

“I’m Gonna Shake and Shimmy,” or may be not:

Choreographing *Hairspray* – Practice as Research

I did not set out with the intention of being the choreographer for a school production of *Hairspray, the Musical*. I became involved because, as an interested parent, I had sent a supportive email to the Head of Music about the last musical presented by the school (Sondheim’s *Sweeney Todd*) and commented specifically on the choreography. As he knew that I was head of a university dance department he suggested to the director of *Hairspray* that we might meet to discuss the production. Initially I thought I would be involved only in overseeing the director’s choreography but it became apparent at the dance audition, in which she participated, that her movement skills were limited; this suggested that my job would be easier if I did the choreography myself rather than rectify any work she might do. I am not sure that this was ever articulated but when we met again we discussed her vision for the choreography, how the numbers might work and the influences/styles she wanted within it. I realised that this was going to be a much larger commitment from me than at first anticipated and, as I had taken on this role voluntarily, it was at this point that I decided I had to benefit from the experience by developing the process into some sort of project.

Quite quickly then a Practice as Research project evolved with the research question of ‘In what ways was it possible to choreograph *Hairspray* while remaining true to my roots, that is, my inheritance of Rudolf Laban’s movement theories through the work of Kurt Jooss, Sigurd Leeder and Jane Winearls?’¹ Nelson (2013) suggests that Practice as Research as a methodology is a multi-mode research enquiry consisting of a product (the choreography seen in this production of *Hairspray*), documentation of the process (all the dances and staging of the songs have been recorded in Labanotation – a way of recording movement in

graphical symbols) and ‘complimentary writing’ which is this article in which I articulate and evidence my research enquiry. It is hoped that the application of Jooss’ and Leeder’s analytical methods to the creative process of choreography for this production of *Hairspray* may be seen as offering a new insight.²

While Laban wrote many texts himself on his ideas and theories (Laban 1956, Laban 1966 or McCaw 2011) Jooss and Leeder put his work into practice in creating dance works for the theatre and in training dancers; their work was articulated by Jane Winearls in her seminal work *Modern Dance: The Jooss Leeder Method*, the only text which deals with the practicalities of their work in any detail and which constantly informs my understanding of their work. Lisa Ullmann helped transform Laban’s work into process-orientated Modern Educational Dance, hardly synonymous with musical theatre, but Laban’s movement theories (and Jooss’ and Leeder’s development of them) can be applied to any activity (dance or otherwise) even something as product-driven as *Hairspray, the Musical*.

There are of course numerous texts about how to choreograph – Humphrey’s *The Art of Making Dances* (1959) and Blom’s and Chaplin’s *The Intimate Act of Choreography* (1989) offer excellent examples of how to create and generate dance material through improvisation and movement exploration – but these are aimed at dancers creating work to express their own ideas, rather than at how to choreograph to a pre-conceived narrative and fixed musical score. There are too plenty of texts (e.g. Cramer, 2013 and Bryer and Davidson, 2005) with Broadway choreographers talking about their careers, who has influenced their work, the sort of dancers they like to work with and so on. Interesting as these are, they are no help in the creative/choreographic process in the context of creating dances for a school production.

For an inexperienced choreographer or dance teacher then Novak's advice (1996) on establishing how dance rehearsals should run, the structure of blocking, reviewing and polishing a number, and how to teach dance to non-dancers maybe useful, although for someone more experienced her advice may seem very obvious. Sunderland's and Pickering's text (1989) is much more comprehensive than Novak's - with specific chapters on, for example, using formations, groupings, structuring time - presenting standard thinking about these aspects of choreography but usefully applied specifically to musical theatre.

Perhaps surprisingly there is little discussion of choreography (process or product) in either the on-line journal *Musical Theatre Review* (focussed on reviewing productions with features on performers, lyricists, librettists and 'other figures in the creative team' or Intellect Books' journal *Studies in Musical Theatre* even though it 'welcome[s] discussions on any theme relating to musical theatre'. It seems then there are few texts on the creative process of choreographing for musical theatre, let alone any which address this in relation to school or amateur/community productions, and none which analyse a specific choreographers' process or which analyse in any detail musical theatre dances/numbers.³ What there are plenty of however are on-line videos of both professional and US college productions of the musical as well as instruction videos on how to do specific numbers from the film of *Hairspray, the Musical*.

