The Dances of Doris Humphrey – Creating a Contemporary Perspective through Directorial Interpretation

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It has been widely acknowledged that Doris Humphrey and Martha Graham were the two most influential exponents of American modern dance. Graham's work has been the more prominent, in part because she outlived Humphrey by thirty-two years and performed for a much longer period. This does not, however, diminish the influence that Humphrey's work has had on modern dance since her death in 1958. More significant, perhaps, is the influence it can have in the future. Humphrey's legacy includes a certain amount of documentary literature, including her seminal book on the craft of choreography, *The Art of Making Dances* (1959); photographs and film footage of her dancing and of her dances; and a codified dance technique which is taught on a wider scale now than ever before. The dances, however, need to be performed in the theatre; if they remain as an archive, they may be regarded as such, and the purpose of my work is to illuminate these dances for a contemporary audience. This article will discuss strategies undertaken to develop a perspective on modern dance production, including the significance of style; the search for a 'living past' drawing on the ideas of R. G. Collingwood; the identification, viewing and interpretation of evidence, including the use of a Labanotation score. The production processes employed by a range of artists involved in reconstruction will be considered, and my own practice positioned in relation to this. The notion of co-authorship will be examined within the contexts of these respective practices, illustrated by examples from recent Humphrey productions.

Other performing arts have survived to a large extent through text-based evidence, but there is no immediate parallel existing in dance. A number of notation systems are utilised, including Benesh, Eshkol-Wachman and Labanotation, with the latter serving regularly for the recording of modern dance during the past fifty years. I would suggest that this, or any symbol-based system is not wholly comparable with those existing in music and drama, in part because the score is written by someone other than the choreographer. Despite the developments in Labananalysis, crucial aspects of movement quality and style, which are integral aspects of interpreting a work, are not in evidence within the Humphrey scores I have encountered. This is not a criticism of Labanotation, or other systems, rather a critical observation of notation.

Style is a fundamental aspect in the staging of dance works because it encapsulates the choreographer's 'signature' and identifies the work as belonging to that particular tradition. In 1996, the American writer and critic Marcia Siegel commented that 'Labanotation has to be retranslated back to the bodies by someone who not only can read it but can teach the movement effectively' (Siegel, 1996: 6). Siegel made this comment in relation to performances given during the Humphrey centenary in 1995 which she felt were stylistically weak, and she was right to raise this as a concern. Without intrinsic knowledge of a style and its philosophy, it is questionable whether a director would be in a position to communicate the often-subtle dynamic and physiological nuances of a movement language. The issue is not solely notation-related, as there are structural aspects of movement that can indicate style, the most fundamental in the Humphrey tradition being the role of the pelvis as the centre of movement initiation, with its interconnecting relationship to the breath and abdominal muscles. Without this connection, the body is prone to move peripherally from the limbs. This, consequently, negates the central principles of 'wholeness' and 'dancing from the inside out' which are the foundation of Humphrey's 'Fall and Recovery' philosophy.[1]

For a choreographer's work to be understood, the style must be clear, and can be, as there are still first generation dancers handing down the respective philosophies, and exponents who are fluent in specific styles. A significant factor is the philosophy behind a style, so that the 'handing down' and subsequent development is rooted in ideas, perhaps more so than in physical action. The central principles of Humphrey's philosophy involve the gravitational pull; lyricism; successional flow; the idea of taking movement to its very edge; the use of breath in a 'whole body' context in which the body's surfaces take on the physiological action of the lungs in terms of expansion and subsidence. The interpretation of these ideas is going to change over time, particularly in terms of physical manifestation as part of the natural evolution of the dancing body.[2] The ideas, however, will remain intact as ideas, and their continuing existence creates a foundation that can underpin a tradition, allowing for the co-existence of both roots and development.

There is an opportunity to establish traditions for modern dance while there is still a living connection. This has happened to a certain extent through the first generation dancers, through whom the movement styles, philosophies and to a certain extent the repertoires have been passed on, much like the tradition existing in classical ballet. There is a distinction however, and a need for something more. The 'handing down' method does contribute to a certain extent with regard to style, and examples from the first generation are, for Doris Humphrey, Ernestine Stodelle, member of the Humphrey-Weidman Company between 1929–35; for Charles Weidman, Nona Schurman, who performed with Humphrey-Weidman and continued to work with Weidman when the main company dissolved in 1945; and for Martha Graham, Christine Dakin, Terese Capucelli and Janet Eilber, who have all held the role of artistic director having been principal dancers with the Martha Graham Dance Company. A dance

'style', arguably, needs to be seen not simply as an entity in itself through the medium of the dance technique class, albeit a dynamic one, but within a broader artistic context – the body of work that is representative of the individual artist, otherwise there *is* no art form, there is simply a physical experience. If the dance works are not performed, modern dance may be left solely with a series of codified dance techniques – Humphrey, Graham, Cunningham, Limón. These techniques emerged to serve the repertoire of the individual choreographer. If there is no repertoire there ceases to be an artistic purpose for the technique other than as a training mechanism. This could be seen as unproblematic but I believe would be detrimental for the continuing evolution of modern dance artists, because the artistry of each choreographer lies within their respective dances. Experiencing this aspect of a tradition presents a connection for the dancer that does not fully exist within the technique class itself.

