



Photo: Evelyn Donnelly

Past, Present, and Future:

The Oral History Project and Archive at the Jerome Robbins Dance Division

YESTERDAY

Time is a funny thing. It is hard for me to believe that I have been the Coordinator of the Dance Oral History Project and Archive at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts for almost twenty years. Back in the day the title was much grander than the actual job. Although the Project was created in the optimistic late 1960s, and with an abundance of good intentions, after the initial founding grants ran out, it had been left for many years with just a small erratic trickle of funds, leaving only a very limited possibility of putting those good intentions into practice.

Nevertheless, coming to the Project as an idealistic young postmodern dancer/choreographer, the good intentions themselves were extremely attractive. Oral history has been a transformative tool in preserving the social and cultural history of communities around the world. It is ideally suited to capture the voices of those not included in traditional historical texts—I first heard oral history described as a means to learn about the past from “the perspective of the soldier rather than the general.” The work made me feel like I was on the front lines of a bloodless, but significant, revolution.

The Dance Division’s Oral History Project was a response by then-curator Genevieve Oswald to the reality that, when compared to the other arts, publishing in dance was sparse. Not uncoincidentally, dancers and choreographers do not typically create the kind of paper trail that can be found in other art forms; there are no sketches, scores or rough drafts. Even the filming of dance, which

at that time was too expensive to do very widely or well anyway, is inevitably incomplete: recording a single performance and unavoidably missing particulars regarding staging and intention. The details of creation therefore may remain hidden within the memories of the artists themselves. Lesley Farlow, who preceded me as Project Coordinator, put it this way in a 1993 *Newsweek* article on AIDS and the arts, dance is an “essentially oral tradition, passed from body to body.”

Although the Project had in fact begun as a means to document the most prominent dance artists of the 20th century, it soon evolved to be much broader and more inclusive. When I joined the Project it had just received funding from the Greenwall Foundation, specifically to expand our work documenting the stories of dance artists who had had a special impact on the New York City dance scene, as well as artists whose stories were at risk due to AIDS. The Foundation had shown a specific interest in smaller arts organizations and promising artists working in newer genres. Subsequently, and throughout my tenure, we have consistently sought to document artists whose work was otherwise not well represented in the Division, often interviewing artists outside of the mainstream, whether creatively or culturally, including those whose stories might be at risk due to age or illness.

TODAY

The Oral History Project is housed within the Jerome Robbins Dance Division’s formidable sound archive. This archive of more than 7000 audio recordings probably came to be labeled “Oral History” because it is a collection of oral resources, preserved and made available for the study of dance history. It is however comprised of a wide range of materials, with oral history interviews making up less than ten percent of the archive. We collect recordings of radio programs, panel discussions, conferences and classes. We also welcome the recordings and transcripts of interviews done by critics, historians, students, and from a wide range of publications devoted to dance and performance. While these materials are wonderful and useful, for those concerned with the documenting and archiving of dance, it is important to distinguish them from the very deliberate creation of primary source recordings that is implicit in the practice of doing oral history.

While the past has, of course, been collected and shared orally for thousands of years, oral history as a modern academic discipline can be said to have begun with the Oral History Research Office at Columbia University, in 1948. The expectations of oral history in its current context are increasingly specific and rigorous. According to the most recent “Principles

and Best Practices” from the national Oral History Association (2009), oral history interviews should be steeped in well-considered ethical and practical guidelines. These guidelines, freely available on the organization’s website, include methodological aspects such as transparency regarding the purpose of the interview, careful attention to the assignment of rights, and a thorough commitment to preservation and access.

With reference to the substance of the interview, the OHA Principles are also specific:

Oral history is distinguished from other forms of interviews by its content and extent. Oral history interviews seek an in-depth account of personal experience and reflections, with sufficient time allowed for the narrators to give their story the fullness they desire. The content of oral history interviews is grounded in reflections on the past as opposed to commentary on purely contemporary events.
—OHA 2009

Influential Italian oral historian Alessandro Portelli has written widely about the reflective and subjective point of view that oral historians purposefully collect. Oral history interviews “reveal less about the events as such than about their meaning.” Oral histories “tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, what they now think they did.”

To successfully capture these golden products of memory, we try to create a balance between formality and intimacy in our interviews. Experience has



shown that for maximum spontaneity and authenticity, sessions should be well-planned, but unrehearsed, with no agenda other than to deepen our understanding of the narrator's perspective on a particular era or topic.

TOMORROW

With the knowledge that oral histories will be preserved for the future as historical documents, it is also desirable (although not always possible) for interviewers to extend their inquiry beyond the specific focus of the project and create as complete a record as possible for the benefit of others. In our case, for example, we get a wide range of visitors to the reading room at Lincoln Center. Future scholars may look to our interviews not only to better understand an individual artist's work, but also perhaps as part of a comparative study of artistic process. Or a young choreographer may research her elders, not only to know their creative process, but also to explore how the earlier artist survived economically, found rehearsal space, paid her dancers, trained her body, got produced, had a relationship, or in one of the greatest mysteries of all for women dancers, raised children.

