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### Writing Dance: Reflexive Processes-at-Work Notating New Choreography

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## Writing Dance: Reflexive Processes-at-Work Notating New Choreography

### Abstract

The experiences of the notator-at-work are a continuous learning event based on personal discovery, reflection, and trial and error. When in the process of notating a newly created work notators often become engaged with the dance on a unique level compared to the times when they are notating works already in existence. This article examines the notator experience alongside the choreographic process of Bebe Miller, from a case study perspective. Using one instance of Miller's choreographing *Prey* (2000) and the notator's documentation of Miller's dance, the side by side collaborative processes of the notator-at-work and choreographer-at-work are examined providing a contextual framework in which to analyze these parallel processes. The following provide a format for examining the case study: (a) holistic contexts of creating: what circumstances influenced the making and creating processes; (b) medium: the materials each professional uses while creating; and (c) temporality: how the two processes intersect over time.

### Keywords

Notation, choreographic process, movement analysis, case study

Puzzlement, furrowed brow, and the phrase, “Oh, and what does that mean?” are the usual reactions when I tell people that I am a professional Labanotator. In response, I explain that I document dances using a system of symbols that results in a score much like a composer’s composition or a playwright’s script. The resultant score is more easily understood than the process by which I come to produce it. Perhaps that is because very few notators have the time or opportunity to explain how they go about doing what they do. Little is written on how to create a dance score or how to notate a choreographer’s dance while it is being created. By sharing my understanding of a collaborative, co-creative choreographic and notation process of a new dance work, the field of dance gains a rich understanding of the value of using the Labanotation system. Identifying instances from the collaborative process provides insight into approaches and best practices for future notation professionals who will document the work of current artists.

The experiences of the notator-at-work provide continuous learning through personal discovery, reflection, and trial and error. A notator typically finds him or herself in one of the following two situations: one, notating a work that has previously been choreographed and the stager has come in to set the dance on a company, or two, notating a work that is being created on the dancers by the choreographer in that moment. These two situations might seem similar, but require very different processes. When notating a newly created work, a notator is privy to the choreographer’s intimate act of creation and to the circumstances surrounding the work, which provide context for movement decisions and meaning-making inside the dance. When notating a work that has previously been created, the notator can have access to information about the dance through reviews, video or film of the dance, images, etc.

Scoring a newly created work in Labanotation, the notator and choreographer prepare for creating and documenting in the present. In these moments of creation, the notator has no prior knowledge of the dance. No previous research is possible, and the notator cannot know ahead of time how many dancers are in the work, the musical selections, the structural aspects of the dance, etc. No historical or cultural contextual information is available because the context has not yet happened. The notator is, thus, intrinsically linked to the choreographer. The notator’s discovery becomes about her ability to “see” what is happening in the studio, discern what is being described through both body movement and oral descriptors, and figure out which symbols best express the movement to readers who have never seen the choreography performed.

In my year-long process of training with three world-renowned notators, I learned to focus on the movement and to quickly get the symbols onto paper. As a notator trainee, I notated sections of existing dances. The first was William Forsythe’s *Artifact II*. I had access to information about the work through videos

of past performances as well as reviews and articles describing the dance. The second dance was Beverly Blossom's *Dad's Ties*. I had access to videos of Blossom performing and was able to interview her during the rehearsal and notating processes. When I came to notate my qualifying score for Professional Notator Certification, which served as my capstone project of my year-long training in New York City, I was presented with an in-the-moment creation, a new work by world-class choreographer and future faculty colleague, Bebe Miller. Thus, my experience as a notator trainee was vastly different from my experience as a notator-in-the-making.

I knew Miller as an internationally-recognized choreographer with a long-established dance company, the Bebe Miller Company, and I knew her as a visiting artist and future faculty member in the university dance department where we both worked. I had previous knowledge of her movement preferences because I had taken her technique classes, attended multiple performances of her work, and met her at city-wide events. However, I did not know her creative process, and I was eager to learn by serving as a recorder of her choreography. Preparing to document Miller's dance through Labanotation, I kept in mind that acts of artistic creation are similar, and, at the same time, widely divergent. I was prepared to share in the process of creation, as participant and observer, and committed to documenting Miller's choreography. Miller's and my intersecting processes included three aspects: (1) an environment which had everything to do with how well one notates or choreographs; (2) a collaborative and welcoming atmosphere, which helped the notator with his or her practice; and (3) an interconnecting practice, wherein the notator's score mirrored the choreographer's dance.

My experience as a professional notator-in-the-making and Miller's experience as choreographer during the 2000 rehearsals of *Prey* provide a case study of notators and the relationships they can have with their choreographers. Once the moment of creation begins, a bonding takes place between choreographer and notator. They become creative persons linked by artistic processes that reflect back the image of each one's journey. Circumstances, tools of the trade, and time mold the methods and problem-solving techniques each one employs. As part of the study, I conducted follow-up analysis and entered the score into the LabanWriter computer program. Examining this experience provide a contextual framework for examining these parallel processes of the notator-at-work writing the emergent score and the choreographer-at-work developing the dance. This study reveals how the notator-choreographer relationship impacts the final product (for the notator and the choreographer) by focusing on three themes: (a) holistic contexts of creating: what collaborative and professional circumstances influenced our making and creating processes, (b) medium: the materials each of us used while creating, and (c) temporality: how our two processes intersected over time.

### **Influential Circumstances of Bringing into Being**

Perhaps the most challenging and exciting moment for a notator is the prospect of beginning the process of notating a work. When I first knew that I would be notating a dance by Miller, I capitalized on my relationship with her. I took the initiative to get to know her movement style through embodied learning and notating by taking her major technique classes as Ohio State and notating short combinations during a brief professional workshop in New York City. My personal belief about understanding visual or performing art is based on John Dewey's theory that the art and the experience cannot be separated. That "in order to *understand* the esthetic in its ultimate and approved forms, one must begin with it in the raw; in the events and scenes that hold the attentive eye and ear of man."<sup>1</sup> I believe that in order to notate to the best of my ability, I need to have an understanding of the choreographer's inspiration behind the dance, and to have a grasp of the circumstances surrounding the choreography. This is consistent with Dewey's view that once an artwork is separated from its "conditions of origin" and "operation in experience"<sup>2</sup> the work ceases to fulfill its mission. Miller reflected on the implied meaning of her work, referencing experiences of humanity or the "human condition," as she termed it, as one of her key themes. Miller created the following terms for human interaction and genuine movement decisions in her postmodern work: "communication between persons," "discovering where the psyche effects change in movements," and "choices other than dancery ones."<sup>3</sup> Miller explains how the meaning in *Prey* evolved over time and solidified as she reflected on how her life experiences were influencing her art from 2000 to 2006, beginning with the work *Prey*:

