

*eadh* European  
Association  
of Dance  
Historians

Volume 2 No. 1  
AUTUMN 2006  
ISSN 1746-5737

# Choreologica

Papers on Dance History

Journal

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Dear members and readers,

Welcome to the 2006 issue of *Choreologica*. Following the changes introduced in 2005, it is time to move even further. Therefore, we would like to invite members and readers to submit articles and examples of their research to the Editorial Board. The aim is to turn the magazine into a forum for an interdisciplinary exchange of dialogues as stated on page 75.

The first example of this move towards a multidisciplinary is Colin Counsell's article investigating the movement from psyche to soma. An eminent performance analyst and respected author on drama and the performing arts, Counsell opens a stimulating debate, which draws upon and encompasses theatre, dance and somatic studies.

Victoria O'Brien's MA dissertation has been welcomed with considerable praise so far. We are happy to present here its final instalment. Her works proves that our field of research benefits considerably from new voices and inputs. And it is in line with these reasons that we would like to invite other examples of new research from graduate and postgraduate students in the performing arts field.

Elena Grillo's contribution is yet another example of a creative interaction between different analytical approaches and research modes. The article, which was first presented as a paper at the study day held by EADH at Logroño in Spain, focuses on a biographical

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exploration of the dancer Pepita Oliva as immortalised by her grand-daughter Vita Sackville West.

Finally, a multidisciplinary analytical approach is also what informs and underpins Astrid Bernkopf's study of Romantic ballet scenarios. A more in-depth version of her presentation at the EADH Study Day "Once upon a time ... in the Highlands" at Sadler's Wells in 2005, Bernkopf's article proposes a threefold approach to the Romantic ballet narrative.

Editorial Board:

Giannandrea Poesio  
Astrid Bernkopf  
Elena Grillo

**From *Psyche* to *Soma*:  
Laban, 'Effort' and the Industrialisation of  
Expression**

**Colin Counsell**

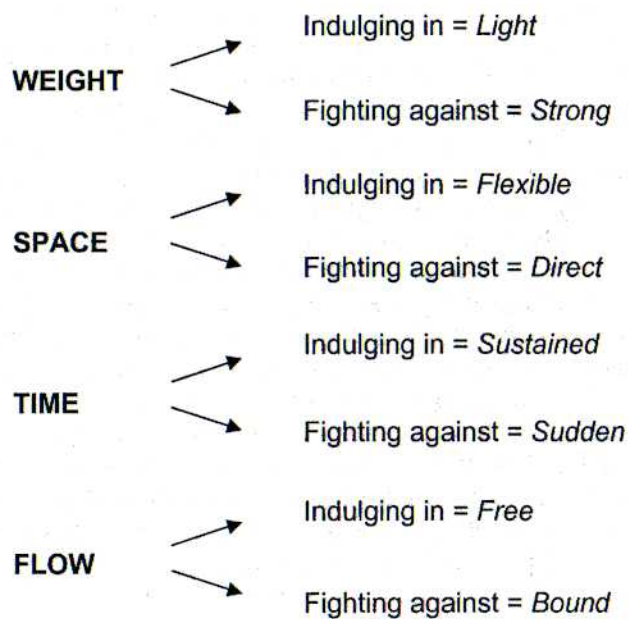
While positioning dance historically is always complex, locating its *kinesics* in history is especially difficult, and this is particularly true of abstract dance. Emphatically non-figurative, the gestures, postures and dynamics characteristic of Rudolf Laban's practice, for example, intrinsically denied any attempt to depict a locatable historical reality. They were nevertheless successful, evocative for performers and audiences alike, and so clearly spoke to some form of perception culturally available to both. In locating its kinesics in history, then, it is necessary to seek not a representation but a mode of cognition or recognition, a historically specific way of understanding the body's actions that those particular movements brought into interpretive operation, rendering them meaningful. It is this line of enquiry I will pursue in the following essay. I will focus not on Laban's choreography but on his training practice, and specifically his work on bodily dynamics or 'efforts', a field he termed *eukinetics*. I will seek to position eukinetic theory and practice, and so ultimately the kinesics it produces, in history by exploring the kinds of conceptual figures underpinning both, those that worked to make it culturally resonant.

