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Library News

From the Dance Notation Bureau

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Dance Notation Bureau Library

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Dance On Paper: The Library's First 75 Years

by Senta Driver

“Dance is not preserved until the scores themselves are preserved”

— Sherelyn Ogden, *New England Document Conservation Center*
consultant to the Dance Notation Bureau, 1982

Over three-quarters of a century, the Library at the Dance Notation Bureau has grown from a handful of manuscripts in a filing cabinet into a group of over 2000 scores with their supporting materials, reference books and archives of organizational records. It is the largest collection of dance scores in the world. As manager of the Bureau's website, the Library serves as the public face of the organization. It is the product of generations of staff and many more volunteers, dedicated to proving that dance can be written down in graphic language with the precision necessary to preserve complex artistic intentions, and staged with fidelity to those intentions. Much more than just a gathering of the work created by generations of sophisticated Notators, the Library is a demonstration of how effective the discipline, and the organization, has become. Its materials are vivid evidence that notation works. This was not always an easy case to make.

The DNB Library now holds records of a majority of the choreography of Doris Humphrey and Antony Tudor. It has a substantial number of George Balanchine's works, and 22 dances by Martha Graham. A large proportion of choreographers active in classical and modern dance are represented by at least one work. Some names are Robert Battle, Pina Bausch, Trisha Brown, William Forsythe, Erick Hawkins, Lin Hwai-Min, Murray Louis, Donald McKayle, Bebe Miller, Mark Morris, Alwin Nikolais, Yvonne Rainer, Anna Sokolow, Fred Strickler, and Paul Taylor. Because most of the DNB's funding has historically come from U.S. foundations, its commissions concentrate more on American artists than on those outside the country, but many of these are also included. It holds substantial recordings of folk and ethnic dance, and even some Pilates, Tai Chi, and yoga material. It also collects textbooks and scores written in notation systems other than Labanotation, including Eshkol-Wachmann and Benesh.

The story is familiar. Four skilled, energetic, intellectually ambitious women came together in 1940 in New York, to compare notes on their separate trainings in Rudolf Laban's new graphic language for recording dance, later called Labanotation, or LN for short. Ann Hutchinson, Helen Priest, Janey Price, and Eve Gentry resolved to coordinate their work going forward. Together, they enabled the preservation of an art form. Critic John Martin was at their meeting and announced the establishment of the Bureau in *The New York Times* on May 15, 1940, even before the four women had agreed to take on the responsibility; he called it the Bureau of Dance Notation. By November the *Dance Observer* was calling it, with slightly more elegance, the Dance Notation Bureau [hereafter DNB].

In addition to the groundbreaking innovation, what this project immediately caused was the accumulation of paper. Dances were being written down in precise detail.

After the first notation course in 1947 there followed more advanced courses in the system, refinement of the notation principles, and students, alongside their teachers, capturing the work dancing around them.

And two file drawers filled with what they were all producing.

This is what Lucy Venable found when she came to the DNB in 1948 to see what was going on. There were eight dances in score in the fledgling collection, counting at least two written before the official launch of the Bureau.

Menuett by Bernhard Klemm, notation by Irmgard Bartenieff, Albrecht Knust and Kurt Jooss, 1936

The Green Table by Kurt Jooss, notation by Ann Hutchinson, 1939

Totem Ancestor by Merce Cunningham, notation by Lena Belloc, 1942

Billy the Kid by Eugene Loring, notation by Ann Hutchinson and Helen Priest assisted by Ann Wilson, 1942

The Charleston Ballet by Jerome Robbins, notation by Ann Hutchinson, 1946

Symphonie Concertante by George Balanchine, notation by Ann Hutchinson assisted by Els Grelinger, 1948

Symphony in C by George Balanchine, notation by Ann Hutchinson assisted by Els Grelinger, 1948

The Shakers by Doris Humphrey, notation by Ann Hutchinson assisted by Els Grelinger, 1948



Figure #1 Boxed scores in the Archives



Figure #2 Part of the videotape collection

Venable was then at the beginning of her performing career, which would culminate nine years later in the José Limón Dance Company. She speaks modestly now of having volunteered to take on these file drawers and set up an orderly collection. In fact she had begun a lifelong commitment to the library. She was wise enough to seek the guidance of the New York Public Library, and Genevieve Oswald, Director of its Dance Collection, came over to inspect and give some valuable advice, starting with the separation of the Bureau materials into three categories: scores, correspondence and a growing group of teaching files. Oswald was the first of a series of New York Public Library professionals who have counseled and assisted the growth of the Library ever since that first contact.

