

Past Performance;
a review of intentions and outcomes in three acts

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Imagine holding an ice cube in the palm of your hand. It sits on your skin, cold, solid and static. It is a contained unit. Its shape is well defined. You can see it, grasp it, and imprison it. Time passes. Contact with a living person is challenging the solidity of the ice, transforming it. Before your eyes its properties are changing. The warmth of your hand is turning that which seemed solid and concentrated into fluid. Slowly it slips from your grasp and trickles through your fingers. To contain it you need to search for a vessel, something to catch what you can no longer hold. The substance is no longer clearly defined, not static, and its shape depends upon the container which captures it. Leave the container near a source of heat and another transformation occurs. Now the substance turns to steam. It escapes from the container and disperses itself into the atmosphere, into the very air you breathe, becoming part of you. Steam could of course be condensed and turned back into water, which when frozen will return to its icy state. Solid static ice, fluid water, dispersing steam, interchangeable but scientifically defined as H₂O. In essence the same thing but with different properties, changing according to circumstance, contacts and physical surroundings.

Now think about Early Dance and set it in context. Imagine you have five minutes to define and describe history and the historical process to which it is linked. Is this possible? Certainly many have claimed so. In defining history, or their version of history, they have summed up its various properties. They have also defined, reconstructed and categorised period dance forms to sit within this history. Everything is contained and presented in a

neat manageable package. They have imprisoned history and attempted to hold it static, assuming that History has a physical solid presence which can be easily grasped. However history is not easy to manage. It can also be fluid, escaping through the fingers of those who try to hold it still. Whatever it may be, no matter how it is defined, solid, static and containable History is not. Like H₂O, the concept of History changes shape through time and circumstance. It may surround us in the very air we breathe, becoming part of us as we become part of it. So in the realm of Early Dance we face a problem and a challenge. This challenge cannot be merely to define Early Dance within an historical process. That would be attempting the impossible task, containing the melting ice in the palm of the hand. Instead we must acknowledge that dance history is not confinable and strive to break down previously constructed scholastic barriers. Early Dance can be researched in archives and documented but dance always was and still is creative art in process. We can try to recreate it but trying to define what we are recreating is similar to setting out on a quest for truth. The question 'What is truth?' requires, but is never satisfied with, concise answers of definition but the question 'What might make a contribution to truth?' suggests a more open ended approach.

This paper does not present firm definitions and absolute conclusions. There is no attempt to compartmentalise and classify the research and performance of Early Dance, which is not static. The inter-changeable defies confinement. Instead researchers and performers of Early Dance are asked to

reflect upon three perceptions of action -- namely what observers of Early Dance think we do, what we Early Dancers *believe* we do and finally what *actually* takes place in a reconstruction of a past performance. It is assumed from the outset that Early Dance is a valid discipline in its own right and that it has a justified and well-earned place in our historical landscape. Dance was and still is usually presented for a perceived audience so we focus on examining a present day performance of a past. This is based on the premise that most of us have an audience in mind, be this the original one of long ago or those who watch our interpretations and reconstructions today. We recreate dances which were originally created as performance pieces for private gatherings, court or stage, but are now performed before a contemporary audience i.e. present performance of past performance.

Participants in and exponents of Early Dance sometimes struggle to be taken seriously in both academic and social circles. Struggles for recognition give rise to apologetics; defences are built around subject areas. Inevitably this leads to more boundaries being set, with enthusiasts struggling to correct real or perceived misconceptions on what they do and why they do it. Some dismissals of work within Early Dance are based on the construction of barriers between academic researchers and performers, with the latter further divided between those with professional dance training and the amateur enthusiast though all Early Dance participants consulted for this study had one common aim, bringing the past to life to help people make sense of it today. Making sense is complicated; postmodernists claim everything must be deconstructed before people can attempt it. An understanding of the role of language becomes vital.

Language is not a window on the world, but a structure that determines our perception of the world. [1]

Being caught up in our own understanding of and use of the language of our own time, we are limited in how we can define and

understand the past. Therefore the dance historians' efforts, both professional and amateur, to interpret the experiences of the past could be dismissed by postmodernists because we use the language of today to bring past dances back to life. Therefore our understanding of past performance may be limited by modern perceptions. Munslow asks

...can we historians retell the narrative as it actually happened or do we always impose our own stories on the evidence of the past? [2]

How far this is true and do we, intentionally or unintentionally, re-shape the past in our Early Dance reconstructions? Keith Jenkins claims that all taking part in historical activities should note that historical objectivity does not exist, only a present day interpretation, based on "traces" rather than "sources" of the past.

