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Mickey Topaz, 1932-2003

On April 28 the DNB and the notation community lost one of their ablest and most dedicated figures. Muriel Topaz, universally known as Mickey, came upon Labanotation in Ann Hutchinson’s first class at Juilliard, and never left it. At only 24 she joined the Board of Directors; she became a Certified Teacher in 1958 and a Certified Notator in 1961. She served from 1970 as Director of Labanotation, and as Executive Director from 1979-1985.

During these years Topaz vividly demonstrated her vision for the organization. “I always knew I was planning for the long term,” she once said, noting that persuading artists to permit the creation and use of scores would take a great deal of time. She oversaw the foundation of a school, bookstore and publishing arm, the engagement of the first Director of Development, and the securing of two major NEH grants to notate the repertoires of Antony Tudor and George Balanchine. A large number of Notators were certified in this period, including many who are still close to the DNB as staff and Board members. She invented a notation course for ballet directors, which brought Maria Grandy into the DNB circle. Topaz was always quick to credit Board members Earl Ubell and Nancy Zeckendorf with giving her the support to accomplish so much in her tenure. And all the while she was producing scores; she sent an additional part of Tudor’s *The Planets* to the Tudor Trust just weeks before her death.

Throughout her career Topaz built communications within the notation community. She was active in ICKL and served as its Chair from 1996-

2000, and was on the organizing committee for International Conferences on Movement Notation in Tel Aviv (1984) and Hong Kong (1990).

Topaz earned a substantial reputation as teacher, panelist, adjudicator, writer and editor. She published three issues of the journal *Choreography and Dance*, one titled *The Notation Issue*; and won a Guggenheim Fellowship to prepare her biography of Tudor, *Undimmed Lustre*.

She was especially proud of advancing Notators. She made it her life’s work to ensure that the DNB might grow and reach for new heights.

Ilene Fox paid tribute to Topaz at a May 2 memorial service: “All of us in the notation community admired her vision. She worked tirelessly to bring the importance of documenting our art form to the attention of the dance field. She never ceased working to document as much of the dance of our time as possible. Under her leadership the DNB expanded, and she increased the number of works notated each year. She placed the first full-time Labanotator at a professional company, the Paul Taylor Dance Company. During her career she personally produced 52 notation scores. She trained many of the notators in the next generation, passing along her careful and thorough approach.

“One of her strengths was her way of encouraging people to reach out and try new things. She supported staff members in wanting to grow. When we did well, she expressed her pride. I admired and learned from her.

“I will always be grateful for the way she supported me when I took over as Executive Director. She gave advice but also stepped back and let me fly on my own. And then she gave me

DNBulletin

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confidence by letting me know she was proud of the job I was doing.

"I would like to speak of Mickey's future, because she will continue to be with us.

"Every time any of the many works she notated are performed, a part of her will be on stage. It is because she notated them that our children, our children's children and their children after that will continue to enjoy these works of art.

"Every time Antony Tudor's *The Planets* is staged, Mickey will be in rehearsal. Not only was she part of the team that reconstructed it, but her score also ensures that what was reborn will not be lost again.

"Every time a student opens Mickey's *Elementary Labanotation: a Study Guide*, and becomes excited about what Labanotation can do for a dancer, Mickey will be with us.

"Every time I arrange for the notation of a new score, she will be looking over my shoulder with approval."

Asian Conferences Rescheduled

Due to SARS, this summer's conferences, DNB/Chinese Cultural University, CORD/WDA/ICKL, and Dance Medicine, have been postponed. The DNB/CCU will be August 5-7, 2004. Executive Director Ilene Fox announced that the program would be carried over and promises to be a stimulating one.

The ICKL conference planned for Beijing in August has been rescheduled for the summer of 2004.

Correction

Contrary to the last Spotlight, about the notation of *Dances at a Gathering*, this was not the first Jerome Robbins score. The DNB has done four other Robbins works. They are the Charleston from *Billion Dollar Baby* and *The Guests* (both incomplete), written by Ann Hutchinson Guest; *Interplay*, by Muriel Topaz; and *Les Nocces*, notated by Topaz with Lucy Venable.

Spotlight: Tudor on Stage

The New York Theatre Ballet has long been recognized for its unusual excellence in the Antony Tudor repertory. Painstaking rehearsal by Tudor dancers and an aesthetic fostered by director Diana Byer have produced a series of revivals regularly noticed in the press and dance community for their depth, artistic detail and atmosphere. Byer notes that her classes include training in music, gesture, timing and use of head and gaze, and nuance. Sitting in a NYTBA audience, one immediately understands why Tudor was so greatly valued in his lifetime.

