape even includes lighting. With Balanchine ballets he said, “You light the form. With other choreographers, it might be the intention.”¹² Knowing and adhering to these priorities keeps the subsequent performances quite similar even with differing dancers. The essence of the dance holds.

Mark Morris’ work, as described by Morris dancer Lauren Grant, is somewhat similar to Balanchine’s in terms of the focus on shape and form. She wrote to me detailing specifics of how she views the stylistic detail of Morris’ work:

The expressivity of Mark's work is conveyed through the specificity of the dancers. When the dancers employ accuracy of time, space, body, and effort, Mark's vision is relayed. His dancers work as a community: they notice the way they operate together in a) time—musicality in his choreography consists of detailed rhythm, tempo, and qualitative articulation; b) space—spatial awareness includes each dancer's relationship with one another in detailed formations, as well as his or her relationship to the stage space; c) body shape and action—dancers work toward a unified approach in manifesting precise lines and movements; and d) effort—nuanced embodiment of movement quality that works intentionally with or against

10. Nancy Goldner, “Leap Before You Look: Honoring the Libretto in *Giselle* and *Apollo*,” in *The Sentient Archive: Bodies, Performance, and Memory*, (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2018), 164–165.

11. Paul Boos, Email correspondence with author, July 12, 2018.

12. Paul Boos, In-person interview with author, August 8, 2017.

that of the music. When these four principles are attended to by the whole cast of dancers, Mark's vision is revealed.¹³

Grant did mention that in more dramatic roles—such as in *The Hard Nut*—there is a focus on characterization, and Boos mentioned the same with Balanchine's work, specifically discussing the dramatic intention in *The Prodigal Son*.

Janet Eilber, former dancer and current artistic director of the Martha Graham Dance Company, also discussed the issue of having many versions of a given work. She described that, "Martha lived so long, she coached multiple versions . . . She was about serving the strengths of a given new dancer in a work. She was about making the performer as powerful as possible."¹⁴ So with a Graham staging, the coaches are given choices between various versions so that the staging can be customized to the dancers in front of them. Because Graham lived so long and coached so many versions, there is a record of the specific modifications she made at various times. Stagers are sent with a book for a dance they are staging that has detailed information. (See figure 1).

Amanda McKerrow, former principal dancer with American Ballet Theatre and now working for the Antony Tudor Ballet Trust, conveyed that with Antony Tudor's work, the atmosphere and dramatization take priority. So, for instance, if the goal is to create a certain dramatic situation, there might be a few choreographic choices, and McKerrow chooses which works best for the group of dancers in front of her. She looks at the videos and documentation available and uses those to see different choices, paying particular attention, like the George Balanchine Trust, to the last version filmed in Tudor's lifetime.

Tudor's working style, with a focus on intent and atmosphere is similar to Anna Sokolow's. Jim May, long time dancer for Sokolow, and stager of her work wrote to me saying:

I usually cut and paste to create a version for the dancer in front of me that fits their soul, which is what the dance is about. This goes for many of her works except *Rooms*, which she never varied because I assume that it had achieved her artistic vision. The depth Anna goes into developing the individuality (and I don't mean just movement) but the depth of character makes reconstructing her works very difficult. On screen it looks so simple, but in the studio the challenge to reject superficiality and not hide behind technique is daunting in today's world of academia.¹⁵

