

Obituary

Lorna Wilson - an outstanding dance educator!

[24th July 1921 to 9th February 2011]



What was so striking about Lorna's career was her concern to view dance education against the widest possible backdrop of the development of Modern Dance in Europe and America; she placed 'educational dance' in its proper context – a mark of her impressive grasp of the bigger picture of an emerging and worthy art form. Needless to say, the European work of Francois Delsarte, Jacques Dalcroze, Noverre, Rudolf Laban, Mary Wigman, Hanya Holm, Kurt Jooss and Sigurd Leeder - and the influence of the Bauhaus were all most familiar to her - together with their American counterparts: Isadora Duncan, Ruth St Denis, Doris Humphrey and Martha Graham (and their many successors).

Undoubtedly, one of the highlights of Lorna's career must have been her visit to Tokyo with 16 dance students whom she led (with Pat Kingston's demonstration of gymnastics) at the 6th *International Congress in 1969*. The *Association of Principals of Women's Colleges of Physical Education* (representing *Anstey, Bedford, Chelsea, Dartford, Dunfermline, I M Marsh, Lady Mabel and Nonington*) proposed the idea that *Educational Dance and Gymnastics in Great Britain* be shown at the *Congress*. Two students from each of the Specialist Colleges were eventually chosen, and following vacation rehearsals, they arrived in Tokyo 'in handsome white track suits, red flip-flops, red handbags (acquired from M & S) and small Union Jack badges from Eastbourne Pier'. They were warmly welcomed and gave their presentation of dance (accompanied by handouts and commentaries by Lorna) in the presence of the Crown Princess of Japan in the prestigious *National Theatre* with its huge stage - which they 'filled with colourful movement and were warmly applauded'. After an exhilarating eighteen days they were homeward bound with 'carrier bags bulging with elegantly wrapped gifts' to the farewell 'Sayonara' of Professor Matsomoto, Chairman of the Congress.

I had the great privilege working with Lorna's for 8 years at Chelsea College (Lorna as Head of Dance and I as Head of Combined Arts) and subsequently with *NATFHE Dance* – of which I was Chairman; I can think of no more inspiring or cooperative colleague to have worked with than Lorna - for in addition to her keen technical expertise in dance, she demonstrated a deep knowledge and interest in the arts generally: in poetry, music, painting, sculpture, literature and drama – all of which she shared with her students as a necessary cultural condition for performers and teachers of dance alike (she deplored any narrowly exclusive



Lorna Wilson (and other well known figures) at Moreton Hall Course 1942



Lorna Wilson's dance students

technical training - which she believed robbed dance of its rich associations with its related arts (see article 'Lorna Wilson's Archives' in *Laban Guild Magazine* Vol 26 No 3 Autumn 2007). For Lorna: University Degrees in Dance were intended to produce *educated* persons, not narrowly trained technicians, no matter how proficient – whether they be professional dancers/choreographers or dance educators. Indeed, Lorna saw no divide between dance education and dance theatre (any more than a divide exists between music education and concert performance) - a seamless continuity was Lorna's philosophy.

Few readers of Lorna's archives (deposited at LABAN archives) could fail to be impressed by the sheer breadth and depth of her knowledge of dance and related arts; they will form a most valuable record of the pioneer development of dance in education and will also bear testimony to the many well-informed students and staff to be found in the former *Women's Colleges of Physical Education*, Wing and General Colleges of Education, without whom dance in education would be far less enlightened than it is today - particularly bearing in mind the very considerable impetus these students and staff gave to Laban's initiatives.

Gordon Curl
July 2011

In addition to the above tribute, a number of Lorna's colleagues and friends have added their tributes, as follows:

'I knew Lorna well as a colleague and friend. We shared many interests, experiences, values and standards in the academic and practical world of movement and dance ... Lorna was a brilliant dance teacher and educator ...'

(Sally Archbutt, former Head of Dance Nonington College)

'... Not only was Lorna much admired in the dance world – she also played Lacrosse for England! ...'

(Hilary Corlett: former Principal Lecturer Chelsea College)

'... Lorna had an extraordinary range of interests and talents with distinction in all. To every aspect of her life she brought a meticulous attention to detail and discipline, always illuminated by a sense of humour and incisive wit. Her loyalty and devotion to her students and friends made her into a great companion and mentor. She will be missed by all ...'

(Sally Murphy: former Lecturer in Dance Chelsea College)

'... As a colleague and friend of dance for many years I shall always remember her love of life and great sense of humour together with her demand for perfection both of herself and others. A wonderful lady to have known ...'

(Varina Verdin; former Principal Lecturer in Dance Chelsea College)

'... As a dance teacher Lorna was brilliant - but terrifying ...'

(Dame Sheila Wallace (nee Pearson) student at Chelsea 1959-62)

'... Lorna was gifted, artistic, talented and dedicated - the ultimate professional ...!'

(Dr Ida Webb: former Deputy Director East Sussex College of Higher Education)