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# Library News

From the Dance Notation Bureau

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### Dance Notation Bureau Library

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## Giving My Works, *Rainwood* and *Ariadne*, New Life through Labanotation

by  
Ze'eva Cohen

In the summer of 2009, as I approached my retirement from Princeton University, whose dance program I founded and directed since 1969, the questions, "What do I leave behind to future generations of dancers?" and "How do I contribute to the creative spark of future artistic directors and dancers as they engage in giving new life to historic dance heritage?" predominated my thoughts and seemed paramount.

The thought that the notation of *Rainwood* would be my retirement present of choice from Princeton, with—as it turned out—substantial funding from my own impoverished dance foundation, was a huge surprise to my close colleagues. Even more surprising was my subsequent decision to personally fund the notation of my solo *Ariadne*.

*Rainwood*, choreographed in 1978, is possibly my most timeless work. Choreographed for seven dancers of single or mixed gender, it has been performed by many major national and international dance companies including Batsheva of Israel, Boston Ballet, Tanzprojekt of Munich and several regional and educational institutions in the USA. As it turned out, this became my most commercially successful work, even though it is the most abstract and enigmatic one. *Ariadne* is its polar opposite.

*Ariadne*, choreographed in 1985, is a solo work for a woman. It represents my particular expertise in solo repertory. It is dramatic, albeit gentle, and requires building a character and creating an inner sustainable (and substantive) narrative.

#### Background:

In the mid-1960's, when I was a student at Juilliard, having just come from Israel with some working knowledge of English and having to hold seven part-time jobs to support myself, the study of dance notation felt painfully slow and totally unnecessary. Reluctantly, after Martha Hill and my notation teacher Muriel Topaz explained that I would not graduate if I did not pass the two-year mandatory notation studies, I joined the class and barely received a passing grade.

Frankly, I did not give much thought to preservation in my early years. Additionally, since I was the instinctive/intuitive kind of dance artist to whom the gestalt of any work came so clearly and immediately, slow analysis, such as notation, seemed an obstacle to "getting there."

I thought in those years that it was sufficient to "save" my work in my kinetic memory; my written notes describing each step of any dance I performed or

choreographed; my own method of writing choreographic patterns in relationship to the music; spatial designs that I learned from my dance notation studies (the only easy and useful part for me at the time), and occasionally stick figure drawings with some comments about dynamics or movement qualities. Also, I had a super-8 camera for recording and the advent of the video camera was on the horizon.

### **Forty-five years later, this is how I came around:**

“Recognizing the signs” was one of the wisdoms I learned to respond to in my more mature life. Here are some of them: In the summer of 2008, Utah’s Repertory Dance Theater (RDT) acquired *Ariadne* for their fall season, entitled “The Messengers.” A year later, they acquired *Rainwood* for their season’s “Elements,” featuring nature and environmental preservation.

In the spring of 2009, as I was thinking of my April 2010 Retirement Tribute Concert at Princeton University, it seemed obvious that bringing RDT to perform these works as part of this concert was timely, and a “natural” choice.

Then the question of preserving these works reoccurred as they were being reconstructed and rehearsed in preparation for subsequent performances. What would be the most lasting media? At first, the option of using only videotaping seemed sufficient as video cameras have greatly improved, and with the help of two cameras we could capture both the distant and close-up views of the works. But the obsolete nature of quickly changing technological equipment of today became a deterring thought. The sign came across my brain, long before I rationalized this, read: “dance notation.”

### **As trusting of “signs” as I thought I was, I never made the inquiry call to the Dance Notation Bureau (DNB):**

Shortly after my revelation, I happened to run into Margot Lehman, a long time member of the DNB Board. Her response to my questioning the prospect of notating *Rainwood* and, furthermore, with no funding in sight, was enthusiastic and encouraging. She suggested I discuss my inquiry with Kristin Jackson, director of programs, at the DNB. Several months passed and I still did not make the call. The option of notation receded into the distance. Then, one golden Fall Sunday afternoon, I ran into Kristin at the Alice Tully Hall coffee shop in Lincoln Center. Kristin had already heard from Margot, and in addition to communicating to me her strong belief in the necessity of preserving my choreographic legacy, convinced me that there must be a way to do this.

I learned that it was too late to apply for the American Masterpieces Grant, sponsored by the National Endowment for the Arts but I had a strong sense, at this junction of my life, of wanting to give back to the dance field a little of the great gift given to me as a dance artist. With the generous parting gift I had received from Princeton University plus funds of my own, I was able to commission the notation of *Rainwood*.

In the summer of 2009, as I was working with RDT on both *Rainwood* and *Ariadne* in Salt Lake City, Sandra Aberkalns began the notating process of *Rainwood*. How she managed to squeeze in the preliminary sketch of *Ariadne* as well remains a puzzle to me!