13. Lauren Grant, Email correspondence with author, August 14–18, 2017.

14. Janet Eilber, Telephone interview with author, September 11, 2017.

15. Jim May, email correspondence with author. August 13–14, 2017 and July 5, 2018.

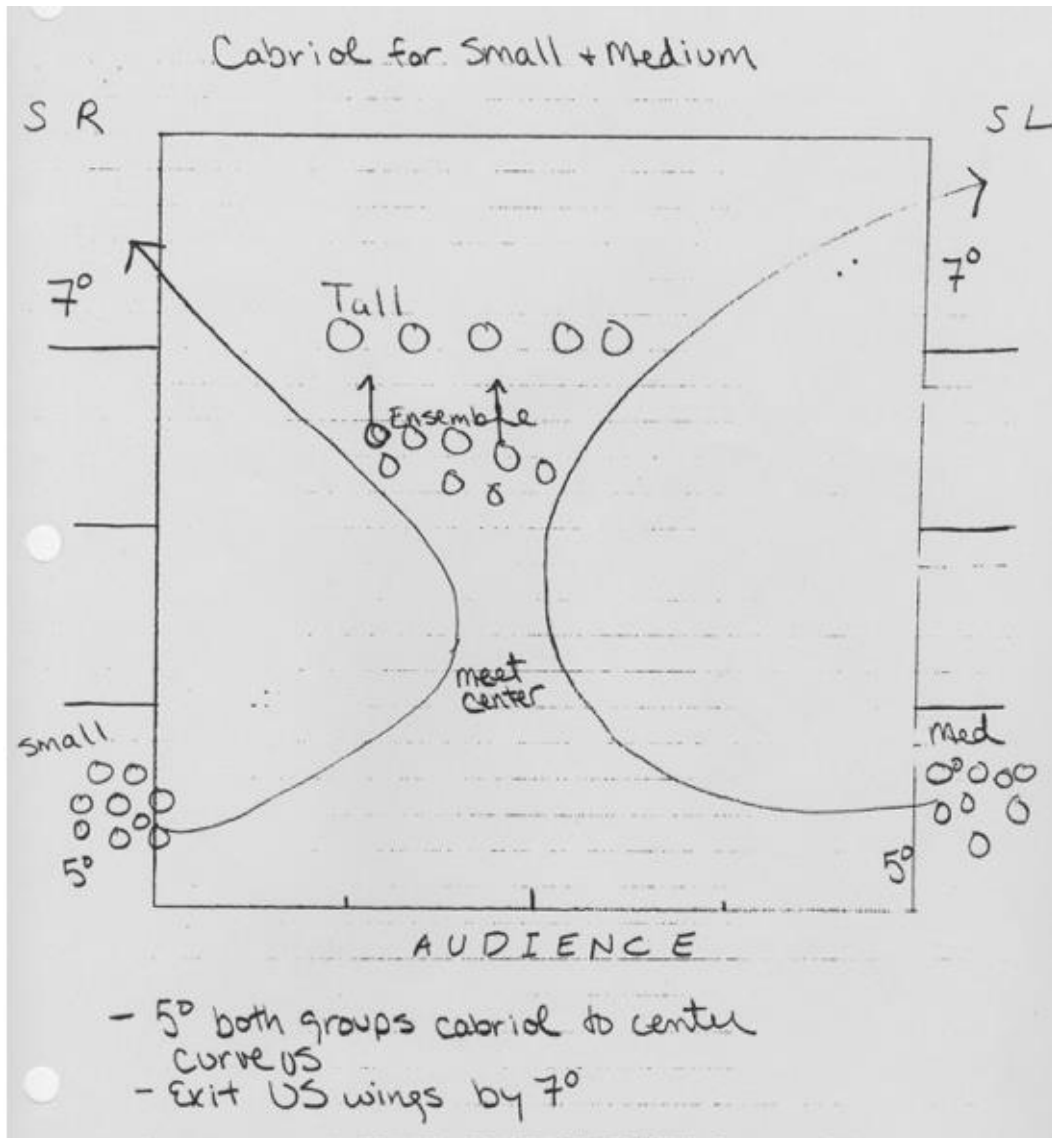


Figure 1: A page from the book for the dance *Panorama* (used with permission of Janet Eilber).

As May describes, in Sokolow's work, the dramatic intent and character always or almost always take precedence, as that was her primary focus. May never shows the dancers a video of a prior performance because he does not want them to duplicate that version. He wants them find their own interpretation and inspiration. In the rehearsal process with May, he makes changes liberally, to make the dance live and get the necessary intent from a specific group of dancers but within the

context of the dance and music. So, for instance, even with alterations, the dancers must make a concrete musical cue.

Importance of the Stager

The stager, also called répétiteur, or régisseur, is of crucial importance. Ideally this person understands the nuances and particularities of a choreographer's style and choreographic sensibility and priorities. They are making the final choices about which dance is the *real* dance in any given staging situation. Alluding to this very issue, professor and author Judy Van Zile quotes the notator Jane Marriett as saying, "I don't notate Balanchine's *Stars and Stripes*—I notate Balanchine's *Stars and Stripes* as taught by Franca Russell."¹⁶ With Marriett's comment, she is emphasizing that Franca Russell's version might have slight variations from another stager's rendition because the ballet was staged from her point of view.

