

# Black symbols on a white page

*or colourful moving images?*

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As early as 1919 the slow motion films of the Pathé organisation were seen for the interesting possibilities they generated for analysing and demonstrating dance steps. Technology has moved on, but the challenge to capture, preserve and recover the dance is still with us. During the last half of the twentieth century arguments have been put forth both for and against film/video and dance notation as the better method for preserving choreography. With the popularity of and easy access to video, voices in favour of the colourful moving image have been loudest; but, as with most passionate and loud declarations, there is little thought behind the sound. Today's dancers find themselves in situations where seeing and not questioning has become the rule of the day.

Viewing any non-commercial video very clearly points up the shortcomings of the videotaping process. The tapes often do not fulfil the intention for which they were made, that is for the accurate, full-blooded restaging of a dance. Though usually of better quality, commercial tapes have many of the same drawbacks, which should be stated right up front before addressing the more serious aspect of why video is not a better source for recapturing choreography and shaping a performance. It is a serious problem for all, too often brushed aside when there is that colourful moving image.

Let us list some common drawbacks.

- The image is too small;
- Lighting is inadequate;
- Special lighting effects, important to the dance, are seldom included;
- Costumes, sets, props and screens hide the choreography;
- The colour of costumes blurs the silhouette if too close to the colour of the backdrop or floor;
- Dancers are hidden from view behind one another;
- Off stage preparations are impossible to know;
- Depth perspective is destroyed;
- The quality of movement is nulled;
- It is difficult to understand how some contemporary partnering is achieved;
- When videotaping in spaces other than on a stage, wings, centre and quarter stage are seldom indicated;
- When a camera pans some dancers disappear from the screen;

- If the camera stays, for example, on the ending of a duet then the entrance of the next dancer is missed;
- When a performing error occurs, the correct choreography is never reshot and spliced in or attached to the end of the video;
- With non-professional taping more than one shooting angle is rare;
- When the dance is shot from several angles and an edited version is the final result, stage front is often lost;
- Synchronisation of music and movement is often not correct;
- Important facial expressions are lost;
- Manipulation of props and moving scenery is difficult to understand;
- With the advent of today's technology it is impossible to understand how unrealistic images of dance and projection are achieved;
- Small movements of body parts, such as fingers, are lost;
- Quick, small footwork is difficult, often impossible, to decipher;
- Left and right are reversed making for some difficulty in learning;
- Videotaping decisions, that is angles and what to video when only one camera is available, is by the videographer rather than the choreographer;
- Dancers do not always do what the choreographer wanted, not only with steps but also with the quality of the movement;
- When an art film is made the choreographer often rechoreographs sections for the camera;
- Sections are often slowed down to make observation of sections easier, thus destroying rhythm and quality;
- Questions cannot be asked of the choreographer or dancers;
- Dance counts and specific cues in music cannot be understood;
- Choreographers are unhappy, not only for the above reasons, but often with the level of performance with the result that viewing access to the video is often denied to the researcher;
- The viewer cannot know what is improvised and what is set.

The list alone should tell responsible people that the popular video is a dubious (but, unfortunately, a stubbornly fixed) form to use as a learning device. When learning from a video, judgements and decisions must be made. This is not precise.

Philosophically, the image of the choreography may exist, perfect and remote, in the imagination. But in truth the matter is different. To memory one may add photos, reviews and director's word notes,<sup>1</sup> and still the choreography is not there. Without the score, restagers are betrayed by dancers' memories. We know that they saw it, even experienced it being choreographed — it must be thus. However, dancers' memories are never the most reliable. Early in my notating career I asked a friend who had danced in *Les Sylphides* if she knew it. 'Of course', came the prompt reply. 'I was in it.' But from her position in the middle of the group, her back often to other dancers, she barely remembered her own role. No matter how vividly dancers may seem to be able to recollect those movement events created by the choreographer, only the notator can identify them with an accuracy that preserves them **centuries** after the memory and notes, and possibly also the video, have gone.

Unless one has tried to find a video or film that is known to exist, one cannot realise what a daunting and frustrating task such searching can be. Letters go unanswered, and addresses turn out to be incorrect. If one is fortunate enough to find the video it will probably be in a location such as the Dance Collection in New York City or some similar location in another country where the librarians may not be allowed to have a copy made. Should one be fortunate enough to be at the location where the video is housed, it may come as a surprise that preservation policy does not allow you to rewind the video to review a phrase. And how much can be learnt and remembered from a few linear viewings? Very little. On the other hand, the dance score allows as much perusal, checking and learning as is desired.

