

ON CHOREOGRAPHIC TRADITIONS AND IDENTITIES

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Introduction

Artists strive to embody their creative visions in different ways. Some have a preference for 'solving' specific artistic problems of different sorts; others follow their artistic intuition throughout their exploration. Yet many combine these two approaches to crafting. Common to all of them is the search for authentic expression and a new "language."

Let's take a few examples from contemporary dance. William Forsythe, the artistic director of the Frankfurt Ballet (Ballett Frankfurth), designs spatial-bodily maps for choreographic explorations for himself and his dancers. Pina Bausch, artistic director of the Tanztheater Wuppertal, draws from her personal-emotional experiences and provides her dancers with verbal imagery as the basis for their common explorations. She also brings in a dramaturge who keeps records of the rehearsals and assists in structuring the work. Both, Forsythe's and Bausch's methods have been described in numerous interviews, publications, and documentation video and CD-ROM technology for some time.

We as members of dance audiences, however, do not necessarily need special information to notice differences among choreographers that, for instance, favor bodily-spatial clarity and those who prefer the rich texture of movement qualities. In the work of the Akram Khan Company, based in England but drawing on the choreographer's studies of the Indian dance tradition of Kathak, the juxtaposition of stillness and movement outbursts, such as in *Fix* and *Rush*, enhances Khan's clarity of spatial design and bodily articulation.

Tero Saarinen (originally from Finland, currently a choreographer for the Opera de Lyon) is inspired by Maurice Ravel's *Gaspard de la Nuit* for his piece *Gaspard*, in which lyrical meditation turns into drama and horror. Thus our kinesthetic memory is left with various moods and dynamic nuances of movement qualities. Our aesthetic and kinesthetic experiences of both artists are supported by lighting, sound, costume, and the absence or presence of props.

While in the above examples of Forsythe and Bausch, I referred to choreographers' approaches to creation, in choreographic works by Khan and Saarinen I described their styles of expression. An important factor, such as dance tradition has been referred to only passing in the examples of Akram Khan.

It is interesting to note that Pina Bausch received her first dance training at the Folkwang School (Folkwang Schule) in Essen that was directed by Kurt Jooss and his collaborators (1927) on the basis of Rudolf Laban's principles as formulated in his teaching and in his early artistic slogan Dance, Sound, Word (*Tanz, Ton, Wort*). This slogan was also embodied in the works by the Dance Theatre Laban (*Tanzbühne Laban*). Jooss himself developed further the idea of the Tanztheater between the thirties and sixties, and Pina Bausch, among the generation of German young choreographers, paved the way for the German Tanztheater of the seventies and eighties.

William Forsythe, on the other hand, was born in New York area and since his childhood was fascinated with the rock'n'roll music and dancing and Fred Astaire movies; he would eagerly practice various sequences and show them off at home. In high school he would dance in musicals that he choreographed himself. While graduating in drama, Forsythe trained both in American modern dance and ballet. For a short time he was a member of the Joffrey Ballet where he danced in works by Jooss, Leonid Massine, and Gerald Arpino. After his residency with the Stuttgart Ballet in the seventies he studied Laban's book *Choreutics* (1) that presents a theoretical articulation of space for the practice of dance composition. In the early eighties Forsythe was invited to create work for the ballet company in Frankfurt. The coincidence of discovering Laban and subsequently directing the Frankfurt Ballet (1984 until today), lead to Forsythe's own method of generating choreographic material.

Since two significant choreographers, Bausch and Forsythe drew in different ways from the Laban tradition, I will next discuss aspects of his legacy as it can benefit the field of choreography.

A Triadic Legacy to Contemporary Choreographers

I will address the Laban-based legacy for contemporary choreographers from three points of view: (i) as resources for dance vocabularies, (ii) as a resource for compositional concepts, and (iii) as a resource for dance analysis.

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In the discussion of dance vocabularies I will address both the movement-dance material used by choreographers, as well as the terminology with which the vocabulary is identified. Some rarely used compositional concepts drawn from Laban's framework will also be addressed in this discussion. Dance analysis, as a means of gaining a deeper understanding of the components and properties that make particular dance works unique, will be referred to briefly.

(i) *Resources for new dance vocabularies : Choreutics and Eukinetics & Effort*

Unlike the dance vocabulary of the Classical Ballet that has been codified since the end of the 17th century in France, the dance vocabulary of Modern and Contemporary dance is created and/or appropriated by the choreographer for each work. The terminology then becomes varied, including the usage of imagery, references to body actions, and ballet terms. [The publication *Dance Words* gives an interesting survey of such usages (2)].

