

The Laban Event in Ascona - October 2016

Anna Carlisle

Anna Carlisle and Valerie Preston-Dunlop were invited to present their DVD 'Living Architecture' at the Laban event at Monte Verita, Switzerland.

A graduate of the Specialist Diploma in Choreological Studies at TrinityLABAN, Nunzia Tirelli, the Italian actress and dancer, returned home with a mission to travel to Monte Verita, the historical site of Laban's search to forge and pioneer a new Expressionist dance form.

She found a splendid Swiss Bauhaus-style hotel, housing a conference and culture centre but little trace of Laban and the revolutionary counter-culture community set up in 1900. Between its foundation and the 1920s, Monte Verita was home and sanctuary to a group of radical thinkers, celebrated intellectuals, artists and political dissidents - amongst them Hermann Hesse, Carl Jung, Rudolf Steiner, Jaques-Dalcroze, Isadora Duncan, Paul Klee, Martin Buber, Max Weber, Hugo Ball, Otto Gross, D.H. Lawrence and Prince Kropotkin, the political anarchist. Inevitably, pedlars, wayfarers and cranks climbed up the hill but gradually, Monte Verita accrued a modest international status for growing concerns about the fragmentation of society, the disappearance of rustic traditions, the strangulation of humanistic ideologies and the encroachment of industrialisation.



Images from the Hotel's website



The mountainous landscape is dramatically beautiful, falling way down to Lake Maggiore and the town of Ascona, rising rocky and wild to the sky above. By the 1920's, the site was dotted with wooden huts, cabins and the quirky sanitarium built by the original owners for rich visitors take a health cure. (The regime was rigorous and uncompromising. Patients were laid out for hours in the sun on a strict diet of vegetables, herbs and evening recitals of Wagner.) Goods and furniture were hauled up the steep slopes by horse or donkey; for most inhabitants there was no running water, heating or electricity. A handful of renovated wooden buildings remain: one now serves as a tea-house; another as an example of the rustic conditions of the time. The museum, housed in the Casa Anatta is currently undergoing renovation. But what also stands on a stoney woodland rise, is a splendid memorial to Laban - a huge steel icosahedron - master-minded by Tirelli.

Nunzia Tirelli is a formidable woman. Her single-minded decision to re-energise interest, to pay tribute to Laban and the Monte Verita community, generated a project which culminated in funding to set up and run an annual LABAN EVENT. Now in its 4th year, the 3-day event has brought together Laban practitioners and scholars from the USA, Germany, Italy, Switzerland, France and the UK. Topics have ranged across Laban analysis, somatics, choreutics, choreology, dance therapy, archival and historical material, architecture, education, the movement choir, choreutic meditation, film, and performance. Highlights have been the public staging and acclaim for Curtis-Jones's re-imaginings of Laban's early choreographies - *Die Nacht*, *Suite 24*, *The Dancing Drumstick* and *Ishtar's Journey into Hades*.



Drumstick (2015). Summit Dance Theatre. Re-imagined by Alison Curtis-Jones
Photograph: © Alison Curtis Jones, 2015

The 2016 LABAN EVENT focused on the theme of the phenomenology of dance, the body-environment relationship and the body as the subject of experience. The schedule was packed with workshops, evening

lectures and performances. Practical sessions for the group of international participants were headed by Dr. Rosa Maria Govoni Co-Director of the Expressive Psychotherapy Institute, Ati, Bologna and Alison Curtis-Jones, Senior Lecturer in Dance at TrinityLABAN UK. Trained in Dance Movement Therapy and 'Authentic Movement', Dr. Govoni's sessions, entitled 'Genius Loci' were inspired by the site itself; Alison Curtis-Jones, led sessions on the body as site in relation to space and place. With perfect weather and evoking Laban's early Summer Schools, the dancers were espied on the mountain-side and in the woods, exploring, mirroring, extending and sensing the movement possibilities and inspiration of the landscape. Early evening and morning sessions of 'Choreutic Meditations' were led by Nunzia Tirelli - a brilliant practical introduction to the after-dinner showing of the film *Living Architecture: Rudolf Laban and The Geometry of Dance*.

