

Rudolf Laban and the 'Yorkshire Connection'.

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This booklet looks back over fifty years of teaching, learning and dancing by members of Yorkshire Movement and Dance – initially the West Riding Movement Study Circle – and celebrates its achievements. If in the 1990s, Yorkshire is the most important British centre for dance outside London, then this is either directly or indirectly a result of the pioneering work carried out by past and present members of Yorkshire Movement and Dance. Several key companies and institutions are now based here in Yorkshire. There is the internationally acclaimed Phoenix Dance Company that is based in Leeds where it shares premises with the Yorkshire Dance Centre. Not more than a mile away is the Northern School of Contemporary Dance founded by Nadine Senior which offers degrees in dance and currently has in residence the dance company RJC. Down the motorway a short way from Leeds at Bretton Hall University College there is another dance degree where the dancer and choreographer Janet Smith is based, and where Random Dance Company was first formed by Wayne MacGregor an ex-student at Bretton who has recently risen to national prominence. This brief and partial survey of some of the more important parts of the Yorkshire dance scene shows both its richness and its national and international importance.

If one looks back at the series of events that have led to the present state of dance here, the 1970s undoubtedly stand out as a key period, and in particular the two residencies in Yorkshire by the London Contemporary Dance Theatre under the direction of Robert Cohan. Many of those in the company who were involved in these residencies – the first of their kind they had run – remember that the connections they made in Yorkshire were deeper and more fruitful than any they made elsewhere. With hindsight one can see that the fruits of London Contemporary Dance Theatre's residencies in Yorkshire were not just the young dancers like Darshan Singh Bhuller and Jonathan Lunn who left Yorkshire and went on to become important dancers and choreographers in London Contemporary Dance Theatre, but also the present strong dance infrastructure here in Yorkshire. But when one looks at this from the point of view of the 50th anniversary of Yorkshire Movement and Dance, one sees that the initial success of London Contemporary Dance Theatre's residencies was due to the existence in Yorkshire of a well supported, large group of talented and skilled dance teachers with enthusiastic and imaginative pupils– the result

of years of good work by members of what was initially the West Riding Movement Study Circle. To put this another way, when London Contemporary Dance Theatre came to Yorkshire bringing with them American modern dance based on the technique developed by Martha Graham they found here teachers, students and pupils who had already learnt a European approach to modern dance initially developed by Rudolf Laban; this grounding in Laban Modern Educational Dance had given them an excellent preparation for the acquisition of what then appeared the new and exciting skills of contemporary dance – and the rest, as they say, is history.

I myself am writing this not as a dance practitioner but as a dance critic and historian: I was there in the 1970s and can still remember the buzz of excitement that accompanied visits by London Contemporary Dance Theatre. I was an art student in Leeds and then a lecturer who became caught up with this enthusiasm for dance and started to write about it. I got to know many members of what is now Yorkshire Movement and Dance, and some of them were very influential in the development of my understanding of dance.¹ But my memories go back a comparatively short way compared with some of those who have contributed to this booklet or whose reminiscences are printed in it. The task I have been given, and the aim of my contribution is to set the work of what was initially the West Riding Movement Study Circle into a broader national and international context. One of the reasons I feel able to do this is because during the 1980s, with Patricia Mitchison and Jean Williams, I was involved in creating an archive of tape recorded interviews that documented an oral history of dance in Yorkshire. When Yorkshire Movement and Dance held a Celebration of Four Decades of Dance at Woolley Hall in 1991, we took our tape recorders there and recorded not only the speeches people made looking back at the organisation's past but also conducted individual interviews with some of the older people there who still remembered its early days; sadly some of them have since died.

