

Athalie Allen Knowles 1921 - 2013

Compiled by Gordon Curl



Athalie Knowles - a long-standing member of the Guild - died on 5 October 2013 aged 92. During my time as editor of the Guild Magazine I was privileged to be the recipient of some of her prolific letter-writings - letters which demonstrated her passion for movement and dance and her admiration for the legacy of Rudolf Laban and Lisa Ullmann.

In his tribute to Athalie the Canon Andrew Knowles, a close relative, reminded us that she was:

the only daughter of Clifford Knowles and his wife Ethel (nee Lunn).

Athalie's father was a civil engineer and chartered surveyor and her mother a concert pianist. From her father, Athalie inherited a capacity for astute observation and assiduous documentation; from her mother an artistic temperament, elfin physique, and firm independence of mind.

Athalie grew up in South London and attended Clapham High School from whence, in 1939, she began her three year initial professional training at Bedford College of Physical Education where she excelled in dance. There followed years of teaching and lecturing in Cambridge and Dartford. In 1956 Athalie took the One-Year Special Course at the Art of Movement Studio Addlestone and during that time, in one of her recent prolific letters to me, Athalie wrote: "In the Summer Term, Lisa - passing me in the hallway - said: 'Mr Laban and I would like to offer you a place on our staff'. I was dumb-founded. For the next eleven years Lisa was my employer".

Athalie became Deputy Principal to Lisa Ullmann - of whom she was highly supportive. Among her many diverse responsibilities was that of directing teaching practices for student teachers - many of whom were on secondment from Trent Park and Chelsea College Eastbourne. As well as a heavy load of teaching, Athalie carried mounting administrative duties at a crucial time in the development of the Studio; she was also a member of The Examination Board of the Art of Movement Guild.

Former HMI BJ Lewis wrote:

Athalie was a colleague of mine in Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Schools from 1968 to 1981, working nationally in colleges and schools. She was a member of the Physical Education Committee with responsibility for Dance and was based in the South of England. When I first joined she was well established and often travelled with her two black poodles who were well known to colleagues. She was a keen and knowledgeable observer of movement and her insights were appreciated by many. When she retired she took the whole of the Physical Education Committee to a London theatre to see a production of CATS.

Of her personal life, Canon Knowles stated:

Athalie never married but maintained a strong connection with her wider family and went to great lengths to attend family celebrations (and) while second cousins discoed in ungainly fashion, Athalie would perform the most graceful of shimmies, observing with characteristic wryness that 'true dance comes from within'.

He also recalled that Athalie and Jo (her companion) travelled widely with:

each successive adventure incomplete until carefully recorded in photo albums and scrapbooks. She would also corral her neighbours into proper observance of the Oxford and Cambridge Boat Race (with everyone required to wear their colours) while on Christmas morning she and Jo kept an open house of legendary generosity.

Athalie's retirement in 1981 was no rest cure for she continued tirelessly to engage in the advancement of movement and dance. Among her initiatives were: the Secretaryship of the International Council of Kinetography Laban; arranging (with the late Ellinor Hinks, Principal of Nonington College) the gift and deposit of the Rudolf Laban and Lisa Ullmann archives to the National Resource Centre for Dance at the University of Surrey; and, with Geraldine Stephenson and Ellinor Hinks, Athalie was a Founder Member of the Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund. She also took part in an Oral Archive Project initiated by the NRCDC.

Athalie will be greatly missed - but her legacy of monumental achievements will undoubtedly live on

Acknowledgements for vital information on Athalie's lifetime achievements are due to: The Revd. Andrew Knowles, Jo Buckle, Dr B J Lewis, Dr Judith Chapman, Anna Carlisle MBE, Stephanie Daniels (Bedford CPE Archivist), Sally Archbutt and Dr Margaret Whitehead.

An addendum to Gordon Curl's obituary for Athalie Knowles:

Reflections from a former student and colleague

Viv Bridson

I was just 23 when I arrived at the Art of Movement Studio (supported by Dartington and the Charles Henry Foyle Trust as I did not fit into any of the categories which qualified for State Funding) and my Principal Teachers were Athalie Knowles and Lisa Ullmann. Then in 1962, rather surprisingly, I was teaching there myself. Lisa tended to thrust people into new responsibilities and now, looking back, I realise how much Athalie's support enabled me to succeed.

Without her clear teaching and artistry students like me would have floundered within the odd hierarchy which was The Studio at that time. At the top of the tree were "The Specials", those students seconded by the Department of Education for a one year course in "Movement Study" - although intelligent they were not dancers in any sense of the word. The next level down, "The Supplementaries", were people doing an extra year of training and quite gifted as dancers. Then there were the odd bods like myself and Geoffrey Sutherland, who wanted to dance. Athalie founded a small performance group for us and some of The Supplementaries. We were encouraged to choreograph and took part in pieces created by Athalie. I can remember still an Effort Study to some music of Duke Ellington, and a dramatic piece where I was an old lady

in a magical shop. She would also manage to arrange the occasional Master Class for us - the guests who I remember most clearly were Lilla Bauer and Lucas Hoving although there were others. In addition Athalie had taken classes with Sigurd Leeder at Morley College and while he did not come to us Geoffrey and I were sent to him.

Both Geoffrey and myself were teaching at The Studio when the new "2+1" Course came into existence - the brain child of Kathleen Howard from Trent Park and Athalie. For us and the students it was all new, an amazing opportunity for everyone. The students spent two years at The Studio, with visiting teachers for academic work, then one year at Trent Park, with a once a week visit from Athalie, Geoffrey or myself, to continue their dance education. It required a mammoth feat of organisation to make this work in the chaos that was The Studio and Athalie succeeded where others, I am sure, would have failed. I never remember her losing her temper.

Athalie kept the Studio alive; she supported Lisa through the difficult time after Laban's death and when she left to become an HMI the whole ethos of The Studio changed. I remember her with affection.