

Transcript of Dance Librarians Discussion Group Virtual Meeting, January 12, 2012

Helice Koffler:

Hi All! I'm here a little early. Please introduce yourself briefly when you join in the chat. Tell us a little about your interest in dance and/or libraries. And if this is your first DLDG meeting of any kind.

I'm Helice Koffler, the convener of the Dance Librarians Discussion Group. I work as Special Collections Cataloger at the University of Washington Libraries and I also am a Certified Archivist. Before coming to the UW, I was part of the Wilson Processing Project at NYPL, which worked on the backlog of archival material in the performing arts at New York Public Library. My main interest in dance and the performing arts is avocational.

Jeffrey Katz:

Hi! This is Jeff Katz, longtime librarian and dance lover. I am presently an Adjunct Professor at the University of British Columbia and a founding member of a new library and archives consulting group called Corvidae, LLC. Previously, I worked for NY Public Library, Seattle Public Library, Queens Public Library, The K-8 School at Columbia University, and the Jewish Theological Seminary. I am also working on a dance-related book for McFarland and am in Seattle right now, home of the Pacific Northwest Ballet (the subject of *WHERE SNOWFLAKES DANCE AND SWEAR*)! Happy to be joining you!

Kathleen Bell:

Hello, I'm Kat Bell and I have my BA and MA in Dance. New to the library field, currently working as a temp in the Woman's Collection of Texas Woman's University. Previously interned at the National Museum of Dance and was a 2011 Dance Heritage Coalition Fellow in Preservation and worked at Dance Theatre of Harlem for 5 months.

Helice Koffler:

Welcome, Jeff and Kat! It looks like our guest of honor has joined us now!

Stephen Manes:

Stephen Manes here. I'm the guy who most recently wrote *Where Snowflakes Dance and Swear: Inside the Land of Ballet* and previously co-wrote the biography *Gates* about Microsoft's co-founder. Also lots of books for kids and young adults, and hundreds of articles about technology.

Libby Smigel:

Hi, I'm Libby Smigel -- executive director of the Dance Heritage Coalition. Kat was working at the Dance Theatre of Harlem on one of our grants.

Stephen Manes:

Hi, everybody!

Libby, I think we met briefly at the DCA conference in Seattle in June.

Libby Smigel:

Yes! I'm amazed you remember. That was a terrific conference.

Stephen Manes:

It was. Pretty darned good *Giselle*, too.

Maryke Barber:

Maryke Barber - I'm the arts librarian at Hollins University in Roanoke, VA, where we have an active community of both undergraduate and graduate dance majors.

Helice Koffler:

Hi Steve, Libby, and Maryke! I guess we can officially begin. How many of you have had a chance to read or see the book?

Maryke Barber:

Have seen it, but haven't had a chance to read it yet :(

Helice Koffler:

Would you like to describe it, Steve?

Stephen Manes:

Sure, Helice. It's a very complete look at what happens at a ballet company and school--in this case Pacific Northwest Ballet--over the course of a year. I wrote it because I couldn't find another book that would tell me how ballet happens. The closest thing would be *Dance is a Contact Sport*, which was written something like 40 years ago.

I try to cover everything: Not just the dancers, but also the people to support them: costumers, set and lighting designers, administrators, donors, stagehands . . .

Jeffrey Katz:

How did you get PNB to agree to do this?

Stephen Manes:

Jeff, I basically proposed the book, got a receptive response, and a few weeks later was told it was a go--and by the way, would I like to stick around to watch Peter Boal teach a class?

PNB was incredibly open about letting me see anything I wanted to. About the only places I considered off-limits were the dressing rooms.

Helice Koffler:

Was covering the company over the course of an entire year always the plan?

Stephen Manes:

Helice, that was more or less the original plan. As things evolved, it became clear that it made the most sense. A lot of things happened early that wouldn't be finished until later in the year. For example, staggers would appear in the fall and winter to set works that wouldn't get onstage until the spring.

Jeffrey Katz:

Were all PNB dancers and staff open to being interviewed and followed for the book?

Stephen Manes:

Jeff, there were different attitudes to me among the dancers and staff, but the vast majority were open and frank. Many seemed genuinely surprised that an outsider would take so much interest in their world.

Maryke Barber:

You've written on a lot of topics - is there a way in which researching performing arts is different/unique?

Stephen Manes:

Maryke, every project seems to have its own dynamic. The amazing thing about ballet is that among the performing arts, it's unique in that since there's no script, you get to see art made from the ground up right before your eyes.

