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The Life of a Dance: Double Take Part II

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Sporton & Norman, *Double Take*, 1986

The Source Material

This paper has its roots in a dance from a long time ago. As is evident in the charming illustration, I was once a chisel-featured young dancer with a performing career ahead of me. With me in the picture is Sandra Norman, later a principal dancer at the Royal New Zealand Ballet, and we are performing in a 10-minute-long duet called *Double Take*. It was made in 1986 and toured extensively in a repertoire for a small dance company based in Wellington, New Zealand.

There will be more to discuss on this later, especially as to why I think it indicates something important about the process of a dance and the validity of treating dances as they were fixed or known points. There will be some discussion about the notion of documentation and its application to dance contexts, often over-emphasized in the re-creation of dance works, and about what the technology of the last thirty years can teach us about the life of a dance. The authority of documents to define the creative process of dance is what is at stake here, and there will be some questioning of whether resorting to the steps really tells us very much about the essence of a dance.

There is a need to address the broader issue of what constitutes a dance as an artistic proposition and test it against my example. This will seek to show how the work in question demonstrates the principles I am espousing, albeit in an unconventional way, but not less convincing I hope for that. There will then be a few questions about the documentation process for dance itself, what it leaves us with and what we can draw from it as important. Finally, I will talk about how Sandra and I came to revisit [this particular dance](#) and what we thought we were doing in the process. The outcomes of this project provide a practical insight into the configuring features of dance, and show ways of dealing with the temporality of dance by pointing less to unenforceable claims of certainty, authenticity or authority, and more towards to the contingent nature of dance as an opportunity for creative engagement.

Dance and its Documents

At the outset I want to briefly identify some of the characteristics and properties that I think distinguish dance from other arts. Dance has always presented its own challenges as an artistic proposition, and the inadequacies of text or textual metaphors to render it comprehensible ought not to indicate failure to understand, but failure to appreciate its defining features. Its manifestation through the body cannot be easily substituted for analytical concepts drawn from other traditions of art-making, and there is a lengthy history defying attempts to quantify it.

It has been a long time since I have sought to say anything within the dance environment or anything related to the outputs of dance academics, which reflects the drift of my interests. Today I work mostly with the application of technology in the creative arts, usually in the context of the visual arts, but with occasional reference to the physical. One of the properties of digital technology is the difficulty it presents in getting away from the material it generates. Both technically and psychologically, it can be tricky to press the delete button and be certain of the result. This is in stark contrast with my earlier incarnation as a dancer in the 1980s where so much of what I did, what others did, and where and how we did it, were lost in the ephemerality of a dance career. For dancers of the current generation, it may eventually be difficult to escape the performances of their past, given the ease and ubiquity of the means of collecting it and the social media archives that come with even the most casual encounter. But in this there are going to be some false assumptions formulated and some mistaken beliefs preserved about what there is available to watch. During my performing career there was always an instinct to preserve the moments of dance for the sake of record or memory, usually assumed as a short-term prospect. But there are reasons that we should sometimes let go of the past in our lives in general, and in our dancing lives in particular, as I hope this project demonstrates. There are some different strands to my objections about the

instinct to preserve and somehow protect dance in a documentary sense. Essentially, I am arguing that preserving it undermines its original impact, that dance as a cultural proposition shifts in time and that there is something useful to learn from it as a result.

The first aspect to be brought forth in defense of this idea is a rather old one, a text from the period that we now call “early modern times.” Thoinot Arbeau (an anagram of Jehan Tabourot, a French cleric) who wrote one of the first treatise of dance to survive. In *Orchésographie* (1588), Arbeau instructs his pupil, the conveniently named Capriol, in the virtues and uses of dance. But one of the things he warns his young charge of is becoming sentimental about the dances of the past. They will bore you, he says, because there is something about us that changes with the times. As dances, you will find them too slow and too simple, just not meeting your expectations of what a good dance could be, despite having been very popular in their day. Arbeau’s charge has always seemed to me rather credible, and we can increasingly test it these days given the type of technology that was around thirty years ago. It was a moment when even modestly funded dance companies, like the ones I worked for, could afford or get access to relatively good quality video cameras, though they were often challenged by low-light situations. There are implications to ignoring Arbeau’s warning about letting old dances go, and sometimes these are thrown into stark relief by the shadowy videos we have, taken without enough light and at densities we find difficult to tolerate given the HD world we now inhabit. But more revealing, once we have tricked the source material into giving up its treasures through the magic of post-production, we can see the limitations of our past selves.