Here are some random case notes from my experience as a notator:

- *Alvin Ailey's Revelations*

Two videos, one of Ailey's first company, and one of the second company show the opening processional from the section 'Wade in the Water' happening on different beats. In one version the dancers step on the beat while in the other they push off on the beat. In one the last backward step in this phrase is on the whole foot and in the other it is on the ball of the foot. Does it make a difference? Perhaps a few such differences go unnoticed but when they add up into the hundreds (as indeed they do) then the greatness of what makes video so popular worldwide begins to fade.

In the section 'Rocka my Soul' what is absolute and what is free? One exact version was taught in rehearsal, after which the dancers were allowed to embellish 'in character', that is to signify as individuals. What would you do if learning this dance from a video? Do you have twelve dancers each copy an individual dancer, or do you teach them one version only and then let them be individual in their performance of the movement? And what are the boundaries of interpretation? The video does not have the answer to these questions.

- *Paul Taylor's Black Tuesday*

A comment by Léonide Massine is of interest to read here. In an interview with John Drummond he said, when speaking about reviving



*Scene from 'Revelations'  
Alvin Ailey American Dance  
Theatre, Australian tour 1965*

*W. F. Stringer Collection  
National Library of Australia*

*Photo: Walter Stringer*

his ballet *Tricorne*: ' ... there might be small details which are not important to the body of the choreography to be changed, but on the whole it remains exactly the same'.<sup>2</sup> When notating Paul Taylor's *Black Tuesday* as it was being restaged on American Ballet Theatre, a similar comment was made to me about choreographic details and changes to them. Perhaps only the notator cares. Why do we care? It is because we are notating for future dance directors. If all they have is choreography that changes from video to video audiences will not be seeing what Taylor originally intended.

- Helen Tamaris' *Woman's Song*  
Helen Tamaris' dance *Woman's Song* requires that her representative take a final rehearsal. One such rehearsal, conducted from the representative's memory, resulted in a section being changed to be twice as fast. When asked what was the movement for the remaining time, there was no answer. The notated version was restored.
- Doris Humphrey's *Ruins and Visions*  
During the 1980s I spent some 400 hours retrieving Doris Humphrey's choreography for *Ruins and Visions* from silent films, interviews with original cast members and my rough unfinished score from a partial restaging by Ruth Currier. Once I had mounted the dance on dancers from the Juilliard School I asked Pauline Koner, an original cast member, to coach the young dancers. Her first comment was that the opening section was 'all wrong and on the wrong music'. After several hours of work the choreography ended up exactly as it had been set. Research showed that this section was always improvised — and what were the boundaries of improvisation? Nobody now knows. Yes, I did work from many unreliable sources but now there is a complete version in notation. If, in the future, more data comes to light it can be included in appendices.
- Anna Sokolow's *Deserts*  
During my years of dancing for the choreographer Anna Sokolow, I experienced her method of working, which included never talking, never turning the head to see what others were doing and never 'marking' the choreography. Once though she missed a rehearsal and asked us to run the new work, *Deserts*, without her. There were no mirrors in the rehearsal studios, and the temptation to look around us was too strong to resist. To my amazement we were all doing something different, while I thought that we were all doing the same. Now that she is no longer with us how will future directors know what was the image used to create this mass effect? Does each dancer learn individual movements? The answer is in the score.
- Lin Hwai-min's *Legacy*  
My observation of the choreography for *Legacy*, made by Lin Hwai-min for his Cloud Gate Dance Theatre in Taiwan, was often a confusing process. On one occasion I returned to rehearsals with my notes written up only to find inconsistencies in them. As I learnt more of the Taiwanese dance culture it became clear that details were often not important. In one section, an arm circle must be performed as described but details as to rotation, the direction the palm of the hand faces and

the degree of flexion could, and did, vary from one dancer to another and from one rehearsal to another. There is no right way to perform much of the Asian traditional folk material, of which there are many phrases in *Legacy*. A major problem in understanding traditional, or even a particular choreographer's style is associated with the idea of the 'insider/outsider'. Video is absolutely no help in decision-making. Movement specialists or notators from within the local traditions must be trained.

