

# Transmission: Re-Imagining Laban.

## Contemporising the Past, Envisioning the Future

Alison Curtis-Jones



Drunstick re-imagined by Alison Curtis-Jones. Summit Dance Theatre in rehearsal 2015. Photo by Alison Curtis-Jones

Over the last two years, I have been researching two 'lost' works, *Ishtar's Journey into Hades* and *Dancing Drumstick*, choreographed by Rudolf Laban<sup>1</sup> in Monte Verita, Switzerland, 1913. Following the Swiss 'Dance as Cultural Heritage' award from the Swiss Federal Office of Culture, I worked with my company, Summit Dance Theatre<sup>2</sup>, to mount these two 'new' works for performances in Switzerland.

*Dancing Drumstick* and *Ishtar's Journey into Hades* were premiered in Teatro Del Gatta, Ascona, October 2015, as part of Laban Event, an international conference arranged by Nunzia Tirelli, in Monte Verita, Ascona, overlooking Lake Maggiore, in the Italian region of Switzerland, where Laban first conceived the works and where Laban established his dance school.

Gathering material remains was an interesting process, leading me to UK archives, the second Dalcroze International Conference in Vienna, as well as the Kunsthau in Zurich. Documents and letters written by Laban to Susan Perrottet (1889-1993), between 1910-1914, were translated for me by Laban's great, great, grand-daughter, Miriam Perrottet, who I met in the Kunsthau, in 2014.

Material remains of Laban's dance works are scarce, there are only photographs, drawings, sketches and writings. With such limited resources, particularly in relation to *Dancing Drumstick* and *Ishtar's Journey into Hades*, how is it possible to mount the works for performance? 'A complete exhumation' of work where little evidence of the original surface form exists is almost 'impossible'. My work is not about exhuming relics, it is using live arts practice to contemporise the past and envisage the future - bridging archival gaps to create

what I call a new 'living archive'. This transmission process from archive to production uses performance as a tool for translation and transformation.

Archival evidence of Laban's early choreography is not readily available and though much has been written about Laban's theatre practice (Preston-Dunlop, 1998, 2013; Dorr 2008; McCaw 2011, Bergsohn & Bergsohn 2003, et al) embodied practical (re)creations of Laban's works are scarce. Views on Laban's existence, the vegetarian colony and the emerging philosophies evident in his work which took place in Monte Verita is documented in a number of sources (Green 1986, Preston Dunlop 1998, et al) and it is this context which provides much of the inspiration for my re-imagining of *Dancing Drumstick* and *Ishtar's Journey into Hades*. The terms used here to describe the process of mounting the works are problematic. I use the term re-imagine, or the term (re)creation to imply a creative process which generates a new form. The tension here is the wider issue of identity, which goes far beyond the parameters of this article, I will, however discuss the terms used in relation to my work. Very little 'actual' evidence of *Dancing Drumstick* and *Ishtar's Journey into Hades* exists, so according to Professor Patrick Primavasi's categories of 're', discussed at the Laban Event in 2015, it is not possible to reproduce, remake or restage as there are too few sources to draw from, nor could I stage a reconstruction, restoration or re-enactment as there are no notation documents to rely on. My work aligns with Primavasi's category of re-creation, re-invention, re-imagining or re-envisioning where an artist has more freedom to explore and develop their own viewpoint on the work and how the work might be. By placing these re-imagined works in the public domain, could they be viewed as re-vivals, where

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<sup>1</sup> Rudolf Laban (1879-1958), thinker, artist, innovator and fundamental in the rise of Central European Modern Dance, is known for his Dance Notation system but less so for his dance theatre works.

<sup>2</sup> Summit Dance Theatre is made up of nine professional dancers, taught through my method of technical training at Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance. Composers Oli Newman and James Keane are TL Faculty and play live. Producer, Nunzia Tirelli, is a TL alumnus of the Specialist Diploma in Choreological Studies. Costumes designed by Mary Fisher of The Royal Opera House, London.

works come back into focus? Other terms, such as review, research, re-evaluate, rethink, respond, which could be linked to this process of looking back and re-presenting work are also interesting, each posing a different perspective.