The Library's central collection, called *Notated Theatrical Dances*, has now grown from these original drawers to a collection of 833 dances in score representing more than 280 choreographers, largely American but with a good proportion of non-U.S. artists. These are housed in a specially designed and protected space in the DNB's New York

Offices. Two of its components honor leading Bureau figures. The Marjorie Isaac Archives, named for a long-term supporter of the Bureau's work, contain the originals of LN dance scores. The collection of score copies that circulate for study and staging are named for Maria Grandy, a dancer, teacher, ballet mistress, and DNB Board Chair.

One dance's records can take up as many as 36 folders. If the score is in autography (handwritten) there will be a separate master photocopy, used to strike copies that can be sent out to users. There may be additional pages containing choreographic changes to the score, or notes made when a new stager, different from the person who directed the notated version, produces significant new information. There will be various amounts of written supporting material in the folders, including photographs, videotapes, audiotapes, information from costume or lighting designers, introductions to the work itself, or background material on its artistic context. After Notators began to write their scores directly on computer in the software for Labanotation called LabanWriter around 1987, the Bureau began a program of transcribing older handwritten scores into the new technology, which continues today. This meant that storage devices, such as Zip disks, 3.5" floppy disks, CD-ROMs, and external hard drives, began to be included on the shelves, with hard copies of their scores in the boxes. The New York Public Library expanded its long assistance to the DNB Library with an agreement to accept DNB's microfilms of the scores, for further protection. It holds these films, with backup copies deposited at the Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee Theatre Research Institute at Ohio State University [OSU]. The Library has usually avoided acquiring physical costumes and props, because of the complex preservation and storage issues. An exception to this policy is the set of juggling pins needed for Hanya Holm's *Jocose*.



Figure #3 Drawer opened to show score folders. Dances here under letter "A" are by artists ranging from Martha Graham and Paul Taylor to William Forsythe



Figure #4 Scores of Albrecht Knust, founding developer of the Laban system

In addition to the collection of LN scores and their supporting material, the Library holds around 20 scores published in the Eshkol-Wachmann notation system. 30 more scores written in the Benesh notation system are now housed at OSU. The Library also maintains files on its own organizational history; materials reflecting the development of LN teaching; editions of the eight different DNB journals and newsletter series it has published over 75 years; the papers of several central figures in the development of Labanotation; and a sizeable collection of books relating to the history of dance, the development of various notation systems, and the artists whose work has been captured.

There is also a group of 201 original handwritten or "pencil" scores dating from the first years of the Bureau's work up through 1968. They were sent for safe preservation in that year to OSU at the time Lucy Venable left the presidency of the Bureau in New York to join the faculty of the OSU Department of Dance. There they reside, in a version of dual-citizen status, as the Dance Notation Bureau Collection within the OSU Library's Lawrence and Lee Theatre Research Institute, curated by Nena Couch. This Collection now contains additional original scores and items ranging from books to notation-related exhibition

catalogues, editions of DNB publications, and every kind of related material. Among these are the papers of Carl Wolz, who was a leading figure in bringing Labanotation into Asia. Copies of the autography scores were created and returned to the New York collection for management, augmentation as needed, and access by companies and researchers. Because of copyright issues involving the original agreements with artists to notate their work, the DNB Director of Programs in New York manages rights matters of these works on behalf of the artists, but OSU and the DNB Extension for Education and Research care for and conserve the actual scores. Lucy Venable has noted that this work was done by three successive Directors of the DNB Extension for Education and Research: herself, Odette Blum, and Sheila Marion, with the help of a number of Extension students.