In May the company presented an all-Tudor program. Along with the well-known *Fandango*, *Jardin aux Lilas* and *Judgment of Paris*, in which last ballet the company is unsurpassed, Byer produced a reconstruction of *Les Mains Gauches*. This trio, created in 1951, forms the second act of *Concerning Oracles*. It was researched and staged by Sallie Wilson at the request of the Tudor Trust's Sally Brayley Bliss, and is now being notated by Leslie Rotman; this will be the 29th Tudor score in the Maria Grandy Circulating Collection.

Wilson taught *Les Mains Gauches* from her legendarily comprehensive memory, with the aid of a silent film of the production in which she danced, aged 19. Rotman observed that this section was somewhat overshadowed in performances of the complete work, and that those who remembered it hoped to bring it into its own here.

The production of *Fandango* was restaged by Diana Byer, with reference to the score and score-reading assistance from Ursula Prenzlau, who danced the role of Desideria. Prenzlau, a 13 year company veteran, studied LN at SUNY Purchase. Byer calls her "a very good reader, fluent and quick; she can answer my questions from the score very fast," underlining the value of speed in tightly scheduled rehearsal situations.

Of LN's value to an artistic director, Byer said, "I know *Fandango*, but I need the score. It's good to have it there for details you don't remember. Once I swore I had the dancers facing the correct way, my body told me so; but I checked the score and boom, they were [180°] off. And there are always imperfections in a video. You need everything: coach, score, video. You need the notation."

Profile

a series on DNB's people and allies

Sheldon Soffer has to be the only experienced conductor ever to serve on the DNB Board.

In 1979 Board member Norman Singer asked a friend of his to join in supporting the work of an organization that claimed it could write down movement and preserve choreography on paper. Soffer, by then head of a major artists' management agency, was already familiar with the DNB, and he accepted.

24 years on, he remains an active Board member (he is a past Chairman and currently President) with a commitment to the DNB's work and a clear ambition for its future role in dance. "I'd like to see the DNB as a kind of Oxford English Dictionary for dance; a resource and library for the field where you can find everything you need, with that kind of comprehensiveness and class," he said in a recent interview.

Soffer describes the atmosphere around the DNB of the early 80's as being very similar to today's, although he notes that then the center of attention was the expanding school and now "it's the re-staging and notating that are the focal points." His natural interest in repertory seems to draw him to these areas. Asked why he has given so many years to notation, he said simply, "the mission is very important. I came from the music world, and there already were scores there to reconstruct. And I was involved with so many dancers in my business." The consciousness of work needing commissioning and exposure, which was the premise of Sheldon Soffer Management, would easily lead to an awareness that work also needs preservation.

Soffer started out as a music composition student. He then developed a career in conducting, and has led performances of *Norma*, a year-long tour of *Teahouse of the August Moon*, and even *Swan Lake*. As Assistant Conductor of the Provincetown Symphony he became involved in orchestra management; this led to the founding of his own firm in 1965. Over the following 35 years he represented dancers and musicians of every description; his first dance attraction was Lotte Goslar and he knew Muriel Topaz before he joined the DNB Board, through her husband, composer Jacob Druckman, who was his client.

Aside from handling artists, Soffer was a pioneer of two special

projects. He was responsible for introducing the Suzuki Method of violin teaching in the US, at the request of the Japanese Consulate. A pilot teaching program in Rochester NY, with funding he secured from the New York State Council on the Arts, demonstrated that American parents would respond with the strong support for their children that the Method requires, and Suzuki entered the US music culture. Soffer also created the Music and Dance Project at the American Dance Festival, matching young choreographers with composers for new commissioned work, backed by Festival Directors Stephanie and Charles Reinhart.

On the Board Soffer has been a sophisticated influence, thoroughly familiar with artists and business issues in his two fields and capable of bringing to the table contacts and perspective from his wide circle of professional colleagues and friends. Most valuably, he is always there with advice, help and energy.

The Library

Scores arriving in the collection include Choo-San Goh's *Beginnings* notated by Sandra Aberkalns; Lin Hwaimin's full-length *Legacy* and Paul Taylor's *Black Tuesday* by Ray Cook; several scores contributed from her own archives by Meg Abbie Denton; and Jerome Robbins' *Dances at a Gathering* by Mary Corey and Sandra Aberkalns.

