

RECONSTRUCTION / RECREATION : REFLECTIONS PRACTICE AND ESTEEM OF REPERTOIRE

by

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Introduction

If we analyse how repertoire in professional dance is restaged, we conclude that it is mainly done in conventional ways, which means by memory, personal notes or video. Why aren't movement analyses and notation valued and practiced world-wide in the professional dance field?

My reflections are based on my experiences with other dance professionals during recent years in Germany, France, Switzerland and North America. It appears that major differences in practice and appreciation of repertoire in modern and contemporary dance exist between Europe and USA, particularly in the area of education and the consciousness about history and its' values.

In the last decade in Europe questions and interest are arising about the cultural heritage of European modern, contemporary and German dance.

Angelin Preljocaj, director from a national choreographic centre in France: "I always felt anxious to save my work. Since the very beginning of my career I preserved everything.... even the work that was unsuccessful... The works of every choreographer belongs to the cultural heritage. If he (the choreographer) passes away, he has to give it to us. And we have to take care of each one's path. There is not even a questioning about that in the other arts."¹

Heike Lehmke writes already in 1993 about a "reconstruction boom" in Europe². Last year in the television documentary "3. TeleTanzjournal"³, 15 minutes were given to the theme: preservation and reconstruction of dance. The chapter's name was "No future without past". Contemporary dancers and choreographers like Susanne Linke, Cesc Gelabert and Arila Siegerts felt a need to keep alive the German dance heritage and recreated the choreographies of Gerhard Bohner "Im (Goldenen) Schnitt" and "Affectus humanus" by Dore Hoyer. These reconstructions have been created mainly from video.

The video excerpt of the documentary "3rd TeleTanzjournal - No future without past", shows the recreation of Cesc Gelabert:

Text from the video:

Speaker : Back to Germany. Young generations feel the demands of the past. Gerhard Bohner died 5 years ago. 1989 he created "Im (Goldenen) Schnitt". It's a masterpiece.

Cesc Gelabert: "We should keep the tradition alive. We shouldn't wait until somebody is already 50 years dead. I am dedicating my work to Gerhard. I want to keep his work going."

Speaker : Gerhard decided when he was still alive that his solos can be danced by others. Cesc Gelabert, originally from Spain, has studied this choreography from the video.

Cesc Gelabert: "It is a piece of maturity. It is simple, but very difficult to dance. On the one hand the geometry, abstraction, controlled form, on the other hand he was capable of a strong presence and expression. It is living from inside."

Speaker: Gerhard Bohner has nearly become a legend in Germany. The efforts to recreate his work are showing that the consciousness about repertoire is growing in modern and contemporary dance.

The Berlin Opera programmed works of the "ballet russe" wherein "l'Après-midi d'un faune" was restaged from the Labanotation score by Ann Hutchinson-Guest and Claudia Jeschke. The Paris Opera had, for the first time, "Sacre du Printemps" by Pina Bausch on their programme. It was not notated. "So schnell" by Dominique Bagouet, was also danced by the Paris Opera, and was notated by Beatrice Aubert at the time of the recreation.

Thanks to Kurt Jooss' and Anna Markard's consciousness about the importance to preserve cultural dance heritage, choreographies of Kurt Jooss, like the "Green table" are being recreated world-wide and a whole Jooss Ballet Program with "Big City", "Pavane", "Valses of Vienna" and "The Green Table" was danced by the Ballet du Rhin in 1994/1995.

The students of the Notation Department of the National Conservatory of Paris have sometimes the opportunities to teach notated repertoire to the dance students, for example: "Shakers" by Doris Humphrey or "Die Welle" by Albrecht Knust. In 1996 the Junior Ballet of the National Conservatory of Paris danced a performance "Les danses notées" ("written dances") with choreographies by Doris Humphrey, Hanya Holm and Anna Sokolow. Former students of the Conservatory have built their repertoire companies, like "Labkine" by Noelle Simonet or the "Quatuor Knust" by Dominique Brun, Anne Collod, Simon Hecquet, Christophe Wavelet. Their repertoire consists of notated works.

