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Ballet's New Stage: Social Documentation of Dance

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Introduction

Social documentation of live performance is audience-driven: 'unofficial' documentation that comes from the public and the audience, not from behind the stage. This has historically manifested itself in many different ways, but it is in the 21st century that social documentation has become truly social. While I have previously written on the subject of social documentation of all live performance, I believe that ballet is a special case. It is an art form that is both archaic and innovative, elitist and accessible, and it has built up a community around itself that is constantly making their feelings on these subjects heard. This paper is the combined result of two pieces of work completed in 2017: a research essay on how ballet is documented and then reconstructed by modern audiences, and how this might change in our increasingly digitized world, and a dissertation that focused on how modern audiences are maintaining personal archives of performance (Robinson, 2017). Both of these works followed a strong theme of social documentation, which has unsurprisingly become significantly more relevant in the age of social media. As documentation in the library and information sector in the digital age has become increasingly computerised, and many documents are now 'digital-born', so has the world of dance documentation made tentative steps towards the same. As Judith Gray put it: "Of all the arts, dance would seem the least likely to accede to the vagaries of rapid change and the relentless advances of this modern technology," yet computer software has become far more prevalent in the field of dance notation recently (Gray, 1989). Most importantly, ballet fans have taken to new technology like a swan to water. The call for papers for Documenting Performance 2017 outlined four main themes. With my specific field, I was especially struck by the fourth, 'Technologies for the Audience,' described as having 'a special focus on the 'changing audience behaviours in the context of digital culture'.

This paper and the original presentation were not written with the intention of condemning or condoning any form of social documentation. Rather, this is a snapshot of audience trends in the ballet community, rooted in a little cultural and historical context.

Historical context of dance documentation

The idea of recording physical movement through notation has been taken up by many dancers and dance researchers throughout history. European dance notation is generally agreed to have begun with Pierre Beauchamp-Feuillet's system of recording Baroque dance, which was commissioned by Louis XIV. Dance notation then evolved through various forms and off-shoots devised by choreographers and dancers with different needs. The most popular form of notation used by

choreographers in the ballet world today is Benesh notation, which was created by Joan and Rudolf Benesh in the 1950s. Joan herself was a dancer with the Sadler's Wells Royal Ballet: her husband Rudolf was a mathematician and artist. It proved to be a well-matched partnership as they combined their twin passions and expertise to create a new language for dance. Benesh notation is used today to both record new works for the future and to learn choreography from previous productions.

However, this is the official, company and choreographer-approved method of documenting dance. It is the usual way in which creators record their own work, now with the help of film, photography, and even virtual reality. I became more interested in social documentation, defined here as the way in which audience members personally and often collaboratively document their experience of live performance. In a place where performance studies and fan studies intersect, documentation of any live performance owes much to the devotion of its audience. One early example of this, which has inspired much of my studies, are the documents found regarding Nijinsky's 1913 *Le Sacre du Printemps,* the original choreography for which was famously lost. Reconstruction efforts relied on contemporary accounts and sketches most of all. The most influential were drawn by Valentine Hugo (née Gross); an illustrator, painter, and ballet enthusiast whose works can now be found in the Valentine Gross Archive in the Victoria and Albert museum's Department of Theatre and Performance. Valentine Hugo, a devoted follower of the Ballet Russes, made many sketches of their rehearsals and performances between 1910 to 1914. Her motivations and process were described by Richard Buckle in the following quote, presented in the introduction of a book of Hugo's sketches:

> The motive, of course, behind the tireless jottings of Valentine Gross, was to record a series of uplifting theatrical experiences (…). Her *notes made in the theatre and in the dark* could be caught unconscious, because she did not know what or how she was drawing. Together with the scribbled name of a dancer or the collar of a costume they were an aide-mémoire which might turn out to be legible and helpful, or as happened in a number of cases, might not. She would not consider these notes as drawings and would probably shrink from showing them to anyone else. (Hugo, 1971)

This description of Hugo's efforts is fundamental to understanding social documentation in this field. Valentine Gross did not, as far as we know, have any particular agenda when making her sketches, and was not documenting on behalf of any authority or other theatrical party. She was simply documenting her own experience in the way that felt most natural to her – just in the same way that a modern audience member might take a photo for Instagram or write a tweet when watching a rehearsal or waiting for the curtain to go up. Her rehearsal sketches (many of which can be seen in the online collections of the V&A) are practically illegible collections of lines and scribbles. They document her own experience of

the dance rather than the dance itself. This is an example of early social dance documentation as we know it – one imagines that if Valentine Hugo had an Instagram, we would have been able to recreate *Le Sacre* much more quickly and accurately.

