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Library News

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Dance Notation Bureau Library
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Director of Library Services:

Mei-Chen Lu

Writers:

Mei-Chen Lu
Allison Parsley
Lucy Venable

Committee:

Sheila Marion
Lucy Venable

Advisors:

Jill Cirasella, Reference Librarian and Bibliographer. Brooklyn College, The City University of New York
Nena Couch, Curator. Lawrence and Lee Theatre Research Institute at the Ohio State University
Patricia Rader, Supervising Cataloguer and Reference Librarian. Jerome Robbins Dance Division New York Public Library for the Performing Arts Library

Brenda Farnell and the Laban Script in Anthropology Studies

by Mei-Chen Lu

When people think of Labanotation, it is commonly in relation to preserving/recording dance movements and choreography. It is interesting to note that a group of anthropologists are using Labanotation for other kinds of movement such as rituals, ceremonial action and sign languages. They call this the Laban script to emphasize Labanotation's formal properties as a true writing system that is comparable to any "alphabetic" script. In one case, Brenda Farnell has adapted the system to notate non-vocal (action) signs in the storytelling performances of Nakota people, an indigenous nation of North America.

Farnell, who currently serves on the Professional Advisory Committee at the DNB, is doing research and teaching with the Laban script. She has recently donated her books and articles on this to our library (we repeat the list again in this issue at the end). Farnell first studied Labanotation with Sheila Marion while a dance student at London's *Laban Dance Centre* (now called *Laban*) in 1976-77. She had danced and choreographed using Laban's movement principles throughout high school in England, and was also exposed to Motif Writing during her undergraduate training at I.M. Marsh College, Liverpool University. It was her interest in a broad range of embodied human actions that later took her into anthropology and to New York University where she studied with Dr. Drid Williams. Currently she is an Associate Professor in the Departments of Anthropology and American Indian Studies at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. Her research topics include linguistic and sociocultural anthropology, anthropology of the body and human movement, expressive culture, and multimedia ethnography.

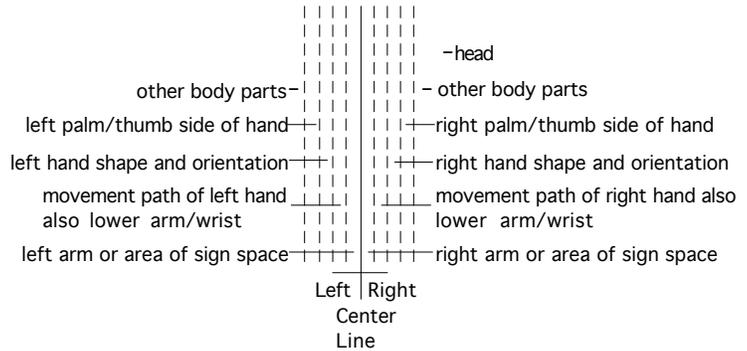
The main focus of Farnell's studies is Plains Sign Talk (PST) which is a sign language shared by indigenous people of the Plains region of North America, covering an area from Canada to Texas. Her observations of human movement in relationship to spoken language illustrate how gestures have precise and culture specific meaning, just as spoken languages do. For Nakota users of PST, body movement signs are considered equally as important as spoken language signs. PST served as a Plains Indian's inter-tribal communication system before English was introduced to American Indians. Unfortunately, fluent sign talkers are now rare in most indigenous Plains communities.

In the past, many anthropologists used pictures, video-recordings, films or even words to record sign languages. Farnell argues that these approaches are inadequate. Pictures present only a frozen view of a movement at one point in time. Video-recordings and films are two dimensional, so it is hard to portray all spatial characteristics of an action sign. Word descriptions have predominated in anthropological attempts to document dances and other movement events, but if the reader does not fully understand the cultural context and does not already have a detailed knowledge of the movement system in question, words cannot provide sufficient information to document or reconstruct the action signs. Thus, an understanding of movement literacy is crucial to observing and understanding action signs in different cultural contexts. An anthropologist must have the ability

to read and write movement, so that translation into the medium of words is unnecessary for creating ethnographically appropriate descriptions of actions.¹ The Laban script provides such a medium, so that in Farnell's work, the reader/scholar can decode the action signs while also reading the accompanying spoken words in the Nakota language and in English translation.