In Paris, Marion Bastien was mainly involved in the realisation of several concerts of dance and live music. The dances were restaged from scores.

In Munich, the dance school of Susanne Mundorf reconstructed a whole repertoire of dances by Grete Wiesenthal. Two of her dances were restaged for the Ballet Company at the Aalto Theater in Essen. They were reconstructed from memory and other visual aids.

Within my own work with young professional dancers or advanced students in Germany, France and Switzerland, I try to include as much work with repertoire as possible.

This information is not complete concerning recreations or revivals in France, Germany and Switzerland, but it can give some ideas about the situation.

Appreciation of notated works and the confidence in restaging from the score

The appreciation of notated works and the confidence in restaging from Labanotation/Kinetography scores is not yet a reality in professional companies, though major ballet companies such as Stuttgart and Hamburg engage full year contracts with Benesh Notators. They usually also work as ballet masters and their scores are often for their personal work. In many cases the scores could not be used by another Benesh notator. To become “literate” within the dance it is important to have completed scores, which can be read by any competent person.

French Choreographer Angelin Preljocaj is far from being average, he works constantly with a Benesh Notator: “Today I could not possibly think to create a choreography without a notator. If I sign a contract, I require a notator, for example with the Paris Opera, where I will stage a performance next April...” He admits that there are financial problems about that, but he says “... I have taken a choice: if I give a full time contract to a notator, I will fewer costumes or less expensive scenery. The priority is to preserve the repertoire.”⁴

The normal choreographer is still thinking in other ways: Rather a dancer more, rather more scenery than paying a notator....This result is also shown by the evaluation by Elena Bertuzzi and Pascale Laborie⁵. 17 national choreographic centres, 18 independant companies and 26 companies “Aide au Projet” (“Project-aide”) were given questionnaires, 20% answered. All the responses were positive about receiving and welcoming a student notator in the company, but hiring a professional notator was refused with the argument of the financial situation.

If we are convinced about a need or a profit, we are ready to spend money, aren't we? What can we – notators, reconstructors - do to make understood that notation has its' professional value?

My personal opinion is that we have to do extremely good work, so that one day our director understands that our good results are related to the work with movement analyses and notation. Further more, we have to be conscious that good results in staging choreographies are not only related to our writing or reading knowledge they also depend on our directing qualities.

I also believe that more interesting and good choreography should be notated and accessible. Perhaps the situation will change through increasing possibilities to study notation in Europe.

Possibilities to study notation in Europe

Besides the well known possibilities to study notation in London and the Folkwang-Hochschule Essen, which has an important tradition in Labanotation/Kinetography teachings, studies have been possible since 1990 at the National Conservatory of Paris. In Dresden at the Palucca School, notation is taught and for two years dance students and dance teacher students at Musikhochschule in Cologne have been learning Kinetography. In the Scala in Milan Labanotation is also intensively taught at the ballet master training.

In Europe is still a long way to go until the work with analyses and notation is recognised within professional dance education, as well as within dance research.

