

## CHOREOLOGY AND THE CHOREOGRAPHIC PROCESS

By

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Back in Valerie Preston-Dunlop's Advanced Laban Studies class in 1988-89, she made sure we understood that there was an enormous wealth of possibilities in Rudolf Laban's work and that it was somehow expected that we were to take the existing knowledge into new fields. It is with these ideas in mind that I decided to present and share with the ICKL what I have been doing in terms of applying choreology to the choreographic process.

I am using "choreology" as an umbrella term to name the discipline which studies dance from an intrinsic point of view. Thanks to Rudolf Laban's initiative and the on-going work of generations of researchers, dancers, choreographers and teachers, the choreological tools used to analyze and describe dance are constantly becoming more and more precise. Thus, to analyze and describe the actual movement, different documentary methods can be used (Kinetography Laban, Labanotation, Motif Writing, etc.); choreutics and the "chumms" (choreutic units and their manner of materialization) help analyze and describe how the space is being used; and, to analyze and describe the dynamics of the movement, one can turn to effort graphs and structural analysis.

Now I shall explain what my work consists of. When I have choreological counseling sessions with a choreographer, or an *asesoría coreográfica* -an AC, for short-, I do not teach, for example, a workshop on Choreological Improvisation for Composition. What I do is I work directly on a specific choreography with a choreographer and his/her company before opening night. An AC is a movement conversation between a creator and an analyst; it is a series of questions that lead to movement exploration, with the purpose of clarifying whatever structural or interpretative issues arise in the movement.

When I do an AC I do not think I am only notating or doing an effort analysis or analyzing the spatial harmony, but rather that I have a choreological problem in front of me that I must attend to and to do so I have to use the choreological tool that best solves the problem. If I detect a problem in dynamics, I turn to effort; if there is a problem in the performance of a particular movement, I notate to understand what is going on; and, if there is a spatial issue, I think in terms of choreutics.

Before describing in more detail the work I have done, I will explain my position with regard to three theoretical issues.

a) The concept of choreology. My starting point is the evolution of Rudolf Laban's concept of choreology. He mentioned choreology for the first time when he presented a lecture entitled "The Dance as a Work of Art" at the first German Dance Congress, in 1927. There, Laban divided the "art of dance" into three areas: choreology, choreosophy and choreography:

While choreology deals with the logic and balancing order of dance, choreosophy is the knowledge of the spiritual relationships of the dance content; choreography is the dance form itself.

Two years later, in 1929, Laban gave a lecture-demonstration with the title "The Problems of Dance" and in this case, he divided the "science of dance" into the same areas, though he defined their content differently:

Choreosophy –the theory and aesthetics of the new dance and dance education; choreology –the theory of the laws of dance events manifested in the synthesis of spatial and temporal experience; and choreography –the theory of movement articulated and notated for the purpose of recording educational exercises as well as works of the art of dance.

Finally, the same areas plus a new one, choreutics, appear in Laban's preface to one of his best known texts, *Choreutics*, which, though finished in 1939, was published posthumously in 1966. Here, choreology became

the logic or science *sic* of circles, which could be understood as a purely geometrical study, but in reality was much more than that. It was a kind of grammar and syntax of the language of movement dealing not only with the outer form of movement but also with its mental and emotional content. This was based on the belief that motion and emotion, form and content, body and mind, are inseparably united.

And Laban elaborated this concept further:

Movement is one of man's [*sic*] languages and as such it must be consciously mastered. We must try to find its real structure and the choreological order within it through which movement becomes penetrable, meaningful and understandable.

To be able to use Laban's definitions of choreology as guidelines for working with choreographers on a specific work, I decided to select and focus on two ideas that I consider fundamental for my work. The first one is that there is a "logic" and "balancing

order” in a choreography. I would not go as far as saying, as Laban does, that there are “laws” in dance, but there are definitely recognizable patterns both when one analyzes a choreography by itself or when one compares it with others by the same choreographer. It does not matter whether the origins of the choreography’s logical pattern may be found in the choreographer’s stylistic preferences, in his socio-historic context or in his life-story, or in a combination of these elements; the fact is that choreographies do have their own logic.

The second idea is that a dance becomes “penetrable, meaningful and understandable” only when its real structure, which is choreological, is discovered. While knowing the choreographer’s stylistic preferences, his socio-historic context or his life-story may throw light on some aspects of a choreography, it is only through a choreological analysis that both the structure of a choreography and its meaning can be deciphered and understood. This I say not as a member of the audience watching a performance, but as someone who is working side by side with the choreographer in the final stages of the creation of a new work, when it is still possible to make changes that will allow the choreography to be more “meaningful and understandable”.

b) The role of choreology in the choreographic process. I have chosen choreology as my main tool because it is the only existing analytic method for studying movement that is intrinsic to dance, objective and thorough.