In New York the score collection, along with archives of all the Bureau's activities, expanded steadily. Susie Watts Margolin was the first full-time Library staffer, appointed in 1965 to foster the necessary gathering, cataloguing, and circulation of materials. Richard Ploch, a qualified archivist, succeeded her on a part-time basis. The holdings had decisively outgrown their two file drawers, and now filled numerous file cabinets, with scores, tape recordings and even costumes pieces, a challenge to the preservation effort. They had not yet acquired a separate archives room of their own.

This is what Pat Rader found when she was appointed the first full-time professional Librarian in 1981. She was an historical dancer with a library degree, hoping to dance part-time. It was Rader who ordered the extra-tall shelves still in the DNB offices today, for the collection's bound books, most (but not all) written in Roman letters rather than graphic symbols. Eight of these shelves are now adorned with brass plates carrying affectionate personal salutes to key figures in the Bureau's work.

this shelf donated by RAY G. COOK June 11 1984

this shelf donated by ANN HUTCHINSON GUEST June 11 1984

dedicated to the memory of JOHN MARTIN by AHG June 1985

dedicated to the memory of ALBRECHT KNUST by AHG June 1985

Dedicated to the Memory of SIGURD LEEDER by AHG June 1985

Dedicated to the Memory of ANTONY TUDOR by AHG June 1987

Dedicated to the Memory of HELEN PRIEST ROGERS April 1999

in honour of ANN HUTCHINSON GUEST April 1999

Rader organized and expanded the collection, and introduced the use of master copies from which circulating scores were struck, to protect the originals from overuse. She remembered in a 2014 interview, "The scores were perpetually unfinished, and being fished out for the Notators to make changes." This is an inevitable part of the notating process, and would complicate the process of microfilming for security as well. Scores undergoing updates would repeatedly need to be re-filmed. Rader speaks of understanding how the DNB already worked on its collection, and setting out to enhance that method. Keeping the scores orderly, findable and available for circulation was a major focus for her.

Rader was dealing with a collection written in a language that was, at first, unfamiliar to her.

"I had started reading the Ann Hutchinson Guest textbook before I came. I took the elementary and intermediate courses and score reading. I loved it. I found I knew [*due to her historical-dance background*] all the artists' names when I began Score Reading...it made me able to find a lost and misplaced page. Xeroxing then could cause chunks of material to be misplaced. And the rubber-cemented bits [*inserted in the score*] would fall off...it gave me a solidification of my feeling that [*Labanotation*] was important: I was proud to be Librarian there and contribute to the dance future. It helped me really understand what I was doing: what I want to be as a Librarian to the people doing the work."

Rader identified a major difference between the DNB Library of her time and more conventional collections. There was no standard comprehensive catalogue. Mary Jane Warner created a project from 1984 to 1999 for the International Council on Kinetography Laban [ICKL] to list the physical locations of all known scores, such as those held by the Language of Dance Centre [LODC], Centre National d'écriture du Mouvement [CNEM], and the DNB Extension at Ohio State. At the same time Rader began work on the list of *Notated Theatrical Dances*, which was intended as a basic tool for making scores available from the DNB for study or restaging. Up to then the DNB had maintained a card file of just the circulating scores, and it was not integrated with the original manuscripts. She reflected,

“It’s not so unusual to start a collection that is half archive [*of protected items*] and half library [*of items that circulate*]. Now it is usual to separate these pieces more than the Bureau does. Architects have a similar profile.”

Rader describes the vital atmosphere of the Bureau in her five years’ tenure. Hers was a period of rapid expansion. She would see half a dozen Notators at work, education courses in session, and white boards on the walls covered with discussion notes. This produced a steady flow of new dances entering the Library. Professional Archivist Leslie Kopp was brought in as a consultant to introduce proper archiving practice. Technology came in, through the invention of a special typing element compatible with LN symbols and the vertical direction LN staves take on a page.

In Rader’s time an even more far-reaching action was taken to strengthen the Library, when the full-time Librarian position was endowed in 1984. This perceptive financial guarantee provided stability, and affirmed to the Bureau itself the central importance of its holdings. It has led directly to the steady and confident advance of the collection.

At Ohio State in the mid 1980’s Venable led a team with technology experts George Karl, Scott Sutherland, and later David Ralley to create word-processing computer software for LN, resulting in LabanWriter and the transition from hand-written or autography scores to digital forms. The score shelves began to fill with computer disks as well as paper.