While this is a wonderful example of audience documentation, it is not nor was it ever intended to be particularly social. This has remained true of audience documentation for quite some time. I have also been exploring the practice of personal performance archiving – documenting theatrical experiences through collecting documents such as programmes, playbills, cast sheets, ticket stubs, posters and leaflets. Whether these are put in a scrapbook, kept in a shoebox, or left to decorate the fridge, these documents hold not just sentimental value for the collector, but also extremely valuable information about performance, theatre and culture for anyone to find. Researching this practice has lead me to an important conclusion. Audience members do not document live performances. They document their experience of watching the performance.

Interlude: Is collecting the same thing as documenting?

A question must be asked here: does collecting materials related to a performance fall into the same enterprise as documenting it? In my dissertation I wrote about how the papers included in scrapbooks and photo albums are not simply booklets of information, but also a kind of emotional flypaper. You look through your old records of performances and remember who you were with that night, what restaurant you ate at, which actors you met at the stage door. This also isn't *social,* per say, because arguably this only works if you are looking at your own records.

A personal sidebar: for my dissertation I needed examples of programmes from different eras, and for this, I looked at my aunt's programme collection. She was able to tell me a story about most of the items, and we even found a note scribbled on a programme for a Flamenco dance show telling us that my sister was born that night as the curtain went up. This is a kind of documentation of memory that you can't reproduce, and therefore, is it really documentation of a single performance, or just a perception of it? On the other side of this practice, I also volunteer at a local theatre archive. We get bags and boxes full of donations of programmes and I catalogue them and sort out the duplicates and the new acquisitions. It's work that I love because I love reading about the historic performances and looking at programme design, but I don't get the same emotional information that I got from looking through my aunt's collection. Social documentation up until recently has been like this – sometimes hereditary but not especially collaborative. When I carried out a survey on audience documentation habits, I included questions on the use of social media, which yielded the following results (Robinson, 2017):

Question 9: Do you document your live performance experience on social media? This could include taking pictures of yourself and/or friends at the theatre, taking pictures of your ticket or other documents, 'checking in' at a theatre's location, attending an event on Facebook, discussing a performance on a forum, etc.

- Yes – always: 67 (24.5%)
- Yes – sometimes: 133 (48.5%)
- Rarely: 50 (18.2%)
- Never: 24 (8.8%)

Question 10: If yes, on which platforms do you usually use?

- Facebook: 171 (72.2%)
- Twitter: 78 (47.3%)
- Instagram: 112 (47.3%)
- Snapchat: 70 (95.5%)
- A dedicated forum: 18 (7.6%)
- Tumblr: 41 (17.3%)
- Pinterest: 1 (0.4%)

Social media allows audience members to share their experience almost directly in the moment. The clear majority of responses indicated that using social media was an important part of the modern theatre-going experience. While micro-blogging websites were clearly the most popular choice in this survey, I would also like to take this opportunity to discuss dedicated fan forums and how social documentation intersects with fan studies.

What does the future hold?

Social documentation has really lived up to its name on social media. It is an odd monster – not quite fandom, not quite forum or encyclopedia – but something in between.

Social documentation of performance is not simply about documenting a particular show. From my experience in fan communities, social documentation is primarily concerned with pinning down and preserving everything one can about the surrounding culture of the performance or performer/s. This is where comparisons to fandom and fan studies come in useful, because social documentation is another example of that beautiful, obsessive, collect-them-all kind of enterprise which many people take for granted but is ultimately so valuable. Take, for instance, Internet forums of ballet fans. The BalletCo forum, (a link to which is included at the end of this paper), is undoubtedly the richest resource available for UK-based ballet enthusiasts.

The BalletCo forum is an online community and resource depository painstakingly maintained by volunteers who are ballet enthusiasts and reporters. (BalletCo, 2017). In its current form the website has 9 main forums;

- Performances seen and general discussions
- Ballet/Dance news and information
- Dance Links – reviews & features
- Doing Dance (subsection: For Sale/Wanted)
- Ticket Exchange & Special Offers (subsection: Special Ticket Offers)
- Not Dance (subsection: Opera and Music)
- Photo Archive
- Test
- About BalletCo Forum (subsections: What Is BalletCo Forum?, Acceptable Use Policy / Help & hints for users, Announcements, Problems, queries & feedback, Archived discussions)

Inside these forums are 'threads' devoted to specific subjects. For instance there is the thread devoted to tracking and advertising every single ballet performance or dancer appearing on terrestrial tv in the United Kingdom. There is also generally a thread for every notable performance or tour, where people can upload reviews, queries, and general comments. Not only is this a good way of documenting one's own experience of a show and comparing it with others, making a truly social and collaborative documenting enterprise, it is also extremely useful for a researcher or simple enthusiast who has not seen a particular show and wants to experience as much information about it as possible. The example I used at the conference to demonstrate this was a thread dedicated to the 2017 World Ballet Day event. ("World Ballet Day 2017: Home," 2017). It's also an example of the most exciting thing about live performance documentation – in many ways, it's finally happening live.

