On Body, Space and Writing Movement

John Harries, Tirza Sapir

The community of those throughout the world who are concerned with dance notation or movement notation is extremely small – far smaller than the number involved in dance or other physical activities, and much smaller than the number of those who compose dance and movement. The discrepancy indicates that the idea of movement literacy cherished by Rudolf Laban as well as by Noa Eshkol has so far barely penetrated the world of dance and movement. It took thousands of years for the undeciphered marks on cave walls to develop into the articulate symbol systems that serve literature, science and music today. The multiplication of dance and movement notations since the first recognizable attempts in the fifteenth century has been more rapid, but their use in practice has been limited. Where notations have been used at all, this has usually been as documentation. This is of course valuable, but it is only one facet of a symbol system. To constitute a comprehensive system, a notation must clearly also serve the purpose of composition, as does the notation of language. This involves a liberation from the set styles of movement upon which choreographers have long depended as organizational principles. The literate composer of movement can make choices among countless possibilities of movement combination offered by an appropriate notated language. Each composer will then inevitably create a style of their own, without the need to emulate that of a previous creator of dances. By the same token, while the repeated performance of existing works is often interesting and a source of pleasure, the satisfaction of exploring and charting new movement experiences can be gained by using as a tool of composition a notation based directly on the physical possibilities of the human body.

The primary aim in creating Eshkol-Wachman Movement Notation (EWMN) was therefore to devise a language and writing system that would make the composition of movement a literate art based on a symbol system comparable to the notation that supports western music. This aim runs counter to the approach that regards dance as a fugitive, 'one-off' or improvisatory activity. Most choreographers have shown little interest in preserving their work in symbolic form,[1] and see no advantage in notation as a compositional tool. However, those who do so reap the benefit of a system that gives access to an endlessly rich source of movement material and a widening of the capacity for invention, untrammeled by habitual patterns and conventions. That it has this power is due to its being an analytical tool as well as a compositional and physical one: the involvement of disciplined mental activity means that dance becomes a process of thinking with the body, and thinking about movement can become dance in which the relations of movements have significance beyond story-telling on the one hand and exhausted routines on the other. Such compositions of movement have their foundation in the context of the endless possibilities of harmonious – or deliberately dissonant – wholes that flow from the integration of the elementary movements of individual limbs that style- and convention-free analysis reveals, and are represented in EWMN. Noa Eshkol herself left a body of remarkable compositions in a unique style. But this is not the only possible style, as she would have been the first to point out. The best way of respecting and continuing her work is by documentation and analysis in every field so far encompassed, and in directions not yet thought of, and the creation of new works of movement composition, applying and if necessary adapting the system to hitherto unexplored areas of movement. Noa Eshkol experimented together with her colleagues in a wide range of creative activities, not least as a means of testing the validity of the notation system, and these projects are documented in more than thirty publications, almost all published by the Movement Notation Society, Israel.

Furthermore, students of Eshkol literate in notation and concerned with research, documentation and composition, have also published books – within the frameworks of the Research Centre for Movement and Dance Notations at the Kibbutzim College of Education, at The Jerusalem Academy for Music and Dance, and with independent publishers. The range of all the books that have been published on EWMN includes leading dance styles, ethnic dance, martial arts, educational movement, graphic art, non-verbal languages, animal behavior, festive dances, movement compositions, and movement notation systems other than EWMN. The continuation of this kind of exploration will ensure the survival of EWMN as a 'living system' rather than an interesting fossil in the evolution of dance and movement notations.

In the 80s of the previous century hopes were raised of using computer aided video as a notation, but this idea has not to our knowledge been adopted. Video can however clearly serve as an adjunct to a notation by providing a general picture of the surface appearance of a work. The falsity of the notion that the existence of video recording renders a notation unnecessary, can be seen by drawing an analogy with the recording of music. Compositions of any complexity or subtlety, in movement as in music, are difficult or impossible to reproduce with any validity by relying on the imitation of a recording. Beside the complications of viewing angle and distance, the material can only be truly interpreted by understanding the way it was originally produced. An understanding of the physical aspect of the performance of movements in order to produce the intended visual appearance is a condition of the full use of EWMN, and is a basic aim of the system as a subject and instrument of education. Furthermore, the experience of producing visual manifestations of the inherent possibilities of human movement as analogues to more abstract phenomena constitutes a potent learning tool.