When Rader moved on from the Bureau to work at the New York Public Library, she made a continuing personal commitment as advisor to the DNB for the rest of her career. The Public Library has also offered support in crafting disaster plans for the hard-copy holdings, along with the regular program of storing microfilm copies off-site.

Jill Cirasella, also professionally trained in Library Science, turned up in 1997 as a volunteer to help with the Bureau and Library’s move from offices on 21st Street to West 30th Street. Not long after she worked to set up the new dedicated Archives room and the files and books, she was herself appointed Librarian. In a 2015 interview she said, “You learn a collection by the specific reference questions that come in; and you learn a collection by moving it,” a sentiment shared by Mei-Chen Lu when she did her own Library move ten years later. Cirasella set the continued development of the *Notated Theatrical Dances* catalog as a primary goal in her time, and also focused on circulation and scholars’ queries, to expand the catchment area of the Bureau and serve researchers beyond the dance community. She began to study Labanotation herself, as had Pat Rader, and analyzed the priorities she saw for the Library. The first and largest project was to catalog the Archives and the Master and Circulating scores, a long-term goal that is partially met with the publication of *Notated Theatrical Dances*. By this time the collection had acquired both videotapes and audiotapes, whose condition needed constant monitoring against deterioration. She also refined the policy by which each score, tape, and audiotape would exist in separate forms: an archival/untouchable original, a master copy usable for striking duplicates, and circulating copies sent out on request. She also began to work with the DNB’s website, newly redesigned by Marion Bastien from earlier incarnations created by Librarian Matthew Sheehy and Executive Director Ilene Fox. This would expand into one of the Library’s most vital roles, bringing the DNB’s resources to the international world of dancers and many others with non-dance projects who needed to find them.

Cirasella has a gift for envisioning the Library’s future, and she left the DNB her analysis of its short, medium and long-term needs, with detailed guidelines for appropriate projects. It was she who suggested that the Library might best be guided by a notation-trained Director, supported by periodic library and archive professional consultants. Mei-Chen Lu found her work an invaluable guide when she took over in 2002. After Cirasella moved on, she has continued to advise her successor and offer help on a variety of issues.

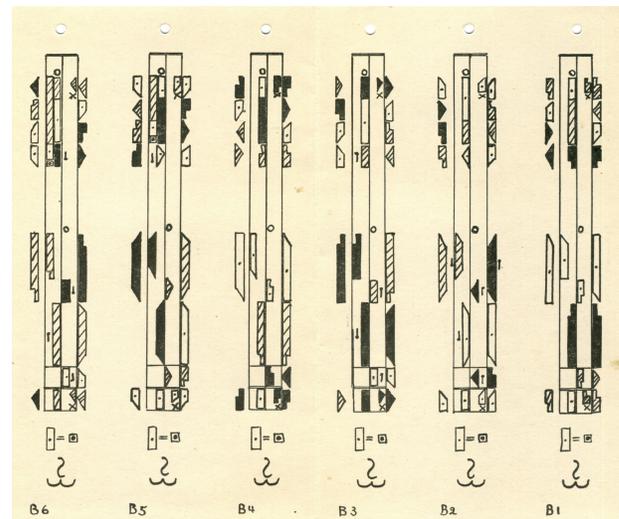
Lu, who came to the DNB from Taiwan via three years of study at Ohio State’s Dance Notation Bureau Extension, is the longest-serving Librarian (the title is now Director of Library Services) and the first to be fully qualified in Labanotation. Her skills (she studied LN through the Advanced Level and is a Certified Teacher and Stager) and depth in the discipline has enabled her to expand the Library position in valuable new ways. In a 2014 interview she commented,

“Having a literate librarian leads to outsiders, visual artists, designers receiving from me better illustration [*candidates*] from a score. Some visual artists came in to see the *Swan Lake* pas de deux: I pulled out the Eshkol-Wachmann score of something and a Benesh; three different notation forms. The visual artists, seeking samples of notation, now had a choice through us, of visually interesting options. They liked Wachmann best.”



