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DANCE HISTORY SOURCE MATERIALS

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Introduction

To be able to work efficiently and effectively with sources is a required tool of the dance historian's trade. Even though the use of computers has revolutionized documentation of historical sources the basic necessity remains to start from the extant evidence of dance. It may well be that as more advanced computer programs are developed so dance historians will need to re-tool and to re-appraise well-established practices, but the starting point for study is essentially with source materials, the bedrock of dance history.

Types and categories of source materials

In history generally a fundamental distinction is made between types of source materials, and it applies equally to dance sources. This is the separation of 'primary' from 'secondary' sources, which is crucial since it determines the nature and value of study in an area as well as any written outcomes.

Primary sources are those that came into existence during the period being studied: thus they are first-hand and contemporary, and provide the raw materials for dance study. Examples of primary source materials in dance are a dance performance, a choreographer's working score or log with all its amendments and annotations, actual costumes worn by dancers for known performances and eye-witness accounts of certain dance events. Secondary sources, as the term suggests, are second-hand, processed, after the event accounts, often using hindsight to trace developments in the dance over a span of time. All the standard dance histories, dance encyclopedias and dance reference books come into the secondary source category. Some of these texts are based on primary sources though the more 'popular' histories often use materials previously published in other dance history books.

Some sources can be regarded as both primary and secondary according

to the purposes for which they are being used. An example of this is the Kinney and Kinney (1936) dance history book. This is now a primary source for early-twentieth-century European theatre dance but in its time and subsequently it has also been used as a secondary source since much of the text reviews the development of dance from ancient Egyptian origins by reference to other published works.

The relative importance of primary and secondary sources usually depends upon the kind of work being done and the person undertaking it. The beginner, faced with too many primary sources at once, may be confused by apparently conflicting evidence, but to use only secondary sources could engender the attitude that all the interesting work has been done and dance history is fixed, undisputed and boring. The exclusive use of primary sources is the mark of the experienced dance researcher who refers to good secondary sources to provide background, points of entry for further study, bases of comparison, and so on. On the other hand, concentrating solely on secondary source material by reading many dance history books can be rewarding, interesting and informative, but as such this means reading about dance history and neither getting involved in the methodologies of dance history nor actually contributing to it.

Generally then, a balance that is appropriate to the kind of study being undertaken has to be maintained between the use of primary and secondary source materials, and this must be based on the recognition that the former are of a particular period and the latter are about a particular period, that the former were produced during the period and the latter after the period.[1]

Given the crucial primary/secondary source divide, in dance history it is often useful to make further categories in order to group similar sources and to gain an overall impression of the kind of evidence they present. However, while the assigning of primary and secondary source status is a necessary first step, subsequent categorization depends largely upon the source base of the topic area selected. For example, the sources gathered for a study of an eminent dancer or dance teacher might usefully be placed in separate public and private categories, the first consisting of published material such as reviews and journal articles, the second of unpublished diaries and letters. Similarly, a focus on a particular dance style might suggest the grouping of written sources, such as class notes, monographs and textbooks, and non-written sources, including sketches, photographs and video.

The categories proposed here, of written, visual and sound sources, are broad but they have the merit of reflecting the classifications used in many dance archives and collections. Since the order in which these categories are presented is non-alphabetical it clearly signals some kind of hierarchy. In fact the order is based on current importance and frequency of use, it being the case that, in Western dance history scholarship, written materials have traditionally taken precedence over visual while, overall, sound sources are only minimally used. This reflects the hegemony of the printed and written

word prior to the introduction of new technologies to record visual images and sound.[2] However, as 'new' dance history methodology develops and traditional practices and the outcomes they inevitably give rise to are questioned, it is likely that in the future more emphasis will be given to the use of visual and sound sources than hitherto. Furthermore, the need to use written sources in conjunction with visual and sound sources is becoming increasingly recognized.