Advanced schools in Israel have introduced EWMN in the curriculum of all grades, as an independent subject, even supporting other subjects such as geography, literature, anatomy, mathematics, geometry, visual art and music. Over the years many methods for teaching the notation have been developed in the educational system. These include writing and reading the notation, movement, composition, observation, and verbal and textual dialogue. Study of the subject is not confined to those specializing in dance, but is aimed at every student without prejudice, and attributes physical equality to all students. The style-free language can reveal the potential beauty of movement in every body and in every culture, without prejudice or stylistic limitation.

Within the frame of special education the notation has been developed in a unique direction, its basic principles organized in the Sapir Method to support and improve the cognitive abilities and spatial and motor orientation of pupils with learning difficulties.

The notation is studied in teacher training colleges and institutes of higher education, and doctoral theses dealing with it have revealed ways of applying it and providing a response to needs thirsted for in the domains of research, learning and education.[2]

Movement notation poses the developmental and educational challenge, of making from the human body a channel that opens the way for an augmentation of what human capabilities encompass. Through this channel it is possible to acquire and maintain creative discussion, as through any language with a valid structure. In this application the human body is adopted as the ultimate basis and natural infrastructure for acquiring knowledge of subjects that are studied in the general educational system. In this way universality is promoted in the development of human knowledge and culture.

The EW system allows analyses of bodily activity founded on *(a)* the nature of the body's structure, and *(b)* a conception of space to which that structure can be appropriately related. The composition of movement is then seen to be among other things the creation and illumination of relations between the body and space, whereby each defines the other. Movements of the parts of the body create a volume imagined as encompassing the total range of movement of all the limbs: a 'sphere of movement' defining its functional 'personal' space. Shifts of this sphere that result from locomotion of the whole body define the space beyond: a 'general' sphere of movement.

EW analysis reveals and articulates the interrelation and interactions of the two: the moving body, and its spatial environment. This shifting correlation characterizes our every action, whether in the practical activities of daily life, in sport, in education or in artistic projects. It is a fact of our existence, of which we are sometimes aware and at other times take for granted. To this complementarity Eshkol-Wachman Movement Notation gives expression through the two modes – *absolute* and *body-related*, the theme which guided the exposition of the view of the notation method presented in our recently published book *Body and Space in Eshkol-Wachman Movement Notation.*[1]

The main theme of the book is the analysis of movement of the human body in relation to a dual system of reference, and its notation in graphical symbols. It is shown that the two differentiated modes – absolute and body-related – used in descriptions of movement in Eshkol-Wachman Movement Notation (EWMN) give separately incomplete accounts but together provide a comprehensive, mutually consistent and complementary picture. The explicit formulation of the two modes allows for decisions as to when one or the other provides the best view of the movement phenomena, and on the other hand reveals the way they are seen and which aspect is to be emphasized.

The formalized identification of these two aspects of movement in EWMN promotes knowledge of the physical and spatial existential wholeness of human movement and demonstrates clearly the way in which the analytical approach of the EW system can lead to endless combinatorical riches in dance and movement composition.

The first chapters sketch the background of common knowledge within which the idea of the notation developed, and indicate the relevance of generally accepted basic concepts. This is followed by the exposition of the central subject of the book: the application of EWMN to movement of the human body in space.

First, a description is given of the concepts, the symbolization and the spatial and body-related systems of reference by means of which the general analysis of human movement is conducted in EWMN. It is explained how the force of gravity affects this symbolization of movements and positions. Concepts and symbols are then introduced that are assigned to the various types of movement and their paths.
Next, the mapping of the limbs of the human body is described, and the relation of the limb surfaces to one another and to the surrounding space.
It is then explained how EWMN deals with overall changes of place within that environment – i.e. locomotion and steps.
The concept of 'simultaneous movement' is introduced as the term is understood in EWMN, and the perception of movements of the limbs as integrated paths of movement, generating spatial 'chords'.
In sum, it is shown that when the concepts are defined and combined in accord with rules of syntax derived from the nature of the movement material, Eshkol-Wachman Movement Notation emerges as a comprehensive language and writing system for movement of the human body.
The book is aimed at teachers and students with a basic knowledge of EWMN. The fundamentals are explained in many books such as *Rubaiyat*,[3] the last of Noa Eshkol's publications to include an ordered explanation of the main principles. Where basic accounts are given in our book, the intention is not to teach the topics from scratch but rather by their juxtaposition to point out the connections between the interrelated concepts that underlie them.

