

What will survive us?

Sigurd Leeder and his legacy

What was it about a single gesture by Peter Wright that made me exclaim “He must have studied with Leeder” (BBC TV 1988). What I had seen was a ‘central movement’ of the arm which Wright was using to demonstrate a possible intention for a reaching gesture.¹ ‘Central movement’ is very distinctive and rarely performed, in my experience, by those who have not had some contact with the Jooss-Leeder training. In fact Wright had worked with Sigurd Leeder from 1944-47 receiving his first dance training and performing experience as an apprentice travelling with the Ballets Jooss on tour in the UK (Wright, 1993). Subsequently Wright studied and worked with many other teachers, mostly in classical ballet, and went on to play a significant part in the development of British Ballet in the second half of the twentieth century. Some 40 years on, having experienced and embraced it, that work with Leeder was still clearly imprinted in Wright’s body.

Sigurd Leeder worked with Kurt Jooss for over 25 years. At the beginning of their partnership, in the early 1920s, both were dancers but, in relation to the Ballets Jooss and the training schools that existed alongside, Jooss was the recognized choreographer and Leeder the teacher. They devised a training method which involved their principles of movement derived from Laban’s theories, particularly eukinetics and choreutics, applied to and explored through dance technique, improvisation, choreography, and Labanotation. Unusually for pioneers in modern dance Jooss and Leeder did not abandon what classical ballet had to offer, rather they used what seemed useful to them - that is the adherence to anatomical principles with regards placement, line and turnout, the structure of a ballet class (barre work, centre work and extended study) and, when practice gives way to performance, the integration of the

theatrical elements of costume, lighting and décor into the conception of the work. There is no virtuosity for its own sake (eg multiple pirouettes) and no pointe work. Their method then was a synthesis, created from existing elements to make a meaningful theatrical language.

By all accounts Sigurd Leeder was an outstanding teacher – Ann Hutchinson Guest for example describes him as “incomparable” and outlines that it was his imagination and use of imagery, his sense of humour and his ingenious choreographic ability which made him so (Hutchinson Guest 1991).² His development of the Dance Study, choreographic miniatures which explored a specific theme, designed to be danced and enjoyed rather than viewed by an audience – much as a Czerny Etude develops a pianist’s technique and appreciation of composition but may not make great listening – was Leeder’s unique contribution to the Jooss-Leeder Method. A Dance Study is built up over a series of classes as the initial idea, usually derived from the principles of movement, is worked on and developed dynamically and/or spatially. Over a period of time a range of studies are created each complete in themselves, but related to one another – a study that works on the contrasts of central and peripheral movement could well have moments of swing, but which are not emphasised in that particular study. However the focus of the three basic rhythms in the next study would inform those swing movements in the performance of the previous study; when the first study is revisited the swing is better for having experienced the second study.

In 1947 Jooss and Leeder went their separate ways and Leeder established his school in London. One of the first students at the newly opened Sigurd Leeder School of Dance was Jane Winearls, already an experienced teacher and choreographer, who trained with him for three years attaining his coveted diploma. His effect on her was profound for she “found in Leeder’s teaching the perfect balance between the organised and the organic, between form

and content and between freedom and discipline” (Winearls 1990, 94). Winearls both embraced and embodied Leeder’s work, so much so that she was immediately employed by Leeder to teach with him in his rapidly expanding school³ and then spent a year or so with Kurt Jooss at the Folkwangschule in Essen, Germany. On her return she opened her own school in London before gaining the post of Lecturer in Dance at the University of Birmingham in 1965.⁴ Winearls had no academic qualifications but wanted dance to be accepted as a valid academic subject: “All work was based on the theatrical form of work which had been developed by Sigurd Leeder and Kurt Jooss from Laban’s basic analysis of movement. I knew that I could build an integrated form of dance that would be conducive to creative freedom married to articulate expression, documented by the discipline of dance notation” (Winearls 2000, 5).

What this meant in practice was that Winearls taught in an integrated way many aspects of dance—historical dance, improvisation, choreography, Labanotation, dance history, social dance —whatever she thought appropriate or necessary for the students in front of her. What she taught was the Jooss-Leeder Method filtered through her own personality and life experiences prior to her work with Leeder (which included numerous courses with Rudolf Laban,) and after (her interest in the Alexander Method for example): “her special gift [was] to assimilate the work of these men and with it to create her own. It is not enough to say that what she did was the Jooss-Leeder Method or Central European Modern Dance. It is the Winearls’ Work; a unique approach to training and nurturing all those interested in dance and the theatre, in which an attention to inner and outer technique must be balanced.” (Andy Adamson 2001a)

Winearls had an unusual teaching style; she appreciated those who worked hard but had an acerbic tongue for those who seemed not to try. She demonstrated frequently and also used a strong “hands-on” approach to mould students physically as well as verbally cajoling, encouraging, or occasionally ridiculing them in her efforts to make her message understood. Her knowledge of the Jooss-Leeder Method was unique to her – many people studied with Leeder, few went on to work for Jooss and then taught for Leeder, and no-one but her has articulated Jooss’s and Leeder’s dance language in print. Her book *Modern Dance – The Jooss-Leeder Method* (Winearls 1958) remains the only text on the method; the accompanying books of dance studies in Labanotation show her work in practice (Winearls 1968). She could be frightening, formidable and forceful with a fiery nature, but could also be warm, kind and supportive. As Adamson (2001a) said, “It was impossible to be neutral about Jane . . . you either loved her or you hated her, but you certainly remembered her. There’s no question that Jane was a person who changed people’s lives.”

