

# LABAN, LEEDER... MEMORY OF MOVEMENT

by

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« You have to give the best of yourself without trying to be perfect »

Sigurd Leeder

## **The last class**

I remember that morning very clearly; it was one of the last classes with Leeder. The enthusiasm we then shared is always with me; it's what drives me, the ever-existing game, even when things get difficult.

That morning, together with the other members of the course, we were doing the exercise that Leeder had suggested to me: to make a bridge. In the previous session he had talked to us about the idea of a bridge: as a link between two places, as a construction from two opposed landscapes, as spaces that join from two different shores... But also as a link between different ideas and ways of performing, or as a place suspended in space between two different realities...which allow us to know others and ourselves, to join, share, compete.

Bridges that are destroyed and built eternally in the winds of history...

That morning I was building a bridge with two groups of dancers placed on opposite sides of the room. Through levers and wheels and elements that pile up, join, screw; bit by bit, the dancers projected structures that fitted in with the ones that, in a symmetrical way, were being created at the other side of the stage.

And Leeder was there, present, with a presence that stimulated and respected the discoveries that were made, sharing the enthusiasm generously. For this reason the room was more like a big kitchen where we were all sharing the excitement of making a cake.

## **Introduction**

I feel, humbly and deeply, that I am the retainer and transmitter of a tradition that understands art as an exercise of humanity and freedom.

I'm not going to talk about technical problems, go deeply into notation systems or develop any rigorous historical studies. But I want to talk about some experiences, which were deeply artistic, and took place, many years ago, in a very poor and beautiful remote country; and of how these experiences continued to spread in spite of storms, and of the strange ways in which they have been fruitful. I want to talk about the period in which Sigmund Leeder was

the director of the “Escuela de Danzas”, which was part of the College of Musical Arts and Science of the University of Chile.

## **History**

All through the twenties, Laban was engrossed in the process of teaching and developing his theories about movement. Sigurd Leeder collaborated directly with him from a self-taught perspective. And that school and that system, became the link between Kurt Jooss and Leeder, who would train and forge their artistic relationship there; the former as choreographer and the latter as educator.

This was, broadly speaking, the beginning of what would later, with the Diaspora that Hitler’s rise to power brought, spread all around the world.

The Jooss Ballet arrived to Chile in 1941, moving the Chilean artistic world by revealing the great possibilities of human movement as a theatrical language, due to its unity of conception, the deepness of its contents, the rigorous execution, musicality and thematic versatility. It became obvious then, as there were already plans to create a National Ballet, why the Institute of Musical Extension of the University of Chile signed up three of the members of the Jooss Ballet, Ernst Uthoff, Lola Botka and Rudolf Pesht, to create a dance school dependant of the University. This school would later become the origin of the Chilean National Ballet.

At first, the school and the Ballet were practically the same entity and it was possible to combine the tasks of both institutions. However, after some time, the growing national and international success, the enormous amount of applications to study dance in Chile and the difficulty of combining the professional work of the dancers and choreographers with the teaching, made it necessary to separate the school from the Ballet. This brought a change of the syllabus to adapt it to the new requirements that emerged and to make the educational work professional. It became obvious then that it would be essential to have someone directing the school full time. For this reason, Sigmund Leeder was chosen in 1959 to direct the Escuela de Danzas.

## **Leeder in Chile**

In 1928, Leeder had presented in Germany, his Kinetography, which came directly from a study Laban had made on movement notation. This difficult task was a manifestation of his spirit of invention, his love for perfection and his patience. He continued working on the process of developing the art of writing during all his life, trying to make it precise, clear and systematic. So, when he arrived in Chile in 1959, he brought with him a solid theory that immediately became part of the Curricular Design of the school. To my knowledge, this was

the first time that movement notation based on Laban was taught in an Official School, at least in the Hispanic world.

Leeder developed his own methods of Dance Technique, Coreuthics, Eukinethics and Kinetography. The pillar on which he based his educational action, was the idea of not training dancers but of educating human beings to become fully so, therefore, to become artists: as Schiller said "Only in play is man fully himself".

