

Summer 2011

Ballet Review



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Staging Dances from
Labanotation

On the cover: NYCB's Teresa Reichlen
in Balanchine's *Rubies*.

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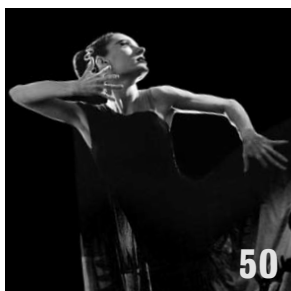
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Cover Photo by Paul Kolnik, NYCB: Teresa Reichlen in "Rubies."

Labanotation as Teacher

Elizabeth McPherson

Elizabeth McPherson: I've been involved in staging dances from Labanotation since my undergraduate years in the late 1980s at The Juilliard School. Tina Curran and I were students when Ann Hutchinson Guest came in to work with us on *L'Après-midi d'un Faune*, a formative experience for me.

Ann Hutchinson Guest: I started with notation when I was seventeen at the Jooss-Leeder School in England, where we had notation twice a week during the three-year course. I found notation logical and enjoyed it. In my spare time, I would make neat copies of the studies and classroom exercises that we were given, with the result that I now have a collection of notated materials of that period, one of which I was teaching just yesterday.

Jooss asked me to stay on an extra year to notate his ballet *The Green Table*. That was my first notation experience, and for many years

This article is based on a transcript by Racquel Brame of Dancing Legacy in the 21st Century: Performing Masterworks from Labanotation, presented at the National Dance Education Organization Conference on Oct. 22, 2010, in Tempe, Arizona.

Elizabeth McPherson, the panel organizer, is an assistant professor and the coordinator of the BA in Dance Education at Montclair State University.

Ann Hutchinson Guest is a founder of the Dance Notation Bureau, author of major books on Labanotation, and creator of the Language of Dance®.

Rochelle Zide-Booth is professor emerita at both Adelphi and Butler Universities and has been a reconstructor for the Dance Notation Bureau since the early 1970s.

Tina Curran is the director of the Language of Dance® Centre USA in Brooklyn, New York.

Oona Haaranen is the director of education at the Dance Notation Bureau.

Linda Roberts-Alexanderson is a professor at Montclair State University and its dance BFA coordinator.

I was more of a notator than a reconstructor. But later on, there was opportunity to reconstruct scores I had not written and therefore I needed to go through the process of finding what was in the score that needed to be brought to life. I have continued with notation one way or another, pretty much through my whole life.

Rochelle Zide-Booth: Just in case people think that notators or reconstructors come only through the college experience, I was a soloist with the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, a principal dancer with the Joffrey Ballet, danced with Jerome Robbins' Ballets: USA, and was director of Netherlands Dance Theater and of the New Zealand School of Dance.

My introduction to notation came in a two-year period when I wasn't working, and when my husband and I adopted our first two children. I stayed home for a couple of years with the children, and at that time the executive director of the Dance Notation Bureau, Herbert Kummel, had this brilliant idea: "In the past we've tried to make reconstructors out of people who came out of the college experience, but we found that they were not really trained to be reconstructors." His idea was that we would take ballet masters, who already were professionals and teach them notation. I was in that first Ballet Master class and learned notation.

I had two weeks of notation before I was sent out on my first job. When I got there, I opened the score, and there was the first section, but the second section had a little note in Ann's handwriting that said, "Will send later." Okay, but obviously if Ann had sent it, they never got it into the score! And this was *Soirée Musicale*.

Hutchinson: But the score is complete?

Zide-Booth: It is now, but it wasn't then. So I went and did everything I could do, then came back to New York. I was fortunate enough that Antony Tudor, the choreographer, came and worked on the missing parts. Anyway that was my introduction to notation.

I used to turn up my nose at notation, and thought like many professional dancers that

notation was going to be stiff; it's not going to move; it's not going to be alive. I was wrong because I saw the results of what I had done. Those dancers were performing *Soirée Musicale* like I had danced it in the Joffrey Ballet. Not just my role, but everybody's part. And this was in Lake Charles, Louisiana, a non-professional regional dance company. Not exceptionally well trained but the rehearsal period trained them well, and the notated score had everything that was necessary to make the performances possible.