Through my performance and academic career, I have been involved in many stagings of dance legacy works. As someone who stages from Labanotation, I am the initial stager, but whenever possible, I bring in a coach who worked closely with the choreographer. (Amanda McKerrow and Jim May, both interviewed for this article, are two of the specialists who have coached dances I have staged from Labanotation.) This is an important step to add style and authenticity. Someone who knew the choreographer personally brings stories and insight to the coaching sessions that pull my student dancers into the project, increasing their engagement. The coach, in this case, knows the work, ideally, inside and out, and they also know the choreographer's working method and style. The staggers I interviewed worked closely and personally with the choreographers whose work they stage. They each have important embodied knowledge of the choreographer's style, manner of working, and intent that is critical in maintaining and forwarding legacy.

As discussed before, Boos of the George Balanchine Trust emphasized that line, shape, and the spacing are vitally important in Balanchine's work. He said, "Lots of importance on line. Completely structured. A diagonal is a diagonal. A circle is a circle."¹⁷ This differs from the other organizations that stage Tudor, Sokolow, and Graham work and generally have a priority on realizing the concept, theme, or dramatic situation being depicted which could cause an alteration of steps. This does not mean, in most cases, that the choreography is not specific, but that there might be choices to get to a desired result. All in all, it seems that the staggers are mirroring how the choreographers themselves set their work or re-visited it in rehearsing new dancers.

16. Judy Van Zile, "What is the Dance? Implications for Dance Notation," *Dance Research Journal*, vol.17, no. 2 (1985): 44.

17. Paul Boos, In-person interview with author, August 8, 2017.



Figure 2. “Central Park in the Dark” from *Scenes from the Music of Charles Ives* as performed by Montclair State University dancers in 2012. Photo: Robert Cooper, (used with permission).

I had the experience of working with Anna Sokolow on *Ballade* as an undergraduate student. The original idea was that the cast would read their parts from Labanotation, and then Sokolow would coach for intent and style. Well, very early on, she started making changes to suit the dancers in front of her. At a certain point, I remember we, the dancers, looked at each other and tossed the Labanotation scores into the corner. Although all of us were well-versed in reading Labanotation, we were happy to let go of the scores because it was thrilling to have Sokolow re-choreographing on our bodies. Jim May from the Sokolow Theatre/Dance Ensemble came in to coach my student dancers a few years ago in “Central Park in the Dark” from *Scenes from the Music of Charles Ives*, after I had staged the dance from the Labanotation score (see figure 2 for a photo of this performance). I was amused and actually overjoyed to see him mirroring Sokolow’s process. What was working, he left intact; what was missing her central idea and meaning for the dance was altered for the dancers in front of him. The Labanotation score for *Scenes from the Music of Charles Ives* was not made from watching rehearsals of Sokolow’s dance company, but rather rehearsals of a group of college students who had limited training in dance. May, using his extensive knowledge of Sokolow’s choreography and her creative practice, revised elements of the dance to better suit my pre-

professional students in realizing what he knew Sokolow's intentions to be with this choreographic work.

Preparing for the Future with Second Generation Stagers

But what happens when dancers who knew and worked with a choreographer are no longer available to coach or stage a work? With the Graham, Balanchine, and Tudor organizations, they are actively anticipating this predicament by coaching or training new stagers. Some are also involved in creating videos of training sessions, for instance former Graham principal dancer Yuriko coaching "the followers" in *Appalachian Spring*. The Graham Company has tried for years to document what the earlier generations have to say about Graham's work, including how to work with fabric or even to create a hairstyle. Nancy Reynolds, working for the George Balanchine Foundation, has been filming stagers who danced for Balanchine, as they coach roles they danced. These films are designed to be used, particularly in the future when Balanchine stagers may be people who never worked with Balanchine personally. The Antony Tudor Ballet Trust has répétiteurs in training. They like the apprentice-mentor model. They identify people who are dancing now, and then try to have them dance as many Tudor works as possible during their performance careers. In embodying Tudor's repertory, these dancers are developing their own physicalized archive of knowledge and understanding of the choreographer's breadth and style. The Antony Tudor Ballet Trust has created some videos of coaching sessions for a few Tudor ballets and hope to create more to best support future stagers and thus performers of his works.

