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# Library News

From the Dance Notation Bureau

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### Dance Notation Bureau Library

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## *Lynchtown*, Presenting Humanity Through Labanotation

by Bridget Roosa

Assistant Professor of Dance, Director of the Dance Program  
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For several years I have been actively staging dances from Labanotation scores by arrangement with the Dance Notation Bureau (DNB). I find this to be a vital component in educating the dance student both in movement analysis and in history. By staging from score, dancers get to travel back into the body and mind of a choreographer and perform in dances that have shaped the art form.

My Labanotation training began at Southern Methodist University with Patty Harrington Delaney. As a dance major, I was required to take Elementary Labanotation, but also had the invaluable experience of dancing in Helen Tamiris' *How Long, Brethren?* staged from Labanotation score. This life changing exposure early on led me to realize there was much more than the notated score that completed the reconstruction process. Under the direction of Delaney and Tina Curran, cast members were immersed into readings and discussions to further our understanding of the historical implications that drove the creation of *How Long Brethren?*. This process proved that reconstruction was more than just executing movement correctly and technically. It became a dance about people with emotions, that as dancers, we were portraying. This approach, which combines repertory with history, affected me immensely. This experience shaped the way I proceed in staging work from score and caused me to further pursue Labanotation studies at Laban in London and at Florida State University where my first stagings were in partial fulfillment of my MFA. Today I continue my studies in Labanotation and I find it important to stage a work annually with my students here at Agnes Scott College.

Each year as I go through the Notated Theatrical Dances Catalog, I search for a piece of choreography that will be challenging both technically and artistically as well as to connect the past with the present. *Lynchtown* from *Atavisms*, choreographed in 1936 by Charles Weidman, immediately became of interest to me because of its dynamic movement quality and its description of social injustice. It is a 7-minute dance that depicts a lynching that is occurring off stage while portraying a community's involvement in and reaction to the crime.

Although I have been arranging stagings with the DNB for over seven years, this project has been one of the most fulfilling for me as a stager and director. The process began with many conversations with the DNB about the possibility of the choreography being danced by an all female cast. Originally, Weidman had cast males to perform the lifting movements. But after discussion, we learned that female dancers could successfully perform these movements with the proper training. Once this change was approved, I began the audition process.

In casting performers, not only was I looking for strength and technical skills but also I needed mature and sensitive dancers who would fully engross themselves in portraying members of a community who took part in these grotesque lynchings. The rehearsal process included research and reading about lynchings,



Agnes Scott College Students in *Lynchtown*  
Photography by John Martin

followed by analysis of many articles and photographs that provided the information necessary to understand and implement the gestural nuance depicted in the Labanotated score. Through discussions, the dancers began to share their family's experiences with oppression and to add information they were learning in other courses. As a result, the dancers became emotionally connected to the work, giving the subject matter and the choreography the integrity it deserved. Facial expression and dynamic energy were not contrived but fully embodied by the dancers who transformed themselves into a community of people that they, in real life, would protest against.

Their true feelings aside, the dancers successfully presented this 1936 work of social activism in 2009 with humility, giving a voice to those victims who didn't have the right to speak. The dancers transformed into honest artists, even stunning themselves with the range of emotions brought out in articulating the choreography. They depicted images of hanging heads and horrifying silent screams while running towards the scene of the crime to get a better look. Pictures of our research process came to life as the dancers' abstracted hands that were sticky and blood drenched while dragging the lifeless body into the stage space. They understood they were portraying children and adults of a community that became enraged with their own fear, buying into the notion that the ludicrous nature of the crime they were committing and observing was justified.

From the very beginning of this project, I was aware of the risk of presenting a piece about lynching. While the dancers understood we were not conveying a piece of choreography that supported lynching, others not familiar with the context of the work may easily be offended. *Lynchtown*, as a title, makes a bold statement, and it can cause many viewers to take offense to my presentation of the topic. This brought up much conversation within the Atlanta dance community. The message of social activism was discussed, perhaps highlighting one of the strongest reasons I felt compelled to present this work. Having the ability to raise eyebrows and promote discussions, *Lynchtown* was successful in uncovering the need to continue the revolt against hate crimes.