Historically, the attempt to overcome the ephemerality of dance has given rise to notation systems. The difficulty of creating anything as universal or as comprehensive as musical notation for movement has bedeviled the practice for a long time. Feuillet (1706) notation, for instance, illustrates my point most efficiently. It may be ancient, but it reflects some of the limitations of all the key notation systems in recording dance for posterity. Essentially, the information set Feuillet thought worthy of notating is the footwork and the floor patterns. The movement of the arms was omitted, undoubtedly because the notators assumed the dancers would know what to do with them, in a turn not unlike the absence of dynamics from Bach’s scores. It requires, as Gleick (2011) would recognize, something like the assumptions of talking drums to be applied to flesh out the information into a dance. For it to work at all, it needs data that may seem redundant, but at any given distance it becomes necessary if we are to avoid misunderstanding what isn’t there, as much as is there, as evidence. I would suggest this principle applies to all systems of dance notation: that they have embedded in them a set of priorities that reflect the values of their developers. If this seems outrageous to you, then you are allowing them greater objectivity than could be

applied to the computer code and software that I now spend most of my days dealing with: all technologies have value systems that drive them, and if the purpose of notation is to parse physical information then it is clearly a technology of sorts.

The limitations of this approach seem strikingly evident to me in the pursuit of the collection of traditional folk dance, for instance. Some years ago, when observing a project attempting to notate traditional dances as anthropology, I had a conversation with the main notator. She had noticed from the scores that whilst the anthropologists were very keen on making a claim to objective reality and authenticity, the dances they were dealing with had evolved significantly over the previous twenty years or so. The assumptions they made were based on a notion of immutability of tradition, given they felt confident that they were in possession of the evidence. More important in my anthropological example than the potential of the notation system to emphasize anything consistent with its value system was the notator's frustration with the assumption that the project was capturing certain folk-dance traditions for posterity. In line with some other foolish claims about traditional costumes (they apparently all look the same in any given village when, young people being who they are, there were always subtle variations in order to be different), it was clear they were collecting the dances of a specific moment in time. This was especially obvious when comparing contemporaneous practice with the older scores they had from the 1950s, with the anthropologists declaring the variation to be either the result of the shortcomings of the original notator, the notation system as it stood at the time or, more outrageously, of the dancers of the present moment. The idea that traditions progress was simply not entertained.

Dances as Artworks

These examples deal with social dance in one form or another, so I want to move to examples of dance as an art form. The first is a short history of the Balanchine work *Apollo*. These days, if you wish to perform it, you must contact the Balanchine Trust who ask for evidence that your company can do justice to it. They then insist on the work being mounted by Balanchine Trust approved repetiteur for faithfulness to the original both in steps and execution, with a further copyright invoked of the technique employed to perform them ("the Balanchine Technique"). The trust was set up in 1987, thirty years ago, to protect Balanchine's work, which they do forcefully. Indeed, Balanchine's name, if capitalized, is a trademark of the Trust. *Apollo* (originally performed as *Apollo Musgete* and occasionally in other variations and languages), is dated as if from 1928, the date of its first performance, when Balanchine was 24. However, the version that we see in the repertoire of the world's ballet companies is not the one Balanchine presented at the Sarah Bernhardt Theatre in Paris in that year. In fact, Balanchine revised the ballet five times in his own lifetime, in various forms, dependent on cast and company. The version we

see preserved is the last one, done in 1980 for the New York City Ballet, with Peter Martins. The version presented the year before had Mikhail Baryshnikov as the eponymous hero, who was taught a lesson about NYCB as an ensemble company by having the male variation at the beginning omitted. If this shows anything, it is that Balanchine himself understood the provisionality of dance and the need to revisit the choreography of even a revered classic. This is in stark contrast to the score: after 1928, Stravinsky made a few minor changes in 1947 and that was that. But this isn't quite the end of the story. Despite the loyalty of many modern reviewers to its symbolism, they often treat *Apollo* like a jocular old friend from whom we could learn a thing or two if only we had a chat. Today it seems to me at least as a ballet of purely historical interest, the driving creative force sucked out by copyright clauses and strict application of Balanchine lore. There are plenty of other examples we could choose, noting that Cunningham was often quite surprised when his work was transferred onto other companies with different training, or even new generations of his own company. The absence of a definitive version of *Swan Lake* in the international ballet repertoire is further evidence that dances require freshening up and reworking from time to time to keep themselves engaging. The point is that decay and redundancy are properties of dance, and attempts to preserve them in documentary form only give rise to an untruth about dance as a practice. Richard Wollheim (1968) discusses this issue in relation to musical scores, noting that performances are “tokens of types,” and grant us opportunities to compare. But my own assessment of this principle is that it does not fit to an art form that of necessity treats its heritage as arbitrary, and for whom issues of authenticity emerge only at the point where it becomes legally and financially valuable, privileging this over artistic or creative impetus.