Tina Curran: My first experience with Labanotation was with Nijinsky's *Faune*. We had a dance history course with Jill Beck at Juilliard, in which we learned repertory and the artistry of significant dance artists through their dances. Jill also taught Labanotation. As a result, we had a wonderful integrated experience of dancing our own history.

After graduation I became involved with staging a number of works – such as Helen Tamiris' *How Long Brethren?* – at Southern Methodist University. Most recently I've been working with Dr. Guest staging Nijinsky's *Faune* at Princeton University and then at Barnard College. These stagings are the focus of my recently completed doctoral dissertation: an examination of the pedagogical process of staging.

Oona Haaranen: I was first exposed to Labanotation at Juilliard. I come from Finland, where there was no such thing as dance notation. For me, notation made sense because I have a musical background, and as a musician I have access to read any music that I want that is in the library, and go and play it. I like the independence and the power that comes when I can read. I don't need anybody to show me what to do.

I currently work as the education director at the Dance Notation Bureau. I recently staged a dance for New York Theatre Ballet. I was asked to teach Labanotation to their dancers while they were learning *Soirée Musicale*. The dancers were learning the ballet and learning to read their steps at the same time. It worked very well.

Linda Roberts-Alexanderson: I have reconstructed and performed dances from Feuillet Notation and have an elementary background in Labanotation. Last year I served as a rehearsal director for Tamiris' *Negro Spirituals*, which was staged from Labanotation by Elizabeth and then performed by our students at Montclair State. Most of our repertory last year was centered on African American choreographers and themes, which included two masterworks: Donald McKayle's *Games* and the Tamiris dance.

We also mounted Pearl Primus' *Bushasche Etude*, which we were able to license from the American Dance Legacy Institute. Karen Love, who had studied with Primus, staged the dance from a video. The students also performed an excerpt from *Stomp Dance* by Jawole Willa Jo Zollar of the Urban Bush Women, a new jazz/hip hop piece by faculty member Jay T. Jenkins, and *Arbitrary Intersections* by guest choreographer Robert Battle.

McPherson: After working with Ann at Juilliard, I danced in several Labanotation-staged dances at CUNY, at City College where I did my master's degree. I also danced in Oona's company, where she staged dances from Labanotation. In addition to the works Linda just mentioned, this year I'm staging Charles Weidman's *Lynchtown*.

In developing a performance repertory, what should the balance be between presenting masterworks and the creation of new works, and why are both important, or maybe not important?

Zide-Booth: Dancers have to feel that they are being created on. It is important to them. It makes them feel that they are a part of the creative process. It's putting on their own shoes and dancing in their own shoes – so that's the new works.

As to the masterworks, dancers also 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. If they are ever going to get into a professional company, they are definitely going to need both of those aspects of their training and experience.

Unfortunately, it is becoming more difficult for them to even see masterworks of dance, let alone perform in them. American Ballet Theatre, New York City Ballet, Joffrey Ballet, or San Francisco Ballet – how many of these companies tour nationally? How many have gone to Omaha, Nebraska, lately? It's not like the Ballet Russe, which went to Omaha and other towns.

That doesn't happen now, and the only way young dancers are going to get this material is through notation. Or through those dinosaurs, like myself, who can stage these ballets. There are very few of us left.

Roberts-Alexanderson: I think a balance of repertory experiences is necessary. In our performances last year we achieved a healthy balance between newly created works and restagings of masterworks. In the rehearsal process, the students made connections from the past to the present and developed a deeper understanding of both, which should inform their work as they move into the future.

Students tend to be interested in the present, but if one can also engage them in learning about the past, they take ownership of these experiences with history. Pedagogically we are trying to help students develop skills that they will need for the twenty-first century and, in dance, I think a balanced repertory helps them achieve that.

McPherson: Tamiris choreographed the solos from *Negro Spirituals* on herself, and performed them herself. I know at least a couple of students talked to me about how they felt that they were in her shoes, so to speak. It gave them an increased understanding of Tamiris because they were in a way embodying her personal expression. This was a wonderful experience for them.

Curran: As our technique changes and our training proclivities change, there is a breadth that's possible with learning and performing new works as well as the masterworks. For example, if dancers are not being trained in Humphrey and Limón principles in a technique class, there's an opportunity to embody those skills and principles inside a repertory.