I traveled to Eritrea in 1999 to teach contemporary dance. When I found that my own sense of choreographic irony (might that be a post-modern vehicle for meaning?) had no place there, I lost my way. I was struck by the directness of people's gaze, and it wasn't until I was home that I realized that they looked at me so directly because I didn't fit in the picture. The lack of irony was because they had no use for it. As artists their job was to teach each other how to be good citizens and neighbors, not just to comment from their own perspective. So where should I start teaching the idea of dance outside of cultural tradition or political propaganda? Could I use my post-modern dance 'code' in a new situation? The answer is another story, but the questions led me to question our own

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1. John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: The Berkley Publishing Group, 1934), 3.

2. Dewey, 2.

3. Bebe Miller, Interview by Valarie Williams, May 14, 2000.

codes of culture, of imagining, of art, of order, wondering how to capture the sense of being inside someone's homeland. This work is the result.<sup>4</sup>

Her questions here, brought about by the circumstances choreographing in Eritrea, inspired the theme for *Prey* and for her subsequent two Bessie award-winning works, *Verge* and *Landing/Place*. Once I began to understand the source of her inspiration, it became clearer how to use the symbols on the page to represent the meaning in her movement. For example, at the beginning of the dance, the performers vocalize baby bird sounds, collectively the group transforms into leopards with vocalizations of “ggrrrhhh...” When I first captured the movement transition from birds to leopards I wrote the movement with a center of gravity symbol. However, with a deeper grasp of Miller’s intention to remain lifted in the body, I changed my movement analysis to low level supports.

In addition to returning from Eritrea weeks before she came to Ohio State as a visiting artist to create a new work for the Department of Dance, her company was undergoing changes in membership, and she was contemplating a move. I too was experiencing major life changes, having just moved from New York to return to teaching at Ohio State. Discussing our life circumstances and professional goals focused us to create an environment to serve her need to stage a work and my need to notate my first full-length dance as a solo notator. The project started with the understanding that I would notate *Blessed*. However, three weeks into the project, Miller changed her mind and, instead of setting the 1996 piece from her repertory, she created the new work titled *Prey*. These were the circumstances that impacted the ways we discovered movement and representative symbols, shaped our choreographic and notation processes, and solved the methodological problems of the choreographer and notator within the dance and the score.<sup>5</sup>

As artists, choreographers, notators, and dancers, we can thrive in the space in which we work or we can feel stifled and unwelcomed in that space. For the notation of *Prey*, I felt that I fit in the collaborative environment and was able to take risks and learn from my risk-taking. To understand environments that foster collaboration and learning, on a simplistic level, two different points of view offer ideas on relationships within working spaces. The first discussion of environments is Andy Clark’s recount of biologist Jakob von Uexküll’s research on ticks and how they succeed in their environments. The second discussion provides attributes as described by post-structural theoretician Patti Lather’s four principles to live by in creating a space in which everyone’s full potential is achieved. The first idea of a collaborative environment embraces von Uexküll’s story of the tick living in what von Uexküll calls the tick’s “umwelt” or the

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4. Bebe Miller, Blog on The University of Maryland Clarice Smith Center, October 11, 2006, <http://claricesmithcenter.umd.edu>.

5. Bebe Miller, Personal communication with author, Winter Quarter, 2000.

affective environment to which the tick is sensitive, and thus, the *only* part of the environment to which it is sensitive.<sup>6</sup> This concept mirrors how an artist becomes responsible for creating in a specific environment and creating that environment;<sup>7</sup> in a sense, Miller and I together created our own *umwelt* for ourselves and the dancers. The second idea relates to how a collaborative and nurturing environment echoes the idea of emancipatory scholarship as defined by Lather. At the time, neither Miller nor I were aware of Lather's theory that includes these four steps: interaction; dialogue, or checking-in; negotiation; and recognition.<sup>8</sup> However, upon analysis of the environment and the process by which we created, I discovered that Lather's theory of emancipatory scholarship, which encourages all parties to fully participate and contribute, describes our framework for creating.

Throughout the multi-month process, Miller, the dancers, and I developed an environment in which we interacted, dialogued, negotiated, and recognized joint creation. The environment, or *umwelt*, was an open and welcoming atmosphere, and the choreographer, notator, and dancers were sensitive to our *umwelt*, or emancipatory scholarship. Miller's part in creating an environment conducive to working consisted of playing music to foster an atmosphere of community, of dialoguing with each dancer and me about the work, of valuing what each of us said and how we moved into and throughout the space in varying levels of floorwork and aerial work, and of engaging with different paces. I contributed to the friendly environment by gaining the trust of Miller and the dancers. I quietly witnessed Miller and the dancers in the intimate moments of creating. I cherished my time in the studio witnessing Miller's process, and respected her ability to create while I was in the room. I apply social justice scholar Leela Fernandes' idea of witnessing to dancemaking: "If witnessing must rest on a deep sense of ethical responsibility; it also brings with it a spiritual responsibility . . . to witness suffering is to witness a part of the deepest unfolding of the soul."<sup>9</sup> I witnessed dancemaking, and while it was not my position to describe how Miller created, I was responsible for scoring the movement and providing feedback. I had a personal commitment to Miller to honor her willingness to allow me unfettered access to her creative process and *umwelt*. Miller allowed all of us to experience her truth.

Together, we established a practice that mirrored emancipatory scholarship and a shared *umwelt*; however, this practice was not immediate. It took until the

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6. Andy Clark, *Being There: Putting Brain, Body, and World Together Again* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997), 24.

7. Howard Gardner, *Creating Minds: An Anatomy of Creativity Seen Through the Lives of Freud, Einstein, Picasso, Stravinsky, Eliot, Graham, and Gandhi* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 18.