Choreography as a Provisional Framework

So, having shared my prejudices about dance as a document, I can turn to this project, called *Double Take Part II*, and sometimes *Double Take 360*. About two years ago I had an email from a dance company in New Zealand that I worked for many years ago. They were celebrating their 30th anniversary and asked if I would be interested in attending a function in Wellington (not possible, it was fairly short notice). I exchanged some email with them about what they had been up to in my absence, and it transpired that they had very little material from the period in which I worked for them. I had a look in my various boxes of stuff and unearthed a couple of VHS tapes that were made at the time, though like most people I no longer had a machine to run them on. Fortunately, I am the head of a department that includes film and television, and I guessed my tech team could find one, which they did. I was surprised to see the material again and was very impressed with its preservation. In 1986 it was only just becoming normal for small dance companies to have access to cameras of sufficient quality, but I anticipated that with all the

steps involved before seeing what remained, even the presence of tapes would not guarantee the ability to play or study them. There were competing formats, the cameras themselves were expensive, the players unreliable, the potential for demagnetization high, and all the other damage that can be done to objects stored haphazardly for 30 years meant there was little certainty that there would be anything at all to see. I vaguely remember dubbing them in an experimental set up that I never properly checked. But what emerged from the transcoding done by my tech team was uncovering the early history of a small dance company tasked to encourage new choreographers. There were three full evening performances, taken at different points in the year, and with the work at different points of maturity. Most of it was, admittedly, unwatchable. Prior to post-production treatment, theatre lighting and the relatively low resolution of the cameras of the time produced mere shadows rather than watchable dances. But the harsh truth was that some of the dances themselves were simply too disposable to be of much interest. I thought there was one exception.

The company had asked a former dancer, Sandra Norman, to organize the celebrations, and it was the first time I had been in contact with her since shortly after I had left New Zealand. I sent her a copy of the original duet *Double Take*, performed to syrupy 1920s operetta, in fortuitously bright light, and I began, with the benefits of reflection, to appreciate just why we got such excellent reviews as a partnership. To be honest, this irked me at the time, as Sandra and I didn't get along particularly well. Indeed, before one of the performances that were recorded, we had an almighty row, and I never seemed to be able to get her to perform it as I wanted. But the evidence on the video suggested I was quite wrong about this: she was more than capable of drawing out of the work something valuable. I suggested, partly as a joke, that we should rework it: after all, it was a duet about the process of a relationship, performed by a couple of young people without much experience of them. Now, as mature people with a past, this might prove rather more interesting.

Dancers and their Body-Lives

At this point, it is worth a short detour into the fate of dancers once they retire from performing. As part of the process of investigation for this dance, I found myself reconnected with a number of figures from my past (I have lived in the UK and the Netherlands for the past 25 years). One of the dubious benefits of social media for people of my age is the reunion with others, sometimes long sundered. I have never been particularly active in retaining these contacts, but it seemed inevitable to accept engagement with this population if we were going to work any further on this dance, especially given that some fundraising would be required. Through the process of reconnecting with them, I would make a couple of observations about

my fellow former dancers. There are those who have kicked on and remain involved as choreographers or regisseurs, and some who have become teachers of dance, but only very few leaving dance behind altogether. What was just as interesting and worthy of a study somewhere, was the fact that almost all of them had some kind of body-based life, a career built on the physical experiences of our youth that were amongst the most vivid we would ever have. A large contingent had sought out alternative physical practices to learn and teach, like yoga or Pilates; some retrained to be physiotherapists, masseurs or medical practitioners either conventional or alternative. One had even become an autopsy technician. For most, there was some deep significance to our body-life, and we had taken that beyond the point where professional dancing stopped. This is often romanticized by people in the dance world, but I don't quite see it that way. It brings home regularly the limitations of a society organized around Cartesian dualism and the low social and economic value wrought by some of my erstwhile colleagues from their intense and demanding experiences in dance. This is just a note, but most of my colleagues were to be lauded for the longevity and cultural impact of their careers; rather, they devoted themselves to keeping the wheels turning, and it is disappointing to see how it has turned out for some of them. In response to the idea of this project, they were (mostly) generous and supportive, though there were criticisms of us linked to the notion that we were seeking to restage the dance as per the original. This, as discussed below, was not the intention, nor would it be possible.

