

staying alive

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What eschews formulas, resists house styles and crosses boundaries? A system which is profound, charged with ideas, open to development and can inform contemporary practice no matter how experienced you are. At the cutting-edge, William Forsyth manipulates Laban's choreutic forms in brilliantly original ways, and at the Folkwangschule, the conservatoire associated with Laban, Jooss and Pina Bausch, Laban's work informs pedagogical studies and choreutics is central to Jean Cebron's masterclasses. Anna Carlisle's illuminating account of an unending voyage of artistic discovery. (Animated)

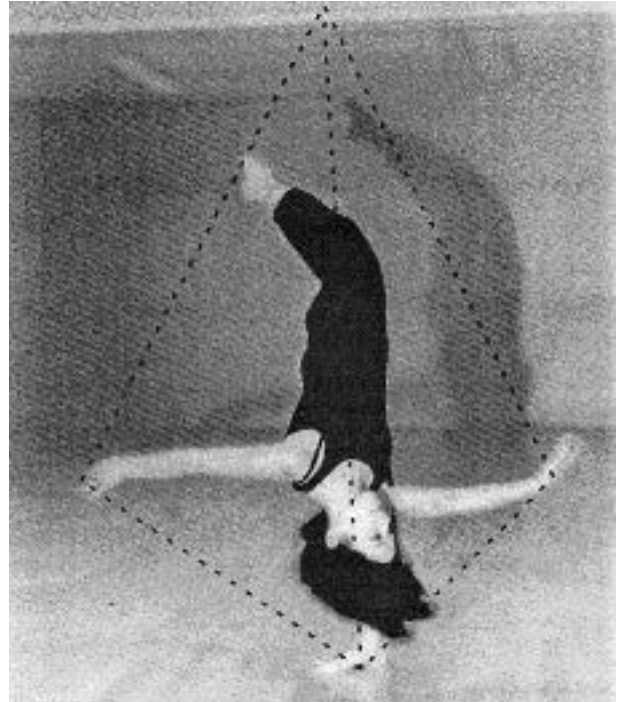
Like the current fashion scene - modern dance styles are various. diverse and eclectic. Today's practitioners are familiar with an ethos which embraces formalism, minimalism, dance theatre. new dance, multimedia, performance art, technology, Butoh and circus. There is community dance, site specific, youth dance, contact, dance education, dance for the disabled, Lindy Hop, Hip Hop, Digital, etc. The boundaries between professional and non- professional criss-cross and blur. Even the structures of classical ballet have been shifted by rebellion, defection and directives to move into the 21 st century. There is a ferment of activity. Styles enter and exit. The scene is dynamic and moves fast. Modern dance is in postmodernist line with other art forms. It seems to have been around for a long time.

In 1965- 35 years ago - there was next to nothing. The London School of Contemporary Dance was in conception. The Ballet Rambert was on the cusp of its modern dance policies. There was classical ballet and there was the Laban Art of Movement Studio in Addlestone - a small commuter village in Surrey: The training there appeared radical and the form defied any kind of categorisation. I was 18, rebellious and fed up with my classical training. I went to Addlestone.

Rudolf Laban had arrived in England in 1938 as a refugee from Nazi Germany. He was 60. He had been one of the most distinguished and charismatic figures in the evolution and development of modern dance in Central Europe. He had taught and inspired Mary Wigman and Kurt Jooss, choreographed at Bayreuth, directed the Berlin Opera. His invention of the concept of the movement choir embodied the notion of 'dance for all' - anticipating the community dance movement by some 60 years. He formulated a system of dance notation - published in 1928 -and in the same way that Freud and Jung investigated the mapping of the psyche, he investigated human movement. He was associated with the Dadaists, Kandinsky and the Bauhaus. He had functioned within the sweep of the European avant-garde. There was no context for him in pre-war England. He turned to research until avenues of work opened up post-war.

