

PRACTICE OF NOTATION IN DANCE COMPANIES

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This paper focuses on the practice of Benesh Movement Notation in Dance companies and the moral and professional responsibilities of the notator with regard to himself and other users of the notation, to choreographers and dance companies and to the preservation of works. I have gained personal experience through my association with the Benesh Institute over a number of years, through my work as a professional notator and through collaboration with other colleagues in the profession.

The notator's position in a company is very rarely limited to just the recording of repertoire. He is more often than not required to be present in rehearsals and may be called upon to reconstruct works for other companies.

Let us first take a look at the role of the notator in the creation of a choreographic work. During the creation period, the notator is more than just a scribe. He is there to provide support to the choreographer in whatever capacity may be required. The notator can be of benefit to the choreographer even before studio rehearsals begin. Should the choreographer so wish, the notator can record phrases of movement which the choreographer has already created or perhaps note the stage patterns and paths of travel etc. This, of course, would depend on the working pattern of the choreographer - whether he may structure some of the work before rehearsals begin or whether he prefers to create spontaneously.

Once the creation period is underway, the notator may be needed to clarify movements and counts already set, thus relieving the pressure on the choreographer's memory allowing him the freedom to concentrate on the process of creation. From my personal experience, often choreographers create by moving spontaneously and sometimes find it difficult to analyse the movements even immediately after the event. Here the notator can be invaluable - the observing eye capturing and recording spontaneous movements which might otherwise be lost. Often it is the case that a choreographer becomes totally absorbed in the creative process leaving the clarification of details until the entire work has been created. When viewing sections of material created, he may be more concerned with the style and structure of the movements rather than specific details. The notator however, is constantly observant of detail and will often notice discrepancies between dancers. These can then be sorted out as the work progresses thus saving precious time in the final rehearsal period and perhaps more importantly, correcting the dancers at an early stage before their body memory of the movement becomes ingrained. The notator is often called upon to retrieve an earlier version of the movement, one which may have been discarded at the time for one reason or another but which the choreographer

decides to reinstate. The notator can also be of great assistance in rehearsals conducted with a pianist. The notator will generally have a music score to refer to and can thus provide an important link between choreographer, dancer and musician.

Perhaps I should mention at this stage that the observation skills of the notator during this creation period cannot, in practical terms, be substituted with a recording of the work on video. In my experience, seldom has video been used for the purpose of recording day to day creation of material. Apart from the pure logistics of this, the video recording would present the individual dancer's interpretation and not the choreographer's intention. In addition to this, observing the recording for clarification of details would be time consuming and may be disruptive to the flow of the rehearsal. Another concern, which I shall address in greater depth later, is exactly how much detail will be clear on video.

During the final stage of technical rehearsals, the notator begins to add details of lighting and sound cues, costumes, scenery and stage locations to the score. During this period, the notator is often called upon to give notes to and rehearse dancers after the run through in order to release the choreographer should he be required to sort out technical problems.

With the working copy now completed, the notator produces a master score of the work ensuring that the notes taken in rehearsals are put into a form which is accessible by other choreologists for subsequent rehearsal and reconstruction purposes and which will provide a complete and accurate record of the choreographic work for preservation purposes.

So what might the notator include in the master score? The score begins with a title page containing essential data which is followed by cast lists, details of sets, programme notes, historical notes, synopsis, biographies of the choreographer and or producer, and reviews of performances. Either at the beginning or throughout the body of the notation, score notes on style of movement, costumes, props, lighting and music can be added. Perhaps most importantly, the notator must identify the production, choreography and score ownership rights. Let me clarify here that the owner of the score is the company, research centre or individual who commissioned the writing of the score. If the score has not been commissioned i.e. if the notator writes it in his own unpaid time, then the notator is the owner of the score.

What of the notator's role as a reconstructor? In most cases, the notator is called upon in this capacity when he has written the movement score himself. However, individual circumstances vary greatly. On many occasions, the notator is asked to interpret another person's score and this particularly happens when the notator has built up a close working relationship with the choreographer.

Before the actual reconstruction begins, the notator must first ensure that all necessary permissions have been obtained for the use of the score i.e. permission from the choreography copyright holder and the score owner.

Generally, the reconstruction process is a collaborative effort between the choreographer and notator. The choreographer may be present during the whole period of reconstruction or he may only be present for the initial period to cast and then perhaps for the final stage rehearsals leading up to the premiere. This varies greatly of course according to the working pattern of the choreographer and his many commitments. Often the choreographer depends entirely on the notator to set the work, only appearing for the final rehearsals stage and of course there are reconstructions of works by choreographers who are now deceased, e.g. Cranko, and more recently, MacMillan.

Let me illustrate the valuable role a notator can play in the reconstruction process through my experience of re-staging *Cruel Garden*, a Christopher Bruce work, for the Berlin Ballet.

In this particular instance, the choreographer was present for the period during which the work was taught. He then left me alone to continue rehearsing the piece and then returned for the final rehearsal stage up until the premiere.

During the teaching process, the choreographer and I worked closely together. Generally, I was relied upon to initially teach the movement after which the choreographer would clarify particular details and elaborate on the style and phrasing of the movements. Often we worked in separate studios teaching different sections of the work, thus saving precious time. The choreographer made many changes to the choreography and I was able to notate these thus keeping a record of the different versions - this I know will be of particular value when the work is again reconstructed later this year for another company.