The Rehearsal Process

It was impractical to try and get a performance organized in time for the deadline of the company's anniversary, but we both wondered if there wasn't an opportunity to make a second dance out of the first. With the video material we had, and with my earlier injunctions about the importance of reworking it, we organized four weeks of rehearsals in London towards a performance and a 360-degree video to be made out of the material from the past. I would point out at this moment that we both (being in our early fifties and having had fairly rigorous careers) have a few residual reminders of our previous performing lives, with an inhibited range of movement and a lack of much performing experience in recent times. This, of course, was the point.

The rehearsals we then embarked upon entailed us trying to work out what we could remember the work and to balance this with what we could still do. We discovered some important things about our younger selves as we watched through the material: we were awfully fast, had excellent balance and a certain physical force that drove as through at a great rate of knots. Less surprisingly, we found we still knew it pretty well, and didn't struggle at all to recall the steps once the music started, only to keep up with the original pace. But as rehearsals proceeded, and we

got to know each other again, we realized some important things about the project we had brought upon ourselves. We had both changed, and all change, whilst it involves loss, also produces a new reality. We marveled at ourselves as young people, performing with fervor but without the experiences we could now look for granted about relationships, about their fragility and about loss. No one gets to our age without a history, and it was this that was always missing from the original.

There were two major milestones to meet during the process: the first was to be sure we could perform it and do so meaningfully, and the second was the complexities of performing in 360 degrees. It is worth seeing some of the [360-degree footage](#), which we found especially taxing as there is no break in proceedings from start to finish, and nowhere to rest. The other challenging feature was the repositioning of work without a front but with the need to show all the angles. There are some results already, but we are hoping to release the full video in time for performance at the Wellington International Arts Festival in 2018, where the dance had its premiere 32 years ago.

The key feature in reworking this was a balance between the past and the present. We were mortified (as suggested by some less-than-kind former colleagues) that we were doing this because we couldn't put the past behind us: what was the point? For a project like this to succeed it needs to be valid as an artistic statement, measured against the kind of criteria I referred to earlier. The question we were posing was whether there was another dance located inside the first one that we could draw out. Our success at this is for other people to decide, but I note we are doing so at a point when performances by older dancers are not so rare any more. I hope this represents a turning point for dance as moving away from being solely the celebration of youthful vitality it was in my own time, but if an artistic statement can't be made this would be a mere consolation prize.

The Value of Souvenirs

What I remained convinced of as a project is that the VHS tapes found in a box at home after 30 years are not worth much as an archive in the traditional sense. They were, at the time, intended to be a record, that much is clear. This was for the temporal purposes of that moment, to teach someone else the dance or to show someone who couldn't attend. That their significance changes over time is something we must accept, noting that subsequent generations of dancers are going to have to deal with much more material than this, and it is rarely going to vanish. Rather, the videos are better understood as a *souvenir*.

The original videos turn out not to be the last word about the piece, only a stepping stone on a journey. Like any souvenir, they are a treasure of memory, a moment captured to be returned to only in part, and that cannot stand as an authoritative account, undermined as it has been in this example by revisiting it

thirty years later. The videos are partial in both senses of the word, as both incomplete and showing only a particular set of qualities because, as I have argued above, they are representing something inherently unknowable. Dance is a process. They have become the past that, like any souvenir, helps us interpret meaning in the present. But the cultural dynamics of dances and the need to find them alive requires us to put away our desire to capture or trap the past as a fixed point. When we do so, we miss its significance for its utility. It turns out that in the present moment the most important thing about this dance has been its functions as bookendings of our life experiences, but we were not to know that at the time of its first performance. What we have sought to do in this project is not to crystallize our past as much as we have sought to improve it, to brush off the accumulated debris of the years in order to address the present. In doing so, we are making a claim that we are somehow still in the dance, somewhere along its evolution.



Sporton & Norman, *Double Take II*, 2017

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