



QUESTIONS OF PRACTICE

# **Digging up the past: Some thoughts about preserving or reconstructing dance works**

By Linda Caruso-Haviland

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Every dancer at some time has practiced the preservation of dance. Whether by entering into the process of accumulating the detailed or qualitative elements of a technique, or in repeating a sequence of movements for class, rehearsal, or performance, we have all engaged in recalling, remembering, reconstructing, and preserving dance. Some of us have also further practiced preservation by documenting rehearsals and performances of newly made or reconstructed or restored works, or by documenting the artistic histories of the work through interviews and conversations with choreographers or dance artists in an effort to keep these works and their memories alive and accessible to other artists, students, fans, or scholars.<sup>1</sup> Some work with companies or students, offering dancers opportunities to put on dances and gestures of past and contemporary

choreographers, thus enabling them to experience a unique historical connection to a choreographer's work while re-embodying and re-presenting the work for new audiences. One way or another, we're all familiar with both the difficulties of remembering and reconstructing dance as well as the tremendous rewards.

But beyond the stage and studio, there are also philosophical issues that attend these processes of reconstruction and that are often inextricable from aesthetic and practical problems. Whether a dance was first made five minutes, five months, five years, or five centuries ago, all present some similar challenges. Although a full discussion of these issues could occupy a much larger space, here are eight questions or problems—and few answers—for your consideration.

1 Can we trust our memories? The problems of memory are well documented in fields ranging from politics, to psychology, to history, to autobiographical writing, and beyond. Writer Barbara Kingsolver sums it up by reminding us that “memory is a complicated thing, a relative to truth, but not its twin.”<sup>2</sup>

Is the memory that we have of a dance a true or accurate memory? Is it reinvented, re-imagined? Is it both? Dancers also frequently call upon another sort of memory, a physical, neuromuscular phenomenon that has been well researched and is often called body memory, motor memory, muscle memory, or, more formally,



Dancefusion company rehearsing the reconstruction of *Women of Troy*, by Mary Anthony, Philadelphia 2006; from left to right: Mary Anthony, and Dancefusion dancers Janet Pilla, AT Davenport, Christine Taylor, Jennifer Rose.

procedural memory or neuromuscular facilitation. Most of us who dance or who have danced know exactly what we mean by body memory—our bodied selves in motion recalling, digging up that which eludes the more mental or verbal exercise of memory. Indeed, many of us swear by it. Yet having said that, a need for caution also arises. Remembering through our bodied selves is a skill unevenly distributed among dancers and even the surest of bodied memories can be faulty, forgetting over time or changing as our bodies change.



From left to right: choreographer Mary Anthony, Gwendolyn Bye, artistic director of Dancefusion, and dancers AT Davenport, Jennifer



Rose, Janet Pilla, Christine Taylor. From left to right: dancers Janet Pilla and Jennifer Rose with choreographer Mary Anthony.

Memory of any sort may be a powerful tool, but it is likely that no instance of it is completely reliable: desire as we might to recreate the identical twin of work long gone, we might just have to settle for a more distant kindred spirit.

2 Should we then trust supporting evidence in the form of first-person account, visual documentation, text, or notation? The problems generated by witness or documentation are also numerous and have been extensively discussed. Was the viewer knowledgeable, sympathetic, hostile, alert, or even sober for that matter? Was there either benefit or danger in his writing or speaking about the dance? How do we know if a particular performance captured in any visual media was the “correct” version and what would we take to be a “correct” version anyway, particularly if there were multiple performances of a work? To what extent might personal or social aesthetics or mores have affected any representation?

If a notational system was available at the time, how do we decipher it now and, more fundamentally, can any system fully capture the details and the essence, if such a thing exists, of a dance? If a notational system was available should we decide that an older notated version of a work is more accurate than one that the choreographer herself revised but did not notate or record? Notation says one thing, an original performer says another—which or who is correct? These questions just skim the surface of problems facing those who analyze or reconstruct historic works, even works performed in very recent history.

