

VDC Interview Transcript

Lucy Venable

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OSU Dance

Westminster Thurber

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Key:

CF: Candace Feck

LV: Lucy Venable

MDB: Megan Davis Bushway (VDC team member)

CF: I am excited to talk with you, Lucy. I wonder if I could ask you to reminisce a little bit about your years in New York, prior to 1968 when you moved to Columbus.

LV: Well, I could try!

CF: What were you doing then?

LV: I just went to New York after I graduated from college. I thought that's what I wanted to do — it was after a summer at Connecticut College; I think that was the first year for the program there, in '48.¹ I attended after college graduation, and then I went on to New York. I stayed in an apartment in the Bronx with a family that somebody had introduced me to; they had daughters that went away to college, so they had a room to rent. My mother said I *had* to have a place to live before I went to New York!

CF: Good advice!

LV: So I was in the Bronx for a year, and the first morning I was there, I looked in the paper and they said you could go to Macy's and see about a job. So, I went down to Macy's and got a part-time job from 9:00 to 1:00 or something, counting the money that came up from the clerks the day before. I was working mostly with mothers who came in after their children went to school, and counted the money part-time. I had that job, and then I would get lunch on the way to taking dance lessons. I had studied with José Limón at Connecticut College, and in Boston before that, when I was in college.² So I went there, and then I would go to a beginner Graham class often in the late afternoon. Afterwards, I would eat dinner somewhere, and go back to my Bronx apartment. So that was the first year — and I considered it my “graduate work,” because there were a lot of performances you could go to, and there were historical lectures on dance, and there was the library to go to. They were just starting the dance part, coming out of music, at the New York Public Library. So I read all the dance magazines there, and looking back on it, I've decided that was my

¹ The American Dance Festival began as a summer dance program located on the campus of Connecticut College from 1948–1978, when it moved to the campus of Duke University in Durham, North Carolina.

² Lucy graduated from Wellesley College, earning a BA in Spanish.

“graduate work.” Then, the second year, I think that was when one of the people left — friends of mine that had lived on West 45th Street — and so that left an opening in that apartment with this other friend, so I moved in there and stayed until I came to Columbus. And that was a wonderful place, because it was 325 West 45th Street, right by Times Square, so it was very convenient, and a very nice apartment in the middle of town, so you could get to places easily. It was right in the Theatre district. So that’s where I stayed until I came here. For awhile, I even kept that apartment so I could go back to New York. Then I got tired of that, so I finally gave it up.

CF: At what point did you actually join the Limón Company? When did that happen?

LV: Well, I had started teaching children before I was with the Limón Company, but I was studying with José, and Doris Humphrey was teaching repertory, so that’s how I got to know her. And she was head of the dance program at the 92nd Street Y; I think she was head of the whole thing. And Bonnie Bird³ had come just then from the Far West, and was head of the Children’s Program. And so somehow and — I don’t know if it was Doris who recommended me to teach in the children’s program — I had never taught children, so that was *great*, and Bonnie was a very good helper with all of that. Then Bonnie decided that they should make a company, because Fred Berk was up there teaching folk dance, and then Bonnie was there and Doris was there. It was quite a dance center! And that’s how the Merry-Go-Rounders came into being.⁴ And Eva Desca was there the first year, and she choreographed a wonderful piece called *The Goops*,⁵ after a book that Doris had that she’d always thought would make a good dance of some sort. So everybody was collaborating, and we had the rehearsal space and everything given to us by the Y. We had that in the morning, and then — it was sort of backwards — we had the rehearsal and *then* we had dance class, a ballet class, for the members of the company *after* their rehearsal! We had ballet with Robert Joffrey, who had just arrived in New York and was settling in; this was before he established his company.⁶ [Alfredo] Corvino came later, and taught us for a while. And so we had all these people, and there was another teacher that came from California and he was new in town, so we got to study with him. We had quite an interesting time up there at the Y. And we had a stage to perform on, so the Merry-Go-Rounders would have that as home base, and they would bring school children to see our programs; on the week-ends, we might go out to Long Island or something. We’d have to load up a truck and take everything to wherever we were going, and we’d put it up and we’d dance, and we’d take it down and go home. So you learned all aspects! That was a real good home base, and we had rehearsal every morning *until* --- the next thing that came along was that the Limón Company was going to Europe. They’d gotten a State Department tour, and they needed a few more people. So I

³ Bonnie Bird grew up in the Seattle, Washington area, what is now Bothell, WA. She went on to head the dance program at Cornish School of the Arts in 1937.

