

Laban in Mexico – A choreological approach

Miriam Huberman

The story of my involvement with Laban's work begins when Bonnie Bird and Marion North came to the Dance Department of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) in 1981 to give information about the then-called Laban Centre for Movement and Dance and its Summer School. At that time I was taking several dance classes, doing a B.A. in History with emphasis on art history at the UNAM since this was the closest I could get to a theoretical complement for the dance practice I was engaged in, and I was working as assistant to the head of the Dance Department, Colombia Moya. I was at the meeting with Bonnie Bird and Marion North to help with the translations and I was fascinated by what I heard. What they talked about was precisely what I had been looking for: a combination of theory and practice in dance which made it possible to describe, analyse and register objectively what went on when people danced or when they just moved.

The result of that visit was that I attended the 1981 Summer School at the Laban Centre. As soon as I came back from London I read and reread all of Laban's books I had bought and I began to experiment and search for ways of applying what I had learnt. This process changed how I danced, how I taught, and how I perceived dance.

My first opportunity to apply my newly-acquired skills came soon. In 1982, Ludwik Margules, one of Mexico's leading theatre directors, who was at that moment head of the University Centre for Theatre (CUT) at the UNAM, invited me to give a workshop to the students who were taking part in the new course for stage directors and set and costume designers. After a few conversations about Laban and his work, Margules chose Motif Writing, floor plans, body part signs and an introduction to Effort as the main elements of the workshop. The workshop was well received and it made me aware for the first time how useful Laban's work could be and of the wide range of areas into which it could be applied.

A year later, Margules was asked by the National School of Music, which also belongs to UNAM, to put together a team of teachers who would be able to give a summer course on acting for opera singers. The school was expecting a dance class to be included, but Margules suggested I go instead, arguing that what I did would have a deeper impact on their training. When the

summer course ended, I was asked to continue teaching the opera singer students on a regular basis, which I did from 1983 to 1987.

Basically, the classes I taught there consisted of a systematic exploration of the relations that could be found between sound and space, sound and dynamics and phrasing, and movement and role interpretation. A typical end-of-term open class programme would be divided into two parts: the first half of the programme consisted of a series of short studies on breath and movement, changes of weight and falls, distortion/alignment, relationships, walking, running, jumping, lines and volumes, open space and closed space, changes of direction and level, and in the second half, the students would perform a selection of songs they had been working on to integrate choreological elements to their interpretation.

I began to study Labanotation through the Dance Notation Bureau correspondence courses. During this stage, whenever an opportunity arose, I would include Laban's work into what I might be doing: whether it was teaching movement to high school students, designing the performers' movement for plays or operas, or making my first attempts at notating the dances we staged in the Renaissance dance group where I performed. The influence of Laban's ideas was also present in the dance criticism articles I published in that period.

In 1985 I decided to interrupt my B.A. studies and go to New York with the intention of studying at the Laban/Bartenieff Institute of Movement Studies and the Dance Notation Bureau. However, almost as soon as I arrived, I came across information about the M.A. in Dance Studies that the Laban Centre offered and, as I realised I preferred this option, I returned to Mexico to finish my B.A.

Thanks to a British Council scholarship, I enrolled for the M.A. in Dance Studies in 1988. With Valerie Preston-Dunlop as my tutor, I wrote the final dissertation on a topic that intrigued me very much. I set out to trace the origins of Laban's ideas in an attempt to identify as closely as possible how, when and where Laban may have had access to his sources, and consequently, to determine to what degree the concept of choreosophy – the word Laban coined to refer to the wisdom that may be found in dance – permeates his work, arguing that it was such a predominant element in his thinking and in his life that it was what guided and motivated his work.

Upon my return to Mexico I taught workshops in different parts of the country using the term 'movement analysis' to describe what I did because the term 'choreology' provoked blank stares all too frequently. Using 'movement analysis' had two advantages: one was that students understood that the course or workshop would be movement-related instead of being another dance technique event, and the other advantage was that they were prepared

not only to move but to go through a process of analysing what they were doing.

From 1993 to 1996 I was invited to work as dance consultant to the Department of Artistic Education of the National Institute of Fine Arts, responsible for elaborating the curricula for each of the art schools that would come together in the newly built National Centre of the Arts. I was able to explain the usefulness of Laban's work to the coordinators of the different sections of the National Schools of Classical and Contemporary Dance. As a result, the curriculum of the B.A. in Choreography of the National School of Contemporary Dance now has Movement Analysis in the first two semesters and Labanotation in the following two.¹ I also worked as advisor at the planning stage of the B.A. in Arts-Dance Option of the University of Sonora. There, the result was that students now have Movement Analysis on semesters III, IV and V.