Postmodernism can be held to signify "the end of history" not in the sense of the end of historical thinking as such, but historical thinking based on modernity's version of what history apparently was understood to be...[3]

Questions on what is understood and presented as history are important when examining Early Dance presentations. Is what is presented to the public merely a modern construct and are attempts at re-creation too subjective? Will all dance reconstructors, academic or amateur, simply be so influenced by the modern world that what they present in public is nothing more than a reflection on their own experience?

Raphael Samuel's *Theatres of Memory* acknowledges the contribution of those outside academia to historical research and reconstruction. There are many unacknowledged people working within historical activities. Samuel claimed that

If history was thought of as an activity rather than a profession, then the numbers of practitioners would be legion.[4]

Pointing in the direction of autobiography, legends, ancient and modern and favourite family songs and stories, Samuel suggested

examining what people *think* is worth passing on to future generations and the reasoning behind their selection and rejection. Drawing attention away from the university department and towards drama, novels, the hidden curriculum in schools, popular TV programmes and magazines, he encouraged unpacking the “unofficial sources of historical knowledge”. Perhaps the past is viewed through the rose-tinted lens of nostalgia but our performances in various presentations might make a valuable contribution to historical understanding because they hold a mirror up to the values of society both past and present: Past because they try to show us how dances were performed or present because they show us how *we think* they were or even as we would have *preferred* them to be.

To understand how the values of modern society affect understanding and presentation of the past, it is worth considering the ideas of Walter Benjamin, philosopher, historian, art critic and writer. Benjamin [5] wrote of how human beings construct a montage, looking at the past through the eyes of the present. In fact a montage might be an accurate description of Living History performance. The latter is a presentation of images or scenes, compressed together into an agreed period of time. For Benjamin the past has to be linked with the here and now. We understand the past because of where we are rather than because of where we have been. Benjamin presents the idea that a work of art, created in the past, had an aura, a meaning and power for its own time, linked with its own unique creation. However every time the work is seen by a new generation or each time it is reproduced for a postcard or a bookmark and placed out of original context, both of location and size, some of its original aura is lost and a new meaning, for a new generation, linked with the latter’s own experience takes its place.

Certainly an Early Dance performer could claim to feel linked with the past, through dancing an original work, but as s/he stands firmly rooted in post modernity can s/he help

but imbue each performance with something from twenty-first century experience? Perhaps each performance, like the telling of a story changes according to circumstance, as Oakshot claims

A proper story is like a river, sometimes it may be traced back to a source in the hills, but what it becomes reflects the scenery through which it flows. It has a history, and its history is marked by the appearance of new incidents or new characters, its colours change, it is told in fresh idioms, it may be concentrated into a ballad or song only to be dispersed again in more prosaic tellings. [6]

Historians once claimed that the study of history was scientific, objective and rational. Postmodernists claim that there can be no objectivity in historical research. There is no access to a *certain* past because meanings and ideas are not static. Others, such as Southgate [7], argue that we can still be objective so long as we are prepared to compare our interpretations with the interpretations of others. In fact certain subjectivity makes its own contribution to historical debate; in any case there are degrees of objectivity.

Increased objectivity is not always a virtue. A dentist who decides to become more objective by ignoring the pain of the patient will not be a successful dentist... Objectivity, in fact is not just a single standpoint. It is one of two directions in which thought can move. We can compare elements derived from two or more angles in various ways that suit the various matters we are discussing, ways that differ widely according to the purpose of our thoughts at the time. [8]

Within all presentations there is subjectivity, both within the selection and omission of pieces for interpretation and within the format of an actual presentation/performance itself. Some degree of subjectivity might contribute to knowledge because the interpretation of a researcher or a performer who can set themselves within a period of history and examine, share and compare their own feelings and practical performance capabilities with those who have different

ones may reach a new understanding based on shared interpretation of shared information.

David Lowenthal is more sceptical, for him the past is omnipresent. We have a relationship with it. It can both enrich and impoverish us and be embraced or shunned. We respond to it by wanting it, knowing it and changing it. However some presentations of the past as though it were a place to visit concern him:

Recognition of the past as a foreign country now colours our view of antiquity from primeval times down to yesterday. We have partly domesticated the past, where they do things differently, and brought it into the present as a marketable commodity. [9]

Lowenthal writes positively of a developing and ever changing relationship with the past. "As we remake it, the past remakes us." but is sceptical, both of attempts to package the past and of claims of preserving things as they really were.

History has become marketable. We can sell tickets for performances of Early Dance. People will pay to discover something new about the past. However a paying public is in a position to make demands. Modern audiences have a relatively short attention span. The performers are required to create hyper-realities, described by Samuel as imaginary pasts, which last mere moments. The short performance is packed away at the end of the day, only to be recreated again in a new setting. The repetitive nature of each representation definitely offers much scope for aura loss, as outlined by Benjamin, especially when the dance package can be rolled away in one venue and unfurled and re-performed in another. Thus the dancing is seen differently within each new setting and context.