An atmosphere of trust is essential for these and other issues to be discussed with candor. In fact, trust on both sides is essential to the success of the interview. As the Oral History Association website plainly states, "in recognition of the importance of oral history to an understanding of the past and of the cost and effort involved, interviewers and interviewees should mutually strive to record candid information of lasting value."

What may sound like common sense can be surprisingly tough, especially when discussing the more recent past. In our Project, personal issues arise, but more often the sensitive points are professional. I have interviewed artists, for example, who struggle with openly questioning the judgment of a critic or a producing organization because of fear of the impact that their words might have on future critical reception or performance opportunities. It is for this type of reason in oral history practice that the rights to the narrator's own words always remain with the narrator, and that they are given the opportunity to restrict access to their interviews for a specified period if they choose.

And yet, while we are careful to create a supportive atmosphere and protect the rights of our participants, it is still important to remember that oral history interviews are not public relations for an upcoming show. (Nor are they the

hour-long educational conversations done on stage in front of an audience, or the post-performance Q and A.)

For many projects, issues of privacy and the expectation of candor also come right up against the current race to get everything up, immediately, on the World Wide Web. We now have a Dance Oral History Channel on the New York Public Library website and are cautiously exploring increasing access through this medium. Yet while many oral history projects take the raw material of the interviews and create multimedia websites and other interpretive products, I remain unambiguously attracted to the mostly process-driven nature of what we do. The end result of all of our efforts is a completely unedited sound recording, and a transcript of that recording, lightly edited for readability. Our role, I feel very strongly, is *not* to interpret, but to gather what we can, as broadly and as deeply as we can, for the benefit of future researchers and creative artists.

I like that this process-oriented nature of our work echoes Yvonne Rainer's oft-quoted "No Manifesto" from 1965.

NO to spectacle.

NO to virtuosity.

NO to transformations and magic and make-believe.

The manifesto goes on, as we know, but I do step away at the last line:

No to moving or being moved.

Having had the privilege of serving as an oral history interviewer, sitting with artists for many hours in a quiet room, listening, exploring, guiding, just us and an unobtrusive sound recorder, I know that the experience of oral history can be profoundly moving for both interviewer and narrator.

And I like to think that the work of oral history at the Dance Division is in alliance not only with Rainer, but also with the values of much of the contemporary dance scene, including Movement Research. Front and center on the Movement Research website I recently noticed a 1984 quotation from Burt Supree. Substitute the words "oral history" for "Movement Research" and you will know all that you need to know about the field and indeed our intentions in the Project:

"Movement Research doesn't exist to purvey a point of view. It's not the kind of jealous institution where students come for the one true word. It exists to keep channels of information open; to keep questions and answers flowing; to make connections between basic facts of anatomy and aesthetic theory and technology. It is a laboratory..."

THE DAY AFTER

Over time, remaining a laboratory can, surprisingly (to me at least), take a little discipline. It isn't glamorous. Spectacle and magic are often more attractive and fundable. Yet we stubbornly continue to record most of our interviews as audio-only, knowing that the visual information about the artists exists elsewhere in the archive, and that by not using video we will tone down the performative aspects of the conversation, and encourage intimacy, honesty and comfort. All of our interviews are painstakingly transcribed and corrected for easier research and analysis, and both the paper and digital files are eventually preserved according to archival standards and discoverable through a detailed searchable summary in an online catalog.

These primary resources are among the Jerome Robbins Dance Division's great gifts to the future. Along with the Project's 400-plus oral history interviews, the Jerome

Robbins Archive of the Recorded Moving Image has filmed over 2,500 choreographic works and holds over 20,000 additional film and video titles. We also are the home for more than 3,000 linear feet of manuscripts, 347,000 photographs and negatives, as well as thousands of rare books, clipping files, designs, programs, scrapbooks and much more. These riches are freely available to any interested researcher without appointment and together provide an immense and abundant resource for future dance creation, reconstruction, and interpretation.

Although we can not do nearly everything that I wish we could, oral history, thankfully, is now an integral component of the Dance Division, and our funding is no longer an occasional trickle but has, for many years, been a series of steady drops. Yet still, as all of these endeavors sometimes do, our presence can feel a little tenuous. I can't help but wonder what will happen to this unglamorous labor-intensive work, to these quiet reflections? Will the archived recordings, some more than 50 years old, safely cross the digital divide and stay available in the coming years? How much support will we get to continue to document our beautiful history?

At these questions my mind strays to the Tao de Ching:

*You do your work and then step back.
The only path to Serenity.*

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To see a list of who we've interviewed thus far go to:

<http://www.nypl.org/locations/tid/55/node/81134>

For streaming excerpts:

<http://www.nypl.org/locations/tid/55/node/177939>

To explore the library website and catalog:

NYPL.org

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Briefly a dancer/choreographer and still, on occasion, a writer, Susan Kraft now chiefly divides her time between the Jerome Robbins Dance Division and teaching yoga and meditation.



Photo: Evelyn Donnelly