I was by then teaching dance history to students on degree courses so that Rudolf Laban was someone I tended to think of working with Mary Wigman in Munich and in Switzerland during the first two decades of the twentieth century and then establishing modern dance in Germany in the years following the First World War. But at Woolley Hall I found myself listening to more than one person who had not only been taught by Laban on teachers courses but had clear memories of him as a comparatively recent visitor to Yorkshire – a 'Yorkshire Connection'. From the point of view of the broad history of modern dance as it has been written by American dance historians, this 'Yorkshire Connection' is an anomaly that does not fit the established view. This is that American modern dance

developed parallel with modern dance in Europe but entirely separate from it, and that European modern dance was killed off by the Second World War. There are conflicting explanations of the latter. Either the Nazis were unsympathetic towards modern dance and caused it to go into decline; or it went into decline as the result of the complicity of its founders with the Nazis – Laban, Wigman and others were members of Goebbels’ Reich Chamber of Culture and were directly involved in the mass propaganda pageants that opened the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games. Whatever the explanation, it is too often assumed that modern dance in Europe disappeared altogether after the Second World War, leaving the field open for the triumphant arrival there of American modern dance in the 1960s and 70s. The ‘Yorkshire Connection’ however is one of a small but important number of instances where a residual European modern dance tradition met and mixed with modern dance from the other side of the Atlantic. My aim in this contribution to this booklet is to set the work of what was initially the West Riding Movement Study Group into this broader historical context and in doing so show how this broader history needs to be adjusted to take account of it.

1947 is the year in which a group of physical education teachers and advisors working for the Educational Department of the West Riding of Yorkshire first came together for dance courses taught by Diana Jordan. These were the first of many, highly popular dance courses and these teachers and advisers became known as the West Riding Movement Study Circle and then Group. This was not of course the beginning of what I am calling the ‘Yorkshire Connection’. One could even trace it right back to before the First World War when Sir Michael Sadler, then Vice Chancellor of the University of Leeds, visited Jaques-Dalcroze’s school at Hellerau outside Dresden and observed there the teaching of Eurythmics. Among the students at Hellerau at that time would have been Mary Wigman and Laban’s future wife Suzanne Perrottet. Sadler’s interest in Eurythmics must be seen as part of a wider interest among British educationalists in German physical education. Perrottet and Wigman first encountered Laban when they attended his dance summer school at Ascona on the Swiss shore of Lake Maggiore on the even of the Great War. The rise of interest in Germany in a range of activities that came to be known as *korpekultur* (body culture) including dance and dance-like physical exercises is a consequence of a concern about the effects on the individual of increasing industrialisation; Germans were much more conscious of these than other people in the West on account of Germany’s late and alarmingly rapid Industrial Revolution. Around the turn of the century in Germany educationalists aspired to develop the whole person – their physical, creative and spiritual life and not just their

intellectual potential. This ideal underlay the best of the teaching of members of the West Riding Movement Study Group up until the 1970s. But although the movement work taught and practised in West Riding Schools in the 1950s and 60s had its roots in the work of Laban at the beginning of the century, it was not children's education that Laban and his associates were thinking about in Switzerland during the First World War, and in Germany during the years following it.

Laban is probably the best known now for his system for notating dance and his theoretical work on the range of movements the body can enact in time and space, which were codified in his movement scales. It is often forgotten that he was also a dancer and choreographer, specialising in making large scale works for 'movement choirs'. The dance plays that in the 40s and 50s became part of the curriculum of modern educational dance had their origins in Laban's modernist dance plays based on simplified fairy tales that he choreographed in Switzerland during the war years and later in Germany. These had been inspired by the innovative theatrical work Laban saw in Munich before the Great War, including Rudolf Steiner's extraordinary Miracle Plays and the Russian painter Wassily Kandinsky abstract theatre pieces such as 'Das Gelbe Klage' (The Yellow Sound). Laban was modern in his tastes: he himself didn't perform in the famous dadaists Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich founded by Hugo Ball (who had been Kandinsky's assistant during the production of 'Das Gelbe Klage'), but he is reported to have been a regular member of the audience. Indeed musical compositions by Laban were played at the cabaret and many of the women in his school including Wigman subsequently danced in Dada events. While Laban and Wigman moved back to Germany at the end of the First World War, there have continued to be dance summer schools in Switzerland up until the present. Iso Partsch-Bergsohn says that the first contact European dancers had with American modern dance techniques was when Anna Sokolow, who had danced with Martha Graham during the 1930s, taught at a summer school in Switzerland in 1957. She also points out that many Americans in the 1920s and 30s travelled to Germany to train at Wigman's school or with one of the other German modern dancers.