Researchers in Switzerland and England have received artists' permission through the DNB to incorporate scores into their courses. Samantha Tewfik from the University of Surrey is using Balanchine's *Apollo* in a course on reconstruction. Karen Hermes-Sunke of the University of Bern is teaching analysis of style and influences on choreographers, and will use 2 phrases from William Forsythe's *Artifact II*. Hermes-Sunke is a notator herself, with 10 scores in the DNB Library.

OSU Extension News

OSU has appointed Scott Marsh the next Chair of the Dance Department. Marsh, who led the Modern Dance Department at Utah and Western Michigan's MFA program in administration, danced himself in restagings from score as a member of Repertory Dance Theatre, and is expected to support the Extension's

depth and breadth of service to the University and the dance field.

Jessica Lindberg's reconstruction of Loie Fuller's *Fire Dance* attracted considerable University attention. She received the Hayes award, the top prize for graduate research; danced the work at a campus-wide faculty awards evening; and was invited to present her video documentation to the OSU Board of Trustees. Lindberg is also the first dance student to win a Graduate School Leadership Award. The *Fire Dance* score will be placed in the DNB Archives, and dance film expert John Mueller of the OSU faculty is preparing a DVD on it.

Ebonie Pittman is the first dancer allowed by Alvin Ailey's estate to learn part of an Ailey work from score. Her honors paper is on crossover movement (modern into ballet) in *Lark Ascending*, for which she read and danced the Lark solo.

Extension Director Sheila Marion used Doris Humphrey's *Passacaglia* as reading material and examples of intermediate LN theory. The sophomore-level students were assigned to read their own roles.

Marion and Valarie Mockabee are videotaping weekly sessions in which Lucy Venable gives advance directors' coaching, on both movement and language, in preparation for next year's restaging of *Passacaglia*. Venable's long experience will also be captured in coaching notes for the score materials.

Summer at the Y with Guest, LOD® and LMA

A summer dance teaching intensive with the apt title *Get Down, Get It Down* takes place July 7-August 1 at New York's 92nd Street YMHA, combining resources of the Y's Dance Education Laboratory, the Dance Education Program of the NYU Steinhardt School of Education, and the Language of Dance Center. Ann Hutchinson Guest, Tina Curran, Jimmyle Listenbee and Barbara Bashaw will join forces with Jody Gottfried Arnhold, who directs DEL (Arnhold also sits on the DNB Professional Advisory Committee). They will present teaching practices that integrate Language of Dance and Laban Movement Analysis; an intensive two week LOD course; and a final week addressing practical applications. Academic credit will be offered by NYU, and registrants

may take certification exams in Stage 1: Language of Dance® Fundamentals.

The 92nd Street Y has a legendary record in fostering all aspects of dance, with a tradition of teacher training that was started by Lucile Nathanson in the 1950's. The Dance Education Lab is in its 8th year as a program of the Y's Harkness Dance Center; it focuses on ways of teaching creative dancemaking through the use of applied LMA. Arnhold is herself a Certified Movement Analyst. She shares with the new NYU Dance Education director Edward Warburton an interest in LOD training, to augment the motif work already part of the approach taken by the DEL and Bashaw to teacher training. As Harkness Dance Center Director Joan Finkelstein put it, LOD "dovetails so beautifully with the work we're already doing with kids." LOD speaks of "cultivating creativity and establishing movement literacy." Arnhold speaks of using LMA as a common language for talking and writing about movement that children, teachers, parents and school administrators can understand. "The thorough movement exploration necessary to fully understand and learn the LOD symbol system is an important focus at DEL."

Bashaw particularly uses motif in her Dance Pen Pal program, with students making and writing dances, mailing them off to be recreated by students at other schools, and meeting to compare results. Arnhold adds, "as they get older the kids are able to add more and more detail, which the symbols of LOD allow them to do. It becomes more like the work of Labanotation than the more open work of motif." She notes that the DEL's LMA-based approach "matches the school focus on literacy. The kids love symbols and notation. They call it 'code' and 'secret language'."

For further information contact Joan Finkelstein at the Harkness Center, 212/415-5555 or e-mail jfinkelstein@92Y.org.

Hill/Wolz Award to Mira Kim

Notation Associate Mira Kim has received the Carl Wolz Award of the Martha Hill Fund Ltd. to support her training as a Certified Notator. The award honored the "bright career path in dance notation so well illuminated by Carl Wolz," a founding Fund member.

179

178

177

176

C becomes enchanted with herself and sings melody (loud but not well) ... using "La, la".

C

D

Follow C with a snide attitude, making fun of her.

excerpt from the roles of Conchita and Desideria in Antony Tudor's FANDANGO, restaged for New York Theatre Ballet from Muriel Topaz's score (see story, page 2)

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