Preston-Dunlop defined choreology as

An intrinsic theoretical and practical study of dance form and content, focusing on a structural study of the medium of dance, that is the performer, the movement, the sound, and the space, using four interdependent modes of investigation: experiential, exploratory, analytic and documentary.

The difference between writing dance criticism and doing an AC is that while the resulting text is “deeply coloured by the personal value system and history of the reviewer”, as Janet Adshead-Lansdale says, an AC is concerned with solving concrete, identifiable problems relating to the way the choreographer is using the strands of the dance medium. So, as an analyst, it is an absolute necessity to have at one’s disposal a reliable and objective method that studies the intrinsic structural components of dance and that can identify problems and propose solutions in movement terms. Not according to what the analyst likes or dislikes but according to what the choreographer wishes to say or do.

Because an AC deals with a choreography as a whole, it is important that the method chosen to analyze it is thorough. The thoroughness of choreology comes from both

Laban's statement as to the inseparable nature of "motion and emotion, form and content, body and mind", and from the fact that a choreological approach can address and solve the majority of the structural and interpretative problems that emerge during the choreographic process. Thus, choreology can come up with solutions to problems relating to the use of different body parts, the choice of actions, the design of spatial forms, the flow of dynamics and phrasing, and the relationships between the performer, the place, the sound and the movement.

c) A choreography as a symbolic system. It was in 1939 that Laban said that movement is "one of man's languages". Since then many scholars have examined the question of whether dance is a language or not. I cannot say whether dance in general is a language but I can say that a choreography develops its own symbolic system, its internal logic that may be considered "a kind of grammar and syntax", as Laban says, because the actions, gestures, spatial forms, dynamics, phrasing and relationships between the performer, the place, the sound and the movement it contains, all acquire a symbolic function, both semiotic and iconic. Another aspect of the development of an internal logic is that a choreographer can switch codes: he/she will decide which actions are abstract, non-linguistic, and which actions will have a semiotic and iconic content.

Therefore, if my starting point is that every choreographer has something to say and that it will be expressed through movement in the widest sense, then part of my job when doing an AC is to make sure that the connections between the movement, their symbolic function and the "grammar and syntax" employed by the choreographer will be as "meaningful and understandable" as possible.

Because doing an AC is not a common activity, I shall describe how the concept evolved, how informal conversations with choreographers became a formal procedure. In general terms, I have worked with four contemporary dance companies, one in England and three in Mexico between the years 1989-2004.

The story begins when Bonnie Byrd and Marion North came to the Dance Department of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) to give information about the Laban Centre and its Summer School. I was fascinated by what I heard and so I attended the 1981 Summer School. As soon as I came back from London I began to apply what I had learnt and this changed the way I danced, the way I taught, and the way I perceived dance.

When attending dance performances, I started to take "notes" to keep practicing effort analysis and Labanotation and, as I did this more and more frequently, I began to realize that I tended to record choreological problems. So, when I shared these "notes" with the

dancers or choreographers who happened to be my friends, they were impressed by the accuracy and the objectivity of the observations I made.

Word got around about my “notes” and I was invited to write an article for *México en el Arte*, which was to be an analysis of the situation of dance in Mexico in 1986. This article provoked different reactions. One of them was a call from Adriana Castaños, director and choreographer of Antares, one of the main Mexican contemporary dance companies at that time, who said that the company had read the article and wanted to meet with me to discuss the issues that were mentioned in it. Another reaction was that some people expected me to become a dance critic, something that I too thought possible at the time.

However, after attending a few performances with the intention of writing about them, I discovered it was not that simple. Back home, having gone over my “notes”, I discovered that many of the structural and interpretative problems I was detecting were avoidable to a certain extent because it became apparent that they had a choreological origin. Thus, I was confronted by an ethical dilemma: I was not comfortable with the fact that, after a performance, my opinion would be asked and I would say things like “this section was not very clear”, “that section was too long and repetitive”, “dancers A and B were weaker dynamically than dancers C and D”, knowing that if the choreographer and I had met earlier, I could have pointed out those problems and the choreographer would have had the opportunity of looking for other solutions. I felt I had an unfair advantage over the choreographers because I knew they could do something different, more effective, more astounding, more intriguing, but most important, closer to what their intention was. Maybe, if I had been just a dance critic with no choreological knowledge, this would never have bothered me. But that was not the case: I knew things the choreographers did not, so I decided I would not write dance criticism but rather share my “notes” with whichever choreographer wanted to hear them.

The next thing that happened was that I went to do the MA in Dance Studies at the Laban Centre in 1988. There I had the opportunity of being asked to be the “outside eye” during the final stages of the creation of Ana Sanchez-Colberg’s *Alice, Alice...Are You a Girl or a Teetotter?* Working with Theatre Encorps was very interesting because we all spoke “Labanese” –everybody was enrolled in one of the Laban Centre courses- and so my observations and comments were immediately understood and this led to a lively interchange of very detailed questions and answers that were translated into actions; for example, I would point out that dancer A was bending over before taking a step and dancers B and C were doing it simultaneously, so Sanchez-Colberg would ask them to try it both ways several times until she decided which way she preferred. Another interesting thing was that, since the dancers never came up with a single solution but with several, the choreographer would now have a whole range of possibilities from which to choose from.