John Hodgson and Valerie Preston-Dunlop in their book about Laban include some fascinating information about the 1920s and 30s that give an idea of the extent of Laban's influence at the peak of his career. These include lists of Laban schools, Laban Movement Choirs and of delegates at a conference on Laban's method of dance notation in 1929 (1990: 126-34). Not only were there German delegates at this conference but people from Austria, Switzerland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Jugoslavia, Latvia, France and the United States. It is perhaps significant that there were no delegates

from England (Ann Hutchinson Guest discovered Laban notation in the 1930s). While Sadler and others had been interested in German culture, the First World War brought about strong anti-German feeling among the British which lasted for some years. Although modern dance did not become established in England in the way it had done in much of Europe, some English teachers of Physical Training (as it was then called) nevertheless travelled to Germany and Switzerland to study at schools of dance and to attend summer schools. By the mid 1930s 'Central European Dance' was beginning to be taught in England. The title 'Central European Dance' was a euphemism. Although Laban was Hungarian, it was in Germany that his work had taken strongest root; and at that time there was a need to distance modern dance from any association it might otherwise have with the National Socialist regime.

Diana Jordan who taught the first teachers course for what became the West Riding Movement Study Group was one of those who had travelled to Germany in the 1930s to learn about modern dance. By the early 1940s was working as a Physical Education advisor in Worcestershire. Jordan was in regular touch with Rudolf Laban who by this time was resident in England. Valerie Preston-Dunlop has written about Laban's years as a senior civil servant in Goebbels' Ministry of Culture, and about the dance play 'The Warm Wind and the New Joy' which he choreographed for a cast of over 100 for the opening of the 1936 Olympic Games but which Goebbels himself cancelled at the last minute. Hitler, Rosenberg and other Nazi ideologists took a strong dislike to German expressionist painting (which Goebbels himself had initially appreciated). Aware of the damage that the Nazi vilification of modern art had done to Germany's reputation abroad, Goebbels pragmatically tried to capitalise as much as he could on the positive international reputation enjoyed by other aspects of German culture about which Hitler had no particular opinion, hence the support he initially gave to German dance artists. After Goebbels' cancellation of his dance play, Laban was dismissed from his post and spent a year under surveillance before going on a trip to Paris from which he decided not to return. He was eventually invited to stay at Dartington Hall in the south of England.

He was invited to Dartington by his former pupil and associate Kurt Jooss. Jooss had been principle of the Folkwangschule in Essen and director of the Folkwang Ballet. In 1932 he had won the first prize in an international choreographic competition in Paris with what became his most famous ballet 'The Green Table'. While there is some doubt about how much Laban and Wigman understood the implications of their association with the Nazis, Jooss was much more politically astute. When in 1933

(see Markand 1985: 50-3) Jooss was ordered to dismiss Jewish members of his ballet company including his musical director and close collaborator Fritz Cohen he refused. The story of how he cleverly arranged to get all of his company, together with their costumes and music out of Germany without the knowledge of the Nazi authorities is one of the more exciting moments in recent dance history. In 1934 Leonard and Dorothy Elmhirst invited Jooss and what he now called the Ballets Jooss to take up residence at Dartington Hall – where he and his associate Sigurd Leeder set up the Jooss Leeder School of Dance on the Elmhirsts' estate in Devon. And it was the Elmhirsts who Jooss persuaded to offer Laban a much needed refuge in 1938.²