1 *Written sources* - advertisements, autobiographies, bills, cast lists, choreographers' log books, critics' reviews, dance notations, diaries, edicts, journals, letters, literature, magazines, music notations, newspapers, parish records, posters, school records, theatre programmes, receipts, tracts, etc.
2 *Visual sources* - primarily the dance itself, also architecture, costumes, designs for sets, films, musical instruments, paintings, photographs, prints, properties, sculpture, videotapes, etc.
3 *Sound sources:*
aural - music (live and recorded), sound accompaniment,
oral - interviews (formal and informal), reminiscences.

These lists are by no means exhaustive, and some materials are such that they could be placed in more than one category depending upon their use. For example, a theatre programme is a written source but it may also be of value for its visual contents such as lay-out, photographs, typeface, etc.

The dance as a visual source in its own right is often taken for granted yet certain dances, even in the here and now of performance, are 'living history'. For example, a current standard performance of a ballet such as *Swan Lake* is but the latest presentation of a work that originated in 1877. Even though the choreography has changed, perhaps almost totally, its survival today is a modern manifestation of a theatre dance genre of considerable historical significance - as well as testimony to the manner in which the ballet tradition is 'handed on'. Thus a dance performance may itself contain the historical threads which can be traced back from the present through time to its inception or earliest records.

Problematic source materials

Most of the items given in the proposed three categories could readily be labelled as primary or secondary sources but some materials present problems in this respect.

Probably the easiest to deal with is photocopied material. The original item, such as a theatre programme, may be a primary source but a photocopy of it is clearly not. There may well be differences in quality of paper, size, colour, texture and so on, all of which may be of significance in the

original. Therefore, a photocopy is just that, a photocopy of a primary or secondary source and it does not take on the status of the original. However, in the future current photocopied material will assume primary source status of a kind for the period in which it was produced.

Descriptions of village dance festivals and society balls often occur in historical novels and other fiction and appear authentic. Nevertheless, such literature is solely a primary source for the period in which it was written and cannot be regarded as evidence for the period about which it was written. There are, for example, several references to dance in Thomas Hardy's (1872) *Under the Qreemuood Tree*, a novel set in early nineteenth-century southern England. In 1926 the then English Folk Dance Society asked Hardy about the accuracy of his dance descriptions. It transpired that in his novel Hardy had described dances that he himself had performed fifty or sixty years earlier. In this instance Hardy is recalling a personal experience, a primary source, but recreating and placing it in a fictional context.

Drawings, paintings, prints, sculptures and sketches of dancers by contemporary artists may at first sight be considered good primary source material; however, there is a need to be aware of prevailing artistic conventions and style. In her book *The Dance in Ancient Qreece*, Lawler (1964) points to the consequence of not recognizing such practices in art.

> The Greek vase painter often draws figures without a 'floor line' - a convention which has led some modern interpreters to insert an imaginary 'floor line' of their own in a given scene, and then to deduce from its position all sorts of untenable conclusions, e.g. that the ancient Greeks engaged in something like ballet and even toe-dancing.
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> (Lawler 1964: 21)

Even when it is known that a dancer co-operated with or posed for an artist, as in Isadora Duncan's case, it is necessary to realize that what is presented is seen through the artist's eyes. Sketches by Rodin and Bourdelle of Duncan dancing are very different in the impression they give of dynamism in Duncan's movement. The former are more static and robust, the latter more fluid and delicate. Therefore, although such material is primary, by virtue of its origins, it needs to be used with considerable care and understanding. Knowledge of artists' personal styles and the art movements or schools with which they identified is required. It may also be revealing to view them as witting or unwitting testimony (see Evaluation of Source Materials p. 150).

In the light of the difficulties that may arise in the use of visual works of art it might be assumed that photographs of dancers would be accurate and, consequently, impeccable primary source material. Yet this would not allow for the fact that many of the technical problems encountered in the early

days of photography, such as exposure time and capturing movement accurately, remained unsolved until well into the twentieth century. Thus photographs (c.1855) of Fanny Cerrito, one of the famous ballerinas of the Romantic period, were of necessity posed, as were most of those of Denishawn dancers taken between 1915 and 1931. Therefore, in using photographs as historical evidence it is important to distinguish between posed and action photographs and to establish location. Posed portraits are usually taken in the photographer's studio, although occasionally outdoor and theatre locations are used, and the pose may or may not be from an actual dance. Action photographs, a comparatively recent development, may evoke a performance mood or quality, but even when captioned with the title of a dance it does not necessarily follow that such photographs were taken during an actual performance.