The question arising from this is how do contemporary practitioners, directors or performers, reach the artist's body of work, and following on from this how can they continue to do so? 'Reaching the artist's work' entails looking back to consider what existed in another time, thus the quest for the answer begins from a historical perspective. It will not remain there exclusively, but for an art form with little history or tradition of its own, reality dictates an outward search, to the other performing and literary arts, and the consideration of existing models and approaches. The ideas presented by R. G. Collingwood in his seminal work *The Idea of History* provide a number of useful and identifiable approaches to the viewing perspective of history. These ideas, notably in relation to the role of the historian as active participator in the interpretation of history, are further reflected in more recent views from the fields of history and philosophy.[3] Collingwood presents theories around such ideas as the 'living past' (Collingwood, 1993: 158), the 'historical imagination' (Collingwood, 1993: 231), and the connection between 'thought and action' (Collingwood, 1993: 115). He makes a further important observation in his essay 'The Philosophy of History', when he states 'Everyone brings his own mind to the study of history, and approaches it from the point of view which is characteristic of himself and his generation' (Collingwood, 1993: xxii). The 'living past' therefore is pursued from the present. This is in line with the position put forward by T. S. Eliot when, in his essay 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', he says '… the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past' (Eliot, 1917: 39). Collingwood's 'living past' infers that there can be continual evolution. He cites an aspect of Hegel's philosophy as an illustration, 'History … travels in spirals, and apparent repetitions are always differentiated by having acquired something new' (Collingwood, 1993: 114). This notion was also put forward by Eliot in his observation that '… the arrival of a new work affects existing work … the whole existing order must be, if ever so slightly altered' (Eliot, 1917: 38). These theories are both attractive and pertinent when considered in relation to the performing arts because of the emphasis on 'living' and 'imagination', and the creative possibilities this emphasis provides.

A CONSIDERATION OF CURRENT PRACTICES IN MODERN DANCE

In defining what constitutes a reconstruction, Labanotator Tom Brown comments that 'the ideal reconstruction for some would be a macabre embalmed impersonation for others' (Brown, 1993: 27). Mark Franko, in his discussion of Baroque dance, observed that reconstructions in the 1980s began to convey something closer to the 'theatrical force of the original choreography' through the emergence of 'a degree of literal accuracy with the requisite theatrical immediacy' (Franko, 1989: 57). Franko infers that the performance of these dances more closely captured documented performance qualities in comparison with some of the pre-1980 'staid and antiquated' presentations he also refers to. He further defines 'theatrical force' as potentially influencing new work rather than merely animating an historical artefact. Franko cites the French aesthetician, Guy Scarpetta, who distinguishes between a 'return to' in a nostalgic sense and a 'return of' in an inventively original sense.[4] Franko's observations have relevance for modern dance, in relation to the individual work as well as to the overall development of a tradition, because of the inference that the work itself can be more than a self-contained entity and can become part of a living tradition that continues to evolve.

The idea of evolving work ties in with the 'continuum' theory presented by Susan Manning, initially at the Dance ReConstructed conference at Rutgers University in 1992, and subsequently in her book, *Ecstasy and the Demon* (1993). She describes first the process that the scholar, in her example, or director will go through:

> The dance scholar has no choice except to pursue the elusive and uncertain text of performance. An event bound in time and space, a performance can be read only through its traces – on the page, in memory, on film, in the archive. Each of these traces marks, indeed distorts, the event of performance, and so the scholar pursues what remains elusive as if moving through an endless series of distorting reflections. But this process leaves its own sort of illumination, and that illumination is what the scholar records, in effect penning a journal of the process of enquiry (Manning, 1993: 12).

Manning contends that 'a reconstructor may favor one of the opposing ends of a single continuum ...' (Manning, 1993: 13). She cites Millicent Hodson and Kenneth Archer's reconstruction of Nijinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps* (1913) for the Joffrey Ballet in 1987 as an example of one end of this continuum. Hodson and Archer's process of reconstruction, for this work and their subsequent productions, has a significant emphasis on documentary evidence and encompasses both scholarly and artistic intervention on their collaborative part. Their artistic goal is the preservation of masterworks, achieved through the restoration of 'lost' work which has, in their judgement, historical relevance and contemporary resonance, and the purpose of their artistic endeavour is to create a reasonable facsimile of the original (Archer and Hodson, 2000: 1).