She certainly changed Adamson’s life – in the early 1970s he had arrived at the University of Birmingham to study music intending to be a professional trumpet player. He encountered Winearls through ‘the Opera Course’, a subsidiary subject offered alongside music in which students studied dance and drama for two years, and was hooked; he by her and she by him. She recognised in him his potential as a dancer and choreographer and gave him opportunities to do both. When she retired he was appointed in her place at the University of Birmingham continuing to work from the Laban-Jooss-Leeder principles as taught to him by Winearls, incorporating the Alexander method into the training and bringing great musicality to the work.⁵ His embodiment of these principles gave him freedom as a teacher to create some remarkable dance studies of his own for the many students who passed through his classes; his use of verbal imagery, metaphor and physical props to enhance his demonstration

was stimulating while his exploration of the principles of movement in his teaching of choreography was often inspirational. As a choreographer for various student and small-scale companies and in his direction of plays and operas he inspired movement ideas in the improvisation and creative processes which he shaped and formed into his vision. What he wrote of Winearls could equally apply to him: “Many will remember with fondness their classes [...], often full of hugging and squeezing of sweaty bodies. Truly cathartic [...] classes helped dancers to explore their own creative impulses through improvisation and composition [...] all aspects of the individual were simultaneously challenged and stimulated.” (Adamson 2001b)⁶

I first encountered Adamson as an undergraduate on the new BA (Special Honours) programme in Music, Dance and Drama in the early 1980s at the University of Birmingham. I had danced for many years before going to university but in the training I received from him I discovered a whole range of ideas, such as the importance of the use of weight or the limitless range of dynamics for example, which were new to me. My enjoyment and sense of fulfilment at discovering through his dance studies and choreography there was so much ‘in’ dance – that it was a means of communication, a medium of expression that could incorporate my experience as a musician and actress – were supreme. This Jooss-Leeder-Winearls based work, filtered through Adamson, still forms the basis of my teaching, my choreography and my research.

While much of the legacy I have inherited is intangible, that which is tangible has survived because of the importance Jooss, Leeder and Winearls placed on the teaching of Labanotation, and its use in recording their work; Adamson’s development of Calaban, a computer-aided-Labanotation system now used by professional notators throughout the

world, demonstrates his commitment to the importance of movement notation. ‘The *Big City* Project’ a restaging of Jooss’s 1932 ballet, brought the tangible and intangible legacies of Jooss and Leeder together for it was brought to life by teachers and students descended, so to speak, from Leeder, and who were immersed in the Jooss-Leeder heritage – for I staged Jooss’s ballet from the pencil copy of the Labanotation score on student dancers who had experienced Jooss-Leeder-Winearls based teaching and dance language from Adamson and me. The Jooss-Leeder dance language is inherent in *Big City* (1932) as it was made at a time when Jooss and Leeder were working closely together training dancers to embody their expressive vocabulary in the creation and performance of the work. I recognised this in the score and taught the ballet to the students using this physical and verbal language. Students then received coaching from Anna Markard (Jooss’s daughter and guardian of his work at that time) using the Jooss-Leeder language of her inheritance.⁷ This process was a remarkable experience for all concerned in the way it brought together so many different strands of Jooss’s and Leeder’s legacies; the tangible outcome was, after corrections had been made, the publication of the Labanotation score produced on Calaban (Lidbury 2000a, 2000b).

Leeder found in Winearls, and she in Adamson and he in me, bodies and minds through which to transmit a way of thinking about, and articulating, dance; we are but few of many who have encountered the Jooss-Leeder work. It survives when it is imprinted in the body, and embedded in the psyche.

¹ Central movement is just one element of the Jooss-Leeder dance vocabulary. It is more than the anatomical sequential unfolding of a limb or the torso; the term ‘central’ implies that the

starting point of the movement is in the centre of the body or at the joint in the limb where it is attached to the body, and is motivated by an outflowing intention giving the movement some expressive significance.

² Hutchinson Guest was a student at the Jooss-Leeder School in Dartington, Devon from January 1936 until the outbreak of WW2. Leeder introduced her to Laban's movement notation system.

³ Leeder became one of the leading teachers in London during the 1950s. In 1960 he moved to Chile to become director and teacher at the Escuela de Danzade Universidad de Chile in Santiago, while his school in London continued to run under the directorship of Simone Michelle and June Kemp. In 1964, he moved to Switzerland establishing the Sigurd Leeder School of Dance in Herisau. Since his death in 1981 and that of his fellow teacher Grete Müller in 2001, the school has passed into the hands of Christine von Mentlen. Some of Leeder's choreographic work is available in published Labanotation scores, although much remains unpublished. Hutchinson Guest has just published a selection of Leeder studies.

⁴ Dance had been part of teacher training in colleges of physical education for many years, but this was the first post of its kind at a university in the UK. (In the hierarchy in higher education in the UK at that time universities were at the top and polytechnics and teacher-training colleges beneath.)

⁵ Winearls retired from the university convinced that dance had earned its rightful place in academia. She worked on completing her second book and continued to freelance, often working with former students and serving as artistic adviser for their dance companies (such as Masque Dance Theatre, directed by Lynda Ryder).

⁶ In 2002 the University of Birmingham closed the dance degree program, thus ending the Laban-Jooss-Leeder-Winearls heritage there. Adamson retired and now applies that heritage in the teaching of Pilates.

⁷ Markard studied at the Leeder School in London in the late 1940s with Winearls. During the 1960s and '70s she worked with her father on preserving his extant works, later staging them all over the world.

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