The proposal of re-imagining, actualising or re-viving archives creates an interesting tension; are they at odds? The debate around the notion of the 're'; of re-staging in particular, is relevant in today's dance practice. The practice of re-imagining has a unique contribution to the current debates on transmission, transformation and transmutation (Lepecki 2010) reconstruction, construction (Franko 2001) re-creation (Preston-Dunlop, Sayers 2013), re-invention (Burt 2003) re-imagining (Lepecki 2010), re-staging, (Pakes 2016, Barba 1999) retrievability (Pakes 2016) and requires further investigation.

The wider contextual issues surrounding these works draw from Lepecki's returning as a method of experimentation. Choreographically experimenting by turning back or in turning back dance without, what Lepecki describes as 'Orpheus's curse of being frozen in time'. (2010) This is particularly relevant when contemporary dancers are contributing to the process and I draw from their current movement practices when generating and shaping movement material. These dancers are not pretending to be dancers from 1913 and I am not imitating Laban's 1913 approach but I am influenced by my understanding of it. What exactly then, is this process of re-imagining another's work?

I have devised a method of practice using choreology to mount the works, established through my previous re-creations of *Nacht* (1927)<sup>4</sup> in 2010, 2011, 2014 with Trinity Laban dancers and Summit Dance Theatre and *Green Clowns* (1928)<sup>5</sup> in 2008, 2009, 2014, 2015 with Trinity Laban dancers and Transitions Dance Company. I have also drawn from my close work and previous collaboration with Valerie Preston-Dunlop as living archive. I use Laban's Choreutics (1966) and Effort (1947) to make and shape the work. It is important to point out that these methods were not yet established by Laban in 1913, I use these methods retrospectively and I have developed the principles in a way that is relevant to my practice today as a contemporary dance artist. These established principles published in 1947 and 1966 are evident in Laban's early works as a way of experimenting to define his thinking of space and time. I have the advantage of looking back to these early works with an in-depth understanding both theoretically and corporeally of Choreutics and Effort today and have developed the theories further for the contemporary practice of re-imagining. I work with dancers to facilitate an embodied understanding of spatial principles and the significance of dynamic phrasing in movement. Dancers work within an improvisational framework to create interpretations of the dance works originally created by Laban based on my interpretations of available sources.



Drunstick re-imagined by Alison Curtis-Jones. Summit Dance Theatre in rehearsal 2015. Photo by Alison Curtis-Jones

My role in re-imagining these works requires a certain amount of detective work, of finding evidential remains, then deciding how I will use this information to discover and understand the works further through interrogation of practice. It is this theoretically informed and embodied practice that creates a deeper understanding of the possibilities and potential of the work. My understanding of *Dancing Drumstick* and *Ishtar's Journey into Hades* is formed through a number of ways using different sources, through engagement with historic references, cultural contexts and use of archives. How archives are used is a source of debate with Lepecki claiming they place works under house arrest, Foucault's proposal on the other hand, suggest that using archives as a way to find, foreground and produce difference, (or invent or make) difference encourages new-ness and moves away from same-ness. This virtual inventiveness comes through the practice of making and intangible thought processes existing in the mind of the creator and how this is transmitted to the dancer in order to activate or facilitate the translation of ideas in embodied practice creates a new form. The use of choreographic activation of the dancer's body as an endlessly creative, transformational archive, provides limitless opportunities to access new modes of working. (Franko,

1989) My work aligns with the view that archives are a place of creative exchange and the involvement of the dancer as a means to experiment with, to facilitate movement language, correlates with Foucault's and Franko's view of the body as a creative, transformational archive.