A further example is Ernestine Stodelle's recreation of the Humphrey solo, *Two Ecstatic Themes* (1931). Stodelle's intention is to bring back a dance that

closely resembles what she remembers as 'the original', which she qualifies as Humphrey's performances of the dance (Stodelle, Interview: 1986). Stodelle has been recreating solo and ensemble dances by Humphrey since 1973. The 'recreation' aspect of Stodelle's practice refers specifically to the process of bringing each dance together again from fragmentary evidence, much as was earlier described by Manning. In addition, there are elements within each dance, to varying degrees, which have been created by Stodelle herself because the evidence is incomplete. One example is the black and white silent film of Humphrey dancing *The Call/Breath of Fire* (1929/30)[5] in which there are moments when Humphrey dances in and out of the light, leaving some of the movement obscured. Stodelle filled in these moments in part from memory, as she had seen Humphrey perform this dance many times; in part through what did exist of the dance before and after the gaps; and in part through her knowledge of the style (Stodelle, Interview: 1990). Stodelle was with the Humphrey-Weidman Company during the period of time in which Humphrey developed and articulated the philosophy of her movement style, a period which also coincided with the making of the dances subsequently recreated by Stodelle. Having this physical and dynamic knowledge enabled Stodelle to find a logical transition from one set of given facts to another, 'if Doris was moving like so in this phrase, and ended there six beats later there are only so many possibilities for how she got there' (Stodelle, Interview: 1990). Incomplete evidence is likely to be a factor in many productions, and directors will inevitably incorporate aspects of themselves, albeit as conduits, within a work, whether intentionally or not. Artists such as Stodelle and Hodson and Archer allow themselves to engage in creative intervention where they believe the evidence both requires and warrants this, and are not completely bound by what may appear to be 'authentic' documentary evidence.

At the other end of her continuum, though not necessarily opposing, Manning places reconstructions which involve significant interpretation, and here could sit Mino Nicholas' version of another Humphrey solo, *The Banshee* (1928), recreated initially by Eleanor King. This role was originally intended for a woman costumed as an ethereal spirit, and Nicholas cast himself, in Kabuki make up and wig (Dils, 1993a: 102). Stodelle intentionally set out to recreate the dance as she remembered it, from the numerous times she had seen Humphrey perform the work. Nicholas likewise embarked on a deliberate course and, whilst having no evidence directly attributed to him with which to determine his intention, the fact that he cast himself in the role is perhaps more indicative of a performer-oriented intention than one relating to the work itself. If one were to categorise, Stodelle's work is more akin to that of Hodson and Archer, in terms of reconstruction, though she herself prefers the term 'recreation' (Stodelle, Interview: 1995). Nicholas' work is far more radical and he uses a range of terms to describe his productions, including 'transcribed', 'revised', 'recreation' and 'based on' (Dils, 1993a: 152). Observations made by Dils (1993a: 144–71) and later commentators (Siegel, 1996: 4; Garafola, 1996: 119) suggest that Nicholas has primarily been engaged in producing theatrical events which happen to be

works by Doris Humphrey, whereas Stodelle works from within the Humphrey tradition in order to advance that tradition.

Dils (1993b) refers to the notion of co-authorship in her analysis of Ray Cook's reconstruction of Humphrey's *Dawn in New York* (1956). Cook's process with a number of Humphrey reconstructions over the past decade, as regards the documentary evidence, has been far more wide-reaching than those I have been engaged with to date, in that he is literally re-constructing 'lost' work (Cook, 1998: 75). This is reflective of the processes used by Hodson and Archer, and Stodelle, and involved rebuilding from fragments of evidence, including partially completed sections of Labanotation, photographs, memories of original performers and Humphrey's notes. There were also gaps in this body of evidence that required creative intervention on Cook's part in order to produce a cohesive whole, much in the same way that Stodelle had to act with *The Call/Breath of Fire*. In relation to 'lost' work, therefore, the production process could be quantified as having two predominant phases – the pre-rehearsal stage which encompasses the construction of a 'document' representing the work, and the rehearsal stage which involves the realisation of that 'document'. The production work I have undertaken, in contrast, has begun from a 'document' that is relatively complete in terms of its vocabulary and structure and, therefore, is more in line with experience encountered by theatre directors working from a script. Whilst there are distinctions in the processes involved in reconstruction as undertaken by Cook and the approaches I use for the pre-rehearsal stage – when the interpretation is being formulated – there is also common ground. The evidence available to Cook, Hodson and Archer, and Stodelle, for example, was considerably less complete than that which has been available to me. This common ground relates to the principles adopted to view, consider and select from that body of evidence once it has been compiled, as well as during the retrieval process.