The (relatively few) texts on doing musicals in secondary schools treat the role of the choreographer and the importance of dance in the numbers in different ways. Wrotniak's (2015) thesis/director's journal on his production of *Hairspray* for example glosses over the dance creation and rehearsal process; Robinson and Poole (1990) however take it much more

seriously recognising that dance has an essential role in the production of a musical and that it may be necessary for a school to hire a professional choreographer, expensive as that may be.

While not a professional choreographer I have had experience of choreographing musicals before and of working with keen, if inexperienced, performers. That, together with over twenty years of working in dance in Higher Education, gave me a reasonable base from which to work. My first question though was why a school with a justifiable reputation for excellent academic achievement and an outstanding reputation for sport would put on a musical. Of course in promoting music and drama *per se* artistic and aesthetic education demands are met but perhaps a more cynical answer is that in any educational establishment the performing arts serve purposes beyond the curriculum: the performing arts often produce excellent photographs - useful for publicity - and generate wordage about co-operation, discipline and the potential for transformation; and they give a sense of the roundness of the education and opportunities available. Musicals particularly fulfil these (often unstated) purposes.

And why would this British school - large, independent and co-educational, with day students and boarding students from across the globe - choose as its 'Senior School Production' the musical *Hairspray*? In some ways it would seem a sensible option - it is very popular with young people so many of the cast would already know the songs, as they are often heard out of context, and they may have seen the film and/or the West End/Broadway/touring versions of the show. It is a comedy musical with a strong, challenging storyline (about [lack of] racial integration in 1960s Baltimore)⁴ so would give the students something to get their teeth into. In addition the cast could be large thus giving performance opportunities to lots of students, and yet more could be involved in the band, or in the tech team. In turn this could

guarantee a large audience which was essential as the school concerned currently does not have specialist performing arts facilities so hires, at great expense, the local theatre. The production then had to be one that would sell, both to students and parents.

Against the choice of *Hairspray* must have been that it is the professional production (not a schools' version) with resultant vocal and acting demands (Binnema 1996); with this goes a level of expectation – as noted above performers and audience may well have seen a professional production which was not only well acted and well sung but which also had virtuosic and spectacular dance numbers. This latter point might have put some directors off given that this school has no dance specialist on the staff - it is not surprising then that dance is not part of the performing arts curriculum with students only getting limited experience of dance in physical education at the younger end of the school. In practice this meant that there was neither a group of students on whom the dance numbers could rest, nor pupil choreographers who might have been given shared responsibility for particular numbers as so often happens (Wrotniak 2015, 384). That the production went ahead anyway suggests either that the amount of dance required in the musical was underestimated by the production team, for the director thought she might be able to do it herself, or that there was a naivety about the process of creating choreography, and the amount of time it takes to teach and rehearse it.

Context

The school has an extensive extra-curricular activities programme of which the Senior School Production was just one option on offer on Thursday afternoons/evenings in the autumn term to the 650 or so students in years 11, 12 and 13 (aged 15-18). Students were advised that as the term went on additional rehearsals would be called on Saturday mornings, all day Saturday and in the few weeks before production Sunday rehearsals too, meaning that for the

day students participating parents/guardians also had to support their child's involvement in the production. The aim then was to put on the musical using as many school students as were interested and committed, rehearsing through the autumn term for performance at the end of January.

Robinson's and Poole's advice that when producing a musical 'It is advisable not to conflict with any major athletic events' (1990, 21) may well be very sound but, in this school, the notion that the musical should not conflict with sport is unthinkable. Competitive sport takes place every Saturday in many sports with home matches usually in the afternoon and participants in away events leaving for their destination from noon onwards – representing the School in a team takes precedence over everything so students had to negotiate absence from rehearsals in order to fulfil team commitments. Other events also took place, if not precedence, for in the last two weeks of the term the music staff and many of the cast took part in an Advent Service, the Christmas Concert and two carol services. Yet more of the cast were involved in the House Drama competition which took place on the last Monday of term. To crown it all a few weeks into the rehearsal process it became clear that some of the non-speaking cast were going to miss the last night of the performance to go on a physics trip to Switzerland. (They were subsequently double cast in some numbers to cover their absence, adding to the rehearsal load.) Add to this two weeks for the mid-term break, three weeks of Christmas vacation and an exam week in January and it can be seen that rehearsal time was at a premium and conflict with other events was inevitable.

