

Ascona Event 2015

Review by Helen Roberts

For 3 days in October 2015, over 50 artists, practitioners, academics and archivists gathered at the stunning and historic lakeside location of Monte Verità, Ascona, Switzerland for the Laban Event 2015. This was the third year of the event which celebrates and explores contemporary research and practices derived from the heritage of Rudolf Laban. The focus of this year's event was 'The Re-', particularly ideas related to re-imagining or recreation.

The event included workshops, presentations and discussion groups. The workshops on the first day were led by Alison Curtis-Jones (UK) and translated by Nunzi Tirelli (Italy) and focused on the practices Curtis-Jones engaged with during the process of re-imagining, re-creating and staging Laban's dance theatre works. Drawing upon Curtis-Jones's approach of using Laban's principles and choreological perspectives, and working practically to gain an embodied understanding of spatial principles and the significance of dynamic phrasing in movement, participants worked within an improvisational framework to create interpretations of sections of two dance works originally created by Laban. On the second day, Maria Consagra (Italy) delivered workshops which took a particular approach to movement for actors and performers using Bartenieff Fundamentals, Effort Theory and use of the voice to create 'Figura' or simplified character through their own movement.

There was also a series of lectures which presented a range of projects involving different methods of re-envisioning and presenting dance works. Stefano Tomassini (Lugano) discussed three interpretations of *Sacre* by Christina Rizzo. The first (2008) was with an all-male group and focused on unity and qualitative energy of the group; the second in 2012 was presented as a video installation on six screens, each delayed by 10 seconds, which presented a counterpoint in the music and spatialization of the linear time creating perspectives of duplication, repetition and simultaneousness; the third (2013) was a solo which was a performative reflection on the deceptions of the usual time and space devices, with the audience listening to the expected music but Rizzo dancing with headphones on to different music. Karin Hermes (Zürich) discussed the artistic-methodological research on restaging Kurt Jooss's *Big City* (1932). Hermes emphasised that for recreation/reconstruction one needs to decide what materials will be used as sources (eg. only the score if it exists or whether to look at a range of other sources too), and consider the layers of appearance within working techniques, such as developments in physical approaches. She suggests that recreation is hermeneutic, there is no set structure, and that individuals revisit work in a spiral form, picking up different elements and, as hidden information is revealed, perceiving the work differently.

These presenters also engaged in a panel discussion with Patrick Primavesi (Leipzig), Alison Curtis-Jones and Valerie Preston-Dunlop (UK) which considered different approaches to 'The Re-'. It established that there are a number of approaches and terms, all with different subtleties, linked to the idea of 'Re'. Primavesi suggested four groups of approaches. Firstly that of reproduction, remaking or restaging where works are not lost completely and there are sources to draw upon; secondly, that of reconstruction, restoration or re-enactment where perhaps they are fading away and hearsay and documents have to be relied upon; thirdly the idea of recreation, reinvention, re-imagining or re-envisioning where an artist has more freedom to explore and develop their own viewpoint on the work and how it might be; and finally revival where works come back into focus or interest. Many suggestions were made by the panel and audience of other terms – such as review, research, re-evaluate, rethink, respond – which could be linked to this process of looking back at and re-presenting work.



Looking out to Lake Maggiore from Monte Verità.
Photograph: © Helen Roberts, 2015.

It was emphasised that a good understanding of the nature of the original work is necessary especially as sometimes there is no outer form such as a notation score, photographs or living dancers, but there may be other material traces, such as writings or images of contemporaneous works, that can inform how a recreation of a work develops. The original intention of the artist themselves is significant, as is the influence of the culture at the time alongside awareness of how culture has changed over time. It is important to engage with the past, be open to different approaches and reflect on critiques of the work for perspective.

Another element of the event brought together archivists and individuals who oversee collections with holdings related to Rudolf Laban – including National Resource Centre for Dance (Surrey), Trinity Laban (London) and Leipzig Tanzarchiv (Germany) – and heritage enthusiasts interested in preservation of and engagement with this past. The discussions aimed to explore and advocate existing archive resources, identify other potential collections of value, and consider ways in which custodians, academics and artists may

work together in the future to further preserve this heritage as well as exploit the potential of its use in research and creativity. Much useful discussion was had and Cyrille Bochow, Laban's great grandson (from Dussia Bereska), indicated several private collections linked to family and associates. A number of participants from these discussions plan to meet again to pursue ideas and collaborative initiatives. Valerie Preston-Dunlop addressed the concept of 'Archeo-choreology' as a process for finding and bringing a completely lost dance back to performance. When there are no material remains (eg. film, notation, people) then different approaches need to be used to re-discover the 'essence' of a work and reimagine it. She emphasised the importance of scholarship and artistry working collaboratively to create a work in this way. A scholar will look at the evidence found about a work, then interpret it in the light of the culture in which it was made before making it appropriate to the understanding of the culture

in which it is to be remade and presented to the public. Therefore, it is a three stage process: finding the remains (archives are required for this); scholarly interpretation; and artistic creation that speaks to today's audience.

