

Process-based Dance Documentation: Living Past the Moment of Bebe Miller's *Prey*.

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Abstract

The dance world employs varied media in preserving and documenting the fleeting image of a dancer's performance of movement and the intangible work of a choreographer. Dance utilizes video, film, notation systems from around the world, text, photos, writing, and reviews to capture a moment of creative art making. The need to notate and preserve current choreographers' works is vital, for without it, our small growing library of documented works will cease to exist. As advocates for documentation and preservation, Valarie Mockabee and Mila Parrish, created a process-based CD-ROM and Labanotation score involving multi-media aspects.

While in the moment of creation, we documented a newly choreographed work by Bebe Miller. Miller is the founder of the New York City-based Bebe Miller Company, and has been actively choreographing since 1978, teaching and performing throughout the United States and Europe. The Labanotation score and supplemental CD-ROM are each stand-alone resources, available for dance scholars, educators and students. This paper discusses the rigors of documenting while in the studio, on the stage, and past the moment. We address techniques, programs, and problem-solving approaches used to record Miller's choreographic process and ultimate work, *Prey*.

Living Past the Moment of Bebe Miller's *Prey*

“Unpretentious,” “postmodern,” “both electric and soulful”¹ describes the work of Brooklyn-based artist Bebe Miller. Her choreographic process is one in which repeating a movement over and over is integral to understanding the relationship the dancer has to the movement; and that the movement has to the dancer. In her formative years as a choreographer Bebe began answering the question: “What is dance?” She answers her own question by “...still finding physical challenges...enjoyable of being in the moment. I almost didn't trust it...I found a whole other process in the process.” Today, Miller embraces those ideas and continues to push the boundaries in her relationship to movement. “There are depths to go...Stay with a gesture and stay with it for fifteen minutes and find where do I space out? Why do I space out?...I'm more interested in the relative space between people and how that gets smashed.”² “For me, process is the point” she stated in a May 2000 interview.³ As a post modern Miller has broken through barriers and embraced art-making techniques that involve dancers, music, improvisation, time, and “catching.”

Capturing Miller's process as well as her movement, Valarie Mockabee, Project Director and Professional Notator candidate and Mila Parrish, Ph.D. CD-ROM designer, struggled with choices in putting down the process and product during the rehearsals of *Prey*, Miller's work she created at The Ohio State University from January 2000-May 2000. The outcome was a CD-ROM to accompany the Labanotation score of *Prey* that displays the choreographic process through interactive multimedia.

In this paper we will discuss issues and decisions surrounding the development of the CD-ROM, *Prey: An Innovation in Dance Documentation, Enhanced Process-based Learning*, the first in a series of digital documentation CD-ROMs for dance. We will offer our experiences as researchers struggling to define and develop new tools for capturing dance. Further we will address the initial conception underlying the research project, the process of investigation, the content and function of the six sections of the CD-ROM, the organizational components of the CD-ROM which include the planning and development stages.

As a dance professionals we often desire more information about a work than is found in a video, a photograph, an interview with the choreographer, a review of the work, a notation score, or even a coach. We pursue the *essence*. It is the desire to have been there first-hand so that we too can explain to our students/company what the work was about, why it was made, what made it happen, how the choreographer felt in rehearsal, how she or he moved, how the original cast “did it.” At best, once videos and films have been gathered, photo archives have been searched, review after review has been read, learned movement from Labanotation scores, there remains the sense that something is still missing. In fact, what is missed is the point of inception, the process of the crafting and evolving that recesses into the minds of performers over time.

Whether as the director/teacher of a work or as the notator/documentor of a work, we have struggled with the question, *Where is the essence of the work?* To aid in this discovery, we investigated technological methods that enhance and complement Labanotation and seek new ways of disseminating and recording

¹ Bremser, M. (Ed.). (1999). *Fifty Contemporary Choreographers*. Routledge.