It now seems remarkable that between 1938 and 1958, the year of his death, he moved from obscurity here in England into a position of renown. Backed by the Trustees of Dartington Hall and the then Ministry of Education, the Laban Art of Movement Studio opened in 1953, and was to function as the only establishment offering training in modern dance for the next decade. What perhaps is even more remarkable -and not widely known -is that Laban's work established him as the founding father of dance in

the English Educational System. His formulation of dance education seeded the curriculum subject as we know it today.



Dancer - Claire Godsmark

In retrospect, my own leap from classical ballet into German expressionist 'ausdruckstanz' was an act of extremism. I was unaware of the extent to which specific stylistic forms become assimilated - not only into the body - but into the processes of thinking. I suffered during the first year -from an inability to improvise, to find my centre of gravity, to roll around the floor (ugly and childish), to understand notation, to execute a 'natural' movement, to comprehend the theory and philosophy. In short, to conceive of movement as the raw material of dance. I was told that I was good at exercises but I did not dare to dance and I had forgotten how to play. I was determined to break the mould. I graduated two years later, fired with enthusiasm and a conviction that the praxis of Laban's work, rooted in the principles of movement, provided a systematic, logical and conceptual framework for the understanding of dance in its diverse forms. What loomed as a future difficulty was the notion of a career in the dance profession.

Modern dance still had no British context. There were no models to act as benchmarks and perversely, whilst the training was based in Surrey, the artistic precepts and theatrical forms of German Expressionist Dance, were enmeshed in a Central European culture. There were no opportunities to develop either as a dancer or choreographer. Most graduates pitched into teaching. It was pioneering stuff. At best, the climate of acceptance showed interest, at worst, response was either indifferent, uncomprehending or patronising. It took another decade for London Contemporary Dance Theatre and Ballet Rambert to forge a public arena for modern dance. In the meantime, Laban's work went out of fashion, eclipsed by the meteoric rise of the Graham technique -now undergoing a similar fate. Since the 1980s, modern dance has burgeoned, gathered momentum, and fast-forwarded into the current eclectic scenario.

Much of the pioneering work has been done and on the surface - given the diversity of options - finding a location for professional career development looks optimistic. But long-term survival in dance has always been a difficult issue. It may not now be any easier than it was in the 1960s. The reasons are different and would constitute another article but a major problem resides in the sheer weight of graduates looking for careers in a profession which is oversubscribed and underfunded. And given the vicissitudes of the post-modern climate, the concepts of long-term development and long-term investment appear unrealistic.

Advice on survival strategies is difficult - and the way in which practising mature artists have forged and sustained careers throughout the last 25 years are probably as diverse as the range of current dance forms. Predominantly, I owe my own survival to Laban. I was intuitively aware that his ideas were *avant-garde*. I had a certain conviction that the praxis resided in fundamentals and principles. I was unaware of the ways in which it would act as a consistent resource long-term. Neither could I predict the extent to which aspects of the training would come to resonate so closely with the forms, genres and concepts that have evolved to spin the fabric of the current dance culture.

Improvisation - criticised here in the 1960s as messy and formless - has already been assimilated into the present dance milieu. The notion of the dancer as creative agent has become an accepted part of practice. Directives to own and develop individuality and personal stylistics are currently encouraged. There is a preoccupation with 'organic' movement, with 'holistic' perspectives. The community dance movement has become an integral part of the scene. Interdisciplinary projects and collaboration are in. Interaction between professional and what Laban termed 'lay' dancers is no longer an unusual phenomenon. Pina Bausch - trained by Jooss - in turn, trained by Laban - has re-invented dance theatre and exerted a major influence on several generations of dance artists. At the cutting-edge, William Forsyth manipulates Laban's choreutic forms in brilliantly original ways.