We provide a service to future artists by developing more scope and range within their movement potential and skill, by promoting a more well-rounded aesthetic and artistic diet this way.

What I found in working with dancers performing *Faune* is that, in considering the expressive insight of an artist of the past, they had a different experience of their present because they realized within this masterwork, as well as in other masterworks I have staged, that fundamentally we are human beings. Regardless of time, we're dealing with human experiences and things that are important to us. How those experiences got expressed in the past provides insight to how artists today work.

McPherson: What are advantages and challenges in using Labanotation as a teaching tool? For me, a challenge is that my dancers don't read notation, so I have to read *every* part myself and teach *every* part myself. If I were using a video, I could have them learn their parts from the video and then tighten things and correct things in a way that would move faster. Using Labanotation is very time consuming, but that is partly because our curriculum does not include it.

Roberts-Alexanderson: What happened in the process is that our students became interested in how dance movement was reconstructed from a page. I was in the room when Elizabeth was working with them, and I would bring the score out so that they could look at and review floor patterns. The students quickly developed a connection to Labanotation, even though they hadn't studied it yet. As a result, many of them became interested and considered it something they might want to learn. I think that's a plus.

Zide-Booth: When I first joined the Bureau, one of their rules was that you never take the scores into the rehearsal room. You were supposed to do it from your memory because it would take too long to keep looking at the score. Actually, I find that so with video. I find it takes longer to stage things from video than it does from notation.



Young Wha Lim and Manuel Barriga in the New York Theatre Ballet production of *Tudor's Soirée Musicale*. (Photo: Richard Termine, NYTB)

Anyway, I thought that idea was nonsense; I took the score into the studio. I wanted the dancers to see those rectangular notations become circular movement. I thought that was important for them to know, and of course I knew the material myself, but it's also very good to be able to check – am I doing this correctly?

With video we have to remember that it is not a record of the choreography. It is a record of a single performance. There may be mistakes. They are interpretations by dancers that may not have been what the choreographer intended.

It's not like that in the score. The score has what the choreographer intended. How you bring it out is up to the individual. But in terms of what's in the score, it's going to be what the choreographer wanted. If it isn't, it's easy to fix. You send it back to the Bureau and say, "On page three in the first measure, there's a

mistake." The Bureau then takes that page out, fixes it, puts the new page in and you are done. You know you are not going to do that with film if there is a mistake.

Haaranen: With the recent staging for New York Theatre Ballet, the director, Diana Byer, said that she feels the performance was more exact and a better performance because of the notation. We had a black-and-white video from Juilliard from the 1960s or 1970s. It showed some things, but there were a lot of things you could not see because of the costumes and how it was filmed.

Of course, the current dancers wanted to look at the video. Why not? All musicians listen to and analyze different performances of the same music, and so should dancers. Byer said in the 2010 World Dance Alliance conference that she felt the performance was a much better performance because of the details the notation provided. You can learn a lot from

watching a video but there are a lot of things that are distorted because of the angles, and you cannot see what all the steps are.

Hutchinson Guest: Some years ago an experiment was conducted at George Washington University in which they took a modern dance excerpt: one group learned it from notation and another group learned it from video. When the dancers came back, the results were videotaped and there was a panel discussing the results.

They expected that the performance of those who learned the dance from notation would be more accurate, and it was. And they expected the performance of those who learned the dance from video would be more expressive, but it was not. Why? First of all, when you have notation on the page, in order to bring that to life you have to understand it and then turn it into movement. It has to go through your body, through your intelligence, and through your muscles.

With video, we look at it, we just let it go through the eyes. We copy it, but do we understand? There is nobody there to point out significant movement details that should be clearly expressed. This same experience occurred in England with A-level dances, where the students could learn a movement phrase from video or from notation. The examiners always found the notation produced a better result.

Roberts-Alexanderson: In the trio from *Negro Spirituals*, one of the movement sequences includes three very fast attitudes done as the dancer is making one revolution. In rehearsal we had both a video and the notation.

Being very digitally oriented, our students wanted to depend on the video, but the dancer in the video neglected to execute one of the attitudes, although the notation clearly had it stated. The students complained, "But that dancer didn't do it. Why should we have to do it?"