- Lester Horton's *The Beloved*

I first notated Horton's *The Beloved* for James Tuitte when he staged it for Dance Theater of Harlem. Many changes were made after Tuitte's departure and he gave a 'thumbs down' to the version that they danced for television. When he next staged it with the help of Carmen de Lavallade, another Horton dancer who was familiar with the role, more detail was added and some changes made. The version that the Swarthmore College (Pennsylvania) dancers performed in my last restaging of the work is not an exact copy of the 1950s video, or of Dance Theater of Harlem's performance, because the dancers are not impersonating Tuitte or de Lavallade. Theirs was an interpretation of a fixed score containing all the information given at both of the previous restagings. Instead of learning from a copy of a copy of a copy, future dance directors can refer back to the score as a starting point.

A recently released video documentary, *Lester Horton (1906–1953): genius on the wrong coast*,<sup>3</sup> reveals three brief sections of *The Beloved* performed long before it was brought back to life by Tuitte for Dance Theater of Harlem. They are quite different from Tuitte's version, though one can see where his version from memory came from. Memory had actually failed him. Because there is a dance score, differences will be added as an appendix to the score thus helping to make our dance history more accurate. They can never be added to the video.

Motivation is the lifeblood of much choreography. It is what is missing from cardboard-like dancers and impersonations. It is what the 'old timers' of modern dance so rightly complain is lacking. It is the reason why a piece was made in the first place. If only the video could answer the questions that should be put to it. How did a choreographer get that performance from the dancers? Was it a challenge to move faster, jump higher, balance longer? And what was their path through space? Should it be copied and be dull or should it be reset with understanding of the choreographer's intention and kept fresh and exciting? Without a score deposited in a library, how will information be passed on? How for example will dancers know that Antony Tudor told the Salvation Army woman in *Undertow* to 'look at the man with eyes that look as if they would devour Christ off the cross'? In Sokolow's *Dreams* how will the dancer know that she knocks the chair to the floor because she is frustrated like 'a wallflower waiting for a lover who never comes'?

I think that one reason why many choreographers prefer the moving image is that they can see their dreams come to life in living colour. It is difficult for them to accept the fact that their dreams can be crystallised in black symbols. Can the choreographer's dreams be dreamt by

somebody else – an artistic director? Many say no. Many however realise that actors in a Shakespearean play in modern dress and setting can speak the lines with more relevance to a modern audience. Some like it. Some do not. But whatever happens future generations can see an interpretation — the only value of the video — whilst others can go back to the written word, symbol, to discover the original intention.

Choreography copied from the moving image becomes no more than a reflection of a reflection. It soon loses the substance that made its notation worth the while. It also changes architecturally. Why? Over the past fifty years I have watched dancers learn first from film and, later, video. Without bias I can say that never have I seen a dancer return to the moving image after learning and performing the choreography. Should they have done so they would have realised what all notators know and that is what is seen today will often not be seen tomorrow.

Furthermore, a reality often not faced by those who acknowledge the superiority of the video is the indisputable fact that with the advancement of science new machines have and will continue to replace last year's model. This is true for both the tape and the disk. In addition, each copy suffers generational loss. Many librarians maintain the hard copy is the only reliable source for the future.

Here is a parting checklist provided by the National Initiative to Preserve America's Dance,<sup>4</sup> for those who still believe that the colourful moving image is the answer to preserving original choreography:

- Does the tape exhibit any symptoms of squealing during playback, frequent head clogging, flaking or sticky surfaces?
- Is the tape a single copy?
- Is the tape physically damaged?
- Is the tape an obsolete format?
- Is the tape an early example of a former popular format?
- Is the tape between ten and fifteen years old?
- Has the tape been in a stable environment with proper temperature and humidity control?

If you answered yes to the first six questions and no to the last then your video collection is in danger!

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#### NOTES

- 1 Word notes are selective and written in brief and are not meant to last more than a few years. Nor are they a language for others to read.
- 2 Léonide Massine interviewed in John Drummond, *Speaking of Diaghilev* (London: Faber and Faber, 1997), p. 172.
- 3 *Lester Horton (1906–1953): genius on the wrong coast*, videotape, 90 mins, sound, colour with black and white segments (Green River Road, c. 1993). This video contains interviews with former students of Horton and early film clips and still photographs of his work.
- 4 For information on NIPAD — National Initiative to Preserve America's Dance (formerly National Initiative to Preserve American Dance) — see the website <[www.danceusa.org/about\\_dusa/nipad.htm](http://www.danceusa.org/about_dusa/nipad.htm)>