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THE DANCER'S WORLD, 1920–1945

Modern Dancers and Their
Practices Reconsidered

Michael Huxley





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▶ **The Dancer's World,
1920–1945: Modern
Dancers and Their
Practices Reconsidered**

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For Jayne and John

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Preface

In essence, *The Dancer's World* is a consideration of dancers' experiences in their time. It sets out to reconsider such experiences historically with a view to illuminating both past and present more clearly. Its central thesis is that a detailed examination of dancers' writings can contribute a new, additional perspective to the history of modern dance. It places dancers, in their own terms, at the centre of their own narrative and shows how they have contributed to history in its widest sense.

There is already a substantial and growing body of research about early modern dance from 1900 through to the 1950s, and I refer to this in my Introduction and throughout this book. Dancers and their practices are central to the historiography of modern dance. It is also true that dancers' writings are referred to in these accounts. *The Dancer's World* differs from all these accounts by making dancers' writings the focus of study. The extent to which these writings are drawn on offers a new account of a historical period with a view to making it relevant to dancers, dance artists, choreographers, dance students and researchers in the twenty-first century.

I have been researching modern dance for many years. It has been a pleasure to share some of the results of this research with students on the BA Dance course at De Montfort University. These students have prompted me to reconsider how to engage most effectively with a period so different from the present. I have been guided by them, by recent research into the pedagogy of dance history and by a sustained reading of a historian of the period, R.G. Collingwood.¹

In my teaching, especially in my third-year undergraduate option 'Dance as History', I have increasingly sought to help students think historically to address problems of the present. I have found that dancers' writings from 1920 to 1945 provide a means for dancers and dance students to engage with the past. The commonality of being a dancer, one who is trying to articulate what the dancer's world entails, provides an entry point whereby less familiar matters of values and politics can be better understood. This provides a different, complementary and sometimes more immediately accessible viewpoint to those of the critics of the time. It also helps towards an understanding of dances recorded nearly a century ago that on first viewing can be both baffling and off-putting in their strangeness. My enquiry is to do with the thinking that produced such work; the point of entry is what the dancers had to say about themselves in their time and this calls for an understanding of the period itself to reveal the context in the thought. Collingwood put this most cogently in his autobiography when he said:

You are thinking historically...when you say about anything, 'I see what the person who made this (wrote this, used this, designed this, etc.) was thinking',²

The Dancer's World engages with modern dancers' thinking through an examination of what they wrote.

The majority of writings that serve as source material for this book are published and in the public domain. Some are very familiar and have been quoted often. Others are more obscure, and some rarely used. Most texts used were written in English but a number of key ones were first published in German. It is hoped that the published texts used, and listed in Select Bibliography, will provide a comprehensive list of sources. The idea is to open up access to these writings to enable further research and study by those who are interested. A selection of archival sources has been explored to give greater depth to certain issues that have arisen, notably those to do with a dancer's experience of his/her training. In *The Dancer's World* there is an emphasis on published work, primarily in books and journals. The very ease with which dancers in the twenty-first century can see their thoughts in the public domain, on Facebook and Twitter and in blogs, puts the achievements of dancers of the early modern dance period into relief. What a richness of material there is in their writings and how prolific were some dancers. It goes without saying that the quality of the writings shows huge variations: there is a major

difference between a short piece of writing for a short-lived journal or in-house magazine and a book for an established publisher, but dancers were published in both.

What connects dancers then and now is an enthusiasm for dancing. The dance remains the central point of interest for dance maker, teacher, watcher and participant. However, what is explored through the word can also be revealing and can help our understanding of what constitutes the dancer's world.

Notes

- 1 In particular, my research and writing have been informed by these:
 - Collingwood, R.G. *An Essay on Philosophical Method*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933).
 - Collingwood, R.G. *The Principles of Art*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1938).
 - Collingwood, R.G. *An Autobiography*. (London: Oxford University Press, 1939).
 - Collingwood, R.G. *The New Leviathan: Or, Man, Society, Civilization, and Barbarism*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1942).
 - Collingwood, R.G. *Essays in the Philosophy of Art*. Edited by Alan Donagan. (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1964).
 - Collingwood, R.G. *The Principles of History and Other Writings in Philosophy of History*. Edited by Dray, W.H. and van der Dussen, W.J. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).
 - Collingwood, R.G. and van der Dussen, W.J. *The Idea of History*. Rev. ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).
- 2 Collingwood, R.G., Boucher, David and Smith, Teresa. *R. G. Collingwood: An Autobiography and Other Writings; With Essays on Collingwood's Life and Work*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 110.

