

Gonzalo Preciado-Azanza

Tilden Russell (editor), *Dance Theory. Source Readings from Two Millennia of Western Dance*, Oxford University Press, Oxford/New York 2020

This book provides a two millennia perspective of the intricate interaction between theory and practice to reintegrate “dance theory” within the historical field of dance studies. By doing so, this critical anthology, edited by Tilden Russell – Professor Emeritus of Music at Southern Connecticut State University –, includes fifty-five selected readings from its roots in ancient Greece until the Twenty-first century postmodern “dance theory”. The problem of tracing and linking the history of “dance theory” is discussed by Russell in the introduction. «Writers in every age have theorized prescriptively, according to their own needs and ideals» (p. xix) weighing down this discipline¹, which leads to question whether it is a methodological problem, rather than dance being an ephemeral art. The book is organized chronologically in nine chapters by prevailing historical, intellectual and artistic eras.

Dance Theory to ca. 1300 explores a millennium and-a half from Greek and Roman classical authors – Plato’s ethics of dance, Aristotle and Plutarch’s raw materials of dance or Lucian’s culture of dance – up to the Fourteenth-century Parisian musical theorist Johannes de Grocheio. It reveals how after the fall of the Roman Empire dance had an immoral reputation under ecclesiastic dominance. *The Renaissance* highlights the flourishing of the first dance treatises such as Domenico da Piacenza’s *De arte saltandi et choreas ducendi* (1452-1465), but above all, Thoinot Arbeau’s *Orchesographie* (1589). Both became «The first to separate dance into the two areas of theory and practice, and the first to name and define the elements of “dance theory”» (p. 26). Arbeau was a pioneer when he created a notation thorough written symbols². He considered himself the “first to have preserved dance

1. As a matter of fact, a valuable source such as the *International Encyclopedia of Dance* (edited by Selma Jeanne Cohen, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1998) does not include any article titled “dance theory”.

2. Alike music, dance also can be written. However, it is not widespread enough given the diversity and disparity of notation systems. Even though Spanish Cervera notation is truly the pioneer, there is not enough information about it, and therefore Arbeau is considered the first notator. Currently, Laban and Benesh notation are the most widely used systems.

knowledge for posterity” – a mantra that will be repeated by almost all dance theorists since then. In *The Seventeenth Century* chapter Russell focuses on French authors François de Lauze and Claude-François Ménéstrier to discuss the influence of the recently founded *académies* as well as the credo of sentiments, which ultimately led to the development of Jean-Georges Noverre’s *ballet d’action*.

The Early Enlightenment chapter introduces the reader the *belle danse*, a term coined to describe Eighteenth-century social dances. It expanded throughout Europe via Beauchamp-Feuillet’s notation, a system forged at the court of Louis XIV. Pierre Beauchamp was his ballet master and conceived the five ballet positions of ballet³. Raoul-Auger Feuillet’s *Chorégraphie* (1700) perfected the choreographic language in a time where there is «A concinnity between dance practice, notation and theory» (p. 84). Russell emphasizes how this treatise marked the beginning of a new format, where theoretical content was drastically reduced, and what endured lacked the thoroughness of German sources – such as Behr or Taubert between 1703 and 1721 –. Undoubtedly, this notation heavily influenced Giovanni Battista Dufort or Louis de Cahusac, among the selected authors in *Dance Theory from Feuillet to the Encyclopédie*, as well as forthcoming notations. Nonetheless, «Its raison d’être was being questioned and undermined» (p. 101) due to its biased focus on the lower body and social dances, directly leading to the chapter *Divergent Paths: Noverre*. This French dancer and ballet master displaced the *belle danse* by *ballet d’action* through his widely cited *opus magna Lettres sur la danse et sur les ballets* (1760).

Noverre’s concepts greatly impacted dance theorists in *The Nineteenth Century and Fin de siècle*, where «Paris became the focal point of a new impetus in “dance theory” writing» (p. 125) – besides being the capital of Romantic Ballet –. Russell emphasizes how Carlo Blasis’ *Traité élémentaire théorique et pratique de l’art de la danse* (1820) or Arthur Saint-Léon’s *La Sténochorégraphie* (1852) prove the implacable ascendancy of practice until the appearance of Rudolf von Laban, one of the most relevant authors of *The Twentieth Century: Modernist Theory*. Laban established “the three areas of dance knowledge: practice, notation and theory”. His prolific 1920s writings established him as a pioneer and theoretical father of modern dance. Laban developed his ideas together with his choreographic practice. *Die Welt des Tänzers* (1920) details «His core theoretical principles, which he formulated under a new title: Tanzwissenschaft» (p. 167) – dance science in German –. While *Schriftanz: Methodik, Orthographie, Erläuterungen* (1926) discloses the basis of his own notation, based on abstract symbols to understand the kinetic content of all movement forms and dance styles⁴. And ultimately, the chapter *Postmodern Dance Theory and Anti-Theory* emphasizes the heterogeneous and latest contributions within the field – as African American Dance Theory authors Brenda Dixon Gottschild or Thomas

3. For this reason, they are still called in French.

4. Laban expressed visually his ideas, either through the symbols of his own choreographic notation or by drawing a human figure in motion through geometric designs. To do so, he created several possibilities of a dancer inside a tetrahedron, that can be understood as a moving sculpture of an expressionist modern dance.

De Frantz –, in order to become even broader, richer and more diverse that it has been in previous centuries.

This volume has been entirely based on primary sources, where Russell has selected a total of fifty-five readings to cover two millennia «That trace a coherent and fair narrative of the evolution of “dance theory” as a concept in Western culture» (p. xxv). Therefore, there are several paths to read this book. You can either go from beginning to end or to select the chapters using the index. Each part includes an introduction to contextualize it, as well as to develop a narrative that links the different ages of this anthology. Particularly interesting is its back matter. All chapters include End Notes with further information about the research, as well as the selected readings and its sources. The author also includes a complete bibliography at the end, which provides an essential state of the art. Russell uses a formal and fluid language with careful terminology throughout the text – including his translations of almost all readings –. It is noteworthy the *Appendix: Table of Dance Periodization* that notes the fundamental chronological differences between music and dance, but also among practice and theory, as «What we call classical ballet is the epitome of Romanticism» (p. 58).

As a whole, *Dance Theory. Source Readings from Two Millennia of Western Dance* covers the untold history of “dance theory” to incorporate it as a much needed field of dance studies. Whereby, this anthology contributes to acknowledge the recurrent leitmotif that «Theorists have continually asserted the lack of any pre-existing “dance theory”» (p. xx) since the sixteenth century. It will be of interest to those academics, researchers or students working in the fields of dance, philosophy and history, as well as to those whose interest lies in dance notation. Undoubtedly, this volume is going to become a valuable tool to connect dance practice and theory, as well as with other related art forms. Definitely, I recommend this book to acquire an overview of the notion, evolution and impact of “dance theory” and its intricate interaction with practice, that have shaped Western Dance.

