

The Problem of Significance:

Revisiting aspects of Laban's discussions of the significance of movement and dance from a twenty-first century perspective

From a contemporary perspective informed by poststructuralist theory, it is all too easy to critique the statements about the significance of movement made by Laban that have been passed on to us. Laban may have been inspired by dance and concepts emanating from different cultures, but he can be understood as doing so from the viewpoint of a European male, the son of an officer, born into a world in which the dominance of the west was often all too readily presumed. Yet, an understanding of how his work may be situated within a particular cultural framework should not be used to negate the continuing relevance of Laban's approach to dance - at least to those who approach theatre dance from a western orientated perspective. In revisiting some aspects of Laban's accounts of the significance of human movement, I will draw on my recent research among a small number of dance artists based in London to demonstrate why I think it is important to continue to pursue Laban's concerns about movement and dance.

Consider the following statements:

Movement in itself is the language in which our highest and most fundamental inspirations are expressed

Laban and Lawrence, 1974/1947, p.73

Dance does not speak through the intellect to the heart as does the spoken word; it speaks directly to our hearts, and afterwards perhaps also to the brain, to the intellect.

Laban, (trans L. Ullman) 1975/1935, p.178

In the teaching of children and the initiation of adolescents, primitive man endeavoured to convey moral and ethical standards through the development of effort thinking in dance. The introduction to humane effort was in these ancient times the basis of all civilisation.

But for a very long time man has been unable to find the connection between his movement-thinking and his word-thinking.

Laban 1950, p. 18-19

Taken out of context, and often relying on their translation, Laban's published statements do raise some theoretical problems. In relation to the first, it can be argued that while sign language and some codified mime may function in a similar way to verbal linguistic systems it has been recognised, even by Laban's most devoted followers, that approaching dance as a language is problematic if considered in the literal sense (Preston- Dunlop, 1998 p.7; Preston- Dunlop and Sanchez Colberg 2002). However the notion conveyed in the second quotation, that dance

speaks directly to the heart, may also be thought to reveal a resort to 'infection theory' expressionism in which in the nineteenth century writer, Leo Tolstoy's words:

...one man consciously by means of certain external signs, hands on to others feelings he has lived through

[That]

... is a means of union among men, joining them together in the same feelings, ...

Tolstoy, 1975 /1898, p.123

In the arts more generally, this infection theory of expressionism was first undermined by the formalist aesthetics that came to dominate modernist approaches to art in the mid twentieth century. Then Beardsley's new criticism of the 1950s dealt with the problem of the intentional fallacy (Wimsatt and Beardsley, 1954), challenging the belief in the pre-eminence of the creator's intention in order to focus on the work itself; whilst the structuralists then challenged the very idea of meaning being generated by individuals. Finally the poststructuralist emphasis on the instability of meaning might be seen as the final assault on an understanding of one artist's work speaking 'directly to the heart' of others.

Specifically, in terms of dance, the philosopher David Best, writing in the 1970s, pointed to the issue of the problem of the implicit dualism of expressionist theories that purport to infer inner feeling from outer action. He included Laban in his criticism of those who, finding it difficult to provide logical grounds for the relationship between feeling and action, resort to beliefs that 'ultimately the mental or spiritual meaning of all physical actions is given by reference to a deity, or to cosmic laws, by a spiritual apprehension of truths beyond normal understanding' (Best, 1974, p.80). Notwithstanding the validity of Best's argument, it is interesting that in what is published as Laban's own writing, if in translation, can also be found a sensitivity to how context affects the interpretation of action and discussion of how cultural differences are revealed in different effort patterns (Laban, 1950). Laban was not blind to some of the issues of interpretation and difference that would be important to the theories that came after him.

Perhaps more problematic in Laban's writings - exemplified in the third quotation - is what may be considered to be a suggestion of a hierarchy of levels of inspiration that reveal an adherence to a metanarrative of human progress; this may give rise to concerns with regard to just on whose terms some inspirations are 'higher' than others, and, how Laban knew about the dance of primitive man unless he presumed the customs of some cultures to be nearer to those of early humans. Moreover, that for Laban, movement expresses our most 'fundamental inspirations' may be felt to imply that movement is a 'natural' form of expression in some respects beyond the reach of culture. Yet twentieth century anthropologists demonstrated the extent to which what may be considered natural physical behaviour is often an important aspect of culture (Polhemus 1998/1993, p.179). Something that Laban himself seems to recognise in his discussions of the 'effort manifestations of social units' (Laban, 1950, p.17).

While Laban's words about movement and meaning can be viewed as revealing the influence of expressionism, in developing his actual means of conveying the spatial,

temporal and dynamic content of bodily actions he ironically seems to be more aligned with the structuralist; there are hardly clearer examples of a system of binary opposites than in Laban's choreutics (e.g. left forward low: right back high) and effort analysis (e.g. bound:free, sudden:sustained). Laban was beginning to develop his theories in Switzerland just after the death of the Swiss linguist Saussure in 1913. Saussure's students, by publishing their teacher's lectures posthumously, prepared the way for the mid twentieth century's structuralist turn. By revealing an underlying structural system of differences Laban was not only showing how dance could be thought of as having structure but contemplating structure in accordance with the most recent developments in the intellectual climate of his time.

