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Tap Dance, Notation, and the Archive: The Possibilities are Plural

Joseph Rubin, a jazz music expert and executive and artistic director of Canton Comic Opera and the (new) Ted Lewis Orchestra, commissioned me to recreate two tap dances from notation for his project “The Ted Lewis Orchestra: *Rhythm Rhapsody Revue*.” While processing Lewis’s archives, Rubin discovered notations for nine tap dances, which had been composed on a typewriter sometime in the mid-20th century. Like all tap dance scores, these notations are unique to their writer as there is no widely used, codified system for notating tap dance. In this paper I explore the process of deciphering and (re)embodying the notated movements, teaching them to a dancer, and coaching her through her performance in *Rhythm Rhapsody Revue*.

From the beginning I want to be clear—Rubin and I have different ideas about reconstructing and reviving material from the past. Rubin’s aim was to present the show “just like 1940” (Rubin, rehearsal). To accomplish his aim for “authenticity,” he created costumes, bandstands, and dialogue based on the artifacts he had gathered in the Ted Lewis Archive. Images from the concert show Rubin dressed in Lewis’s suit and top hat on stage at the Lincoln Theatre in Columbus, OH. Musicians wear the red suit coats Rubin had custom-made for them, and they sit behind bandstands built based on photos from the archive. Rachel Keane, the tap dancer who performed in *Rhythm Rhapsody Revue*, wore costumes built to resemble those worn by the original dancer, Nancy Bell in Lewis’s shows in the 1940s.

From the start, I was skeptical of Rubin’s mantra of “just like 1940.” And in my process of working with the scores all the way through the performance, that suspicion continued. Each time I had to make any decision about something that was unclear within the score, it became

even more obvious: it is not possible to create something exactly as it once was. Though we can attempt to reconstruct a work, which, according to dance scholar and notation specialist Ann Hutchinson Guest involves “constructing a work anew from all available sources of information, aiming for the result to be as close as possible to the original” (65), we also have to recognize that it is a reconstruction and that it will never be *exactly* as it was in the past. Further, as evidence one can hold in one’s hand, archival documents do not guarantee “truthfulness.” In his performance work, performance studies scholar Paul Dwyer invites his audience to “consider the “slipperiness” of documentary truth and the ways in which interpretation of archival material is always shaped by ideology, memory and imagination” (Dwyer 118). I doubt my engagement with these tap dance scores in 2014 produced exact replicas of the performances in 1940. In what follows, I focus on the scores and the decisions I had to make in this process to reveal that, when we deal with the archive, the possibilities are plural.

As I proceed, I want to state very clearly that my primary method on this project included practice-based research – reading and dancing the scores – which produced embodied knowledge. I then translated that information into words to put it into conversation with other discourses of notation and archival research.

Before I share the particular scores I used for this project, I want to introduce different examples of tap dance scores to demonstrate that from the start, in writing tap dance, there are many possibilities. First, Kahnnotation is a system developed by tap dancer Stanley Kahn in the 1930s specifically for writing tap dance. It involves a staff of three lines, one each for counts, step notation, and stage direction. The step symbols themselves—curvy lines, check marks, and combinations of the two in different orientations—require special training and knowledge to translate into actual movement. Labanotation, originated by European modern dance pioneer

Rudolf Laban, is used for writing human movement generally, and when used in the dance context, Labanotation has historically documented modern dance. However Jean and Marshall Stearns included a series of tap and jazz dance steps written in Labanotation in an appendix to *Jazz Dance: The Story of American Vernacular Dance*. Like Kahnnotation, reading Labanotation requires a particular kind of literacy as triangles, squares, rectangles, and other shapes in a variety of lengths and shadings represent the steps. Finally, Anita Feldman published her own system of tap notation in her 1995 book *Inside Tap: Technique and Improvisation for Today's Tap Dancer*. Of these three examples, Feldman's notation is the most accessible to dancers as she uses names of steps; codes for directions such as "R," "L," and "travel side;" and numbers for counts. Taking just these three systems as examples of tap dance notation demonstrates very clearly the range of possibilities in writing tap dance.

The scores I worked with for *Rhythm Rhapsody Revue* were quite different from any of those discussed above. As I shift the focus to my experience with these scores, I will share my process of reading them and point out some of the decisions I had to make along the way. Generally, each score is set up in the same way. The label at the top of the page indicates the style of the dance; below the label, the song is listed along with the composer. The first, labeled "RHUMBA" is set to the song "Siboney," by Ernesto Lecuona. The second is labeled "ADVANCED BUCK #44" (hereafter BUCK) and is set to the song "Swamp Fire," by Harold Mooney. The step notation follows this heading. Counts for the steps run along the left side of the paper and the choreography is notated to the right of the counts. Each piece is divided into eight to twelve-measure "steps;" and the beginning of each is labeled with a subheading. On the RHUMBA score the step headings also include the number of measures, "STEP I (8 Meas.)," for example.

Most of the notation was quite easy to decipher. For example, the first step on RHUMBA was filled with abbreviations such as “spk.”, “dr. R heel”, “brsh. bk.”, and “st. L to L”. These notations are not far from what I would use if I were writing down a phrase, so I quickly translated them to spank, drop right heel, brush back, and step left to the left respectively. However, not all of the notation was so easily read. For example, what might “fk. wg.” indicate? And what about “L fig. 4 frt. of ankle”? Again, I translated these terms as best I could using instinct and my knowledge of dance vocabulary from other dance styles. Though I am still not convinced that “fk. wg.” means fake wing, (which I made up since there is no such step in the tap dance lexicon) each time I encountered that code, that is what I used. Further, in step VI of BUCK where “wg.” is indicated, I asked the dancer to perform an actual wing. So although I was not always certain that the movement I associated with the code on the page was correct, once I established a connection, I was consistent in my use of that movement with that code.