Film and video may also seem to be easily classified as either primary or secondary source material and, generally, this is the case but here, too, caution is needed.

Much of the early dance film available presents difficulties in establishing date, place of origin and subject matter simply because such details, even if recorded at the time, can readily become separated from the film itself. Laboratory analysis may establish approximate dating; nevertheless, dance film shot in the first decade or so of the twentieth century is invariably unstable and also difficult to use. The apparent jerkiness of the movement can be rectified in the transfer to video format but it needs to be appreciated that since the filmed event is seen through the eyes of the cameraperson it is inevitably a selected presentation.

Video recordings are easy to use and amenable to various analytical tech' niques. Even so, whether the video is a primary source, as in the recording of a dance event (where occasionally it is necessary to distinguish between actual performance and rehearsal), or secondary, as in a documentary television programme (although these often include primary source inserts), here, too, the element of selectivity has to be taken into account. It is rare, for example, for the whole performance area to be in frame throughout a video recording of theatre dance and, similarly, a processional carnival with dance elements is unlikely to be recorded in its entirety. Other matters which need to be allowed for when using dance video as a historical source are that the movement tends to be 'flattened', the space and dynamic can be distorted and the small dancing image depersonalized.

Sound sources may also be problematic in use. In this text 'sound sources' is the preferred category title although in general history texts 'oral sources' is used as the global term. This choice of terminology is deliberate here because it allows a distinction to be made between aural sources, such as music, and oral sources, which can then be reserved for the spoken word.

If the provenance of a music recording or disc can be established and the instruments being played identified then few problems will arise in the use

of such materials, which are likely to be primary in origin. Nevertheless, if the current recording of a music work is being employed as a source for studying a dance choreographed to that music decades or even centuries ago it needs to be appreciated that such matters as tempi and other aspects of performance may well have changed during the intervening years. This is a further example of a secondary source which, although of value, cannot be used as if it had primary source status.

Oral sources are gaining importance as their unique significance in dance history is becoming increasingly recognized. Generally these sources are of two types. First, there is the oral tradition of a subgroup or culture which is passed on from one generation to the next and is liable to both embellishment or erosion but appears to retain essential features. Reference is made earlier in this chapter to the handing-on of roles in ballet. This is accomplished by means of a combined movement and oral tradition which is also an important element in social and traditional dance. Second, there are the oral histories which are concerned with first-hand accounts of events and experiences lived through. These are primary sources of potentially great importance to the dance historian since they offer material not readily accessed elsewhere or even unavailable by any other means. Consequently, oral history sources need to be used with a clear understanding of what they can yield rather than with an undue emphasis on their perceived shortcomings.

Whether live or recorded, oral testimony may range from reminiscences given as a monologue to highly structured interviews. When dancers and other witnesses speak freely of the past and their involvement in it as recollections this resembles a sound autobiography. Typically, it is likely to be multilayered and possibly anachronistic but its value lies, for example, in the accuracy of remembered details of choreography, particular interpretations and performances and perceptions of events. Such testimony is 'lived experience' and is properly regarded as phenomenological. While former choreographers, critics and dancers may have reliable movement memories (although this is not necessarily so), it is likely that, as in a written autobiography, events recalled and retold may be subject to selection and re-ordering. Facts and other evidence can be cross-checked with reliable contemporary accounts but primarily these personal accounts need to be valued for what they offer in terms of insights, impressions, feelings and the overall ambience of a period rather than for factual matters. Oral testimony of recent dance history has the merit of immediacy although long-term trends and developments may not be appreciated. Conversely a dancer reminiscing about events that occurred more than half a century ago may well be able to describe key events and personalities but the detail may be missing.

