

Perennial Principles: Generation and Regeneration in Dance Education in the UK

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Anna Carlisle

Introduction

The story of Laban's role as Founding Father of Dance in the English State Education System is little known today. It reaches back to the 1940s but embedded within lies the life-blood of both his vision of Dance for all children in schools and his vision of Movement education as enhancement to the life of the individual and the life of the collective psyche. Today, dance in schools is well established and progressively popular, yet the culture in the UK carries only faint references and traces of Laban's work. I believe that the creative use and application of his theories are as relevant and inspiring today as when dance took hold and spread to many parts of the country several decades ago. Laban's theories have sustained and resourced my own long career as a dance educator and choreographer.

Context

Laban arrived in England in 1938. Rescued from destitution in Paris by Lisa Ullmann, a former pupil working with the Ballets Jooss at Dartington Hall in Devon, he was brought to sanctuary at this idyllic estate dedicated to the arts, ecology and community living. He was penniless, emaciated and deeply depressed. Described as "a bag of bones" (Willson 1997, p6) unable to speak the language, with no work permit and an England poised at the brink of war, Laban's prospects looked bleak. Three years later, due to what Laban might have called favorable constellations in the cosmos, an opportunity arose which was to provide the conditions for the regeneration of his creative energies and the possibility of realising his dream of dance for all children in the general education system leading to the unfolding of a very different career.

The opportunity for Laban to resource and reformulate his work came from an unexpected quarter - it emerged from the world of Physical Education. A Government directive to introduce more freedom, creativity and dance into the Physical Education curriculum reflected the prevailing State Educational philosophy in England which was cast in the Progressive mode - arts-oriented and child-centred. In the knowledge that seminal aspects of Laban's work were closely attuned to the Progressive philosophy, a small group of enthusiastic practitioners of Central European Modern Dance, organised a landmark conference designed to present the concepts of Laban's 'free dance' form to an influential audience - a gathering of physical educationalists and members of Her Majesty's Inspectorate. The success of the symposium, attributed mainly to the contribution made by Laban and Lisa Ullmann, effected a move which was to influence the

course of dance education in England for the next thirty years. An official request to the Board of Education to promote 'modern dance' in schools marked the beginning of an era in which Laban's theories formed the basis for the development of what came to be known as 'Modern Educational Dance'.

Over the next decade - and attributed to Ullmann's inspirational teaching - the groundswell of enthusiasm for Modern Educational Dance engendered a demand for teacher training and an urgent call for the formulation of a syllabus and methodology for the school curriculum. Whilst Laban's response, in the form of the textbook, *Modern Educational Dance*, (1948) was visionary in its philosophy, details of a syllabus and methodology proved somewhat insubstantial for an inexperienced teacher. As a guide to tuition, he presented a collection of 16 fundamental Movement themes with: "the leading idea is that the teacher should find his own manner of stimulating his pupils to move, and later to dance, by choosing from [...] [those] movement-themes which are appropriate to [...] the stage and state of development of [...] the class." (Laban 1948, p28) Laban said 'NO' to prescribed stylistics; NO to standard exercises and step dances; NO to music as a prerequisite of the dance class and NO to training dancers for the stage. Educational dance, he proposed, should be based on experience and understanding of the principles of movement, on universal forms, on archetypal or prototypical rhythms and spatial configurations. It should foster expression of the inner life of the child. It should facilitate the preservation of spontaneity and offer a rich range of movement possibilities in the service of nurturing and developing creative and expressive agency. The educative nature of the 'free dance' form was holistic - engaging the intellect, the life of feeling and the spirit in creative dance activity. The role of the teacher was cast as activator of the imagination, guardian of individuality and agent in the development of intelligent action. The successful realisation of the themes and concepts set down then in the text, presupposed a dance teacher with a considerable knowledge of theory and practice, and a high degree of creative imagination and organisational ability.