In order to help teachers understand where I was coming from in terms of educational theory and how I was justifying the incorporation of choreology into the curriculum proposal for the above-mentioned institutions, in 1994 I published an article entitled 'Areas of Dance Knowledge'. Its purpose was to serve as a guide for deciding what subjects to include when designing a dance curriculum based on the idea that to be educated in dance means to cover all five areas that constitute dance since each one deals with a specific form of knowledge. Thus, the technical area provides the intrinsic practical knowledge of dance; the choreological area provides the intrinsic analytical knowledge; the choreographic area develops the creative aspect of dance and integrates all the acquired knowledge – theoretical and practical, intrinsic and extrinsic; the theoretical area provides the extrinsic theoretical knowledge; and the interdisciplinary area provides the extrinsic practical knowledge.²

Area	Type of knowledge
Technical	Intrinsic practical
Choreological	Intrinsic analytical
Choreographic	Creative aspect + integrates the intrinsic, extrinsic, practical and theoretical
Theoretical	Extrinsic theoretical
Interdisciplinary	Extrinsic practical

So, while it is expected that all areas will be present in a curriculum, what will vary from school to school is the amount of hours dedicated to each area because this should correspond to the school's aim; that is, more or less hours will be dedicated to each area according to whether the school wishes to produce performers, choreographers, teachers, etc.

Since 1990 I have worked with several dance and theater companies as a 'choreological counselor.'³ When I have choreological counseling sessions I work directly with a choreographer or a stage director, on a specific choreography or play before opening night. The sessions are a movement conversation between a creator, an analyst and the performers; they consist of a series of questions that lead to movement exploration, with the purpose of clarifying whatever structural or interpretative issues arise in the movement. When working like this I have a practical 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.

On the whole, the secret of these sessions lies in the fact that they are based on the application of an analytic method that is intrinsic to movement and dance, and is objective and thorough.⁴ Choreology is what allows creators to clarify the relationship between intentions and what they actually do with the performers and their movement on stage. In the end, if I have done my job well, the creator will be satisfied because the result corresponds to his/her intentions and the audience will enjoy a work that has a clear and logical structure and, in Laban's words, is 'meaningful and understandable.'⁵

After attending the ICKL⁶ 2007 conference in Mexico, I started a research project on the situation of Laban's work in Latin America, which was the subject of the paper presented at the 2008 Laban Conference. The project explores why Laban's ideas are still not integrated into the mainstream Latin American dance scene despite their relevance and the fact that Latin American people have been in touch with his ideas for several decades. So far, I have identified three possible lines of enquiry:

1. Because of the way dance is usually taught and perceived, people in Latin America generally have no need or interest in developing an intrinsic analytical understanding of movement and dance.

2. In Latin America, Laban's work is being studied and applied in a fragmentary fashion. This refers to the fact that few people take a 'choreological' approach to Laban's work; instead, they focus on Labanotation, Movement Analysis or Motif as independent aspects of a whole.

3. While Laban's work is slowly penetrating higher education institutions, there is no Laban-based training/certifying centre in any Latin American country, which makes it difficult to stay up-dated, maintain similar standards, and develop projects.

Just before the 2008 Laban Conference, Alejandro Schwartz, head of the Centre for the Arts in Veracruz, invited me to coordinate a diploma course on choreological studies. The programme will consist of a two-week intensive course and two intensive weekends for follow-up and the presentation of the

students' application projects. Following Dr. Valerie Preston-Dunlop's advice to 'be inclusive,'⁷ the programme brings together certified teachers in Labanotation, Movement Analysis and Language of Dance, and the contents have been organised according to the choreological 'star' (the body, action, space, dynamics and relationships) to achieve an integrated approach to the analytic and structural study of movement and dance. The programme will begin this coming July.

References

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1. The National School of Classical Dance has recently added a subject called Reading and Writing Dance which is based on Language of Dance.
2. In the original article each area was described more fully; it was divided into subareas, and a list of possible subjects was included.
3. In the paper I presented at the 25th Biennial Conference of the International Council of Kinetography Laban/Labanotation I gave a detailed description of this type of work.
4. Preston-Dunlop V. *Dance Words*. London: Harwood; 1995, p. 580.
5. Laban R. *Choreutics*. London: MacDonald and Evans; 1966, p. viii.
6. International Council of Kinetography Laban
7. Personal conversation with Dr Valerie Preston-Dunlop, Laban Conference 2008.