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Directing the Dance Legacy of Doris Humphrey: The Creative Impulse of Reconstruction

by Lesley Main. 2012. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press. xi + 190 pp., photographs, notes, bibliography, index. $29.95 paper.
doi:10.1017/S014976771300020X

Who was Doris Humphrey? And what was her work? We could ask these questions about any figure in dance. The search for definitive answers would be clotted with interventions and interpretations, hearsay and deliberate refocusing. A new dance work inextricably combines concept with performance, but there's no foolproof way of preserving the entity composed of that created object and the performers who brought it into being. In the other arts, reliable documents can be consulted: a written text, a musical score, a recording of the original performance. That history can be taken for granted and left alone—or it can be used to create new histories of up-to-date interest. In dance, textual verifications either do not exist or have inherent shortcomings that alter the work. All dance performance works change over time, along with our understanding of crucial meta-definers like meaning, quality, and style. So it is tricky to assume that we know a dance, even one we have seen.

Lesley Main, who has undertaken the rehabilitation of Doris Humphrey in the UK, gained her perception of the choreographer from her teacher, Ernestine Stodelle. At the beginning of her book, *The Dance Technique of Doris Humphrey and Its Creative Potential*, Stodelle quotes her mentor: "I always thought students should learn principles of movement and be encouraged to expand or embroider on those in their own way" (Stodelle 1978, vii–viii). This remark, taken with Stodelle's title, pigeonholes Humphrey as a teacher, not an eminent choreographer. When I looked at my own copy of *The Art of Making Dances*, I found I had underlined the same words, plus the sentence that precedes them in Humphrey's introductory chapter: "I never believed in teaching with a set vocabulary of movements, hardened into technical sequences" (Humphrey 1959, 19). Humphrey assumed that these words would fall on fertile ground, given what she foresaw as "the astonishing spread of the modern dance through the educational system." Her book is matter-of-fact—a teaching manual for dance composition students. She hoped it would contribute to a developing theory of choreography, but not, I think, to the erasure of her own choreographic accomplishment.

There is no urtext for any of Humphrey's early dances, except for a few primitive films. Her unfinished autobiography, published first in 1966 by Selma Jeanne Cohen's *Dance Perspectives* and completed by Cohen, ends in 1928 when Humphrey, Pauline Lawrence, and Charles Weidman departed from Denishawn and began making independent work. All the Labanotation scores were made late in Humphrey's life or after her life, when second thoughts and generational slippage had occurred. Aside from scattered references to moments in Humphrey–Weidman's and Limón's dances that illustrate her theory, *The Art* doesn't tell you how *she* choreographed anything, or what any of these dances should look like in its entirety.

After Humphrey's death in 1958, professional productions of her dances became rare. I first saw a few of them done by the José Limón company in the early 1960s, but today you'd have to do some digging to find one. Re-reading Humprey's book, dance academics of the 1980s perceived Humphrey as dictatorial, a stern formalist, despite her many offbeat opinions. When her dances are performed now, they usually represent the earliest, experimental

https://doi.org/10.1017/S014976771300020X Published online by Cambridge University Press

works, which grew from simple movement motifs and ideas into dance metaphors.

Ernestine Stodelle danced with Humphrey in the early years (1929–1935), and she viewed the first investigations as underlying the evolution of Humphrey's later choreography. As a stalwart in the missionary work of inventing modern dance, Stodelle saw her mentor in romantic terms. She retrieved several early Humphrey dances, imprinting them with her own lyrical movement qualities. To me, Humphrey's romanticism was made of sterner stuff: her optimism, her confidence in a utopian community, her courage and determination to keep going regardless of adversity, and an expansive vision about her own work.

Ernestine Stodelle's reconstructions of early Humphrey eventually came to represent the discoveries of the first decade, and also Humphrey's contribution to the choreographic art. They are enshrined in Stodelle's book, in a documentary film,[1] and in her teaching at New York University's former School of Education (not the professionally oriented Dance Department in the Tisch School of the Arts). Stodelle was persistent and persuasive. Her influence, plus the intractable elusiveness of dance, have frozen Humphrey's choreography at an embryonic technical and conceptual stage, when Humphrey didn't have the resources to build larger-scale works.

Fall and Recovery seems to sum up her technical discoveries, but it was not the only one. The early pieces grew from profound questions into the nature of dancing, the possibilities of choreography; they are so basic they became staples for giving students experience in reading scores and dancing relatively simple choreography. But gems like *Water Study* and *Two Ecstatic Themes* would seem slight today, in a professional repertory that stresses balletic virtuosity. We do not see productions of Humphrey's more complex later works, the darker ones, or the dramatic ones she made in later years for the Limón company.

