

On Archive Access (or lack of)

by PhD Research Student Erica Charalambous, Centre for Dance Research Coventry University, UK.

School of Communication and Creative Arts, Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia.

What would we be without our archives and who would we be without insight into our history? After all “we are what we keep; we keep what we are”, as archivist Terry Cook so eloquently emphasizes when he highlights the important role that archivists and archives have in determining our social, political and cultural history (Cook 2011). In addition, Cook highlights the necessity to rethink that maybe “we are what we do *not* keep” because certain archival content equally worthy of appraisal and inclusion is not part of the hegemony of institutional archives. Dance content is amongst the lesser archived materials in comparison to the other Arts such as Theatre, Music and Visual Arts, and thus harder to find and make use of what is kept and preserved in an archive or archival collections. To make matters more complex access to such archives is often limited either due to the absence of catalogued material, the limited amount of content one can view in short time visits and the challenges of archival mediation; assisting with access to archival collections and mediating between users and material both on site and online (Duff 2010).

Over the last two decades, how we collect, preserve and conserve our archival material in dance has undergone many rapid changes due to technological advancements and multi-media developments. Various methods of capturing dance making and dance performance have increased the possibility to record and store dance content and this has undoubtedly upgraded dance documentation and affected our understanding of our immediate past as well the potentiality of the near-coming future. The challenge of accessing dance content via archival collections has experienced an improvement and has become more accessible through digitisation and various online platforms hosting digital dance content. However, although in some cases access to this content is free and functional in other cases it can only be accessed through membership or paid access, and it remains limited in size or duration of viewing. Besides, archivists must further develop their mediation skills in order to provide guidance and access to content for users. The absence of archival mediation; the lack of a

finding aid and the impossibility for the user to liaise with an archivist on online platforms becomes an additional obstruction to accessing content.

We are living a science fiction dystopia in which the only way we can access our stored and preserved past is through digital online platforms. Our daily activities, interactions and work are shifting into frequent use of online environments. Accessibility to archives has shifted and digital archives with online access are now a real-life necessity. A multitude of possibilities arises with this reality shift but along with it come many challenges. During these surreal times that are becoming a new reality due to the Covid 19 pandemic and the circumstantial restrictions of movement that come along with lockdown and the limits of public engagement has rendered access to archives physically impossible. It was challenging to access content about dance in archives beforehand and although in the last two decades there have been a handful of projects improving this challenge we are faced with a new challenge. How do we find these online resources and how do we use them?

Part of my doctoral research was to visit many such archival collections both on site in Germany, Australia and the UK, and also online. As I am approaching the end of my PhD journey, I have listed the archives I have visited along with those I can continue visiting through online platforms. In this short report regarding accessibility to online dance collections and dance archive resources I am sharing a selected few for dance practitioners and dance scholars to navigate through and delve into. There have been a handful of attempts to concentrate dance content and list as many archival collections as possible in Germany during the turn of the 21st century *Tanz Fonds Erbe* initiated a series of projects to discover, re-enact and connect content through performance research projects and then linking online resources <https://tanzfonds.de/en/magazin/overview-dance-archives-around-the-world/>. Although most of the links of the physical archival collections are no longer applicable and have not been updated some of the online links of this catalogue are still functional while others have disappeared in cyberspace.

First and foremost, *RePlay* <<https://www.siobhandaviesreplay.com/>> the 'born digital' online archive of British choreographer Siobhan Davies <<https://www.siobhandavies.com/archive/>> is one of a kind and holds a substantial body of four decades of work including, audio-visual material of dance works, rehearsals and interviews, photographs, manuscripts, programme notes and various digitised ephemera. The online archive also features a digital tool to create

your own scrapbook to trace your searches and pin down what is of interest. Rambert Dance Company's online environment features some snippets and teasers of the archive collection and featuring the company's history <https://www.rambert.org.uk/about-us/our-history/> with historical images from the Rambert archive.

The Balliou Library of the University of Melbourne hosts a number of digitised collections one of which is the *Theatre and Dance Platform* <https://digitised-collections.unimelb.edu.au/handle/11343/92018>, which is an ongoing project hosting archival material from dance and performing art companies in Melbourne. The largest part of the featured material on the *Theatre and Dance Platform* is a selection from *Lucy Guerin Inc* <https://lucyguerininc.com/> digital archive repository including photographs, posters, programme notes, performance reviews and video recordings of dance works and dance rehearsals. Another fine example is *AusStage*, an online open access and open sourced database of live performance art that has taken place in Australia or from Australian based companies around the world. *AusStage*, <https://www.ausstage.edu.au/pages/browse/>, is an ongoing project and holds material like the very first records of theatre and dance performances information. Most of the catalogued information about works and events lead to hyperlinks that take you to the original source information and on several cases the possibility to view a related digitised image of a related photograph or painting connected to a theatre or dance work. The National Library of Australia, has a diverse collection on dance, circus and performing arts and a selection of these collections is featured online <https://www.nla.gov.au/what-we-collect/dance>

From the USA perspective there are a number of sites to navigate through with many podcasts, interviews and recorded talks to listen to. *Dance Online* <https://alexanderstreet.com/products/dance-online-dance-studies-collection> hosts a large selection of digitised content and currently has a month free registration to access and view content regarding the 20th and 21st century *Dance Studies Collection*. The New York Library has a selection of digitised images in the digitised collection section. Here one can find a rare selection of photographs on dance by dance artists Ruth St. Dennis and Isadora Duncan <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/collections/dance-in-photographs-and-prints#/?tab=about>. Furthermore, the USA National Library of Congress holds a selection of material of music, dance and theatre including a number of databases which concentrate

information on collection and catalogues of content some of which are viewable online <https://www.loc.gov/performingarts/>. There is a long list of archival collections, compiled and found on the main website of *International Consortium for Advancement in Choreography Inc.* <https://www.danceicons.org/research/?p=160120102305> in the USA. The majority of these collections, although amongst them some digital material too, it is only possible to access the content when physically visiting the archive. The New York Public Library luckily has an online digital collections platform <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/danceaudiovideo> offering a broad selection of material including dance videos, photographs, monographs and texts.