Laban's engagement with the Art of Dance and the power of dance education to contribute to the health of the psyche and the health of culture was a life-long concern. As early as 1920, he wrote to Hans Brandenburg that his mission was two-fold: "first to give Dance and the Dancer their proper value as Art and the Artist, and second to enforce the influence of dance education on the warped psyche of our time" (Green 1986). But by 1945, with a growing reputation in England as innovator and expert in Movement Analysis,

Laban had been invited to apply his work to industry, psychotherapy and the theatre. True to his nature as researcher and polymath, Laban had moved on.

It fell to Lisa Ullmann and a small group of dedicated practitioners to pioneer 'Modern Educational Dance' in schools over the following three decades. Assisted by Ministry of Education funding and a favourable political climate, dance education began to become established in the school curriculum. By the late 1960s, the appearance of dance teachers in the scanty 'uniform' of leotards and tights, began to become a startling addition to the State Education school staff room. I was one of this small minority fired with the mission of pioneering dance education in a school in the East-end of London.

Whilst it was Lisa Ullmann, rather than Laban, who became the figurehead for the pioneering of Modern Educational Dance, her work was exemplary in the translation of his concepts for a Movement and Dance education. A brief insight into the training course for teachers gives a powerful flavour of his educational vision. The 3-year training course at the Laban Art of Movement Studio was publicised as a "Two-plus-One Year Course" - two years of training in Laban praxis, followed by a one-year course in teacher training at a College of Higher Education. The focus was on the secondary school age range - 11-16 years.

In addition to the demand for the embodiment of Eukinetik and Choreutic principles, the timetable at the Art of Movement Studio included Dance Notation, Dance Technique, Dance Composition, Movement Observation, Anatomy, Music, Art, Literature, Drama, the study of National Dance, Child Development, Educational Psychology - and gardening. Required reading included Jean Georges Noverre's *Lettres sur La Danse et sur les Ballets*, Plato's *The Timeus* and P.D. Ouspensky's *The Psychology of Man's Possible Evolution*. In alignment with Laban's educational theories, the ethos was experimental, phenomenological and heuristic. The notion of the dancer and dance teacher as creative agent was paramount.

Coming from a long training in Classical Ballet, my exposure to Laban's work was traumatic. I expected to be told what to do, to learn by imitation, to jump higher, to pirouette faster. Horrified by instructions to roll on the floor, move in a natural mode, dance without music, improvise, create material - and above all - indulge in self-expression, my perceptions of self - and of dance - were seriously confounded. But I persisted. I persisted in the realisation that rigidly codified stylistics and conventions of dance training not only programme the ways in which the body moves but crystallise the ways in which we think. To the rescue came a moment of transformation - a moment which Laban called 'self-realisation' - when I could let go the struggle to become The Lilac Fairy and simply dance to be a human being.

The study of Movement Analysis constituted the core of the training. Choreutic and Eukinetik principles were presented in the form of Dance Studies, guided improvisations, group dance compositions and student

tasks for presentation and evaluation. Theory was inter-twined with practice. The programme of study was closely aligned to the sixteen basic movement themes set down in the outline syllabus in Laban's text *Modern Educational Dance*. Following a Piagetian model of child development, the first eight themes were described as 'elementary' and deemed appropriate for the junior school child. Successive themes, described as 'advanced', were designed to attune to an older age-range, (11 - 16 years) and built up along a scale of increasing complexity.

An example of an advanced theme concerned with teaching 'spatial awareness' reads thus:

The drawing or writing of small and large patterns in the air can be best stimulated by writing numbers or letters into all directions of the sphere of movement. The progressive increase in the size of the pattern should finally fill the greatest possible extension of the sphere of movement, the patterns being performed as fluently as possible. Turning round while writing in the air can be used to increase flow and flexibility. The difference between angular and curved patterns should be experienced; for example, the difference between a triangle and a circle of the same size and made in the same position (Laban 1948, p33).

Thematic material for the delivery of Effort study - on which Laban placed a particularly strong emphasis, believing that an understanding of the dynamics of expression facilitated harmonisation and integration of the whole personality - was similarly summarised.