The most shocking revelation throughout this process of staging *Lynchtown* was realizing hate crimes still exist even today. Lynchings and other oppressive acts of violence are still occurring and people are motivated through fear to hate. These shocking discoveries helped the dancers connect this early 20<sup>th</sup> century dance to events taking place currently. Feelings of curiosity, horror and repulsion were discussed at length among the cast of *Lynchtown*. It became apparent to all of us that the importance of presenting *Lynchtown* to the community lay not only in preserving dance history but also in continuing the pursuit of social activism to diminish injustices that are still occurring today.

In addition to staging this piece for the Atlanta community, *Lynchtown* was presented on the adjudication concert at the American College Dance Festival at Middle Tennessee State University and was chosen by adjudicators Mark Borchelt, Maura Keefe, and Ursula Payne to be included in the gala performance. The following assessments were provided during the

adjudication feedback session. Borchelt claimed the work was important to “teach us about our humanity” and that the dancers’ “maturity [is] shown when they say, I am a vehicle for the work”. Keefe said the piece “didn’t feel like a museum piece” but that it “felt fresh and exciting, as if it was made last year”. Payne added that the piece was “well rehearsed and coached”.

Successfully presenting a work about humanity, which used a Labanotation score as the vehicle for translation was very rewarding. I could not be more proud of the journey that led to the stunning, mature performances by the dancers, and I look forward to witnessing continued growth in Agnes Scott College dance students through stagings from score. Today’s students are the Labanotation professionals of the future, and it is important to enhance their educational experiences through mounting master works.

## HOW DOES ONE ARRANGE A STAGING WITH THE DNB?

by Kristin Jackson

A major part of my job as Director of Programs of the DNB is to manage and facilitate the ongoing staging requests of dances from the more than 750 Labanotation scores we have in our library. A majority of these requests come from university dance departments and dance companies. The course of action necessary to fulfill these requests can be straightforward or complex. This determines the length of time necessary to arrive at a finished contract. Allowing at least 8 months to 1-year from initial request to performance date is ideal. You may ask why so long? Therefore, I thought it would be helpful to delineate the important steps needed in order to bring a request to a completed contract and successful staging.

### Staging requests

Requests usually come in varying forms, such as emails or phone calls. The more complete the request, the more quickly and efficiently it can be handled. There may sometimes be unforeseen setbacks, so it is always best to make inquiries as early as possible.

- Sometimes an inquiry will only have the name of the dance requested. This usually requires more follow-up correspondence and can delay the process. It is always best to include the following necessary information (a PDF document, Contract Worksheet, can be found on our website under “Site Search and Site Maps” and may be filled out ahead of time):
  - Name of dance and choreographer
  - Contact person (if different from person making request)
  - Name of dance company or university department
  - Address, phone, and email
  - Is a stager required? If so, what is name of the stager?
  - First performance date
  - Length of license
  - Number of performances
- Other times, an inquiry may come in with all the above necessary information, but a stager will need to be contracted through the DNB. This requires going through our roster of staggers to see who might be available for this project. This may entail follow-up correspondence and negotiations.
- The ideal inquiry, of course, will come in with all the necessary information and already have a stager in place. These requests can be quickly processed if there are no setbacks with the licensor, licensing and royalty fees, or recommended artistic coaches.
- Finally, requests for the DNB to recommend names of dances of a certain length and cast size suitable for staging are no longer necessary, now that the Notated Theatrical Catalogue is available on the DNB website. Companies have access to this information beforehand and can leisurely do the research themselves. This is highly recommended and has proven to be most efficient for both the company and the DNB staff.

