

The Estampies: Should we accept the current perception?

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As the centuries pass, things get lost and sadly, for our little community, we have no written choreographies prior to the mid-15th C. We do have music, iconography and written accounts of events during which dance took place. All of these can be useful in aiding us to piece together what might have been and how the dance in the distant past may have looked.

This paper will focus on the Estampie, one of these forms of dance we know to have existed in the period known as the High Middle Ages and the beginning of the Late Middle Ages, roughly covering the years between 1000-1400 CE. It was a time of chivalry, courtly love, crusades, castle building, Troubadours and knightly tournaments, all of which contributed to maintaining the social order. This paper is borne out of an in-depth study undertaken in 2016 culminating in workshops and a performance at the *Medieval Music in the Dales Festival* at Bolton Castle.

However, before I begin the investigation within this paper, I feel it is important to be clear – I will not be attempting to deliver a definitive statement or ‘perception’ of what the Estampie dance was. It is my belief that we will never know how these dances were performed. I do not believe we will ever be able to ‘reconstruct’ an ‘authentic’ dance from the Medieval period – there are too many variables. These variables, I believe, also apply to later periods that have some form of notation or written choreography. However, this paper is not about the viability of authentic reconstruction, instead it is about questioning perception and what alternative options are offered from various perspectives framed within that question. If we have limited information, what can, or should, we do with it? Should we leave it locked away in the vault of history, never to be used, or should we explore options of what might have been?

So, what is the perception of the Estampie? And can it be subject to change? Surprisingly, despite the scant evidence and amount of conjecture that needs to be applied, one can often find definitive statements regarding what the Estampie and the other forms of dance from the period, were. Why has this happened? How has a perception become established, persisted and perhaps most importantly become an accepted “fact”? If we don’t know how these dances were performed, then why is there a seeming insistence that we do?

As this is the Early Dance Circle (EDC) Conference, then that is where I shall begin. The EDC website¹ in the *Dance through History* information sheets states briefly: "estampie, *parts of which are thought to have been the earliest solo couple dance.*" This comment may refer to observations made by Peggy Dixon² and Belinda Quirey³, which are as follows:

Dixon: *The assumption that the Estampie was a dance for one couple at a time comes with a second assumption that it was danced for an audience.....Present doctrine has it that they were danced by one man and one woman as a couple.....I am not aware of any firm evidence in support of it, though neither have I ever heard it contradicted.*

Quirey: *So, let us assume ...that the Estampie was a 'Danse a Deux.'*

This idea of it as a couple dance persists within many other references found on the internet:

- Estampie - courtly dance of the 12th–14th century. Mentioned in *trouvère* poetry, it was probably danced with sliding steps by couples to the music of *vielles* (*E Britannica*⁴)
- The Estampie was the first couple dance in history, devised by the Troubadours to suit the ideals of courtly love. The dance tunes are said by clerics to have kept the minds of the populace from lascivious thoughts (*The Albion Band*⁵)
- Estampie was another circle dance that replaced the Carole. It introduced a couple line dancing while facing the public instead of singing. Instruments were used as accompaniment to the dance (*Medieval Chronicles*⁶)
- The Estampie - Devised by the Troubadours of Provence in Southern France in the 12th century. This is a couple dance with the man standing to the side of and taking the hand of the lady who stands on his right or even sometimes between two ladies. The couple can now move freely around the space available, forward and back and describe various figures using various steps (*TRADAMIS*⁷)

The “Stamping” option.....:

- There is also another form of very early dance known as 'Estampie', which could potentially be where the word "stamp" originated, from the stamping of feet to the strong rhythmic beats of the Estampie melodies. (*Tamara Warta “Love to know”*⁸)
- Estampie or instampitta was the most popular dance of Middle Ages – we don't know much about it but it could be - i. Stomping dance ii. Complicated enough that didn't encourage “impure thoughts” (*MUSC Lecture 752*⁹)
- Estampie: The stately Estampie originated in France and was characterized by elaborate body movements (*Music history is thrilling*¹⁰)

However, for various reasons, perhaps the most 'creative' definition is as follows:

