

Review of Doris Humphrey Technique: The Creative Potential, a videotape written, directed, and hosted by Ernestine Stodelle and Doris Humphrey: The Collected Works, Vol. 2, a compendium of Labanotated Scores

By: Ann Dils

Dils, A. (1995) Review of Doris Humphrey Technique: The Creative Potential, a videotape written, directed, and hosted by Ernestine Stodelle and Doris Humphrey: The Collected Works, Vol. 2, a compendium of Labanotated Scores in *Dance Research Journal*, 27 (1), 40-41.

Made available courtesy of University of Illinois Press: <http://www.press.uillinois.edu/journals/drj.html>

*****Note: Figures may be missing from this format of the document**

DORIS HUMPHREY TECHNIQUE: THE CREATIVE POTENTIAL, written, directed, and hosted by Ernestine Stodelle. Photographs by Barbara Morgan. Sponsored and produced by the Doris Humphrey Society. Princeton Book Company, A Dance Horizons Video, 1992. VHS format, color and black and white, 47 minutes. \$49.95.

DORIS HUMPHREY: THE COLLECTED WORKS, VOL. 2, Introduction, historical background and movement analysis by Ernestine Stodelle; Labanotation by Jane Marriet and Muriel Topaz. New York: Dance Notation Bureau Press, 1992. Distributed by Princeton Book Company. xii + 217 pp., Labanotation examples, Labanotation scores. \$125.00.

The video, *Doris Humphrey Technique: The Creative Potential*, begins with a good, very general introduction to Humphrey's work and ends with rarely seen reconstructions of early Humphrey solos and a duet. The video might be a nice way to introduce Humphrey in a dance history class or to round out your knowledge of her choreography. The central portion of the video, however, includes a discussion of using Humphrey technique as the impetus for new choreography that is best used by those with an in-depth knowledge of Humphrey's work. The book of Labanotation scores, *Doris Humphrey: The Collected Works, Vol. 2*, is best suited to those that read Labanotation, but also contains interesting, more easily deciphered information on the process of Labanotating dance scores. Both resources offer insights into the work of Humphrey expert Ernestine Stodelle.

Ernestine Stodelle, who contributes heavily to both these resources, danced with Humphrey from 1929 to 1935. Stodelle spent many subsequent years analyzing and teaching Humphrey technique, exploring Humphrey's precepts in her own choreography, and reconstructing and coaching Humphrey's dances. While Stodelle graciously presents herself as a Humphrey disciple, this designation tends to mask the quality of Stodelle's own work, especially in clarifying and expanding the ideas behind early Humphrey technique. Stodelle is a scholar, but her writing is distinguished by her memory and ability to write about moving from the dancer's point of view.

The structure and stated purpose of the video, *Doris Humphrey Technique: The Creative Potential*, veers between Humphrey homage and an examination of Humphrey technique as the foundation for choreographic exploration. It works best as homage. In its opening moments, gorgeous images of Humphrey by Barbara Morgan linger on the screen while Stodelle briefly outlines Humphrey's "steel and velvet" gifts as a dancer (1), the breadth of her choreographic vision, and the analysis of movement that led Humphrey to her technique. A 1936 film clip of physically daring Humphrey-Weidman dancers appears next, performing stretches, full body swings, and back falls. Later in the video, Stodelle's dancers perform her reconstructions of *Quasi-Waltz* (1929), *Two Ecstatic Themes* (1931), and *Etude Patetico* (1928). The video concludes with the Westinghouse film of *Air for the G String* (1928), featuring Humphrey in the central role. Stodelle also appears in this dance.

The central portion of the video is devoted to the creative potential of Humphrey technique. Stodelle first discusses Humphrey's analysis of basic human movement and then presents a series of movement studies, each labeled with some movement theme— successional flow, swing trio, leverage, and the like. In the studies, set to modern piano solos, Stodelle builds the gracious spirals and curves or strict angularity of Humphrey technique into short, tightly developed dances. Stodelle's dancers are good at projecting images through movement, and the studies suggest mini-situations of human harmony or struggle. This section ends with Gail Corbin's piece, *Fantasia on Doris Humphrey's "Water Study,"* a reworking of Humphrey's water-based movement themes. Corbin's work is set to a John Coleman piano score.

What exactly Stodelle sees as the creative potential of Humphrey technique for today's choreographers isn't clear. In particular, she doesn't explain if the deep integration between movement, motivation, and resulting imagery that is part of her Humphrey work has to be kept or if we can disentangle these elements. Beyond the protective environment of Stodelle's Connecticut studio, I can't see new choreographers holding onto the underlying values of an historic movement form and developing them in any meaningful way. Stodelle's 1978 book *The Dance Technique of Doris Humphrey and its Creative Potential* is a helpful companion to the video, but also leaves unanswered questions about the translation of Humphrey technique into current terms (2).