There was not a great deal of material here for a young teacher to resource the planning of a syllabus and a dozen classes a week suitable for pupils in the 12 - 16 years age range. The later publication of Valerie Preston Dunlop's *Handbook for Modern Educational Dance* (1963) presented further ideas for the translation and delivery of Laban's concepts, but deeply embedded in Laban's conception of the dance teacher was a directive to explore, invent, create and construct.

During the 1970s and '80s, however, the influence of Laban's work in education began to diminish. There were four main events which converged to create a crisis for Modern Educational Dance:

1. The Art of Movement Studio closed on the retirement of Lisa Ullmann and moved to London to become the Laban Centre for Movement and Dance. The focus shifted to the training of professional dancers and to an opening of the parameters of dance study;
2. There was a move to introduce examination courses in dance, both at the level of the secondary school and higher education. Concomitant with this was the criticism that Modern Educational Dance education was hampered and confused by its placement in Departments of Physical Education;
3. There was a Governmental reduction in funding

for teacher training; and

4. The first training establishment in Modern Dance - based on the Graham technique - also opened in London and began to tour the UK with performances and lecture demonstrations in colleges and schools. The work was impressive, expressive and beautifully constructed. Some Laban teachers defected - heedless of Laban's theory that a training for the stage was inappropriate for children in a general school situation.

Laban's concepts for dance education were predominantly process-oriented. He believed that "in schools we should not attempt to produce external success through effective performances" (Laban 1948, p??). But a National directive for dance education to encompass the study of Dance as Art precipitated the necessity for a re-casting and a re-shaping of Modern Educational Dance. The new directive set down the study of three major strands: the appreciation and evaluation of professional dance works; the teaching of choreography; and the study of performance techniques.

It was challenging for Laban-trained teachers to accommodate these new perspectives. Yet here was an opportunity to use Laban theory in new and creative ways. Laban Movement Analysis and experience of Movement Observation offered rich resources for the study of professional works, identification of choreographic methods and devices, the characteristics of dance stylistics and dynamic and spatial preferences. It was an exciting, creative challenge. That early Art of Movement training provided a set of experiences, skills and concepts which were to have progressive and cumulative application. It facilitated adaptation to change and acted as a mapping device as boundaries were shifted and new dance territories created.

In retrospect, however, with a dearth of Laban trained teachers and the emergence of a dance education world which has become highly eclectic with no coherent pedagogy, no common language and a focus on examination results, an ethos has unfolded in which the understanding of movement, meaning, embodiment, spontaneity and creative, intelligent action has become attenuated and etiolated.

Regeneration

Fired by the knowledge that a number of Senior Lecturers involved in teacher training were voicing concerns that the quality of pupils' examination work was bland, with little spatial awareness, a lack of dynamic variation - and at National level, imminent plans to remove Labanotation from the examination syllabus - a pilot research project, designed to introduce a group of dance teachers to Laban Theory was programmed at the University of Bedford in 2006 (Killingbeck 2010). Subsequent feedback was extremely positive and 2007 saw the inauguration of a new Dance Education Masters Programme which includes a 'Laban Studies' Unit. A DVD to illustrate the creative uses of

Laban's theories has been designed as a resource for current dance teachers engaged in this programme. Now into its fifth year, around 40 dance teachers have achieved successful completion of the courses and have attested to incorporating Laban's work into their creative practices. The most common feedback received from these students has been along the lines of "Why did we not learn about these concepts during our dance degree courses?"

In addition, this year has seen the completion of a follow-on course which offered participants further Laban training in Choreutics, Eukinetics, Movement Observation and Dance Theatre. Taught predominately by a group of first-generation Laban practitioners, now in their 80s, the outcomes have been productive and enthusiastic. Several young dance teachers have joined the Council of the Laban Guild and a Ph.D is on course which will include an introduction to Laban Studies for dance students at the de Keersmaeker School in Brussels and theatre students at the University of Ghent.

The projects are a beginning - but the beginning of a direction for a regeneration of interest in the value of the seminal legacy that Laban has left for the future.

Conclusion

Whilst my focus has been placed on Laban's theories for Dance Education, I have very deliberately titled this Paper, 'Perennial Principles'. Laban's work constitutes a profound resource for an understanding of the world of Movement and its power to enhance both personal and professional life and the life of culture. It has, in contemporary ecological parlance 'sustainability' and its application to a wide range of fields is evidenced by the variety of presentations on the programme for this Conference.