As well as Laban himself and the members of the Ballets Jooss, other Germans who had experience of Laban's work were also escaping from Germany and settling in England at this time, some of whom would play an important role in the development of modern educational dance and become regular teachers on the West Riding Movement Study Group's programme of courses. Among the most important of these were Lisa Ullman who had trained in one of the many Laban Schools in Germany, and Sylvia Bodman who had been a dancer in Laban's dance company TanzBühne Laban during the 1920s and co-principal of a Laban school in Frankfurt. Bodmer settled in Manchester in 1942. As I have already said, dancing as part of primary and secondary education was not an area that Laban and his German followers had taken any interest in: they were more interested in choreography for the large amateur movement choirs and for professional dancers, and in notation. In England however, while the Ballets Jooss toured regularly during the 30s and 40s, modern dance as a performance form never attracted much interest, but the area in which it did take root was education. It was lecturers in Physical Training who went to Germany to take courses in modern dance, and introduced 'Central European Dance' to England. Leslie Burrows trained with Wigman and then set up a studio in London where in 1937 she was joined by Louise Soelberg, who had danced with Jooss. Diana Jordan both trained with Burrows as did many others at the time. Joan Goodrich did courses with Wigman and more extended work with Burrows before returning to her post at Bedford College of Physical Training. Lady Clegg took a diploma in Central European Dance with Goodrich. Margaret Dunn, a friend of Jordan and Goodrich's who was on the staff of St Gabriel's Teacher Training College where she taught Central European Dance. St Gabriel's was evacuated from London to Doncaster during the war and, luckily for Yorkshire, shortly after the College returned to London she was appointed as an adviser by Alec Clegg.

As I have already suggested much of the basis of modern educational dance has its roots in artistic and intellectual currents in Munich at the beginning of the twentieth century. It was in Munich before 1914 that Laban absorbed ideas about modernist, abstracted dance plays from the work of Steiner and Kandinsky, while it was in Zurich and Ascona during the war that he worked out his movement scales and his philosophy of dance. Underlying all of this was a philosophy of the individual as a creative being who develops equally her or his intellectual, spiritual and physical capacities, and this ideal informed much German art and philosophy at the beginning of the century. In Britain in the late 1930s and 40s, a broadly based political shift towards the establishment of a welfare state included a desire to give all children, irrespective of their social background, equal opportunities through education. British educationalists came to subscribe to a child-centred view of education that recognised the importance of creative work including dance movement as an important part of children's education. Laban's ideas about dance and the development of the individual were therefore very much in tune with the wider social climate then prevailing in Britain. In the 1990s a very different philosophy of education now holds sway, and politicians now demonise 'trendy' educational ideas to which many progressive teachers and educationalists devoted their lives from the 1940s to the 1970s, including members of what was initially the West Riding Movement Study Group. It was this belief in the need to develop the whole person, physically, creatively and intellectually that underlay the introduction of Laban's ideas to English schools, and to the schools run by the West Riding Education Authority under its director Alec (later Sir Alec) Clegg. And it is probably now possible to say that modern educational dance was taught better and more successfully in the West Riding under Sir Alec Clegg than anywhere else.

If the West Riding Movement Study Circle was initially formed in 1947 by Diana Jordan, (who Alec Clegg had brought to Yorkshire from Worcestershire shortly after he himself had made the same move), it is worth noting that Laban himself had taught holiday dance courses for teachers in Sheffield in 1944, 45 and 46.³ Arthur Stone, another education advisor who Alec Clegg had brought with him from Birmingham, recalled that modern educational dance was more established among women teachers than among male Physical Training (PT) teachers because the women had taken courses with Laban and his associates during the war while the men had been in the army. Dick Eastoe had been a Captain before his demobilisation when he had returned to teaching PT in Yorkshire. He was one of the original members the West Riding Movement Study Group that Jean Williams and I interviewed at Woolley Hall in 1991. He recalled going on an in-service teachers course to Dartington College where

he was the only man and therefore received individual dance tuition with Laban himself. Arthur Stone and Diana Jordan decided to try to remedy the lack of interest among male PT teachers in dance by setting up a men's group of the West Riding Movement Study Group. He recalled one session where Diana Jordan had got the men improvising dance in what Laban called free flow. Apparently this was not an easy task; but they ended up making so much noise that Stone suggested to Jordan that she stop them, only to be told that she didn't know how to. Eastoe recalls Laban as a frequent teacher of the men's group.