8. Patti Lather, *Getting Smart* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

9. Leela Fernandes, *Transforming Feminist Practice: Non-violence, Social Justice, and the Possibilities of a Spiritualized Feminism* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2003), 91.

fifth or sixth week for Miller to be comfortable with my presence in the studio. At that time, the music ceased to be as loud. Subsequently, she asked my opinion, saying, “What do you think about unison here?” referring to the nine to ten-measure opening phrase of the “Pärt Section,” which continues for over sixty measures. She asked, “What do you think of this music?” Thereby, I, as notator, became an integral part of the rehearsal process, reading back to her what she had created. Miller began to check in with me about what we had done in previous weeks, asking, “What did I have written for that movement? What did the dancers have in their muscle memory?” I tried not to influence the creation of the dance *per se*, but toward the end of the rehearsal process I provided information on musical cues, entrances and exits, and movement phrases. Our relationship changed over time as the environment mirrored the *umwelt* and four steps of emancipatory scholarship—interaction, dialogue, negotiation, and recognition.

### **Medium, Method, and Tools of the Trade**

Notating movement can be similar to creating it; during *Prey* my notating reflected the open, participatory, and interactive environment. In the beginning, I sat on the side of the room as I had been trained in professional notator certification. After several weeks, I began sitting next to Miller at the front of the studio (figure 1). Typically, during the course of the first two months of rehearsals, the dancers improvised from a phrase Miller created. The dancers were grouped in pairs and trios. Miller determined when a phrase could be potentially useful, and I would pick up on that cue and notate it. As Miller moved to the next group, I had the freedom to ask the dancers to repeat their phrases and quickly write them down in draft symbolic form.

Throughout the process, my score increasingly came to mirror Miller's process of shaping and reshaping movement phrases. When she refined her movements, I refined the symbols that I used to convey the choreographic meaning. When Miller moved one contact improv phrase from one section to another, out came my notation symbols, and they too moved within my notebook. When she created transition steps from one phrase to another, I created the horizontal and vertical ordering of symbols to reflect those steps. Miller is a frugal creator: she uses phrases over and over, and she manipulates phrases by changing the timing and the placement in the space. She took one person's movement from a duet and put that movement on the *corps*. As I began to understand her creative process, I came in armed with multiple copies of the thematic phrases, scissors, scotch tape, and post-it notes. I used all of the resources available in the moment. Immersed in cutting and pasting, moving phrases here and there, and adding Miller's subtle nuances to sketched-out phrases, the score's emergence reflected her process of figuring things out. While experimenting, Miller used any one of



the following: observing, moving/role playing, and verbally communicating. She contextualized all of the movement within her desire for “layers of humanness,” as she describes it, which was pervasive throughout her process. When shaping the improvised phrases, Miller watched from different places in the room, in utter stillness without any motion, in stillness with hands to face or hair, or through empathetic movement. In these instances I paused; I stopped and tried to figure out what she was seeing. Through this process, I began to realize that what Miller was seeking was not only the movement, but also the *way* the movement happened. I silently questioned, “How do I notate the *motivation* behind the movement and not merely the movement and style?”



Figure 1. Bebe Miller, center, and the author, left, in rehearsal in 2000.

Stemming from my desire to document the motivation behind the movement, I created a CD-ROM, and later updated it to a DVD, as a companion for the Labanotation score (figure 2). The DVD shows key instances from rehearsals that relate to particular movements to provide insights into motivation and intent. The DVD, titled *Prey: An Innovation in Dance Documentation*, comes with the rental from the Dance Notation Bureau of the Labanotation score and includes more than twenty **bbnotes**. A **bbnote** is a tool that illustrates Miller

teaching or coaching the dancers alongside selected movement phrases shown in Labanotation. The DVD also incorporates an edited video of the group performing the dance with an explanation of the historical and cultural contexts of the dance, and an interview with Miller. To use the **bbnotes** section, the user clicks to **bbnotes**, selects one of the two sections of the dance, titled “Birds” or “Pärt,” selects a section (e.g., Beginning Birds), and selects a movement phrase (e.g., Hungry Birds). Notation then appears next to the phrase with the **bbnote** icon. Once selected, a video clip and transcription appear on the screen to provide more detail about a particular moment.

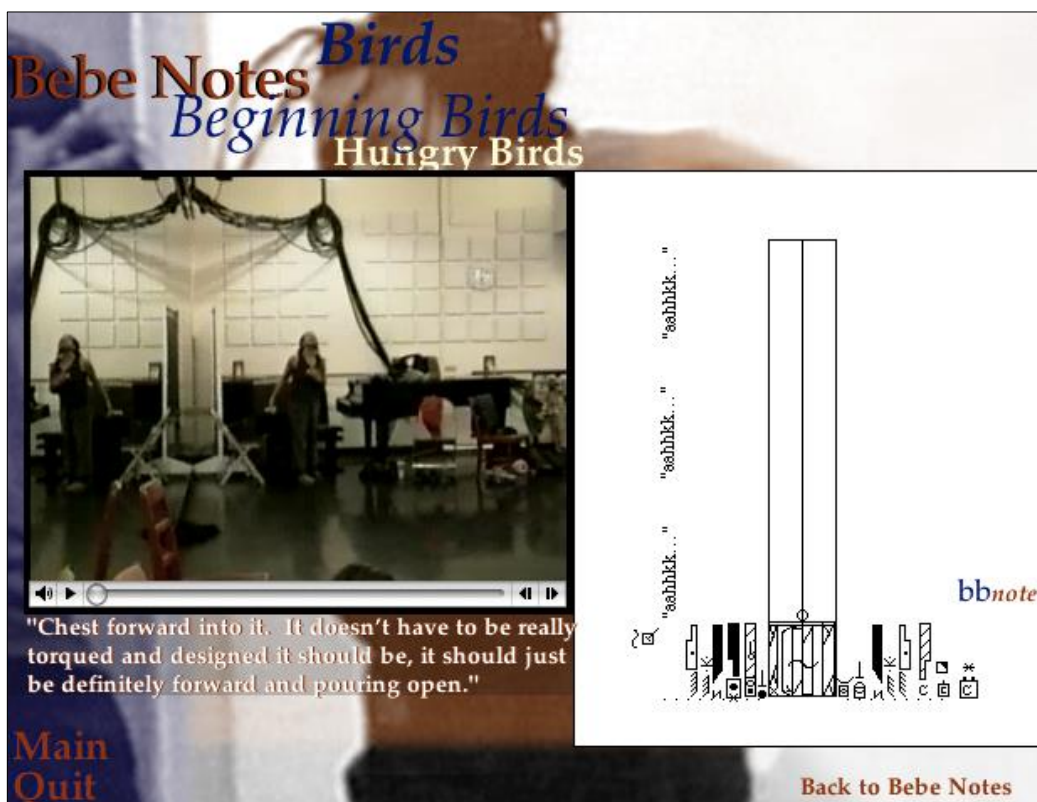


Figure 2. A screen capture from the DVD's section “Birds” from Bebe Miller's choreographic work *Prey*. The **bbnote** references the starting position of the section, and a video pops up on the screen with Miller indicating the sound and movement.