Personal experience, as a performer at English Heritage and National Trust venues, suggests that most sponsors of historical performance appear to be either unaware of or unconcerned about this. On visits to sites, following requests for performances of "authentic early dance", our team has been taken to the "space

set aside for dancing" This could be anything from a freshly mown lawn, (hazardous but pretty), to a gravel path, (lethal), or the sloping bank (foolhardy), outside either the refreshment hut or the lavatories. The space marked out for dancing is tiny. When we politely point out that dancing properly and safely requires a flat, dry, hazard free, surface and furthermore the public will not be able to see authentic dance in its true setting, fifteenth century court dances were performed indoors in large halls and not in the vicinity of the garderobe, we are often met with bewilderment and "does it really matter" shrugs. Often requests to dance indoors, in a reasonably accurate space, is turned down either because "Dancing will damage the floor" (National Trust) or "If it is a nice day the public will want to stay outside" (English Heritage) or "That would be a health and safety issue" (Both). Thus we have a choice, either to comply with the customers' requests and dance out of context or to refuse to play a game of pretence and lose a booking. So we

Play games with the past and pretend we are at home in it, ignoring the limitations of time and space by recreating it in the here and now...[10]

Inevitably a compromise is made. We have to dance in the selected space but we are given permission to tell the public what we show them is not necessarily an accurate representation. In any case, each time we dance in a new venue, surrounded by new scenery, we have changed the meaning and context of the performance. We have contributed to aura loss. So why do presenters and audience become drawn into this pretence, why try to recreate the past at all?

For English Heritage the answer is simple. It is for educational purposes

...to create an opportunity for children to take part in a historical reconstruction...for many children this way of working can unlock history. Places and objects can come to life because they can be compared with what we did...wearing simple period clothes gives the past an identity and creates the sense of a different reality. [11]

Past Performance

Although subject to criticism from some we can encourage people from all walks of life to take an interest in Early Dance, sharing, with an audience a belief that dance preservation matters and that engagement with it is enjoyable. But we are subjective so why do we devote much time to the study of dance manuscripts and the painstaking reconstruction and performance of early dance if we simply draw our audience into a game of let's pretend? What are we trying to do and why do we do it at all?

From a privileged position, as the secretary of the Early Dance Circle I distributed a short questionnaire within the early dance world and discussed our varied aims and purposes with fellow researchers, reconstructors and performers. Questioning theories usually provides the impetus for further research. However the task of unpacking debates becomes more complex once questions move away from research methods and onto performance. Whilst academic research may thrive and even grow when challenged, any perceived criticism of artistic performance is another matter entirely. Reading papers and books uncovers differences of academic opinion but conversations with performers and their responses to the questionnaire uncovered deeper emotions. There was a greater variety of players on the dance stage than may be first assumed. People are involved in Early Dance reconstruction for many reasons.

The majority of respondents believed that actual performance of early dance was vital. This would encourage others to take an interest in early dance and therefore both ensure participation in research and reconstruction and the survival of the dance forms themselves. Most felt that dance performance could play a part in encouraging a general historical interest:

The performance may get the audience interested in finding out more about the period.

Whilst many made greater claims, clearly stating that costumed performance of early

dance, before an audience, encouraged the latter to take an interest in specific aspects of social and political history.

The social hierarchy in court dance shows how they were able to integrate foreign and visiting royal/diplomatic visitors e.g. Bulstrode Whitlock at the Swedish Court....also helps understand the eighteenth century development of the consumer society's social assemblies and the rise of the middling sort.

The importance of understanding and mastering the skills of social dancing of the period is also exceedingly helpful in coming to a fuller realization of social mores and customs that were currently in practice and indeed sometimes necessary for living at the time. In addition costumed performances in appropriate settings such as an early ballroom built for the purpose, give a clear idea of community entertainments, how these were organised, the use of space, the interaction of different levels of society (or not) their aspirations, how people organised their lives and so on.

For some, audience reaction to performance was not enough, the chance to encourage active participation was important:

Early dance is just one aspect of how people in the past lived, therefore should be shown/taught alongside all other social history topics. This is what I am doing and the public love it.

Heritage events provided some with opportunities to take early dance to a wider audience:

I teach the general public so that they can experience it at heritage sites and at historic and other art and music festivals and parties.

Though follow up conversations with respondents indicated that some thought the heritage movement generally

Has no understanding of dance in its proper context. Sets too many limitations, provides no suitable space for dancing and pays too little.

The most striking aspect of the responses however was a clear division between those who believed that dance research should, indeed must, lead to performance and those who saw it as a theoretical activity.

How can it be dance research if it remains on paper? A dance is not a dance unless it is danced.

