

**Gordon Curl**

**Movement and Dance**

**1954-60**

***A Jewel in the Crown of the West Riding.***

The editor of the **Laban Guild for Movement and Dance** recently invited members to evoke their 'memories' and 'reflections' as to 'how Rudolf Laban's work was at the heart of their teaching', and to share such experiences during the Guild's 70th Anniversary. A response to such an invitation is all but irresistible, especially to a nonagenarian – who, like others of this vintage - seems to have the propensity for reminiscing.

Sixty-odd years ago I walked through the impressive portals of a gracious mansion in the beautiful rolling countryside of the West Riding of Yorkshire. It was Bretton Hall - a dreamland of 18th Century architecture, lakes, waterfalls, woodlands, Camellia House and contemporary sculptures. What more suitable a setting, one might ask, than this for a Teacher-Training College of Music, Art and Drama (with Dance for all) - to which I was appointed to teach Movement and Dance with a little instrumental Music in 1954? Margaret Dunn, the Vice Principal, was my Head of Department - a much admired colleague - later to become President of a 5,000-strong Laban Guild.



*Bretton Hall in the 1930s*

The 1950s were times of great excitement and ferment in the West Riding of Yorkshire. Teachers were clamouring to take courses in Laban's ideas. Woolley Hall and neighbouring colleges and schools were stretched to capacity with week-end and holiday courses - led by inspired tutors, county inspectors and visiting lecturers (including Laban himself and Lisa Ullmann).

Diana Jordan OBE, the Warden of nearby Woolley Hall recalls that:

*"... all over the country, here and there, individual teachers, training college lecturers and Local Authority Advisers were, through their experimental work with children, building confidence in a fresh approach to physical education based on the needs of children and a better understanding of human movement gained from the teaching of Laban ..."*



*Rudolf Laban*

This 'fresh approach' to physical education had not escaped the notice of the universities either, for Professor Bantock of Leicester University referred to 'the carefully wrought and elaborated work of Rudolf Laban ... a means to the creativity of bodily movement'. Professor Meredith of Leeds University alluded to Laban as an example of 'the deep draught, drawn by our country from the pool of frustrated Central European talent', adding that:

*"Several years ago at a school in Yorkshire I witnessed something of the educational impact of Laban's ideas. It was an impact through physical exercises. What it demonstrated was that by starting with the movements of the child's own body, the whole educational behaviour of the child, including reading, writing and drawing could be freed, energised and enriched in ways which have to be seen to be believed ..."*



*Movement and Dance Students at Bretton Hall*

Professor Louis Arnaud Reid, having watched Lisa Ullmann teaching, eulogized, declaring that:

*"A spectator of Miss Ullmann's pupils at work can feel strongly convinced of the inseparability of feeling, desire, striving, and bodily posture - attitude, stretching, reaching, moving to fill three dimensional space. The observer seems to perceive before his eyes the dynamics of spirit."*

A revolution was surely taking place - with a radical shift in teaching methods and responses from the hitherto rigid formality of prescriptive physical education to a deeply creative mode of movement expression.

I recall the occasion when a General Inspection was visited upon us at Bretton Hall. Among our guests was the distinguished H.M. Staff Inspector for Physical Education - Ernest Major OBE, renowned as a P.E. disciplinarian, nearing retirement. On meeting him that day I wondered whether he appeared a little uneasy in this heady atmosphere of all-pervading artistry - with art students in paint-daubed smocks, seated behind easels, contemporary orchestral and vocal sounds issuing forth from music rooms, altercations from the drama studios, large-scale Pompeii murals, ornate Adam ceilings, elaborate sweeping staircases and an abundance of sculpted pieces in alcoves.

Our Staff Inspector was clearly anxious to witness some undiluted Physical Education; he therefore lost no time in asking me to escort him to the gymnasium, but we had no gymnasium - no wall bars, no vaulting horses, no bucks - only a theatre with tabs, legs and a cyclorama; art studios; music rooms; coach houses; stables; kennels; a lovely Camellia House - and two sublime lakes.

So, on a mid-summer's afternoon (to our visitor's seeming disorientation), I escorted him to the beautiful terraced gardens, where, on a secluded sward - surrounded by rhododendrons in full bloom - he met, to his astonishment, two dozen male music, art and drama students busy practising their Shakespearean dance-drama sequences, significantly dressed in 'Montague' and 'Capulet' tea-shirts.



*Terraced Garden*



*Pond in the Terraced Garden*

It was in this seductive setting that our Inspector eyed these imperious young 'Elizabethans' with some suspicion - even more so when they were encouraged to indulge in 'weight' and 'free-flow' - not to mention the heightening of 'body-awareness', 'spatial orientation' and a multiplicity of delicate (and less delicate) 'effort-actions' - and some alarmingly intimate improvisations! Only when they engaged in some DV8 controlled violence did our Inspector's eyes seem to widen with the slightest hint of admiration (or was I deceived?)

The interplay of warring Shakespearean Houses - with their expressive moments of confrontation, triumphalism and despair - all seemed to leave him perplexed. What had this physical theatre to do with physical education? What was this mid-summer madness? He turned aside to meditate among the rhododendrons - scouring my 'Labanese' teaching notes for some enlightenment. I was convinced that my inspection was doomed to failure.

I escorted our distinguished visitor back to the mansion - unaware of the conclusions he might embody in his Inspector's Report. Whatever the outcome, I was very proud of, and full of admiration for, my Bretton Hall students who had done their utmost to demonstrate, unequivocally, the powerful creative influence of Laban's legacy - clearly at the heart of their expressive movement and my own modest attempts at tutoring.

Thank you Bretton Hall, students and staff, and Laban, for a memorable six years in this blissful community of breathtaking creativity!



*Mansion - 2015*

**Gordon Curl - 2016**