Of course (and I think this is underappreciated and something I tried to emphasize in the book) a lot of times it's being REMade from a "script" that doesn't really exist except in dancers' bodies and brains.

Libby Smigel:

Sounds as though you were an "embedded journalist."

Stephen Manes:

Libby, that's a perfect description.

Kathleen Bell:

What was your knowledge of the ballet world before you began the research process?

Stephen Manes:

Kathleen, I've been going to ballet for several decades now. I have lots of pithy opinions, more or less informed. But that's it. I'm a terrible dancer. So I came into this with only the preconceptions and knowledge a typical enthusiastic audience member might.

Maryke Barber:

Tell us about something you learned that really surprised you.

Stephen Manes:

Maryke, considering how little I knew when I started, there were plenty of surprises every day. What surprised me most about the dancers was the sheer focus that they bring to their work. As I think I mention in the book, it's amazing to see that the muscles dancers probably use most are the ones in their eyes.

But another surprise is the number of constituents an artistic director must satisfy. He or she has to juggle dancers, ballet masters, staggers, choreographers, donors, financial types . . . and more.

Using digital audio was one of the big changes from my last huge project, the Bill Gates bio. I thought because I'd be able to jump around in digital files, I wouldn't have to transcribe them. Wrong.

Kathleen Bell:

How about something that confused you that you had to look into more deeply to understand?

Stephen Manes:

Kathleen, one of the things that was fascinating was the way a big ballet like *Nutcracker* is put together. The kids need the most time, the advanced student less, and the pros can get it back in a day or two. This all unfolded in front of me as the months went on, but it took a while to understand it.

Helice Koffler:

I see a few others have joined us. Please feel free to introduce yourselves and ask a question!

Zoe Waldron:

Hi everyone, Zoe Waldron from New York Public Library.

Stephen Manes:

Hi, Zoe.

Zoe Waldron:

Hi Stephen. I work mainly as an image cataloger, but previously had experience cataloging Jerome Robbins' audio tapes. I'm also involved in a personal archival project related to a writer.

Stephen Manes:

Aha! Robbins was a big part of the year I cover in the book. *The Concert* was part of the gala, and then they also did *Fancy Free* and *In the Night*. And there were some delicate negotiations to bring *West Side Story Suite* and *Dances at a Gathering* to the company for future years.

Kathleen Bell:

I love *Dances at a Gathering*.

Jeffrey Katz:

Can you recall who did the staging of these Robbins works and how these stagings were received by the company?

Stephen Manes:

The Concert was staged by Christine Redpath, who was extremely meticulous--probably the perfect person to inherit the Robbins mantle. The other two were restaged here by the ballet masters and Peter Boal, since they'd been done before.

But watching the dancers work with a singing coach who helped cast *West Side Story Suite* was astounding. They were totally out of their element.

Zoe Waldron:

Was it easy for the company to work with the Robbins' trust to obtain the rights to stage the material?

Stephen Manes:

Zoe, I wasn't privy to those negotiations, but Peter Boal mentions in the book that that there was some initial reluctance to give *Dances at a Gathering* to PNB--in part because one of the stagings had had an unpleasant experience in (as I recall) London.

Zoe Waldron:

Thanks for your reply. Was this PNB's first time staging ballets by Robbins? You may have covered this in your earlier responses, I'll check.

Stephen Manes:

Zoe, I believe PNB did one or two Robbins pieces way back when. I am almost positive they did *The Cage*. But Peter Boal, who had worked with Robbins, brought in several of his works--at least half a dozen by now.

Zoe Waldron:

That's terrific.

Kathleen Bell:

Were you able to sit in on other administrative meetings?

Stephen Manes:

Kathleen, I was able to sit in on board meetings, budgets meetings, school administration meetings--just about everything.

Helice Koffler:

You made the point earlier about the "scripts" being in the dancers' bodies themselves. Did you find that different staggers and choreographers had very different approaches to creating those "scripts" or documenting the works?

Stephen Manes:

Helice, one of the major elements of the book is the emphasis on the work of staggers and the very different ways that they do their jobs. I have read a lot about ballet, and this is only rarely talked about. In the book, you see a dozen staggers and see how different their approaches are.

Jeffrey Katz:

Did you have to show the book to the people at PNB and get approval prior to publication?

Stephen Manes:

Jeff, there was no approval required by PNB, and I probably wouldn't have done the book otherwise. When I went in for a final interview with Peter Boal to wrap up some loose ends, he politely asked if he could have a look at the manuscript, and I agreed. He did catch some odd errors, but that was it, and he told me he found it exceptionally accurate. When the book came out, he was kind enough to give me a very positive quote.