From questioning, “How do I indicate the motivation behind the movement?” I created the supplemental DVD, which provides examples to elucidate Miller's motivation and rehearsal process. From asking, “How can I best employ the Labanotation symbols to represent her motivation and style?” I researched multiple ways of writing the same movement, but with different

stylistic preferences. One particular movement I spent time analyzing was Miller's contraction. To help me organize and select appropriate symbols for her contraction, I looked at how other notators have scored different aspects of movement styles. During notator training, I learned the conventions of how to notate Martha Graham contractions, the Merce Cunningham curve, and the Paul Taylor contraction. I studied multiple ways to write a similar movement experience, and I learned to discern style through notation and movement. The process of notating the contraction highlighted the fact that Miller's, my own, and the dancer's learning came from moving. I worked out drafts of the contraction movement using symbols that represent lateral folding  $\triangleleft$ , contraction  $\times$ , and sequential  $\nabla$  ways of moving. I embodied the movement and watched the dancers and Miller work to achieve her particular style of contraction. I embodied the movement in order to understand the inner workings of her contraction (see figure 3). I utilized the spine symbol  $\text{♯}$  followed vertically by a symbol representing a sequential  $\nabla$  movement and a symbol representing the movement idea of contraction  $\times$  at two degrees. This symbol grouping represents Miller's contraction. In figure 3, the symbols to the right of the equal sign more fully describe the movement, which resides in the glossary.

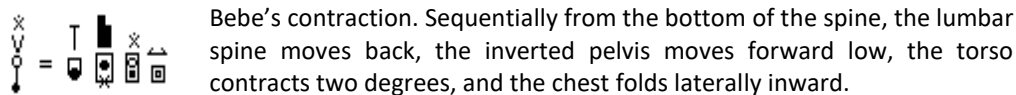


Figure 3. The glossary entry for Miller's contraction.

This way of repositioning, examining complexity, and visualizing with our bodies is echoed by cognitive psychologist Michael L. Anderson:

We re-position ourselves . . . to reduce the complexity of the visualization problem; likewise we employ repeated trials to allow us to better 'see' what shape [the object] must be to be most useful in this context. The point is not that we do no calculation or pre-computations and internal representation on the one side, and repeated environmental interactions on the other.<sup>10</sup>

Maintaining repeated interactions or re-positionings within my notator environment allowed me to figure out the symbolic representation for Miller's contraction and the best way to portray her style of contraction. My ability to learn grew because the environment encouraged everyone to try new things. For example, I thought anew about how to approach and analyze aspects of style, such

10. Michael L. Anderson, "Embodied Cognition: A Field Guide," *Artificial Intelligence* 149, (2003): 108.

as the contraction, and discovered how to notate the upside-down and intertwined partnered movements (see figure 4). I asked questions of the dancers during the writing and analysis phases of notating. By writing Miller's movements, I created a scaffold, or a map, of her ideas. The score that emerged included a comprehensive analysis of Miller's movements with supplemental material that provided insight into the many influences on the movement. This type of trace format opened up a range of new possibilities. By writing down Miller's movements, future generations, who wish to stage the work from score and analyze her movement or choreographic style, can examine her movement ideas and what influenced those ideas. By preserving Miller's choreography, scholars can discover new knowledge about her work as seen through various lenses. Through the symbols on the paper, future generations can compare and combine Miller's choreography and movement choices with new ideas in choreography or even use them in new contexts. Utilizing multiple perspectives, they can analyze and inspect the work within the purview of historical and cultural contexts. Embodied cognition theorist Clark extols the benefits of writing, or rather notating, ideas because we can "then inspect and reinspect the same ideas, coming at them from many different angles and in many different frames of mind."<sup>11</sup>

Notating Miller's movement, I inspected and re-inspected how I utilized the symbols to portray movement. I employed graduate notation students and notation colleagues to read back to me the phrases that I had written. They provided different perspectives. On a basic level, that process helped me problem-solve how Miller's movement was conveyed in symbolic form. Was Miller's movement really conveyed by the symbols I selected? Similarly, Miller checked in and asked the dancers to perform the movement for her to determine if what she saw was what she wanted. As I went through this process on a weekly basis, I began to question how I utilized my medium—the symbols—just as Miller used her medium—the dancers. The trace format, the score and the dance, allowed us to revisit the movement by checking in with the dancers and asking them to repeat a movement or moment in the evolving dance. This reciprocal learning began to shape how I thought about representation of the movement through the symbols.

Long after the dance was produced, I continued the evaluation process, analyzing and re-analyzing while laying out the score and inputting the symbols into LabanWriter. As I input the symbols, I checked to make sure that I ordered the symbols horizontally and vertically in cluster groupings, that I wrote the same movement the same way each time it appeared on the page, and that I created with attention to the intentions I observed during Miller's creative process. As I revised and analyzed, Miller fiddled with the duet of dancers J and Z right up until the performance; this revision caused me to fiddle with my symbols as well. To date,

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11. Clark, 208.

I am still less confident of those measures than I am of other parts of the dance (see figure 4). In J and Z's duet, the symbols represent the choreographic structure and style; however, the movement notation is not as fully detailed. In other instances, such as the group movement in the "Birds Section" of the dance (see figure 5), the ordering and clustering of symbols immediately represent the style and choreographic framework of the dance.