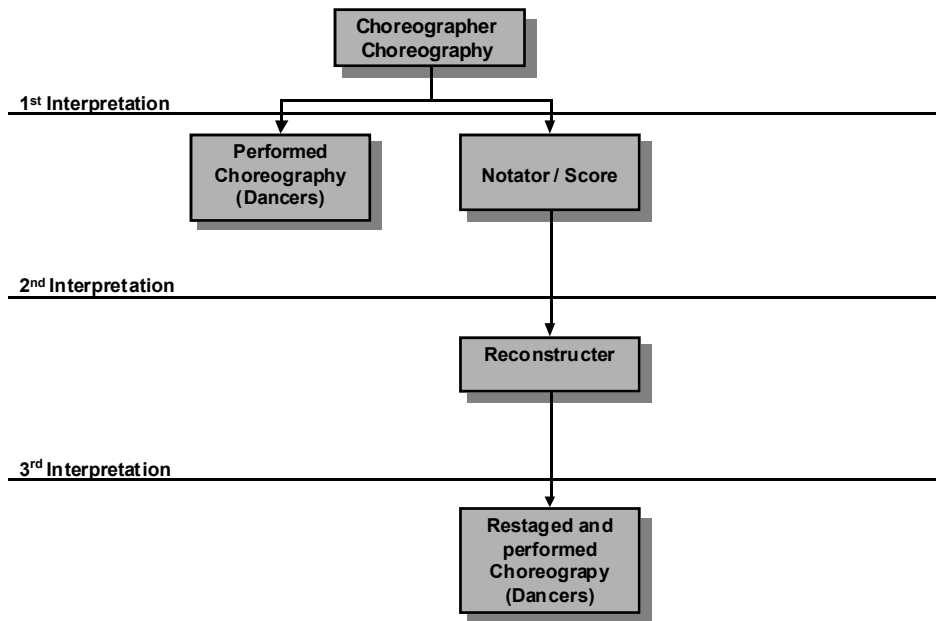
Notation and dance research in Germany

The established dance research in Germany does not make much use of notation.⁶ They do not yet recognise that through notation the analytical process of understanding movement is strongly influenced. Movement research and reflections about movement are possible on a scientific base. Dance revival, which influences historical reflections and research, is one important possibility which notation provides.

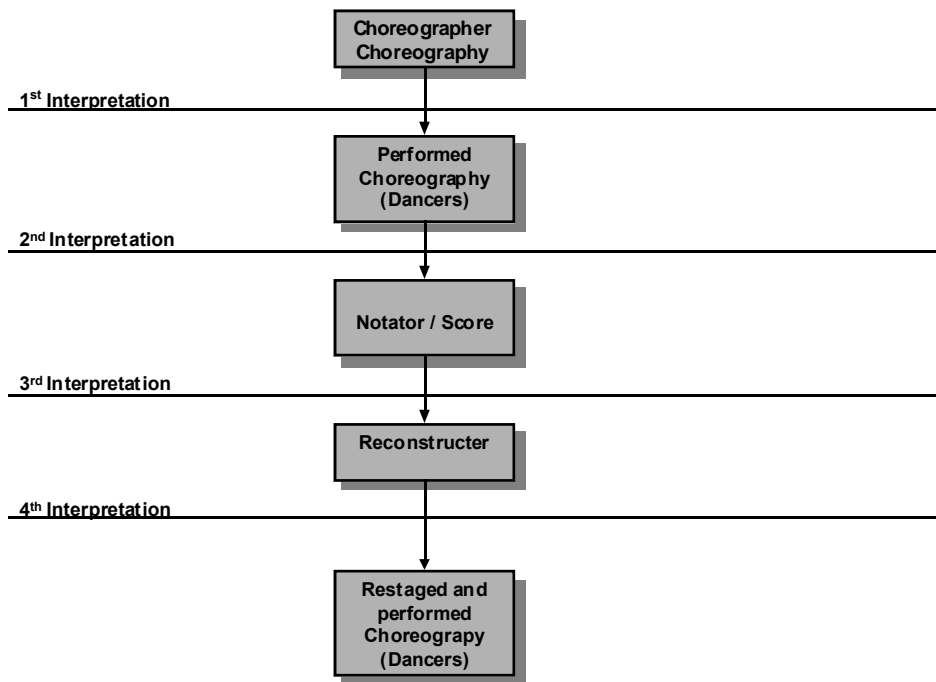
The process from the creation to the repertoire

Is resistance against notation connected with the common problem, that choreographers fear loss of control? They might fear - more through intuition than through explanations - that there exists a problem of the interpretation of the interpretation of the interpretation. This problem is clearly presented by Judy Van Zile "What is Dance? Implications for Dance Notation".⁷