An international video dance collection, based in France, features a selection of recorded dance work excerpts from a variety of artists and dance styles <https://www.numeridanse.tv/en>. The Goethe Institute, a German based Institution, hosts an online site where dance videos are featured along with articles, interviews and provocations about contemporary dance are shared <https://www.goethe.de/en/kul/tut/gen/tan.html>. The Bremen German Dance Film Institute <http://www.deutsches-tanzfilminstitut.de/> features a large selection of dance films and historical information about German dance ensembles, choreographers and dancers. Some European based database platforms which hold and direct you to further resources and content on dance and performing art are: the European Collected Library of Dance and Performance <http://www.eclap.eu/portal/?q=en-US> and Europeana <https://www.europeana.eu/en> which hosts digitised cultural heritage material which can be viewed online.

A very special independent platform is that of *UbuWeb Dance* <http://www.ubu.com/dance/> which hosts a variety of videos and films with a mix of pop and eclecticism. This continues to be interesting work in progress, like *Delving into Dance* and which also propose a new formula to consider for archiving dance and the multimodal material which compose a dance work. Similarly for something different and independent from another part of the globe I recommend, *Delving into Dance*, an Australian online platform <https://www.delvingintodance.com/> with a selection of podcasts from choreographers and dancers from all over the world sharing their stories, thoughts, methods and challenges. The platform was launched as a series of podcasts about early Australian choreographers and has grown into an online repository of interviews, talks, texts, research and provocations from

dance makers and dance practitioners from all over the world. Another global specialist online library including performing arts collections is *Arenapal* <https://www.arenapal.com/> where a large number of images from photographers collections, dance, theatre and music artists images and a number of dance and theatre establishments digital collections are hosted here. In the case of *Arenapal*, one can navigate and search through the actual material but is required to register and create an account so as to download, view further content and make use of that content for research purposes.

In addition to these above links there are several sites with recorded interviews and talks about dance which are archival in essence as they capture and discuss themes and topics of dance, dance making and dance scholarship. *Dancing Bodies in Coventry* <https://dancingbodiesincoventry.com/podcasts-2/> is an ongoing project documenting dance and performing arts practitioners, scholars, choreographers, producers, researchers connected to the city of Coventry. Here below I am listing a handful of independent sites hosting and arranging podcasts that open up possibilities for capturing and archiving dance through the means of an audio archive. This approach gives me the freedom to listen to the content and move while doing so, it offers some freedom from being fixed onto the screen and allows for more space to move with the dance related material shared in various discussions. These podcasts also stretch the content and focus to a variety of dance styles and themes and are great to listen while commuting or walking or staying safe at home. Here is a list of such alternative podcast sites: *The Moving Architects* <http://themovingarchitects.org/category/podcast/> , *Choreography Podcasts* <https://player.fm/podcasts/Choreography>, *Star Quest 8 Podcasts to Plug into* <https://www.starquestdance.com/8-dance-podcasts-to-plug-into/> and *Dance Teacher* recommending three dance-specific podcasts <https://www.dance-teacher.com/3-dance-specific-podcasts-youll-love-on-your-daily-commute-2619402506.html>

In early April 2020, in an article in the New York times one could find a list of theatre houses sharing their performance content online as well as instruction for DIY dance performance recipe to create a dance during lockdown <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/07/arts/dance/stream-dance-online-virus.html>.

Similarly, certain establishments such as theatres and performing arts hubs began sharing content online during these times of the Covid 19 pandemic and thus opening their archives

and sharing live performance work and streaming content online. Here is an article in *The Culture Diary* presenting a collection of resources to view some rare, classic and current work fluctuating the online web of dance from UK based theatres and performing arts hubs: <https://www.theculturediary.com/stories/watch-theatre-music-and-dance-shows-home-during-covid-19-pandemic-ongoing-list>. In these instances, dance and theatre institutions are reaching people's doorsteps and living rooms, blurring the boundaries of restricting access to viewing performance and even inviting audiences to make the most out of their virtual experiences and interact with dance and choreographic practices.

Many libraries, theatres and museums have been required to share their content through online portals and channels in order to keep up with the necessity of offering virtual experiences of already existing content and some newly created content in lockdown settings. It is as if we have been fast forwarded into the future and discussions about digital preservation and digital curation have instantly become part of our new reality; the new normal. The necessity to access content can only be done through cyberspace currently and content is being live streamed in large amounts. Although at moments this seems exciting to be able to view dance works and performance events from the comfort of one's home it still raises questions about archiving dance. I have only listed a selected few, I am sure there are several more that I have not mentioned or come across yet. There are still few archives of dance offering online access to their content and although just viewing the number of links in this short report not all the content is openly viewable and usable. Nevertheless, there is plenty to long for regarding the future of dance making, capturing and archiving and what we choose to keep or not keep in our dance archives. I would like to end this short essay with a question: What is the future of dance performance and along with it, what sort of future dance archive are we creating and how do we want to access dance in a post-COVID future?

Cook, T. (2011) 'We Are What We Keep; We Keep What We Are': Archival Appraisal Past, Present and Future, *Journal of the Society of Archivists*, 32:2, 173-189, DOI: 10.1080/00379816.2011.619688

Duff, W. M. (2010). 'Archival Mediation' in *Currents of Archival Thinking*, (eds.) Eastwood, T. and MacNeil, H. Libraries Unlimited: California