I never knew Humphrey personally, but neither did Lesley Main, who heads the Performing Arts department at Middlesex University outside London. Main was a founder of the Doris Humphrey Society in the UK and directs productions of Humphrey's dances for students and semiprofessional dance companies. Main takes Stodelle's Humphrey as a springboard for her own interpretations, assuming that her sometimes-radical adjustments will reinforce Humphrey's reputation.[2]

In this book, Main reports on four Humphrey dances (*Water Study*, *Passacaglia*, *With My Red Fires*, and *The Shakers*) that she staged in different ways. Assuming that Humphrey's work needs some drastic reconceptualizing to appeal to the contemporary audience, she turned for guidance to theoreticians like R. G. Collingwood and Hayden White, and the work of once-radical theater directors like Peter Sellars and Robert Wilson. Successful deconstructions can be ingenious, but their fascination lies in how they bounce off a well-known text. Nothing of Humphrey's can serve to ground a remake in a similar way.

Lesley Main based her reconstructions partly on Labanotation scores, choosing between differing versions; she relied partly on Stodelle's memory-driven revivals; in some cases she reworked key Humphrey dances thoroughly. Although I'm familiar with all four dances Main produced, her verbal descriptions of her four directorial approaches do not evoke stage images to me, let alone convey how these concepts led to better ways of interpreting Humphrey's choreography. This book, published as part of a series sponsored by the Society of Dance History Scholars, does not include a DVD of the dances as directed by the author, or films of the more conventional stagings from which Main levitated. Since Main admits she took enormous liberties with Humphrey's choreography, her own history deserves to be documented so that at least we can compare it with established versions of Humphrey's work.

Main shares the current notion that by changing what we know or think we know about a choreographer's work we somehow bring the work into the present. In her Prologue, she acknowledges that Humphrey created important work: "This legacy is a vital part of American cultural heritage and demands attention not only from the perspective of preservation but also from a contemporary desire to *creatively* engage the past" (3, my italics). I do not agree with Main that changing or even rebalancing Humphrey's work would improve it, or make it more understandable to the contemporary audience.

Perhaps these renovations should be acknowledged as new dances entirely, as Main did when she "stripped [*The Shakers*] of its religious connotation" (148) and gave it a new title, *The Chosen*.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S014976771300020X Published online by Cambridge University Press

Did Main's *The Chosen* carry a program acknowledgment of what Main contributed to or subtracted from Humphrey's 1931 *The Shakers*?

Her account of *With My Red Fires* makes it sound like a completely different dance. It may be a perfectly respectable dance, but Main re-imagined the characters and cut whole sections of the choreography, in an attempt to make *Red Fires* more intelligible. Following Susan Foster's 1999 projection of gender theory onto the dance (Foster 1999, 89–93)—an interpretation conceivably drawn from the 1972 revival, which cast a black man, Raymond Johnson, as the suitor—Main claims the original dance showed the dangers of difference (110–3). But, given the time in which it was made (1936), what if *Red Fires* was about the dangers of autocratic power?

For *Water Study* (1928), Main chose to foreground certain aspects of the choreography she calls "the forward successional curve." How did that look to the audience, and how did it create "a framework of enquiry to explore the dance afresh and away from the clutter of the past" (63–64)? I can't think of a less cluttered dance than *Water Study*.

For *Passacaglia* (1938), Main used a different recorded version of the score, which imposed different dynamics and tempi on the dance. In one of history's ironies, Humphrey herself chose a deconstruction, Leopold Stokowski's heavily orchestrated version of the *Passacaglia* and *Fugue in C Minor*, to accompany her dance. How would all these musical choices have affected *Passacaglia*, and what would they have said about Humphrey's relation to the great Bach work that determined the dance's structure?[3]

Some erosion in thinking about the most creative figures in dance history is inevitable. Early Humphrey dances shift constantly, morphing from their initial performances to rely on subsequent modifications by the choreographer, films made while she was alive, scores written during her repertory classes at Connecticut College and Juilliard in the 1940s and 1950s, and posthumous incarnations shown by former dancers over four decades of reconstructions, all shaded by recent decades of revisionism.

Main pays Humphrey a great tribute by putting her dances on a par with a perpetually renewable Shakespeare. Few modern dancers have been accorded this respect. The big questions now are about where current restagings come from and how they pass into the public consciousness. Despite the devotion of disciples like Stodelle and Main, their adaptations tell us that Humphrey's dance needs to be scoured and brought up to date. In the unanchored environment of dance, it is risky to subscribe to the idea that "the past" is something every new generation should have a hand in. The more clever and compelling these improvements are, the greater the chance that the originating artist will recede even further into the clouds.

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Notes

1. See Stodelle 1992.

2. See my biography, *Days on Earth. The Dance of Doris Humphrey* (Siegel 1987).

3. Lucy Venable, who made the 1955 Labanotation score, wrote a fine account of directing the 1965 production for the short-lived American Dance Theater at Lincoln Center. See Venable (1965).

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S014976771300020X Published online by Cambridge University Press

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