

## Response by the Dance Heritage Coalition to the Request of the Librarian of Congress for information in a Study of the Current State of American Television and Video Preservation

As an alliance of institutions holding significant collections of materials documenting the history of dance, the Dance Heritage Coalition (DHC) has a critical interest in the current state of American television and video preservation. The DHC's mission is to preserve, enhance, augment and improve access to the materials that document the creative contributions of past, present, and future dance. Because videotape offers an immediate and convenient means of recording movement, the dance community has come to depend on it. As other methods of recording dance are costly and/or labor intensive, videotape has provided the first instant recording device for the ephemeral art of dance and has become a de facto recording standard, accepted by the Copyright Office as a means of registering intellectual property rights to a dance. It is a natural tool in the artistic process of creating choreography and an obvious means of viewing the dance after performance. Videotape has become a form of currency in the dance world. Paradoxically, however, the instability of videotape and the briefness of its life-span are rarely or only just becoming known to those in the dance community who depend upon it so greatly.

As the late dance videographer Michael Schwartz wrote in the *Poor Dancer's Almanac*: "Of all the arts, dance has been the most profoundly affected by the widespread use of video technology. Choreographers, dancers, critics, historians, and producers now have a tool that can preserve the ephemeral material of rehearsal and performance--for repeated, detailed viewing. Video has affected not only the preservation and teaching of established repertory but also the work process itself. Instant replay allows the dancer and choreographer to rework and edit a dance as it evolves.... Edited into promotional tapes, video documentation has become an essential part of the business of all performance--a tool required by funders and presenters to determine who receives funding and who is presented." It is also an ubiquitous tool in the field of anthropology and ethnology, used to document the dance forms of many cultures. Widespread use has created a plethora of video materials documenting the history of dance in the second half of the 20th century and we are now faced with the difficult challenge of preserving this material.

While the parent institutions of some DHC members, which include the Dance Collection of The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts; Harvard Theatre Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University; Library of Congress, Music Division; San Francisco Performing Arts Library and Museum; American Dance Festival; Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival; and The Lawrence and Lee Theatre Research

Institute at Ohio State University, may have submitted testimony separately, this testimony from the DHC, collectively, addresses the needs of video preservation of the history of dance.

In recent years the videotape holdings of these collections have swelled due to the prevalent use of the medium. Additionally, the active videotape production by institutions such as the New York Public Library Dance Collection (NYPL) and the American Dance Festival (ADF), which act as documenters of dance, has increased the size of collections. While no formal, field-wide assessment has yet been conducted of all extant dance videotape documentation, DHC members alone hold in excess of 30,000 videotape titles, mostly unique footage. The collecting policies and size and date span of collections vary from DHC institution to institution. The Dance Collection at NYPL holds approximately 20,000 videotapes of varying formats. ADF houses a collection of 2,000 videotapes documenting dance performances and other events at this premier festival of American modern dance. The smallest collection among the participants is at the Harvard Theatre Collection which currently holds some 200 dance video tapes.

The Twyla Tharp Archives, housed at Ohio State University, provide a good example of the field-wide dilemma. Tharp, one of America's seminal modern choreographers of the past twenty years, keeps a video recorder running constantly in her studio, as work is created, amassing a growing archive of well over 1,000 videotapes in varying formats, including 1", 2", VHS, and Hi8, as well as 1/2" open reel-to-reel tapes for which preservation is difficult and costly. While not all video tape shot in Tharp's studio necessarily needs to be preserved, the selection, examination and appraisal of such unique material, if not done by the artist prior to its arrival at the archives, becomes a tremendous problem for the curatorial staff. The Tharp videotapes depict not only the evolution of her choreographic works and style, but also the dancing talents of her company and the many guest artists who have worked with her over the years, such as Mikhail Baryshnikov.

Collections like the Tharp archive are duplicated in the collections of virtually all Coalition participants. Most DHC collections hold video materials of all formats, with dates ranging from the late 1960s to the present. Together the holdings in these collections document the past, present and future of one of America's seminal art forms - the art of movement and dance. But significant materials documenting this history are not all gathered in repositories. Rather there is tremendous concern about the videotape materials maintained in "private" hands in the dance community, just as Tharp's collection was until its donation to Ohio State University. Virtually every major dance company in the United States, from the New York City Ballet to the Merce Cunningham Foundation has a significant collection of video materials, akin to the Tharp archive, that require on-going maintenance and deserve long term protection as they document a significant contribution to the history and culture of the

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United States. Given the prevalence of the medium and the number of ballet and modern dance companies in the country, not to mention community and culturally based dance organizations, the number of important video documents of dance is likely to be in the range of at least 100,000 tapes.

One of the goals of the Dance Heritage Coalition is to develop an awareness of the acute crisis in video use and preservation and to seek solutions. While initial educational efforts through publications and conference presentations have begun, the premise of the Coalition suggests that effective solutions will arise more efficiently through a collaboration of many communities. The DHC has identified four significant issues regarding videotape which require collaborative solutions.

**1. Moving image materials documenting dance are often of uneven or poor quality.**

While technical standards and training may exist, for much of dance, even dance of universally recognized artistic merit, video documentation is undertaken without the benefit of such training or knowledge of such standards. Works selected for videotaping by organizations such as NYPL, or chosen for broadcast by *Great Performances* or *Dance in America*, benefit from professional documentation (at least a three camera shoot which is edited into a single videotape). The cost of such a production is prohibitive for most dance companies and necessarily reaches only a very small fraction of dance works. As the taping of dance movement is complex it requires skill and training; liken it to the taping of a basketball game or an ice-skating event. Consider the number of cameras that have been trained on the moves of Michael Jordan, vs. the cameras that have been focussed to capture the movement of Martha Graham.