Jeffrey Katz:

Excellent to hear - and it says a lot about the confidence PNB had in your approach and work.

Diana King:

Hi Stephen, this is Diana King at UCLA. There has been a lot of attention paid to the relevancy and solvency of the arts in the current budget environment, and to the aging of the audience for disciplines like ballet. I'm wondering if you saw a lot of anxiety over that, and how the company approached marketing and outreach.

Stephen Manes:

Hi, Diana. The aging of the audience is not something I heard much about, though you could certainly see it at the theatre (though at least in Seattle, the audience skews younger than for the opera) and particularly among the donors. The year I covered was particularly sunny for the company--a triumphant *Romeo and Juliet* [Jean-Christophe Maillot's *Roméo et Juliette*], a huge *Nutcracker*. But as I discuss in the book's wrap-up, the following year brought a snowstorm that crippled the city during the *Nut* run, and the company came up about \$1 million short.

The budget is always an issue. The year I was there, the "platonic" budget was more than \$4 million over the final, solvent one.

BTW, Diana, there's a lot in the book about marketing and outreach. Marketing of *Nutcracker* is a BIG deal in PNB's world. It starts early in the year and culminates with a barrage of advertising in the fall. The other marketing is important--right now, PNB is going all out for its US-premiere Ratmansky *Don Q*--but compared to *Nut*, it all is more or less a rounding error. A big issue in the book is the decline of subscription sales, a big problem throughout the performing arts world.

Diana King:

Thanks--I'm still waiting for our copy to be cataloged, but hope to read it soon!

Helice Koffler:

As someone who majored in the Victorian novel, I didn't find the book's length to be daunting. I'm curious about what the reaction has been among readers. For example, how do sales compare with the print and electronic versions?

Stephen Manes:

Helice, sales are running about 4 to 3 in favor of the \$35 hardcover vs. the \$10 electronic edition. So far on Amazon and Twitter and in reviews, only one or two people have complained about the length of the book--though a few have complained about its weight!

Helice Koffler:

Yes, one of my colleagues described it as being heavier than a ballerina!

Stephen Manes:

I tell people the hardcover will improve their port de bras . . .

Helice Koffler:

Are you planning on continuing to write about dance?

Stephen Manes:

Helice, I've written a lifetime's worth about dance in this one book. I'll likely leave the field to others, but you never know.

Jeffrey Katz:

To your knowledge, has the book been reviewed in any library journals or on any library-specific websites? And how has the library market been for sales?

Stephen Manes:

<http://www.tla-online.org/publications/broadsideonline/Broadside39-1.pdf>

Stephen Manes:

Whoops! That link is a partial answer to Jeff's question. It's the latest issue of Theatre Library Association's *Broadside*, which has a highly favorable review of the book. Unfortunately, for now there's no way of knowing which copies have gone to libraries and which to everybody else.

Kathleen Bell:

Has the experience of writing about dance changed your experience when you go to the ballet now?

Stephen Manes:

Kathleen, the immersion in the studio and theatre has definitely changed the way I look at ballet. After hearing staggers and choreographers tell dancers, "FINISH that step!" I think the same thing myself when I see things getting mushy. And I find that restagings where the choreographer isn't present often lack the crispness and intention that the originator imparts.

Zoe Waldron:

It was so interesting to hear Jerome Robbins' discuss in his audio tapes how he made his ballets. It is great that you could put this kind of information into a book on PNB.

Stephen Manes:

Zoe, there are several original works in here. But there are also restagings by choreographers (fascinating how willing they are to "fix" things they see as having been wrong the first time) and lots of works set by staggers who had the work in their pores--and staggers who didn't and spent a lot of time looking at video to try to catch up.

Helice Koffler:

Yes, jumping off from Zoe's comment, having interviewed so many involved in the creative process, what sort of material should librarians and archivists be collecting to capture the richness of the process more fully?

Stephen Manes:

Helice, tapes are great, but they only begin to convey what's going on. It's definitely a tough world to archive because of its fleetingness. Interviews would help; I found almost everybody in this world extremely articulate about it. Several readers have commented on the sections that are largely in the words of dancers, teachers, and others.

Stephen Manes:

I think the Frederick Wiseman films on ABT and Paris Opera Ballet show mainly how much context you need to understand what you see before you. Wiseman shies away from providing that context--it's his method--and it almost totally fails in these films.

