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## Collecting to the Core--Moving Texts (i.e., Videos)

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# Collecting to the Core — Moving Texts (i.e., Videos)

by **Susan L. Wiesner** (Laban/Bartenieff Archivist, University of Maryland Michelle Smith Performing Arts Library; Dance Editor, *Resources for College Libraries*) <swiesner@umd.edu>



Column Editor: **Anne Doherty** (*Resources for College Libraries* Project Editor, CHOICE/ACRL) <adoherty@ala-choice.org>

**Column Editor's Note:** The "Collecting to the Core" column highlights monographic works that are essential to the academic library within a particular discipline, inspired by the *Resources for College Libraries* bibliography (online at <http://www.rclweb.net>). In each essay, subject specialists introduce and explain the classic titles and topics that continue to remain relevant to the undergraduate curriculum and library collection. Disciplinary trends may shift, but some classics never go out of style. — AD

When I studied dance theory and history in college the professor assigned the task of building an anthology of dance works by the choreographers who helped shape the dance of the twentieth century. While there was a great deal of information available regarding individuals' biographical details, choreology, personal aesthetic, cultural data, and responses to their works (reviews, etc.), in order to complete the assignment we needed to see the dances. So we watched recordings of the dances on reel-to-reel, U-matic, Beta disc, VHS, and yes, even some on LaserDisc (DVDs hadn't been produced yet). Later, as a graduate student and scholar, I conducted close readings (exegeses) of danced texts, which required the ability to stop, slow, speed up, view and re-view all or portions of a recorded work. At that time my needs were met by the institutions' libraries. Then, when I started working in an academic library as a drama and dance librarian, I began conducting collection assessments. Through experience I knew what texts best supported research and theoretical courses, yet as I delved into the holdings, I noticed that a large portion of what would constitute a good dance collection was missing: that is, the visual component. For no matter how comprehensive a collection might be in terms of written texts, dance is a visual art, and thus it is imperative that scholars, researchers, and students have access to a breadth of dance works in a visual medium, the moving texts. And, although I had been fortunate that the universities where I studied held fairly large collections, I realized as a librarian that research can be restricted by a lack of holdings in visual materials.

Providing access to visual representations of dance works, however, is not as simple as adding videos to a collection. Several factors impact the value of a visual collection. As with written texts, the academic focus of the dance curriculum will drive the selection process for visual media. An undergraduate department with a conservatory approach will perhaps need more instructional videos on technique in the department's focused genres (e.g., ballet, jazz, modern). A department that concentrates on dance history and theory (especially in graduate studies) will require examples of choreography from not only the well-known choreographers and dancers but also those whose work might not be commercially available. And, as many libraries depend upon approval plans for purchasing materials, which do not take into account the genre or context of the visual material, the automatic purchase of video may not match the requirements of the academic department. Streaming services, such as **Alexander Street Press**, may not comprehensively support course content either, as a breadth of material does not necessarily mean the content is of value to a particular course. For example, in the case of the **Alexander Street Press** database *Dance in Video*, a preponderance of the content is geared toward ballet (25 percent), which will not support a dance history course focused on twentieth century modern dance.<sup>1</sup>

Then, too, once selections are made, the purchase of visual material may present a challenge due to availability. Many commercially available videos are not included in conventional distributors' approval plans, and some libraries are not able to purchase directly from vendors such as **Amazon** or **Dance Books**. So, too, might a database be cost prohibitive, and decisions should be made as to a lease option or a purchase. (Full disclosure: at one institution I recommended purchasing *Dance in Video*, while at another we opted for a leased site license.)

Costs aside, at least with the **Alexander Street Press** databases librarians and users can feel assured that the material has been vetted. The same can also be said for collections held by individual repositories or archives such as *Jacob's Pillow Dance Interactive*, the **New York Public Library's Jerome Robbins Dance**