And, because we all spoke the same language, we could easily recognize whether a proposal worked or not.

Upon my return to Mexico, one of the first companies to contact me in 1990 was Antares. They had a concrete proposal: they wanted me to watch the final rehearsals of a new piece, *En invierno a Heliópolis*, they were creating and to give them their "notes" before opening night. This is what Adriana Castaños has to say about the way we worked:

As far as I can remember, you would give us feedback on the use of gestures and on the structure of the choreography, analyzing all the elements as a whole and comparing what we were doing with what we had done in other choreographies.

The next step was that another of the choreographers I had given "notes" to, Jorge Domínguez, became the head of the Coordinación Nacional de Danza and the idea of AC turned into a reality: if a choreographer wanted to work with me, they could contact me through the Coordinación. This way, in 1992, Serafín Aponte of Barro Rojo called me in to work on *El universo visto por el ojo de una cerradura*. And there were definite choreological problems in the piece. Serafín says he invited me because he knew I was Laban-trained:

I had taken some Laban classes and I could tell how it helped to clarify movement but the rest of the company did not know anything of this, so I expected them to be able to distinguish the qualities of movement and the use of energy in time and space. That is why I invited you to work on certain sections of the choreography and why I wanted it to be practical.

One of the sections chosen had an interesting effort problem: due to the fact that Barro Rojo had been training in Limon technique, their arms showed a strong preference for light, indirect free flowing, sweeping movements and their steps tended to be suspended. However, in this particular section, Aponte wanted strong, direct, bound movements both in arms and legs and he was not getting them. The problem was solved first by doing a couple of improvisation sessions contrasting these extremes until the dancers could distinguish the difference, and then by applying the new qualities to the specific steps and gestures of the choreography and repeating or going back to improvisations until Aponte was satisfied with the result.

In 1994 I left Mexico City to live in Tampico. At the end of a solo performance by Irma Meza, the only professional contemporary dancer and choreographer in Tampico, she opened a dialogue with the audience and, knowing that I was present, she asked me directly what I thought of her work. Given the context, I just made some general comments, but they were enough for her to invite me to work with her on her next piece.

Irma Meza explains that to be able to go on dancing she had to create her own choreographies and that she wished to improve her work, so when I mentioned the possibility of doing an AC, she accepted. Work on *Una petenera petenera* began in 2003 when she received a scholarship from the Fondo Estatal para la Cultura y las Artes de Tamaulipas.

What Meza wished to accomplish with the AC was:

- To have a “trained external eye” who would detect possible flaws or mistakes in the choreographic process before it was performed to an audience.
- To learn to be faithful to my ideas when translating them into movement.
- To achieve a final result that would be clear, well-balanced and well-structured, taking into account the principles of movement analysis that you use and that, at the same time, it would correspond to my personal aesthetic search.

In this case, the process of the AC was slightly different because Irma Meza had not finished the choreography yet. In our first sessions she explained her ideas, her sources of inspiration and her motivations/intentions, while I kept asking for more details to get to know her context as much as possible. During the following sessions she would show me the movement sequences she had already created. She would repeat a sequence a few times while I documented the problems I was detecting. For example, these were some of the problems:

- In the opening section, because of the angle Meza had chosen to perform the action of pouring sand on her body, her elbow hid her hand and therefore it was difficult to understand what she was doing;
- Before she pours sand on herself, she had a phrase in which she played with the sand and scooped up some of it; the problem there was that there were no accents in the phrase, which made it have a “flat” feeling to it.
- In one of the duet sections, the moments where there was spatial tension or spatial projection between the two dancers were not precise —one would create tension but the other would not; when both pointed in a certain direction the degree of projection each one achieved was different.

In all cases, after documenting the problems, I would tell her exactly what I had observed and I would then ask her two questions: whether she did those things intentionally and whether that was what she wanted the audience to perceive. The answers are usually negative, so she would start exploring possible alternatives until she found one that solved the problem. This way, we went over each sequence, analyzing every detail, constantly contrasting what she was doing with her motivations/intentions as the basic reference point

for her to decide what stays and what goes, and repeating the process until the problem was solved and the sequence was ready.

On the whole, the secret of the success of an AC lays in the application of an analytic method that is intrinsic to dance, and is objective and thorough. Choreology is what allows the choreographer to clarify the relationship between his/her intentions and what he/she actually does with the strands of the dance medium. In the end, if I have done my job well, the choreographer will be satisfied because the result corresponds to his/her intentions and the audience will enjoy a choreography that has a clear and logic structure and is "meaningful and understandable".

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