

Rudolf Laban - artist - dancer - choreographer - teacher - theorist - mystic

“Dance as an art, we may be sure, cannot die out but will always be undergoing a rebirth it perpetually emerges afresh from the soul of the people” Havelock Ellis

Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance in London is a vibrant living testament to the life and work of Rudolf Laban. It is an impressive geometric building full of energy, light and translucent colour. The design provides inspiring inner spaces which mirror the flowing movements of dance. It is one of the world’s leading conservatoires for contemporary dance training, and has pioneering education and community programmes in dance and music. The building alone reflects so much of what Laban discovered about the expressive qualities of the human body in motion, and a range of innovative programmes reveal that his influence is far reaching.

Rudolf Laban, a charismatic and unconventional man, led an extraordinary life. Born in 1879 into an aristocratic Austro-Hungarian family with a high-ranking army officer as a father, he rejected a military career and chose to follow his passion for the arts, in particular human movement.

This interest was sparked by early studies as an artist, when he became intrigued with the moving body in space. This led him towards classical ballet and the theatre, becoming a performer, choreographer and teacher. However, it is as a movement theoretician that Laban made his most important contribution to understanding dance as an art form.

Holding an influential position in the German dance scene as head of the *Ausdrucksdanz* movement, he became known as the “father of expressionist dance”. Amongst his celebrated apprentices were Mary Wigman, Kurt Joos and Sigurd Leeder, who continued to extend his influence. Globally, Laban is still celebrated as an important early founder of European modern dance, significantly raising the status of dance to an art form.

However, it is not in the elitist world of the theatre and classical ballet that Laban’s main legacy exists. He had a broader vision of movement which encompassed many aspects of life. His ideas have initiated innovations not only in acting and performance, but also in personality assessment, psychotherapy, educational theory and child development, and even time and motion studies in industrial settings.

Most importantly, Laban believed that dance should be made available to everyone and that it could exist not only as a celebration of community but also of self-discovery for the individual.

As an adolescent Laban was introduced to the Sufi brotherhood where the power of movement on the psyche impressed him deeply. Later he became involved with the Rosicrucian brethren, Freemasonry and Anthroposophy, all of which led him to a deeper spiritual and social awareness. This was happening at a time of cultural change when freedom of feeling was becoming more acceptable, as well as the use of the physical body as a means of self-expression.

Rosicrucianism led Laban to believe in personal equality and the ideal of promoting an individual’s creativity through dance. Thus he set out to develop a teaching methodology that enabled each person to devise their own movements. He searched for a basic vocabulary of expressive movement which abandoned the constraints of traditional step patterns relying on

musical structure. Instead he wanted to free each person's body to discover its own rhythms, to create its own steps and to experience joy in the medium of space.

In 1929 at the age of fifty Laban was at the peak of his influential career in Germany and was appointed director of the *Deutsch Tanzbuhne*. However, in 1936 his work in Germany ceased abruptly, due to the egalitarian nature of his work being judged as anti-Nazi. He was dismissed by the regime and forced to leave the country. He sought refuge in Britain.

The years in Britain 1937 to 1958

Laban's arrival in Britain coincided with a radical change in educational practice, from a system of formal learning to a child-centred education. Emphasis was placed on the individual learner, and creativity was at its heart. Laban's long held dream that dance should be part of every child's education was to become a reality, not in Germany but in Britain. Fundamental to this idea was a holistic approach, advocating that education should encompass the whole person **body**, mind and spirit. Laban's vision of a creative dance programme in education set out to do just that.

It is in the field of education that my own first-hand experience of Laban's legacy exists. As a twelve year old in the mid 1950's, I was a beneficiary of Laban's beliefs. I was fortunate to attend a school where the dance programme was based on Laban's methodology. This early experience so inspired me, that at the beginning of the 1960's I undertook a three year teacher training specialising in dance. We studied the "art of movement" as described by Marion North, one of the leading practitioners.

"Movement becomes a creative art, passing from the intuitive and spontaneous stage of expression to the selective and 'possessed' form of the young dancerchildren not only express themselves but begin to communicate through their art."

As a student teacher of Laban's method, it was necessary to learn about his theories of expressive movement. There were two main areas of study, one concerned with the dynamics of movement and the other with spatial harmony or choreutics.

Laban's Effort Theory was concerned with the dynamic rhythm of a person's movement. Laban believed this was unique to each individual and revealed how a person responded to the world. As such it was connected to personality assessment. He identified the 4 'motion factors' of Time, Weight, Space and Flow. The words below describe the polarities of each movement factor.

Time - ranging from sudden to sustained

Weight - ranging from light/fine touch to strong

Space - ranging from direct to flexible

Flow - ranging from bound to free

These dynamic elements of movement remain universal. In a dance context when they are understood and fused together in different combinations, the expressive character of movement comes into play. Focus is not only on action, but on '**how**' the movement is performed which is a '**qualitative**' experience, most importantly involving an inner response.

