A Choreographer Reflects on *Ariadne*: from Life, to Art, to Dance Notation
by Ze'eva Cohen

As an adolescent growing up in Israel, I was fascinated by archeological sites such as those found in Cezaria, where historical relics from Hellenic and Roman periods were buried in the sand along the Mediterranean. A particular sculpture, or rather semi buried fragments representing a woman – a head here, arms there – kept coming back to haunt me.

Who was she?
Why was she abandoned?
Why wasn't she buried with her body intact in a dignified manner?
Could she be Ariadne[1], the mythological Cretan princess?

In 1985 I first created *Ode*, a group work for the Chicago Repertory Dance Company to music composed by the Greek composer Vangelis to ancient Greek poems sung by Irene Papas. Later that year I felt a great need to develop a solo, *Ariadne*[2], inspired by the central figure of *Ode*.

In reflecting on the many artistic media and languages representing Ariadne throughout history, I was struck by the thought of her immortality. The story and fate of Ariadne was first spoken, and then written numerous times in different forms. Since antiquity the collective force of artists: storytellers, writers, sculptors, painters, composers, and choreographers refuse to let her die as a woman abandoned and forgotten on the island of Naxos. Enabling Ariadne to take charge of her own story and empowering her to emerge from the labyrinthine maze of her life into a better understanding of her fate was my motivation in creating this dance. In my dance, the restless spirit of Ariadne comes back to life in order to wrestle with her fate and reassemble her broken body in an effort to find wholeness and spiritual peace.

The choreographic building blocks of the dance are based on 15 poses[3] depicting women's daily and ritual activities found on archaic and classical Greek pottery and tombs dating from the 9th to the 5th century B.C. In the dance, Ariadne first appears as a fallen sculpture, the pose being an exact replication of a figure found on an Athenian jar, which portrayed a funeral procession. Haltingly, she attempts to first remember and then connect these 15 poses in an order that would lend a new meaning to her life. Her faltering search leads to false exits. But Ariadne eventually succeeds in stringing these gestures together in an order that guides her, as well as the dance, to a desired resolution. I interpret the 15th and final gesture, which has Ariadne offering the symbolic olive tree branch towards the audience, as one of finding internal peace and liberation. Only in this last gesture does Ariadne allow herself to face the audience in a direct manner. All other 14 poses are performed in a less direct way, more akin to the two dimensionality of the original paintings; legs, feet and head are in profile while breast and shoulders are frontal.
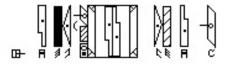
The soft and lyrical dominant tone or quality of the dance can be found in the transitions between the quoted gestures, which are fleetingly performed throughout the piece. Therefore, it is particularly satisfying to the viewer to finally see these gestures performed with confidence and clarity at the end of the dance.

Left: One of the 15 poses from Professor Martin Robertson's book Greek Painting, published by Skira/Rizzzoli c. 1979.

Center: Caryn Heilman of Ze'eva Cohen and Dancers (1983-1988) replicating the pose on the left in *Ariadne*, performed at Riverside Dance Festival, New York City, 1985. Photo: Tom Brazil.

Right: Notation of Heilman's movement. Notation by Sandra Aberkalns, 2011.

I often think of the smooth and affirmative progression with which these gestures are performed in the final moment of the dance as isolated music notes "arriving" at their correct place in the scale, or random words finding the perfect phrase.

This thought led me to contemplate the contrasts between the language of choreography and dance notation. I was struck by the differences: One requires an immediate recognition and empathy from its audience regardless of their level of experience as viewers of dance; the other appears to be abstract geometrical symbols unless one has learned to read this language. Furthermore, dance choreography, because of its ephemeral nature, does not survive the performance, and will never be repeated exactly the same. Dance notation captures and preserves dance, so that it can be reproduced and experienced by generations to come.

This polarity led me to further thinking on the changing nature of how human life has been presented by various artists of different media over time and the varying degree of abstraction: The Greek paintings that influenced this dance, evolved from geometrical shapes and human figures resembling children's drawings to more expressive paintings approaching more realistic renderings of the human body. Cuneiform script[4], one of the earliest known written languages, which developed over four millennia, evolved from a system of pictorial representations to more abstract characters. It symbolizes a reverse progression. Here, the depictions move from the recognizable image to the more abstract representation.

To a degree, and regardless of these differences – either of these languages, including performance and dance notation – depend on the individual's knowledge/literacy and interest in decoding to arrive at the level of understanding and empathy to capture a story or a story's essence.

These thoughts bring me back to the topic of dance performance, Labanotation, and *Ariadne*'s recently finished score as well as my legacy as choreographer. Of the approximately fifty works I have created over the past forty-five years, I feel privileged to have been able to preserve two of my works, *Ariadne*[5] and *Rainwood*[6] in Labanotation. My main concern is not only the accuracy of future stagers' ability to read and translate the score correctly – but rather that the passion and spirit of Ariadne will resonate true and, ideally, in a similar manner to the way it was choreographed.

Can and will the object become the subject? To my view, this seems to be the challenge. It is my hope that present and future stagers will be able to resurrect Ariadne and bring to audiences her life as a breathing and living human being whose fragmented parts are integrated into a greater whole as she succeeds in coming from darkness into light.

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[1] According to several sources, Ariadne is the daughter of king Minos of Crete, who dealt Athens a humiliating defeat in battle. As part of a peace agreement, Theseus, an Athenian prince and heir to the crown, volunteers to replace one of the youths sent by Athens to be devoured by the Minotaur – a monster whose body is half human half beast, and who is kept at the heart of the labyrinth built by the architect Dedalus. Ariadne and Theseus fall in love at first sight. Araidne, to assure Theseus' successful return after killing the Minotaur, gives him the Golden Thread, which enables him to find his way out of the labyrinth. Their subsequent elopement to Athens where she would be queen is the agreed upon plan.
While there are several sources telling different versions of how Ariadne's story is resolved, I followed the version that describes Ariadne as eloping with Theseus, only to be abandoned by him on the island of Naxos where she died.

[2] *Ariadne* was first performed by Caryn Heilman, Ze'eva Cohen and Dancers (1983 -1988), Riverside Dance Festival, NYC, 1985.

[3] The 15 figures (illustrating daily and ritualistic actions performed by women) are from Professor Martin Robertson's book Greek Painting, published by Skira/Rizzzoli c. 1979.

[4] Cuneiform script originated in Sumer around the 30th century B.C.

[5] *Ariadne* notated by Sandra Aberkalns, 2011, as performed by Rosy Goodman of Repertory Dance Theater (RDT/UT). Funding for Ariadne's score was made possible by a grant from the Edward T. Cone Fund of Princeton University's Humanities Council.

[6] *Rainwood* was notated by Aberkalns in 2009 as performed by RDT/UT.