The musical was directed by a teacher of English who gained experience of directing as an undergraduate, had extensive experience of working on drama and musical productions with year 9 students and has a love of musicals. The choice of musical was hers in consultation

with the Head of Music and subject to approval by the Headmaster. While the Head of Performing Arts (who took up his post after decisions were made about the musical) was production manager overseeing the budget, liaising with the theatre, making the set, training the tech crew and so on, she promoted the musical to students at the start of term and, as might be expected of the director, led the acting audition process, worked with the musical director on casting, planned the rehearsal schedule – a formidable piece of organisation of not only students but also of rehearsal spaces – and in addition came up with the design concept. As well as the Thursday and weekend rehearsals she held regular lunchtime dialogue rehearsals.

The musical director was the school's Head of Music; he had been MD for other musical productions at the school and has extensive experience of choral singing. His involvement with the show was perhaps politic rather than from a love of musicals but nonetheless he was totally committed to the production. Not only was he or the assistant MD (also a member of the music staff and passionate about musicals) often both of them, present and repeteteuring at the rehearsals, they also undertook regular one to one teaching/coaching sessions for principal singers during the week; in production the MD of course conducted the band and the assistant MD played keyboards.⁵

The time commitment from all the teaching staff concerned was considerable: the music staff calculated that they had given, before production week, over 300 hours in rehearsal; my hours were around 120 in rehearsals plus another 30-40 hours creating the material in advance of rehearsals while it is impossible to calculate the true number of hours the director gave to the production. As Robinson and Poole (1990, 68) state:

A most important component of the production that must not be forgotten

is the dedication of the participating teachers. The devotion of their extra-curricular time, energy and expertise is far too often taken for granted. It is very clear that secondary school musical theatre exists mainly because of this dedication.

This is particularly true of the school staff involved in this production for while all staff at the school are contractually required to undertake 'Activities' in the daily 4-5pm slot and/or Saturday morning activities, the dedication of the staff involved here was extraordinary, and I suspect, largely unrecognised/unconsidered by those staff not involved.

The working relationship between the choreographer and director was very harmonious; her carefully planned rehearsal schedule meant that my time was used efficiently in rehearsals and that I had acceptable spaces in which to work when the Drama Studio was not available (for example it was used for performances of a play by the lower school, for the house drama competition and as an exam hall all of which rendered it unusable for rehearsals). She welcomed such input I made regarding her work, as I did her comments and suggestions on my work, and we shared the frustration of students not remembering words or dance material.

Similarly my working relationship with the MD was equally amenable although I often felt that his time and skills, and those of the assistant MD, were wasted playing the same few bars over and over again as we worked on a particular dance phrase.⁶ However his/her presence meant that dance rehearsals could serve also as singing rehearsals when appropriate and that tempi for the numbers rehearsed were correct at the outset and remained constant (Robinson and Poole 1990). That I read music was acknowledged by the MD as being a distinct advantage as we were able to communicate effectively in moving around the music score in rehearsal and I could easily identify to him any questions I had. Both the Director and the MDs were very supportive of what I was trying to do with the students recognising and

appreciating the difficulties of working with students who were often out of their comfort zone. In return I was impressed by their commitment and perseverance.

Process

Rehearsals began in September with a brief audition period which was for casting purposes rather than to eliminate students on grounds of lack of ability. A 45 minute dance audition was incorporated where I taught some simple steps (eg basic cha cha step, step ball change) developed into a dance phrase to test muscle memory, musicality and speed of learning. It quickly became apparent that of the 44 students present there were many more girls than boys, that the majority of the students had not had any formal dance training (ie been taught steps and required to reproduce them) but some of them could certainly more than shake and shimmy. While all members of the ensemble would both sing and dance it was also clear that there were some students who absolutely should not feature in the (many) dance numbers. The challenge then would be to create dances that were within the abilities of the students (but to stretch those who were more able) which were also vibrant, exciting and matched the vitality of the music, while making them all look as good as possible.⁷

One of the most challenging aspects of the production was that for the amount of dance concerned and the number of students involved, there was not enough rehearsal time. This meant that dances were set in the allocated rehearsals but there was no time to rehearse them after, nor was there time in the next rehearsal when there was always new material to be learned for a different number, often by a different group of the cast. To mitigate this to some extent at the end of every rehearsal the dance material was recorded and then posted on the pupil resources area of the school intranet which gave students access to it as and when they had time or inclination. This facility was used by most students⁸ but not all. In an ideal world

a pupil would have acted as Dance Captain to lead extra rehearsals. In reality this just was not possible as no pupil showed themselves as having the physical expertise, the ‘all seeing eye’ or the personality/confidence needed to do this role.