The restructure of the program of the Dance department created by Leeder and the teachers of the Escuela, also conferred on the educational activities a clear social dimension. Some passages of the technical report are very revealing in this sense. This is how it starts:

" Seeing the dance school with a university status and spirit, it's necessary to give it the widest possible scope. If we talk about social function its because we are convinced that Dance, as an educational discipline and artistic expression, is and will become increasingly important and, in time, will gain recognition in other educational systems. "

As for specific training, it says:

" The dancer should not be trained inside the conception of a specific stylistic. He should be allowed to develop his technical and expressive skills as widely as possible. The training must turn him into an instrument that is sensitive to the richness that today's theatrical expression demands. "

"The choreographer's training must contain the analytical knowledge of the whole dance complex and a clear comprehension of the emotional contents of movement, and of its dynamic and formal sense. "

"The training of teachers directed to amateurs is based on the fact that dance has always played an essential role in the social activities of every culture, it was never confined exclusively to the stage. "t has always acted as a harmonising power, and this is due to the fact that its performance affects the human being in its physical, emotional and intellectual integrity."

For all these reasons, Leeder saw the necessity of justifying the notation of movement as a subject and a specialisation. About this matter he says:

"It's necessary to have a notation system that can register any type of movement and is capable of giving us a precise image of its characteristics in time, space and energy. Rudolf Laban's system is the first of many efforts to try and solve this problem. This system allows the study of a composition, as in music, without the ornaments and errors of the interpreter. We can't imagine the development of music or literature without their corresponding notation systems. Dance will only be capable of coming out of its childhood if it has a proper notation system. The education of the dance notator will include the dancer's basic training and a full knowledge of the Dance Notation System. He will progressively write down ballet and dance

exercises and will cooperate in folk dance investigations and seminars on different dance styles.”

Leeder adapted Laban’s system by structuring a training methodology in which all the aspects of movement would be worked on, to try and educate dance professionals to have a wide artistic, critical and analytical spirit. Curious and sensitive people, who are able to think, analyse and compare and are not limited by anything, not even a style of dance.

### **Leeder the teacher**

Each significant apprenticeship makes us question everything we had learnt before when the act of teaching becomes an important part of life. As Ortega y Gasset said: “A lesson is a highly dramatic incident for the one who gives it and for those who receive it. When this doesn’t happen it’s not a lesson but something else – maybe a crime- because it’s an hour lost and life is limited by time, so losing part of it is like killing life, like practising white murder.” This is the highly dramatic way, also with a great sense of humour, in which Leeder taught.

In the pedagogy lessons he used to say to me: -Each lesson I give is dedicated specially to one student, in each lesson I try to watch one person and adapt the movement so that it helps them specifically in their own dance. This was the way in which Leeder was present in his classes and it’s also the sign of the teacher’s greatness. Etymologically “presence” means being with the other. And his presence made every pupil feel secure in developing what they were and what they did, even if this way of doing was different to everything else, even if he didn’t agree with it. Sometimes it was hard for him to accept this, of course, but the important thing was that he made the effort to understand, that he understood that pupils must never be cloned replicas of the teacher.

He once told me that he had learnt never to judge talent in others because of an incident he had witnessed: Laban had a student in his school whom he used to lose his patience with. She was a bit fat and not flexible at all. She couldn’t raise her leg more than 20 or 30 degrees and she did this with great effort: she had to put her leg on a chair and... Hop! She lifted it with both hands. So Laban was constantly expelling her from his classes: -Hey you, no talent, out! But she would come back again and again. After a few years the woman disappeared and they never saw her again. They thought the woman had gone back to her home to do her “housework”. One day, though, while on tour, they went into a small theatre where a small dance festival was taking place and they watched and were very touched by a woman dancing, who drew triangles in space with her body and left them there, set up in space. This woman was, no other than Mary Wigman. From this experience they learnt or tried to learn that another person’s talent should never be questioned. This was very important, not only as a personal way of seeing things, but also as an educational concept.

The way we treat other people is related to a certain idea about the human being. It corresponds to an ideology that thinks about people in relation to themselves and the others.

### **The social value of art**

Sigurd Leeder and Kurt Jooss, apart from collaborating with Laban, also shared the same ideas as him: to bring dance to all kinds of audiences and represent the social conflicts through theatrical movement. This is what they called, even in the twenties, “dance-theatre”, in a clearly parallel way to Bertold Brecht’s conception of theatre. It was about making a type of dance that would compromise with the historical moment that they were living. This is the main characteristic of *Mesa Verde*, *La Gran Ciudad*, *Pavana para una Infanta Difunta*, etc.

In 1924 they founded an artistic and educational association. Their first piece of work was a show they produced called *Two Male Dancers*, 1926-27, from which the second part, *Dance of Death*, was born. What was interesting about this part was the great amount of characters from a variety of social backgrounds, which moved around the stage. It was only the two of them, helped by masks, managing to create the illusion that there were a lot of dancers.