World Ballet Day is a collaboration between The Australian Ballet, Bolshoi Ballet, Royal Opera House, National Ballet of Canada, and San Francisco Ballet. 20 hours of rehearsal from these companies and featurettes from others are continuously live streamed on October 5th. I missed the World Ballet Day event as on the same day I had gone to Paris to see the National Ballet of Canada. (I had first seen the National Ballet of Canada on World Ballet Day 2016, and in Paris 2017 they performed Nijinsky, about the choreographer behind the Rite of Spring, which I wrote about for my independent study paper. Luckily for myself and several others in similar situations the forum thread for WBD 2017 has five whole pages of people watching live, commenting, analysing, and asking questions on the event. It is a beautifully collaborative experience which still makes a surprising amount of sense when read back.

This forum is the best place in which to carry out 'detective work' much like how the 'dance detectives' Kenneth Macmillan and Millicent Hodson

researched audience reviews and sketches to recreate the Rite of Spring. It's useful because this was a live stream – and although some people recorded it onto their own devices, it is not so easy for everyone to go back and watch. This forum includes many things: people asking questions and getting answers, people giving their opinion, the occasional debate/fight, and ultimately, it's a really good record of people's experience of WBD 17. The best part is that it was genuinely live - people were uploading their thoughts in real time. This is becoming more and more common. I went to see a workshop performance of Heathers the Musical at The Other Palace in June 2017. We were asked to download an app (Slido) on our phones that was half-forum, half-micro-blogging; users could ask questions, rate scenes, answer polls and give feedback, all in real time. This was so the director of the workshop performance could take our feedback in its purest, least limited form, and use it to better the performance. This is just one example of how social documentation can be used to affect direct change.

Conclusion

In 'Notes Made in the Theatre and in the Dark', I wrote that 'dance documentation should continue to make wider access a priority'. I think this is especially true for ballet. Currently, social documentation is mostly focused on existing fans, still using that model of tacit knowledge to create intra-communities. Social media is helping to address this lack of accessibility, and the best part is that social media puts people's memories in *context*. However it is often company oriented - for example, company Twitters retweeting praise for their own shows. I would like to see social documentation take a wider approach. We are seeing a shift from individual scrapbooks and shoeboxes under the bed to public blogs, Twitters and Instagrams. Perhaps the next step is to make the performances themselves more socially available. I have said before that ballet is elitist, and in a way so is all theatre - overpriced and limited (usually) to one venue. That is part of what makes it special, but some companies are also choosing to open their shows to a wider audience through new types of digital 'documentation' such as virtual reality. With virtual reality making its way into the arts, balletomanes may even have the chance to relive ballets in a totally immersive experience. While many companies have put up 360-degree videos of rehearsals and behind-the-scenes featurettes before, the Dutch National Ballet were the first company to premiere a ballet that was created and produced for virtual reality. The show, 'Night Fall' was created in conjunction with the Samsung virtual reality department, premiered with free access online on World Ballet Day in 2016, and was also available to watch at the VR cinema in Amsterdam on the weekend of the 27th of August. This ground-breaking event highlights the third reason that dance should be documented; for posterity, for the

dance itself, and also for the wider opening of access to the arts. Richard Heideman, press manager for the Dutch National Opera & Ballet, told Digital Trends that

> it is also meant to see if we can reach a new audience with this project. We intended to reach out to people who would normally not buy a ticket to a theater or ballet performance, but are willing to try the VR project – and we hope it gets them inspired and excited to also try the live on stage experience one day. (Dormehl, 2016)

While this paper is a simple snapshot of some current trends in social documentation of ballet, it hopefully also begins to address the hugely positive effects that a wider accessibility to dance could have, and how social documentation is helping to realise this. Never before has it been so easy for audience members to preserve their own experience of a performance, while also sharing their opinions and queries with a practically endless stream of community members. Personally, I would like to see this community, especially in the world of ballet, expand. Ballet companies are embracing social media and live performance relays, such as World Ballet Day and 'Big Screen' events across the country. More than ever, social documentation and 'official' documentation are working in tandem thanks to a wider access to the internet and new technologies than ever before. I expect this will only increase in years to come. It is up to the producers, creators, and of course, archivers of live performance to decide how they will work with this new order.

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