Figure #5 Mei-Chen Lu, Director of Library Services, examines Rudolf Laban’s letter to his American colleagues on his 70th birthday, with a printout of his new research into the *Space Harmony of Movement* that he enclosed with his letter [see right, Figures #6 and 7]

Dear Friends,
 I was most deeply touched by the very great number of good wishes and remembrances for my 70th birthday. I cannot express how delighted I was to hear from you all, and how much I enjoyed receiving the good news from so many old friends. It gave me the greatest pleasure to hear about the progress of our work all over the world!
 I feel it would interest you to know something of my recent research, so I am sending you the enclosed print of the basic sequences of Movement Harmony in Space as a token of my love and gratitude.
 Rudolf Laban
 Manchester 1950.



She has been able to direct researchers in valuable new directions through her close knowledge of the scores. One such, Kyle Maxwell-Doherty, was wrestling with how to incorporate certain types of African percussion accompaniment into the dance notation. Lu connected him with Doris Green, who has done extensive work notating African percussion within her movement scores.

With her LN expertise, Lu has also been able to take on a role in improving the scores by clarifying the technical language that Notators use, so as to ensure that the terms retain the same meaning. She noticed that material obtained during later productions from a score was being submitted to the Library variously as “editions”, “updates”, and “revisions”, among other words, without a good account of whether they came from artists’ changes, or versions presented by a different artist-coach, or grammatical improvements in notation. In 2011 she led Notators Sandra Aberkalns and Mira Kim in creating *Codified Score Terminology*, a guide that defined such terms and requested the Notators’ sources. It underlines one of the strengths of LN, its ability to absorb and preserve variant information on a dance without losing any earlier forms. This depends upon sharing precise language. Figures #8-10 show parts of the Library’s three versions of Kurt Jooss’ *The Green Table*, as recorded at different artist stagings and amplified with later information.