Work documented without the skill of well trained camera people generally results in poor quality documentation: a performance taped by a single camera set at the center of the back of the house during a dress rehearsal for example, or taped by a hand held camera in the hands of an inexperienced camera person. Poor documentation is the result of bad camera work; the use of uncleaned or obsolete equipment or inexpensive equipment which results in poor resolution; or inferior lighting or taping conditions. More and better training for videography is needed, directly in the dance community, in order to improve the quality of tapes created without the benefit of an expensive production staff.

To improve the quality, some Coalition participants play a dual role, serving both as a repository and collector of video as well as a producer of video. NYPL's role as a producer has been particularly important to the dance community, serving to document master works that would not otherwise have been recorded, as well as creating a level of expertise in the filming of dance and raising the community's

standards for acceptable documentation footage. In addition to producing approximately thirty dance videotape recordings each year, NYPL also collects tapes produced by others, adding some 800 or more annually. Similarly, ADF's collection, for the most part, has been created by the Festival, demonstrating that in the dance community, many organizations serve as producers and/or creators of videotape footage.

## **2. Original recordings are frequently not properly cared for or preserved.**

Just as the collection policies, size, and date span vary among DHC institutions, so do their preservation programs. However, it can be said that across the institutions the programs are inadequately funded to address the needs of video preservation. The smaller organizations frequently make use of outside vendors for dubbing services and sometimes actual preservation work (e.g. San Francisco Performing Arts Library and Museum has used the services of the Bay Area Video Coalition; ADF has developed a relationship with Sony Corporation which has led to some pro bono work to transfer 3/4 inch tape to Betacam and to create VHS viewing copies). Faced with rapidly growing collections on rapidly deteriorating tape stock, however, the institutions are struggling with a race against time. The tapes in private hands in the dance community generally suffer from poor storage conditions and mishandling. One strategy the DHC employs is the improvement of storage, handling and labeling of video materials from the point of creation so that the preservation problems can be minimized in the future. This, however, requires an on-going education effort for all members of the dance community.

Generally speaking, however, the dance field is unable to provide adequate storage facilities for the videotape it generates. The institutions asked to house the tapes for future cultural preservation are also pressed to provide the appropriate storage, as facilities with controlled temperature and humidity are costly to maintain. Some participating institutions have more adequate storage than others and smaller organizations like ADF, have been able to take advantage of relationships with larger organizations. Duke University has provided ADF with adequate storage at a new state-of-the art library and archival storage facility. This space, however, could easily be usurped by institutional priorities that do not include the needs of ADF or the dance community. Some of the more able dance organizations make use of commercial storage facilities provided by Iron Mountain, as does the Merce Cunningham Foundation and NYPL.

Within the Coalition, participants have discussed preservation priorities and have attempted to use various preservation survey techniques to identify priorities. Surveys intended for large archival collections, however, have proven inadequate to the task of identifying preservation priorities for videotape. A simple identification system for videotape deterioration problems, such as that developed for photographic materials

by the Image Permanence Institute would be most useful. The preservation problem faced by the dance community is massive. We are faced with tens of thousands of reels of tape recorded on now obsolete formats which require transfer in order to preserve them from further deterioration and to make them viewable. Standardized tools for setting priorities are lacking, the facilities to undertake this transfer are few, and the process is costly. On top of this, the field continues to record on a variety of formats. It is necessary to maintain equipment in all formats for playback and transfer in the future.

Perhaps most significantly there is no technical preservation standard for videotape at the current time. For this reason it is difficult to secure funding for preservation projects as funders are reluctant to provide money for work that may have to be repeated (and in the case of magnetic media will probably have to be repeated continually). More research is needed to identify the most cost effective way to preserve videotape for the long-term. Better preservation solutions and broad based support for the issue, similar to the efforts that have been conducted by the library preservation community around the cause of the brittle book, is now needed for magnetic tape, before a vast record of the last quarter of the twentieth century, and particularly its dance and performing arts, is lost.

### **3. The recordings that have been made are often not accessible.**

Accessibility has been a paramount concern to the DHC. Consequently a major cooperative access project is underway whereby participants are addressing their cataloging backlogs, creating MARC-VM records for videotapes and moving images and contributing these records to the national bibliographic utilities, RILIN and OCLC. In addition the project has developed cataloging guidelines for the implementation of the national standards of AMIM (Archival Moving Image Materials cataloging rules) and MARC for dance materials. These guidelines are used by all Coalition participants in their cataloging. The guidelines have been developed and refined by participants as cataloging of dance documentation materials occurs. The cataloging is generally full level with access points provided for all dance related subject matter. A cooperative authority project insures that personal names and uniform titles for choreographic works are added to the national name authority file. This cooperative project has been funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities. While it addresses a significant portion of institutional collections there are still significant holdings yet to be cataloged.

Once cataloged, most of the participating collections are able to make their videotapes available for use. Some, however, due to the inability to create reference copies, are not able to do so. At least one institution has developed a preservation policy based on demand. Materials are duplicated for viewing use when they are requested by a researcher, thereby letting researcher demand drive preservation priorities. At

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