

Volume X
No. 3
Spring
2016

Library News

From the Dance Notation Bureau

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Dance Notation Bureau Library

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Library News is published four times a year
in New York

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The DNB gratefully acknowledges funding support from:

New York State Council on the Arts, New York
City Department of Cultural Affairs, National
Endowment for the Arts, Alphawood Foundation,
The Harkness Foundation for Dance, The
Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, Jerome Robbins
Foundation, The Antony Tudor Trust, Jody and
John Arnhold, and our individual contributors
and members.

How I Got Hooked on Labanotation (Part One)

by Billie Mahoney

At age 16, in my senior year of high school, I was hired to take over teaching the classes at a dance studio in Independence, Missouri, which was more than an hour bus ride from Kansas City. It was during World War II, and the owner wanted to follow her husband to the army camps, but her mother didn't want to give up the school. I was prominently known as a performer who could do tap, ballet, acrobatic and baton twirling, all of which were taught in the school. So I was able to be excused from high school gym class and study hall to leave school every day at 2:00 o'clock and teach classes from 4:00 to 9:00 P. M. and all day Saturday. How to remember all the different dances taught in those classes? Word Notes were the only option on that long bus trip to and from the studio.

In 1948, as a senior in college majoring in Foreign Languages, the noted French author André Maurois was a visiting professor teaching a course in the Art of Biography. We were assigned to write the biography of anyone of our choice. I chose Vaslav Nijinsky, who was still alive. In doing research I not only learned about Albert Zorn's notation, but in the same publication came across an article about Laban's system of recording movement, which I found very interesting.

The following summer of 1949, I ventured to Colorado for the eight-week summer session at Colorado College in Modern Dance with Hanya Holm. Her assistant was Alwin Nikolais (Nik), who taught a course in his Choroscript, which was based somewhat on the Laban System. Nik used two staves, one for arms and legs, and the other for movements of the torso. The symbols were music notes to indicate timing placed in the columns of the staff with the stems pointing in the direction of the movement. This was fine for stepping forward, backward, side and diagonally, which is what I remember most of those early Modern classes with Hanya and Nik – moving through space in all directions, focus, and feeling that space. I also remember that Laban's daughter, Juana de Laban, visited Hanya that summer which furthered my interest in Laban.

Back home in Kansas City, resuming my performing, which incidentally had paid my way through the University, I would be asked what I had learned in Colorado. Being a "fancy" dancer¹ I would say, "all we did was walk." Then in January, 1950, I was hired as the ballet teacher in a prominent Oklahoma City dance school, again with many dances to devise. It was amazing how concepts learned the preceding summer about direction, focus, moving in space, and from composition classes, were so useful. But as in the past I resorted to word notes as I found Nik's Choroscript too unwieldy to make notes for the dances -- although the concept was appealing.

Then that summer of 1950, having heard so much about Connecticut College from the New York dancers at Colorado, I determined to venture East. I had really been turned on to Modern Dance. After the long train ride from Kansas City, I had to change trains in New York City, and took a cab from Penn Station to Grand Central, and with my first experience being in New York City, thought "Wow, someday?"

¹A "fancy" dancer is one who performs ballet, toe, tap and acrobatic.

Martha Hill was heading the Connecticut College program of the American Dance Festival. The six-week course included technique classes with Doris Humphrey and José Limon, composition with Doris and Pre-classic dance forms with Louis Horst (Picture 1). AND a course in Laban's system of Dance Notation taught by Els Grelinger (Picture 2). The concepts easily fell into place for me, and I notated a Sarabande which I had composed for Louis' class. Ann Hutchinson came to visit the final weekend, and I learned about the Dance Notation Bureau in New York City.



Picture 1 Composition Class with Louis Horst



Picture 2 Notation class with Els Grelinger

Arriving in New York City that August with tap shoes and batons, (having learned that my type of dance was much more marketable than Modern Dance), I was immediately booked into clubs on Long Island and New Jersey, as well as on major television shows². I soon started learning my way around the city, about dance classes, etc. and getting a new act staged. While breaking in the new act, I became thoroughly engrossed in the new Jazz Dance classes, which to me felt like the rhythms and footwork of tap dance combined with the body movement of modern dance. Peter Gennaro and Jon Gregory were the first jazz teachers in New York and were popular with the Broadway and TV dancers. Taking classes from each, I found Peter's classes more ballet oriented and lighter, and Jon's a stronger more grounded style like modern dance and more suited to my body type.

It was during this time that I finally found my way to the Dance Notation Bureau on 20th Street, which was in a walkup apartment building filled with the stench of coal smoke, and was enrolled in the Intermediate Notation class taught by Judy Bissell. Then along with

² The Tonight Show, Ed Sullivan Show, Arthur Godfrey and Friends, Jackie Gleason special, and more.

classmate, Muriel (Mickey) Topaz, who had studied with Ann Hutchinson at The Juilliard School, we moved on to the Advanced level and Teacher Training with Lucy Venable as our teacher, all within a year.