A further issue for consideration here is the extent to which my practice incorporates the element of co-authorship in comparison with the practice of those cited above. The degree of involvement may appear considerably less in practical terms, given the scale of material those artists have had to find and/or create. *Dawn in New York*, for example, was missing a number of short sections that comprised one third of the work. Cook's more recent venture, *Fantasy in Fugue* (1952), had the entire second movement (of three) missing that was subsequently rebuilt from photographs and the memories of one of the original dancers. My production processes have not required this level of 'detective work' because of the existing materials available. One of the directorial tasks, however, is ensuring that what material Humphrey has left can speak today, so that it can make sense today. In that context, therefore, the aspect of co-authorship is substantive in my work because I believe the choreographer cannot speak, nor can the choreography, without this intervention.

In positioning myself within the range of practice discussed here, the notion of co-authorship is particularly useful because of the breadth of possibility it offers. If one considers the activities of Stodelle and Cook, whilst there are

significant elements of their respective practices which differ from mine, a common aspect is that the director approaches the work on even terms with the choreographer. This directorial activity is underpinned by the right to be creative where creativity is called upon, and that right is engendered by working from 'within' the Humphrey tradition. Where our practices diverge is in the context in which creativity exists or is employed. Both Stodelle and Cook begin from a premise of locating and producing Humphrey's work. I begin from the premise of exploring Humphrey's work to discover what more it could say. In relation to the range and nature of directorial practice that I have been engaged in since 1995, a device that has proved to be illuminating is the adoption of a continuum, as there are clear distinctions across four works that have been staged during this period. The four dances are *Water Study* (1928), *The Shakers* (1931), *With My Red Fires* (1936), and *Passacaglia* (1938), chosen because they are representative of, arguably, Humphrey's most formative decade.[6]

INTERPRETIVE AND CREATIVE CHOICES WITHIN THE DIRECTORIAL PROCESS

A central aspect of my directorial process is the search to find something new in the work. Integral to this is Collingwood's notion of the 'living past' and how one can reach that. Collingwood's 'living past' implies that there can be continuing evolution. His argument, presented earlier, cited the Hegelian spiral, defined as history travelling in spirals, with apparent repetitions differentiated by having acquired something new (Collingwood, 1993: 114). If one applies this to one instance of a work's performance history, the spiral and its acquisitions become clear. The centre of the spiral is Humphrey's original production; dancers from that original production perform it many times with numerous cast changes;[7] dancers from that first generation direct the work for the next generation who have not had the exposure to the source, the choreographer herself, but have had an immersion in the style and philosophy; dancers from this next generation pass it on again, in a time when dance technique and training have changed out of all recognition in the seventy plus years since the spiral began. If nothing else about the dance is consciously altered, the passing of time has created an evolution. Applying this concept to the directorial process, each time a director embarks on a new production, that production will inevitably be influenced by the director's past experiences of the work and within the stylistic tradition. In my own case this involved performance experience with Stodelle besides assisting her in the direction of works for other companies. The most salient point here is the spiral back to the source, Humphrey herself. That connection is fundamental to my development as a dance artist working within the Humphrey tradition as performer or director. The existence of this connection inspires, from my own perspective, artistic confidence in terms of allowing work to evolve within parameters that have can evolve.

The initial stages of a directorial process involve the research and consideration of those elements which could be regarded as constituting the work,

and which contribute to the directorial understanding of the work and its subsequent interpretation. This process begins with the evidence, to gain some insight into the choreographer's intention and the work's theme. Important to my approach is the search for traces of the artist's intention, and that this search begins with evidence generated by the choreographer. Collingwood's perspective on the viewing of evidence is particularly useful here. He asserts that the business of the historian is to discover something through the interpretation of potential and actual evidence – 'potential' being all existing evidence and 'actual' being the parts of the evidence the interpreter chooses to accept (Collingwood, 1993: 280). I would further distinguish the consideration of evidence in my process as having two phases with the element of 'choice' being distinctive in each phase in relation to Collingwood's viewing model. The first phase focuses on the search for traces relating to 'intention' and will necessarily draw upon a limited pool of evidence as I choose to accept only evidence attributable to and generated by the choreographer. The second phase encompasses a much wider consideration of primary and secondary evidence, thus the element of choice is more wide reaching because the scale of material is so much greater.