*Division - Audio and Moving Image*, the **Dance Heritage Coalition's Online Exhibition of the Dance Treasures**, and the **Dance Notation Bureau Online Digital Archive**.<sup>2-5</sup> For those interested in dance ethnography or anthropology, the *Ethnographic Video for Instruction & Analysis (EVIA) Digital Archive* project contains materials uploaded by scholars, often from anthropological field work.<sup>6</sup> It is not open access, but there is a request process for access, and the materials are selected by an editorial committee. The same cannot be said of **YouTube** or **Vimeo**, frequent go-to websites for students and scholars alike. I often speak regarding the many and various instantiations/versions of a work, and use twenty examples of *The Dying Swan* I collected on **YouTube**. Although there is a copy of **Mikhail Fokine's** original version danced by **Anna Pavlova** in those twenty examples, there are many alternate versions of choreography (not **Fokine's**) and dancers (not **Pavlova**), as well as an anime version that is actually *Swan Lake*, not *The Dying Swan*.<sup>7</sup> Further, in most of these cases, there is no information regarding provenance. In fact, one must search for any hint of provenance; for example, in the **Fokine/Pavlova** clip it is through the public comments that viewers can find details on the ballet's premier date and likely film date. And one should always question whether user-generated information is correct. While metadata may be lacking and provenance unclear, **YouTube** and **Vimeo** do offer convenience, speed, and accessibility often missing in the subscription services and archival repositories (in part due to dissimilar approaches regarding copyright concerns). That said, there are examples of dances posted to **YouTube** by the curated archives mentioned, especially reconstructions from Labanotation uploaded by the **Dance Notation Bureau**. Proper vetting of streamed content then, is required.

Another issue with these streaming databases is the abbreviated lengths of the dance works, as only one- to two-minute clips — often taken out of context — are available, and many are locked due to copyright and fair use issues. So, too, is that aforementioned need to slow down, rewind, and replay portions of a moving text in order to provide analysis, functions not always offered by the databases. Some do, however, offer a means of previewing a work so that a determination can be made as to acquiring a full-length version for a collection either through purchase or ILL.

Staying abreast of the most recent materials can present a challenge as there is, as yet, no equivalent to *Books in Print* or *Choice* for video and other visual media. One small database with reviews of audio/visual material does exist, *Educational Media Reviews Online*, but it includes fewer than 100 reviews of dance videos, doesn't contain

*continued on page 50*

## From the Reference Desk from page 48

2016, ISBN: 9781483350035, \$185) uses "the **CQ Press** reference guide approach" to "help students understand how American cities (from old to new) have developed over time (Part I), how

the various city governance structures allocate power across city officials and agencies (Part II), how civic and social forces interact with the organs of city government and organize to win control over these organs and/or their policy outputs (Part III), and what patterns of public goods and services cities produce for their residents (Part IV)..."

## Collecting to the Core from page 49

the most recent releases, and doesn't have a representative collection for dance. It is, however, open access, which is a plus. A new bibliographic database hosted by the **Library of Congress (LOC)**, *Tap Dance in America*, is based on over twenty-five years of research by dance scholar **Constance Valis Hill** and includes information on the performance medium that can help in selection and procurement decisions (as well as adding a wealth of documentation).<sup>8</sup> Still, as helpful as it may be, there are no links to any digital video materials, and locating copies of the moving texts themselves, many of which are historical, may require a great deal of detective work. As *RCL* editor for Dance I not only rely on my subject matter expertise as a scholar, but I also reach out to colleagues in various subdisciplines for recommendations, especially those in ethnographic studies and/or genres with which I am less familiar (e.g., Bharatanatyam, African styles, tap). So, too, I use listservs and social media; I discovered the **LOC** tap bibliography through **Facebook!**

A final challenge with visual material in dance is the metadata provided by websites, databases, and the OPAC, which in turn affects my ability to provide *RCL* users with the bibliographic information necessary for acquiring materials. For example, even commercially available videos do not always have ISBN numbers, and although I try to provide **OCLC**

numbers, by doing so I am falling into the restriction dilemma I mentioned earlier, for this limits selection by virtue of the material/item having an **OCLC** number. As for streaming websites, I can only hope that they contain a URL that is a persistent link, so that *RCL* users can find them and circumvent a catalog maintenance nightmare. Production data such as dance title, publisher, and publication date can offer some assistance to users hoping to locate visual materials, but other metadata elements are at times more difficult to find and add. Individual choreographers, performers, date of original performance, date of performance captured on video, performance space, set/costume/light designers, composers, specific dances included on a video, alternate versions (new editions or a completely new version, as in the case of *The Dying Swan*): all of these elements and more are important to the study of dance. In fact, I believe that dance is one discipline that could use a FRBR-like concept to improve cataloging and metadata records.