Having recognised all this I want to leave aside questions of how Laban's writings may be read as revealing a tendency to a universalism that could be deconstructed as situated within the cultural presumptions of his time and place. Rather I want to focus on the continuing relevance, in terms of the theatre dance presented in western orientated performance spaces, of key elements of his approach to dance as deeply meaningful. A relevance that continues because Laban perhaps can be best understood as confronting some underlying issues for dance as a performing art that, at least in western societies, are still pertinent.

Crucially, while Laban had the capacity to contemplate dance in precise structural terms, he did not reduce dance to formal structures but rather recognised both the experiential value of dancing to the person, and in a theatrical context, recognised the importance of 'contact with the audience' (Laban 1950 p.19). For Laban, the formal structures he explored were implicated in a spiritual realm. While, following Best's argument, metaphysics may not be felt to provide a satisfactory solution to the problem of how the significance of movement is understood, the important issue for dance is that *felt* experience is not disregarded.

The legacy of religious and philosophical doctrines that distrust bodily sensation may have been further challenged since Laban's era but they still have a substantial impact on how western orientated people experience their embodiment and conceive of dance. In this context it is interesting to contemplate that in his early years of artistic development, Laban allied himself with those who today we would view as seeking alternative lifestyles. Whatever else went on at Monte Verita, in the aims of this community (Green, 1986) may be recognised some of the same challenges to rationalist assumptions about the relationship between mind and body, and the desire to find a different way to experience the interrelationship of self-other-world, still sought by those groups who today set themselves against the norms of 'mainstream society'. The rationalist legacy, while having many positive outcomes for western society has distanced bodily from mental experience to the point where it is common for people to articulate a sense of lost wholeness. Dancers practise bodymind centring© or body awareness techniques so that what has been split asunder can be reintegrated. But in how, nowadays, dancers reintegrate themselves as mindful bodies or embodied minds, they can be seen as articulating the complexities of the relationship of bodily organism to the culture in which they are enmeshed and hence continuing in that exploration of body-self-world in a manner that links them to those pioneering spirits of the early Modern dance.

In considering the relationship of body and mind, the sociologist Charles Varela (1995) has suggested that the phenomenological concept of the 'lived body' provides a sensitising strategy that is useful in resisting the problems of dualism. However, he is also careful to emphasise that this concept falls short of providing an ultimate philosophical solution to dualism. Similarly Laban's exploration of 'effort' might be thought of as a tactical response to the rationalist legacy that prioritised reason, or

analysis of the physically measurable aspects of movement, over feeling, or in this case, the perceived physicality of indulging in or fighting space, time and weight. While Laban may not have provided the kind of grounds a philosopher would require to resolve the problem of dualism, his development of a means of analysis of the effort combinations we become conscious of, does offer a conceptual framework for the analysis of physicality, or in his words of 'thinking in movement'. That an analysis of effort relies on the assumption that the bodily attitudes of others can be perceived objectively may raise issues of cultural factors that affect perception. Notwithstanding, Laban uniquely offers a way of bringing the embodied structures of being in the world into play with other aspects of discourse.

In contrast, in an account of approaches to literature that reflect on the role of the reader, I came across this statement:

The experiences or responses that modern reader-orientated critics invoke are generally cognitive rather than affective,

Culler, 1983, p. 39

Culler's statement reminded me of how as a student in the 80s I had felt that accounts of art that focus on the cognitive response (to either aesthetic features or semiotic content) were somehow lacking something that was important to why I wanted to be involved in dance. But how is this missing 'something' to be accounted for?

As part of my research I asked the following question of six other artists who live and work in London:

From your experiences as both performer and audience how would you describe what is happening between performer and audience when a performance 'works'?

My choice of questions and artists makes my findings far from 'objective' but their answers I think suggest that my concerns are not that unusual.

I think it's a dialogue or an exchange... of sensations, of memories, of energies, of resonances with something the artist has communicated...

Informal Communication,
Gaby Agis, 2003

If the performance is good and the performers are good at communicating and they have been able to communicate (and) it might be just for a moment, just a split second where they just come together. They journey together. You have taken the audience with you.

Informal Communication,
Mehta, 2003 (edited 2007)

For me, performers imbue the movement with some kind of meaning that they bring something of themselves into the

performance. And they are the kind of performers that I like to watch.

Informal Communication,
Artist A, 2002

You feel that emotionally they've kind of got you somewhere...

Informal Communication,
Anderson, 2003

It was very shamanistic and there were points within that where the audience, the whole audience went silent. The state of the audience changed, presence changed and it changed through her.

Informal Communication,
Artist D, (describing Deborah Hay), 2004 (edited 2007)

You can feel them [the audience] as well. They give you energy or they are like holding energy... I don't know how you just know.