In retrospect Arthur Stone (or Stoney as he was affectionately called by many) felt that the men's group was a failure and that they should have tried to interest the male art teachers in teaching creative movement. But in Dick Eastoe's case movement work with Laban was clearly a decisive and extremely useful experience. He went on to be a headteacher, first of a small school and then at a large comprehensive in a mining district (where?). He told us with some pride that every child in his school did some creative work, with clay, paint and dance, during every school day. Jean Williams then played devil's advocate and asked him but what about reading, writing and maths. How for instance does dance help children with spelling? His reply gives a deep insight into the philosophy behind Sir Alec Clegg's work in the West Riding. Well, he said, dance and art help develop the child's attention and sensitivity, and makes them notice things. They won't learn to spell unless they notice the difference between letters.

You can read elsewhere in this booklet more of the memories of these early members of the West Riding Movement Study Group as well as reminiscences by those who discovered it in more recent years. Successive stages of local government reorganisation gradually decreased the number of schools and colleges run by the West Riding Education Department transferring them to the cities' control, and then finally abolished the County Council altogether. This caused both the name and the aims of the group to change. It has recently diversified into a number of areas not directly connected with schools, including liturgical dance and performances on religious themes. It is to the 1970s and the arrival of London Contemporary Dance Theatre in West Yorkshire that I now want to return. It was Margaret Dunn who was instrumental in inviting Robert Cohan to bring the company to Yorkshire for a residency in 1976, and as I have already mentioned, this was the first educational residency in Britain by a dance company. They were primarily based at Bretton Hall where Margaret Dunn was the Vice Principle. They also stayed at Bingley College. These, together with Lady Mabel College of Education

at Wentworth Woodhouse, had been the main teacher training colleges teaching dance in the old West Riding. It was primarily also dance teachers in West Yorkshire who were members of the Movement Study Group who brought their pupils to observe or take workshops with the company.

The sight of highly trained professional modern dancers was at this time a new and overwhelming experience for both teachers and pupils, but it is too often forgotten that modern dance itself was by no means a new concept for these Yorkshire folk. They were able to relate to it more easily than their contemporaries in other parts of the country because of the long tradition of high quality dance teaching in West Yorkshire. What had been missing was the example of trained professional modern dancers to give pupils and teachers an idea of what it was possible to achieve. Laban, Bodmer, Ullman and their peers had experience of training professional dancers or watching modern dance. Most of the teachers of modern educational dance had never had access to this experience, nor had their pupils. It seems in retrospect that almost overnight modern educational dance was dropped and American modern dance adopted by dance teachers. Many, though not all, of those who were introducing American modern dance were not even aware of the existence of a European modern dance tradition and were under the misapprehension that in Britain there was only ballet.