Performers of the Work: Past and Present

The performers of a work undeniably contribute to it. They are ultimately the ones conveying the work into performance, who can "make or break" how the work is received, and if it conveys the choreographer's intent well. Robert Joffrey stated it simply, "A poor dancer will not make that choreography as exciting as a good dancer."¹⁸ Going further, Labanotator Muriel Topaz contributed, "A real work of art has to be able to survive several interpretations and, in fact, to change—not the steps; it has nothing to do with changing the steps."¹⁹ Dancers must create their own presence in a role that is not imitative of a previous cast member, but yet still conveys the essence of the work. In discussing staging Vaslav Nijinsky's *L'Après-Midi d'un Faune* from the Labanotation score with college dancers, Labanotation expert Jill Beck described the questions that arose from the dancers who were

18. Dawn Lille Horwitz, "Philosophical Issues Related to Notation and Reconstruction," *Choreography and Dance*, vol. 1, part 1 (1988): 49.

19. Dawn Lille Horwitz, 48.

reading their own parts from the Labanotation score, “Where was the boundary between the choreography that was in the score [. . .] and the performance we had to develop in our dancing? And in that border area between the dancers and the dance, how much creativity was allowed? How much was demanded?”²⁰ These examples are important considerations for staggers and dancers to investigate and address.

Dances generally fit into the context of the time in which they were created, but when they are staged years later, the goal is that they have a current vitality. This does not always happen. I have seen a few stagings where the dance did not really hold up; it looked stale. In one of these instances, the dancers were not taking risks, and it appeared they were trying almost too hard to perform the dance “correctly.” It is so important that the dancers are nurtured to live the movement fully, which goes beyond perfection of steps. The choreography needs to have relevance to them for it to take on a vibrant life through their bodies. This can start with giving background and context on the choreographer and the dance. Personal stories about the choreographer, the choreography, and/or the choreographic process help connect the dancers to the dance. At a conference on staging dances held in 1992 by the Charles Weidman Foundation, Labanotation expert Ray Cook spoke about staging Humphrey’s *The Shakers* and telling the dancers that the dance is not about religion but about sex. He said, “This gets them interested right away.”²¹ This was Cook’s method of drawing the dancers into the choreography to increase their personal interest and investment.

Retired professor, stager, and professional dancer Rochelle Zide Booth discussed in a 2010 panel discussion on staging dances from Labanotation that dancers “need to feel that they can be creative within a framework of an existing piece that they were not a part of to begin with.”²² In some works, there may be choices the performers are allowed to make or improvisational moments that encourage a personal connection. Or perhaps, the performers are reading the notation themselves as happened with *Soiree Musicale* for New York Theatre Ballet in 2010.²³ The cast members learned Labanotation as they were reading their parts in the score. Similarly at Juilliard in 1989, the student dancers (myself included) read our individual parts from the Labanotation score of Vaslav *Nijinsky’s L’Après-Midi d’un Faune*. Reading my own part allowed a personal connection and interpretive experience not unlike having a choreographer create work on a dancer because it promoted an individual voice and personal responsibility over merely copying steps someone showed me. As well, the performers of a dance legacy work

20. Dawn Lille Horwitz, 48.

21. Charles Weidman Dance Foundation, “Experiences in Reconstruction,” Panel Discussion, May 10, 1992, New York City: 15.

22. McPherson, Elizabeth, “Labanotation as Teacher,” *Ballet Review*, Summer 2011: 81.

23. Kristin Jackson, *DNBulletin*, vol. 12, no. 1 (Winter 2010), 1.

become part of the continuum of history in carrying a work forward. Director of the Language of Dance Center, USA, Tina Curran expressed this sentiment:

There is something I am hearing over and over again: how a profound sense of legacy comes out of the process of performing a masterwork, whatever the time it was created, and being a part of the process of recording it for preservation. There is also a sense of responsibility and pride that I've found in the dancers with whom I have worked. Looking back and embodying the movement and voice of an artist, then having the responsibility to carry that forward, is a powerful experience.²⁴

The Ghosts of Previous Performers of a Work

Another consideration is that previous performers of a work can impact future performances, positively or negatively. Perhaps the stager or current dancers read written accounts with clear descriptions of particular performers' interpretations, or perhaps they observe prior performances on video or consult photographs. Audiences as well may carry those prior performances in their minds when they watch a work being performed. When a role is closely linked to one performer, this influence must be more pronounced. Consider Martha Graham in *Lamentation*, Arthur Mitchell in *Agon*, or José Limón in *The Moor's Pavane*. How does a present or future performer learn from, without imitating, the *ghosts* of these roles?