To share knowledge of early dance research should be an academic activity as distinct from practical.

These questions may have answers in academic studies but true understanding surely requires actually trying out the dances.

Surely both theoretical research and practical reconstruction are of equal importance in that research, based on original manuscripts and dancing manuals, enables attempts at performance to be made, while attempts at performance can be used to test the validity of a particular interpretation of the manuscripts. Historical context and reconstruction are vital partners in the same process. An academic challenge of historical research and the physical and emotional challenge of reconstruction and performance make good bedfellows. A barrier between researcher/scholar and performer is uncomfortable and does not contribute to knowledge.

Barbara Sparti recognises this. Asking what the relationship between performers or “active participant dancers” and the work of scholars is, she decides if performers are to correctly interpret the content of a dance treatise then they must understand its original context. It is important to find out why it was written, compare it with others and ask whether it was typical of the period or a reaction to “some abuse of the time.”[12] This implies that serious attempts to reconstruct early dances need to have links with formal research if the dancers are aiming for a valid interpretation of a past performance. Opposition to this view is understandable. Dancers don’t want to spend time in archives. Their passion is for

dance itself. Janet Adshead notes that for dancers

The relevance of a historical perspective for the understanding of any human activity is often questioned. Direct participation in the activity itself, in this case dancing and in making dances, is seen by many people to be of paramount value. Indeed unless people dance, there would be nothing to be a history of. [13]

Whilst warning would-be performers that

this is to minimise the importance of historical understanding and to fail to see its potential to enrich knowledge in and of dance. Understanding of dance can develop in a number of ways but to ignore the historical and contextual factors, which explain and give rise to the existence of any particular form or type of dance is to run the risk of minimising its functions. [14]

Whether one chooses to be a researcher, a performer or simply an appreciator of early dance is a personal decision. Sparti values being involved in dance as both performer and researcher, claiming that to do otherwise is somewhat limiting.

Those scholars who have not performed or danced out reconstructions are limited when writing about choreographies. On the other hand, performers who start writing about dance are often unable to deal with anything other than choreographies. [15]

One could choose to be involved in all three. We should question the claims of any performer to understand the needs of an audience if they had never sat through a performance themselves. What is important for researcher, performer and audience is for dance in historical terms to be placed in a cultural setting whilst remembering that its role, position and value has changed through time. In modern Western culture Dance is seen as an art form, something appreciated by a minority. It has lost its educative, ritual and social functions. However in recent years there has been a resurgence of interest in dance as an activity for everyone. Line dancing and Salsa groups meet on a regular basis in halls and pubs. Films e.g. *Billy Elliot*,

the success of the *Lynx Aftershave* dance promotion and prime time television dance competitions in the *Strictly* series have brought dance out of the theatre and back into the community. Dance also finds place in T.V. and cinema period drama. However there is debate within Early Dance on how valuable this showcase is. What a director believes to be good value in film may not be an accurate representation of early dance. Also as the purpose of dance changes through time, a modern audience might have some difficulty appreciating the hidden codes within dance performance in 1589.

And if you desire to marry you must realise that a mistress is won by the good temper and grace displayed whilst dancing, because ladies do not like to be present at fencing or tennis, lest a splintered sword or a blow from a tennis ball should cause them injury...And there is more to it than this, for dancing is practised to reveal whether lovers are in good health and sound of limb, after which they are permitted to kiss their mistresses in order that they may touch and savour one another, thus to ascertain if they are shapely or emit an unpleasant odour as of bad meat. Therefore from this standpoint, quite apart from the many advantages to be derived from dancing, it becomes an essential in a well-ordered society. [16]

Setting aside the feminist perspective and arguments on what might be considered a well ordered society today, it is important to raise questions on how much historical background an audience should be given before any dance performance takes place? Does additional historical knowledge assist in the understanding of performance? How authentic can a performance be if an audience has no understanding of dance in its social and political context? Indeed as dance was part of social/political activity rather than a theatrical performance event until the eighteenth century

The *performance* of early dance for an audience (like traditional village dances done on stage) is in itself unauthentic. [17]

This honest admission by Sparti, that any audience-based performance of pre-18th century dance is clearly out of context and therefore inauthentic, is a clear reminder of Benjamin's claims that meanings change with time. By performing fifteenth century Italian balli for a twenty-first century audience, outside the confines of an Italian Princely Court, original aura is automatically lost. The audience has no understanding of the political statements, which were obvious to contemporary observers, in the dance (who dances first, who partners who, who leads the dancers onto the floor) and no understanding of the splendour and size of the original dance space. This is not to say that the balli should not be re-presented today, but most claims and expectations of authenticity are overstated and inaccurate.

Some groups are aware of this. Their dancers seek to create an *atmosphere* of the past rather than reconstruct a past performance itself. Programme notes admit both aims and limitations.

