

LOTTE H. EISNER AND RUDOLF VON LABAN

Film and Dance Belong Together

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Rudolf von Laban (1879–1958) was one of the most important dance theorists of the Weimar Republic. Having shot to fame as a mystical "life reformer" in Ascona (where his dance pupils had frequent contacts with the Dada circle around Hugo Ball and Hans Richter), he went on to create one of the best-known systems of dance notation, presented in his 1928 book *Schrifttanz* (Script dance). He would go on to direct the Deutsche Tanzbühne in Nazi Germany and write an efficiency study, *Effort*, in 1947. In this interview published one week before the Second German Dancers' Congress in 1928, Laban shares his ideas about cross-fertilization between dance and film performance with critic Lotte Eisner. The second of three major dance congresses in the Weimar Republic, this one was attended by innovators of modern dance including Laban, Harald Kreutzberg, Gret Palucca, and Mary Wigman.

In a few days, the *Zweiter Deutscher Tänzerkongreß* (Second German Dancers' Congress) will open in *Essen*. This is a sign of the increased value accorded to dance as an art form in and of itself.

Rudolf von Laban, the chairman of the Kunstausschuss für Tanz [Arts Committee for Dance], recently clarified his goals: he is demanding a college of dance arts and a site for dance theater.

This champion of new efforts in dance sees the significance of the congress vis-à-vis the Magdeburg congress. Beyond a congress, he sees the further development of dance arts with regard to other artistic means of expression, such as film.

"Our first congress in Magdeburg," says Rudolf von Laban, "was more or less only a preliminary attempt to combine our efforts. Here, there were not yet any actual artistic formulations, but rather discussions of more economic questions.

"But it was precisely through intensive engagement with preliminary financial questions that Magdeburg became the basis of our second congress, in Essen, which is dedicated exclusively to artistic problems.

"This 'dancers' congress' in Essen will present a genuine cross-section of all achievements heretofore made in the area of dance, a clarification of all dance-related efforts—only a clarification, mind you—not an argument for one or the other. For the congress's task should be to mediate between individual, and in some cases competing, trends and initiate contact among the various schools. Here, we will see and learn to understand the accomplishments of all dancers and dance organizations through theoretical and practical demonstrations, discussions, lectures, and a festival.

“After all, these efforts are essentially dialects of one language, dialects that we must preserve and promote.

“This is why our program has been designed as comprehensively as possible, from modern Russian artistic dance to traditional provincial folkdances.

“The congress will not make the same mistake as so many other conferences. It will not only showcase long-recognized accomplishments in dance but also and above all valorize the work of younger artists. Thus, three afternoons are reserved for performances by young dancers. And a jury will have the difficult and, as always, seemingly dreadful task of testing and challenging up-and-coming artists.

“Aside from the issues of the new generation, another important question will be up for debate and must be decided here. On Saturday, June 23, there will be a discussion of the problem of ‘*choreology and dance notation*,’ which will have *revolutionary significance for the entire art of dance*.

“Since the sixteenth century, repeated attempts have been made to put dance into writing in a way analogous to the notation used in music. Again and again, such experiments have failed to take hold. My new dance notation will not only provide a means of inscribing and preserving dance. Through its analytical and synthetic potential, it will also bring clarity and simplicity—the demands of our era—into the arena of dance composition.

“With that, I call for a meticulous dance composition, in the spirit of movement analysis and synthesis, which, in contrast to unreflective emotional or natural dance, could be called *Schrifttanz*. This would be a work of dance art created through the *mastery of the innermost principles of movement*.

“Like musical notation, my dance notation depends on a running staff, representing in itself the rhythm. In the five-line system, the particular body parts that should follow the respective rhythmic impulses are indicated by the placement of block symbols [Laufbalken] in a corresponding space between the lines.

“Every impulse has a direction; the slant or gradation of the symbols will denote these directions.

“*All curves and trajectories of movement can be expressed with three symbols, given the multiplicity of possible combinations.*

“In Essen, this clear and simple dance notation will be adopted officially for the first time. *Essen thus marks the birth of written dance as a recognized art form*. An art built on harmonic principles will take the place of arbitrary movement.

“*Furthermore, this dance notation will be significant for film.*

“Today, film shoots take a lot of time on account of the endless rehearsals required for particularly complex movements. But if every actor receives a movement script from the director to study in advance, the scenes can be shot much more quickly, and they are much less likely to be ruined through false movements.

“For the moment, directors may think this study of movement roles is too complicated to undertake for an individual scene. It may take a while for them to understand how much time and labor can be saved by this method. *But for sound film, movement notation will be necessary from the outset*, because it will be impossible for the director to give commands or directions during the shoot.

“Thus, in sound film, image, movement notation, and sound will flow together into a unified whole.

“On the occasion of the sound film demonstration in Dresden, I personally created a cinematic dance pantomime for Bolten-Baekers entitled *Der Drachentöter* [The dragon slayer],¹ whose individual movements I laid out in advance in my dance notation.

“I thus speak from experience. Here, during the filming of *Der Drachentöter*, the specification of movements proved of inestimable value and made the shoot much easier.

“I will attempt to demonstrate the actual outcome of my dance notation in a longer dance film, on which I plan to collaborate with Wilhelm Prager.² However, I do not want to say anything about it, because we are still too early in the process.

“Generally speaking, film and dance must become even more intertwined. *Today, film directors do not see clearly enough how far the mutual influence of endeavors in cinema and dance can lead us.*

“On the one hand, I am trying to *introduce film into dance instruction* and to use slow-motion recordings to help students understand movements in their individual phases. I first tried out such experiments in the choreographic studio, and I want to develop them in college courses.

“On the other hand, up to this point, little has been done to build a connection between film and dance. Occasionally, filmmakers bring in dance students and their teacher for interludes, but for the most part, they have the star and a few actresses dance as well as they are able. And yet, aside from questions of dance in the narrow sense, film actors have much to learn from dance movement, all the more so given the way that film mercilessly registers and displays every false or tense movement.

“In a time when dance is finally being hailed as an art—for the congress in Essen amounts to the definitive proclamation of dance art and its formulation in dance notation—film cannot afford to ignore us.

“Beyond the first steps in a film like *Wege zu Kraft und Schönheit*³, the great work of film dance must be created.”

Notes

1. Heinrich Bolten-Baeckers was a German playwright, librettist, and filmmaker who specialized in film comedies. In 1927, he founded Lignose Hörfilm System Breusig, a sound film company; the first Lignose sound film was demonstrated in Dresden in 1928.

2. Laban is likely referring here to a film he was planning together with Wilhelm Prager entitled *Tanz ist Leben* (Dance is life). A script is preserved in the Laban estate at the Tanzarchiv Leipzig.

3. Laban is alluding to a section of *Ways to Strength and Beauty* (see the text by Max Osborn, no. 53) devoted to dance, in which Laban figured alongside several other well-known representatives of Ausdruckstanz.