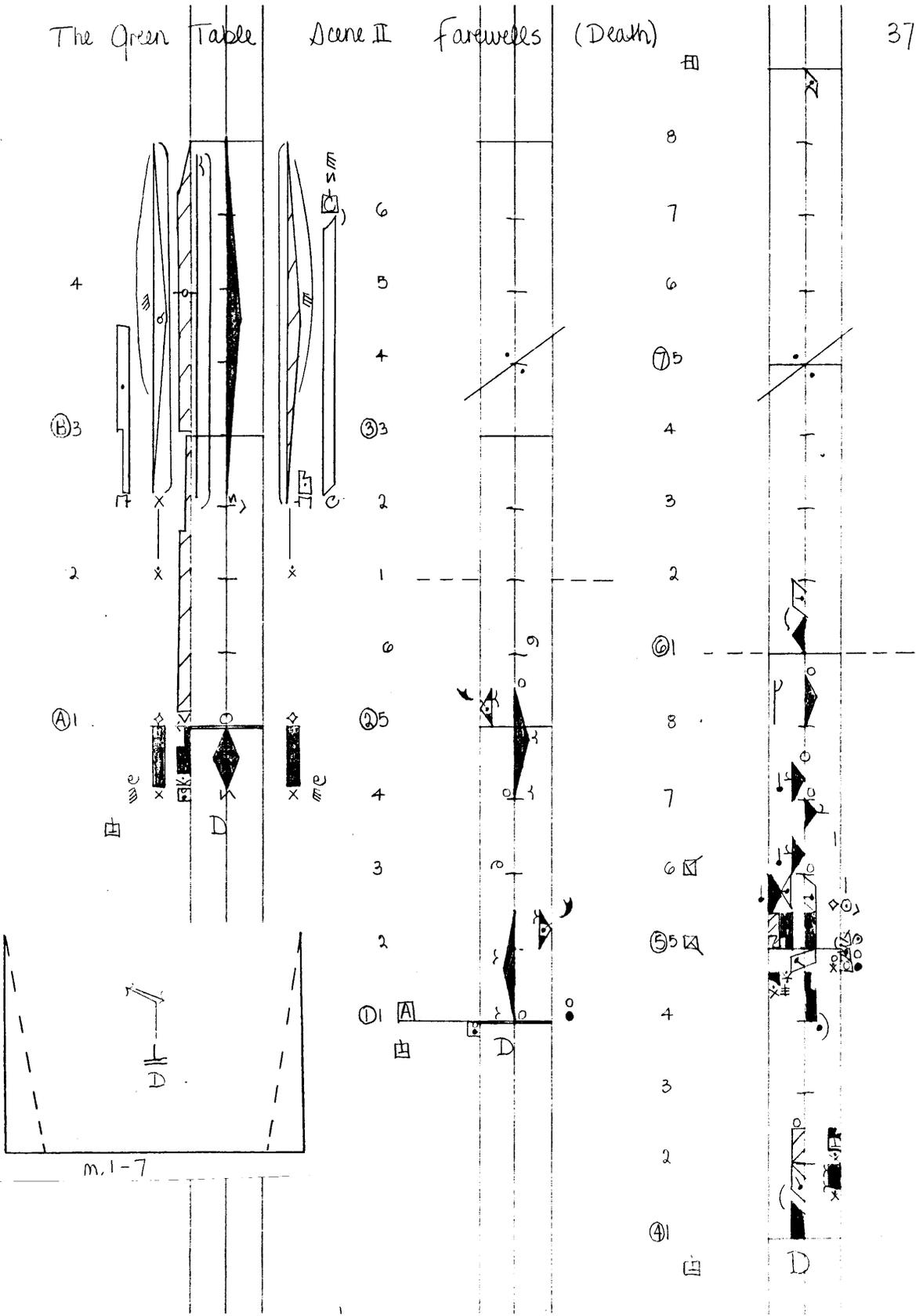


Figure #9 Notation of The Green Table by Gretchen Schumacher, 1980

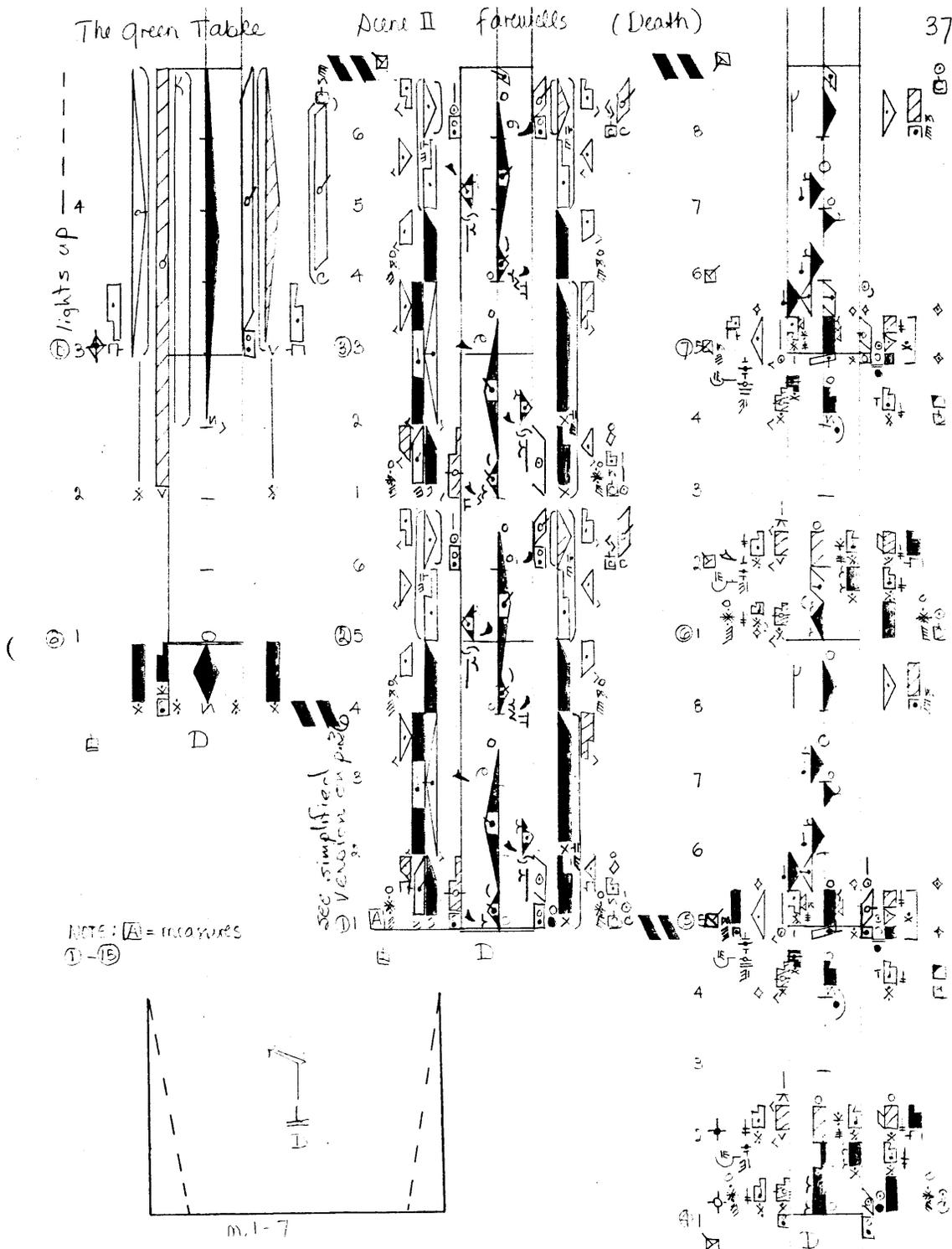


Figure #10 Notation by Jane Marriott of The Green Table in a 1986 production. This was staged by Odette Blum from Figure #9's 1980 score and coached by Anna Markard, with a new score recording Markard's final revisions

Lu's approach is to maintain a group of advisors to whom she frequently turns. She says, "We ask for testing by the community," for instance, on the performance of the website. She has worked with outside archivist consultants, and periodically with interns. The Dance Heritage Coalition, of which the DNB is a member, shares the Library's office space and has contributed valuable help to the creation of Library finding aids.

When the Mellon Foundation offered support to the Library, her primary request was to complete the placing of *Notated Theatrical Dances*, the main catalogue of the collection, in searchable format online. This had been the dream of numerous successive Librarians and Executive Directors. It was realized after four years of work and the crucial facilitation of Scott Sutherland, long the DNB's IT guru. Lu observed its effect: people who used to have to phone and e-mail for advice on suitable projects can now research this for themselves, probably finding an even wider range of interesting options that match their dancers' abilities.

The Librarian manages the DNB website, the principal way in which the Bureau's work is made known and available to the world. The site has been expanded by each Librarian in turn since the technology became available. Lu's developing computer expertise has enabled the DNB to meet its public's exploding expectations that everything it seeks should be digitized and online. The DNB can now serve scholars working outside dance and reach a much wider community than ever was possible. In 2015 Lu was invited to Tours, France to speak at the ICKL Conference on *The Dance Notation Bureau in the 21st Century*, with particular focus on what its website has to offer. She was the first Library Director to earn this opportunity.

