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Nature Moving Naturally in Succession
An exploration of Doris Humphrey's *Water Study*
By Lesley Main

PP slide 1

Water Study was the first major ensemble work Doris Humphrey choreographed following her departure from Denishawn in 1928 and it continues to be staged today, most recently in 2008 in New York City by Gail Corbin and Turin, Italy by myself. As a Humphrey exponent, I regard *Water Study* as a corner stone of Humphrey's tradition because it embodies the first representation of her movement philosophy.⁵ Humphrey went on to formulate and articulate her philosophy over subsequent years, observing, "only much later did I find in Nietzsche a word expression of the meaning of these movements".⁶ It was in fact three years after choreographing *Water Study*, in 1931, that she read *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) and identified Nietzsche's Apollonian/Dionysian concept with her own theories of movement which she named 'Fall and Recovery'. Humphrey's movement philosophy encompasses the interconnecting aspects of breath rhythm, successional movement, gravitational pull, wholeness of movement and moving from the inside out. She recognized the diametrically opposed urges toward danger and repose that Nietzsche ascribed to the two basic kinds of man. She wrote "not only does the fall and recovery make movement living and vital, but it has psychological meaning as well. These emotional overtones were recognized very early by me and I instinctively responded to the exciting danger of the fall and the repose and peace of recovery".⁷ Humphrey described the creation of *Water Study* as "starting with human feeling, with body movement and its momentum in relation to the psyche and to gravity, and as it developed the movements took on the form and tempo of moving water".⁸ Her intention was rooted in a broader need for experimentation. Her motivation was an exploration of natural movement and its relationship to natural forces including the gravitational pull, rather than any conscious decision to create a dance 'about' a specific theme.

PP slide 2 - quote

A notebook of Humphrey's dated from this period contains the starting points for the work - "Nature moves in succession, usually in an unfolding succession to a climax and a more sudden succession to cessation or death".⁹ Humphrey's emphasis on succession is key because successional flow is a central aspect of the fall and recovery action. Her brief description also completely encapsulates the eventual structure of the dance itself, as it grows from a state of stillness through a progressive series of rising crescendos to a point of climax that explodes into the sudden cessation she describes here. She went on to conclude: "all natural movement must follow that law of nature - of which water is the best example to follow as it most nearly approximates the capacity of our rhythm and phrase length".¹⁰ Rhythm, alongside successional flow, is at the root of the work, as Humphrey discussed in a program note from 1928, "Probably the thing that distinguishes musical rhythm from other rhythm is the measured time beat, so this has been eliminated from the *Water Study* and the rhythm flows in natural phrases instead of cerebral measures. There is no count to hold the

dancers together in the very slow opening rhythm, only the feel of the wavelength that curves the backs of the group”.¹¹ There is, in actual fact, no ‘count’ in the conventional sense at any point in the dance, one reason why dancing in and watching this work is so exhilarating.

Eleanor King, from the original cast, commented that the dance was “the most satisfying of all Humphrey’s works to perform because it was a masterpiece of flowing motion”. More recently, Marcia Siegel described *Water Study* as “one of the most extraordinary works in American dance” and “still one of the most stunning achievements in abstract dance”. Deborah Jowitt, agreeing, observed that it “beautifully expresses the analogy between the human being and universal processes”. Despite Siegel’s notion of abstract dance and Jowitt’s metaphysical interpretation, the work does conjure up images of the movement of water and waves traversing through space, building in speed and intensity in a seamless flow of energy. The dance was not a literal depiction of the sea but can be read in such a way.

I first experienced the work as a dancer with Ernestine Stodelle and subsequently as her assistant in Europe. This combined exposure provided a deep insight into the work. My own reconstructions never felt quite ‘right’, however, and I couldn’t discern why. Some years ago I endeavoured to find a new way into the dance without disrupting the dance itself. I wanted to find a new place from which to explore the dance afresh and away from the clutter of the past. Humphrey’s ideas acted as a framework for that exploration. Through exploring the ideas of succession and successional movement, one particular facet emerged – the ‘forward successional curve’. This movement occurs repeatedly and in varying guises throughout the dance. Basing my exploration on the physiological and dynamic aspects of this movement and its variant forms allowed a new perspective to be created from which I could approach the work as a whole.