The aim of the choreography was always to reflect each number’s intention, rather than the dance just being present to fill out the music, for which Bob Fosse’s analysis of what each dance number in a musical should achieve was useful (cited in Kobal 1988, 287). Table 1 places each number from *Hairspray* in Fosse’s categories.

[insert Table 1 here]

Fosse also says: ‘Of course all [...] should be accomplished with some beauty. They should be handsome to look at. And, somehow, emotionally affect the audience.’ While it cannot be claimed that all the dances in this production of *Hairspray* were performed with beauty, some of them were good to look at, and some of them, thanks to the verve with which they were performed by cast and band alike and the emotive music, did emotionally affect the audience.

As noted in Table 1 not all the numbers required choreography as such but needed staging, generally a much quicker and possibly easier process than choreographing (Warren Carlyle cited in Cramer, 2013, 84). It was surprising that there was not a greater disparity between the non-dance numbers staged by the director and those staged by the choreographer as these were never really discussed at the planning stage. The lack of disparity could be for several reasons: firstly that the choreographer ended up with some input on the director’s numbers in tidying the moves (clarifying exactly what they were physically, rhythmically, dynamically and where they were spatially); secondly that the director learned from the choreographer;

and thirdly that over time the choreographer absorbed some of the director's style.

Some things however - the over use of repetition without variation and literal translation of lyrics into movement – remained unsolvable within the timeframe.

Choreographic process

So how to choreograph for a group of largely inexperienced dancers, some of whom had never performed on stage before? It was apparent from the audition that what might be seen as a desirable process, where the choreographer could attend rehearsals with movement ideas for exploration and development by the cast and so arrive together at final material of which the cast had some ownership, was inappropriate; the majority of these students were unused to being creative physically or responding to physical tasks. In addition the time constraints were formidable given the amount of dance within the show. This resulted in my working out all the dance material in advance and using rehearsals to teach the many dances. However it was still possible to 'make room for magic' (Carlyle cited in Cramer, 2013, 77) as occasionally it was possible to leave the conclusion of a dance open (but planned in case it was needed) to see how it would end, either responding to the director's vision of how the number finished in relation to the next action/scene or to see if any of those involved had ideas to offer. It allowed more able/willing performers to contribute so, for example, the student playing Tracy who was very confident physically (but not by her own admission 'a dancer') was able to add movements for her character to the choreography. In contrast some cast members, when requested to come up with, for example, a final pose, were so lacking in confidence in their own physicality that they just asked to be told what to do.

In exploring whether it was possible to choreograph *Hairspray* while remaining true to my inheritance of Rudolf Laban's movement theories through the work of Kurt Jooss, Sigurd

Leeder and Jane Winearls, key choreographic choices concerning eukinetics – use of dynamics and sense of flow - and choreutics – the spatial aspects of movement – were made early on in the discussion process, namely that the ‘Council Members’ would move with specific movement qualities - bound flow and light energy - on straight pathways with direct movements at middle and high levels, using mostly flat and steep planes of movement,⁹ while the ‘coloured people’ (O’Donnell et al 2002, 85) would move predominantly with stronger energy, on curving and circular pathways with indirect movements at middle and low levels mostly in the floating plane. The exception was Tracy who naturally moved in this latter way which, fortunately, was right, for the narrative demands that she move like Seaweed and the other black kids (Act 1, sc 4 – Detention); this way of moving draws Corny Collins’ attention to her but contributes to the Council members despising her. When ‘integration’ was achieved in the final number movement material was shared with all the characters dancing each other’s material. While this may sound simplistic it gave the performers something to hang on to in understanding why their moves were as they were and, in those moments of improvisation it gave the dancers a physical concept in which to do their own thing. It gave the dances if not a vocabulary of movement, a framework and a concept (Andy Blankenbuehler, cited in Cramer, 2013, 40) to work within.

“Nicest Kids in Town” (Act 1, sc 1), in which Corny Collins introduces the group of performers on his show, is an example of how this worked in practice. As with most of the songs the main vocalist in this number is both interrupted and supported throughout by ensemble singing, with musical interest derived from key changes and bridge passages. As the main performers were miked up in the production but the ensemble performers were not, it seemed essential to ensure that their ‘Bop-bee-ba’s ‘Whoo! Ow-oot’s (O’Donnell et al 2002, 121) and so on were focussed out to the audience as they would never have carried

over the pit band otherwise. So, while Corny was singing the ‘Nicest Kids’ moved a lot, and when they were singing they moved less.