Eager to share my knowledge as a Certified Teacher of Labanotation, I encouraged some of the jazz dance students to take a course and started notation classes of my own at Showcase Studios; then was given space to teach in a Conference Room of the Hotel Belvedere where I lived. In the jazz classes with Jon Gregory I was fascinated by his innovative movements and practiced notation by analyzing and notating the movements. By becoming proficient in the detail, I was asked to be his assistant. It was during this time that Albrecht Knust came to visit the Bureau and held some classes. When I questioned Knust about how to write one of Gregory's moves, which was the fingers walking down the other arm, I remember he commented, "We've never seen a move like that."

In 1956 Gregory left New York to become Dance Director at 20th Century Fox, and a short time later a new jazz dance innovator by the name of Luigi arrived from Hollywood. I was in his first class at The June Taylor School, and after every class took time to break down the movements into Labanotation. It wasn't long before he asked me to help with his classes, and I became his first New York assistant.

And it was during this time, (mid-Fifties through Sixties) that I was invited to teach at the Dance Notation Bureau, which was then located uptown near Columbus Circle, and a long career was begun at the Bureau ranging from faculty to Education Director, from Board member to Executive Committee as Treasurer, and whatever. The Bureau had many outreach programs. Ann Hutchinson had started the Jr. Dance Notators, a program with regular sessions with well-known dance artists teaching a master class, which we would notate and publish in the Jr. Dance Notators' Bulletin. I particularly remember a tap dance session with Paul Draper and still use some of that material in my tap classes today.

Our goal was to learn all we could about dance, music, different technique styles, and what might be needed to be included in a dance score. Prominent leaders in dance such as Martha Hill, Hanya Holm, John Martin, and George Balanchine were supportive of the Labanotation system.

We had Forums, and it wasn't all that difficult to get notable guests to take part. As jazz dance classes were still new, we had a panel discussion on "What is Jazz?". When I invited Jack Cole to be on the panel, he declined with the comment, "Dancers shouldn't talk about dance." Really? Guests were Billy Taylor, who had a radio show on jazz music; Matt Mattox; historian Mura Dehn and others. I taught a jazz dance class (picture 3) and my regular students performed a number which I had created and notated, and the notation was distributed.



Picture 3 Dance Forum on "What is Jazz", Mahoney teaching Jazz Class (c. 1961)

The subject of another Forum was Choreographers and Composers, with Hanya Holm, and some well known Broadway composers and dance music arrangers, such as Trude Rittmann, discussing the trials and successes of putting together a Broadway show.

Matteo³ was invited to teach us the intricacies of Bharata Natyam, a form of Classical Indian Dance. We experienced writing facial twitches and positions for parts of a finger. The more we learned, the more we could see the need for Labanotation, and many new developments took place during those years prior to the publication of the 1970 edition of "Labanotation" by Ann Hutchinson.

We had yearly Dance Notation Conferences and our Philadelphia colleagues and others from out of town would come to the Bureau for panel discussions, to share our latest explorations and to learn of new developments.



Picture 4 Billie with Leonide Massine at the DNB



Picture 5 Billie assisting Jose Limon at the Juilliard (1972), with Martha Hill

As the original purpose of the Dance Notation Bureau was as a "clearing house" for notation systems, it was agreed to invite practitioners of other systems to enlighten us. We had a course in Benesh Notation, one with Charles B. McCraw, whose system Scoreography was being supported by Agnes de Mille, and then the crowning jewel was when Leonide Massine came to New York to work with Robert Joffrey. Massine agreed to introduce his notation system at the Dance Notation Bureau (picture 4), and in learning his system (which I believe was based on that of Stepanov), we were able to show him the advantages of Labanotation in the situations his system had not been able to deal with.

To this day I use Labanotation for my daily tap classes to remember the routines for several different classes and to devise floor plans for various performing venues.

It is through Labanotation that I have had the opportunity to meet and work with legends of the dance world, from Leonide Massine to George Balanchine and Eddie Villella to José Greco, and to be on the Dance Faculty of the Juilliard School alongside Hanya Holm, Anna Sokolow, José Limon (picture 5), Ethel Winter and Helen McGehee among others, and to earn the respect of José and Helen, who put their rehearsals in the charge of this "fancy" dancer from Kansas City.

Part Two of "How I Got Hooked on Labanotation" will appear in an upcoming issue of the DNB *Library News* and will cover more exciting experiences that came through documenting dance in Labanotation including the recording of the Twist with Chubby Checker.

³ American dancer and choreographer who was an authority on ethnic dance forms. His 1990 book "The Language of Spanish Dance" included descriptions in Labanotation.