With these and other challenges inherent in the inclusion of visual/moving texts in a dance collection, it might seem futile to try. But try we must, for as librarians we are in a position to provide infrastructure support for our constituents, even those who study the ephemeral art of dance. And as interactive databases, websites, digital materials, and other media enter into the mainstream of academic study in the sciences, arts, and humanities, tackling the challenges with video will help us as we move into the virtual library of the future. 🐾

### Endnotes

1. *Dance in Video*. Alexandria, VA: Alexander Street Press. [http://alexanderstreet.com/products/dance-video-series\\*](http://alexanderstreet.com/products/dance-video-series*)
  2. *Jacob's Pillow Dance Interactive*. Becket, MA: Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival. <http://danceinteractive.jacobspillow.org/>
  3. *Jerome Robbins Dance Division - Audio and Moving Image*, The New York Public Library. New York: New York Public Library Digital Collections. <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/divisions/jerome-robbins-dance-division-audio-and-moving-image>
  4. *Online Exhibition of the Dance Treasures*. Dance Heritage Coalition. <http://www.danceheritage.org/treasures.html>
  5. *DNB Online Digital Archive*. Dance Notation Bureau. <http://www.dancenotation.org/library/frame0.html>
  6. *EVIA Ethnographic Video for Instruction & Analysis Digital Archive*. Indiana University. <http://www.eviada.org/>
  7. **Pavlova, Anna**. Choreography by **Mikhail Fokine**. *The Dying Swan*. YouTube, 1:57. Accessed February 12, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QMEB-FhVMZpU>
  8. **Hill, Constance Valis**. *Tap Dance in America: A Twentieth-Century Chronology of Tap Performance on Stage, Film, and Media*. Made available by the Library of Congress, Music Division. <https://memory.loc.gov/diglib/ihas/html/tda/tda-home.html>
- \*Editor's note: An asterisk (\*) denotes a title selected for *Resources for College Libraries*.

## Booklover — Off-Broadway

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When rewinding on some previous columns, I realized that “a little gem of a used book” is my routine description for “Great stories by Nobel Prize Winners” that I purchased from a second hand bookstore a while back. And it is. I come back to it often and each time I am intrigued. *A Man of Letters* by **François Mauriac** caught my attention and I begin to read. There is a bibliographic forward prior to each story. This one italicized paragraph is dense with information. As I learned about **Mauriac** — born in Bordeaux in 1885; considered a leading Catholic novelist of his century; served in World War I; awarded the Nobel Prize in 1952; and wrote a play that appeared off-Broadway to successful reviews in 1958. Wait, off-Broadway productions?

I am also currently reading *Alexander Hamilton* by **Ron Chernow** — the novel that was the inspiration for **Lin-Manuel Miranda's** sensational off-Broadway and now Broadway musical “Hamilton: An American Musical.” One of the principals in the show is **Marie Joseph Paul Yves Roche Gilbert du Motier, Marquis de Lafayette**, or simply **Lafayette**. He and **Alexander Hamilton**

had some similarities in their respective timelines prior to when they met at that tumultuous point in American history and they established a close bond during the American Revolution. If you are unfamiliar with the musical sensation “Hamilton,” the entire performance is presented in rap and brilliantly crafted. The simple line: “Immigrants..... We get the job done” from the tune “Yorktown (The World Turned Upside Down)” sung by **Lafayette** and **Hamilton** is just one example of the one-point lyrics from **Miranda's** libretto. Frenchmen and off-Broadway, my reading choice in Nobel literature oddly always ties into my life.

**Mauriac's** story, however, is about a more elemental struggle — the one between a man and a woman. On the surface the story reads like a dime-story novel more suited for a day at the beach. A writer named Jerome; his fifteen-year paramour named Gabrielle; the affair with Berthe, the mother of sickly children; the intervention; the angst of the betrayed lover; the departure in a cab all are introduced to us by an unnamed third person, a friend whom Gabrielle not only confides in

but also entices to speak with Jerome on her behalf. However, **Mauriac** pushes the reader a little deeper. “Some books lay on a small table, but none had been opened for months. How on earth did this woman spend her evenings? No sort of reading could release her from herself; nothing her imagination prompted could prevail against what was torturing her. What creature of a poet's fantasy could succeed, even for one minute, in distracting her from the man who had deserted and betrayed her?”

**Mauriac** was presented the Nobel Prize in Literature “for the deep spiritual insight and the artistic intensity with which he has in his novels penetrated the drama of human life.” *A Man of Letters* captures this intensity very nicely. 🐾

*Author's Note: While reading about Mauriac I stumbled upon some quotes attributed to him. This one seemed especially apropos for the booklovers among us: “Tell me what you read and I'll tell you who you are is true enough, but I'd know you better if you told me what you reread.” — DJ*

