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Ann Hutchinson Guest, trailblazer in the field of choreology, the recording and analysis of dance moves – obituary

Working from a deep understanding of how to analyse body movements, she revived a succession of long-lost dances

By Telegraph Obituaries

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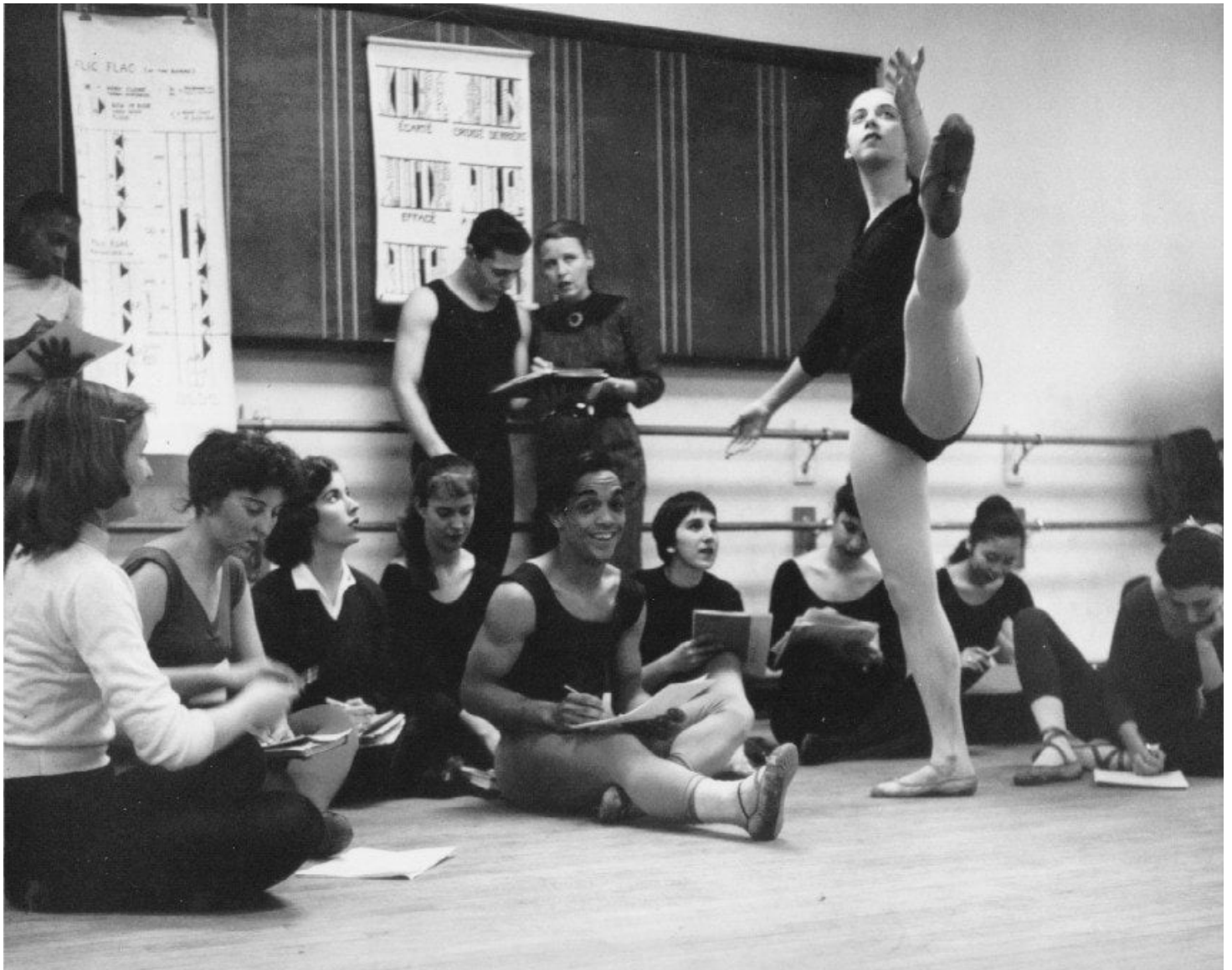


Ann Hutchinson Guest, who has died aged 103, was a pioneer and world expert in the

emerging science of choreology, or the writing down and analysis of dance movement. She researched some 80 systems for recording dance – spanning more than 300 years, most of them were obsolete – and used her knowledge to recover celebrated but long-lost dances and ballet numbers.

Most notably, these included her 2000 staging for the Royal Ballet of a reconstruction of Vaslav Nijinsky's signature 1912 work, *L'Après-midi d'un faune*, which she had attempted to reconstruct ever since the dancer's widow had given her some of his notes.

The staging finally became possible when Nijinsky's own notation, marking every step, turned up in the British Library, and Ann Hutchinson Guest had the skill to decode his highly idiosyncratic code system.



