

Volume VIII  
No. 2  
Winter  
2014

# Library News

From the Dance Notation Bureau

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**Library News is published four times a year in New York**

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## The DNB gratefully acknowledges funding support from:

New York State Council on the Arts, National Endowment for the Arts, Alphawood Foundation, Capezio Ballet Makers Dance Foundation Inc., The Harkness Foundation for Dance, The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, The Antony Tudor Trust, Jody and John Arnhold, and our individual contributors and members.

## Staging Blind – The Contrasting Experiences of Staging Martha Graham's *Celebration*, and the Advanced Labanotation Certification Reading Project

Fenella Kennedy

There seems to be an abiding confusion in the dance world about what Labanotation can do, cannot do, and what it is seeking to do in the first place. Confronted with a two-dimensional, symbolic representation of movement, dancers often mistakenly believe that notation treats movement as merely two-dimensional. Unable to access the shapes on the page, they question how the shapes on the page can possibly comprehend the artistry of dance. The most common misconception I come across when talking to individuals who are aware of notation, without having studied it, is that Labanotation seeks to stand for dance alone: that notators believe our multi-shaded, geometric code is all we need to capture any dance piece put in front of us.

The briefest association will prove that this is not the case. The delight I find in Labanotation is that it *does* understand how varied and sophisticated movement can be, and as a student completing my Advanced Certification Written project (tutored by the inestimable, and ever-patient Sandra Aberkals), my biggest challenge has been learning to respect my limitations in recording those differences; where I *need* to stop and use the supplementary resources, be they videos, trained bodies, personal accounts or other forms of documentation. For me it is in that respect for what can be notated, and what cannot, that conversation is opened up between scores, staggers, notators, artists and dancers, and that Labanotation becomes its most useful, elegant, and joyful.

In this article I will be talking about the Reading module that forms one third of the Advanced Labanotation Certification, and what that process taught me about staging from score alone. I will be contrasting that process with another reading experience, in which resources were more abundant.

I was very lucky, in 2013, to read Ray Cook's notation for a staging of Martha Graham's *Celebration* (1934), where communication between the director's vision, historical records and the score was very much in the foreground of the process. The director, Susan Sentler, who came in to coach after the piece had been set by myself, is a former Graham Company member, with years of experience dancing and staging Graham works. The dancers were Trinity Laban students from London. These dancers regularly take Graham technique classes as part of their undergraduate studies, and as staggers we also had access to various videos of the work, and the Graham Company's own resource pack. I myself have studied Graham technique for several years, and have danced in or helped stage a few other pieces from the repertoire.

The opening section of *Celebration* is complex and contrapuntal, with various small groupings moving around the stage simultaneously, each with a different movement motif, and with dancers shifting regularly between groups. Labanotation was the only tool in our kit capable of determining which dancer was supposed to be going where, and the clarity of the score made it easy to establish the detail of the recurring motifs, as well as where variations were introduced later in the piece.

There was, however, a general acknowledgement that *Celebration* has been through many variations since its original performance in 1934, and the presence of various resources allowed us to discuss, for the purpose of this performance, whether our priority was to replicate what might have been seen in the 1930's, or during the work's re-creation from memory in the 1960's, or to produce a version that reflects the present day Company aesthetic, which was captured in notation in 2009. Sentler attempted to draw a coherent stylistic sensibility from her own experience, video recording from various performances, and the fine details written in the score. This ability to embrace different visions enabled her to communicate to both myself and the dancers the technical subtleties and the shared physical understanding that made the work so resonant.

It is interesting, therefore, that for the Dance Notation Bureau's Advanced Labanotation Certification, students are asked to stage a work from score without any of this additional comparison of ideas and resources. To pass Advanced Certification, each student must complete a theory exam, notate 8-10 pages of a dance work or technique, and stage a suitably challenging piece, using just the score. It's a fantastic opportunity for anyone enthusiastic about notation; copyright and funding issues means that chances for a new notator to stage works are few and far between, and here you are allowed to pick a score that interests you (within certain criteria) and just get on with it. At the time of undertaking this project, I was lecturing at Trinity Laban, and so student dancers and studio space were freely available to me.

The Advanced Certification Reading project score must be for several dancers, must be licensed for educational use, and must contain theory at Advanced level. This rules out a surprisingly large number of scores, but certainly not enough to diminish the kid-in-a-candy-shop feeling you get from standing in front of the DNB catalogue and knowing that you get to pick one thing to take home with you. It was eventually decided that I would take *3 On A Match*, choreographed in 1982 by Victoria Uris, and notated by Virginia Doris in 1991, which forms the basis of the second staging experience I wish to describe.