- In the SCA we do dances from the 17th, 16th and 15th centuries, but none earlier. Except for the Saltarello, but that is made-up, so doesn't count. There are two varieties of dance written by Troubadours - the Dansa and the Estampida. Says the Doctrina; "A dansa is so called, naturally, because one dances or leaps to it, so it must have a pleasant melody; and one performs it on instruments, and it delights everyone who hears it." (Pierre Aubrey p123-127) According to the Doctrina; "An estampida is so called because it is taken vigorously in counting or in singing, more than any other song. All the dances of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries are types of estampie." This dance style is thought to have been derived from sacred music of the time.
- Estampie (or Istampitta) is a dance and musical form common in 13th and 14th century Europe. The history of the dance is largely unknown. Paintings from the period, however, depict the dance involving heavy hopping and/or jumping. Over time the form evolved into a highly stylized abstract piece characterized by ornamentation and contrapuntal passages of modest complexity. (*SCA*¹¹)

For a dance about which there is no written description, there seems to be a huge amount of material claiming to define it. How then is it possible to establish veracity and what would be the point in the attempt? Despite the scant sources surviving from the period, several different styles or names of dances have been consistently identified.

We have an early primary source - Johannes de Grocheio wrote *De Musicae* in c.1300 (Harley MS 281, fol. 49) and alongside defining different forms of medieval music he identifies three

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types of instrumental dance music – The Ductia, The Estampie and The Nota. Sadly, Grocheio gives very little information regarding what the dances looked like. The structure of the music is clear but the best clue we get is “they measure its movements in line dance (Ductia) and in rounds (Choreis).”

A recent and comprehensive secondary source for the music comes from musicologist Timothy McGee¹². Using Grocheio and other studies, McGee lays out organised descriptions of all existing music for each style identified, how the music is structured and what oddities there are.

There are then a small collection of texts beginning from the turn of the last century with Pierre Aubrey¹³, Curt Sachs¹⁴, Frances Rust¹⁵, Richard Kraus¹⁶ and more recent studies by Peggy Dixon¹⁷ and Robert Mullally.¹⁸

Sachs’ theoretical explorations ran parallel to the practical developments being made by Mabel Dolmetsch and Melusine Wood¹⁹, Wood drawing on the work of an earlier historian Pierre Aubrey who published in 1907. While Dolmetsch really narrowed her focus to the notated dances, Wood and her students Peggy Dixon and Belinda Quirey made use of Aubrey’s work and made attempts to recreate the dances from the medieval period.

Amongst these sources the dances identified include: *Dancing Mania* and *Peasant dance*, *The Carole*, *The Saltarello* and *Bassadanza*, *Ductia*, *Nota* and paired dances, *The Estampie*, *Carole*, *Bal*, *Danse*, *Tresche*.

What do we know about the Estampie?

Music for dances identified as ‘Estampie’ has been found in several manuscripts from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. There are three surviving manuscripts containing the music. One is a French source dated to sometime around the mid thirteenth century - *Chansonnier du Roi* (BNP 844)²⁰. The second is a later Italian source dated to the mid fourteenth century held in the British Library (BL Add MS 29987) titled ‘Istanpitta’. The third English manuscript also held in the BL (Harley 978), again dated to around the middle of the thirteenth century, contains three pieces of music identified as Estampies - the Simple, Double and Gai. Finally, there is a piece of music dated earlier than all the rest to around 1180, called *Kalenda Maya*, or *The First of May*.

Aubrey is the first to investigate the musical structure. McGee takes up the mantle eighty years later with great effect. He and others clearly explain the identifying markers and structure of Estampie music. They are characterised similar to a verse / chorus structure, however the ‘chorus’ has two different endings – an open or ‘apertum’ and closed or ‘clausum’.

That’s it! That is ALL we know for sure – everything else is frustratingly ambiguous...