In relation to the first phase, the 'actual' evidence for these dances is rooted in what Humphrey has said about the nature of the work, the theme, the choice of music, the characters – if these exist, any indication from her of how this work came into being – and such indications do exist. Visual references can make a valuable contribution, if they can be directly attributed to the choreographer. A filmed version of the work directed by the choreographer could be termed a primary source, as can photographic evidence, although Humphrey was known to create poses that were not actually in the dance but would fit into a photographer's studio (Stodelle, Interview: 1985). One example is the Barbara Morgan photograph of *The Shakers*, included in the supporting documentation with the Labanotation score. The photograph depicts Humphrey as the Eldress with six other dancers, including Charles Weidman and Beatrice Seckler. Evidence of this nature should perhaps be viewed with some caution because the representation is incomplete, yet there are still clues to be found in Humphrey's facial expression and in the upper body gestures and positions.

With Humphrey's works, by and large, the movement vocabulary the director uses will be based on the Labanotation score. This document will give one version of the movement vocabulary, as witnessed by the notator, which can be illuminated further through the processes already identified. A further indicator is Humphrey herself, dancing during the period of time when the work was created as this illustrates dynamic and how she actually executed movement. One example, from *The Four Pioneers* film (Mueller, 1965), is a short excerpt from *Duo Drama* (1935), in which Humphrey and Weidman execute a series of side leaps, falls and tilts which are consistently weighted and have a sense of abandon and verve. This would seem to be a clear indicator of stylistic quality. There are further examples filmed at several of the Bennington Summer Schools that are housed in the Humphrey Collection at the New York Public Library. These include *Doris Humphrey* (c.1938), which has footage of Humphrey demonstrating

the circular fall, which has relevance for *Water Study*, and two excerpts from *Passacaglia*, one of which shows Humphrey dancing the turn solo and bell theme, and the second shows Humphrey rehearsing a group of women in excerpts from the work. *Young America Dances* (1939) shows brief fragments of Humphrey and Weidman dancing and of Humphrey teaching class, and *Students and Teachers at Bennington* (1939/40) has footage of the Humphrey falls – side, back and spiral, and again is relevant for *Water Study*. Whilst film may not be as useful in determining intention, it would clearly have value here, as the footage that exists is sparse but clear.

A further example of 'actual' evidence is the musical/rhythmical accompaniment for the choreography. With the exception of *Water Study*, which is in silence, one starting place is the recording used by the choreographer as this should convey the phrasing and dynamics heard at the time of creation, which in turn will convey clues to the execution of movements and movement phrases, and possibly to the unfolding scenario of any action or narrative. It should also be acknowledged, however, that movement dynamics can be different from those contained within the music. With regard to the execution of movement and movement phrases, Leopold Stokowski's interpretation of Bach's *Passacaglia and Fugue in C Minor*, which was Humphrey's preferred version, provides one example in the *Passacaglia* variations 15, entitled 'Lyric', and 16 – 'Turns'.[8] The former has a distinctly quiet, gentle quality, preceding the sweeping, booming sound that accompanies the technically virtuosic turn sequence. The progressive contrast in the sound adds to the dramatic progression of the work and, more specifically, the qualities heard in the sound can translate to the movement. The director can be confident in pursuing this because the evidence makes clear that Humphrey's movement was closely influenced by the music's sound and structure, and by this conductor's interpretation. A further example, in *Passacaglia* variation 17 – 'Men's', is the opening-arm gesture preceding a jump sequence. By adopting the musical timing and sound of the Stokowski orchestration, which consists of a long, resonating dotted quaver releasing into a staccato semi-quaver, the gesture can be pulled out and suspended, allowing the jump to burst forth. Other recordings do not have a comparable degree of resonance or staccato, so the sense of 'suspension' is not as pronounced. This particular emphasis appears in numerous passages throughout the work, and is significant because 'suspension' is a fundamental stylistic element in Humphrey's work and, therefore, the Stokowski interpretation could be seen to be stylistically appropriate.

Once evidence has been considered, one has a sense and idea of the choreographer's intention and the theme of the work. Given that my intention is to create a contemporary production rather than a historically-located reconstruction, it is relevant at this stage to consider the possibilities contained within the thematic aspect of the work. Jonathan Miller refers to 'looking through contemporary eyes at what a play was expressing in the past' (Miller, 1986: 121), which I would take further by suggesting that what the theme was in the past may only be clear today by expressing it in the present, in a contemporary context. An example of this is *With My Red Fires*. Humphrey's scenario is based on a

possessive, destructive matriarchal love, which also depicts intolerance and prejudice. For a contemporary production, a theme of possessive love is not dramatically interesting or challenging from my perspective as, in Western contemporary society, the idea of a young woman leaving her mother does not have the connotation it would have had in the late 1930s when the dance was created. However, if the theme is shifted to other elements Humphrey indicated, possibilities that do have a contemporary context could be considered.