⁴ According to the NYPL entry, “The Merry-Go-Rounders were established in November 1952 as a non-profit children’s dance and theater group to perform educational dance performances. The Merry-Go-Rounders were founded by a number of faculty and teachers at the Children’s Dance Department of the 92nd Street YMHA, which sponsored them from 1952 - 1961. Doris Humphrey was the artistic director for The Merry-Go-Rounders from the beginning.

⁵ *The Goops* books comprised a series of writings, including a comic strip, originally published between 1900 and 1950, by Gelett Burgess.

⁶ During part of this time, from 1950 to 1955, Joffrey taught at the New York High School for the Performing Arts, where he staged his earliest ballets. He founded the Joffrey Ballet School in New York City in 1953 and formed his company in 1954.

was invited to go along because they were doing some of the larger pieces of Doris's and so on, and that's how I got started with that. So nothing was planned — it just happened!

CF: That's how life is.

LV: Yeah! So I'd already gotten involved with teaching the Limón classes. When his smaller company was going away, they would say, "The company's going away. Would you teach?" (She laughs): "Alright." And then I had to teach at Juilliard for the same reason, because José was also teaching there. So, things just fell into my lap; I didn't plan anything!

CF: What year did you graduate from Wellesley?

LV: I think it was 1948.

CF: At what point did you encounter Labanotation?

LV: When I first came [to New York], I was taking Graham technique and Limón technique. And in the Limón class was this woman who was taking notation,⁷ and she was trying to drum up trade with everybody, and encourage us, and I kept saying "No" (she laughs, acknowledging this). Then finally, one day, I think I decided "Well, I guess I have to look into this, *too*." So, I think there were two or three people who were in this class, and we went around to somebody's apartment, and sat around the kitchen table and had a lesson or so. And, you know, they would give us ten lessons, and then after you finished those ten lessons, maybe somebody would leave the class... it was sort of confusing, but that's how it got started. And there wasn't any [Dance Notation] Bureau then, of course. Ann Hutchinson's apartment was sort of "headquarters," but we didn't go there for class — we would go to other people's places. But every so often, they would have little meetings of people who were interested in this, and that's how I met Irmgard Barteneiff. She was working then with children in a hospital — I don't know whether it was in the Bronx or where; it was uptown somewhere — children that had come through polio, and that's how her Fundamentals got started. She was working with polio patients and learning more for herself, too, using Laban's theory, and so forth. But she was also a physical therapist, and what-not. So she was around, and then through that began all her things for dancers, too, but that's how I knew her. There was just a lot going on! That was my "graduate work."

CF: Yes, it was! I can't think of a better program! In those early days of meeting in apartments, and not really having a Bureau — when did the Bureau come into existence? And did you get certified, or did that not exist yet? I don't really know.

LV: Well, Ann's apartment was down in Greenwich Village, and sort of around the corner — I don't remember what the street is — there was still the Joffrey company over there, and they had a studio. In the same building, there were spaces that had been an elevator shaft, but they'd made them into a little office space. So Ann Hutchinson found this, and that became the Bureau office. And I think — I don't know — \$25.00 a month, or whatever it was — was something that we could afford. So that became the Bureau. And then the space exactly above — still, like an elevator shaft

⁷ According to an earlier interview with Nena Couch (2002), the woman's name was Joanne Emmons.

— was free, and now we had two rooms, so you could pull on a cord to ring a bell to each other. That's where the Bureau started, but it started in Ann Hutchinson's apartment, really — or *with* her.

CF: Would you say, in a way, that you were teaching each other — or did Ann already know everything there was to know at that time, and she was disseminating the knowledge?

LV: I never really studied with Ann. First of all, I wasn't advanced enough, because there were other people, like Els Grellinger and others.... Then Ann might have a summer session – four weeks or six weeks, or something — so I took those lessons, and then we would — in the building where Joffrey was, where we had our elevator shaft, there was also a studio, so we could rent the studio for the summer session, just for the hour or so that we wanted a class — so we had space to move in, and so forth. So there were just a lot of dance things going on down there! Somehow everything worked out.