A few years ago I was impressed by the performance of Pablo Francisco Ruvalcaba, as the Moor in *The Moor's Pavane* with the Limón Dance Company, so I sought him out to ask him about his interpretive process for this article. Over the past ten to twelve years, he has performed the role of the Moor countless times. He described how his main objective was to "tell the story."²⁵ Because his body, training, and experiences are different from other performers of the role, including Limón, Ruvalcaba explained that his performance could not be an exact duplicate even if that were his objective, which it was not.²⁶ He would, however, "often view other dance artists' interpretations as inspiration to grow the role, sometimes trying on certain choices to see if they would fit his telling of the dance. Most of the time they did not, but they did allow him to consider different nuances of reaction and depth of feeling that—together with his own experiences—would help him hone his own 'Moor.'"²⁷ Ruvalcaba then let each performance develop in that particular time and space and in relationship to his other cast members, concentrating on

24. McPherson, Elizabeth, "Labanotation as Teacher," *Ballet Review*, Summer 2011: 87.

25. Pablo Francisco Ruvalcaba, In-person interview with author and email communication, July 19–25, 2018.

26. Pablo Francisco Ruvalcaba.

27. Pablo Francisco Ruvalcaba.

developing his own interpretation.²⁸ He noted that “steps are only the words,” but that what is important is “how you say the words.”²⁹ This echoes researcher Catherine J. Stevens’ statement that “. . . the art and meaning is not inherent within the steps themselves, but instead is found in the relations between the elements.”³⁰ The personal investment of the dancer in performing the dance is a vital component of making a dance relevant and meaningful to an audience and to situating a performance as an actuation of the *real* dance.

Engagement of the Audience

If the dancers are deeply engaged in the work, that is the first step toward *buy in* from the audience, but there can be other ways to assist this. Ray Cook said, “So you have to make an educated guess, not guess, but decision as to how it’s going to be done and go for it and direct it the way you think you would like the audiences of today to see it. It doesn’t mean you change the steps. It doesn’t mean you change the relationship of the movement to the music. But there are other things that do get changed.”³¹ He goes on to talk about intent and motivation. McKerrow spoke about wanting to “get it right” with each staging and stay far away from the dreaded “dated” word³² referring to a piece that lacks vitality and currency. In recently staging Charles Weidman’s *Brahms Waltzes* from Labanotation for university dancers, I altered the costumes to eliminate the many ribbons tied in bows and just be simple costuming in gray leotards and skirts. The ribbons seemed to date the dance and create a kind of sentimentality that is not present in the dance otherwise. I do not think Weidman was going for sentimentality, at least not in the kind of ribbons and bows way, but he created and costumed this dance decades ago when fashion/taste/style were different. I wanted the dance to be seen for its choreographic merit today and not be judged negatively as stale because the costumes dated it. If a work lacks relevance for dancers and audiences of today, it may cease to be performed.

Final Thoughts

While defining exactly what makes a given performance an accurate rendition of a dance is difficult to describe in words, my research for this article brought me to

28. Pablo Francisco Ruvalcaba.

29. Pablo Francisco Ruvalcaba.

30. Catherine J. Stevens, “We Dance What We Remember: Memory in Perceiving and Performing Contemporary Dance,” in *The Sentient Archive: Bodies, Performance, and Memory*, (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2018), 87–109.

31. Charles Weidman Dance Foundation, “Experiences in Reconstruction,” Panel Discussion, May 10, 1992, New York City: 17.