Rostibolli Renaissance Dance bases its performances on material drawn from contemporary sources. Each production uses choreographies and music from a particular period, be it 15th, 16th or 17th century. It then seeks to recreate the atmosphere of the time by combining the dance with relevant spoken extracts chosen from original writing -- diaries, letters, occasional official documents or poetry -- to create a story relevant to the history of the period. Contemporary music and song provide an authentic framework for the dances. Well-researched and colourful costumes complete the picture. [18]

There is a subtle compromise here. The group claims that it is trying to create an *authentic framework* for the dances not that the dance performances themselves are authentic. Dance is an art form. Individual dancers are interpreters. They bring different meaning to a piece each time they dance. No matter how closely they follow an original choreography or a director's instructions, a dancer's mood can affect the dance.

When they dance, dancers also engage in interpretive activity. That is, their performances (dances) are interpretations -- during the performance the dancer interprets the dance. Just as the reader of a poem, through intonation and emphasis, can bring the words to life and give the particular qualities and meanings, so the dancer can affect the dance. [19]

In the expressive arts qualities and levels of interpretation are always changing. In a play's season an actor gives many different performances. Musicians too approach pieces in different ways. Ian Anderson, a modern composer and performer with *Jethro Tull*, claims that every performance is a new performance and interpretation. Explaining when asked for a live performance of his own compositions, he replied that he can never recapture the spirit of the original performance. [20]

This is not to say that each new rendition is of less value than the original but every performance is different. The context for the performance has changed. If a modern composer-performer knows he cannot recapture the authenticity of his own first performance, then how could any performer claim to capture authenticity of works from previous centuries? To perform a piece as it was originally intended is impossible. Each performer brings something different to the work at each staging. In dance each new dancer puts something of themselves into the interpretation. In drama this is expected. No-one requires one actor's rendition of Richard III to be the same as another's. Each is required to take a familiar script and bring something new to the role. The ability to move an audience and involve it in the spirit of the performance is what distinguishes a great actor from a mediocre one. The early dance performers consulted shared a common aim, to encourage more interest in historical dance and to present an audience with good quality performance. Perhaps a concentration on emotion rather than total historical accuracy would take an audience closer to the spirit of an original dance performance and

arguably, lose less meaning than one which, painstakingly attempts, but fails, to reconstruct every original nuance?

Claims to present authentic dance exactly as it was performed in another time are unauthentic and unfair, both to original performers and dancing masters. We know that the Italian dances in our repertoire were re-performed or rather re-created for different occasions and that a dance seen in Siena must be seen to be better than one presented for Florentines, Caroso himself tells us that he has re-visited and 'improved dances' on several occasions [21]. Frederick Hammond shows that similar re-creations took place when early opera was performed

Within Italy when an opera re-appeared in another city it was never performed as an exact copy of the original. Particular preferences were taken into consideration and novelties were promised. [22]

These attempts to please patrons present modern reconstructors with challenge and choice. Which version of *Allegretta D'Amore* should be regarded as authentic and original? The creator's first rendition or his final one?

For Sparta this confirms that for re-performance of dances described in dancing manuals of the 15th and 16th centuries and of dances within the early opera framework the "concept of authenticity is a relative one." She claims "Since there is no normative text we are free to recreate dances as we wish." [23] However performers are advised to consider giving life to the dances by asking more questions about changing and individual context e.g. who was dancing and on what occasion?

It would also be wrong to try to preserve early dance simply by handing down a "received historiography of dance." Where performers simply try to repeat what their original teacher taught them. Sometimes a particular dance style can be seen at the annual Early Dance Festival. It is not difficult to work out which school of thought, or which teacher/researcher has influenced a particular group. In which case what is the group preserving, the spirit of

an original dance or the original work of a modern researcher/teacher?

Hazel Dennison challenges many preconceived notions when she claims that it is both possible and desirable to transpose dances from the ballroom and court into a theatrical one. Starting from the premise that known theatrical forms in the fifteenth century, morality tales and mumming performances, contained dance and choreographic properties common to both social and theatrical dance and arguing that dancing masters were choreographers she encourages performers of early dance to be more adventurous when sharing their art and interest with a wider audience.

We dance these 500 year old creations with the bodies and spirits of today, and whilst remaining true to their creation we should not lock them too safely away...Today's dancers and choreographers need to realise these dances in their original context but should not feel intimidated into treating them as artefacts. Their strict form allows scope for fresh honest interpretation and their unique content focuses on Domenico's (a 15th century dancing master) own creative process as a choreographer. [24]

Dennison seeks compromise. Creating an atmosphere of the past but giving new life to the dances 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.