Zoe Waldron:

Interesting to hear your thoughts on Wiseman.

Stephen Manes:

Zoe, I thought the best moments in those films were the ones in the administration. Because Wiseman refuses to tell you anything--not even who the dancers are or what they're dancing--he just flattens out the value of the work.

Zoe Waldron:

I think I agree with your take. I'm not sure I got very much out of the film, or at least as much as I'd hoped from such a long movie.

Stephen Manes:

Zoe, the ABT film has an amazing scene where the executive director [Jane Hermann] is chewing out [an unidentified Metropolitan Opera House representative] for bringing in the Bolshoi with a similar rep. But the rest of the movie is utterly dull.

Helice Koffler:

I felt the ABT one seemed more honest; the people in the Paris Opera film seemed to be "performing" more for the camera. Steve, can you think of any books or films that do a great job of documenting the creative process?

Libby Smigel:

Comments like yours on the Wiseman films would be very helpful in the context of the Dance Films Association ... we need to talk about how to communicate with non-dance audiences.

Stephen Manes:

Libby, the advent of YouTube seems to be changing the way people watch dance films. I'm seeing a lot of chat on Twitter about YT excerpts. And several of the young dancers I spoke with told me that they watch all sorts of stuff--old Nureyev, old Baryshnikov, anything they can get their hands on.

Libby Smigel:

You're right about the change in dance-watching, Stephen. But I'm also interested in how we can hook people who don't watch any dance - and don't know the dances, the dancers, or what to look for (like "finishing" the step!).

Stephen Manes:

I'm with you, Libby. But things like "finishing" the step seem to take a lifetime to learn--or else the staggers wouldn't complain about it so much!

Libby Smigel:

But once you know the concept, as an onlooker, you can spot it in performances!

Libby Smigel:

Helice, is there a way that we can save the transcript of this discussion -- I think it's worth saving and sharing.

Helice Koffler:

Libby, yes, I can archive it on the site. I'll also see if I can paste the transcript into a document and send it on the listserv too!

Zoe Waldron:

I must go, thank you Stephen and Helice. A fascinating discussion.

Stephen Manes:

Helice, I'm drawing a blank about your question--in part because the creative process is so hard to document!

Libby Smigel:

I'll need to get offline soon, but I want to thank Helice and Steve for a terrific discussion.

Maryke Barber:

Stephen and Helice, thank you for this conversation! I look forward to reading the book and sharing it with our community. This was a treat in the middle of an ordinary work day.

Stephen Manes:

Thanks to everybody! Wish I could type faster!

And think faster!

Maryke Barber:

I was impressed with how you juggled all of our questions, actually!

Libby Smigel:

Bye now!

Kathleen Bell:

Thank you Stephen and Helice!

Helice Koffler:

Thanks for taking time out of your busy day. Does anyone have any final questions for Steve?

Jeffrey Katz:

As a librarian who has worked for many years with teens and children (and who has ordered your books for my YA and children's shelves), I am wondering if you have any plans to do another YA or children's title at some point.

Stephen Manes:

Jeff, I've got several ideas for books, and most of 'em are for kids or YA. But as a respite from this project and while the new ideas are percolating, I plan to reissue most of my out-of-print titles for kids and YA as e-books. Still trying to figure out about art for them, which I don't own.

Jeffrey Katz:

I think that one thing we can push for is an increase in dance education programs in schools! That can really hook people into dance!

Helice Koffler:

Yes, and especially for young boys. Things are changing, but there's still that gender bias.

Stephen Manes:

Male ballet dancers are in incredible demand.

Stephen Manes:

Jeff, maybe I would have been a slightly less terrible dancer . . . but now that I think of it, we did learn the schottische from our gym teacher . . .

Jeffrey Katz:

All I learned was the hokey-pokey!

Stephen Manes:

Yeah! We learned the hokey-pokey. Also square dancing. Allemand left!

Stephen Manes: Thanks, Helice, for setting this up. It was a real pleasure!

Jeffrey Katz:

Thanks Steve - it was a lot of fun and extremely informative. By the way, how can people order the book?

Stephen Manes:

Ordering: Amazon, Barnes/Noble, Ingram!

Helice Koffler:

OK, I will officially call a close to this virtual meeting. I wish more of you could join us live in Dallas next week! Also, let me know if you would like to try another virtual meeting between now and ALA Annual and suggest some topics or guests. Thank you so much, Steve and for everyone who attended! I will be posting the agenda for the Dallas meeting shortly!