‘Succession’ as a concept is suggestive of one thing after another; connection; nothing happening in isolation; a natural progression, growing and diminishing, advancing and receding. King commented, “In the succession patterns which determine the flow, every inch of the exhilarated body moves, as the repeated successions pass from the toes through the knees, hips and spine to crown of the head”.³² Here she is talking about succession in experiential bodily terms and at the same time spatial terms, as the movement flows across the space. There is an organic connectivity within the individual body and, simultaneously, from one body to the next. The idea of succession in *Water Study* cannot be considered in isolation however. It needs a further connection to ‘nature’ and ‘the natural’. Margaret Lloyd observed, “In her desire to get to the living source, Doris turned to nature rhythms as she turned to natural movement.”³³ Here are two discrete yet interlinking ideas. Nature rhythms are ever present and unchanged by time – the wind blows today as it did in 1928, as the rain falls, as tides ebb and flow. It is not hard to identify the rhythms created by each of these natural happenings. Nor is it hard to discern that these rhythms are not constant but ever changing – ‘successional’, one might say. Through the rhythms in nature comes movement in nature, the rise and fall of a rhythm creating the movement. As a breeze picks up, for example, the movement of leaves or branches increases correspondingly. That Humphrey choreographed *Water Study* right at the time she was engaged in a detailed exploration of natural movement based on the rise and fall of the breath and the gravitational pull is no coincidence but a natural consequence.

There are influences of ‘nature’ and ‘the natural’ in Humphrey’s creative process in terms of movement, rhythm and time. She talked about “starting with human feeling, with body

movement and its momentum in relation to the psyche and to gravity”.³⁴ Interesting is her reference to ‘human feeling’ and the ‘psyche’, aspects of human nature rather than the natural world. Is there any difference, however, between the rise and fall of human emotion? One could argue that succession is equally prevalent in a human context.

The absence of a structured time frame creates a freedom that has a logical connection to the organic flow of Humphrey’s choreography. She not only created ‘the natural’ in movement terms but she allowed it to exist in a natural time span. In her program note she referred to “the rhythm flow(ing) in natural phrases instead of cerebral measures”.³⁵ The sense of ‘freedom’ exists in a number of contexts. The human spirit, by and large, is free; nature, similarly, is unrestricted. The liberatory aspects of *Water Study* exist in terms of time and space, one interlinking with the other. The amount of space the dance can cover links directly with the amount of time it takes for the movement to unfold. The implication of ‘rhythm flowing in natural phrases’ suggests an open time frame but not completely without parameters because Humphrey’s reference to ‘phrases’ implies the existence of a formal structure of sorts. In fact, the actual phrase structure of the dance is very clearly defined. As the dance progresses, so too does the forward successional curve. I would suggest that it is the principal movement motif in the work because the development of the curve closely maps the development of the dance itself, certainly in Stodelle’s version.

PP slide 3 - ideas linked to PP slide 4 - structure

Humphrey provides a key set of ideas in the extract from her notebook, cited earlier - “*Nature moves in succession* [1], usually in an *unfolding succession* [2] *to a climax* [3] and a more *sudden succession* [4] *to cessation* [5] or *death* [6]”.³¹ The first idea, “*Nature moves in succession* [1], correlates with the opening section, ‘The First 5 Waves’ as it builds from a point of stillness; the *unfolding succession* [2] could describe the ‘Breakers and Tumblesaults’, as the choreography becomes more expansive in both time and space; the *climax* [3] comes in the ‘Five Big Rushing Waves’ as the movement reaches its peak; the *sudden succession* [4] is the ‘Splash/Whirlpool’ as the ‘whole’ fragments; *cessation* [5] is seen in the ‘Calm’ and ‘Spray’, as the power of the movement dynamic recedes; and *death* [6] is the ‘Roller’, the final progression to a final stillness.