² Miller, B. (2000). Remarks to Dance 659 at Ohio State University. March 8, 2000.

³ Miller, B. (2000). Interview with Valarie Mockabee and Mila Parrish at Ohio State University. May 14, 2000.

movement. Mockabee, a leader in this investigation, was involved in three CD-ROM projects which began to address issues such as background information; a moving image of what the work looks like in a particular moment in time; the process of rehearsal and work time; the choreographer; and analysis of the work itself. However, none of those projects afforded the opportunity to be in on the crafting and art making; they were works all previously choreographed.

Process of investigation

In November 1998, The Ohio State University awarded grant monies to Mockabee that funded the development of a comprehensive dance documentation project including an interactive CD-ROM to accompany the Labanotation score. Together, we found that this collaborative project has stretched both our imaginations and critical research agendas. Through our own involvement and observations of Miller during a five-month process, we have come to discover what Miller's art-making choices were about in relation to *Prey*. We have recorded it in various media, compiling it all on one CD-ROM.

From January 2000-May 2000, Parrish videotaped and Mockabee "took notes" in Labanotation during all of Miller's rehearsals. The rehearsals took place with the student dancers in a New Repertory Class at The Ohio State University's Department of Dance. Our combined efforts are depicted in what was the main section that became known as "bebenotes."

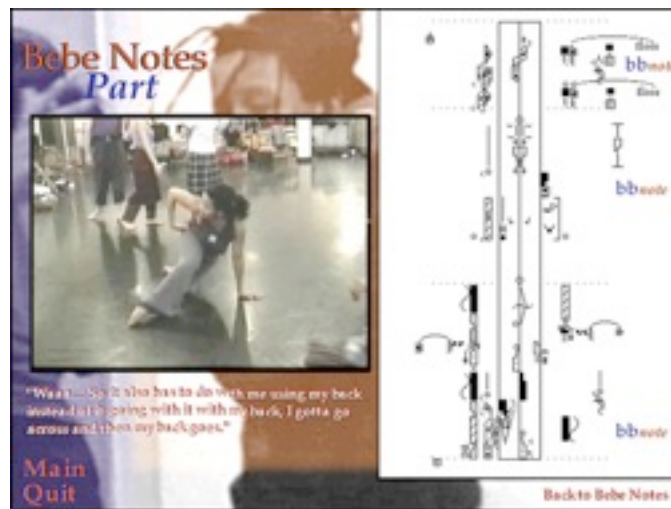


Figure 1. Screen shot of bebenote interface.

Parrish designed the interface of a bebenote by linking a video clip of Miller demonstrating or describing her movement with the same moment in the Labanotation score. Coined "bebenotes," these statements are designed to provide critical entry into the work informing a director, notator, historian, and teacher about what was experienced and expressed during the rehearsal processes. Bebenotes highlight relationships between the "process" of developing the work and the "product" of what was written in the Labanotation score.

With the idea of *bebenotes* in mind we began rather simply by videotaping and notating Miller's rehearsals. We were mainly concerned with obtaining footage of Miller teaching and talking about the phrases that would later become the dance. Little did we know that Miller was not just going to set a work, but she was going to *create* in every sense of the word. We chose key ideas/concepts that emerged from Miller's process of creating, and categorized them for the CD-ROM. During the rehearsal process, we both became aware that what we were seeing and documenting was much more than a means to an end...We were actually being afforded the opportunity to capture *essence*.

As a result of our continuing presence in all aspects of the creation of the work, we were attentive to the detailed insights Miller provided, specifically improvisational structures. Therefore the scope of the CD-ROM grew. In a process similar to that of an action researcher, we uncovered depths of information as they unraveled during the rehearsal process. We developed a series of coding sheets to assist our later reflection in the schedule of activities and events of the daily rehearsal process. These coding sheets supplied transcriptions, identified dialogues and questions from the dancers, Miller's responses, and therefore became crucial to the overall analysis of the work. Before each rehearsal we reviewed the previous day's coding sheet and discussed our observations.