I analyzed which symbols, or groupings of symbols, constituted the best way to depict the movement while maintaining alignment with the rules of the Labanotation system. I sought out glossaries from scores from the past twenty years to examine how notators portrayed movement while creatively respecting the system's rules. One notating challenge I faced was with timing. Miller used timing in different ways as a choreographic device. She used individual and group breathing to establish a pulse, and she defined a range of pulses within the group. The first section of the dance, "Birds," was danced in complete silence, with group breath establishing a pulse for the main phrase (see figure 5). For this section, I matched the relative timing of the symbols to a metronomic metered pulse of 92. For the second section of the dance, "Pärt," I created the metronomic markings for the pulse in relation to the musical measures. I researched ways to provide the reader with information to indicate how to approach Miller's use of time, such as: varied timing as individuals in a group, increasing speed, free timing in an *ad libitum* state, or movement performed exactly on count one of music measure 64. I chose the symbols based on both the rules of the system and the ways other notators had used timing symbols in scores such as *Crossing the Black Waters*, *Three on a Match*, and scores of dances by Anna Sokolow.

Working in an environment that embraces the ideas of Lather's emancipatory scholarship of interaction, dialogue, negotiation, and recognition encourages each member to flourish. I worked with the dancers and Miller while negotiating with the movement, the symbols, and the choreographic style (or intent). I then began to experience reciprocity, wherein we, as creators of our own environment, worked back and forth and sought each other's opinions. Miller, the dancers, and I became the respondents by co-constructing an atmosphere that produced the knowledge of the dance and the score. While participating in this approach, it is not customary for a notator to hand her score over to her choreographer and ask the choreographer to read back what she has written. However, in this case, several of the dancers could read notation, and they were able to read, reflect, and respond to the movement represented by the symbols, providing valuable feedback about the notation. I also engaged the help of eight other notation professionals, who aided and guided me along the way. Without their astute and rigorous review of my notation, I would not have had the opportunity for continuous refinement and analysis of my notating choices and symbolic meaning-making.

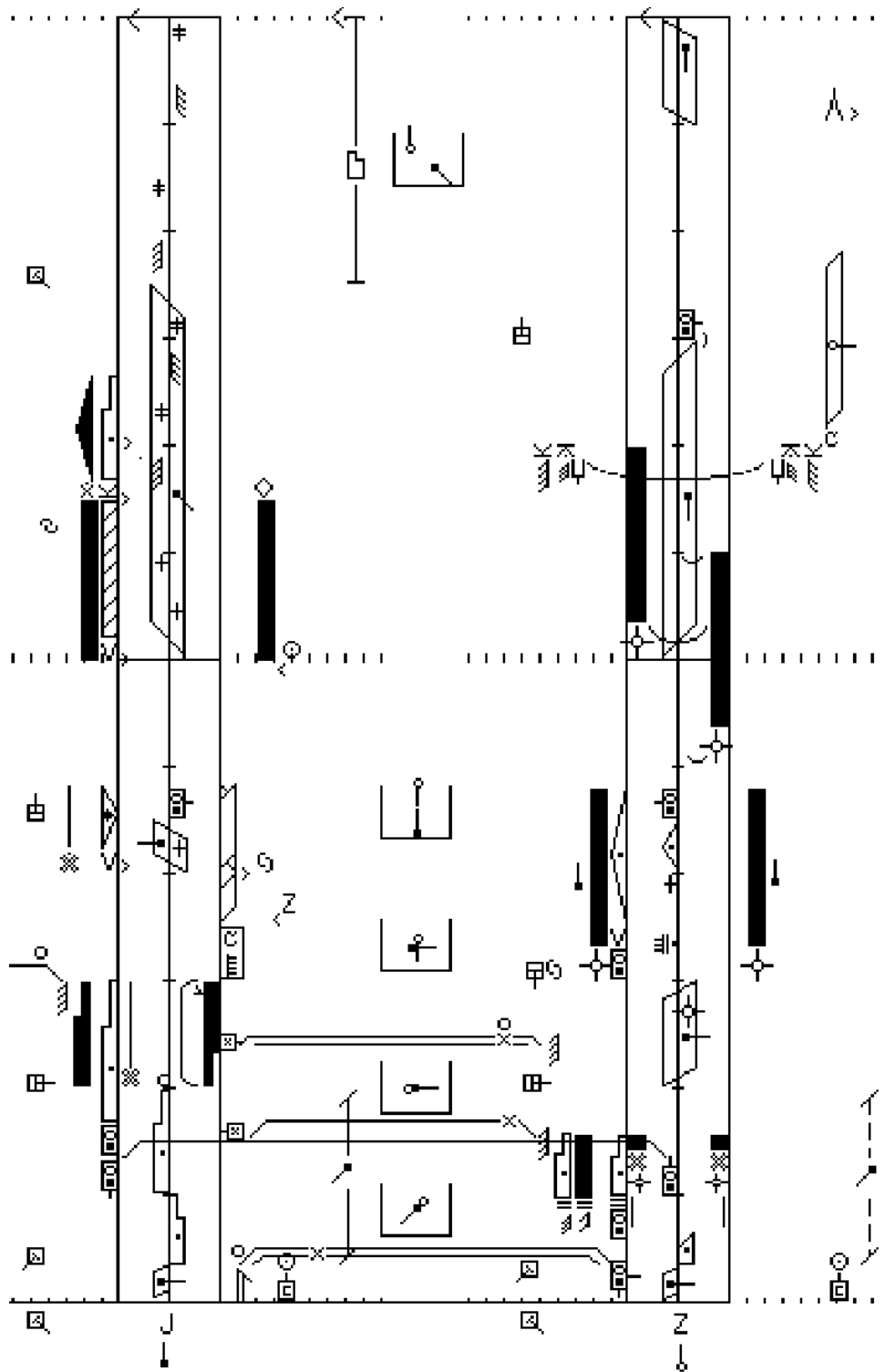


Figure 4. Two measures from the duet of J and Z.