Over these two intensive weeks together at RDT, I learned many things. One of which was how much richer the work became when an astute observer such as Sandra looked at it. Also, in my many conversations with her and after seeing the final score of *Rainwood*, I understood that the dance notation itself has evolved over the years to become a much more creative and open process where new language and symbols may be created to suit the particular stylistic aesthetic of different artists and different works.

I was also appreciative of the substantial historical, technical, and stylistic information given in the score about the work, including suggestions for its reconstruction by future staggers. Knowing that the DNB has its library and archive, which stores and preserves music and visual material associated with the work, was also reassuring.

My hope is that the dance community, as run by various institutions, whether professional or educational, will find ways to connect with and acquire the scores of *Rainwood* and *Ariadne*. I also hope that future staggers, artistic directors, and dancers will not only sweat over the precision of the notation’s instructions, but will allow themselves some freedom as they bring new meanings and freshness to my works, *Rainwood* and *Ariadne*.

## Staging Dances from Labanotation Scores

by  
Odette Blum

Preparation begins with researching the literature and background materials about the choreographer, the choreographer's style and about the dance, including the introductory information in the preface to the score which provides much information about the dance. Ray Cook in his *Dance Director*<sup>1</sup> goes into great detail about this preparation and his book should be read by anyone beginning this process.

As time goes by there are fewer people with a practical knowledge of the styles of the modern dance pioneers and their successors. As the early scores of their dances were staged it was found that some stylistic elements had unknowingly been assumed. I am not referring to the details of movement in the score and the choices made in writing, which are important factors in contributing to the style, but of particular qualities that are not always apparent, e.g. "Fall and Recovery" is a basic element of the Humphrey style but there is little in the scores that provides this information. Take the 9 count phrase<sup>2</sup> in Humphrey's *The Shakers*: in counts 4 & 5 & the pliés and relevés (see illustration below) should be performed as a fall and recovery i.e. drops into the pliés with a rebound and suspension onto the relevés, but this information is not indicated.

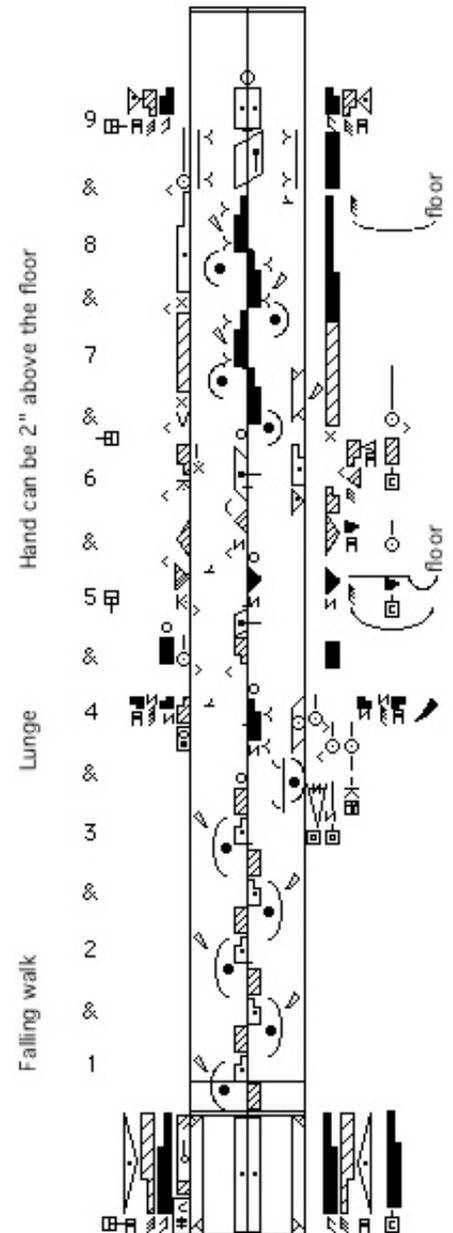
Most students in contemporary dance have no experience in these styles since techniques and styles have changed. This is a problem for the younger generation of dance directors staging works of the past. A film can provide a sense of the style, assuming it is a good representation of the dance - when performed, by which group and under whose direction. However, there is little available visually in motion on how the basics of the style are achieved. Films of choreographers rehearsing a dance would be helpful but there are few of these to accompany dance scores. There is an excellent film of Sokolow rehearsing *Odes* in the Department of Dance at The Ohio State University, filmed by the Department of Photography & Cinema. This film provides a clear picture of the passion and intensity with which Sokolow rehearsed and which she expected from her dancers. This could be helpful to staging any Sokolow work and, indeed, any pre post-modern choreographer's work.

After the research is completed the study of the dance and music scores with the audio CD begins. Pre-computer dance scores had pages of repeat signs, sometimes referring back several pages, making scanning impossible, so pencil in what is needed, perhaps supports only, rhythmic patterns definitely. This enables one to go through the score while listening to the music to find the relationship between the two, and to see the simultaneous relationships between the phrases on several staves, particularly crucial in canon forms.