The difference between Farnell's use of Labanotation and its use in documenting Western concert dance forms, is that she employs more leeway in the use of the symbols and the staff (see diagrams on the right). Farnell often strips away the outside lines of the staff leaving only the centerline, because the action signs only involve certain body parts (arms, hands, upper torso, head). The sign talkers usually stand or sit on the same spot while gesturing their hands and arms according to precise geographical and other spatial references. The indigenous words are listed on the left side of the staff and direct translations of the PST signs into English words are provided on the right side. Since speed/timing is not related to outside influences like music, the length of the spatial symbols is a standard. Meter/bar marks do not carry any weight of timing, but reflect the start and end of performed spoken/gestural sentences. Instead of notating the exact movements from any one particular performance of a story, Farnell uses the symbols to "spell" the essential components of an action sign. She employs the flexibility of description possible with Labanotation to write the movement using indigenous conceptions of body parts, space and time rather than Western or English speaker's concepts. It is this flexibility, she maintains, that makes Labanotation the most useful movement notation system for anthropological purposes.

When Rudolf Laban invented the writing system, his vision was to record human movement, not just dances. It is exciting to see the Laban script applied to anthropological studies. Farnell has been guiding young anthropologists to use the Laban script in her course: *Body Movement Literacy: Labanotation in Anthropological Perspective*, where she teaches it as a research tool to conceptualize, record and analyze embodied human actions.



The Labanotation staff adapted for writing Plains Sign Talk

1. Wanaq—kaš, nen, Nak'ota ūpi, ec'ake nen ūpišj.
 Long ago here Nakota they live/ be always here they live not
 Lo—ng ago, the Indians that live here now, did not always live here.

The centerline divides right and left sides of the body as in standard Labanotation. The area symbols drawn on the centerline with —||— inside refer to areas of the signing space (—||— = center area, loosely in front of the chest/waist). The path signs apply to the gestural spatial pathways made by the hand. The storyteller is sitting facing Southwest. The Key at bottom left indicates that, among Nakota people, the cardinal directions, NSEW, are conceived as four quarters with S being the most important. Courtesy of Brenda Farnell

¹ Williams, Drid. *Modes of Continuity and Change in Action Sign System*. Journal for the Anthropological Study of Human Movement, Spring 2004. Page 19.

TRANSLATION PROJECTS PROGRESSING! by Allison Parsley

In an effort to bring Labanotation to students, teachers, and dancers in their own language, people in Japan, Hong Kong and South Korea are translating or have translated the *Elementary Labanotation Study Guide* (hereafter referred to as the *Study Guide*). The project was initiated some years ago by Carl Wolz, whose desire was to spread Labanotation throughout Asia. Wolz served as consultant for the Japanese translation. Tom Brown and Judy Van Zile have been consultants for the Chinese and Korean ones, respectively.

Labanotation had become known among dance students and researchers in Japan mostly because there were many Japanese students studying abroad in Europe and the United States where they had access to Labanotation courses. Realizing the difficulty of continuing to study Labanotation upon returning to Japan, Harumi Kimura, a teacher of dance and dance education at Yamanashi University and Satomi Kasuya, a lecturer in dance at Showa College of Music, formed a Labanotation Study Group in 1998, under the guidance of Wolz. They realized shortly after forming the organization that there was a real need to translate the *Study Guide* into Japanese for the students who were interested in becoming certified at the elementary level.

Before beginning their translation, the members worked with Wolz to define the Labanotation terminology to make sure that their translations would be consistent throughout the book. Dividing the sections among several group members, working part-time over the course of several years, and digitally scanning the examples from the English edition, the group is anticipating that the *Study Guide* will be used in universities throughout Japan. Although the project is still in the process of being completed, they have found a publisher in Japan and hope to print at least several hundred copies.

The Korean version of the *Study Guide* was published in 2001. It was translated by Shin Sang-mi and Choi Hae-ree, professors of dance and dance ethnology, respectively, at Ehwa University in Seoul and they received some professional advice from Judy Van Zile who in 1981 was the first person to teach Labanotation in South Korea. Now there are many Korean teachers teaching Labanotation throughout the country. According to Van Zile, one of the problems they encountered during the translation process was "trying to translate the verbal language used in the English version into Korean, and the possibility that maybe some of the English words should simply remain, with good, clear explanations in Korean of what they mean. After all, the English is often a translation from the original German!"