It is our belief that the organizing principles of EWMN, faithful to the nature of human movement and formulated in a consistent notation, reveal the pattern in the whole: the harmonious synthesis of the elements of movement of the human body in space.

Endnotes

[1] Arthur Lubow wrote „Can Modern Dance Be Preserved?" in New York Times/Magazine November 5, 2009: '[C]horeographers generally prefer videotaping to the written systems of dance notation that translate movements into symbols.' 'As a documentation device… videotaping is far from perfect. It alternates between long shots and close-ups, sacrificing either movement detail or spatial organization as it does so.' Note how the critic points out the inevitable choice of *either* the absolute or the body-related view.

[2] For example, these works by students and colleagues of Tirza Sapir within the framework of the School for the Arts of Dance and the Research Centre for Movement and Dance Notations at the Kibbutzim College of Education, Technology and the Arts, and the RikudNetto dance group:
Ofer, S. (2001) *Movement literacy: Development of the concept and its implications for curriculum*
Al-Dor, N. (2004) *The impact of learning EWMN on the developing of coordination.*
Ofer, S. (2009) *Development of symbolic language to represent movement among fourth graders*
Ronen, T. (2015) *Physical activity based on Eshkol-Wachman Movement Notation improving geometry studies for third and fourth grade pupils.*
Shalit, L. (2015) *The effect of physical exercise based on EWMN on attention and on coordination among students with ADHD*
Yaakov, O. (2015) *Spatial directions identification based on acquired external spatial visual representation and mental representation: Relations to modality and age groups.*
Henner Drewes: *Transformationen - Bewegung in Notation und digitaler Verarbeitung* Folkwang-Texte Bd. 18 (Hg.: Fellsches, Josef). Verlag Die Blaue Eule, Essen 2003.

[3] Eshkol, N. *Rubaiyat* (1979), The Movement Notation Society.

Tirza Sapir first met Noa Eshkol, founder of Eshkol-Wachman Movement Notation, in 1968 and was her student, and later her colleague. As a member of the Movement Notation Society between the years 1969–2008, she participated in the preparation of many of its publications. She served on the staff of the Research Centre for Movement Notation at the Faculty of Visual and Performing Arts, Tel Aviv University 1973–1977. She developed teaching methods in EWMN for children and adults and from 1978 taught Movement Notation at the Kibbutzim College of Education, Technology and Art, Tel Aviv, and coordinated Movement Notation studies there until 2015. She served from 2000–2007 as Head of the School for the Arts of Dance at the College. At the School she founded the programmes for Dance Theatre and for Graduate Teachers, and in 2008 established the „Research Center for Movement and Dance Notations" there. She developed the „Sapir Method" – „Improving and empowering of cognitive abilities through movement and movement notations (EWMN)". She founded the dance group **RikudNetto** in 1986 and is the choreographer and instructor of the group, working in the framework of Eshkol-Wachman Movement Notation. Her published scores include two dance cycles – *Hanukka Notebook* (1987), *Festive Dances* (2013) – collections of festive dances, written and taught in different communities through the framework of her dance activity, for the revival of a festival culture in Israel; and five dance suites performed by the **RikudNetto** group: *Birds* (2005), *Landscapes* (2007), *Dancing Fire* (2014), and *In the Steps of Painters* and *Seascapes* (in preparation). In addition, three reference books: *Voices of Landscapes* (2011), *About Time* in EWMN (2009) and *Body and Space* in EWMN (2015).

John Harries first met Noa Eshkol in 1948 at Sigurd Leeder's studio in London, and became her first student, and colleague, collaborating in the preparation of the first book on Eshkol-Wachman Movement Notation (EWMN), the system developed by her together with Avraham Wachman. He continued to work with Noa Eshkol on the formulation of the explanatory texts and was a member of the first of her experimental dance groups, the Chamber Dance Group. He was a founder member of the Movement Notation Society, and was a member of the Research Centre for Movement Notation at the Faculty of Visual and Performing Arts, Tel Aviv University, 1973–1979 and 1983–1992. He introduced the application of EWMN in visual art, and continues with this work, especially in abstract video art. He has written two books and articles in a number of international journals on the subject of notated visual art, and collaborated with Tirza Sapir in books on the subjects of time, and on body and space in EWMN.