I use Laban's known methodologies; improvisation, Space Harmony and Effort, but translation of ideas and distance from the time the works were created and my interpretation of sources suggests the work materialises in a new form. Dance historian Lesley Ann Sayers

states, 'at issue here is not the simple case of one work being inspired by an earlier one, but a more complex one in which a new work emerges from a close analysis and creative dialogue with an earlier work and its contexts.' (Preston-Dunlop & Sayers, 2011). This emergence of the 'new' from existing materials has led me to examine my process of creative interpretation in this context.

The challenge of re-creating lost works includes interpreting the work's performance potential. (Pakes 2016, Jordan 1987) Leslie Main discusses the extent to which creative imagination should be employed and the notion of contemporary interpretation in her reconstructions of Doris Humphrey works (2014). Hodson<sup>3</sup> and Archer pose similar questions regarding their reconstruction of Nijinski's *Le Sacre du Printemps*. Contemporary interpretations of Lepage's *Hamlet* (1997), Matthew Bourne's *Swan Lake* (1995) Ek's *Giselle* (1982), all challenge the re-creation/reconstruction debate.

I continue to interrogate the issues of re-imagining, the role of the archive and intangible processes in studio practice through my doctoral research and refer now to some of the contextual research of the era which informed my view of

<sup>3</sup> Millicent Hodson, Kenneth Archer 1997 – *Sacre du Printemps*.

<sup>4</sup> *Nacht* (1927) is a political satire, exposing the underbelly of the Weimar Period – a tumultuous period in history. Laban refers to his distaste for 'dollars, deceit and depravity' and the work examines the superficialities of social etiquette in *Smart Set*, the greed of stockbrokers, the way *Tanz Bars* were used for political propaganda, and the monotony of work and labour.

<sup>5</sup> *Green Clowns* (1928) is Laban's anti-war piece dealing with dehumanisation of the body through repetitive work and industrial machine-like imagery, the horrors of war, the fragility of relationships, the humour and mindlessness of following political leaders. This work was the pre-cursor to Kurt Jooss' *Green Table* (1932). The BBC filmed a section of *Green Clowns* for a documentary programme on Modern Dance, 'Dance Rebels' screened in 2015

## *Dancing Drumstick and Ishtar's Journey into Hades.*

It was 1910 when Laban moved to Munich, a centre of artistic activity and philosophical thought, where he began his ideas about the nature of bodily rhythm through the separation of movement, from music. Laban's movement influences during this period also included the body-culture approaches of Bess Mensendieck, (1866-1959) Rudolf Bode (1881-1970) and Emil Jaques-Dalcroze (1865-1950), all of whom were part of the physical, spiritual and expressive culture of the whole that was prominent in Munich at that time.

Bradley and Preston-Dunlop write that Laban's approach was in contrast to the music centric theories and practices of Dalcroze's Eurhythmics work and moved beyond the unrestrained, free flowing movement that dancer Isadora Duncan performed to Chopin and Beethoven. Laban was searching for something more specific. Dalcroze based his method on his observation that the body was inclined to respond to music by moving. Dalcroze taught movement as the externalisation of the form inspired by sound, but Laban was interested in the movement itself, its content, meaning and relationship to the human spirit. Despite what might seem to be similar philosophies regarding sensory experience of the body by both Laban and Dalcroze, Laban was not concerned with the embodiment of music or a particular aesthetic ideal; he preferred movement that was expressive of itself. Dalcroze's method for him, it seems, didn't allow for the body's expressiveness.

In 1912 Marie Steiner proposed a new prayerful movement art, Eurythmie, where vowel and consonant sound are translated into a series of gestures so that poetry or biblical stories could be 'danced', as 'visible speech, visible song'. (Preston Dunlop 1989) For Laban, according to Preston-Dunlop, this was derivative. Following Laban's viewing of Dalcroze's production of *Orfeo and Euridice* and the accompanying published paper 'How to Revive Dance' where Dalcroze proposed a way forward for dance through 'music visualisation', Laban's view of movement for its own sake was solidified.

Preston-Dunlop and Selma Odom write about Laban's meeting with Suzanne Perrottet in 1912. Perrottet (a trained pupil and teacher of Dalcroze method) abandoned the 'music bound' Dalcroze method in order to pursue more radical movement experiments with Laban.