At the core of all Laban's practice lies a conception of the human subject as, in his terms, 'psychosomatic', a holistic whole in which 'motion and emotion, body and mind are inseparably united.'<sup>1</sup> While dominant Cartesian models presume interior and exterior selves to be discontinuous, separated by the screen of self-consciousness, for Laban they form a continuum, with each the consequence and reflection of the other. But if this 'minded body' is humankind's natural state, it is one that had by the early twentieth century become imperilled, the conditions of modernity – confined urban living, job specialisation and, most of all, subjugation to the motions of machines – having caused a rift between *psyche* and *soma*. Describing a formative encounter with the products of the industrial 'robot age', Laban explains:

I saw with growing clarity how man will come under the domination of the machine. The soul-less steel-ox, the locomotive, is only a beginning. Thrilling as the power of conquest over air and sea may be, man will surely have to pay dearly for it. The whirring and clanking of thousands of wheels and chains is infectious; soon man himself will become a whirring of wheels and chains; soon he will see in life, in the whole of nature, and in himself, nothing but the machine, and the soul will be forgotten... hadn't the soul already withered and died in the maze of our spurious culture, in the turmoil of the big city?<sup>2</sup>

As a result of modernity, our bodies, the instruments for conveying thought and feeling, had become detached from the mind in which they are experienced, our actions made 'soulless', thus rendering the dancing body incapable of authentic expression. It is this which underpins Laban's aesthetic project: 'it became clear in that machine workshop,' he continues, 'that my place was not to serve the soul-less steel-ox but rather to become a kind of adversary and antithesis to it'. By reintegrating body and mind, Laban technique was to restore dancers to a prelapsarian wholeness, and so make their movements once again expressive.

This goal is at the heart of eukinetics. All movement, Laban explains, possesses purely material qualities of Weight, Space, Time and Flow: these are its essential 'motion factors'. But the Space or Weight attributes that a gesture exhibits are the product of the moving subject's 'inner attitude' to that motion factor, an internal posture that can vary between the extremes of 'indulging in' and 'fighting against'. 'Indulging in' Time, for example, makes for movement that uses up large amounts of it, and so is what Laban terms *sustained*, while 'fighting against' Time leads to action that is *sudden*.<sup>3</sup> 'Fighting against' Space leads to *direct* movement, taking the shortest path – using the least space – by moving in a more or less straight line, while 'fighting against' Weight produces movement that is *strong*. 'Flow' describes the degree of control exerted, and hence a movement's fluidity: *bound* Flow ('fighting against') is highly controlled, visibly subject to the mover's will, while *free* flowing movement ('indulging in') continues under its own momentum. With two possibilities for each motion factor, Laban compiles a list of eight essential dynamic qualities or 'efforts':



Thus each effort is the meeting point of mind and body, a 'psychosomatic' synthesis of mental disposition and physical action. Of course, real movements operate in multiple dimensions, have characteristics of Time and Weight etc. Combining 'light', 'flexible' and so on, Laban compiles a catalogue of eight key movement types – only eight because Flow plays a limited role at basic levels of eukinetic theory. He names these 'basic effort actions' after the everyday activities which best encapsulate their physical character – 'wringing', 'dabbing', 'thrusting' etc:

| Weight | Space      | Time        | Basic Effort Action |
|--------|------------|-------------|---------------------|
| Strong | + Direct   | + Sudden    | = Thrusting         |
| Strong | + Direct   | + Sustained | = Pressing          |
| Strong | + Flexible | + Sudden    | = Slashing          |
| Strong | + Flexible | + Sustained | = Wringing          |
| Light  | + Direct   | + Sudden    | = Dabbing           |
| Light  | + Direct   | + Sustained | = Gliding           |
| Light  | + Flexible | + Sudden    | = Flicking          |
| Light  | + Flexible | + Sustained | = Floating          |