[Insert Table 2 here]

The song’s structure, outlined in Table 2, helped to structure the dance in that each verse had related dance material (but not a straight repetition) all based around movements in the flat and steep planes. The movement vocabulary – step ball changes, step closes, step turns and so on - was fast, light in energy, and direct, and travelled on straight pathways; in the Roll Call each performer developed a gesture to represent their character but these gestures stayed within the stylistic framework of the number. This movement style was maintained in “The Madison”, “It’s Hairspray” and “The Cooties” but with different dance vocabulary.

In contrast those involved in the Detention scene (Act 1, sc 4), where there is no singing but the dialogue is underscored, moved in a completely different way. It was the first time that the audience saw the ‘coloured people’ and the music - a ‘blues’ – had a completely different feel and sound from everything heard so far, thus encouraging a different way of moving. This time movements were much slower; they focussed around hip circles and figures of eight in the floating plane and shoulder circles in the steep plane, knees were bent with a lowered centre of gravity, pathways were more indirect and the movement quality throughout had more weight. This way of moving was seen again in “Run and Tell That” and “Big, Blonde and Beautiful”.

“You Can’t Stop the Beat”, the final number, brought these two ways of moving together, physically representing integration. For the dance at bars 91-116D (O’Donnell et al 2002,

272) new material was used to mark the uniqueness of the situation but clear links were made to previous dance material presented in other numbers. However the movement phrases for the repeating chorus (eg bars 29-45) used straight lines and circular pathways, hip and shoulder circles, all the planes of movement and the effort qualities mentioned previously. This song seemed endless so variations in facings and size of the movements were introduced in preparation for the full out rendition in Part 2 of the song.

This number raised an interesting issue - some gestures, such as the hand leading the arm across the body in a wave motion ('the motion of the ocean'), seem to be known by people whether they have seen the movie/stage version or not. Should I use this gesture? It can be seen in Jerry Mitchell's choreography for *Hairspray* for the original Broadway production (2002) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Rlp1zrB14g>). It is so associated with the musical that I had to use it. Similarly "Big Doll House" is often choreographed as a tap number (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wGMYk-C307g>) but, as none of the cast in this production had any/enough experience of tap dancing to perform in this style, the pressure to conform to this tradition was not so strong. I took inspiration from the many numbers from the musical available on YouTube, such as the UK touring version for, as Kathleen Marshall notes (cited in Bryer and Davison 2005: 151): 'When you're working as a director, you have a script, a playwright, and actions [...]. When you start choreography you have nothing.' At the start I had no idea that there was so much interest in the musical on-line, or that there were training videos for specific numbers (e.g. "The Madison") from the film of *Hairspray*. Motivating as these YouTube extracts were they could never be more than inspirational – the dancers in these versions had a level of physical skill and achieved a complexity of spatial patterning and rhythmic variation that was beyond the grasp of most of the cast.

Teaching/Rehearsal process

Choreographing the dances was only one aspect of the work; the dances then needed teaching to the cast. This had to be a positive experience for all concerned especially at the start as issues arriving then would have been detrimental to the rest of the rehearsal period. I was very conscious that for some of the cast this was their first experience of learning dance material that was set, which had to be recalled as it had been taught, rather than just doing their own thing. Although I had a lot of material to teach I also had to teach them how to learn in this context – through looking and listening, by trying and then practising, taking correction and wanting to perfect the movement. To achieve this I had to adopt the ‘command style’ in knowing and showing exactly what I was teaching (notating of the movement, which demands precise analysis of movement in time and space, helped to ensure this); my demonstration of the movements had to be really clear, I had to use a language that they understood (dance specific vocabulary alternating with other verbal descriptions), I had to be aware of the different speeds at which they all learned and recognise when they were ready to take feedback – on technical aspects and physical accuracy, rhythm, spacing, focus, energy quality and so on. Above all I had to be encouraging. The students’ desire for perfection (or at least surety of what they were doing), came quite late in the rehearsal process (as their fear of failure/need to succeed surfaced perhaps). Several of the older students and the staff who knew the cast assured me that this was normal and that ‘everything would be all right’ and that ‘we’ll get there’; they were correct, and they did.