If you can't feel the audience you are not reaching out -
by throwing yourself over there - even if they are cold

Informal Communication,
Artist B, March 2003

It was interesting to me that some sense of communion between audience and performer was important to London based dancers who between them drew on ballet, contemporary dance, Egyptian dance, jazz, hip hop and kathak. Like them if I perceive a performance as successful, I may feel I have connected in some way with the performers, but the grounds for believing this are fraught with philosophical problems. Yet while this sense of 'contact' is problematic in the light of twentieth century understandings of the complexities and slipperiness of human communication, this does not mean that the sense of human interaction is not important to a number of dance performance traditions.

A sense of communicative interaction is something that has been discussed by Valerie Preston-Dunlop in her development and updating of Laban's theories within choreological studies that draws on a synthesis of semiotics and phenomenology.

...we have to remember that dance is not about understanding, primarily, but about engaging with the work phenomenally and searching for meaning, maybe.

Preston Dunlop 2002, p. 271

The 'plane of intersection of phenomenology and semiotics'...
'illuminates the multi –engagement with a work from spontaneous, irrational, personal, corporeal absorption to intellectual searching for significance, concurrently, that audiences bring to an event'.

Preston Dunlop 2002, p. 270

My own research suggested that the phenomenological experience of communicative interaction is dependent on, but not reducible to semiotics. This idea of the interplay between semiotics and phenomenology is informed by discussions of embodiment. For example, the cultural and psychological anthropologist Thomas Csordas has suggested that an understanding of embodiment may necessitate investigation of the relationships between a number of perceived dualities listed by him as being pre-objective:objectified, mind:body, representation:being in the world, semiotics: phenomenology, language:experience and textuality:embodiment:

These pairs of terms define a critical moment in theorizing about culture and self.....our purpose is to identify the terrain on which opposed terms meet ...

That terrain is marked by the characteristic reflectiveness and the process of objectification that define human consciousness, giving substance to representation and specificity to being-in-the-world.

Csordas, 1994, p. 20

It is interesting to reflect that in their dance practices artists may have been negotiating what Csordas identifies as the 'terrain on which opposed terms meet' (Csordas, 1994, p. 20) long before this became a recognisable theoretical proposition. Discussions with artists who make work they perform in themselves, revealed the skill with which they negotiate between their phenomenological experience of being in the moment of the dance and their understanding of how they may be perceived by others in relation to culturally understood systems of signification.

For performers this ability is an important part of their artistic development but it is also perhaps an extension of the skills necessary for social interaction in the conventional sense as explored by the sociologist Erving Goffman (1969/1956). Moreover in a society, such as that in London, that is thought of as marked by difference and in which people constantly have to respond to those whose life experiences and cultural backgrounds cannot be presumed to be similar, this skill becomes of increasing importance both in everyday life and in performance.

If it is accepted that:

While physical culture may be viewed as a crystallization - an embodiment - of the most deeply rooted and fundamental level of what it means to be a member of a particular society, dance might be seen as a second stage of this process

Polhemus, 1998/1993, p. 179

Then, dance may not only be understood to articulate culturally derived bodily ways of being, but in the current context of increasing globalisation, in which performers and audience members are informed by different cultural traditions, a dance performance might at times be viewed as the site of the negotiation of significance in the context of difference.

This was emphasised to me through discussions with those artists who might be thought of as second generation immigrants or black British. Their comments suggested that that sense of the problem of the rationalist legacy informing so much

of the development of contemporary western theatre dance is encountered differently if other people have tended to assume that, by virtue of your ethnicity, you are somehow less the product of western dualism. For them, as for other artists who might be thought of as offering ways of being that do not fit into easily defined norms in terms of ethnicity, gender or sexuality, the success of their performance may to some extent be dependent on the audience being willing to enter into a reciprocal embodied interaction in which what it means to be male/female/ black / white young/old (and so on) is open to negotiation.

How cultural difference is contemplated has certainly changed since Laban first formulated his theories; and even during his life time Laban's own thinking about the relationships between the west and its others did not stand still¹. In Britain today, informed by experiences of diversity, dance theorists may be more wary of accepting as universal what may be argued to be culturally learned patterns of behaviour. Contemplating dance within culturally defined semiotic systems certainly guides the understanding of dance in relation to appropriate codes and provides against approaching one kind of dance with the codes and values of another.² However, it is important to keep in mind that the experience of dance is enriched by an engagement that, in Laban's terms, requires thinking in movement, responding to the physicality of action. Those uncomfortable with resorting to universals or metaphysics to ground this kind of thinking might rather contemplate the reciprocity of human interaction that informs how, in the moment, we make sense of action and allows for recognition that this too, at least to some extent, is culturally shaped. That this reciprocity of interaction is made more complex by the experience of diversity is a current challenge for dance, at least as it is understood in western orientated theatres. In contemplating those dance performances which rework different traditions and create hybrid dance identities in a global context, Laban's explorations of dance may provide the means to develop a sensitivity to how different ways of being in the world are manifested, and perhaps even negotiated, in performance. Hence they may be invaluable to the dance artists, and audiences of tomorrow.

¹ An unfinished article on the value of dance published after Laban's death can be read as questioning the presumption of western society's place at a pinnacle of human development

² Certainly from the standpoint of Artist B it can be important to use more broadly understood semiotic systems to direct the audience's attention.

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