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Library News

From the Dance Notation Bureau

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Giving My Works, *Rainwood* and *Ariadne*, New Life through Labanotation

by

Ze'eva Cohen

In the summer of 2009, as I approached my retirement from Princeton University, whose dance program I founded and directed since 1969, the questions, "What do I leave behind to future generations of dancers?" and "How do I contribute to the creative spark of future artistic directors and dancers as they engage in giving new life to historic dance heritage?" predominated my thoughts and seemed paramount.

The thought that the notation of *Rainwood* would be my retirement present of choice from Princeton, with—as it turned out—substantial funding from my own impoverished dance foundation, was a huge surprise to my close colleagues. Even more surprising was my subsequent decision to personally fund the notation of my solo *Ariadne*.

Rainwood, choreographed in 1978, is possibly my most timeless work. Choreographed for seven dancers of single or mixed gender, it has been performed by many major national and international dance companies including Batsheva of Israel, Boston Ballet, Tanzprojekt of Munich and several regional and educational institutions in the USA. As it turned out, this became my most commercially successful work, even though it is the most abstract and enigmatic one. *Ariadne* is its polar opposite.

Ariadne, choreographed in 1985, is a solo work for a woman. It represents my particular expertise in solo repertory. It is dramatic, albeit gentle, and requires building a character and creating an inner sustainable (and substantive) narrative.

Background:

In the mid-1960's, when I was a student at Juilliard, having just come from Israel with some working knowledge of English and having to hold seven part-time jobs to support myself, the study of dance notation felt painfully slow and totally unnecessary. Reluctantly, after Martha Hill and my notation teacher Muriel Topaz explained that I would not graduate if I did not pass the two-year mandatory notation studies, I joined the class and barely received a passing grade.

Frankly, I did not give much thought to preservation in my early years. Additionally, since I was the instinctive/intuitive kind of dance artist to whom the gestalt of any work came so clearly and immediately, slow analysis, such as notation, seemed an obstacle to "getting there."

I thought in those years that it was sufficient to "save" my work in my kinetic memory; my written notes describing each step of any dance I performed or

choreographed; my own method of writing choreographic patterns in relationship to the music; spatial designs that I learned from my dance notation studies (the only easy and useful part for me at the time), and occasionally stick figure drawings with some comments about dynamics or movement qualities. Also, I had a super-8 camera for recording and the advent of the video camera was on the horizon.

Forty-five years later, this is how I came around:

“Recognizing the signs” was one of the wisdoms I learned to respond to in my more mature life. Here are some of them: In the summer of 2008, Utah’s Repertory Dance Theater (RDT) acquired *Ariadne* for their fall season, entitled “The Messengers.” A year later, they acquired *Rainwood* for their season’s “Elements,” featuring nature and environmental preservation.

In the spring of 2009, as I was thinking of my April 2010 Retirement Tribute Concert at Princeton University, it seemed obvious that bringing RDT to perform these works as part of this concert was timely, and a “natural” choice.

Then the question of preserving these works reoccurred as they were being reconstructed and rehearsed in preparation for subsequent performances. What would be the most lasting media? At first, the option of using only videotaping seemed sufficient as video cameras have greatly improved, and with the help of two cameras we could capture both the distant and close-up views of the works. But the obsolete nature of quickly changing technological equipment of today became a deterring thought. The sign came across my brain, long before I rationalized this, read: “dance notation.”

As trusting of “signs” as I thought I was, I never made the inquiry call to the Dance Notation Bureau (DNB):

Shortly after my revelation, I happened to run into Margot Lehman, a long time member of the DNB Board. Her response to my questioning the prospect of notating *Rainwood* and, furthermore, with no funding in sight, was enthusiastic and encouraging. She suggested I discuss my inquiry with Kristin Jackson, director of programs, at the DNB. Several months passed and I still did not make the call. The option of notation receded into the distance. Then, one golden Fall Sunday afternoon, I ran into Kristin at the Alice Tully Hall coffee shop in Lincoln Center. Kristin had already heard from Margot, and in addition to communicating to me her strong belief in the necessity of preserving my choreographic legacy, convinced me that there must be a way to do this.

I learned that it was too late to apply for the American Masterpieces Grant, sponsored by the National Endowment for the Arts but I had a strong sense, at this junction of my life, of wanting to give back to the dance field a little of the great gift given to me as a dance artist. With the generous parting gift I had received from Princeton University plus funds of my own, I was able to commission the notation of *Rainwood*.

In the summer of 2009, as I was working with RDT on both *Rainwood* and *Ariadne* in Salt Lake City, Sandra Aberkalns began the notating process of *Rainwood*. How she managed to squeeze in the preliminary sketch of *Ariadne* as well remains a puzzle to me!

Over these two intensive weeks together at RDT, I learned many things. One of which was how much richer the work became when an astute observer such as Sandra looked at it. Also, in my many conversations with her and after seeing the final score of *Rainwood*, I understood that the dance notation itself has evolved over the years to become a much more creative and open process where new language and symbols may be created to suit the particular stylistic aesthetic of different artists and different works.

I was also appreciative of the substantial historical, technical, and stylistic information given in the score about the work, including suggestions for its reconstruction by future staggers. Knowing that the DNB has its library and archive, which stores and preserves music and visual material associated with the work, was also reassuring.

My hope is that the dance community, as run by various institutions, whether professional or educational, will find ways to connect with and acquire the scores of *Rainwood* and *Ariadne*. I also hope that future staggers, artistic directors, and dancers will not only sweat over the precision of the notation’s instructions, but will allow themselves some freedom as they bring new meanings and freshness to my works, *Rainwood* and *Ariadne*.