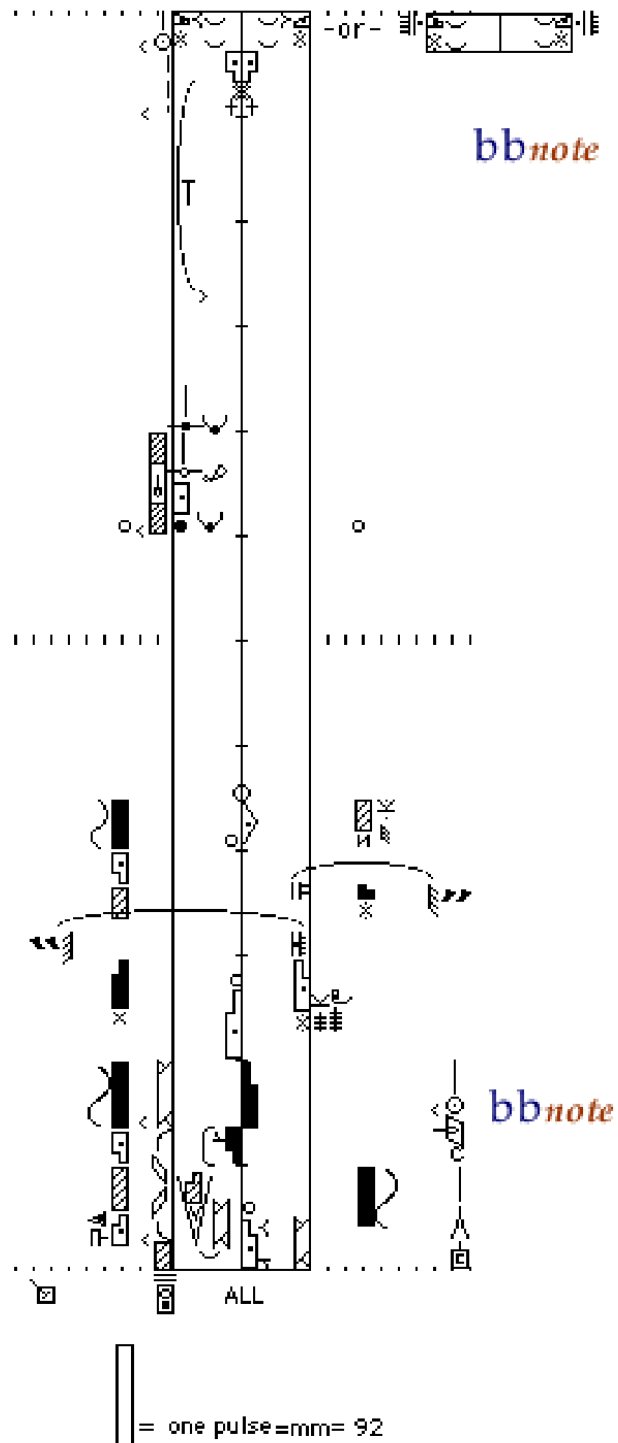


Figure 5. Group movement phrase from the “Birds” section of the dance.

During this research process of refining my notation, I kept in mind John Gilmour's sentiments that "Language is reflexive, and it, therefore, opens up possibilities of mutual expressiveness between people."<sup>12</sup> In this instance, mutual expressiveness occurred between Miller, the dancers, and me. The score became the expressive vehicle for future readers and dancers of Miller's work.

Being a part of a choreographic process over ten weeks and working daily on movement phrases that may or may not be included in a final version of a dance requires deep engagement with the choreographer's process, the movement, and the notation symbols. This commitment is what Howard Gardner<sup>13</sup> and Howard Gruber and Doris Wallace<sup>14</sup> attribute as one of the hallmarks of the creative person—sustained involvement with a set of problems. Collaborative conditions, freedom of ideas, and new thoughts for each participant mirror the second generation of creativity scholars who focus on

how novelty emerges from . . . improvised group collaborations. This collaborative turn in creativity research has provided us with a deeper understanding of how new things are created—not only by solitary individuals, but also by collaborative teams and social networks.<sup>15</sup>

The collaborative process encouraged Miller, the dancers, and me to work collectively and provided support for each of us. Subsequently, the collaborative network offered a framework for support of notation-time in the studio, choreographer and notator work-time, refinement through shared studio-time, and the final analysis of the score by the notator during the months following the last performance of *Prey*. The collaborative atmosphere remained essential during the entire experience.

### Intersections in Time

The continuous, sustained involvement with choreographing juxtaposed with the addition of notation and documentation of the dance made Miller acutely aware of time. Miller's awareness of time passing while in the moment of creating appeared to be a stressor for her, sporadically, throughout the creation process. It is my assessment that the stress was mainly due to having only two-hour blocks of

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12. John C. Gilmour, *Picturing the World* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1986), 86.

13. Gardner.

14. Howard E. Gruber and Doris E. Wallace, *Creative People at Work: Twelve Cognitive Case Studies* (New York: Oxford Press, 1989).

15. R. Keith Sawyer and Stacy DeZutter, "Distributed Creativity: How Collective Creations Emerge from Collaboration," *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts* 3, no. 2 (2009): 11.



rehearsal time. Miller usually works in blocks of three to four hours with her company, and thus, this shortened window allowed her little time to get into the flow of continual creation. In contrast, after rehearsal hours, my time spent in front of the computer writing, analyzing, and checking my notation often resulted in the realization that I had been creating for over four hours.

Our time in the studio was only the beginning of establishing a full draft of the dance in symbolic form, and once the performances finished, then, and only then, could I begin to establish the final version of the score in the LabanWriter computer program. This is because Miller, in the true sense of Jacob Getzels' trait of a creative person,<sup>16</sup> changed and shaped the dance right up until opening night. So, when that is the case, what can the notator do during the first three months of rehearsals? How can she know what to notate, or when to notate? My process was just as elusive as Miller's. Miller created an overall phrase from which every movement stemmed, and that provided the inspiration for improvisational happenings throughout the rehearsal process. I thought, "Great! Now I have the foundation for the piece." Even though I had perfected that phrase, in no way did it ever turn up in its entirety, or in more than two or three steps together. My revision of the analysis of the phrase also proved to be an interesting exercise and helped me understand Miller's movement preferences, but it did not yield a page of notation.

Thus, the symbols on the page were rehearsed in the same way that Miller's dancers were rehearsed. The dancers who understood notation read what I wrote and they analyzed the writing in relation to their movement, and I calculated the relative timing on the page in relation to the timing of the length of performance time and musical recording. During rehearsals for the first section of the dance, entitled "Birds Section," the dancers' time factor was based on "felt" rather than "organized" *tempi*. There are no measures for this section, only sound and time. The dancers together discovered the rhythm to each phrase as a collective whole. I experienced that whole with them, and originally I had trouble separating myself from them in the stages of analysis. During analysis and final editing of the notation score, my determination to express their shared rhythms became more systematized in the symbolic representation. The dancers' embodiment of time had to be symbolically written down so that future readers would not merely plod along to a prescribed meter marking (mm=108), but, instead, would point the way toward a solution to performances in the future.