The second volume of Labanotation scores of Humphrey works, *Doris Humphrey: The Collected Works*, includes three dances: *Air for the G String* (1928), *Two Ecstatic Themes* (1931), and *Day on Earth* (1947). Stodelle introduces the book and contributes a preface to each score including the history of each dance and a movement analysis. The scores also contain a history of production and credits for each score, a glossary that aids the reader in understanding notation solutions particular to the work, information on music, costumes, props, and, in some cases, existing films and suggested program notes. This volume joins Volume 1, which includes scores for Humphrey's *Water Study* (1928), *Shakers* (1931), and *Partita V* (1942). Volume 3, containing *Soaring* (1920), *Passacaglia* (1938), and *Invention* (1949) is scheduled for publication in 1995. Approximately ten other Humphrey works have been notated and are housed at the Dance Notation Bureau in New York City.

Labanotation can be understood at a very rudimentary level. Readers can get a general sense of how the choreography is constructed and the movement phrases developed by seeing the repetitions and variations in symbols as they move up the page. It's evident where unison movement occurs and where dancers enter and leave. Spatial formations are blocked out in separate boxes. But in general, scores are frustrating for those who can't read every pin and tick of the notation. Really understanding a score means hours of concentrated analysis, usually backed up with other kinds of reading and watching films. Without this additional labor, scores appear as thousands of details without delivering a clear, overall sense of a dance. This problem can be minimized by including written analyses that offer insights into the overall gestalt of the dance.

The movement analyses that Stodelle contributes to each score are written as chronological scenarios of weight changes, movements of body parts, and changes in the dancer's inner feelings. The following is from her analysis of the opening of "Pointed Ascent," the second half of *Two Ecstatic Themes*,

The first series of movements has an irregular staccato accent not unlike that of a tack hammer. Abrupt shifts of weight coincide with rhythmically punctuated efforts to rise from the prone position that marked the end of "Circular Descent." A shoulder twists, an elbow thrusts upward; the head turns desperately from side to side in search of means of support; the hips pull under at a plane that gives the dancer secure positioning for subsequent attempts to rise. Gone is the luxury of sensuous suspension; everything now hangs on the thread of tenuous balance, a direct struggle against gravity and its threat of domination. (Pp. 61-62)

Although Stodelle writes from the third person, about "the dancer," she doesn't treat this analysis from the vantage point of a viewer. Stodelle writes as if she is performing the movement or as if she is trying to think through the movement for "the dancer."

Pleasurable as it is to kinesthetically work your way through Stodelle's analyses, she never gives you a succinct sense of the overall structure and impact of the work. For *Two Ecstatic Themes*, this is provided, later, in Humphrey's 1935 program note:

Two Ecstatic Themes is the keynote to Miss Humphrey's mature work. The first part is in circular and spiral movements, soft and sinking, to convey an emotional feeling of acquiescence. The second part, in contrast to the first, moves in pointed design to a strident climax suggestive of aggressive achievement. The whole is counterpoint of circular and angular movement, representing the two inseparable elements of life as well as of design. (P. 64)

The contrasting vantage points represented by Stodelle's analysis and Humphrey's program note point to a general problem with using this collected volume for historical study. Viewing films or reading other sources, such as Marcia B. Siegel's Humphrey biography, *Days on Earth*, is more helpful in realizing the overriding impact of the dance (3).

These scores contain a clear indication of their production history, information notated scores sometimes lack. For example, the notation for *Air* and *Day on Earth* honors the contributions of the casts appearing in the work at the time of notation. For *Air*, Stodelle worked from the Westinghouse film, and the individual parts are both designated with letters, A, B, C, D, and E, and with names, Doris, Dorothy, Hyla, Ernestine, and Cleo (pp. 18, 19). Parts in the *Day on Earth* score are marked J for José Limón, R for Ruth Currier, L for Letitia Ide, and C, the only generic designation, for child (pp. 113-215). The inclusion of this information allows readers to understand the collective nature of dancemaking and the contributions dancers have to their roles.

Other included information helps readers realize the long, labor-intensive process of finalizing a score. As dances are reconstructed from film, research, and memory, and then Labanotated, a surprising number of people help shape the score. Stodelle reconstructed Humphrey's *Air* and *Two Ecstatic Themes* for the Limón company in 1975. Jane Marriett began the notation at that time. Both notation and dance were revised in 1980. At least two people check each score, a process that involves reconstructing the work on another set of dancers, and yet another person does the autography (pp. 1, 2, 53, 54). The history of production for the *Day on Earth* score is even more complex, including multiple revisions and greater input from dancers.

In 1995, Humphrey-ites celebrate the one-hundredth anniversary of Humphrey's birth with a variety of activities including an October Humphrey conference at Teachers College • Columbia University, a memorial service in Oak Park, Illinois, a conference in London, and a concert of Humphrey reconstructions in Taiwan. These gatherings will provide opportunities to see the diverse perspectives available in written, Labanotated, and video resources played out in performance and lecture halls. People who knew Humphrey personally can converse with people who know Humphrey only as an historic figure. Humphrey specialists—the Labanotators, reconstructors, and dancers—can carry out discussions with the historians and critics who strive for a broader picture of Humphrey's life and work.