Going into *Celebration*, as I described earlier, I was able to draw on the expertise of a director, the trained bodies of dancers, my own physical experience, and various visual resources. For *3 on a Match*, mine would be the primary vision in realising the score, and I would have to communicate it without a huge prior knowledge of the choreographic intention behind the material – in fact I committed to staging the piece without physical experience of the movement, and no opportunity to use visual records of the piece to fill in the gaps. What I did know was that Victoria Uris was influenced by Paul Taylor in her style, from which I could draw some conclusions about performance of the material, although my knowledge of Taylor is far less in-depth than my knowledge of Graham.

The score for *3 on a Match* consists of a brief synopsis, technical information and a glossary, as well as a list of additional resources and the notation itself. In addition to the score I obtained a copy of the music score from the DNB library, and – quite unusually – a recording of the music with performance instructions voiced over. The introduction to the score explains that the piece explores a dysfunctional family relationship, and indeed, browsing through the notation you come across delightful word notes to that effect: “M is putting F's head on her plate.... F handles D like a piece of meat... Tearing at her viscera...” I have to confess that going into my preparation time, I looked forward to learning how these would play out.

Having never staged from a score without video before, especially one so complex, I became aware of new challenges presented while preparing for rehearsal. In the score for *Celebration*, the movement automatically turned itself into the technique I know and love – I had a sense of the unwritten transitions from one movement to the next – the feel of the piece as a whole. *3 On A Match* by contrast felt completely out of context, but it meant that there was a sense of revelation every time a movement became clear as a whole: “I move this leg here and this arm here and my weight goes here and Oh wow I get it I'm in Child's Pose now! Hooray!” The more time I spent giving myself a holistic sense of the movement, the more I understood what the piece itself was trying to say. The question, of course, was how could I be sure that I was doing it right? That the sense I had matched that of Uris and her dancers?

Enter the mentor! As part of the Advanced project, each student finds an experienced notator to come into the process at various stages of the piece and make sure everything is going according to plan. It was here that I learned most about the actual artistry of notating, beyond what you have to do to read the piece from a score. Shelly Saint-Smith not only held me to accuracy, but pointed out places where choices in the notated language used might indicate a choice in the choreographic intention; where by being accurate to the score, rather than the general sense of the movement, the clarity of style was made

manifest. Working with her in this manner, it became abundantly obvious what Labanotation could communicate in the hands of an expert – I wish all notation sceptics had the opportunity to have seen her in action!

Truly also, the dancers themselves taught me what the piece was saying, although this is not to say that they added any inflections over and above what was scored. It stands to reason that when working out the notation on my own, it was impossible for me to truly understand the richness and complexity of relationships within the work from moment to moment. These revealed themselves when the dancers performed the movement in rehearsal. The mystery of why one particular relationship bow was used instead of another, or why two dancers appeared to have the same movement written in different ways, became clear within the context of the group – and thus the piece revealed not only its content, but its intention.



**Fenella Kennedy**

I am now at the cleaning stage of *3 On A Match*. Having blocked the whole thing out, I am now going back and making sure I have been true to the score, rather than what I think the movement is going to be. Whole sections that have consistently felt awkward fall into place as I discover the one little sign I missed; the re-reading of information I initially glossed over adds a whole new layer of meaning and communication between the dancers. I find that without the video and embodied experience we drew from to stage *Celebration*, the score does step in to fill many of the gaps, and I am not displeased with the results. Questions of authenticity obviously arise, which I cannot answer, having no access to the original work or any of its subsequent manifestations, but I feel as though the piece makes sense as a whole – credit I am sure going to the notator, Virginia Doris.

The Advanced Certification is the first time students like myself really get a sense of what being a notator might actually entail. As I said in the introduction, you learn again and again what notation can do, what it can't do, and what you should be seeking to do in the first place. You also truly grasp the scope of all the things you have yet to learn in order to do so. The reading project, despite feeling like the most accessible of the three modules, is left until last for a reason: it is by truly testing the limits of your theoretical and written knowledge that you discover the skills needed to find depth in the score. The lack of visual information, as much as it makes the process harder, serves in the end only to re-affirm the potential within Labanotation, and why I first started, and continue to study this beautiful language.