In 2000 Tom Brown, then chairman of the Hong Kong Dance Alliance, applied for funding to translate the *Study Guide* into Chinese. Several attempts were each turned down. But fortunately Wendy Chu, influenced by Wolz's passion for dance and Labanotation and a need for a Chinese *Study Guide*, since she was already teaching Labanotation in Chinese, began translating it on her own time. Having received a Master of Fine Arts degree from The Ohio State University in 1991, where her focus of study was Labanotation, she is now a lecturer at The Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts. In 2003, Chu used her students for feedback, giving them one chapter at a time and making necessary changes based on their comments. Currently, other teachers and students in Taiwan are using Chu's translated *Study Guide* and are providing her with additional feedback and changes. Chu has yet to find a publisher, but is planning on at least 500 copies which she hopes to sell in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and mainland China.

Notated Theatrical Dances 2008 Edition

The 2008 Edition of *Notated Theatrical Dances* is now available! Newly acquired scores since 2005 have been added. New features are the listing of the permission status of scores for educational, research and performance use, and the royalty and licensing fees if a work is to be staged. The catalog is now available for searching or downloading on the DNB's website www.dancenotation.org or you may order a printed copy for \$15 plus postage and handling by phone 212/564-0985 or email library@dancenotation.org.

En Dolor

By Lucy Venable

Ethel Winter and her Choreography: En Dolor has recently been given to the library. This is a book about one of modern dance's great performing artists and besides telling her life story it contains a score of Ethel Winter's best known solo *En Dolor*. The gift was made by Karen Hermes, editor of the book, as well as notator of the score. Hermes graduated in 1998 from the Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique et Danse in Paris after completing the advanced course in movement analysis and Labanotation, and she is an ICKL Fellow. At the 2005 ICKL Conference at Laban in London, Natasha-Lea Gibbs and Berenice Montagne each performed the dance in the Bonnie Bird Theatre. They used the then "in progress" score which was being tested and were coached by Karen Hermes as well. Permission had been granted by Ethel Winter as is required.

The book contains a substantive interview with Winter on performing and teaching by Kathryn Eggert and Hermes and a lecture, given by Winter while an Affiliate Artist at Hood



Courtesy of Ethel Winter and Karin Hermes

College in Maryland in 1967, on the requirements for becoming a performer such as discipline, concentration, patience and supreme concern. Victoria Geduld has written a short biography of Winter, and beautiful early photographs have been contributed by Winter's husband, Charles Hyman. Additional pictures show her in well known roles she performed with the Graham Company, in her own company and on Broadway.

The dance *En Dolor* was choreographed at Bennington College in 1944 when Winter was nineteen years old and a student there. It is about loss, and was inspired by what she had been reading at that time about the Spanish Civil War. Over the more than twenty years she performed it, she has

found that it has meaning for many people, and she still teaches it today. Hermes is one of the dancers who has performed it, and then she went on to notate it, for which we are grateful. There are not too many scores that you can buy! This one is available through amazon.com at a very reasonable price. Enjoy!

New Acquisitions

SCORES

- *Creature on a Journey* (1943) choreographer Jean Erdman notator Mira Kim, 2006-07
- *Endangered Species* (1981) choreographer Danny Grossman notator Sandra Aberkalns, 2007 rough manuscript
- *Hamadryad* (1948) choreographer Jean Erdman notator Mira Kim, 2006-07
- *Satyric Festival Song from "Dance Songs"* (1932) choreographer Martha Graham notator Sandra Aberkalns, 2007
- *Serenata Morisca* (1986) choreographer Martha Graham after Ted Shawn notator Sandra Aberkalns, 2007

BOOKS

- Beaconsfield, Hannah. *The Swan Who Wanted to be a Ballet Dancer*. Bloomington: AuthorHouse, 2007 gift of Hannah Beaconsfield
- Bhxpeba, H. A. *Labanotation [in Russian]*. Moscow: 2006 gift of Ann Hutchinson Guest
- Farnell, Brenda. *Do You See What I Mean? Plains Indian Sign Talk and the Embodiment of Action*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995 gift of Brenda Farnell
- _____. *Human Action Signs in Cultural Context: The Visible and the Invisible in Movement and Dance*. Maryland: The

- Scarecrow Press, 2001 gift of Brenda Farnell
- Hecquet, Simon and Sabine Prokhoris. *Fabriques de la Danse*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2007 gift of Simon Hecquet
- Hermes, Karin, ed. *Ethel Winter and Her Choreography: En Dolor*. Paris: Atempo, 2006 gift of Karin Hermes
- Potts, Nadia; with DanceForms Illustrations by Rhonda Ryman. *Betty Oliphant: The Artistry of Teaching. A Series of Ballet Classes*. Toronto: Dance Collection Danse Press/es, 2006 gift of Rhonda Ryman