Humphrey's choreographic canon was noted for a recurring theme of idealism, and she had not ventured into the darker side of the human psyche until she created *With My Red Fires*. The dance has a colour and tone that is notably distinct because of its dark and dramatic connotations, and the narrative and characterisation. Siegel observed that 'Doris pulled back from the demonic theatricality she had uncovered, almost in spite of herself, in *Red Fires*' (Siegel, 1993: 165), which would seem to concur with this notion. Furthermore, Humphrey did not venture into this dark territory again. My initial responses to the dance were based on a black and white film of the version Humphrey had staged at Juilliard in 1954 and, subsequently, the Labanotation score (1964) and a film of the dance by the American Dance Festival in 1978. I was inspired by the dramatic power, but even more so by the potential I felt was there for the dance to speak meaningfully within a contemporised context. Humphrey's narrative was based on possessive love, but underneath this lies the secondary and inter-related themes of intolerance, ignorance and bigotry, which I felt could be drawn out and given greater prominence.

In considering a shift of emphasis within the narrative, attention had to be given to the place and relevance of Humphrey's central characters. It has been acknowledged (Siegel, 1993; Cohen, 1995) that Humphrey intended these to be symbolic rather than literal characters, which could imply a certain open-ness. What must also be considered, however, is whether a production claiming to be an interpretation of *With My Red Fires* could legitimately make that claim without the Matriarch figure, for example, as this character is pivotal to the narrative. However one approaches the interpretation of this work, the existence and presence of this central figure are integral to the development of the narrative. Whether the character actually needs definition as 'The Matriarch' is a different question, for the dancers and the audience. A less definitive alternative would be to identify this role as the 'Central Figure', for example, and this has been adopted for my interpretation. Humphrey gives a clear indication of how this character influences the action and scenario when she talks about 'the old woman screaming from the top of the house' (Cohen, 1995: 140). This particular description is significant, because the action it refers to instigates a transition for the massed group, from being a benign entity into something darker and more destructive. Humphrey's description certainly creates an evocative image for the director, but the issue here is how the image is dramatised. Part of the directorial challenge, therefore, has been to discover the means by which Humphrey's image could be conveyed.

Two particular photographs of Humphrey in this role have been integral

Fig. 1. Doris Humphrey as 'The Matriarch' in her dance *With My Red Fires*. Reproduced with the kind permission of Charles H. Woodford.

to the interpretation. One is by the dance photographer Barbara Morgan and the other is in the collection of the Dance Notation Bureau. In the Morgan photograph (DHC/NYPL), Humphrey is caught facing the camera, arms stretched wide to the sides, hands in fists with the left holding the wide swirling skirt. The motion of the skirt suggests she is in mid-turn, as the fabric swirls upwards in a spiral from low on the right, around her back and up to the left fist. There is a sense of suspension to the movement, which is also bound, strong and direct. These qualities are also evident in the DNB photograph (see Fig. 1) in which Humphrey is seen in profile, standing tall on top of the box which represents the Matriarch's 'house'. In addition to the movement quality, the juxtaposition of set, costume and movement further emphasises the power of this character, as the hem line of the dress falls at least a foot below the top of the box, with the overlap creating the illusion of an elongated and superhuman force. The combination of movement qualities identified in both photographs induces the sense of 'suspended stillness', which is key to the interpretation of this role. As director, I have chosen to give prominence to these images in my interpretation over others because of my belief that the psychological drama induced by this character can be better conveyed for a contemporary context in a more subtle, internalised manner than the exaggerated and pantomimic portrayal of the role as notated and performed in the 1978 film.

Consideration and determination of a work's theme also encompasses its location, or setting. The distinction comes in the degree to which this can happen and is likely to differ from work to work. If *The Shakers*, for example, is located at a prayer meeting in a Shaker meeting house, as Humphrey showed, it is difficult to see what else the dance could be 'about' from an audience perspective. Furthermore, with such a title and such a setting it *is* clear what it is 'about' before the dance begins. For a reconstruction this is as it should be, but, by considering the location from a metaphorical perspective, there are other, new possibilities. In relation to staging a Shakespeare play Bill Alexander talks about 'transposing to some other period, to unleash the play' (in Berry, 1989: 178). In applying this approach within a dance context, such a production can still contain aspects of the choreographer's 'intention', as far as this can be determined, and her choreography, in terms of movement and structure. The initial source for my interpretation of *The Shakers* had been Humphrey's movement vocabulary and her juxtaposition of symmetry with asymmetry, which I wanted to explore through extending the existing structure. Transposing the setting to somewhere specific would not have been appropriate, as that would retain a literal emphasis. Transposing to somewhere non-specific, however, removed the literal element altogether and allowed for a more open reading. The ensuing process involved removing all trace of the narrative context, including identification of individual roles, costume and the original music score, and the production itself was no longer recognisable as *The Shakers*.[9]