In art, we refer to such concepts as colour, texture, form, harmony. In a similar way, with Laban's Effort Theories, we are introduced to the elements of dynamic movement in all its richness. This connects us not only to the visual impact but also the '*feel*' of the movement. Putting an emphasis on the 'quality' of movement requires a direct personal connection to each movement, a direct link from our inner world to an outer expression. Here, we are in the realm of dance as an expressive art form, a wordless language and a means of communication. The Laban dancer's technique is not about reproducing a set vocabulary of movement as in ballet, but in being able to understand and use dynamic form, combined with structuring the surrounding space. We become free to dance from centres of energy initiated within our own bodies, as explored in much of today's choreography.

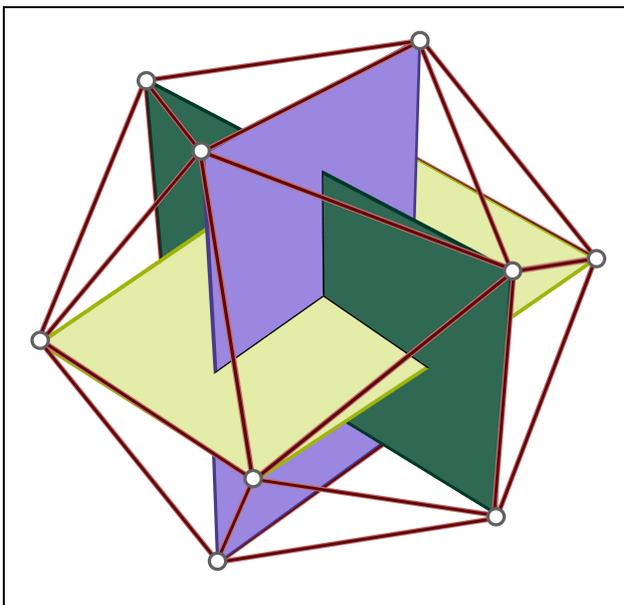
Another important contribution to dance study, is Labanotation. This is a method of analysing and recording movement using a system of signs on paper. Each sign represents body parts moving dynamically in space and time, similar to a music score.

Laban's Spatial Harmony Theories and Sacred Geometry

Similar to our work in Meditation des Tanzes, Laban sought to find ways of encompassing a spiritual dimension in dance. He knew about the embodiment of sacred geometry in other art forms such as architecture, art and music and sought to find ways of achieving this in human movement. His research was based on an acknowledgment of the harmonic principles in platonic solids. He believed that space could be embodied in movement as an esoteric experience, in other words, the impression it made on the dancer. This was described by his apprentice Mary Wigman.

"The organic combination of the spatial directions and natural three dimensional qualities led to a perfect harmony. The different movements not only flowed effortlessly from one to the other, they appeared to be born of each other."

Laban identified three planes of movement, the door plane (side to side purple) the table plane (horizontal light green) and the wheel plane (front to back dark green). When the points from all three planes are connected, they create an icosahedron.



Laban created large icosahedral models, big enough for the dancers to move inside and to perform harmonious sequences or scales of movement. He created five, six and seven ring scales and related them to innate movement patterns and the psyche.

Today the concepts of Laban's spatial theories are shown clearly in the work of William Forsythe, an American choreographer. His choreography is seen as a fusion of classical ballet and modern dance. He developed Laban's view of the body as "living architecture" and the creation of moving geometric shapes around the body. Unlike ballet, he creates "centres" outside the body involving ever-changing and different body parts. This results in innovative off-balance or labile movements.

Laban advocated no single dance technique or method, but looked for universality. As such, his work on the nature of expressive movement encompasses all dance forms, as well as other areas of life. It has united the vast array of people who use his work and has contributed greatly to dance research and scholarship. His ultimate legacy is said to have engendered a spirit of creativity and enquiry.

Afterthought as a Meditation des Tanzes dancer

Throughout his life Laban was aware of dance as a spiritual practice, as was Bernhard Wosien. Although their two dance forms manifested themselves differently, one as an expressive art, and the other as a form of meditation, they sprang from the same spiritual and philosophical beliefs.

Both instigators were aware of a fifth dimension of existence and they both appeared to have the gift of intuitive visioning. In their work each one had a quest to travel inward to the innermost centre and to find a perfect connection with the inner and outer being.

In the last lecture he gave in 1958, Laban spoke of his appreciation of Plato's quest and his own beloved "Land of Silence". Perhaps his words can speak for Wosien too and the dance forms they created. They lived in different eras but Bernhard Wosien met Rudolf Laban once that we know of, when he was 15 years old. Any influence of one to the other must remain as pure speculation

"Behind external events the dancer perceives another, entirely different, world. There is an energy behind all occurrences and material things for which it is almost impossible to find a name. A hidden, forgotten landscape lies there, the land of silence, the realm of the soul, and in the centre of this land stands the swinging temple... in which all sorrows and joys, all sufferings and joys, all struggles and deliverances meet and move together"