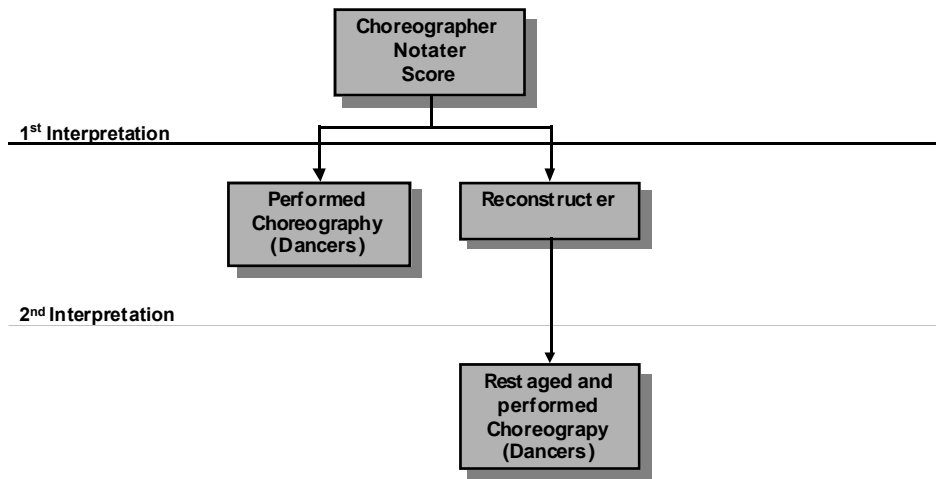
If we use visual aids to analyse the process from the creation to restaged work, we find different variations



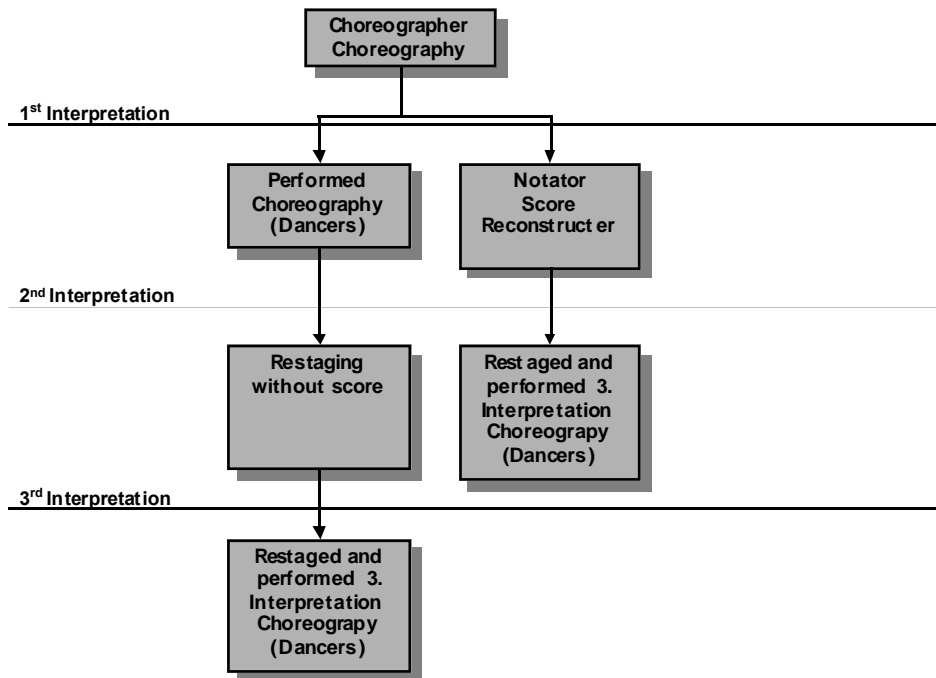
The process shown above is well known, the notator is hired while the choreographer is creating or recreating his work. There are three interpretation levels.



Such a process is reality when the dancers reconstruct from memory and the work then is written down. There is a 4th interpretation level.



In dance, contrary to the music field, such a process is still unusual. There are always two interpretation levels, whenever and how often the choreography is recreated, if the choreographer writes his own score.