I was very aware from the outset that these students had no language connected with dance teaching, that is, no concept of ‘do it on the other side’ or ‘marking’ for example. I did not specifically teach these terms but used them as and when appropriate. Students were also unfamiliar with dance class conventions such as standing in rows or of moving the front row

to the back and everyone moving forward one row so that they could all see what I was teaching and I could see whether they all had the dance material. Dance vocabulary terms, such as parallel or turnout were completely unfamiliar to most and I realised early on that saying the names of steps such as 'step ball change' meant nothing to many of them, or at least they could not translate the meaning of the words into physical action quickly enough, but if I gave a sequence of steps a name such as 'basic, one jump', 'basic, two jump', as I did for "The Madison" then this seemed to help the performers remember the sequence.

My teaching process is derived from Sigurd Leeder's working method of class material all being focussed on the 'Movement Study' where a specific theme or movement idea, usually derived from the principles of movement (see Winearls, 1958 and Lidbury, 2017), is introduced and then developed rhythmically, spatially and dynamically through several classes working towards the study, a 'choreographic miniature'. While we did not have the luxury of developing material over time, the process of introducing the movement in its most simple form and then developing layers of complexity was adhered to. Thus movement phrases - usually step patterns were introduced first then arms, head and facings added - were not taught in the order in which they would come in the dance rather they were taught in order of complexity, starting with the most simple. As each new phrase was taught its relationship to the previous one was articulated and students were given time for individual practise. The dance was then assembled from these ingredients and arranged in space. In this way movement memory was stimulated by the ordered introduction of material and students were excited, perhaps grateful or relieved, as they realised that they already knew material when the dance was put in order. Starting straight in at the beginning of the dance may well have been very off-putting for the less confident movers and have caused panic over memory failure. As it was at the end of each rehearsal something was accomplished which could be

recorded for the students to look at as a memory aid, and the students had had the experience of dance material being taught to them organically. This process was particularly effective with the large group numbers, such as 'You can't stop the Beat', and was made more achievable by having the MDs present to play as and when needed, at a tempo to suit the learning process.

Findings

The processes discussed above led to a final product which, it seems, was a great success: the theatre was sold out on all three nights; fellow students, parents, staff and the senior management team all acknowledged what an enjoyable, professional show had been presented; and many students in the audience expressed their desire to do the musical next year. As might be expected some excellent photos were taken and various letters to parents and to students in the cast from the senior management team spoke of 'a stunning, high energy, professional performance' with one openly acknowledging that 'A popular, energising musical with a big cast was exactly what we needed as we built our performing arts reputation.' It was clear then why this school had undertaken this production; *Hairspray* had served its purpose.

But for the students concerned, and the staff, the impact and repercussions were much greater than this. Because it drew its cast from the three senior years in the school friendships across year groups have been made which might otherwise not have happened. Students studying quite different programmes – GCSE, A Levels or International Baccalaureate – have interacted, as have students from the boarding and day communities (hitherto new students in the 6th form boarding house may have had no opportunity to meet day students studying a different programme from them). Some students who were new to the school or who have not

taken part in productions before brought themselves to the notice of fellow students and staff outside the production. Staff have seen students in a new light for their particular talents, for their leadership qualities, for their commitment to the production. Students now may see the staff concerned in the production in a different light, recognising a shared passion for the performing arts perhaps. We all - cast, tech crew, band and production staff - became sensitive to and appreciative of the unique talents of all concerned and we all have shared memories of the process and delight in the end product.

From my perspective being part of *Hairspray* has reminded me of how good it is to work with people towards a shared common goal (Berkson 1990), teaching them to do things that they did not know they could do. One question that has been asked of me since the production was how did I get those boys (or any of the cast) to dance, as if there was no way that any of them could, or would want to. In reality they all wanted to dance - they had all chosen the senior school production as their 'activity' and they knew from the outset that dancing was part of the production - my role was to get them dancing well by creating material they could do which looked effective and that I could teach to them in an efficient manner; in this I succeeded. However I did not succeed with all the students; one in particular was an excellent dancer in his own way and style, which was quite unlike anyone else's and not at all the style I was after in the choreography. It became clear early on that he was only ever going to do the material his way - which was different every time he did it - and in the end, that was how it had to be. In his role, as Seaweed, this was acceptable but for the girl playing Tracy, who, as the script demands, had to copy his moves in the Detention scene, it was more demanding - she really never knew what he would do or where on stage he would be doing it.