I’d like to look in more depth now at four of the six sections to illustrate the progression of the forward successional curve alongside Humphrey’s ideas: **Dancers on stage**

PP slide 5

The First 5 Waves - “*Nature moves in succession* [1]”

A key aspect of Humphrey’s style is that it can appear effortless which belies what is happening in bodily terms to create that ‘look’. *Water Study* is a revealing example because of its uncluttered clarity and economy of movement vocabulary. On an individual and collective basis, dancers need a mature grasp of Humphrey’s principles of successional movement in various forms. The opening section is an important example of movement design because of the physiological connections between the shapes created here and how they recur in developed form/s later in the work. The ‘constant’ running throughout is the ‘forward successional curve’, partially executed in the First Wave and then more completely from the Second Wave with its greater height and volume.

The movement vocabulary comprises a series of variations that create an image of waves growing in height and intensity from a state of calm. The emergence of the First Wave is

subtle to the point that the audience may not even be aware the dance has begun until the wave has progressed some way across the stage. The movement begins from a low kneeling tucked position. [Dancers demo in unison – First Wave] The pelvis lifts up over the heels on an in-breath. A successional curve is initiated in the torso. The feeling is one of suspension, of a long curve coming up out of the ground through the tail bone and spine, which proceeds back down into the ground through the crown of the head to move onward through space. For the dancer, there is a complete kinesthetic immersion from this first movement, with the sensory surfaces of the body alive to the energies that are being generated in every dimension. [Breath out] The pelvic-initiated curve is developed into a higher, more expansive curve in the Second Wave. [Dancers demo – Second Wave] Here, the fingertips lift just off the floor as the elbows billow out to enhance the shape. As the back surface of the body is drawn up into this shape, there is a sense of buoyancy in the hollow created by the movement. This hollow is not an empty space but has substance and volume. [Breath out]

The Third Wave sees a higher curve, arms extending one in front, one behind, with the weight shifting forward through the pelvis and right knee. [Dancers demo – Third Wave] The buoyant sensation increases and does much to instil a sense of ‘the organic’ for the dancer, of being part of and immersed in a force that is alive and ever moving. [Breath out] The natural gravitational pull of the undertow becomes more pronounced as the wave recedes, one body picking up the resistance of the pull after another, dove tailing to create a continuous fluid image. The opening section progresses from calm ripples, barely discernible, much as one might observe looking out to sea. The ripples build gradually into fully formed waves and as they do so there is a sense of the waves coming closer toward the shore – ‘nature moving in succession’.

PP slide 6

Breakers/Tumblesaults - “unfolding succession [2]”

The transition into the ‘Breakers’ signals a change in the tide. Perhaps, even, a different tide. Humphrey did not set out to create a literal interpretation of ‘the sea’ at a particular point in time and the structure of the dance allows us to see a successional or episodic form. The end of the Fifth Wave is a fleeting tableau of two waves peeking and falling. From here, there is a separation as the dancers are drawn upward from the floor and outward, into two linear formations. Stodelle referred to this section as waves crashing and breaking against rocks. Dancers are in unison and in opposition, allowing the ‘waves’ to pull away and toward each other. The main movement motif commences with two weighted side swings. On each ‘up’ swing/suspension, the arms and upper body are in a variation of the forward successional curve. The body creates the same sense of expanse within the space and shape in front of the torso. Danced in profile, the audience sees the form of two waves building to a peak before breaking and rushing in to centre to ‘crash on rocks’ as the dancers run and burst upward into two leaps. [Dancers demo – ‘Breakers’ swings, succ and leaps]

The idea of ‘unfolding succession’ can be seen in the structure of the ‘Breakers’ section, first as the alternate groupings are established and then, in a variation of the leaping/falling action that draws the group together.

PP slide 7

Five Big Rushing Waves - “climax [3]”

Whilst not the end of the dance, one can attribute the idea of ‘climax’ here because the movement reaches its peak. The lined formation of the previous section dissolves into a cluster. Each wave begins with a deep fall and suspension, a development of the side swing

movement in the ‘Breakers’ and a further representation of the forward successional curve. The feeling of being ‘inside’ the body of the wave is different from those that have come before. There is a more profound sense of immersion as the bodies come together in a completely unified organism for the first time. Stodelle described the running as ‘surging’ and ‘pounding’. One can feel and hear the change in intensity. [Dancers demo – 2/3 from d.st corner]