This process shows two interpretation levels, if the notator is at the same time the reconstructor. In contrary there are three interpretation levels if the work is restaged without score. Most significant is that the interpretation levels without score will continue endless with each transmission, but the work with a score will always stay on three interpretation levels, if another reconstructor is restaging. Although working with a notator who writes a score is an interpretation we realise that in long term the score provides a tool to stay closer to the choreographers intention then a oral transmission over different dancers generation.

Restaged repertoire: Abomination or advantage?

In a first publication about cultural heritage of dance created by the French Ministry and directed by Philippe Le Moal, the questioned choreographers express their wish to stay in the ephemeral. The choreographers refuse the thought of being “fixed” on paper and even think it is a betrayal of the art of dance.⁸ Imagine such a situation in the domains of music: such one sided attitudes seem impossible. “There is not even a questioning about that in the other arts...”, to repeat Preljocaj.⁹ It leads to the discussion whether the author of a work is independent of his work and of the dancers he works with. We need to make a distinction between the moment of the performance, which means the ephemeral aspects, and the message of the work as well as its’ structure. Why do we – I am including myself as a part of professional dance – have such problems about that?

Maybe more evaluations about the advantages of working with scores and notation would be helpful. I wish there would be more experiments in Europe such as Leslie Rotman’s staging of Tudor “Offenbach in the Underworld” where “the value of a notated score was demonstrated with the amount of details and stylistic accuracy that the notation could add to a piece once staged from memory.”¹⁰

“Dance is communication” Ethel Winter says. We love working among and with others, to be inspired by others. We can not imagine to sit at the table to create. Why ? Isn’t it, especially in our times, an advantage to be so much involved in the physical and emotional presence?

It is important to think about the issues of dance repertoire, especially about where , when, and under which conditions works should be recreated:

“I have seen the same works of Graham when they were created, and then when they were restaged in Avignon. They were danced by different dancers and I think it is an abomination...”¹¹

I asked Ethel Winter how she feels about that. She answered: “Yes, I understand. The problem is that the inner meaning gets lost, only right on metrics, right counts, right spacing, and so on... sometimes they are very good in these aspects, but it is not enough. That is a sort of abomination. Restaged work needs a lot of work on inner qualities.”

This is a important consideration for restagers. Such work is not only dependent on the score, it needs more. It needs a rehearsal atmosphere, it needs the interest of the restager in how to work with the dancers, how to understand the individual personalities and bodies of the dancers. “It is the responsibility of the reconstructor to recreate as much as possible the atmosphere and techniques of a Tudor rehearsal.”¹²

We should also understand that the process of creating is building from content to form. The process of recreating starts from the form and has to complete the circle of form and content the other way around. The circle of form and content should always be in a flow. We all know that the body needs to generate the movements, but the process of studying

the movements has to include the work on the inner qualities, so that the movements itself never becomes automatic. I found it very helpful to ask the dancers short and concrete questions, such as, “which point of the body do you feel very aware of now?” or “to whom are you addressing your movement?” If I am responsible during performances, I do not stop asking questions and working on inner qualities.

Cunningham also sees the advantage of someone else restaging his dance, as he mentioned with his work “Sommerspace”. He realises that he can not do that very well and Margaret Jenkins, who notated the whole dance in Labanotation, would do it better. When he first staged a work in Paris on other dancers, he decided to accept that the result was not the same. He thought it could be interesting, even if he had to realise that many things were different and perhaps far from what he aimed for with his own company.¹³