My early training then, provided a set of experiences, skills and concepts which were to have progressive and cumulative application. It facilitated adaptation to change. The provocation to think about, analyse, philosophise about movement and meaning, integral to the Laban training, functioned as a mapping device when boundaries shifted and new dance territories were created. It has underpinned and

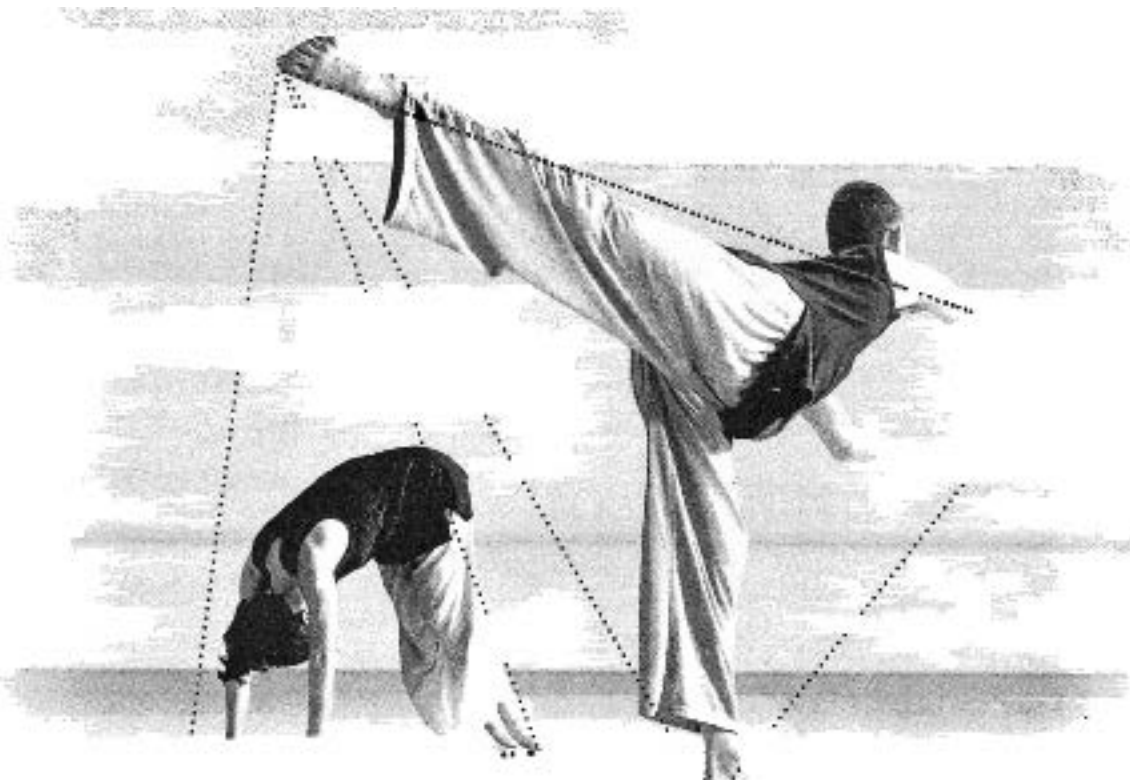
sustained a broad spectrum of teaching commissions over many years, from primary to professional level, and has functioned long-term as a rich reservoir for choreographic work. It stokes the engine, generates and regenerates action and fuels a passion for dance.

There is today, limited access to training for the more experienced artist. The Laban Centre London integrates choreological studies into professional training. The Laban Guild has formulated courses for training in the community dance field. Laban International Courses have sustained an annual Summer School for many years. There are some opportunities to study in Europe and the United States and on an assignment to the Folkwangschule in Essen I discovered Laban's work informed pedagogical studies and was alive and buzzing in Jean Cebron's masterclasses.

There is, of course, no singular, definitive or exclusive system which can serve modern dance. Different forms suit different personalities and artists are by nature iconoclastic. But Laban's work has been generally underestimated. It has much to offer. It eschews formulas, resists house styles, crosses boundaries. The system is profound, charged with ideas and open to development. It is rooted in human movement and therefore logically illuminates the stuff of dance. It has relevance to contemporary practice. It merits a revival of interest.

Anna Carlisle

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