She is prepared to add dramatic interpretation to a performance whilst still claiming to follow the original instructions. For Dennison this adds value to a performance and gives a modern audience something resembling a plot to follow. Rostibolli attempt something similar by taking a medieval story, for example the *Wife Of Bath's Tale*, or an historical event e.g. The Plague and Fire of London, but using original dances to tell it. In this case there is no claim to be presenting a past performance but the dances themselves are set in a period context. Some

questionnaire respondents questioned the validity of such performances:

They give a false perception of old dances which should never, indeed can never be performed.

But the performers themselves might argue that this re-performance and re-creation keeps an interest in early dance alive. Provided that

programme notes are honest and do not deliberately set out to deceive an audience there is nothing wrong in adding drama to performance.

The way the Gresley manuscript is used and interpreted, to enable the dances it contains to be performed would be worthy of special study in its own right. Only a few questions are examined here. What researchers and performers do with the text and what they *think* they do will illustrate what past performance is or rather what creators of past performance intend it to be. This is our most recent example of different early dancers actually working from the same script.

The Gresley manuscript contains instructions for reproducing dances in a notebook belonging to Johanes (John) Banys. Dancers working from it still use it for the same purpose; arguably the role of the document has not changed through time. The dances are works of expressive art. The manuscript could be described as a fifteenth century director's notes, written to assist in a 15th century recreation of a contemporary work of art. Will new performances of a *Gresley* dance now depend on individual readings of the manuscript? This is a crucial question. This exciting discovery, for those studying English Early Dance, has been transcribed and presented to the dance world by a musicologist who took eleven years to realize how important the document was. If the first pages had been sent to a dancer would the *Gresley* story be different? It would possibly have emerged more rapidly. The *Gresley* dances escape from the archive by accident. Carolyn Steedman is aware of how such accidents happen.

The archive is made from selected and consciously chosen documentation from the past and also from the mad fragmentations that no-one intended to preserve but just ended up there. ...and nothing happens to this stuff, in the Archive. It is indexed and catalogued, and some of it is not indexed and catalogued, and some of it is lost. But as stuff, it just sits there until it is read, and used, and narrativised. [25]

But to re-emerge as something truly useful this “stuff” needs to be “read and used” by someone who recognises its true worth, someone who actually knows what it is. Fallows admits that he did not appreciate the significance of the document. Therefore he did not make attempts to narrativise it until someone else told him what was. This should raise some concerns for all those who perform Gresley dances. Will dances reconstructed from his transcription be linked with a musician’s perspective rather than dancers? If a dancer had made the first transcription would a dancer’s eye have noted something in the original document, a musician’s would not? I contacted dancers working on reconstructing *Gresley* dances. All but one were working from the Fallows transcript. This implies a general assumption that the Fallows transcription is accurate.

Huge possibilities exist for changes in meaning and interpretation even before the dance is set on the floor. Dancers work from their own notes, taken from their director’s verbal instructions. The director’s notes are made from their study of the script, in this case their copy of the Fallows transcript or a copy of a friend’s copy and so on. Fallows passed his original transcript to Jennifer Nevile, another musician, with an interest in dance. Dr Nevile examined the musical structure of the document and developed her own notation of the dance. Capriol Dancers were invited to work with Dr Nevile and the dances were given their first public re-performances in 1999, three years after Fallows published his transcription. It is easy to see how a re-performance develops into something quite different from the original as dances are handed on. A performance for the

Early Dance Circle Festival 1999 was videoed. One mistake captured on film could be responsible for a whole new dance style. Dancers, using the film as a source would be working from a copy, of a copy, of a copy of a musicologist’s interpretation of Johannes Banys’ personal notes. In simple terms, they would not and could not work from the original dance itself.

Another development further supports Benjamin’s claims of auratic loss. When I visited the archive in Matlock, to request box D77 box 38, I found the original document had been reclaimed by the Gresley family “To prevent it being damaged.” The Fallows transcript had taken its place in box 38. Thus a twenty-first century musicologist’s work becomes an artefact itself, while the original document was locked away. One CD copy had been made of the manuscript. This added a new dimension to study and certainly changed perspective and perception. New technology had reproduced and perhaps improved the source. Now we can manipulate the manuscript. Magnify the images on each page, zoom in on undecipherable words. This was certainly a useful tool for the researcher and of assistance when making my own transcript but I confess to feeling great disappointment.. If Benjamin’s concept of aura is linked with feeling of awe felt before a work of art, in laypersons’ terms the “Wow Factor” then, for one reader at least, this reproduction of *Gresley* via computer destroyed it. Benjamin was right, aura is lost.