Another area in which the notation proved invaluable was that the choreographer was able to return to his original intention of the choreography. Two of the dancers who had danced the lead roles in London were again to perform in this production for Berlin. Their body memory of the movement was scratchy, although after watching the video and demonstration by myself or the choreographer, many of the steps came back to them very quickly. But what they remembered of the steps of course was what they had actually performed and many of the steps I demonstrated were met with exclamations such as "I don't remember doing the step like that!" or "I definitely didn't turn there!" yet the choreographer had retained a visual memory of the movements and could see at times that what the dancers were doing was not really how he had initially seen the movements. This is where the notation was essential as a record of the choreographer's original intention. I would then demonstrate to the choreographer what he had created originally and generally this is what he wanted to return to - his original concept of the movement.

Throughout *Cruel Garden* props played an integral part and these were needed for the initial stages of rehearsals. Because I had included detailed information of the props within the score, such as the dimensions of the cloth and dowel needed for the bullfighter's cape, props of the correct size and shape were able

to be supplied, thus enabling the dancers during the rehearsal period to work with props they knew would be similar to those they would use for performance. It can be most frustrating for a dancer to have to work with a prop that is too heavy or too small or too large when the prop is integral to the movements.

During the period of the choreographer's absence, I continued to rehearse the dancers concentrating also on the 2nd cast which the choreographer had not as yet had the time to work with. It was during this period that I found myself called upon in many different capacities. I remember being approached by the costume department to clarify for instance, what type of shoes were needed, how many matador costumes were required, which dancers had to wear dinner suits for a particular scene, etc.

I remember also that I was able to assist the musical conductor with movement cues. It was the same conductor who had directed the music in London and I recall at the time how impressed he was at how I had incorporated the music into the notated score. I was able to demonstrate the movements to him pointing out for instance when the dancer needed to pause and also indicating how long the musical phrases needed to be to allow the dancer sufficient time to complete the movements. This again saved precious rehearsal time.

I also attended orchestra rehearsals with some of the dancers. This proved invaluable in that I was able to indicate tempos to the conductor and inform him of particular instruments which the dancers needed to hear more clearly above others. I was also able to help the dancers identify cues etc.

During the final stages of technical rehearsals, the choreographer relied on me immensely to sort out a variety of problems whilst he dealt with others that needed his personal attention. This final period leading up to the premiere can be frantic and the choreologist can provide invaluable support.

The choreographer watched the premiere although he left early the next morning. He left important technical and musical instructions for me to deal with and I was required to give notes to the dancers and to undertake any rehearsals necessary before the next performance which took place I think 3 or 4 days later.

Since this initial reconstruction, I have returned on several occasions to rehearse the work, thus releasing the choreographer in order to undertake other commitments.

So far, I have only dealt with the notator's role in a dance company, but let me now address the role that video plays in the rehearsal studio. Speaking from personal experience, video is extremely useful as an initial introduction to the dancers - to give a general idea of the steps, relationships, use of space, and style of movement. But it does have serious limitations. Video omits important information through movements being masked by costumes, lights, scenery, other bodies and through close ups of individual dancers. Video converts a three dimensional event into a two dimensional image which unavoidably introduces

errors of perception. Timing isn't always clear and counts are non-existent. Video lacks accuracy as dancers can make mistakes which are not captured on film. Often exits and entrances are obscured. We cannot see intention in video. In creating choreography, a primary concern is what is behind the movement - the meaning and motivation. Video also records each position in only one way. If we see movement only once, we cannot differentiate error from intention. Of course, this can be overcome to a certain degree by referring to several videos of the same work although this is an extremely time consuming process. Video does not distinguish the work from the performance - the video shows how one dancer danced on one particular occasion. We are limited by one interpretation of the dance but was that the work? Finally, there is the very real problem of reversing the image on the screen and the time wasting which occurs whilst finding the appropriate place on the tape.

I have outlined the notator's professional responsibilities with regard to choreographers and dance companies and to the preservation of works, but what of his responsibility with regard to himself and other users of the notation? The professional value of BMN is as a universal language and its efficiency is in the consistency of usage. All choreologists must therefore respect the copyright which exists in BMN and work within the existing rules of the language so that BMN remains a viable means of communication. This does not mean however that the development of the language ceases - on the contrary. Notators must be responsible for bringing any difficulties to the attention of the Institutes Technical Advisory Panel, which oversees the unified development of the system, so that the notation can continually develop to accommodate changes in choreographic styles and complexity of works.

Biography

MICHELE BRABAN was a Fellow of The Benesh Institute and Rehearsal Director and Personal Assistant to Christopher Bruce at Rambert Dance Company. She trained at the Victorian College of the Arts in Melbourne, Australia, completing her studies at The Benesh Institute, London. From 1982, she worked as notator then repetiteur with Ballet Rambert. Later, with London Festival Ballet, she was primarily responsible for the choreography of Christopher Bruce whose works she taught internationally. From 1989, she worked for The Benesh Institute, where her responsibilities included librarianship, teaching, examining and publications. During this time she was also employed by the Royal Ballet on a freelance basis to write master scores of MacMillan's Prince of the Pagodas and Ashton's La Fille Mal Gardée. In 1994 she returned to Rambert to work with Christopher Bruce before relocating to Australia.