1) The word

McGee suggests the Latin root *stante pedes* meaning stationary feet. Paul Nettl²¹ also notes *volta pedes* meaning turning feet. Sachs comes to a different conclusion for *stante* or *stantiae* in Vulgar Latin as meaning delay, linking the ‘delay’ to the musical structure. He then states it can be traced back to the Frankish *stampon*, which “therefore must have been a stamping dance,” only to contradict himself a page later by stating “the estampie must have been a quiet gliding dance.” He uses a translation of Froissart’s *Chronicles*²² to support his idea by using the verb ‘to glide’. Dixon disagrees with his conclusions when translating the same passage, claiming the musicians were providing the beat and the young dancers “sesbatoient (to gambol, to frolic, to disport oneself).” ‘Frolicking’ indicates a different kind of movement to ‘gliding’. Musicologist Elizabeth Aubrey²³ highlights the “several connotations.....to pound, to

stamp....to turn around.” Like Mullally, she also attempts to define *tresque* as turn; Mullally states ring, Bal/balent – dance or Mullally states a theatrical performance and Sal/Salent - leap. Finally, historian Calvin Claudel²⁴ has linked the word through using Louisiana French, to run away, bolt, uproar, or to race. he provides an interesting link to the dance accounts at tournaments. Medieval tournaments were races with great uproar and possibly horses bolting. So, there is no agreement on the meaning or etymology of the word Estampie. This affects the choreographic recreation, but only as far as everything is possible. Some may say it is a stamping dance, while others insist it is slow and gliding. There is no more evidence for either.

2) The iconography

We have lots of pictures depicting dance (we assume) but none are identified as a particular type. While they may be useful to us as inspiration for shapes and form they are useless to us to identify dance types. Also, any information and inspiration I glean from the iconography and accounts is not evidence of dance in the High Middle Ages, it is only the author’s perception which may vary from individual to individual therefore creating multiple realities.

3) The accounts

Dance is written about in a number of sources, although often in an ambiguous or in a dramatic, narrative. One useful account is Jaques Bretal’s *Tounai de Chauvancy* (MS Douce 308).

4) The music

There are many options of tempo and type of instrument the music is played on. There are many different recordings of the same piece that are almost unrecognisable from each other. It is easy to imagine how a piece played at a quicker tempo will affect the movement and change it compared to the same music played at a slow pace. However, greater importance may be the instrument used. A trumpet gives a very different sound to a flute, vielle or harp. McGee suggest much would have been played on the vielle. Citing Grocheio he tells us the “*Vielle is the ideal instrument for all secular music.*” Any attempt to decode what the Estampie may have been needs to take into account how much variety and deviation could occur with just one musical interpretation.

What are the options:

Wood produced the first interpretations of the three pieces of music in the English *MS Harley 978*. Dixon built on Wood’s work and developed suggested choreographies for all eight of the Estampies in the *French MS 844*. Dixon was not any more adventurous than Wood with her step vocabulary, using single and double steps and simple floor patterning, sticking with the conventional perception that an Estampie was for a couple and created work that is essentially, simplified fifteenth century choreography.

In 2003, Cait Webb²⁵ recreated two of the eight French Estampies and I am aligned with Webb in her interpretation. Recognising the medieval dance is: “a matter of invention.” She is also keen to point out that “some rhythms are lively and some more regal.”

Eleven pieces of music in *MS 844* are identified as dance music, I focused on five pieces named Estampie Real or Royal and these are numbered 1 to 8. I attempted to produce a range of distinct historically informed re-creations to demonstrate my contrasting theories of what an Estampie MIGHT have been. Wood, Dixon, and Cartmell all recognise anything we do is conjecture, yet all adhere to the interpretation that the Estampie was a stately dance for a couple, perhaps the forebear of the *bassa danza*. Only Webb re-creates different choreography using circles and chains, similar to the choreography identified as a Carole. I do not dispute either of these

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interpretations, but I believe there may be other options. The following are the different interpretations I explored for the presentation at Bolton Castle:

1) Stately couple

There is no specific evidence to support the notion the Estampie was a couple dance. As Webb highlights, there are: “no depictions of people dancing as a single pair or procession of couples in this period”. In literature, however there is evidence that couples did possibly dance together. An eleventh century poem Rudlieb:

*“The youth springs boldly up, against him is his maiden.
He is the falcon like; she glides like the swallow;
No sooner are they near than they shoot past each other;
He seizes her with ardour, but she flees his grasp.
And no one who beholds them both could ever hope
To equal them in dance, in leap, in gesture”* (Sachs 1932:268)

There is no indication they were dancing an Estampie - there is nothing to say they're not. It does evidence a romantic courting dance for a couple. Sachs insists the Estampie is a gliding dance. Using this extract as inspiration, I chose Estampie *seste* for this interpretation.

