RUDOLPH LABAN (1879 – 1958)

Rudolf Laban (1879-1958) was born in Austro-Hungary. Laban was a dancer, a choreographer and a dance / movement theoretician. One of the founders of European Modern Dance, his work was extended through his most celebrated collaborators, Mary Wigman, Kurt Jooss and Sigurd Leeder. Through his work, Laban raised the status of dance (other than ballet) as an art form, and his explorations into the theory and practice of dance and movement transformed the nature of dance scholarship.

He established choreology, the discipline of dance analysis, and invented a system of dance notation, now known as Labanotation. Laban was the first person to develop community dance and he set out to reform the role of dance education, emphasising his belief that dance should be made available to everyone.

In 1948 the Laban School began its life as the Art of Movement Studio in Manchester, moving to Addlestone in Surrey due to expansion in 1953. Five years later Rudolf Laban died. In 1973, on the retirement of Lisa Ullman, Marion North became Head of School (Principal and Director), followed by Bonnie Bird, Artistic Director, who joined the Art of Movement Studio in 1974. The Art of Movement Studio was renamed Laban Centre for Movement and Dance in 1975, and moved to new premises in New Cross, South East London.

Rudolf Laban (1879-1958) was the son of a high ranking military figure in the Austro-Hungarian empire. He spent much of his time in Bosnia and Herzegovina, in the towns of Sarajevo and Mostar as well as the court circle in Vienna and the theatre life of Bratislava. He was educated in both western and eastern cultures.

Rejecting the military career planned for him, he became an artist. Through his studies of architecture at the Ècoles des Beaux Arts in Paris he observed the moving body and its spaces.

Aged thirty, he moved to Munich, the art centre of Germany. There he focused on revolutionising Bewegungskunst, the movement arts, spending the summer months at his Arts School on Monte Verita.

In 1919 his major career in Germany began. Rudolf Laban ran a dance theatre company, a chamber dance theatre company and opened a main school, a movement choir for amateurs, wrote articles and books, performed, and created dance works.

Over the next ten years he created 25 Laban schools and choirs for the education of children, amateurs including men, and professional dancers in
Latvia, Zagreb, Paris and Germany, always retaining a 'movement laboratory' for his own research.

In 1927, he moved to Berlin, opening the Choreographisches Institut. By 1929, his 50th birthday celebrations show that he was at the height of an influential career, not only as a leader of the Ausdrucktanz movement, but as a recognised intellectual in the field of dance theatre and movement study.

He was appointed director of movement and choreographer to the Prussian State Theatres in Berlin in 1930. In 1934, in a Nazi Germany, he was appointed director of the Deutsche Tanzbühne. Falling foul of Nazism in 1936 while at the height of his career, his name and work was destroyed by the Government Propaganda Ministry. Many of his followers emigrated, especially to the United States, and in 1938 he took refuge in Britain.

At the age of sixty, supported by Lisa Ullmann, he started a new phase in his career. He worked in industry, introducing work study methods to increase production through humane means, and greatly influenced the movement education culture in Britain opening, through Lisa Ullmann, The Art of Movement Studio in Manchester in 1946.

In 1953 the studios moved to a donated country estate in Addlestone. In his last years he concentrated on movement as behaviour, studying the behavioural needs of industrial workers and psychiatric patients. This enabled him to lay the technical basis for what is now the profession of movement and dance therapy, and a basis for the expressive movement training of actors.

He died in his late seventies in 1958. But his work lives on in astounding abundance. Many people are unaware that what they do is influenced by the vision, energy and creative boldness of Laban.

Rudolf Laban was in poor health most of his life suffering from what we would now call spasmodic manic depression, which appeared during and after excessive creative endeavour and after what he perceived as rejection of his ideas. He was poor throughout his career, and never owned a home or possessions beyond his working papers. He married twice and fathered nine children, although his family life ceased when his career took off in 1919. He developed and relied on a series of apprentices to follow through his ideas, Mary Wigman being the first, Marion North being the last.