Scan for the choreographic structure: thematic material, variations, repetitions, relationships between individuals and groups, floor plans, etc. I think it is crucial for an understanding of the dance to first learn and perform one part throughout, regardless of how many times one may have seen the dance. If that is impossible then learn a series of parts that together achieve that result. This provides an understanding of the flow of the dance, its phrasings (which may take time to discover through performance), transitions, climaxes, dynamics, relationship to the music.

Direction symbols in any score can be read in two ways, either as arriving at a specific location, or as having a spatial intent. Nowadays a step is generally performed with heels down first, in the past a step with the toes down first was assumed. It is necessary to know the style and/or the period in order to make informed choices. Thankfully, these days more stylistic elements are included in dance scores.

Take note of thematic material that could be taught first, or used for auditions, and, if teaching students, phrases that may have technical challenges, which could then be practiced apart from the dance.



9 Count Phrase from *The Shakers* by Doris Humphrey

A visiting director should consult with the in-house colleague when an audition is needed for students, not all shine in that situation; there is no way to know how responsible a student will be, or whether one may have what is required e.g. a strong rhythmic sense that can maintain a constant rhythm in silence for *Water Study*.

Recording rehearsals is a very helpful and time saving tool. It allows the director to see, evaluate, think through, in one's own time and with the usual careful perusal of the score, what needs to be done in subsequent rehearsals. It is also advantageous for the dancers to see how they are doing. I like to use it when the structure has been taught and, if I am a guest director, again a day or two before leaving, so that I can plan the final rehearsals that will be most helpful to the cast and the rehearsal director.

The director should teach the dance without ever resorting to sight reading (i.e. reading from the score instead of memorizing the dance) in order to demonstrate the movement, while the dancers follow. This results in "marking" the movement without any integration of dynamics and motivation. Absolutely the worst way of introducing a dance and betrays a lack of respect for the dance and the choreographer. The score can be available (on a music stand is helpful) to answer questions, as a memory jogger and, with a brief explanation, enables the dancers to check their pathways on the floor plans.

Having read/performed the score and noted the choreographer's ideas and imagery it is helpful to the dancers for the director to have many alternate descriptions since not all respond the same way to words. Imagery is crucial to achieving the qualities desired and to pointing the dancers in the right direction in order to find ideas and imagery that is meaningful to them.

Begin by showing a DVD of a good performance so that the dancers gain an understanding of what lies ahead. Talk about the choreographer and the dance, give handouts and/or reading lists that provide the needed background, e.g. for *The Shakers*, knowledge about the beliefs that affect every aspect of Shaker life - their form of worship, social interaction, architecture, etc. are essential to the images and qualities needed to perform the dance.

Listen to the music together analyzing in broad strokes whatever will be helpful initially in learning the dance, such as changes in key, repetitions, dynamic changes. Each dancer should have a CD of the music. Some students may not be accustomed to listening to music of the past, so they should be encouraged to play it until it becomes comfortably familiar.

I provide a warm-up that incorporates the elements of style of the choreography. For pre-post-modern choreography the sense of weight is essential but is now not necessarily a conscious part of a dancer's technique. I generally begin with Bartenieff's basic floor exercises to get in touch with one's center of weight. Standing body swings assist with gaining the sense of weight. Adding backward jumps to sagittal swings (the take-off coinciding with the height/suspension of the backward swing) helps to provide the sense of weight on the downward arc of the swing when landing. It also makes clearly apparent those who are still "holding" the center of gravity, since the leg joints do not bend with total ease on the landing. Included in the warm up are parts of phrases that may be technically difficult for students and need special attention, also the techniques of knee work, falls, etc. when needed.

Rhythm is the base upon which the structure of a dance is built and needs to be clearly articulated from the start in both movement and words, along with the motivation and dynamics. The latter two may not be emphasized, except for accents, until the sequence has been memorized, but it is important for the dancers to understand what the phrase/section is about from the beginning.

In educational institutions the visiting director may have only a brief time in which to stage a work, perhaps a week or ten days, however the style must already be evident at the end of that period so that the in-house rehearsal director will know how to continue the process. The cast must be expected to rehearse with total concentration and intensity so that elements of style become gradually absorbed and observable; this is true for the entire rehearsal process. If relevant to the dance, this should include an understanding that their own, or suggested imagery, be a part of each movement. In dealing with characterizations, as in *Shakers*, *Negro Spirituals* and many others, they need to have a running narrative of imagery that will produce the needed qualities and situations. This narrative has to be integrated into the movement and internalized as much as all other aspects of the dance. I encourage the dancers to write out the narrative for themselves.

<sup>1</sup> Purchase information: blum.1@osu.edu

<sup>2</sup> Humphrey, *Collected Works Vol. 1* p. 152