Seste is often recorded lyrically, at a slow tempo, on a flute or harp with bells. There are slight variations in tempo and rhythmic choices and regulation of bar lines and the closed ending varies with either three or four bars. The original notation is three bars and Paul and I decided to keep this interpretation. It is choreography for the two people dancing not for the people watching. It is an intense flirtation between the two, a seduction using spirals and weaving through archways made by the other partner, brief glances of the hands, brushing past each other before withdrawing. I drew on some of the iconography to create some of the shapes, particularly the hand gesture used by the women in the second *punta*. While I have made the decision not to be influenced by Middle Eastern movement, I felt I could hint at it. Much of this choreography also involves turning and swirling that was emphasised by period clothes. The mantles or cloaks which are full and long and can be used to accentuate the sweeping turns both slow and fast.

2) A training study

The dances are numbered. Could it be that these dances were some sort of study for the nobility to learn as part of their preparation for aristocratic adulthood? The high middle ages had many manuals and rules to follow – Daniel of Beccles²⁶ and Andreas Cappellanus²⁷ rulebooks were wide-spread in Western Europe. There may well be a dance rulebook yet to be discovered. The fifteenth century dancing master, Antonio Cornazzano²⁸ maintained the *Bassa Danza* was the child of the Estampie. A student of Domenico²⁹, he created geometrical, formal choreography for Bassa Danza for two to eight people.

Drawing on the fifteenth century Bazza Danza notation, I created choreography that could be used like a medieval exam piece. Several dancers could perform alongside each other but are ultimately alone in proving their own ability. I chose Estampie *Uitime* for this interpretation. This is the final piece in the suite and does have a sense of regularity and resolution to it.

3) Stamping, low, threshing

One early theory of Estampie choreography is that it used stamps, possibly due to etymological assumptions. While I do not think it is the definitive choreographic choice, it would be remiss

to ignore this as an option and experiment with how successful it could be. Again, while no references are specifically identified as an Estampie, there are many mentions for feet stamping and/or striking in the literature:

“He leads singing and striking with his foot.....she knew well how to sing agreeably, strike with her foot and be lively.....then he begins to sing and strike with his foot like the others.” (Mullally, 2011:48)

I explored this alternative with Estampie Septime. The problem was trying not to be influenced by my training in modern tap and 16th century Canaries. Also, although it is one of the shorter pieces, it was difficult not to get stuck in a rigid question and answer form between the dancers and to create an interesting choreography.

4) Upbeat / group

Barbara Sparti³⁰ highlights an interesting shift in society with *“the emergence, starting in the mid-fifteenth-century Italy, of the ‘professional’ courtier”*. Western Europe, with the advent of the Renaissance was moving from the medieval period into a different age. The divide between the pursuits and behaviour of nobles and those of the lower and middle classes was strongly emphasised. Baldararre Catstiglione in his 1528 *The Book of the Courtier* insists

“The courtier must appear ‘elegant and attractive’ when dancing, and never be outdone by ‘ordinary villagers’ or peasants. When he is dancing in front of a crowd and along with many others it is fitting...that he should maintain a certain dignity, though tempered by the lightness and delicate grace of his movement”

Cornazano orders that in the Saltarello *“the lady’s foot must never leave the ground, but not even that of the man”*. Could it be possible that the dance of the previous century was livelier and less ‘dignified’ than that of the Renaissance? With the dawn of the new age came new movement. Mark Franko³¹ wonders: *“How carnivalesque motifs indigenous to medieval and Renaissance popular culture found their ways into the upper echelons of baroque culture”*. The great Baroque ballets may have been more intricate and codified, but did they grow out of the vast pageants, tournaments and carnivals of the medieval period? Perhaps movement we now view as from the lower classes i.e. the carnival and grotesque, were far more acceptable during the prior centuries.