It is my contention that Laban's *Choreutics*—the dancer's articulation of space— and *Eukinetics & Effort*—the range of movement qualities, provide both a new movement-dance vocabulary and its terminology. I will demonstrate this in the work of two choreographers: one who developed within the tradition of Laban's teaching in Central Europe, between the thirties and seventies—Ana Maletic, and the other in a very different cultural milieu of the United States, between the seventies and today—Vera Blaine.

While being a dance student of Maga Magazinovic in Beograd, Ana Maletic was inspired by the performance of Laban's dance theater (*Tanzbuhne Laban*) in 1924. She subsequently earned the diploma from the Choreographic Institute Laban in 1936. In the late '30s and early '40s, Maletic became one of the pioneers of Laban-based modern dance in the former Yugoslavia, founding a school, choreographing, performing and writing textbooks and dance histories. She formed the Zagreb Dance Scene (*Zagrebacka plesna Scena*) after W.W.II, was also the choreographer of the folk dance state ensemble *Lado* (in the fifties), and co-founded *The Studio for Contemporary Dance* (the sixties).

Although I was educated in the tradition of her teaching, it is only recently that the way in which *Choreutics* and *Eukinetics* were part of her choreographic vocabulary and of the terminology she shared with her dancers, became evident to me. While classifying the papers in her archives in Zagreb I came across her choreographic notes and also notes of her dancers describing and recording their own choreographic parts in ballets, such as *Petrica Kerempuh*, (1946), and

Connections (Veze, 1967). [PHOTO: 'Criminal Connections' from the ballet *Connections*] Besides verbal notes, almost every bodily action was specified also in terms of Laban's spatial scales numbering, as well as the description of movement qualities.

Vera Blaine, my colleague in the Ohio State University's Dance Department, teaches BFA foundation courses in composition, and MA/MFA investigations of choreographic resources. An alumna of the OSU department of Dance, she also pursued her choreographic studies with Merce Cunningham. Her interest and subsequent commitment to Laban's framework was sparked by a workshop taught by Valerie Preston-Dunlop at OSU in the summer of 1977. Since the late '70s my classes in Choreutics and Eukinetics/Effort became a source of further insight in this area. Several of her choreographic works took a point of departure from Laban's spatial scales. Searching for a structure and vocabulary new to her body, Blaine reached for some aspects of Laban's spatial scales in her group works, such as *Progression* (1978), and trio *Signs* (1982). A more recent choreographic exploration took place in 1997 with Stacy Reischman—a young dancer who was interested in recreating some movement themes from the dance score of *Progression*. This resulted in the solo *Facets*. PHOTO: SOLO FACETS.

(ii) *compositional structures*

Some rarely used compositional concepts can be drawn from Laban's choreutic framework. While canon in time has a long tradition in music and dance composition, a canon in space and time is not much explored. In my class etudes and choreographic works I frequently explored space-time canons based on simple choreutic forms for groups of three to twelve performers.

In the context of composition it is not inappropriate to mention Laban's manuscript space-game-puzzle (*Raumspielpuzzle*) (3). Several decades before John Cage and Merce Cunningham practiced "composition by chance", Laban's device was intended to awaken spatial and temporal awareness in a game-like fashion. He suggested that various groups of spatial directions, written in his notation on separate cards, be assembled and performed in various tempi and with body actions of the performer's choice. He outlined two major ways for using the game in which the actual execution of the puzzle is left to the performer. Arriving at movement sequences by chance would require an attempt to suspend one's reasoning about figuring out the movement. On the other hand viewing

directions in relation to spatial models, such as a cube, octahedron, or icosahedron, would engage an inner visualization of the movement intent.

William Forsythe's statement that "dancing has a lot to do with projecting into imagined geometric space"(4) shows his point of departure from Laban's space models particularly the cube. He frequently refers to Laban's *Choreutics* as "a great book and the basis for a lot of things we do"(5). Another choreutic notion Forsythe uses is Laban's classification of trace-forms, such as straight, angular, rounded, curved, and spiraling. "The traces [trace-forms] are valuable especially in what we call 'generative modalities' which means if we are using traces in improvisation technologies, then we are probably going to use them to generate motion by re-assigning them to some part of the body and not to the part they were generated with. And then rewriting them again"(6) .