Odom states Perrottet reflected that after working with Dalcroze 'she could not move for a long time' because she had been formed by set gestures and exercises that now seemed false to her. She found Laban's ideas about the body in space, how the parts of the body function; how their range of motion relates to geometric form; how open ended way of exploring through improvisation can lead to movement invention. Like Laban, she was fascinated with musical dissonance and percussion, areas that, at the time, did not interest Dalcroze.

It could be said that Suzanne Perrottet was able to convey first-hand understanding of Dalcroze's work, methods and theories and was thus instrumental in helping inspire and solidify Laban's thinking in relation to movement, rhythm and sound. My research of archive documents including Suzanne Perrottet's letters at Kunsthhaus, Zurich, reveal how she used her new found method pedagogically to challenge dancer's

rhythm and develop skills, technically and creatively. Laban asked Perrottet: 'what if I take music away from dance?'

Perrottet joined Laban's school in Monte Verita in 1913 along with Mary Wigman, giving up her post at Dalcroze's school where she had been a pupil in Hellerau. Wigman went on to establish 'Absolute Dance' (autonomous dance, independent of music and steps) and became an acclaimed figure in German Expressionist Dance, following her choreography of *Witch Dance* in 1914. This era included the premiere of Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps* (1913) in collaboration with Valsav Nijinsky and Nicholas Roerich, along with Dalcroze's student Marie Rambert who served as both performer and dance mistress. The experiments in Ascona 1913, included at least two works, *The Dancing Drumstick* and *Ishtar's Journey into Hades*. *Dancing Drumstick* was 'the rhythm of the body made audible' and is Laban's attempt to shift dance away from the constraints of music. Counterpoint of movement and sound proved interesting for Laban and



*Ishtar's Journey into Hades* (2015). Summit Dance Theatre. Re-imagined by Alison Curtis-Jones  
Photograph: © Alison Curtis Jones, 2015

he moved away from set codified steps to reveal its potential, exploring how rhythm and patterns of the mind and spirit manifest in movement. The division of time in the natural movements of the human being 'has nothing to do with metric rhythmic systems'... *they follow another law*'. (Laban, 1912). Laban used the term 'Free Dance' (der Freie Tanz) meaning free from musical constraints, from dramatic narrative and set steps, therefore the dance material was made up of freely juxtaposed rhythms and forms.

My re-imagined *Drumstick*, is an attempt to show Laban's shift to arbitrary rhythm - a materialisation of extreme and subtle dynamic changes, where dancers establish their own felt rhythms and work together in unity without sound and make stillness resonate. Musicians accompany the dancers, playing in response to what they see, not the other way around; it's not radical today, but it was in 1913! This work was a radical departure then and I believe, is a direct result of the rebellion of the established method of Jacques Dalcroze, his music visualisation and music inspired movement. *Drumstick* rejects the Dalcroze method of music visualisation, by replacing the reliance of dancers on music, meter and sound cues, with sensed group rhythmic changes in the body and general space. Musicians James Keane and Oli Newman follow the dancers with sections of live improvisation in performance, responding to dancer's movement in real time. I challenge dancers and musicians with complex non-metric, arbitrary rhythmic phrases, which are sensed and not counted, encouraging group cohesion through acute sensory awareness and phenomenological responses. I refrain from using counts in rehearsals and when setting technical warm up exercises, so that dancers don't rely on numbers, experiencing the movement phrasing corporeally instead. Dancers use breath and vocals to create a cacophony of sound, juxtaposing with the dynamic resonance of the body to create inorganic forms and musicians work with polyrhythms as a way of contrasting what they see with what we hear.

Further evidence of this shift away from Dalcroze by Laban is seen in 1915, in Laban's publicity material for his summer school Tanz-Ton-Wort (Dance-Sound-Word) which explains how his approach to movement education is through the individual finding of his own movement rhythms: through the principles of swing, tempo, beat, order, structure, and is quite different from Dalcroze's early eurhythmics, where the body submits to musical rhythms.