The staging of these four works has a contemporary perspective, and incorporates, in different ways the positions highlighted above. It has been enlightening to see where on the continuum the individual dances lay, as each is

quite distinct in nature and each has the capacity for more than one approach. A central factor in all the production processes has been the aspect of co-authorship, and how this has evolved within the specific circumstances of each work and its interpretation. *The Shakers* has been the most radical experience, although the initial intention had not been to create a new work but to explore what the choreography could reveal without its literal elements. This act of exploration, from its basis in historical documentary evidence revealed, in fact, a new dance, although significant parts of Humphrey's choreographic vocabulary, structure and design remain unaltered. The extent of change may raise the question as to whether this new work should be quantified as co-authored rather than an original work by myself. The artistic intention underpinning the production was to 'explore creatively' rather than to 'create' in itself. Humphrey provided the 'words', I provided the context in which those words are uttered, and the nature of that context is such that the 'words' now reveal a quite different message. This may be taking co-authorship to its edge, as the creative intervention on my part has produced a work that could not be categorised as 'by' Doris Humphrey. However, to categorise it as 'by' Lesley Main would also be inaccurate. Humphrey's dance was not simply a stimulus for my own creation, her material forms a substantial part of the new work, and to leave this unacknowledged would amount to choreographic plagiarism. The co-author relationship, therefore, serves as the most accurate descriptor for work of this nature, with the continuum being a useful device to analyse the degree of creative intervention within each production process.

The ideas and principles developed here in relation to Humphrey's work are not exclusive to this particular tradition, and could have significant impact in a wider context. Modern dance is in the early stages of developing its own history in comparison with the much older and established forms of classical ballet, music and theatre. Humphrey is a pertinent marker from which to develop processes that will both maintain and extend an artistic tradition. Of the major modern dance figures, Humphrey is the first whose tradition does not remain solely within the remit and responsibility of 'first generation' performers as the passing of time has necessitated intervention by the next generation. If one defines 'first generation' performers as those who have had a direct association with their choreographer, Martha Graham, for example, has a 'first generation' which is far more extensive in comparison with the group of Humphrey-Weidman and Humphrey-Limón dancers who constitute Humphrey's 'first generation', as do more recent figures such as Merce Cunningham and Paul Taylor.

Despite the on-going work of 'first generation' exponents, there will come a point in the individual histories of the artistic traditions when the perpetuation of the repertoires and the underlying movement styles and philosophies will become the responsibility of artists who do not have that direct association with the choreographer. This will also be the point at which the existing body of evidence for a specific tradition will need to be drawn upon in ways that may not be required at this time because of the current prevalence of 'first generation'

knowledge and experience. Graham was reluctant to have her dances notated (Stodelle, 1985: Interview), so that evidence of this nature does not exist to any large extent. A significant body of evidence on her dances does exist, however, in the form of film and video recordings, photographs and Graham's notebooks. Taylor, by contrast, embraced notation as a form of recording and has had the majority of his major works notated either during the choreographic process or during revivals for his own company (Kane, 2000: 77). His willingness to do so indicates not only a desire for his dances to continue being staged, but also an acknowledgment that, one day, this activity will be undertaken by someone other than himself or his immediate associates.

Such a development is not imminent but it is inevitable, and modern dance as a field should be ready for the transition in order to protect the great works that our major artists have produced. It is possible that Humphrey's *Passacaglia* (1938), Graham's *Clytemnestra* (1958), or Taylor's *Last Look* (1985) could have the longevity of *King Lear* or *The Cherry Orchard*, as the strategies exist to keep the works alive and vibrant. As a result, modern dance audiences would become accustomed to seeing productions of the same work within a range of interpretations in the same way that theatre audiences are accustomed to viewing interpretations of Shakespeare. Productions such as those presented by The Globe Theatre, by directors such as Peter Brook, and the quite radical treatments favoured by the likes of Peter Sellars and Robert Wilson illustrate the capacity of a work to survive repeated and divergent intervention. Dance works have the same capacity. The issue is not just about the practical engagement with a work from an artistic perspective, however. It is also about the perception of a work, and the processes through which we determine what a work 'is' and, moreover, what a work 'can be'. In a comparison with theatre and opera, Siegel warns against the 'wholesale transformation' of a dance work if artistic license is taken too far (Siegel, 1993: 15). I agree if the intent driving a production is simply to produce a theatrical event. However, if the intent is to produce the work from within the stylistic tradition, in a process that encompasses the body of evidence relating to that particular work, I suggest that the 'work' as an entity is robust enough to withstand repeated and diverse interpretation. Whatever takes place during an interpretive process, the body of evidence will remain, as will the stylistic philosophy, and both aspects may be extended as a result of new interpretation.