Around that time, another of Leeder’s students, Hans Weidt, who came from a workers background, was also taken by the idea of doing “dance actions” against social misery, exploitation and repression. This is what moved him to create his group “*Die Rote Tänzer*” (The red dancers) in Berlin, which figured workmen, old people, beggars and the unemployed.

### **Social dance in Chile**

Following this tradition, the productions from the *Escuela de Danza* were taken to spaces that were far from the commercial circuits. This was how, parallel to Augusto Boal’s social theatre for example, they created a type of dance that was performed in the streets, shantytowns, hospitals, prisons, community centres, cultural houses, etc. We used to perform repertoires figuring our own choreographies practically every week. Pieces by Carmen Beuchat, Gaby Concha, Julio LÚpez or my own, to which Leeder added his own in an exercise of generosity and democratic practice.

In those times the country didn’t even know the meaning of the word “grant”, so we had to do things as best as we could. We didn’t have anything, not even, and this may sound absurd now, a camera, so we barely have any graphic documentation. But we had access to the old costumes of the National Ballet that we restyled. And Leeder managed, in his strange Spanish, to get everything we needed to put up a performance: he would get the materials to build a portable stage from the firemen, black cloth from a funeral house for the backdrops,

transport in army lorries from the army. Those were other times, Chile was then a very democratic country and, obviously nobody had heard of anybody called Pinochet.

I have some images in my mind from those “sumptuous” tours. We reached places that seemed to be the end of the world. Sandy deserted streets, barely lighted by bulbs that dangled in the wind, which made us feel very vulnerable and lonely. But Leeder with his endless enthusiasm pushed us to go and look for audiences, house by house, in our make up and costumes. Once we went to a shantytown where the priest had set up a stage in front of the chapel and while we changed in the small hovel that he used as his dormitory, he was lying on the floor, under a lorry, trying to repair it for someone so that he would be able to go to work. In another occasion we performed in an old circus tent. It was pouring rain and we had to apply our make up with our feet sunk in the mud and dance avoiding the puddles.

### **The ramifications**

Simultaneously to all this, a new strength was taking hold of the National Ballet program. Young choreographers, who were searching for a new language and identity for Latin-American Modern Dance, were starting to be programmed. This was the beginning of a new current of communication between various groups, institutional or not, that investigated and studied indigenous, popular and folk traditional music and dance, together with the myths and legends of Latin America. In this attempt they also started to systemise their investigation about dance by writing and analysing it through Labanotation.

All along I felt that our humble dance was interwoven and engaged with life. And that was, precisely, the seed from which our dear Balca (Chamber Ballet of the University of Chile) was born. It was a natural continuation to those school performances, with the intention of becoming a small company, with maximum mobility, which would get to those places to which the National Ballet couldn't reach. The Balca became a quarry for new choreographers and dancers and was also a pioneer in all the new artistic tendencies of those days.

Then the winds of history blew and destroyed all the bridges...

### **In memoriam**

Teri Sacamoto, marvellous dancer and friend, received a beating that destroyed his kidneys. He died after some time in Sweden, exiled and in the greatest loneliness, far from the town where he had lived all his life and where he had danced his Pajaros for the last time.

That priest was fired in front of his chapel, like many others. That shantytown was taken over by tanks. The University was left without teachers or students. What has happened to all those children who danced in that giant circle with me and of all those who had helped us to build the stage at different times!

Many dances will have to be choreographed in their memory, to clean the wounds.

## **Conclusion**

Many years after I observe myself in my relationship with my patients. This relationship, with all the different tools I possess, is impregnated by the training I received from Leeder. I have many elements to help me in the therapeutic process. I can see the patient through his body symmetry, the place where he rests his weight, how he balances the different segments, how he transfers, where he retains or liberates movement, what part guides the gesture, what his tempo and rhythm are, how he moves in space and what types of effort he's using. I am also capable of approaching the emotions that lie in his movements and postures. I can help and accompany the creative process of their personal dance. I have kept the memory of movement that, today, allows me to help people.

25 years ago, when I arrived in Barcelona an exile, I proposed a course on Laban and Labanotation to the Institut del Teatre. They weren't interested, even if I had tried to explain about it as clearly as possible. I'm glad that they finally came to terms with it. We must thank Agusti Ros, especially, for all his effort and patience in making it possible for Labanotation to be taught and for the celebration of this Congress. This, even if it's a small area of life, allows human beings to understand each other and it shouldn't be taken lightly.

Quite a few people are needed to build a bridge.