From this discussion, and from earlier interviews with Forsythe, as well as his CD-ROM *Improvisation Technologies* (7) one can gather that within his complex procedures Forsythe couples the idea of trace-forms with Laban's notion of crosses of axes. Accordingly the dancer's space can have a center in a space model, or dancer's body, or various joints. Forsythe's brief demonstrations of various ways of transposing particular trace-forms to various centers in the body, and then superimposing one idea over the other, generates fascinating sequences. [PHOTOS: FORSYTHE'S DEMONSTRATIONS] Commenting on the CD-ROM Forsythe points out that the ideas of trace forms are presented one at a time. "But when you're actually dancing, it is seldom that the principles occur in isolation" (8). He further explains that the CD-ROM "is not teaching a way to move. It offers training in how to sense motion traces, and how to develop an awareness of folding mechanics in the body. It is simply a basic approach to improvisation. Maybe less about how to improvise than about how to analyze when you're improvising . . . In itself, it's not choreography, but rather a tool for analysis" (9). One can see that *Improvisation Technologies* have been developed so that the devices can be used by Forsythe's choreographic ensemble that collaborates in the creative process.

Dana Caspers, a member of the creative team, describes in great detail complex processes involved in creating various works. For instance in *ALIE/N A(C)TION* Part I (1992) "we took sheets of transparent paper, drew shapes on them and cut geometric forms into them which we folded back to create a 3D surface underneath. We layered this on top of the book page, a flattened projection of the Laban cube, and a computer-generated list of times organized into geometric

shapes Next, we each constructed a list of Laban symbols, times, letters, and numbers from the document, which we used as a map to guide us through the stage space and through the structure of the piece as a whole" (10).

Critic Roslyn Sulkas refers to manifold influences in Forsythe's *Artifact* (1984) in vivid terms in that it "sometimes seems like a huge dance processor, chopping up and spitting out bits of Petipa and Balanchine, Laban and Bausch. But the ballet is uniquely Forsythian in demonstrating everything that dance had thought to do in its short theatrical life, and then more" (11).

(iii) dance analysis -- choreological analyses

Dance analysis in general, and choreological analysis in particular, can offer students of choreography, and experienced choreographers alike, deeper understanding of the components and properties of a dance work and of its impact on viewers. It has the potential to show aspects that are or are not effective in the choreographer's own compositions. On the other hand several choreological analyses have put into focus the uniqueness of a particular cultural or individual dance style, and have distinguished it from other styles. (12)

In concluding, it is my hope that this article has shown the possibilities for creative assimilations. Various dance traditions, such as that of classical ballet, social dancing, and particularly that of Rudolf Laban have offered a wide basis to some contemporary choreographers to assimilate, deconstruct and recreate work that reflect their artistic identities.

Endnotes

(1) Rudolf Laban, *Choreutics*, annotated and edited by Lisa Ullmann. London: Macdonald and Evans, 1966.

(2) Valerie Preston-Dunlop, compiler. *Dance Words, Choreography and Dance Studies*, Volume 8, Harwood Academic Publishers, 1995.

(3) Vera Maletic, "Composition: A Synthesis of Applied Theory," "Appendix IV," *Body-Space-Expression: The Development of Rudolf Laban's Movement and Dance Concepts*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1987.

(4) Gerald Siegmund, interviewer. "William Forsythe: Choreographer of the 20th Century." *Dance Europe* no. 23. (August/September, 1999).

- (5) Gerald Siegmund , interviewer. "William Forsythe: Choreographer of the 20th Century." *Dance Europe* no. 23. (August/September, 1999).
- (6) From an interview conducted by Nik Haffner published in the pamphlet accompanying the DC-ROM, *William Forsythe: Improvisation Technologies, A Tool for the Analytical Dance Eye*
- (7) William Forsythe, et al. *William Forsythe: Improvisation Technologies, A Tool for the Analytical Dance Eye*, CD-ROM, ZKM Karlsruhe and Deutsches Tanzarchiv, Cologne 1999.
- (8) &. (9) From the interview conducted by Nik Haffner published in the pamphlet accompanying the CD-ROM.
- (10) Dana Caspersen "It Starts from any Point: Bill and the Frankfurt Ballet" in *William Forsythe* edited by Senta Driver; Vol.5, part 3 of *Choreography and Dance*, Harwood Academic Publishers, 2000.
- (11) Roslyn Sulcas, "Watching from Paris: 1988-1998" in *William Forsythe* edited by Senta Driver; Vol.5, part 3 of *Choreography and Dance*, Harwood Academic Publishers, 2000.
- (12) - Muriel Topaz. "Specifics of Style in the Works of Balanchine and Tudor." *Choreography and Dance*, Vol. 1, 1988.
- Vera Maletic and Carol Maxwell "Toward Computer-Assisted Score Analysis," *International Council of Kinetography Laban: Proceedings of the Nineteenth Biennial Conference*. 1996, pp. 73-103