I would like to finish with words from Rudolf Laban. I quote from a copy of a letter (in the Laban Archive at the University of Surrey) sent by him to an old friend, the year before he died (1957) in which he sets down his mission and his achievements:

What I really did are two or perhaps three things which I saw earlier than other people.

(a) I have reminded people of the existence of the world of movement and its importance as it had been felt in ancient times in its great unity embracing all activities of man - from work to re-creation - from art to therapeutic affairs - from education to science.

(b) I have tried to collect some fundamental facts of movement as seen in nature - and also found in tradition. Not of course, the tradition of particular methods of training or taste, but the tradition of movement conscience which could help to reawaken and strengthen our own.

Besides this I have observed and encouraged the attempts of my friends to find their own ways to

express themselves and to guide others towards this freedom out of which - if we are lucky - a contemporary movement conscience could arise. I have invented a few means and instruments to serve as a starting point in the exploration of the world of movement and to stimulate the understanding of the harmony of movement.

This is a rather modest account of a man who was frequently described as a genius. He has omitted to record that he was singularly instrumental in the making of Central European Modern Dance and the invention of a recording system - Labanotation. He was known throughout Europe as a movement theoretician, a researcher, a choreographer, writer and artist-philosopher. His work has made significant contributions to the fields of Industry, Therapy and the Theatre. He was also founding father of what we now call Community Dance, Site Specific work and Dance Education in the United Kingdom. It is interesting, then, to ponder over his thoughts in the last year of his life. He points us towards a very broad horizon - a vision of a lively and vital interest in the role that movement plays in our lives and the life of society.

Laban was one of those rare human beings, despite long periods of real poverty, who was strong enough to hold to the truth of his own maxim - to find his own expression and follow his own conscience. As Laban practitioners, whatever our field, I believe it important to hold to his wide-sweeping vision of movement as a

life-enhancing educative force - a force which has the power to reach towards health and harmony.

Notes

The account of the history of Dance Education in the U.K. has been summarised from:
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Motus Humanus Celebrates its 20th Year of Operation

2012 marks the 20th birthday for Motus Humanus. This professional organization for Laban-based movement professionals was founded by Charlotte Honda, Carol-Lynne Moore, and Kaoru Yamamoto. In 1991, we incorporated as a non-profit in the state of Colorado and in 1992 we started encouraging our colleagues, friends, relative, and other Laban organizations to join. We have enjoyed a productive relationship with the Laban Guild ever since.

From the beginning, our mission has been to grow the field of Laban-based movement studies. Our volunteer board has worked diligently to serve the Laban community by sponsoring the following:

- 8 Roundtables on Professional Issues (small conferences covering a variety of contemporary topics relevant to movement specialists)
- 11 Advanced Seminars, addressing theoretical and professional matters such as Choreutics, Effort phrasing, observation and notation, Bartenieff Fundamentals, Kestenberg Movement Profile, the Laban/Lamb legacy, movement psychology for actors, writing and publishing, and teaching Laban theory at the college level

- Seed money grants for research projects such as motion capture of Choreutic forms, semiotic analysis of film, DVD materials on effort phrasing in dance, and archival preservation of Laban-related materials

- Newsletters and other publications, including two monographs (*Seeing, Doing, and Writing Movement*, 2004, and *Rudolf Laban: New Facets of His Life and Work*, 2011) and contributions to the Guild magazines, a collaboration that began in 2008 and continues today

- Lifetime Achievement Awards for notable Laban professions such as Irmgard Bartenieff, Ann Hutchinson Guest, Warren Lamb, and Geraldine Stephenson.

Other activities include book signings and book salons, regional meetings, and focus groups on specific applications of Laban theory, such as Movement Pattern Analysis. Motus Humanus has also served as the certificating body for Movement Pattern Analysts who have completed advanced training in this application of Laban theory pioneered by Warren Lamb.

Over the past 20 years a number of different programs