David Wilson, director of Capriol, believed that the work of transcribing dance manuscripts is an art form in itself. He differentiated between a transcription and an edition. The latter is used to try to establish what the original writer wrote. The editor may feel it necessary to correct scribal errors, he

will need to exercise considerable imagination (controlled by recognised principles of textual criticism) in making speculative emendations to yield a plausible text. It is legitimate, though not obligatory, to modernise the spelling, punctuation and

layout of the text to make it more readily comprehensible to a modern reader. [26]

This, like the performance of a dance itself, is akin to an editor faced with a badly garbled interpretation, and Wilson explains that it is

Not until you do it yourself that you realise how many tricky choices you have to make.

Now a text more comprehensible to the modern reader may be some distance from a text understood by the original writer's contemporaries. However a text more comprehensible is a text more useable. But when dancers make an interpretation of the interpretation, they won't be recreating the original performance. Diana Cruickshank shares this view and confirms that David Fallows did well to produce a readable transcript, which many can use:

When the Gresley manuscript was made public everyone thought that it was wonderful and exciting because this was a truly *English* English manuscript. It wasn't an English translation of French or Italian dances. However although it was English it was still in a foreign language or rather a language foreign to us. It contains words we don't understand, dance terms we have never heard before such as rake and flourdelice. [27]

Working with the Fallows or Nevile interpretations in order to realise the dances on the floor is a difficult task. I noted that individual interpretations linked with mood affect each performance, but to reach the stage where mood can be considered, written instructions have to be translated into movement. Paper based instructions may be read and interpreted in different ways. Words on paper are not easy to put into practice. 'The first 3 forth and torne, whill the second retrett 3 bake' seems a simple instruction. We could translate it as the first three move forward and turn, while the second takes three steps backwards. However there is no indication of how the dancers should step or whether the first 3 turn together in a circle or as individuals on the spot. Similarly, when asked to take two steps with a leap, some dancers will perform two high steps,

assuming that "with" refers to an *embellishment* of the two steps, whilst others automatically take two walking steps and then add a jump, assuming that with a leap means *and* a leap. These small differences in interpretation will provide several versions of the original dance and there is no way of knowing what the original choreographer intended. The original dance cannot be performed though we can experiment with various flavours of what might have been. We have to experiment to see what works, what appears to make sense. We work on interpretations of old words. With luck some of these may be close to the original but there is no way to prove it!

In March 1999, Derbyshire Record Office hosted the first modern public performance of five dances from the *Gresley* Manuscript. The venue was Haddon Hall and the audience

A very select audience composed partly of senior national figures of the world of manuscripts and archives and partly those who had worked in conserving and publishing the document both in electronic and conventional media. The latter group included Professor David Fallows and Dr Jennifer Nevile. [28]

The make up of the "select" audience is interesting. Derbyshire Record office clearly saw the re-enactment of *Gresley* in an archive context. The event was a celebration. However, activity within the work of academic scholarship, i.e. interpretation and conservation of manuscripts, was the real focus of the festivities. The impact of a discovery, of vital importance to the field of Early Dance, was not the main focus of attention. Reintroduction of the text of the *Gresley* dances was set in the context of music and the reintroduction of the actual dances themselves in the context of manuscript conservation. This is another reminder of the limits of modern perception and understanding of artefacts. Re-interpretation and performance, of a past performance piece, is confined by pre-conceived notions held by the audience. The academics and archivists at this premiere

understood the importance of Gresley as a rare manuscript but had little understanding of the actual importance of the realization of these dances for dancers. Had the audience consisted of Early Dance practitioners then the relationship between performer and audience would have been different with the performance itself taking on new meaning.

In either case, it seems reasonable to argue that this re-performance of items from past performance is a good example of how each reconstruction of a new performance alters with audience perception and the aura changes. Johanes Banys ideas were being reinterpreted by performers and audience alike. Intricacies and accuracy of steps, over which the performers agonised, were not at the top of the invited audience's agenda.

The dances were performed by Capriol, led by David Wilson. Live music was provided by the Bedford Waits. Wilson describes the process of making a workable live performance from written directions:

We performed the dances in the versions prepared by Dr Nevile...What we received from Dr Nevile was a proposed sequence of steps fitted to an arrangement of the relevant music together with a sketch of the assumed floor patterns. We still had to decide how certain steps and manoeuvres were to be executed; in what general style the dancers were going to move...and what were the dynamics of each dance as it took shape on the floor. [29]

Even at this first re-performance Capriol dancers were already three levels of interpretation away from the original dances. They had worked out their routines by trying out and sometimes adapting Nevile's interpretation of Fallows transcript of Banys' initial instructions. There is no way of knowing whether the Banys notes were of dances choreographed by him or handed to him by another dancing master.

Ironically, although the Derbyshire Record Office had carefully chosen a fifteenth century setting for the occasion, other concessions to modernity had to be made.