Not only do these scores contain tap dance steps, they also refer to ballet terminology at times. For example, step III of RHUMBA combines tap dance and ballet vocabulary: “Cr. roll R 5th. frt. / Stomp R 5th. frt. (no wt.)” I translated this to cramp roll in fifth position with right foot in front; stomp right foot in fifth position, front, with no weight on the right foot. Step IV/V of RHUMBA ends with “leg raised in arabesque.” Other terms from ballet that appear in these two scores include “Leap out to L in pose like attitude en face” (RHUMBA 7), “R diag. fwd. R (effacé)” (BUCK 2), and “L arm up in 3rd” (BUCK 3). I discuss this ballet vocabulary to point out the many languages contained within this score. Depending upon a dancer/reader’s familiarity with this language, they will produce various performed versions of this score. Not all tap dancers “speak” ballet, so words like *effacé* or *arabesque* may not mean anything to them or they may have heard the terms but not know exactly what they mean.

In addition to finding the movement notation difficult to translate at times, the counts also proved to be rather challenging. Rhythms shift from being even – 1&2&3&4 – to swinging – 1&2&3&4. Within the same step, the rhythm might shift from duple meter, where the beat is divided in half, to triple meter, where the beat is divided into thirds, as in step I of BUCK. This rhythm reads 1&2&3&4&5&6&7&8. These sorts of shifts are not uncommon in tap dance, but typically they come about in relationship to the music as the piece is choreographed in a much more organic manner. But our process was very different: first we read the score to embody the steps. Then we added the music. Because the rhythm-to-music connection was not immediately present, this process was sometimes quite challenging.

Step III of BUCK was a particular challenge because, as we learned through experience, the timing of it was incorrectly scored. Based on the way it is written, the step should be performed twice as fast as all the rest of the piece. Added to this complication, the step is a turning, traveling step in triple meter with sounds on nearly every division of the beat – 1&2&3&4&5&6&7&8. When we first translated it, Rachel was actually performing the correct timing because we had misread the score. After we had translated the whole score, and she was dancing her way through the entire piece I realized we had made an error; she was not performing that step in the timing indicated, so we worked hard to bring it up to speed. However, because the tempo of the music was already an almost impossible speed to dance to, we did not know how she would ever be able to accomplish this step. Eventually, when we put the tap score alongside the music, we learned that the timing written in the score is actually incorrect. Performed as written, the steps fly by in double-time, but in reality, the step fits with the music in regular time. But even before we had made this realization, I was prepared to change the step so it was actually executable.

This leads me to a question I asked myself time and again: as the interpreter of this score, how much liberty am I willing to take as I transfer the words from the page to a physical body? How true to the score will I remain and under what circumstances will I alter the steps? I was not just making decisions about things absent from the score; I was also sometimes consciously changing things. After translating all of BUCK Rachel asked if she could change a step. Rather than spank right, heel drop left, step right, could she spank right, step right, heel drop right? “It just makes more sense in my body,” she said. I quickly replied yes, but that got me thinking.

First, even though I tried to be as honest to the score as possible, I am quite certain I altered the original choreography unknowingly. In fact, I doubt the score is perfectly true to “the original” either, and the discrepancy of timing discussed above is one example. Though allowing Rachel to change a step is a blatant example of disregard for what is written, in that moment I was thinking of this dancer, the living, breathing person standing in front of me, the one who would perform this dance in front of hundreds of people in just a few short weeks. She is a different person than the original dancer, and there has to be some acknowledgment of this. I see that as part of my role as interpreter of the script; one of my responsibilities is to negotiate the differences between this dancer and the original, between this performance of the dances and those decades ago. This is another instance where interpretation of a score, a piece of supposedly “true” archival evidence can produce more than one iteration.

As I make my way to my conclusion, I want to give an example of the slipperiness of work with the archive in performance. Rubin was thrilled that I had been able to read the scores because he wanted to present the choreography “just like 1940” (Rubin, rehearsal), and though Rachel and I did our best to revive the tap dance steps as written, her performances were not perfect. In one performance at the Lincoln Theatre in Columbus, Rachel made a mistake in the

first step of RHUMBA and then improvised the first half of the dance because she could not find her way back in to the choreography. Her improvisation was definitely in the style of the piece, but the steps and choreography that we worked so hard to recreate were missing. I found this moment very true to live performance and I wondered if the original dancer had similar experiences in her long performing career with the Ted Lewis Orchestra. I also wondered if anyone in the audience could possibly know that they were being duped; I suspect that even Rubin did not know she was not performing the choreography as it was written. So again I ask, is it ever possible to recreate a dance “exactly as it was”?

Tap dance scores – from Kahnnotation to those written in Labanotation to these Lewis-notations – are historical documents. As historians Martha Howell and Walter Prevenier tell us, archival documents require “historians to make assumptions, to fill in blanks, to make intuitive guesses [...]. This is, in the crudest sense, the essence of historical interpretation, and such interpretation is just that – interpretation” (79). As a dancer, I have been interpreting the choreography of others my whole life, and in this project, I translated this skill to my work as a historian. I trust that each interpretation, no matter how close to the original, will never BE the original. The archive and the tap dance notations in it offered me a bounty of information from which I produced tap dances as near as possible to those that came before. Though I am not inspired to create a system of tap dance notation nor am I desperate to revive more of these Lewis notations, my work with the scores and the show in general raised many practical and philosophical questions in regards to working in the archive. In my future work, whether I am calling a square dance, teaching the shim sham, or writing about a contemporary dance piece, I will continue to remind myself that, in dealing with the archive, whether adding to it, working with in it, or interpreting artifacts from it, there are many possibilities.

Works Cited

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