Repertoire / reconstructions in contemporary dance education in Europe

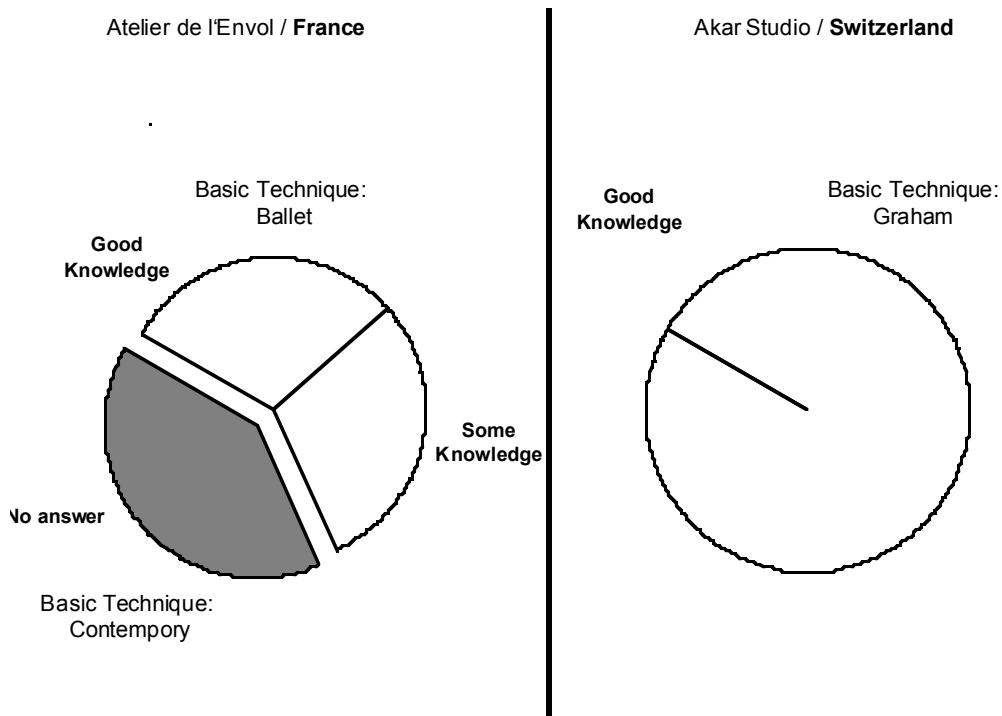
This lack of history consciousness in dance education as well as in professional dance might also have its advantages: choreographers like Meg Stuart who feel more freedom to create in Europe, feel that the tradition in the U.S.A. has blocked new developments of choreography. Writer André Lepecki sees a gap between dance in Europe and the American wish to create their tradition. He talks about “process of solidification lasting for decades” within American dance which circulates around American programs and schools.¹⁴

The ballet world never had such questions, it was and is normal to study repertoire. Concerning contemporary dance education in Europe, it should be questioned how to introduce more repertoire and how to decide which works are important to study.

Jacqueline Robinson feels that contemporary dance education absolutely needs repertoire study. She expressed that contemporary dance seems to be the only artistic discipline which apparently refuses to integrate recognised and esteemed heritage in education. (She was talking about the situation in France.)¹⁵

Even Susan Buirge, who refuses any repertoire for her professional work, considers work on repertoire important for students: “For example, working a choreography of Doris Humphrey obliges the students to discover different rhythms... it means to find an approach to history, to the dimensions of ideas, and that’s very important.”¹⁶ She thinks that a difference should be made between what should be studied and what should be presented on stage.

