

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Colleen Hooper

WritingDancingthINKingDANCing

by Lynn Matluck Brooks

Everyone's conference is different. This report is of mine: the peaks of my experience that poke above the overabundance of choice at the joint conference of the Society of Dance History Scholars and the Congress on Research in Dance. Because it was held at the University of Iowa, in cold-and-snowy Iowa City, conference travel was frustrating and delayed for many, including my five-hour delay on the way there and seven-hour delay on the way back. But the conference theme, Writing Dancing/Dancing Writing, seemed ready-made for thINKingDANCE folks, and weather or no, we were there. More on that shortly.

I arrived exhausted, but made it to the 7:45 a.m. working group meeting of Dance History Teachers on Friday, where I was stimulated by my colleagues' success in their classes with embodied experiences, observation practice, and offering students opportunities to see full-length works. Although I was excited about the two sessions titled "Keywords for Dance Research," anticipating these would be reflections on hidebound definitions and terminological confusions, I was disappointed that several presenters used the occasion to attack longstanding Western perceptions of terms while seeming to suggest that their own views were somehow free of bias or preconception. I had to wonder, for example, what Avanthi Meduri's exposure to ballet had been that gave her confidence to assert, in her discussion of the keywords "Classical Dance," that Indian classical dancers had to be masterful actors and dancers, while classical ballerinas were only dancers. Surely we all bring our ethnocentrism to our use of terminology—a factor, then, for everyone to realize in such discussions.

Several panels looked at issues of dance notation. In one on Friday, Heather Young took on notions of dance's ephemerality by asserting the primacy of the body as a repository for dance memory from generation to generation. I understand the validity of her point in light of her research into restaging William Forsythe's work, but how do we handle the lived memory of, for example, a ballet by the eighteenth-century master [Louis Pécour](#)? That question came to mind again in a Saturday panel on "New Directions in Movement Notation Theory and Practice," when baroque dance expert Catherine Turocy spoke. Most exciting, however, about her presentation were her experiments in making [Feuillet notation](#) fresh as a creative tool for contemporary dancers. Exciting examples of these directions were abundantly evident in the video clips she showed of dancers following eighteenth-century curvilinear pathways, but

using expansive limb motions and levels familiar in contemporary dance. Every panelist at the packed session that included Turocy was outstanding—Victoria Watts on issues of notation, language, and semiology; Hannah Kosstrin on new digital media applications for Labanotation; Monica F.A. Santos on Labanotation as a tool for anthropologists; and Brenda Farnell, whose discussion of “American Contemporary Dance Ideologies and Movement Literacy” challenged the soma-centric prejudices of some dancers that, instead of dissolving Platonic and Cartesian body-mind dualisms, only harden them by denying the role of verbal conceptualization in the understanding of dance.

Related to notation concerns were Melissa Melpignano’s investigations into manifestations of physicality in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Italian ballet libretti. This same concern stimulated Linda Tomko, in response to other scholars’ recent comments on bodily presence in baroque dance notation, to look closely at Feuillet’s symbolic and written dance instructions. Similarly, Nona Monahan demonstrated the subtle but distinct changes to movement performance effected by her reinvestigation of manuals familiar to early-dance practitioners, like [Thoinot Arbeau's Orchesography](#) and the dancing manuals of [Fabritio Caroso](#) and [Cesare Negri](#).

Issues of class and cultural differences, discomforts, and sensitivities arose in several presentations. Fangfei Miao questioned the ethics of a dance-film work created by two current Chinese artists using the labor and performance of low-paid Chinese farm workers, while Sharon Kivenko discussed moral dilemmas arising from her anthropological research involving her study with a Malian dancer who earns a meager living teaching non-African tourists and researchers. On the same panel, Ray Schwartz, living and dancing in Mexico, asked, “Is it Cultural Enough?”—pointedly articulating concerns of labeling that non-White, non-European-American artists face in finding presenters and funding.

Delightful surprises enlivened the sometimes dense sessions: Joellen Meglin’s images and analysis of Ruth Page’s 1970s *Alice* revealed the work as a fair challenger to Christopher Wheeldon’s more recent balletic take on Lewis Carroll; and Camilla Kandare’s careful investigation of the choreographies that shaped the reception of Queen Christina of Sweden when, after abdicating her throne and converting to Catholicism in the mid-seventeenth-century, she visited Rome in a much-publicized coup for the papacy.

Earlier, I promised more on the thiNKingDANCErs who were drawn to this so-compatibly themed conference. Four of us, mobilized by Ellen Gerdes, made our way to a round-table-cum-workshop on “Experimental Dance Writing in Philadelphia,” held on Saturday afternoon. Megan Bridge, our newly appointed executive director, talked about the founding of TD, its evolution, reach, and scope. I spoke about the coverage and assignment process, as well as about the impact of TD on my own writing and editing. Ellie Goudie-Averill shared her perspective as a Philadelphia dance artist who had read and been reviewed on TD’s pages before joining the writing group and reviewing her own dance colleagues. Ellen Gerdes talked about the educational impact beyond TD’s immediate circle, and then led the attendees (few but dedicated) in a writing exercise and discussion. It was wonderful to work together in this context, particularly since Gerdes and Goudie-Averill are now living far from Philadelphia, less able to put full energy into regular TD work.

The conference was rich in opportunities to reconnect with friends and colleagues not seen since whatever prior conference we both had happened to attend. It also provided several dance shows for attendees. The outstanding one was Liz Lerman’s *Healing Wars*, a richly blended art installation, musical theater, and dance work rooted in Lerman’s Civil-War research, but with overt reflections on the U.S.’s latest war commitments, including an Iraq-War veteran on stage, sometimes without his prosthetic right leg. The show was as thought provoking as the conference.

Writing Dancing/Dancing Writing, joint conference of the Society of Dance History Scholars and the Congress on Research in Dance, Nov. 13-14. <http://sdhscordconference.wildapricot>

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