From that point, we were faced with analyzing Miller's rehearsal process, choreographic process, movement preferences, and art making preferences. The CD-ROM was more than just, "This is the work in Labanotation and here is Bebe talking about the movement in a 'bebenote.'" It became about the *how* and the *why* movement happened; the *way* it happened and what moments brought about these happenings. We not only documented the work, but also captured the process, and ultimately the underlying foundation for Miller's choreographic preferences.

Thematic content sections of the CD-ROM

The content sections of the CD-ROM provide insight into Miller's process and resulting choreographic work, *Prey* (2000). The six content sections are defined as (1) Meet Bebe, (2) Context, (3) Movement Content, (4) Process, (5) Bebe Notes, and (6) Complete Video. *Meet Bebe* supplies biographical information about the artist, her company, and an in-depth interview with Miller answering questions concerning *Prey* and her choreographic process. *Context* provides Miller's art making process within universal themes and socio-cultural contexts that define her as the commensurate postmodern choreographer. A descriptive analysis of *Prey* written by dance scholar Candace Feck is highlighted. *Movement Content* offers video examples of the choreographic structures, thematic content, and phrasing in the work *Prey*. *Process* includes the improvisational structures employed in the development of the dance; highlighted are Miller's directives and tasks and her dancers' solutions to these structures. *Bebe Notes* provides digitized video of Miller articulating the choices of performance alongside the Labanotation score while *Complete Video* displays an edited three-camera shoot of the entire dance.

Process of CD-ROM development

The CD-ROM interface was created by mapping out sections using a flow chart. The flow chart of sections resembled a web showing links and topics in each of the sections. The web-like interface presented content addressed and cross-referenced. With the content flow chart as a guide, we considered aspects of interface design using a handwritten template on paper. On the template we placed key features, with video, text, and audio and the corresponding navigation buttons.

Correlation between the six sections was created by maintaining a consistent interface, and the same navigation structure at the bottom of the screen. Parrish unified the screen design and the layout of text and images by employing similar aesthetic preferences. When developing the design of the CD-ROM, we



Figure 4. Screen shot of the Meet Bebe section of the CD-ROM

Once the content sections were defined and all materials (text, images and video) were gathered, we began converting this material into a digital format. Several different programs were used for this digital conversion, Media Cleaner Pro, Adobe Photoshop, Adobe Premiere, and Microsoft Word. We used a Media 100 station with Media Cleaner Pro at Sorenson II compression to digitize rehearsal footage. Sorenson II was selected for the ability to retain high image quality and color range while reducing the MB size of all video. There are seventy-five video clips ranging in length from 16 seconds to 12 minutes. Once components were digitized, all the text, image, and movie files were imported and arranged in Macromedia Director to create the CD-ROM.

Conclusion

The CD-ROM has been used in Labanotation, Dance History, Laban Movement Analysis, Dance Education, Choreography and Music classes at The Ohio State University and at Arizona State University. It was tested with intermediate and advanced notation students from OSU. Miller herself used the CD-ROM when four months into rehearsal, she and two of her dancers wanted to revisit original improvisation material that we had identified and used in the *Process* section.

As University faculty, co-researchers teaching dance technique, Laban Movement Analysis, Labanotation, and dance education, we theorize that such digital documentation of Miller's choreographic process serve as contextual documentation and educational curriculum. With the Miller project as a foundation, we are developing a new process-based project to document a choreographic work in the Fall of 2001. Parrish applied and received funds from Arizona State University for this second documentation project. We are scheduled to analyze and document the working procedure of Bessie award-winner and choreographer, Vicky Schick, as she creates and refines a new work during a three-month period. The elation, once again, of living in the heat of creative battle to preserve a new work, and then to give it the potential for ongoing life in the future, is thrilling and extremely rewarding for both of us, and will lead to works living long past the moment of inception.