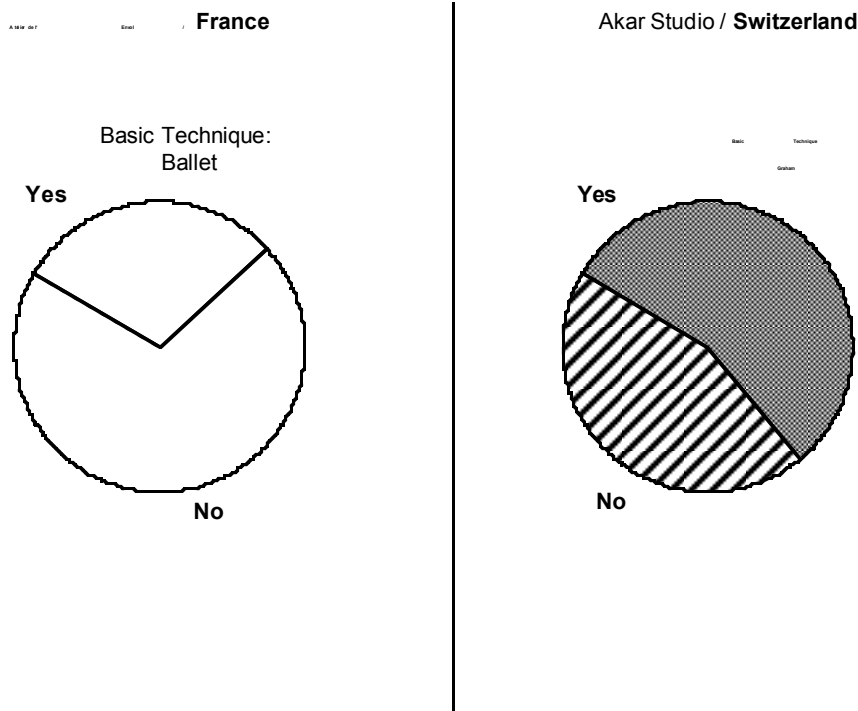
Below are the results of my evaluation about young dancers knowledge of repertoire of important works of the 20th century:



On the left hand side are the results of a youth company in France. The dancers are between 18-25 years old and all of them want to become dancers or dance teachers.

It is significant that all the young dancers with a contemporary dance education did not answer the questions about repertoire (dark grey). The dancers with a basic ballet education showed good knowledge (light grey). Some knowledge, limited to choreographers in Europe, was the results of dancers with a various dance style education such as jazz, contemporary and some ballet (hachures).

On the right hand side we see the good results of advanced dance students or semi-professional dancers with a background in Graham technique in Switzerland. Their age: between 17 – 49. Three of them want to become dancers. One is a freelance dancer and one is a dance teacher.



Above we have the results concerning former repertoire studies of the same dancers. In France only the dancers with a ballet education had studied repertoire (light grey). All others never danced a repertoire choreography before working with me (hachures).

In Switzerland more than half of the dancers had already studied repertoire (royal blue), even though the majority does not want to become professional dancers.

In Switzerland four of the dancers had their first confrontation with notation, they had never heard about or seen it before.

While restaging the “Negro Spirituals” in Switzerland, I copied the floorplans of the trio “Little David” and of the group dance “Saints” for the dancers. All of them found the floorplans helpful, some considered them extremely helpful after a longer break.

The following are responses from the students when asked about their positive learning experiences from repertoire studies:

- filling movement with inner meaning
- importance in working precisely
- taking responsibility for the given role
- musicality in relation to possibilities of expressing emotions
- experiencing dance history within their own body
- mastering their own difficulties and growing beyond limits and learning that it is worth while

- interesting how the restager works with the dancers
- became conscious about how much strength and force are in old choreographies, how up to date they still are
- experiencing practical knowledge about history of dance
- learning techniques of theatrical gestures
- learned how notation becomes something practical and concrete
- discovering something new, very different from “things” today
- learned what it takes to be serving in the spirit of a ballet and to be able to dance another style
- working and performing with live music
- learned many face expressions!
- pluralism of expressions

The following are quotations from the students about their learning process from repertoire studies which they considered difficult:

- realising that their own technical level was not sufficient
- staying in the spirit of the choreography
- demands are quite difficult concerning music

Before concluding I would like to present another excerpt from the chapter “No future without past” from the documentary “3rd TeleTanzjournal”

Text from the video:

Speaker : In the Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique et de Danse, the work with artistic heritage is possible through notation and recreation.

Quentin Rouillier (Director of the dance department of the Conservatoire): “We start to think about the cultural heritage. A work has been created – what happens with it, do we preserve it? And if we do, why, for whom and how?”

Speaker : If a student works with reconstruction as his major subject he has to restage alone from the score for his final exams. Here we see a rehearsal of a choreography from Kurt Jooss. Jooss has been one of the most important German choreographers. This reconstruction from the score is showing aspects from the work of Jooss which we normally do not remember.