Since the monologue style may not always yield the specific material sought, an interview format is often adopted. In this the recollection and narrative process can be given a degree of structure and kept 'on track' and

this may lead then and there or subsequently to a memory being triggered. Here again, though, there are pitfalls to be avoided and the interviewer needs to be aware that a potentially interventionist role may prejudice the gaining of unique insights.

Evaluation of source materials

With problematic source materials the need is to establish primary or secondary status and to understand the particular ways in which they can then best be used. In contrast some source materials can easily be categorized but they have to be judged by various criteria in order to determine their value to dance history study. Three examples illustrate the point.

Historical studies of dance that cross language divides necessitate using translations if texts cannot be read in their original form. Translations made by non-dance specialists may place the dance essence of an account in jeopardy; caution has to be exercised because some dance terms and nuances do not translate readily. In such circumstances the dance historian has to attempt to evaluate the translations to hand in order to determine, for example, how much credence should be given to one translated text in relation to another.

Autobiographies, the written counterparts of oral histories, are often seized upon as being central primary sources especially when emanating from a choreographer or dancer. Yet these, too, require evaluation. Occasionally authorship is contested and some recent autobiographies have been acknowledged as partially 'ghost-written'. Other factors which need to be taken into account are the time-gap between when the events occurred and their written description, and whether the text is based on diaries kept and notes made at the time or largely consists of memories retained over the intervening years. Some autobiographies are written in a narrative style with the intention of adding a personal viewpoint to well-known events, others are motivated by the desire to 'set the record straight' and to challenge existing interpretations of cause and effect, although such underlying reasons are rarely made explicit. In this respect autobiographies tend to be more deliberate and less immediate than oral histories simply because the written word is perceived as the more permanent testimony and, thereby, to offer the opportunity to refashion and even recast past events. Autobiographies are valuable primary source material for what is revealed about authors, their personal relationships, their perceptions and views about the particular events in which they were involved and the prevailing climates of opinion within which they worked. But, as chronicles of facts, autobiographies can be downright misleading and understandably so. Therefore, in order to extract the full value of an autobiography in dance history terms it is necessary to evaluate it as a primary source of a particular kind and to use it in the full understanding of its various attributes.

Biographies may be classified as primary sources when written during their subjects' lifetime, or immediately afterwards, and secondary sources when written much later. Nevertheless, in some respects a more crucial distinction is by reference to the materials upon which the biography is based. In this case judgements have to be made as to the value and merit of the primary and secondary sources used as well as the balance between them. Other factors which can inform such evaluations are, for example, whether the subject of the biography is still alive and if access to personal papers has been gained. Most biographies are of the chronological-narrative type, some are more thematic in structure and a few are written in the vein of other disciplines such as psychoanalytical studies. It is important, too, in arriving at judgements about the value of a biography to include a consideration of its author in terms of interest in, links with and knowledge of the subject matter.

While translations, autobiographies and biographies are just three examples of source materials where prior evaluation promotes effective use, there are four further guidelines which can aid this process. These are to do with testimony, authenticity, reliability and value.

In general history Marwick (1989) makes a distinction between 'witting' and 'unwitting' testimony which is also relevant to the evaluation of dance history source materials. The term 'witting' testimony is used to describe those primary sources in which the originator of the source sets out intentionally to convey the information that the source contains. Examples of witting testimony abound in dance history. Sachs (1933, trans. 1937) bases his classification of dance themes and types on the reports of European travellers who, from the seventeenth century onwards, saw various kinds of tribal dancing in the then remote areas of Africa, Asia and other parts of the world. Sometimes these eye-witnesses to the event give information over and above what they intended and this is then termed 'unwitting' testimony. In many of the accounts included by Sachs the use of words such as 'obscene' and 'hideous' convey far more about the attitudes of the European onlookers than the quality of the dance being described. Indeed, it is often this very failure to realize the culture-bound stance of observers and to ignore the unwitting nature of their testimony that makes the early dance history texts both suspect and difficult to use.

As well as eye-witness and participant accounts the official documents of national, regional and local arts organizations and dance companies offer particular examples of witting testimony and this is especially so when they include annual statements and financial accounts. In contrast, many of the photographs of women dancers taken during the first quarter of the twentieth century provide unwitting evidence which the dance historian can use to gain insight into the then prevailing attitudes both to the body and to women.