3 In a reconstruction, exactly what is it that we are trying to bring back to life? There is obviously something there ...

Edward de Bono, a sort of guru in the field of creative thinking, has described memory as that which “is left when something happens

and does not completely unhappen.”<sup>3</sup> If these dances had completely unhappened, we wouldn’t be having this conversation. But *what aspect* of what happened are we striving to resurrect? The steps? Some recognizable and repeatable set of motional/gestural phrases? Perhaps the work’s larger intent? Possibly the feeling of the piece? The images it conjures up? A combination of these elements? What is the essential nature of a particular work that we are trying to recapture, what elements demand notice and restoration, and, of course, since each of us may have different ideas about that, who decides?

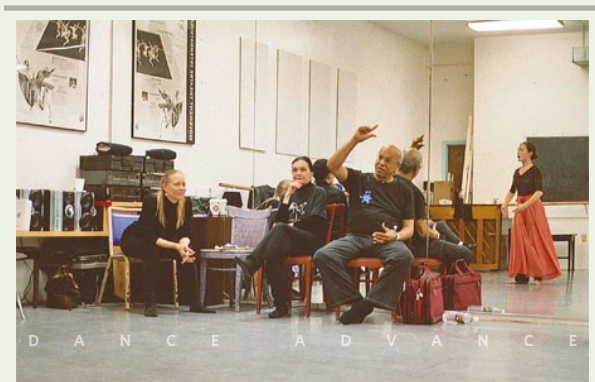
Jane Sherman, discussing the reconstruction of Doris Humphrey's earlier works, has said "that to be able to capture the conviction and spirit of these seminal theatrical dances is more important than letter-perfect reconstruction of steps."<sup>4</sup> What exists as the choreography may, as Sherman suggests, be more than steps, but exactly how much of the actual step vocabulary is expendable or replaceable before the restaging ceases to be an accurate reflection of the original?

Because the style and intent of dance can vary so much, there can be no hard and fast rule. There may be works that are so formally constructed that, as Sirridge and Armelagos claim in what I take to be a problematic essay, attention to "doing the right thing and staying in line"<sup>5</sup> is all that is necessary to fulfill the choreographer's intention (or to re-fulfill it in the case of reconstruction). On the other hand, there are clearly works in which the shading and the shaping of the steps—around an idea, a particular bodiedness, a quality of motion, or an emphasis on the social, cultural, political, etc.—is absolutely essential to the core identity of the piece. In such cases, if too much attention is given to the steps and not to the context, performance quality, or intent, with what are we left? We have all seen reconstructions of work that are highly disappointing because either the reconstructor or the dancer was unable to capture the qualitative or dynamic or emotional or even narrative elements of the piece. Faithfulness to a correct sequence of steps does not necessarily ensure "accuracy."

4 If a reconstructor wants in some way to change a work so that it speaks to a contemporary audience, can she? To what extent can she push her efforts before the "spirit" of the work is violated, or a different work emerges? To what extent should a dance, like a Shakespeare play, be treated like a text that we can re-outfit to meet our contemporary tastes or desires?

5 We should never pretend that there is not a politics of some sort at work in the processes of preservation or reconstruction, some pressure of an economic, social, political, cultural stripe that influences what works are selected, who controls the process, and who writes or rewrites the history that informs it. This holds true whether we're discussing a single work or, as in some cases, an entire genre of dance.

6 What role does reconstruction play in contributing to our attitude towards and understanding of the ephemeral nature of dance? Ephemerality at different periods in our intellectual and aesthetic histories has been seen as a defining and dynamic factor of dance, a metaphor for life itself. In other periods, however, dance's ephemeral nature was cited as a reason to assign dance a relatively low status as an art form. It was thought that the ability to exactly repeat a dance, as one could "exactly" repeat a musical composition, would go a long way towards establishing its credibility. The first truly complex and comprehensive form of notation in Western dance was developed not only to meet the practical need to preserve or teach the dances of the day but also to give dance more legitimacy as an art form by bringing it closer to a scientific epistemological model that held sway in the eighteenth century.