Following the rule that fashion often reacts against that which went before, the graceful restraint of the fifteenth century may have been a reaction against the wild abandon of the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. There is plenty of evidence in the iconography and accounts already quoted to support movement that was vigorous and spirited and shows kicks, leaps and acrobatics. Bretal describes a noble lady, dressed as a man, who *“tosses the apple then slaps the ground with his hands”*. I have adapted the choreography for Estampie Quinte for this interpretation. The movement in Quinte has come from iconography. The lifting of the leg, the hopping, the raised ‘goal post’ arms. Even though I created a set sequence of movements, the choreography could work as a great celebration group dance that individuals could join and drop out of, as required or desired, creating that spirit of carnival and street drama so prevalent in this period. I attempted to create an ‘authenticity of medieval spirit’, a carnival atmosphere.

Which leads me to a final option:

5) Improvisational

Perhaps the reason why there is no surviving choreography is because there was no choreography. What if dance was free, open and improvisational? The medieval period was one

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of great colour, great carnivals and pageantry. Theatre wasn't formalised so why would dance be? Franko describes Domenico's dance aesthetic: "*The body became a physical index of virtue and prudence in Renaissance dance*". Is this because it had been general before? As the Renaissance tried to bring order to the world, was what came before gloriously disordered?

Developing from the previous interpretation of a lively group dance, I returned to Bretel for inspiration. At the *Tournoi* the ladies put together their own theatrical/dance entertainments. They may have used the popular dance music of the day, i.e. the Estampies, to create a one off bespoke performance. A noble lady could have asked her *trouvere* to play number six, for example, for her to create that evening's dance. Bretel's account of *Chapelet* tells of the lady moving and dancing with the garland and the knights approaching her in attempts to woo. The descriptions of the movement include twirling, steps smoothly, runs and playing with a garland both flirtatiously and pensively. The question-and-answer structure seemed still to abide by the accepted formalities of noble society, but it also seemed to hint at comedy and flirtatious exchange. The accounts identify skipping, turning, jumping as all those could be used provided that the story is told. Perhaps the movement was improvised around a narrative frame?

So, what are we left with?

If one thing is certain, it is that nothing is certain (perhaps like some other negotiations that are occurring currently....³²) I believe we need to stop trying to pigeonhole and 'define' the dance, to stop being so rigid in our perception. We will NEVER be able to "authentically" re-create an Estampie (whatever authentically means, but that's a different argument). But let that neither make us stick to one flawed perception nor let us stop experimenting with alternatives. Our preoccupation with striving for the unobtainable has got in the way.

Alessandra Iyer³³ asserts: "*If re-creation of choreography can break away from the rigidity of aiming at authenticity, then a range of new possibilities may emerge*". Let's stop searching for the definitive and see what else may emerge. Musicologist Peter Kivy³⁴ highlights a problem: "*historically authentic has come to sound dogmatic and inflexible whereas historically informed sounds much more pliable, less dogmatic and more open to alternatives.*"

Valerie Briginshaw³⁵ holds the firm view: "*the whole of the past consists of interpretations.*" So history or historic narratives are interpretations of interpretations.....there is no such thing as 'reality'. Cathy Bowness³⁶ makes the same point: "*Is what is presented to the public merely a modern construct and are attempts at re-creation too subjective?*" Will all dance re-constructors, academic or amateur, simply be so influenced by the modern world that what they present in public is nothing more than a reflection of their own experience?"

Bowness sees this in the work Hazel Dennison re-creates: "*Dennison seeks compromise. Creating an atmosphere of the past but giving new life to the dance, she performs for a new audience. She captures the spirit of the original choreographies, following the instructions given by the dancing master, but allows the dances to speak to the audience in modern theatrical terms.*"

Cecilia Nocilli³⁷ develops the argument: "*not only is it necessary to respect the sources, but we should also reconsider the original meaning of the performance....deconstruction*" She proposes using the Jacques Derrida theory of deconstruction to re-examine the sources proposing that Domenico was the first de-constructor: he deconstructed his contemporary dance repertory in order to create a new one...Although still linked to the Middle Ages, his production is born from the separation, the fragmentation of early elements to create a new and noble style".