Elizabeth said, "It's in the notation, and they are going to do it." So we rehearsed, and we fought a lot, and we rehearsed, and they ultimately did the notated sequence. In May

2010, we had the chance to do this dance at the 92nd Street Y. It was a wonderful experience because Helen originally performed the solos from *Negro Spirituals* there, and many years later we were doing them again.

The performance was recorded. Our students now feel that they have performed the most accurate version of that dance, and I think they take a lot of pride in that ownership.

Hutchinson Guest: This has been found to be pretty much true across the board, and I hope that if there's a difference between video and notation, the notation will no longer be deemed wrong. This seems the inevitable conclusion.

In one instance, a performer on a video was doing all the movements very abruptly, and the notation showed connected sequential movements. When the choreographer was asked about this, he said, "I could not get that dancer to do it correctly."

But that is what got videotaped. The next person coming along will think that's right, and they are going to copy it, along with any little personal mannerisms that a performer has. The person looking at the video thinks, Oh that's nice, and may exaggerate them even more.

McPherson: To speak about that interpretive process, one of the dancers in *Games* wrote about how it was so difficult from the notation that she had to create her own interpretation of the character. She viewed this as a negative. So we had a long talk about how that is a good thing because you are *creating* the character instead of copying someone else's interpretation from the video. Copying was what she was used to; it was familiar.

Zide-Booth: Pennsylvania Ballet wanted to stage Tudor's *Cereus*, which is named for a night-blooming flower, a nightshade. I had not seen the ballet, and although there was a video, I didn't know it then, and the notation score was incomplete. The supports were there but a lot of the other things weren't.

Before Tudor arrived I staged the dance as best I could. It is a very atypical piece for him.

One young man in the company who was from the Royal Ballet just wouldn't go along with the group. Whenever I would insist on something, he would say, "Well, we'll wait until Mr. Tudor gets here." He did not trust the notation.

Tudor finally got there and watched the rehearsal. I was very nervous because he was watching it. When it was over he said, "That's

He said, "And the dancers, I want to thank all of you. You've done a really good job with coming along with this piece - except you." And he pointed to the young man, at which point the other dancers fell on the floor laughing. I think the score has been completed, and it can be done. It's a wonderful ballet.

McPherson: What tools can we use beyond performance and rehearsal of the dances? This moves beyond notation a little bit.

Roberts: At my school one of my yearly responsibilities is coordinating an informative performance, an "Informance." Last year, I teamed up with faculty member Neil Baldwin, who is a historian and author. We asked representative students who were in the cast of each of the dances to become dance dramaturgs, or as Neil likes to say "danceaturgs."

These students also did research on their dances and think about the historical relevance of the work. They presented their findings in the Informance as part of a panel discussion that followed excerpts from the dances. The students began their research by interviewing fellow cast members, asking, "What do you as a dancer need to do to bring this work to life?"

An eye-opening event occurred in our study of

Bushasche Etude. The students had been performing it as a dance of joy; however, their research indicated that Primus saw the dance as a dance of peace. This allowed students to work through any aggressive tendencies by portraying warrior movements. The information changed the way they did the dance.

McPherson: This dance was done through



Lynchtown at Montclair State University: Tywan Bynum, Tracy Dunbar, Julian Morales, Patrick John Padilla, Elise Tarantina, and Jacqueline Schobert. (Photo: Mike Peters, MSU)

my ballet! I thought it was lost, I thought I would never see it again." He turned to me and asked, "How did you get my ballet? Did you ever see it?" I answered, "No I didn't. It's in the score." He said, "I'm not going to touch anything this woman did. I'm just going to fill in the gaps." There were places that I couldn't stage because there was nothing there.

the American Dance Legacy Institute, which makes distillations of masterworks. Some of them are only notated, and some are notated and videotaped; this one was just a video.

Roberts: The student who was the dance-aturg got a great deal from her experience because she personally influenced the way this piece was performed.

Zide-Booth: This also has a lot to do with the people working with the dancers, and the way that you give them other material and the way that you do the background work. All of that has to be a part of it. Picking up the score and looking at it is just the beginning.

Hutchinson Guest: I'd love to tell the Grinnell story. Grinnell College is a small college in Iowa. Teresa Heiland was the head of the dance department there, and somehow the students got hold of the book *Nijinsky's Faune Restored*, and they wanted to do the ballet. There was no notation taught there, Teresa didn't know notation, but they were determined to do it.