In order to solve a similar problem for the second section, which does have music, I sat with metronome in hand while I beat out every click of the metronome to see if my imagined dancers performing would indeed end at

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16. Jacob W. Getzels, "Creative Thinking, Problem-solving, and Instruction," in *Theories of Learning and Instruction*, ed. Ernest R. Hilgard (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 240.

approximately the same time as the music. Capturing the timing with the symbols proved as difficult for me as it did for Miller and her dancers. She rehearsed the timing with an ear toward listening for changes within the music. In response, I created a range of *tempi* within the score that allowed for future dancers to select how fast or slow to dance within the suggested parameters.

Another aspect of time is coming to a conclusion in the dance. As with many creative endeavors, determining when the work is complete feels difficult. The complexity in defining an ending to the project aligns with one of the identified attributes of a creative person by Getzels and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi—trouble determining when to stop solving a problem.<sup>17</sup> Miller's conclusion of time came when the curtain rose on the dance, and my notator's task of completing the score began when the curtain dropped. A notator can take several months to complete the score, or several years depending on the work schedule and time available. In my case, I took five years to complete the score of *Prey*. I created a first full draft, a friend of mine reconstructed it, and her dancers performed it. I made revisions and, with the help of the Board of Examiners at the Dance Notation Bureau (DNB) made up of Professional Notators, mentor Lucy Venable, and checker Ray Cook, I completed a final approved score of Miller's collaborative dance.

This five-year period afforded me many opportunities to provide additional information beyond the score for future reconstructors or directors. However, I kept in mind the warning of Fritz Klingenberg, one of Laban's assistants, ". . . the notator is easily tempted to write in more detail than is useful to the reconstructor."<sup>18</sup> With the help of numerous readers, I was able to keep the Labanotation score relatively clear and uncluttered. As Klingenberg emphasizes, other materials are sometimes extraneous, but can be useful for future audiences of the score. Looking at scores from fifty or sixty years ago, there is an assumption that the reader of the score understands the "style" of the choreographer, but that is not always the case with currently trained dancers who direct works from score. Therefore, I made a choice as a notator to include the supplementary material that accompanies the Labanotation score. Although the information on the DVD is not crucial to reading the dance from the Labanotation score, it is useful to provide for future generations the context of the choreographer's intentions and choreographic process.

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17. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, "The Domain of Creativity," in *Changing the World: A Framework for the Study of Creativity*, ed. David. H. Feldman, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, and Howard Gardner (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1994), 140.

18. Fritz Klingenberg, "What Should One Write Down and What Not," in *Schrifttanz: A View of German Dance in the Weimar Republic*, ed. Valerie Preston-Dunlop and Susanne Lahusen (London: Dance Books, 1990), 39.

### Personal Reflections on Training Notators

The notator must be aware of three factors that contribute to the conceptual development of the score. These three are: (1) analyzing appropriate symbols to represent the movement, (2) determining which aspects of the performer's artistic interpretations of the dance are crucial to the style, and (3) understanding the context of a dance's creation. Therefore, the notator's task becomes determining which problem she wishes to solve. This task can be placed somewhere in the middle of Getzels' continuum of problem solvers: those who are presented with problems, and those who discover problems. The notator neither holds to solving only presented problems, nor does he or she solely discover problems. Traditionally, the notator is thought of as being presented with a problem (the dance to be notated) and then solving that problem in the accepted way (notating it according to all accepted rules), which is at one end of Getzels' continuum of solving problems. An alternative would be to think of the notator as one who is presented with an overarching problem (documenting a dance) and then discovers, or even creates, problems within the larger context (thus, solving that problem with the choreographer). I worked closely with Miller in the studio on a weekly basis for over four months. I argue, I learned to discover the problems with her while in the moment of creation, and I experienced smaller versions of discovery and problem-solving as I analyzed and refined my score over the ensuing months and years.

Csikszentmihalyi's systems view approach to creativity provides another framework for understanding the work of the notator. A notator is creative in three areas: domain (the studio), person (the notator), and field (the dance field). The notator's process of creating a score exists within a higher order of the choreographer and environment and exists inside the field of Laban Studies. This notation process is "a dynamic model with creativity the result of the interaction between three subsystems: a domain, a person, and a field"<sup>19</sup> in which the notator works within the codified domain of Labanotation and Kinetography Laban begun with the 1928 publication of Rudolf von Laban.<sup>20</sup> Albrecht Knust and Ann Hutchinson Guest expanded Laban's formal theories from his system for writing down dance and are, today, known as Labanotation in the United States and Kinetography Laban in Europe. Within the domain of the notation system, rules, syntax, and codified ways of writing, notators can expand and add to the language due to the careful standardization practiced. The field makes up those standards and is comprised of the Certified Professional Notators and Fellows of the International Council of Kinetography Laban/Labanotation. Following Csikszentmihalyi's words, these leaders of the field decide if

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19. Csikszentmihalyi, 145.

20. Rudolf von Laban, *Schrifttanz* (Leipzig: Universal Edition, 1928).

an individual's performance meets the criteria of the domain. It also decides whether an individual performance that departs from the standard rules of the domain is 'creative' and thus should be added to the domain, or whether it is simply 'deviant' and thus should be ignored or censored."<sup>21</sup>

The view of the notator, and his or her place within the field, is not determined by the notator utilizing the system of Labanotation to express movement, but it is the recognition of that notator by the field who deems him or her creative. The field determines whether the notator exhibits traits of a creative person and those are intrinsically linked with his or her social and cultural surroundings (the *umwelt*), which helps bring about creative objects (the scores). If the notator is one who needs to be creative while in the moment of notating, then the field must foster an environment of learning for our future notators. To encourage notators to achieve, the field must create environments much like the one Miller created. In that environment, my hand-written draft score looked like the process of the choreographer: it was jumbled, mixed-up, marked-out, re-drawn, re-instated, and thrown away at the final double bar line. As I became a re-maker and re-shaper, I became an embodied learner, one who encounters new ways of knowing and understanding, a "body in thought and learning" or "the learning self."<sup>22</sup>

To provide another perspective on learning, we can look at Mia Keinänen, Kimberly Sheridan, and Gardner's examinations about the implications of training and how training can be either perpetuated from generation to generation or sustained in a particular field. Specifically, they looked at how modern dancers were trained within an established doctrine without asking questions or being taught how to formulate questions. They surmise "such a milieu does not encourage the young dancers to be innovative or daring, qualities that are desirable in situation/horizontal areas of expertise."<sup>23</sup> Instead, these dancers often replicated what they knew, and many did not extend what they knew into new collaborations or activities.