A second useful test in evaluating dance source materials is that of

authenticity. This is to do with whether a source is what it purports to be in terms of its subject matter, date and provenance. Examples of this are Nijinsky's (1937) diaries and Duncan's (1927) autobiography, since both publications have been questioned on the grounds of authenticity It has been suggested that the original writings of these dancers have been amended and altered and, in some instances, passages written by others inserted. However, unless the historical study is based on only one source, and this would be rare, questions of authenticity can usually be resolved or at least allowed for by reference to other primary sources.

The reliability or the degree to which a particular source can be trusted is a third important factor in making judgements about dance sources. A dance theatre programme can normally be relied upon to give accurate information. Nevertheless, when dancers are injured, last-minute alterations in casting and even in the dances presented may have to be made and therefore what is printed regarding certain dances and performers in a theatre programme may not always be accurate. Eyewitness accounts may also need to be assessed in relation to their reliability. It is often vital to know whether such a witness was an interested, although peripheral, observer or a key participant. But from this it cannot necessarily be assumed that the latter is likely to be more reliable than the former. Corroboration with other sources may confirm the reverse to be the case.

The value of a single item and the comparative value of several source materials is a fourth important factor in judging worth and usefulness. Shawn's (1963) book on Delsarte, the nineteenth-century movement theorist, is itself a secondary source but, since Delsarte did not publish his own work and the publications of his various pupils are largely unavailable, Shawn's text is often used in the initial study of Delsartean theory. It is important therefore to establish the value of Shawn's book as a means of gaining access to Delsarte's work. In this case, as in many others, the matter may be resolved to a certain degree by examining the bibliography and the references cited. Mere length in either case does not guarantee worth, but in Shawn's thirty-six-page bibliography 'with commentary' the Delsarte literature itemized consists almost entirely of primary sources and the annotations are particularly detailed. This is an indication of the book's value as good secondary source material to the dance historian studying Delsarte even though more recent studies have advanced knowledge in this area considerably

The value of other sources may reside in their status. For example, the British *Dancing Times* (published monthly from 1910) and the American *Dancemagazine* (published monthly from 1926) are the leading 'traditional' publications of their kind in their respective countries. They derive much of their authoritative status from their longevity, continuous publication and the resulting vast written source which has accumulated. This does not, of course, confer special status on any single item published in one magazine:

rather it is the whole runs that cover many decades of dance history which are significant.

With some written material the value of the evidence it contains can be determined by relevant knowledge of the author and this is particularly so in using the work of the dance critics. Dance criticism at its best is objective and informative with the judgements made being supported explicitly by reasons and by references to the choreography, the performance and so on. Although dance critics may well enthuse and inspire, it is important in the study of dance history to be able to recognize the difference between matters of fact and matters of personal opinion in their writings. Beaumont's perplexed remark on first seeing Martha Graham dance in *Appalachian Spring* in London in 1954 - 'but why does she roll about on the floor ... l' It breaks the line' (Beaumont in Roose-Evans 1970: 110) is understandable only in the light of the knowledge that Beaumont was an expert on ballet with scant knowledge of American modern dance His remark as such is of little value to the dance historian trying to identify trends in Graham's choreography over time but it could be of considerable value to a dance historian interested in, for example, the development of different modes of dance criticism and the prevailing use of particular canons of judgement in theatre dance.

Summary

The importance of source material in dance history study cannot be overstated. All academic disciplines have their essential features, and in dance history one of these is its source base. Source materials in themselves do not constitute dance history but as the remnants of and commentaries upon the past they provide the basic starting point for study. It is, therefore, essential that students of dance history, at whatever level, understand the crucial importance of source materials and take steps to acquire proficiency in their use-

Notes

1 It is important to note that, although the primary and secondary source distinction described here is that which prevails in the discipline of history, in anthropological studies a much more permeable boundary is adopted.
2 This is another instance where historical and anthropological practices differ. In the latter, sound sources often assume primacy and frequently are the only sources available.