'Dance has things to say and express that cannot be said through music or acting, and in a deep way. It is the music of the limbs.' (Laban 1924)

Dalcroze Eurythmics and Laban's principles of Choreutics and Eukinetics are associated with a number of different fields, health, well being, therapy and education. Laban's work continues to evolve in a number of disciplines including theatre and dance practice. I have drawn from these principles to establish a practice to train contemporary dance artists in contemporary dance technique. My practice encourages dancers to embody movement somatically, through imagery, meaning and intention rather than specific steps and counts. Imagery is used throughout my rehearsal process to help dancers find sensation, authenticity in movement and to clarify intention. Laban refers to 'inner attitude' and connection with this inner sense or intention encourages expressivity.

Dancers learn by doing and discovering rather than observational practice such as use of mirror, they become mindful of bodily sensation and feel the movement first, before it is given shape or form. I prefer to facilitate movement without influencing dancers responses with recordings of previous re-creations and encourage group cohesion through proprioception; raised consciousness and sensorial awareness of the ensemble, moving together with organic solidarity, affiliation in shared space, mutuality and collective consciousness, so that unison work is felt and sensed corporeally, rather than seen objectively from the outside or adding counts. When dancers engage in cognitive responses (decision making - 'where shall we go in the next space, who's leading?') or they begin counting, movement becomes mechanical rather than organic, and cerebral rather than corporeal.

Laban's *Ishtar's Journey into Hades* is fundamentally about the body, experimenting with different ways of using the body and its surfaces. The depiction of the mythical goddess and her followers as she descends into the Underworld is used as a means to explore how the body can express the narrative. The Queen adorns an item of jewellery or clothing at each of the seven gates to enter the Underworld. The body part associated with the piece of jewellery or item adorned, is the starting point for movement, encouraging surfaces of the body to engage with space and initiate traceforms, shape and form. Use of scale and perspective of space are significant to illustrate the idea of the journey into the Underworld. The Queen's choices result in no return; she is left naked, alone, isolated, vulnerable... powerful. *Ishtar* evolved through a series of studio experiments where I investigated issues of sacrifice and ritual, materialism, loss of the soul, struggle, both physical and emotional in an attempt to redeem and regain self. The piece emerged as a parody, dealing with dramaturgy and narrative. It moves away from taught set codified steps by finding movement solutions for set improvisation tasks, which I devise for the dancers.

These 'new' works become fragments of performance ephemera which in turn, create new archival traces, in the bodies of the dancers and in the minds of the viewer. My use of actual evidence, (that is, actual material remains available in archives) and subsequent translation (potential evidence through interpretation) leads to provision of new images of the work, creating associations with Laban's work that potentially, along with seeing the live works, add 'being' to Laban. By providing photographic images of my re-creations of *Green Clowns*, *Nacht*, *Drumstick* and *Ishtar*, I am providing new images which are associated with the original works and therefore provide a particular perspective of the work in the mind of the viewer.

Can seeing re-imagined Laban works live in performance therefore potentially change perceptions of existing archive materials and perceptions of Laban's work as an artist...?

Re-imagining past dances with embodied corporeal knowledge in practice provides a different insight to the work for dancers and audiences in a way that studying materials alone cannot provide. Using the body-as-archive (Lepecki 2010) and working with dancers and collaborators to actualise my (and their) interpretations, re-imagining is not about the past that was, which is impossible to retrieve, it is about the present that is...

I will expose more insight to *Drumstick* and *Ishtar* in due course<sup>6</sup> and hopefully, audiences will see the work performed live in the UK in the future!

Alison Curtis-Jones

<sup>6</sup> *Drumstick* was performed by members of Summit Dance Theatre outside in Monte Verita and filmed by German TV company ARTE on the site where Laban's early dance experiments took place. A Swiss film company captured the process and performance of *Drumstick* and *Ishtar* in 2015, a documentary film will follow.

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