Importantly I came to understand that I was contributing to something much more than the production of the musical through the experience that I was giving the students. Their feedback¹⁰ confirms this – from the revelatory ‘I didn’t realise it would be so hard and take so much practise’ and ‘I never could dance, but clearly everyone can and now I enjoy to do it’, to the philosophical ‘I’m much more open to the idea of dance’, ‘I can do anything I put my mind to’. Some spoke of gaining self-confidence, and of acquiring respect for those who dance professionally; two commented ‘It’s made me want to carry on dancing’. What more could I ask as an outcome?

With regards my self-imposed practice as research project the product spoke for itself in successful performances of the choreography of the dance numbers in which, on the whole, I had proved to myself that it was possible to be true to my roots and to choreograph the musical using the Jooss-Leeder analytical methods I had inherited. For me these methods gave the work integrity, reinforced the effectiveness of these particular aspects of the Jooss Leeder work and answered my research question. The dance numbers, where key choreographic choices were made regarding Eukinetics and Choreutics, are all documented in Labanotation and could, if desired, be restaged from the score. This article, Nelson’s ‘complimentary writing’, has articulated and evidenced the context, the choreographic and rehearsal processes and the findings and implications of my research enquiry.

¹ Rudolf Laban (1879-1958), dancer, choreographer, artist, teacher and theorist is probably most well known in the UK for the application of his work to dance education and in the US for ‘effort-space’ and Labanotation. However this article refers to Laban’s work as it was

developed by the choreographer Kurt Jooss and his partner Sigurd Leeder in Germany in the 1920s and '30s and then in the UK. 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 and disregarded that which did not. Their method then was a synthesis, created from existing elements to make a meaningful theatrical language which Jooss refined in his choreographic work and Leeder in his teaching. Jane Winearls attended Leeder's school in London and wrote the only book which examines the Jooss-Leeder Method in detail. She kept the Jooss Leeder work at the heart of all her teaching which included lecturing in dance at the University of Birmingham from 1965 to 1978. There I encountered the work through Winearls and her protégé Andy Adamson; my understanding of the Jooss Leeder work informs both my practice and my research.

² Jooss is most well-known for his seminal work *The Green Table* (1932) but over his long career he choreographed extensively for opera (eg *Dido and Aeneas* (Münster, 1926 and Schwetzingen, 1961) and oratorio (eg Handel's *Belshazzar*, Geneva, 1972) but not for musical theatre.

³ An exception might be Richard Dyer's and John Mueller's "Two Analyses of 'Dancing in the Dark' (*The Bandwagon*, 1953)".

⁴ See Dana Heller's *Hairspray* (2011) which analyses the complexities of the issues and themes (gender, race, civil rights, nostalgia) in the John Water's movie (1988).

⁵ In the past the musical production has had a professional band drawn from the school's peripatetic music staff. This time the MD had six student musicians, from years 12 and 13, supported by five music staff; some of the students were experienced ensemble players others

had never followed a conductor, been in the pit, or been part of a show such as this.

Nonetheless the band carried the show with excellent playing and obvious enthusiasm. While these students coped well with the *Hairspray* score the MD acknowledged that the complexities of a *Sweeny Todd* may well have been beyond them.

⁶ I really appreciated having live music in rehearsals as the presence of live musicians in dance classes at universities is, in my experience, expensive and a rare luxury.

⁷ The majority of students who were in the production were already involved in the arts – some came from exam based subjects (eg GCSE Drama, GCSE Music, A Level Drama, A Level music) and already had a level of confidence and performance experience; others were involved in the Chapel Choir or Pop Choir with less on-stage performance experience.

⁸ Students were given a post-production questionnaire which asked ‘How often did you access the access the website to watch/rehearse the numbers you were in?’ Possible answers were never, once or twice, quite often, regularly. Of the 33 responses the majority of students ticked ‘once or twice’, eight ticked ‘never’. Other questions concerned previous dance experience (only two had attended regular dance classes outside of school), which dance had been hardest to learn, easiest to remember and so on.

⁹ See Winearls, 1958, the chapter on Dynamics (pp. 79-91) and the chapter on Direction and Design (pp. 92-110). Winearls acknowledges her debt to Laban in her ‘Author’s note’ (p.6).

¹⁰ These quotations come from free text responses at the end of the questionnaires.

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