The venue was Haddon Hall (Derbyshire) where the Banqueting Hall remains essentially in its late fifteenth century form and provides a setting that is only too authentic. The flagged floor goes back to the fourteenth century and its surface is so worn and uneven, that for the safety of the public, it is normally covered by large areas of matting. Out of the concern for the safety of the dancers, we also chose to leave this matting in place as the lesser of two evils and were glad of a long in-site rehearsal to adjust our technique accordingly. [30]

Johanes Banys left no instructions on the actual style of the steps to be performed. In rehearsal Capriol made basic technical decisions on how they would actually execute each movement.

A basic decision had to be made at the outset: to step onto the toe or onto the flat foot? We were especially glad we had chosen the second option when we encountered the practicalities of performance at Haddon; no one could have danced on the toe on that floor with any confidence. [31]

As previously observed, the venue selected for performance directly influences the presentation. In dance reconstruction, Samuel's claim that that our ability to understand the past is constrained by where we are today is true in practical as well as philosophical terms. We dancers plead not guilty, on a technicality, to Lowenthal's charge of "not liking the past and changing it". Dancers often attempt accurate reproduction of steps and movement but when modernity makes a past process dangerous, health and safety regulations *require* us to change it.

Thus the dances, described by Johanes Banys in the late fifteenth century, re-entered the English dance repertoire. Wilson does not record how they were received by the first audience. Early Dance enthusiasts had to wait seven months for a costumed performance. Capriol took the dances to the 1999 Early Dance Circle Festival, an in-house celebration of dance research and practice.

Past Performance

The dances were now presented in a late twentieth century space, on a floor designed for dancing. Music was presented through a state of the art sound system. The dances were well received and the performance was filmed, thus preserving another artefact and capturing a moment of time. The dances were returned to the realm of the dancer and open to new interpretation. There have been many since. Without doubt Johannes Banys' little note book has captured the imagination of dancers, musicians and lovers of old manuscripts and from whatever field researchers and practitioners come, with their different perceptions, they all agree interpretation of both text and dance has only just begun.

This brief foray into the adventures of the Gresley manuscript clearly indicates that our performance of a past performance is complicated. It challenges us to use our imagination to breathe new life into archived information but reminds us to be modest in our claims of authenticity. We use both knowledge and imagination in our reconstructions and we are not infallible. One cannot help but wonder what judgements and leaps of imagination future performers of early dance will make when they attempt to reconstruct dances of our own time. The world is now information rich and there is visual evidence of our social dancing but if for some reason this was lost, if researchers had to construct our own time from textual sources only what would happen? Terms with which we are familiar today will obviously be open to reinterpretation. Imagine a dance class in 2999, when a dancer told to recreate "twentieth century dancing with heavy rock" asks the teacher if "a rather small pebble will do instead?" or whether one has to don a space suit to authentically recreate Michael Jackson's Moonwalk? Will future researchers, looking for continuity and change by linking surviving fragments of knowledge gleaned from the media, decide that 21st century students met regularly to preserve their ancient dance heritage when the written sources indicate 'there was another brawl in a

bar in Lewisham on Saturday night' and will students be required to provide their own props, a towel (size unrecorded) to enhance a reconstruction of the 20th century twist and a large handbag around which to dance to create a truly authentic disco experience? Will conference papers on authentic costume be followed by fierce academic debate on the merits of the platform shoes, the stiletto and the flip flop and whether dancers should adopt the New Look, the Mary Quant mini or Punk fashion for an authentic reconstruction of the conga?

Of course appeals to the imagination, to support a reconstruction of an historical event or piece are not a product of the twenty-first century. All dramatic reconstructions and performance have depended on a subtle relationship between performer and audience. Fashions and interests may change and subtly affect the nature of performance. A study of individual performances might indeed discover more about the time the performance was presented, rather than the event it attempts to recreate. The audience has always been invited to "play games with the past." Imaginary forces have always been at work. The chorus of a Greek tragedy told the audience what to feel and described what could not be reconstructed in the theatre and a 16th century prologue demands compliant imaginations.

For 'tis your thoughts that now must deck
our Kings
Carry them here and there, jumping o'er
times.
Turning th' accomplishment of many years
Into an hour glass; [32]

Perhaps there is no harm in admitting that we are "playing with time" and our contributions are part of a living, changing history. We share our interpretations and performances of the past but also tell the story of us in our own time. Our reconstructions mark our relationship with past, present and future and though each one destroys original aura new aura is created -- our own. As Benjamin reminds us:

To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognise it the way it really was. [33]

We will provide future researchers with many theories on Early Dance but those ideas also provide a window on our own lives, showing what we valued, what we felt was important to preserve from the past. With so much underneath the surface, there is little wonder we could not imprison the ice cube in our hand. In fact it was not a melting ice cube at all. It was just the tip of a very large iceberg!

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