Acknowledgements

Dancers past and present have been, and continue to be, central to my professional and personal life: none more so than Jayne Stevens, without whose support this book would not have been possible. I teach dance history, but I teach students who are dancers, and I have worked with hundreds over the years. In the past few years I have researched and written of the student learning experience. It became clear to me, both in my pedagogic research and my teaching, that dancer's writings helped establish a discourse for students for whom the past was indeed a foreign country. The common experience of being a dancer allowed for a starting point that was more immediate than the writings of critics, however lucid, or archival documents, however important. Thus this book brings together my research interests and my interest in dancers, and particularly dance students.

I am indebted to the many students whom I have been fortunate to know during my time at De Montfort University. They really are too numerous to mention. My dance colleagues at the university have all contributed to this discussion. Much of the thinking behind this book has been generated by discussions with students as part of my 'Dance as History' option. They have given me fresh perspectives on material and narratives with which I thought I was familiar and have asked the difficult questions that needed asking. My special thanks go to Emily Bolton, Rachel Bhanu and Jennifer Hutton. My thanks also to Prarthana Purkayastha, now at University of Plymouth, for helping me question the received narrative of modern dance when we taught the option together.

This is a historical account. June Layson introduced me to dance history; Ramsay Burt has, for the past many years, kept me in touch with the most recent developments, especially those in dance studies, and has kept interrogating my thinking. I am also indebted to many people who have challenged me and opened up new approaches, in particular, Brian Door and Martin Leach. Colleagues, including those in the Congress on Research in Dance, have contributed to my growing interest in the historiographies of dance and its pedagogy, not least Cara Gargano, Ann Dils, Alexandra Carter and Mark Franko. Over the years I have been influenced by many who have researched and written accounts about modern dance. I owe a particular debt to Horst Koezler, Hedwig Müller, Selma Jeanne Cohen, Alexandra Carter, Marion Kant and Susan Manning. All the people mentioned so far have contributed to my understanding of dance and its history in ways that contribute to the ideas that underpin this book. I have met some of them but briefly; others have been in dialogue with me for decades, to my benefit. I never met the British historian and philosopher R.G. Collingwood (1889–1943), but his writings have had a considerable impact on my thinking. He was a man of the period, writing at the same time as the dancers who are studied here.

I am most grateful to De Montfort University for its continued support for my research, most recently through the School of Arts and the Performance Research Group. I have benefited from support to enable the formulation of the ideas behind this book, support for pedagogic research into dance history and for travel to archives in the United Kingdom. The Arts and Humanities Research Board (now Council) funded a visit to the New York Public Library Dance Collection, and some of the results of that visit have informed this current text. My visits to the National Resource Centre for Dance (NRCD) Archive at the University of Surrey, the Dartington Trust Archive and the New York Public Library Dance Collection have left me inspired thanks to efforts of the supportive colleagues who work there, especially Sharon Maxwell of the NRCD.

A number of people have read and commented on the writing that now constitutes *The Dancer's World*. I am most grateful to Ramsay Burt for detailed comments on various drafts. Dance colleagues at De Montfort University have commented on early iterations. I thank my students on my 'Dance as History' option 2013–2015 for giving me their feedback. To them, and to the many other colleagues whom I have

drawn into conversation, I warmly acknowledge their help. Much of the research and writing for this book have been undertaken in a convivial home with the encouragement of Jayne, who knows about dance, and John, who knows how to study. Any errors in this book are entirely my own responsibility.

I acknowledge, with many thanks, permission to quote from archival materials by Leslie Burrowes, Diana Jordan and Louise Soelberg from NRCD at the University of Surrey. All text is still in copyright and must not be reproduced without permission. Every effort has been made to identify copyright owners and I apologise if infringement has occurred. If you have information regarding copyright owners please contact the archives at the University of Surrey. I am grateful to Gordon Curl for his kind permission to quote from S. Goddard's (1966) translation for him of Rudolf Laban's *Die Welt des Tänzers*.

1

Introduction: Early Modern Dancers and Their Practices Reconsidered

► *Abstract: This chapter sets out the case for examining the dancer's world as expressed in dancers' writings. The historiography of modern dance between 1920 and 1945 in Europe and the United States of America tends to stress the role of the choreographer in the sense that we use the term today. I argue that this is a revisionist interpretation and that during the period modern dancers wrote of themselves as dancers even when talking of choreography. A case is made to reconsider early modern dancers and their practices by a re-reading of their writings. Dancers' writings referred to include those from both continents and those involved in both performance and education including that of Leslie Burrowes, Isadora Duncan, Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, Rudolf Laban and Elizabeth Selden.*

Keywords: dancers' writings; historiography; modern dance

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