Preston-Dunlop focused on the creation of *Ishtar's Journey into Hades* and *Dancing Drumstick*, the works to be premiered at this event. The idea for recreating these lost works began at the Laban Event 2013 with the recognition that it was 100 years since Laban created them during his time at the experimental Monte Verità artists' community (which also included dancers such as Mary Wigman and Suzanne Perrottet). Alison Curtis-Jones and Valerie Preston-Dunlop then began the process of researching what evidential traces they could find to inform how these works might be presented. There were no material remains in the form of film, photographs, scores or other key documents; however, letters were found in the Kunsthhaus archives in Zürich between Laban and Suzanne Perrottet which talked about the work, there were photographs of other works from the same year which gave a feeling for how they might look, and a chapter in Laban's 1935 book *A Life for Dance (Ein Leben Für Den Tanz)* discussed

both works describing them as 'a play with a purpose'. Thus, these sources provided key information which pointed towards the motivations behind the works.

Although it is not possible to determine Laban's artistic decision-making process, it was clear that whilst he was creating work he was using improvisation methods and working with expressive movements that were not rhythmic and with expressive sounds rather than music. He did not want dance to be a subsidiary art to music, he wanted the two art forms to stand side-by-side and clearly he aimed to achieve this, particularly with the work *Dancing Drumstick*. Preston-Dunlop also recalled working with Laban and dancers from this earlier generation when she was a teenager and the open and collaborative nature of creative and rehearsal methods which was also key to finding the 'essence' of the works. Curtis-Jones and Preston-Dunlop also looked at other events that were happening in dance at the time in order to situate the works in their cultural context. Drawing upon these elements, the work then needed to be brought to life in the studio by Curtis-Jones as the choreographic artist, with her company Summit Dance Theatre. Curtis-Jones identifies the works do not aim to be and nor can they be a transcription of the original works, but by drawing on the traces found and through interrogation of contemporary practice with current dance artists for today's audiences, they form part of what she calls a new 'living' archive.

The pinnacle of the weekend was the world premiere of these two works at Teatro del Gatto in Ascona. Creation of the works was funded by the Federal Office of Culture through their prize for 'Cultural Dance Heritage in Switzerland', and performed by Summit Dance Theatre. In *Ishtar's Journey into Hades*, Ishtar, the queen, goes on a journey to the Underworld, in which the other dancers follow rather than influence. At each 'gate' she relinquishes items of enticement of civilization such as jewellery and clothing. At the end of the work she is naked, seemingly vulnerable but surprisingly strong as she faces her fate.

Dancing Drumstick was Laban's experimentation to move away from the restrictions of Émile Jaques-Dalcroze's approach to rhythmic understanding and music visualisation. He wanted to take away the constraints of music and explore the dynamics and rhythmic complexities of human movement, something which also changes the state of power between the two arts. Curtis-Jones worked with these ideas: the dancers drive the musicians not the other way around; rhythm is arbitrary and non-metric; the dancers establish their own felt rhythms and the sounds of the body are audible; dancers work in unity and the durations of stillness give resonance. In watching the dance the viewer is drawn to the whole rather than individual dancers and is aware of the shift between a definite rhythmic lead of the dancers to a merging of body sounds and drums and to polyrhythmic effects. There is a synergy between movement and sound (created by Oli Newman and James Keane) which creates unity and depth in the work.

The performances, attended by over 200 local residents and conference goers in a packed out theatre, received a standing ovation from the audience. Curtis-Jones, through her creative practice, doctoral research and working with students, dance artists and with Summit Dance Theatre, continues to further refine, research and explore reimagining Rudolf Laban's work. She uses her interpretation of Laban's Effort principles (1947) and Choreutics (1966) in her artistic practice to re-imagine his works and trains the dancers of Summit Dance Theatre using her approach of integrating choreological principles in technical training to enable them to perform the works.

The Laban Event is organised by Nunzia Tirelli, an alumnus of Trinity Laban's Specialist Diploma in Choreological Studies. To find out more visit http://www.laban.ch/en/home_en.html. The 2016 Laban Event is planned for 7-9 October with a theme of *Genius Loci*. You can also follow the work of Curtis-Jones and Summit Dance Theatre on Facebook.

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The life-size Icosahedron sculpture by Miki Tallone positioned in the part of Monte Verità's grounds known as 'Laban's training area'. Photograph: © Helen Roberts, 2015.