Lu was asked by Lucy Venable in 2006 to begin issuing *The Library News*, presently the only regular DNB publication. She solicits articles relevant to any aspect of notation and restaging, whether in dance or other disciplines, professional or community-based; it reaches almost 1400 subscribers. As such, it reinforces the Library's role in growing wider public awareness of what written movement notation, and the DNB, can offer to all sorts of researchers and dancers. *The Library News* is a visible sign of the Bureau's maturity. It also demonstrates the essential value of the collection, which has become a generating force, spurring new thinking through the power of its collection.

Mei-Chen Lu has her own dreams of extending the Library's scores and other archival materials online, as a free and accessible resource on the DNB's own website.

Given the ubiquity of computer technology and the habits of the new audience, she pictures an image, on the website, of scores crowded on a shelf. Click on one that is not covered by copyright and it blooms out as a book one may flip through, rather than scrolling down, ready to read at once on screen. Music sound and scores, video and photographs can be accessed or even embedded in it. Copyrighted material would be handled differently, so as always to remain protected by the Library and the DNB according to its artist agreements. The DNB notation distance-learning courses could be put in a format to run directly on the website. More and more materials could be offered for free. "The point," she says, "is to spread the gospel. The more people use the system, the merrier."

Through the Library's work, the scores live. They enable new performances and the sharing of choreographic knowledge. They also influence thinking about movement, everywhere that people are moving.