In my professional training as a notator, I had two experiences of notating choreographic dance works, the first experience I functioned in a setting where I was ancillary to the team, and interactions with the dancers and stager were limited. In addition, the dancers simultaneously learned several parts of the dance directly from video portraying different performances of the work across several

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21. Csikszentmihalyi, 147.

22. Elizabeth Ellsworth, *Places of Learning: Media, Architecture, Pedagogy* (New York: Routledge Palmer, 2005), 16.

23. Mia Keinänen, Kimberly Sheridan, and Howard Gardner, "Opening up Creativity," in *Creativity and Reason in Cognitive Development*, ed. James C. Kaufman and John M. Baer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 217.

years and in multiple studios. This experience created a great strain and uncertainty in my notating, and my final evaluation of the happenings parallels aspects of the experience in Keinänen, Sheridan, and Gardner's study. The score which ensued was particularly un-imaginative, tedious, rule-oriented, and riddled with gaps of information. In my second experience, I functioned as part of a team of the choreographer, training-notator, and notator-trainee enterprise. In that score, I took more risks, found ways to creatively break the rules, and attempted to notate in parallel the creativity that I saw coming out of the dance. The latter experience influenced my subsequent choices of what type of notating experiences I sought.

Functioning as part of a team and welcomed into a collaborative experience provided a safe place for learning and risk-taking. Understanding and examining the influence of the context of the notating experience on the end product, the way the work is taught, the process by which the notator is notating while in the studio, and the experience the notator and his or her trainees are having at that moment, allows the field to respond to more inclusive pedagogical theories. If we pay attention to the experiences of the notator trainee, the trainee learns how to learn from his or her experiences. These learning moments can happen in what Ellsworth describes as *transitional spaces*, which are designed to be "an answer that provokes us to keep thinking" thus allowing the notator and notator trainee to hone "a self and intelligence that is always in the making."<sup>24</sup>

Dewey states that the artist works to create an audience to which he does communicate," for a notator this is presumably the future readers of the score. "In the end, works of art [scores included] are the only media of complete and unhindered communication between man and man that can occur in a world full of gulfs and walls that limit community of experience."<sup>25</sup> Considering that a score is a type of creative endeavor within a codified set of rules and theories, a score can provide communication linking the choreographer's creative vision and movement style to future directors of the choreographer's work and future dancers of her movement. The score is the result of the choreographer's creative process and final product as perceived through my observation, inquiry, perception, analysis, interpretation, and documentation. At the moment of transference of information, the score becomes a living, breathing object the minute the next person reads/dances it. In order to achieve aspects of success with future readers, dancers, and scholars of scores, the dance field must seek to expand the field of notation and attract new creators who will utilize dance notation in unimagined and inventive ways. We need to be attentive to the fact that we wish to attract, what Keinänen, Sheridan, and Gardner describe as, "the most creative individuals who are committed to breaking new ground rather than

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24. Ellsworth, 59.

25. Dewey, 109.

to sustaining the subdomain itself.”<sup>26</sup> As Klingenbeck wrote almost ninety years ago:

. . . to recognise what must be written down, and what not, is not entirely easy, because the boundaries are always fluid and in most cases it is exactly the secondary manifestations belonging to the interpretation which can make a dance interesting and valuable. Nevertheless, composition and interpretation must be clearly separated from each other by the dance notator, if another artist is to be able to recreate thereafter.<sup>27</sup>

Three strategies can help achieve Klingenbeck’s goals for a notator. The first requirement for any future professional notator is a firm grasp of the theory and ideas of theoretical concepts. The future notator must be aware of multiple sources for ways to notate movement and include in the scores aspects of different styles. However, while theory is important, it is crucial for those working with the future notator to encourage and provide safe ways so that a person can make mistakes and learn in a collaborative environment. Secondly, the future notator requires time to notate and quiet, focused commitment to analyzing and writing the score. He or she must have the ability to utilize new computer programs and options for writing alongside the trusted pencil and paper. These options take time and skill to input the movement in a final format. The third aspect of development of a notator-in-the-making is a mentor who will provide feedback, encouragement, and offer a way through, but not always the only way through.

### **Final Thoughts**

The process of notating a score and the process of choreographing a dance parallel each other through three aspects: environment, medium, and time. The score becomes a representation of the dance, and through the process of notating the dance, the score serves as an artifact of that particular version of the dance in that particular time. Understanding the circumstances that influence the creative processes as choreographer and notator in this case study can translate to support future experiences. Creating a welcoming and nurturing working environment through interaction, dialogue, negotiation, and recognition helps all contributors (choreographer, notator, dancers, etc.) form a cohesive and collaborative environment. A relaxed atmosphere encourages participants to try new things, experiment, and succeed. The environment plays a role in how we create, how we collaborate, and how we understand and respond to the dynamic in which we work. Working in an atmosphere that encourages risk-taking and experimentation

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26. Keinänen, Sheridan, and Gardner, 216.

27. Klingenbeck, 40.

allows the notator and choreographer to utilize one another's medium and to analyze how each conveys the meaning and vision. Taking the time to create a nurturing environment, analyze meaning, and engage with aspects of time through sustained creativity, problem-finding, and problem-solving all aid in the development of the notator.

As the dance field embraces new ways of understanding and knowing movement, so does the subfield of preservation and documentation, including Kinetography Laban and Labanotation. The field will need to determine best practices for utilizing multiple ways of documentation as it encounters eclectic views on movement and ways to analyze and document it. As well, the field can collaborate on emerging ways to provide levels of information about dances for future generations. And finally, the notation field is strong in its knowledge that Kinetography Laban and Labanotation serve the world as recognized leading methods in preservation of movement for almost a hundred years. Those notators who have come before us have allowed the world to know, read, and experience dances that shaped what the dance field is to date. In order to continue that legacy, it is up to those who lend our voices to the notation field today to create the type of open, collaborative environment that I have experienced as a working notator. We must exhibit the sentiment of creative persons, those who are in constant motion toward becoming—because if we are not becoming, then we are not learning, and if we are not learning, then we are not creating.

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