What if Nocilli is right in thinking that Domenico may indeed have separated out all the ingredients forming a traditional medieval choreography so as to create something new. Nocilli professes: “*If we have a duty nowadays, it is not that of respecting existing steps and choreographies, but of creating new metaphorical systems to portray the world,*” or as Franko insists, we must start: “*Seeing new in the old*”. Let us take the scraps of information we know about the Estampie and play. Let us re-create new inspiring or provocative work from the old. Let us delve into and re-create the role dance played in the society of the past. Let us re-create from research, capturing the spirit from the ideas lost in the mists of time. In short, let us allow the dance to live.

Endnotes

- ¹ <https://www.earlydancecircle.co.uk/resources/dance-through-history/the-middle-ages/>.
- ² P. Dixon, *Dances from the Courts of Europe, vol. 1*, Nonsuch Productions, 1999.
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- ⁴ <https://www.britannica.com/art/estampie>.
- ⁵ <https://mainlynorfolk.info/guvnor/records/theprospectbeforeus.html>.
- ⁶ <https://www.medievalchronicles.com/medieval-life/medieval-dance/>.
- ⁷ <http://www.tradamis.org/courtydancinhistory.html>.
- ⁸ https://dance.lovetoknow.com/Medieval_Dances.
- ⁹ <https://earlymusicmuse.com/english-estampie/>
- ¹⁰ <http://aelflaed.homemail.com.au/doco/earlydance.html>
- ¹¹ <https://sca.uwaterloo.ca/mjc/sca/early-dance-music.html>.
- ¹² McGee, Timothy J, *Medieval Instrumental Dances*, USA: Indiana University Press, 1990.
- ¹³ Pierre Aubrey (1907), *Estampies et Danse Royales*
- ¹⁴ Sachs, Curt (1937), *World History of Dance*.
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- ¹⁹ Wood, Melusine (1949), "English Country Dance prior to the 17th Century", *Journal of the English Folk Dance and Song Society* 6.1, 8-12.
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- ²³ Aubrey, Elizabeth "The Dialectic between Occitania and France in the Thirteenth Century", *Early Music History* (1997), 16, 1-53.
- ²⁴ Claudel, Calvin, "Coquillarts Use of Estampie", *PMLA*, 1946,61 (2), 589-592.
- ²⁵ Misericordia and Gaita (2003) *Eschewynge of Ydlenesse*, Offbeat Tracks.
- ²⁶ Daniel of Beccles, Book of the Civilized Man, (c.1300) *Urbanus Magnus Danielis Becclesiensis*, ed. J. Gilbert Smyly (Dublin, 1939)
- ²⁷ Andreas Capellanus: *The Art of Courtly Love*, trans. John Jay Parry. New York: Columbia University Press, 1941. (Reprinted: New York: Norton, 1969.)
- ²⁸ Antonio Cornazano, *Libro dell'arte del danzare*. Città del Vaticano, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, capponiano
- ²⁹ *De arte saltandi et choreas ducendi" di Domenico da Piacenza. Edizione e commento*. Longo, 2014.
- ³⁰ Sparti, Barbara, *Dance, Dancers and Dance-Masters in Renaissance and Baroque Italy*, Bologna: Massimiliano Piretti Editore, 2015,
- ³¹ Franko, Mark, *Dance as Text: Ideologies of the Baroque Body*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, 133-152
- ³² Please note this was written during the time of the Brexit negotiations – which sadly resulted in disaster....
- ³³ Alessandra Iyer *Music in Art* Vol. 25, No. 1/2 (Spring-Fall 2000), pp. 25-32.
- ³⁴ Kivy, Peter 'On the Historically Informed Performance', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 2002, 42:2, 128- 144.
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- ³⁶ Cathie Bowness, "Past Performance: A review of intentions and outcomes, in three acts," Lecture/Demonstration in *Dance and Heritage: Creation, Re-creation and Recreation*, ed. Segal & Tuck, Proceedings of the EDC Conference 2010, 111-124, notably 119.
- ³⁷ Cecilia Nocilli, Re-creation of Historical Dance: A Legacy of the Collective Imagination of the Screen?", in *Dance and Heritage*, EDC Conference 2010, 41-47, notably 45.