From left to right: Gwendolyn Bye, Mary Anthony, teacher and choreographer Donald McKayle (who was in the original cast of *Women of Troy* in 1954) and Dancefusion dancer AT Davenport (in mirror).



From left to right: dancers Janet Pilla and Jennifer Rose with choreographer Mary Anthony assisted by Donald McKayle (in mirror).

A more contemporary estrangement from ephemerality as a descriptor of dance was prompted by theories about or attitudes towards—or even the practice of—dance that stripped it, consciously or less so, of its discursive nature as a human semiotic act or as a viable object of discussion. Dance was thought, as Susan Leigh Foster says, to be able to “construct a mood but not deliver a message.”<sup>6</sup> So reconstruction or restaging, as an attempt to summon dance back from the realm of the ephemeral or the forgotten, reinstates an interesting and possibly productive tension that is still at play today, in the making of performance theory, between a longing for discourse or reiterability and the desire to valorize the dynamic and volatile nature of the ephemeral in dance.

7 What technologies are or will be necessary or effective in researching, restoring, or reconstructing past works or ways of dancing? The act of dance may be ephemeral, yet it nevertheless leaves traces in a variety of archives, ranging from bodies to libraries. The role of the repertor, the teacher, the guru has long been to serve as the conduit between generations, to pass along the dance, preserving it in its most original state. But while the body may be the most powerful transmitter of motional information, it is also, as we have seen, unreliable—it is idiosyncratic, forgetful, and, alas, not eternal.



*Women of Troy* in performance at the Painted Bride Art Center, Philadelphia, April 2006; Dancefusion dancers Janet Pilla as Cassandra, and Joseph Bunn as Agamemnon in roles originally danced by Mary Anthony and Donald McKayle in 1954. Photo by Randl Bye.

In place of this body-to-body transmission or, better, as a supplement to it, teachers, choreographers, historians, archaeologists, anthropologists, and software designers have developed many methods of research, analysis, and archiving to continue the transmission process, all of which will continue to require careful consideration as to their usefulness for and relationship to reconstructing or preserving the dance. In addition, we should encourage crossing borders into like, as well as unlikely, areas of conceptual or applied practice to develop new techniques.

8 Lastly, even if we can remember or recall a dance, and even if we do decide which essential elements must be replicated, what *value* does this work have to a present world removed from the social, cultural, and historical location from which the work originated?

The descriptor “museum piece” is often disdainfully used to refer to reconstruction efforts. This pejorative is justified, perhaps, if key contextual or qualitative elements are missing from the restored work. If, however, the criticism is based solely in a judgment that the piece is outdated or a relic that does not speak to our age, perhaps that criticism should be reconsidered. The impulse to record and remember history is variously motivated, but we see no problem with preserving the words or events of human history, no problem with preserving the music and fine art of ages and cultures long past; in fact, we prize these cultural artifacts and demand trained and skilled scholars and practitioners to do just this work. Certainly this same attention should be given to dance.

Why dance seems to age less well than other art works is a question that would take more time and space to address; the question at hand is what to do with historic dance works. We tell ourselves that there is always a place for “classics” in our stable of admired work and that we should, indeed, cherish them, although history reminds us of both our biases and foibles in determining membership criteria for this canon. But there must also be a place somewhere for the work that may not endure for decades but that is, nevertheless, good, solid work and important, as is all art, in understanding who we are as a people, and how and why we got here. We should see and experience as many old works as we can; they literally flesh out our dance history and speak to us in a very particular and important way about who we are as dancers and dancemakers. Of course, shifts and changes are inevitable. Memory fades, audiences and contexts change, dancers’ bodies and techniques evolve and devolve. Even if we could recapture a work perfectly, new bodies, new thoughts, new sensibilities remake old dances even if they resist. But, without any illusions that we will be seeing the “original,” there should be commitment to the effort.