32. Amanda McKerrow, Telephone interview with author, August 30, 2017.

the point of identifying that it is when a performance carries the essence of that dance. Stagers, coaches, performers, and even the audience can contribute to this. What the essence of the dance is varies from dance to dance and relates to the choreographic process and priorities of the choreographer of the work in question. And there may be multiple versions of *the dance* if we are looking at exactness of steps and spacing because a dance is more than steps—there is an inherent flavor, style, or content that transcends the exact steps. Scholar and stager Lesley Main expresses this idea well: “As a director, I aim to create a compelling theatrical experience by exploring what a work was in the past in order to discover what it could become in the present.”³³ A great stager identifies the essence of a dance and nurtures the dancers to embody it, and then the dancers have the task of transmitting it to an audience.

The stagers I spoke with feel a tremendous weight of responsibility in passing on legacy and promoting a living and activated archive. They each have worked closely with the choreographer in question and have a personal attachment to the work and deep respect for it. They are adamant about the importance of the works continuing to be performed. Professor and author James Penrod expresses their sentiments: “Knowledge of our dance heritage—kinesthetically, visually, and culturally—informs and gives meaning and context to the dance works being created today.”³⁴ History enriches us, and as attested to by the stagers quoted in this article, maintaining our dance legacy with integrity to the choreographer’s intentions and the essence of their choreographic works is very much present and alive.

References

- Beck, Jill. “Recalled to Life: Techniques and Perspectives on Reviving Nijinsky’s *Faune*.” *Choreography and Dance*, vol. 1, part 3 (1991): 45–79.
- Bissell, Bill and Linda Caruso Haviland. “Introduction: A Body Comparable.” In *The Sentient Archive: Bodies, Performance, and Memory*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2018, 19–22.
- Boos, Paul. Email correspondence with author, July 12, 2018.
- . In-person interview with author. August 8, 2017.
- Charles Weidman Dance Foundation. “Experiences in Reconstruction.” Panel Discussion. May 10, 1992. New York City.
- Danilova, Alexandra. *Choura: The Memoir of Alexandra Danilova*. New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1986.

33. Lesley Main, *Directing the Legacy of Doris Humphrey*. (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2012): 6.

34. Amy Ginsburg and James Penrod, “New Work and Reconstructed Work in the Context of Dance Repertory,” *Dance Research Journal*, vol. 29, no. 1 (1997): 4.

- Eilber, Janet. Telephone interview with author. September 11, 2017.
- Guest, Ann Hutchinson, ed. *Nijinsky's Faune Restored*. Philadelphia: Gordon and Breach, 1991.
- Guest, Ann Hutchinson. "Symposium on Nijinsky's Faune." *Library News from the Dance Notation Library*, vol. 7, no. 3 (Spring 2018): 1–6. http://www.dancenotation.org/news/Library_News/library_v12_n3.pdf
- Ginsburg, Amy and James Penrod. "New Work and Reconstructed Work in the Context of Dance Repertory." *Dance Research Journal*, vol. 29, no. 1 (1997): 1–4.
- Goldner, Nancy. "Leap Before You Look: Honoring the Libretto in *Giselle* and *Apollo*." In *The Sentient Archive: Bodies, Performance, and Memory*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2018, 146–182.
- Grant, Lauren. Email correspondence with author. August 14–18, 2017.
- Lille, Dawn. "Philosophical Issues Related to Notation and Reconstruction." *Choreography and Dance*, vol. 1, part 1 (1988): 37–53.
- Main, Lesley. *Directing the Dance Legacy of Doris Humphrey*. Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2012.
- May, Jim. Email correspondence with author. August 13–14, 2017, and July 5, 2018.
- McKerrow, Amanda. Telephone interview with author. August 30, 2017.
- McPherson, Elizabeth. "Labanotation as Teacher." *Ballet Review*, Summer 2011: 80–87. http://www.balletreview.com/images/Ballet_Review_39-2_Labanotation.pdf.
- Ruvalcaba, Pablo Francisco. In person interview with author and email communication. July 19–25, 2018.
- Sills, Bettijane with Elizabeth McPherson. *Broadway, Balanchine, and Beyond: A Memoir*. Jacksonville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2019 (forthcoming).
- Stevens, Catherine J. "We Dance What We Remember: Memory in Perceiving and Performing Contemporary Dance." In *The Sentient Archive: Bodies, Performance, and Memory*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2018, 87–109.
- Van Zile, Judy. "What is the Dance? Implications for Dance Notation." *Dance Research Journal*, vol.17, no. 2 (1985): 41–47.