Rudolf Laban's ideas were influenced by the social and cultural changes of the time and the contexts that he worked in. The traditional constraints against showing feeling were being questioned, opening the way for a freeing of the feeling body.
Rudolf Laban believed the best way to advocate this freedom was by mirroring it in dance and the movement arts. Freud's discovery of the psyche, opened a previously closed door and the body's sexuality need no longer be hidden. The movement arts were thought to be a great medium to express this new freedom, by men and women dancing barefoot and in little clothing.

In Paris and Munich (1900 - 1914) Rudolf Laban acquired his spiritual attitude and unique value regardless of gender, social status or educational standing. He interpreted this as valuing individuals own choice of movement, and self initiated vocabularies.

Rudolf Laban witnessed the response to cultural changes by visual artists such as Klimt, Kockoshka, Shiele, Cezanne, Matisse, Picasso and Kandinsky.

He asked himself what was the equivalent of the visual arts revolution for the movement arts? He abandoned the constraints of traditional steps, the reliance on music to inspire and structure dance, the need to mime a story to reveal a body, freed to find its own rhythms, create its own steps and revel in the medium of space. Der Freier Tanz was born.

His search for the basic vocabulary of expressive movement identified the basic factors of movement flow, with weight, embodying time and space.

Rudolf Laban wrote articles and books and formed dance choirs of young male and female performers in his endeavour to introduce a contemporary mass dance culture for urban populations. He created dance works of a celebratory and participatory nature which often dealt in abstract terms with a social and spiritual agenda to educate socially aware dancers.

The First World War put an end to social positioning and this was reflected in theatre art by discarding the traditional positioning of actors. He removed the hierarchical system of ballet companies and replaced it with the democratic ensemble.

Rudolf Laban created and toured works for his large and impoverished company. His works explored social themes just as his drama counterparts did (e.g. Brecht), as constructivist visual artists did (e.g. Malevitch) and as caricaturists did (e.g. Grosz).

Rudolf Laban and his pupil Kurt Jooss made dance into a social force, creating political anti-war ballets and anti-poverty ballets in the 1930's.

Dance in Opera

The public were confounded, either elated by the rule breaking defiance of a dance that showed 'freed, enlarged, strengthened dancing' or infuriated at the
defiance of tradition. Critics were either rapturously pro or aggressively anti, and Opera dance could never be the same again.

Rudolf Laban fundamentally excelled as an experimenter with choreographic processes and was not a successful choreographer of products. He needed others to polish his works once he had completed the first experiments.

What sets Laban apart from other early dance pioneers in this century? He was both a creative artist and a creative theorist at home, in the studio and the laboratory, equally able to express himself through movement and writing.

His legacy is not in outstanding theatre works of dance but in studio practices and theoretical methods driven by movement practice.

Dance Literacy

Rudolf Laban's passion was to establish dance as an art of equal standing to its sister arts, a place it had never held. It had to establish a medium through its own literacy, hence in his burning desire to find a notation for dance. Without literacy dance would never be taken seriously by the cultural elite.

Rudolf Laban spent twenty years understanding movement sufficiently to create signs on paper that could represent body parts moving in space and time dynamically. Today, as Labanotation, his system caters for the needs of the modern dance world. Just as musical notation has to adapt to the changing needs of composers. So Labanotation has to grow to cope with modern needs and technologies.

Conclusion

What aspects of his work still provide a basis for development in the 21st Century?

The multi-faceted and continually developing nature of Laban's output forms both a challenge and a difficulty for students of his work. No-one can encompass it all.

Major dance training courses offer Laban work on their curriculum, but these are not necessarily his prime legacy. He maintained that he had no method and had no wish to be presented as having one. Rather a spirit of enquiry is the main legacy that unites the scattered and diverse body of people who use his work.