We of course continue to need the textual sources, the images, the remnants of thoughts and ideas written or spoken, the evidence of the histories and the cultural pressures that shaped or were shaped by the dance. But as a dancer, I also want to live inside of these ways of moving, as best I can, even knowing that my body will never be the same as a body cultivated in the baroque courts, or in juke joints of the south, or in avant-garde performances at Black Mountain in the '50s. If I can't live inside of them, then I want to see them, to have at least that level of kinesthetic connection. I want my students to live inside of them and to see them as well, as Foster says, to consort with these bodies,<sup>7</sup> these ways of moving, these visions of the world that feed our present ways of moving and making movement and shaping our present world.

Who knows what the future holds? What will be the impact of the move towards a virtual world, towards the instantaneous exchange of information, towards immediate, if not always accurate or full, responses to any questions we could posit? Towards a world in which cyberspace reconstructs our very notion of “real” bodiedness or of performance? What impact will all of this have on the practice of history itself, let alone the preservation or restoration of works, especially dance and other bodied performances from the past? I don't know, so I'll take these dances now. I'll take them as classics; I'll take them as dusty, museum pieces; I'll take them as objects of puzzlement and curiosity; I'll take them, preferably, performed with intelligence, sensitivity, and passion.

A Chinese proverb warns us that “The palest ink is better than the best memory.” In this case, ink is not only text and image, but the wet, dark, fluid ink of bodies in motion...from past to now... We need the ink...all of the ink.

## Biography of Linda Caruso-Haviland

Linda Caruso-Haviland began teaching at Bryn Mawr College in 1979 and founded the Dance Program in 1984. Prior to that, she founded the dance program at SUNY/Westchester Community College. Caruso-Haviland received her BA in dance from Adelphi University and her doctorate in the areas of dance and philosophy from Temple University. She has taught technique, theory, composition and performance at colleges and universities and has consulted in the areas of theater dance, children's dance and dance for educators. She also taught in and directed the College Seminar Program at Bryn Mawr and in 1996 received the College's Rosalyn R. Schwartz teaching award. Ms. Caruso-Haviland has performed with companies in New York and Philadelphia, principally with ZeroMoving Company, and continues to dance and choreograph. Her professional activities include panel presentations, interdisciplinary arts collaborations, choreographic consulting, scholarly research and writing, and she has co-directed projects designed to uncover and preserve the work of significant Philadelphia dance artists through video documentation and oral histories. She is an Associate Professor in Dance at Bryn Mawr College, Director of the Dance Program and Chair of the Arts Program.

### Footnotes:

1. As an example, Dr. Mary Edsall and I worked with five seminal Philadelphia dance companies and artists over a period of three years to uncover and preserve the work of these dance artists through video documentation and oral histories. In various years the work was supported by the National Endowment for the Arts and by Dance Advance, a program funded by The Pew Charitable Trusts and administered through the University of the Arts. The documentation now resides in the Philadelphia Dance Collection at Temple University.
2. Barbara Kingsolver, *Animal Dreams: A Novel* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1991).
3. Edward de Bono, *Lateral Thinking* (New York: HarperCollins, 1973).
4. Jennifer Dunning, "Some Esthetic Problems in Reviving Old Dances," *New York Times* 22 July 1982: C22.
5. Mary Sirtidge and Adina Armelagos, "The In's and Out's of Dance: Expression as an Aspect of Style," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 28 (1997): 16.
6. Susan Leigh Foster, "Fugitive Desires," *Choreography and Narrative: Ballet's Staging of Story and Desire* (Bloomington: Indiana U Press, 1996) 197.
7. Susan Leigh Foster, "Choreographing History," *Choreographing History*, ed. Susan Leigh Foster (Bloomington: Indiana U Press, 1995) 6.



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