

**LABANOTATION SCORES COMMISSIONED
BY THE AMERICAN DANCE LEGACY INSTITUTE**

by

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This presentation was accompanied by slides and videotaped excerpts of the Repertory Etudes

In 1996, I began my association with the American Dance Legacy Institute. This organization was founded by Julie A. Strandberg, Artist-in Residence and Director of Dance at Brown University, and Carolyn Adams, the former principal dancer with the Paul Taylor Dance Company. In this presentation, I will describe the Repertory Etudes Project as well as the choreography and notation scores that have been commissioned as part of that project. In addition, I will mention dances that have been notated as part of a project devoted to documenting and preserving selected works of the New Dance Group.

A key concept driving the Institute's several projects is access: access to dance and to an experience of modern dance masterworks. According to its mission statement, the Institute «was established to provide all Americans with the opportunity to practice, enjoy, and participate in the art of dance». . . «regardless of age, race, sex, disability, economic status, or geographical locations» (<http://www.asli.org/about/mission.php>).

The Repertory Etudes Project

One day last summer, I listened as Julie Strandberg described the specific purposes of the Repertory Etudes Project to group of public school teachers from the Carolinas. She noted that dancers, especially dancers-in-training, are often given messages from the larger dance world that discourage or prohibit their participation in theatrical dance: for example, their skill as dancers may be deemed insufficient to perform a professionally choreographed work well enough, or they may not meet casting preferences or requirements (which may bring up any number of issues regarding access and casting in terms of sex, or race, or even weight).

The Repertory Etudes Project is centered in the commissioning of short dances, called repertory etudes, that are created by American modern dance choreographers *expressly for the purpose of providing access to their choreography*. In order to preserve the concept of access, there are several mutual understandings surrounding the creation of a Repertory Etude: first, the casting of the Etude is not be limited by sex; that is, either a male or female performer should be able to perform the work. Second, the choreographer does not place restrictions on the performance of the work: in purchasing the packet of videotapes,

Labanotation score, and other supporting materials, the rights to perform the choreography without restriction or further fees are also purchased. Third, although consultants for the Etude are identified, there is no requirement for a consultant and the work could be performed with no checking whatsoever. The work may be learned from videotape, or from the Labanotation score, or from a consultant. Fourth, the packets are priced affordably to provide access to all economic levels. Fifth, the Etude is based in the previous work of the choreographer. One of the interesting aspects of this last stipulation has been the different interpretations of it by the choreographers involved thus far.

By this time, some of you may already have heard about the first Repertory Etude, *Rainbow Etude*, choreographed by Donald McKayle at the University of California, Irvine. This etude is based on McKayle's 1959 *Rainbow 'Round My Shoulder*, a work often considered to be his masterpiece, an exploration of the drudgery, reveries, and failed escape of prisoners laboring on a chain gang.

Rainbow Etude not only used the earlier work's theme and some of its movement, it also provided an opportunity for McKayle to revisit the older work in other ways. The music for the 3-minute *Rainbow Etude* was selected by McKayle from two songs that he had originally considered for inclusion in *Rainbow 'Round My Shoulder*, but had decided against using. In addition, the first movements used in the Etude were drawn from the 1960s-era kinescope of a televised performance of *Rainbow 'Round My Shoulder*: McKayle had improvised a dance in silhouette behind the host who was introducing *Rainbow 'Round My Shoulder* to the television audience. This improvisation of decades ago formed the basis for the first measures of the *Rainbow Etude*, as well as for the final movements at the end of the Etude. Much of the remainder of the *Rainbow Etude* was choreographed new for the Etude, although some short phrases were taken directly from *Rainbow 'Round My Shoulder*. The phrases that were taken from the original *Rainbow* include movements done by the men in the original work as well as those done originally by the woman (who performed a quadruple role of idealized woman, teenager, mother, and wife). Thus, the *Rainbow Etude* provides a challenging mix of the strong, bound, work-like, repetitive motions with even timing that are associated with the men on the chain gang, as well as the indirect, lighter, free, and carving movements with fragmented timing that characterize the female in her idealized role. The result of the choreography is a work that gives the dancer a condensed kinesthetic experience of *Rainbow Round My Shoulder* as well as a journey into its emotional landscape.

It has been fascinating to see different choreographers create an Etude. David Parsons approached the assignment from the point of view of technical and performative requirements, in essence identifying movements and phrases that typify his style of choreography and performance. Rather than choosing one work from his past from which to draw an Etude (that is, to ask the question: what movements will give the dancer a lived

experience of this particular work?), Parsons asked a question that could be termed: *What movement abilities do you need to master in order to dance the Parsons repertory?* In order to answer this question, Parsons chose phrases from many existing works for the challenges they provide to a dancer's development, or for characteristic body positions or coordinations, or simply to introduce the dancer to key phrases from the repertoire. The *Parsons Etude* is short (as are all of the Etudes), and an effort was made to keep it within the grasp of a developing dancer.

An intriguing feature of this work expanded the original stipulation about casting: in addition to the possibilities of performing the *Parsons Etude* as a solo or a duet, it may also be performed by a group of any size—as a «jam session.» The jam session abandons the solo's orientation to the room and instead begins as a large circle. At any point in the Etude, dancers may enter the space within the circle and join in the Etude. They may perform as much of the Etude as they wish, relate to any dancer or facing in the room that they wish, and «exit» the Etude at any point. The «jam session» was thought of as something that could be performed in a gym or perhaps out-of-doors, or just by the dancers themselves as something enjoyable to dance on their own.

The third Etude resulted in yet another approach. The *Rooms Etude* was based on Anna Sokolow's signature work of mid-century alienation. Lorry May, Sokolow's long-time dancer, created a six-minute dance that could be performed by a soloist, six-person group, or twelve person group. With a chair for each performer, phrases from several of the sections of *Rooms* were distilled into five modules that encapsulate some of the emotional states presented in the original work. As is typical of Sokolow works, while the movement is not physically virtuosic, every movement was filled with a different kind of virtuosity, that of emotional potential and consequence.

Rather than choreographing a separate Etude, the Toronto-based American choreographer Danny Grossman contributed a trio from a larger work, *Ecce Homo*. The *Ecce Homo* trio presents several technical challenges to the modern dancer: changes in leg rotation from parallel to turned-out to turned-in occur every couple of counts; a two-dimensional (planar) use of the body and extremities is used throughout the work; there is a recurring use of the Graham-style contraction; and finally—and perhaps most challenging—the work is characterized by a quickness combined with directness and crisp distinction in positions. The endurance, speed, and clarity necessary to dance the Trio from *Ecce* were noted by Adams as necessary attributes of aspiring dancers. The Trio from *Ecce* provides an extended assignment in building speed with crisp and distinct design.

Three new Etudes are in progress at this time: in Summer, 2000, Ray Cook began the notation of a new Etude choreographed by Daniel Nagrin. In Winter, 2001 Carla Maxwell

began the choreography of an etude based on the work of José Limón. And this summer (2001), the initial work of creating a Pearl Primus etude is under way in Saratoga Springs.

In passing, I will also mention that the ADLI has commissioned three scores as part of its New Dance Group Project. This project was begun in 1999 with a grant from the NEA to document and preserve works by choreographers associated with the New Dance Group. At this point, three scores have been commissioned: Eve Gentry's *Tenant of the Street*, Daniel Nagrin's *Man of Action*, and Mary Anthony's *Lady Macbeth*.

This last slide gives contact information for the Repertory Etudes Project. *The Rainbow Etude* is available for purchase now. The other packets are in the process of being assembled by the Institute.

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