Jane Dudley, who had been a member of Martha Graham's dance company in the 1930s and 40s, moved to London in the early 1970s to teach at the London School of Contemporary Dance at The Place. Giving an address at the Yorkshire Dance Centre in Leeds a few years ago she said that she regretted the way Graham's work filtered into English schools where this was to the detriment of the existing Laban-based modern dance teaching. Surprisingly perhaps Jane Dudley said she admired modern educational dance;⁴ but then she herself had trained in New York in the early 1930s with Hanya Holm who was a pupil of Mary Wigman's, and she remembers Wigman herself teaching in New York in the 1930s. Dudley also observed that she doesn't think the dance technique based on Graham's work 'suits the English soul': 'As soon as anybody left the School, like Richard Alston and Siobhan Davies, they went straight to New York and trained at the Merce Cunningham Studio' (1994: 23). However, it does not seem like that when looked at from a Yorkshire point of view. Graham-based modern dance seems to have suited many Yorkshire souls. I am not just thinking here of the many young people in Yorkshire, particularly men, who were inspired in the 1970s to go London and train at The Place and often then to dance with London Contemporary Dance Theatre. I am also thinking of the dancers who stayed in Leeds and particularly of Phoenix Dance Company. It is surely no coincidence

that of all the modern dance companies of the 1970s and 80s that had a technical basis in Graham based modern dance Phoenix is the only one still flourishing – even London Contemporary Dance Theatre has disbanded. Nor therefore should it be taken as a coincidence that the current artistic director of Phoenix, Thea Barnes, was a member of the Martha Graham Dance Company for eleven years.

Many of the original members of Phoenix, together with the senior female dancers who are still with the company, were pupils at Harehills Middle School where Nadine Senior was head teacher, and then danced in her youth dance group in the 1970s and early 1980s. Nadine Senior trained in modern educational dance at Lady Mabel College of Education, and it is Laban-based modern educational dance that she insists always formed the basis of the work she did with her pupils at Harehills Middle School. She never taught them any Graham-based modern dance technique; her pupils learnt that in workshops with members of the London Contemporary Dance Theatre and with other dance companies visiting the region. I am pointing here to something I identified at the beginning of this article: the healthy mixing of American and European modern dance traditions that occurred here in Yorkshire.

I have tried in this article to give an overview of the history of dance in Yorkshire that places it in a broader, international context. The point of recounting history is surely to help one better understand the present, and as times change so does one's view of history. More than once in this article I have found myself pointing out that things look different when looked at from a Yorkshire point of view, but I have also suggested that this Yorkshire point of view should change the way people outside Yorkshire understand the development of modern dance. I don't just mean by this that they should give greater recognition to the contribution made by Yorkshire born or Yorkshire trained dancers, teachers and choreographers. I would quite like people in London and the South of England to be aware that the most important artistic developments do not always happen in the metropolis, but Londoners are very unlikely ever to take that on board. Where I think attitudes should change is about the relationship between modern dance in Europe and North America. We shall better understand the contribution that Graham and Cunningham-based modern dance has made to dance in this country when we have acknowledged the British and European modern dance traditions with which these have become inextricably although sometimes invisibly mixed. Nevertheless we need to recognise the differences between the many varied components, just as Dick Eastoe said his pupils needed to learn to notice the difference between letters in order to spell. When we have achieved this we will be better able to value our present, rich dance experience.

¹ Margaret Dunn in particular was very supportive. I remember how surprised I was when she told me how much she enjoyed reading my early reviews in *New Dance* magazine. I sometimes met her at dance performances and remember sitting with her at Wakefield Theatre Royal during a programme of Youth Dance performances during the 1986 National Youth Dance Festival. My review of that evening provoked some letters complaining that I was too harsh and unsympathetic, and I gratefully remember that my opinion was one that Margaret Dunn herself endorsed.

Later in the decade I planned to teach a day school for Leeds University on German Expressionism and Modern Dance. It was unfortunately cancelled because only one person enrolled for it. When I asked in the office if they knew who this was, I was surprised to find it was Margaret Dunn.

² In 1953 William Elmhirst donated premises at Woburn Place in Addlestone, Surrey as a permanent home for the Laban Art of Movement Studio.

³ Laban started to become involved in teacher training in 1941, the same year that he became an associate of Paton Lawrence and Co, and started applying movement analysis to industrial work study. He continued working in both industry and education until his death in 1958.

⁴ Jane Dudley taught a weekend course for YMD at Woolley Hall in the 1970s.

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