The image I use for this section is drawn from the type of waves found off the North Shore in Hawaii favoured by the ‘big wave’ surfing community. These waves are the most extraordinary bodies of water, so immense and powerful as they reach a peak but potentially deadly. The immensity can seem benign at first, belying the true nature of the waves as they unfold. The extreme contrast inherent in these waves parallels the extreme ends of Humphrey’s ‘fall and recovery’ theory, the Apollonian/Dionysian ‘arc between two deaths’. Apollo and Dionysus represent conflicting but intertwining impulses of human nature – the Apollonian drive to achieve perfection and stability and the Dionysian desire to experience the ecstasy of abandon. Humphrey described these states as “different names for the will to balance and the will to grow”,³⁷ implying that one must reach out beyond one’s known, safe experience in order to advance. Stodelle described this growth as “a daring act of exploration leading to self-knowledge or disaster”.³⁸ *Water Study* is full of potential disasters for the dancer, one of the reasons why it is so thrilling to perform. As the dance reaches this ‘climax’, the timing of the fall is that ‘daring act of exploration’. There is no cue and there is no count. The dancers must repeatedly fall together as one, trusting their collective intuition.

PP Slide 8

More briefly now:

Splash/Whirlpool - “sudden succession [4]”

The ‘sudden succession’ comes out of the 5th wave. As the peak of the wave is reached, a small group of dancers link hands and stream out of the main group. The runners’ sudden exit initiates a series of descending and decelerating falls in the remaining dancers. The breakout by the runners is unexpected, hence why the idea of ‘sudden’ makes sense. What follows is a rapid succession downward to a point of stillness, reached in a matter of seconds. The tableau created is reminiscent of the end of the 5th Wave, with its fleeting image of a still form.

PP slide 9

Calm/Spray - “cessation [5]”

Out of the stillness comes a ‘cessation’, an ‘ending’ rather than an ‘end’, suggesting there is still some way to travel. A series of weighted pulling ripples, danced in unison, depicts calm returning after a pounding, relentless storm. The moving image is undulating; shifting, rising and falling on the breath, bodies crossing in space.

PP slide 10

Roller – “death [6]”

The movement of the ‘Roller’ passes through the First Wave then the Second Wave before the forward successional curve extends outward into a lunge. As the weight shifts forward, the ‘peak’ of the wave is reached before a sustained descent into horizontal stillness. As each dancer reaches the peak, the next one begins. The result is a sedate expansive image flowing across the stage, “rumbling out to sea” as Ernestine used to say. The last dancer in the canon completes the descent of the ‘Roller’ off stage. The image that is left is of on-going motion, of a continuing succession of movement even though one can’t physically see it any longer.

The correlation between ‘death’ and *Water Study* had not occurred to me before considering Humphrey’s ideas more deeply in interpretive terms. There is, of course, no literal ‘death’ but there is a link to Humphrey’s idea of ‘death’ as it relates to her movement philosophy. She identified the ‘arc between two deaths’ from Nietzsche’s writing which she subsequently defined as ‘active death’ and passive death’. Having already considered the Apollonian/Dionysian correlation earlier in the work, the final position in *Water Study* is a clear example of ‘passive death’ because there is nowhere else to go beyond the prone horizontal place each body reaches at the end.

PP slide 11 - 2nd Wave/curve

Identifying the forward successional curve and then charting its development throughout the dance was the crucial factor that allowed me to engage with the work from the present. Without changing a single movement or direction or idea, I was able to work with the dance in a way that made sense in the present and, more importantly, produced a version that felt right – felt like it used to when I was dancing it.

To conclude this presentation, we would like to show you the work. Cast size normally runs between 10 and 16. Today’s group numbers only 8, which would not happen in a formal performance context but will allow you to see the various groupings, patterns and spatial design Humphrey employs. Allow your imagination to increase the scope of what you see before you. The costume design is a new one I’ve been playing with for the last couple of years. My preference is for the original skin-toned leotard and tights because of the clarity they give the form. However, I was intrigued by the motion and sound created by this design. Lighting for the dance is an important factor in creating the right ambiance. In a fully staged production, the dance would be backlit with a blue cyc along with low side lighting that builds in level as the dance progresses to the ‘Splash/Whirlpool’ section and then subsides back down.

Introduce dancers –full performance of ‘Water Study’