

DANCE HERITAGE COALITION

April 2, 1993

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

APR 2 1993

MOTION PICTURE, BROADCASTING
AND RECORDED SOUND DIVISION


Steve Leggett
Library of Congress
M/B/RS Division
Washington, D.C. 20540

Dear Mr. Leggett,

Enclosed are ten copies of the Dance Heritage Coalition's comments for the National Film Preservation Board review process. These duplicate the document faxed to you yesterday by Coalition representative Madeleine Nichols, Curator of the Dance collection at The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. I hope this reaches you in time for inclusion in your report and I thank you for giving us the opportunity to contribute.

Film and video are essential to the documentation of dance and so the Coalition has significant concerns in this area. Our comments generally focus on the problem of films which are not housed in national or public institutions but rather are in private hands. The preservation problems at institutions and their ability to deal with them we believe will be well documented by reports submitted by the institutions themselves. Therefore the Coalition's comments do not deal extensively with these issues. Additionally the Coalition's comments refrain from mentioning video, as this is not part of the NFPB's charge. However, we would like to state that preservation of videotape, or rather the difficulty of or inability to preserve videotape, particularly obsolete tape formats, is a primary, urgent and growing concern for the dance community. I'm sure this issue had been raised in the course of your work. We only hope that national attention can also be brought to bear on this major preservation problem which will have a long range effect on the documentation, not only of dance, but of all of American life and culture during the second half of the twentieth century.

Sincerely yours,


Catherine J. Johnson
Coordinator, DHC

120

Coalition Coordinator: Catherine J. Johnson 149 Harmon Avenue Pelham NY 10803 Phone: (914)738-7185 Fax: (914)738-7271

Core Administrative Committee

Jeanne T. Newlin
Harvard Theatre Collection
Harvard College Library
Cambridge MA 02138
Phone: (617) 495-2445
Fax: (617) 495-1376

Madeleine M. Nichols
Dance Collection
The New York Public Library
40 Lincoln Center Plaza
New York NY 10023-7498
Phone: (212) 870-1655
Fax: (212) 799-7975

Margaret K. Norton
San Francisco Performing Arts
Library & Museum
399 Grove Street
San Francisco CA 94102
Phone: (415) 255-4800
Fax: (415) 255-1913

Vicky J. Wulff
Library of Congress
Performing Arts Library
Kennedy Center
Washington DC 20566
Phone: (202) 416-8780
Fax: (202) 416-8786

COMMENTS SUBMITTED TO THE NATIONAL FILM PRESERVATION BOARD
BY THE
DANCE HERITAGE COALITION
ON CURRENT PRACTICES OF FILM PRESERVATION
IN THE AMERICAN DANCE COMMUNITY

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

APR 2

MOTION PICTURE, PHOTOGRAPHIC
AND RECORDED SOUND DEPARTMENT

Film preservation, for the dance community, holds a special challenge. The performances, dancers, dance steps and costumes in earlier centuries were depicted through writings, notations, engravings, drawings and, eventually, in still photographs. This century has provided for the first time the moving image record. Choreographers and dancers now use these to register their works for copyright, to study their works, to present their works to audiences beyond the immediate "live" audience, or simply to document and preserve a record of their art works.

The Dance Heritage Coalition, established in October of 1992, is a national alliance of all those working to preserve and document our nation's dance traditions. The Coalition was organized by representatives from four leading dance research institutions: the Dance Collection, The New York Public Library; Harvard Theatre Collection, Harvard College Library; Library of Congress; and San Francisco Performing Arts Library and Museum. The mission of the Coalition is to preserve and make accessible the documents of the creative contributions of American dance -- past, present and future. Formed by participatory, cooperative projects, the Coalition is a collaboration of the dance community, the library and archival field, scholarly

institutions, and individuals focusing in four essential areas: access to materials, documentation of dance, preservation of dance documents, and education regarding documentation and preservation. The following comments address the areas of concern which have been identified by the National Film Preservation Board: collections, preservation, facilities, access and outreach.

1. Collections. Films of dance are decentralized, generally owned by dance companies or private individuals, although some films of dance have been centralized in institutions which include dance in their collecting policies. Among these are the Library of Congress, The New York Public Library, Harvard University, University of Texas, and the San Francisco Performing Arts Library & Museum. Except for the American Hollywood theatrical films, dance films are largely unique materials. Their scope encompasses the dancing of the 1930's through 1970's, when videotape emerged as the tool of preference because of its portability and relatively low cost. The commercially produced and released films which incorporate dance are fewer in number; but they may be the best and often the only records of some of our great dance artists, among them Bill Robinson and the Nicholas Brothers, for example. At particular risk are the privately shot films on 8mm and 16mm which contain moving images of decades of dances and dancers. They are sought and cherished for teaching new dancers, for restaging masterworks of earlier

decades, and for presenting the artistry of dancers who have died. Most recently, for example, a silent 8mm film of Rudolf Nureyev when he first danced in America was sought for the Kennedy Center tribute to honor him.

2. Preservation efforts. The difficulty, time and cost of the transfer of old, shrinking film stock to new stock and other formats presents the major preservation problem. The poignancy is that our artistic heritage is disappearing on deteriorating stock. Dancers must locate films in private collections, in facilities with no on-going preservation program in place. At best, the institutions which do have collections and preservation programs, make referrals to qualified film laboratories which can technically work with the various film formats in fragile physical condition. Without access to technical people who can assess the physical condition of these unique and aging films, however, the process is ineffective and only sporadically successful.

3. Facilities. The current storage conditions for films of dance are generally poor, as so many of the films are in offices, closets and similar places. With the exception of some institutions, rarely does measurement of temperature and humidity or use of proper packaging occur; rarely are films inspected until the content of the dancing recorded is needed. Specific examples include the film for the Nureyev tribute, or films now

being located and used for the revival of choreographic works of George Balanchine, or films studied for the renewal of cultural dancing by second and third generation Yugoslavian groups in the United States.

4. Information and Access. Presently, access to these unique moving image materials is limited to the owners of the films, except for those films which are in institutions. On a case by case basis, the owners do show or loan their films to the dancers and choreographers whose work is in the film. Preservation priorities, if they are considered at all, are set and controlled by the possessor of the film, or possibly by the individual dancer or choreographer involved. Most of the films bear no identification of the names of the dances or dancers they contain. This pattern does not allow for use by researchers, loans for educational screenings, descriptions on computerized databases, and sharing of information beyond private acquaintances. The only arguably positive aspect of this lack of a system is that the rights of copyright owners remain protected. However, the price is that our cultural heritage is hidden and the risk is inadvertent dispersal and even disappearance of that heritage.

5. Outreach. Educational and museum institutions can effectively foster public awareness of preservation issues and can address the needs which exist. Through workshops and

technical consultations, the professional preservation community can be brought into contact with artistic endeavors. Simple, routine practices which aid in the preservation of film can be encouraged, such as the use of clean equipment, measuring temperature and humidity, routine inspection, clear labeling, the creation of back-up copies stored in proper conditions, and at least collection level listings in our national bibliographic databases, if not detailed item level cataloging of important films.

For dance, the moving image record is a vital part of continuity and growth. Therefore, the Dance Heritage Coalition urges the National Film Preservation Board to give consideration and specific budgetary attention to the preservation of films of dance and to work toward a national prioritization of dance preservation.