Jacqueline Challet-Haas: “The work with notation is a tool. The object is to notate each choreographer’s work, each style.

Speaker: Is there a value judgement?

Jacqueline Challet-Haas: "No, not at all!"

Quentin Rouillier (Director of the dance department of the Conservatoire): "I think it is wonderful how a work can live again through notation, it is like a heart that starts to beat again."

Speaker: How long will it take until we have in Germany such possibilities of intelligent approach to make dance history live again through revivals?

(Scene is changing to the Berlin Opera)

Speaker: Nijinsky wrote in his diary:

"Beauty is not a relative thing.

Beauty is God.

Beauty is God with emotion. I love Beauty that's why I understand it."

A performance and rehearsal at the Berlin Opera. Ann Hutchinson-Guest and Claudia Jeschke are restaging.

Claudia Jeschke: "The dancer should find their freedom within the precise given forms. They should not imitate but find a way to express within the given structure from Nijinsky."

Final remarks

Is the appreciation of notation connected to an existing, or non-existing appreciation of repertoire? Or vice versa?

Questions and problems about notated repertoire are ultimately questions and problems about dance and dance forms.

Why are these questions more urgent then ever?

It relates to the changes of our world. Today a dancer stays a few years in a company and then changes to a next contract. There is rarely a life long commitment to an institution or a particular choreographer. The ballet created their "repertoire-consciousness" in a time where the circle of generations was mainly intact and the oral transmission could work.

Knust writing from 1969 is still valid:

"There is still a lot to do, important works have to become literate through notation and the dancers prejudices against the still widely unknown dance-notation have to be overcome." ¹⁷

NOTES

- 1 Le Moal Philippe, see references, page 59
- 2 Lehmke Heike, see references, page 51
- 3 3. Teletanzjournal, see references
- 4 Le Moal Philippe, see references, page 177-178
- 5 Bertuzzi Elena et Laborie Pascale, see references
- 6 Zukunftspapier TANZ, see references, pages 68-89
- 7 Van Zile Judy, see references, page 42
- 8 Le Moal Philippe, see references, pages 39-43
- 9 Le Moal Philippe, see references, page 59
- 10 DNB Bulletin, see references
- 11 Le Moal Philippe, see references, page 167
- 12 Topaz Muriel, see references, page 17
- 13 Le Moal Philippe, see references, pages 169-179
- 14 Lepecki André, see references
- 15 Le Moal Philippe, see references, page 67
- 16 Le Moal Philippe, see references, pages 167 and 66-67
- 17 Knust Albrecht, see references

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3. Teletanzjournal, deutsches Tanzfilminstitut Bremen, direction: Heide-Marie Härtel, authors: Heide-Marie Härtel, Susan Barnett, Ulrich Scholz, Karin Sunke, Hanno Sauer and others, realised for German National Television ZDF and 3SAT, 1998.

NOTES

- ¹ Le Moal Philippe, see references, page 59
- ² Lehmke Heike, see references, page 51
- ³ 3. Teletanzjournal, see references
- ⁴ Le Moal Philippe, see references, page 177-178
- ⁵ Bertuzzi Elena et Laborie Pascale, see references
- ⁶ Zukunftspapier TANZ, see references, pages 68-89
- ⁷ van Zile Judy, see references, page 42
- ⁸ Le Moal Philippe, see references, pages 39-43
- ⁹ Le Moal Philippe, see references, page 59
- ¹⁰ DNB Bulletin, see references
- ¹¹ Le Moal Philippe, see references, page 167
- ¹² Topaz Muriel, see references, page 17
- ¹³ Le Moal Philippe, see references, pages 169-179
- ¹⁴ Lepecki André, see references
- ¹⁵ Le Moal Philippe, see references, page 67
- ¹⁶ Le Moal Philippe, see references, pages 167 and 66-67
- ¹⁷ Knust Albrecht, see references