In addition, the spirits of Monte Verita were at work. The preceding Public Eranos Jung Lecture, packed with local people from the region and titled 'Myths that Speak to Us', presented an exposition on the theme of Plato's Cave. Filmed in 2008 with the aim of bringing the metaphysical ideas which underlie Laban's creation of Choreutics to light - the Platonic concepts of Sacred Geometry inherent in Rosicrucianism and Free-Masonry - *Living Architecture* was introduced by the makers of the DVD, Valerie Preston-Dunlop and Anna Carlisle. Enhanced by transformation into Blu-Ray format and presented on a large screen with voice-overs translated into Italian, the complex material and beautifully danced presentation of the geometry of the Scales, provoked appreciation from the audience and a deal of interesting and profound questions.

Two further lectures cohered to excite and enrich knowledge of Asconans and the anarchic community on the Mountain of Truth. There can be no doubt that Laban was a major creative force in the history of the Monte Verita community, yet there were many other celebrated inhabitants and visitors who contributed to its notable status. Isabelle Danto, Dance Historian, journalist and Director of audiovisual cultural production at the Pompidou Centre, Paris, presented current research for her up-coming book: *Monte Verita - A Modern Utopia*. Extending the parameters of focus, her publication will place the Monte Verita project in the perspective of a wider cultural, social and political context.

In 2009, Ascona re-opened the newly renovated Teatro San Materno - a Bauhaus temple of dance built in 1927 for the Belgian Expressionist dancer, Charlotte Bara. Chiara Tassi, archivist of the Fund Charlotte Bara at the Museum

of Modern Art in Ascona, presented a fascinating portrait of this Expressionist dancer who settled in Ascona in 1919. Trained by a pupil of Isadora Duncan, she studied with Alexander Sakaroff and teachers of oriental dance; her later solo choreographies were described as intensely mystical and religious.



Under the directorship of Tiziana Arnaboldi, Teatro San Materno is now a centre for contemporary dance training, educational projects and performance. On the last morning of the event, the schedule included a visit to this small jewel of Bauhaus architecture and a performance in the theatre and on the site. Outside, on the slopes of the gardens, umbrellas mushroomed in the rain as the audience watched six dancers traversing



Photos from Teatro San Materno's website



pathways and stairways, walking the walls, hanging from balconies, appearing and disappearing - under, through and around the architecture of the building.

There were many wonderful experiences on this superbly organised LABAN EVENT but for many participants, the solo performance by the Italian dancer, Guiseppe Asaro was especially memorable. Commissioned by Tirelli, this took place late one evening in the deserted wooden building, Casa Anatta. In small groups, the spectators were led by torchlight through rough mountain paths towards an unknown destination. Closed to the public and undergoing restoration as the Monte Verita Museum, the building smelt of age and old wood. It was spookily womb-like - and black as night. The small audience huddled on makeshift chairs or sat on the floor facing the tiny stage. Asaro had quietly inhabited the building for days and the work he presented - *Solitude* - embodied his experience - an empty room, light and shadow, a solitary chair and filmic material of his presence in other empty rooms. The movement material was sparse, economic and authentic, creating an atmosphere which accumulated in dreamlike intensity. Was it too fanciful to imagine that the spirits of Laban and Wigman might have joined us that night?

Appreciation for Nunzia Tirelli and her partner-in-aide, the film editor, Giorna Beltrametti, was profoundly meant. Tirelli, with her energy, inspirational presence and her extra-ordinary organizational abilities, master-minded another superb LABAN EVENT. She has worked tirelessly over many years to secure funding and run this event with little practical help and assistance. I urge all practitioners and members of the Laban world to recognise and pay due tribute to her indomitable spirit and future work.

<http://www.laban.ch>



Nunzia Tirelli

Photo by Giorna Beltrametti



Screenshots from Guiseppe Altaro's *Solitude*



Icosahedron at Monte Verita Photo by Helen Roberts