



Smithsonian Institution

National Museum of African American History and Culture

Playbill for Duke Ellington's Sophisticated Ladies

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Labanotation can record a grand jete or the snap of a finger
[[image - photo of men in kilts with swords]]
[[caption]] The Sword Dance of Brigadoon [[/caption]]

choreographer. There was a real danger that the next time this show was put on, the dances would simply be passed on the way someone remembered them with all the faults of memory "corrupting" the choreographer's original intention.

At this point the Dance Notation Bureau stepped in. For 40 years the Bureau has been home for the notators. It has maintained standards, kept the notated works in its archives, taught new notators and raised money to preserve dance. The Bureau found private funds to notate Brigadoon and approached Ms. de Mille for permission to record the work. Ms. de Mille enthusiastically agreed and the process began.

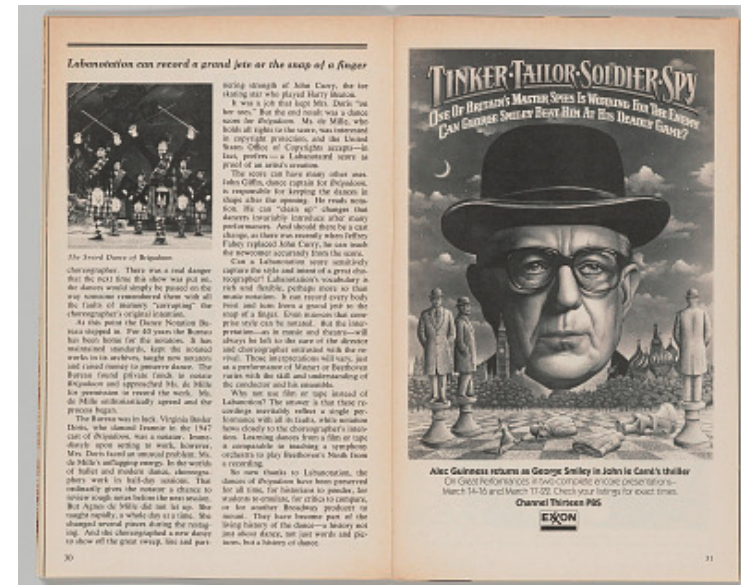
The Bureau was in luck. Virginia Bosler Doris, who danced Jeannie in the 1947 cast of Brigadoon, was a notator. Immediately upon setting to work, however, Mrs. Doris faced an unusual problem: Ms. de Mille's unflagging energy. In the worlds of ballet and modern dance, choreographers work in half-day sessions. That ordinarily gives the notator a chance to review rough notes before the next session. But Agnes de Mille did not let up. She taught rapidly, a whole day at a time. She changed several pieces during the restaging. And she choreographed a new dance to show off the great sweep, line and partnering strength of John Curry, the ice skating star who played Harry Beaton.

It was a job that kept Mrs. Doris "on her toes." But the end result was a dance score for Brigadoon. Ms. de Mille, who holds all rights to the score, was interested in copyright protection, and the United States Office of Copyrights accepts - in fact, prefers - a Labanotated score as proof of an artist's creation.

The score can have many other uses. John Giffin, dance captain for Brigadoon, is responsible for keeping the dances in shape after the opening. He reads notation. He can "clean up" changes that dancers invariably introduce after many performances. And should there be a cast change, as there was recently when Jeffrey Fahey replaced John Curry, he can teach the newcomer accurately from the score.

Can a Labanotation score sensitively capture the style and intent of a great choreographer? Labanotation's vocabulary is rich and flexible, perhaps more so than music notation. It can record every body twist and turn from a grand jeté to the snap of a finger. Even nuances that comprise style can be notated. But the interpretation - as in music and theatre - will always be left to the care of the director and choreographer entrusted with the revival. Those interpretations will vary, just as a performance of Mozart or Beethoven varies with the skill and understanding of the conductor and his ensemble.

Why not use film or tape instead of a Labanotation? The answer is that these recordings inevitably reflect a single performance with all its faults, while notation hews closely to the choreographer's intention. Learning dances from a film or tape is comparable to teaching a symphony orchestra to play Beethoven's Ninth from a recording.



So now thanks to Labanotation, the dances of Brigadoon have been preserved for all time, for historians to ponder, for students to emulate, for critics to compare, or for another Broadway producer to mount. They have become part of the living history of the dance - a history not just about dance, not just words and pictures, but a history of dance.

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[[advertisement]]

[[image - drawing of man's head with skylines of London and Moscow; men dressed as chess pieces, one broken chess piece in foreground]]

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