The processes articulated here allow for further creative practice, contingent on a different selection and 'reading' of evidence. The Humphrey works discussed in this article will undoubtedly be revisited, but my subsequent directorial processes would not necessarily include the same choices in terms of privileging one particular form of evidence over another. Adopting the Collingwood stance in relation to evidence allows for a fresh approach to the same documentation. With *Passacaglia*, the focus on the 'sound', which has been the major influence to date, could give way to another aspect such as Humphrey's reaction to war which was an underlying theme for her. Adopting such an approach could have the effect of shifting the emphasis from abstraction

to a thematic or even narrative interpretation, to discover what Humphrey's vocabulary can say within such a context. Similarly, new emphases could be identified in *With My Red Fires*, in terms of the narrative and characterisation which would in turn, elicit new readings.

These production processes and resulting performances have enabled me to both critique and develop existing theoretical approaches to reconstruction, and to demonstrate that current practice can be extended effectively. The proceedings for *Preservation Politics*, the most recent international conference on dance reconstruction, contain reference to the 'introduction of perspectives from Shakespeare edition, opera and theatre' and how 'advanced thinking from other art forms poses a challenge to the dance community' (Jordan, 2000: Preface). The findings drawn from my research demonstrate the application of such perspectives within a dance context and show that the art form can not only withstand external intervention but can be enhanced by its presence. The four dances that have been staged along with accompanying analytical investigations[10] indicate the scope that exists for directorial interpretation in relation to modern dance works. During the course of my research, theoretical constructs drawn from history, philosophy, literary and textual criticism and from performing arts practice itself have been applied to the research and staging of these four dances. As a result, the principles that have arisen and been tested by these stagings have the potential to impact on a wider field of creative practice and theory. Most specifically, however, by disrupting conventional notions of reconstruction and authenticity, revealing the instability of a performance text yet retaining its stylistic imperatives, privileging the role of co-author/director and incorporating the imaginative manipulation of evidence, the dance works of history can remain accessible to future creators, performers and audiences. The approaches that have been identified have the potential to produce a vibrant, grounded and creative environment in which the individual works and the wider tradition can both exist and continue to flourish.

NOTES

1. Humphrey's theories of movement are articulated by her in the following statements – 'The desire to move stimulates organic matter to reach out from its centre of equilibrium' (Doris Humphrey Collection: folder M65); 'To fall is to yield; to recover is to re-affirm one's power over gravity and oneself' (Humphrey in Rand Rogers, ed., 1980 [1941]: 189); 'Falling and recovering is the very stuff of movement, the constant flux which is going on in every living body all the time. I … instinctively responded very strongly to the exciting danger of the fall, and the repose and peace of recovery' (Humphrey in Rand Rogers, ed., 1980: 189). See also Stodelle, Ernestine (1995); Cohen, Selma Jeanne (1995).
2. See Topaz, Muriel (2000), pp. 102–4 and Thomas, Helen (2003), pp. 110–11 for further reference to the evolution of the 'dancing body'.
3. See White, Hayden (1978, 1987), LaCapra, Dominick (1985, 1989), Tosh, John (1993), Mink, Louis (1972), Goldstein, Leon (1972, 1990, 1994) for more recent discussion and analysis of the ideas and issues raised by Collingwood.
4. Fuller discussion of this principle is contained in Scarpetta's monograph *L'Impureté* (1985), Paris: Grasset.
5. This film is housed in the Humphrey Collection at New York Public Library.

6. These dances were initially staged as part of my doctoral research. Production dates: Water Study, 2000; The Shakers/Dance of the Chosen (2001); With My Red Fires (2001, 2004); Passacaglia (1995, 2005)
7. The Shakers and Water Study, for example, were performed as part of the Broadway review, 'Americana', 1932. The dancers, therefore, had the physiological and performative experience of these dances daily for many months.
8. Humphrey adopted the term 'variation' to structure *Passacaglia*, giving each individual phrase a specific title.
9. A complete exposition of this production process and the consequential impact of this form of intervention is contained in 'Finding *Dance of the Chosen* in *The Shakers*', Chapter 7, unpublished PhD thesis, Lesley Main (2003).
10. See 'The Dances of Doris Humphrey: an investigation into Directorial process and Co-authorship', unpublished PhD thesis, Lesley Main (2003).

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