Ann Hutchinson Guest, rear, standing, at the High School of Performing Arts in New York in the late 1940s | CREDIT: Courtesy of the Dance Notation Bureau and DNB Collection, Ohio State University

Other remarkable recoveries included recreations of an 1836 signature solo of the

legendary ballerina Fanny Elssler and an ensemble from an 1844 ballet, *La Vivandière*. Ann Hutchinson Guest's training originated in the modern dance world, and she made significant recoveries of pioneer American modernism by Doris Humphrey.

Her work's versatility and innovativeness showed in the applicability of her understanding of how to break down the components of body movement into a wide range of languages – from the grace and nuance of classical art dance to physical efficiency in factory assembly lines, better use of space in theatre, and even the minute inflections that could improve a golf swing.

Originally from New York, Ann Hutchinson Guest derived her skill and knowledge of what she would define as dance's different languages from her immersive training at Dartington Hall, the Devon estate developed as a progressive arts and education centre by the Anglo-American philanthropists Dorothy Whitney and Leonard Elmhirst between the wars.



Teaching Labanotation, c. 1963 | CREDIT: Courtesy of the Dance Notation Bureau and DNB Collection, Ohio State University

Dartington became the haven for some of Europe's most advanced dance pioneers, refugees from Nazi Germany, notably the German choreographer Kurt Jooss, with whom Ann Hutchinson trained as a teenager from 1936.

Jooss's ballet *The Green Table* had caused a sensation at its 1932 Paris premiere in its satirical handling of geopolitical negotiations, with black-suited diplomats dancing evasively around a green baize table, and when he and Sigurd Leeder resettled the Ballets Jooss in Dartington in 1933, his politically and socially expressive modern ballets

established a firm bond with British audiences.

In 1938 the veteran Hungarian dance theorist and Berlin ballet master Rudolf Laban joined them in Devon. Laban's systematic attempt to define and analyse stage movement enthused the young Ann Hutchinson, and on her return to New York to begin a performing career on Broadway she used her spare time to try to write down the dancing in the best shows.

Successfully recording Jerome Robbins's dances in the musical Billion Dollar Baby, she set up the Dance Notation Bureau, and was commissioned by the leading ballet choreographer George Balanchine to notate his Symphony in C, and Hanya Holm to record for copyright her dances in the Cole Porter musical Kiss me, Kate.



Carlos Acosta at the Royal Opera House in 2004 in L'Après-midi d'un faune, revived from Vaslav Nijinsky's dance notation score by Ann Hutchinson Guest | CREDIT: Angela Taylor

Such recognition in the dance world was not, however, matched by earning prospects, and in the late 1940s she returned to Dartington to work with Laban, who was establishing Britain as the base for his training system.

With the founding of the Laban Centre of Movement in Manchester, she wrote the textbook Labanotation in 1955. On Laban's death in 1958, Ann Hutchinson had his blessing to establish the International Council for Kinetography Laban, as the protector

of the system.

Her aim was for “dance literacy” – whereby dancers and choreographers should themselves learn to write down movement, as musicians and composers read and write musical scores – but it proved hard to achieve in practice.

The choreographer Matthew Bourne, a 1980s student at the then Laban Centre for Movement and Dance (now Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance), recalled being taught notation but found it of little practical use.

Yet Hutchinson was able to show its value for children with reading difficulties. By first enacting stories with mime and movement, she built their confidence and fired their interest in the actual words – an approach of value in theatre practice, too.

Ann Hutchinson was born on November 3 1918 in New York, the third child of a detective novelist, Robert Hutchinson, and Delia (née Dana), a granddaughter of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Brought up in England from the age of eight, she was sent to dance classes for therapy after childhood illness.





Ann Hutchinson Guest in 2019 at the National Dance Education Organization Conference | CREDIT: Courtesy of the Dance Notation Bureau

After Dartington Hall, Ann Hutchinson studied in New York with the contemporary choreographers Martha Graham, José Limón and Antony Tudor, before pursuing a short wartime performing career largely on Broadway.

After a brief wartime marriage to the trumpeter Ricky Trent, she met her second husband, the English solicitor and dance historian [Ivor Guest](#), at a launch party for her Labanotation textbook.

They married in 1962 and for the next half-century – until Guest’s death in 2018 aged 97 – the pair became an invaluable joint source of historical understanding of dance, uniting her academic work on scores with her husband’s fascination with early dance personalities and institutions.

In 1967 Ann Hutchinson Guest established the Language of Dance Centre in London to

publish notation research and choreographic scores, and replicated the Centre in Connecticut in 1997. She wrote standard textbooks on Labanotation and dance notation, and in *Choreographics* (1987) illuminatingly showed how 13 leading notation systems each recorded the same movement patterns.

Ann Hutchinson Guest, who held two honorary doctorates, was appointed MBE in 2021 for services to dance.

Ann Hutchinson Guest, born November 3 1918, died April 9 2022

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