They started the correspondence course from the Dance Notation Bureau in September. By December she was handing out the parts. "You are going to be nymph number one" and so on. They weren't able to bring me over from London, but in November the girl who wanted to be the lead nymph came to London. She was there for about three weeks.

When she came to see me, I asked, "How much of the notation do you know?" And she said, "Well I haven't done a great deal." So I said, "You're going to be the leading nymph?" "Right!" "Well let's see. Here is her entrance, where does she come in? All right and how many steps does she take? What does she begin with?"

That was easy, so I put on the music and said, "Wait a minute, here's your entrance," and we rehearsed that. Then we did it again until she was comfortable with it.

"Now where are your arms?" Well, there were a couple of symbols that she hadn't had, so I explained those. She then took the arm position, and we rehearsed the entrance again and so on. She was learning the dance and

learning the notation at the same time, and this is something that has happened elsewhere and is really the best way to get into a score, to get into the Labanotation.

In April, I was putting on *Faune* for the Boston Conservatory Dance Department, and Grinnell could afford to fly me from Boston to Iowa. When I got there, they were doing the steps, but it was rather the same as with Juilliard. They had the whole thing, but they hadn't focused on trying to find the dance within to really perform it.

I said, "Let's see what is happening," because Nijinsky's version of *Faune* is telling a whole story; the people are individual people, they look at each other. If you know that, you can ask, "What was that movement about? Why did they turn? What was happening? Therefore, how are you going to perform that?" The minute the movement has meaning, you know the whole thing has come to life. It doesn't matter if one performer's reasoning is different from another. It will have life because it has intention behind it.

In the case of abstract choreography, you have to bring into play your kinetic logic. What is the sense of the movement? Is the next movement going to come out of the previous or is it a total break? You work your sense of development of movement, relationship of movements. Then you may have differences in interpretation, but they are different interpretations in acting and that's not so bad.

I think we need to accept that recreations may not look like the original. "Oh, that is not the way the Graham company performed it back when!" Of course not. Different people, different bodies, different times. But the piece has integrity. It has value. And it should be performed.

In England, Stephanie Jordan, who has done a great deal of research into dance and music, used this approach when she was teaching. She taught the students enough notation so they could have access to the scores. She would find something they were interested in and then, as they studied the score, they learned more of the notation and brought the two to-

gether. They had a much clearer, deeper understanding of the movement because they could see the detail. Very often someone is taught a movement, but they don't see the salient part of it.

Curran: Related to the question of the integrity of the piece, what I found with *How Long Brethren?* concerned the African American experience. I was working with primarily Eurocentric students in the South who came from different parts of the country. They were not from the 1930s or from an African American background.

How did that dance then become something for them to have a relationship with, to express what was the intention behind the movement? The idea of struggle was not foreign to them, and migration was not either. Those themes of the dance became entry points for all involved in the process to examine our lives beyond the rehearsal and the performance.

We can bring audiences into the picture with "informances," lecture-demonstrations, and displays out in the lobby. We can address these ideas and questions with the audience so that the dance has some meaning, becomes an expression of what these human issues and themes and experiences are.

It was really interesting to have *How Long Brethren?* as a focus. The dancers made an investment in having a real point of view and a real personal connection to the movement, knowing that it had to communicate something not from the 1930s but from today, yet still honor the intention of those dancers from the 1930s and what Tamiris represented as well.

McPherson: With *Games* we had the opportunity of having Donald McKayle come in to talk about its creation. In it, something happens to one of the female dancers, but it takes place offstage. I wasn't sure exactly what it was, but it was clearly something bad. Mr. McKayle meant it to be somewhat ambiguous. It is related to an experience from his childhood, when a friend of his was beaten by a policeman, for no reason.

Having him tell that story and talk about other parts from the piece was wonderful for not just the students, but also the faculty to really understand where it came from. We had a notator, Robin Hoffman, in the rehearsals with Mr. McKayle to document any changes in the Labanotation score.

We also were able to bring in Thais Barry, a member of Tamiris' company. She had not performed the *Spirituals*, but she did talk about dancing with Helen. So we were able to bring in some voices to enlighten the students' experience, in addition to what they were getting from the details in the notation scores.

Curran: 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.