### Licensors

Once all the details of the staging have been clarified, the next step is to contact the licensor and inform them of the request. The licensor can be the choreographer or a designated heir. Most of the time, permission is granted, but this is not always a guarantee. Most dances are licensed for a 1-year period, although some works may be licensed up to 3-years. Sometimes the licensor or designated heir will want to know more about the school's or dance company's background and will request a DVD/video of previous performances to evaluate. Licensors may also require a minimum number of performances. This can range from 4-10, depending on the length of the contract. If the licensor has not previously set licensing and royalty fees for his/her work, then this must be settled with the DNB. If a choreographer is deceased and an heir has not yet been named, then further research needs to be done to determine whom to contact. If an heir is not found, licensing and royalty fees are determined by the DNB and kept in escrow until the heir is located.

### Fees

Two fees are paid to the licensor, a licensing fee and a royalty fee. The licensing fee is set by the licensor and it determines the length of the contract. The royalty fee, also set by the licensor, is considerably lower and is charged for each performance. These fees range in price and a small percentage goes to the DNB.

There is also a DNB service fee, which is currently \$275. This service fee includes the rental of the Labanotation score, its production package, such as music score, audio CD, DVD, production information (if available) and supportive services. It is important to note that while the contract is in negotiation, the Labanotation score and production package can be sent out to the stager ahead of time for review and preparation. Our Director of Library Services, Mei-Chen Lu, handles this part of the process. Score inquiry fees, \$20 for a month preview, may be paid ahead of time and deducted from the DNB service fee, once the contract is completed.

### Stagers

Most dance departments and dance companies requesting stagings have a faculty member or artistic director who can stage from Labanotation score. Other times, however, a stager needs to be contracted through the DNB or recommended by the licensor. Depending on the schedule and availability of the stager, this can take from 6 months to a year to arrange. Once a stager has been confirmed, the schedule of rehearsals is set-up between the company and the stager. Fees are established for the stager and require a separate contract. The length of rehearsals will determine the stager's weekly fees, per diem, transportation and housing expenses (if applicable). In addition, with consideration to the locale, complexity of the dance and the experience of the stager, costs may vary.

### Artistic coaches

Whether a stager is contracted through the DNB or not, the licensor may also mandate that an artistic coach "check" or "fine tune" the staging from score. The artistic coach may be the choreographer or a dancer, who has previously performed the work. This necessitates a separate contract. Ideally, the artistic coach needs to coordinate his/her rehearsal schedule with the stager so that they overlap, preferable towards the end of the rehearsal period. It is important to note that most coaches do not read notation, but have valuable insight that can reinforce or add to the staging. In some very special cases, two coaches may be required. In Donald McKayle's *Games*, for example, one coach checks the vocal accompaniment and the other checks the movement. Since the coaching process (from 1-3 days) takes less time than the staging, coaches are paid fees on a daily basis along with the required per diem, transportation and housing expenses (if applicable).

### Contract/s

Finally, once all of these details are in order, the contract/s may be drafted. I usually confirm all the terms several times with the company prior to this stage. The draft is then given to Doris Caravaglia, our Office Manager, who prepares the contract. Then, the contract is returned to me for editing and review. Once all revisions have been proofed, Doris mails out the completed contract along with the invoices and payment schedule. If applicable, the stager's and artistic coach's contracts are also prepared and mailed.

### Final thoughts

For the most part, the companies that contact the DNB are cognizant and thoughtful of the time element involved. When dealing with the many factors and concerns, it always takes more time than expected. Your patience is appreciated and helps make the process much easier. It is ultimately my pleasure to be of service to everyone interested in staging a work and to make sure that I am able to provide the best assistance possible. Certainly the collaborative effort between the DNB staff and me makes this challenging endeavor more manageable. To those of you that I have already worked with, I am indebted to you for your patience, understanding and gratitude. For those of you whom I have yet to help, I hope that this article and the information that exists on our website, can provide a clearer road map to help you achieve a successful staging. I look forward to hearing from you!