CF: Well let's talk about Helen Alkire, and how she came into your orbit. What happened there?

LV: I was trying to think when I first met Helen, and I'm not really sure. She brought students to Connecticut College every summer, and I taught there, so it might have been there, or it might have been at the Bureau, because she took one year off and was thinking of working on a doctorate or something, at the time. And I'm not sure if that was when I was on tour, because I don't remember her in New York so much...or whether that was how she first became connected, because she did take some lessons in notation, yet I don't remember her at the Bureau doing that. So, that's where I'm a little confused! And I'm sure she and I talked about this, but I've forgotten those details. It was somewhere around there — because eventually, she was on our Board of Directors. And she was one who — when people were getting concerned about preserving everything and getting it out of sight in case there was a big war, and so on — she said that all these things should be preserved, and was offering storage here at OSU. But she was in contact, because she did serve on the Board of Directors, so that's how all of that came about.

I remember having the head of the New York Public Library, Genevieve Oswald, down to our little office, because I told her that we were starting a library, and I wanted to know how to do that. So we had two drawers (she laughs about all of this, in retrospect), and she said “Well, you can divide it into the scores, and the notation materials — lessons, and so forth.” She came on a Saturday, her day off — came down to the Village and sat in that room and told me how to make a library!

CF: Straight from the horse's mouth!

Now, you mentioned that you had really resisted these invitations to learn Labanotation, at first. What was it that eventually changed your mind? When was your turning point? What got you excited about it?

LV: Well, I don't know that I *got* excited! I was still rummaging around. I wanted to dance, and notation didn't sound like that — it was something else. I don't know why I didn't want to do it; I thought I was busy with these other things.

CF: Well, you were! But at some point, you certainly embraced it, and I just wondered if you can remember that?

LV: No.

CF: No, it just evolved, then... So let's go back to Helen inviting you to come to Ohio.

LV: I don't quite remember how that came about, the first thing. But I know it happened, and I told her I didn't think so. But then for some reason, I do remember — maybe it was the next year, or some months later — I was going to a dance concert, and was sitting upstairs in a theatre near Carnegie Hall; I was at the lower part of the balcony, and I looked down and there were Helen and Suzie.⁸ They were in New York, and I had thought again about that offer and thought maybe I'd be interested in the job. So I moved down at intermission and asked if the job was still available, and that's how I said yes!

CF: Do you recall what happened for you in between saying no and saying yes — what it was that appealed to you?

LV: I'll have to think about that some more, because it must have been about '67. I don't know when they created the College of the Arts...

CF: '68.

LV: Yeah, so they were preparing in '67 and it was taking a while, so...

CF: What you've described is a very rich and stimulating twenty years in New York, where you had your "graduate school" — so much going on! I could imagine... I mean, you were born and raised in West Virginia, right? So you knew what you would be coming back to, more or less — and it wasn't New York! Maybe there was something about not wanting to give up what you had there initially, and then you came around somehow...

LV: I'll have to think about it some more...

CF: Well, I'm glad you did come back!

LV: And then I found out that Ruth Currier, who was a very good friend of mine and in the Limón Company and everything — that *she* was coming. But this was after each of us had said "Yes, we're coming" — and Ruth was coming because she was promised that she could have a company. So that was sort of interesting how that came about. It was '68... (she does some calculating): Yes, I think that was after I had been with the Limón Company for a while, and we'd done all these exotic tours, but I didn't like touring in *this* country very much. When we toured in this country, it was arranged by the Limón Company, and it didn't have the United States backing you and so forth, so it wasn't as glamorous as the other touring was: you were just getting on a bus and sitting there, traveling across the country — plus the fact that they didn't take the larger pieces, and so there wasn't as much for me to do, in that respect. I wasn't one of the "stars" of the company. So, I think I had turned down touring with them, and was sort of ready to do something else.

CF: That makes sense. Talk about, if you can, what you encountered — what you *expected* to find from what Helen had told you about the department, and what you did find. Because I think in '68,

⁸ Suzanne Schroeder

the OSU program may have still been located in Physical Education. Were they in the Physical Education building when you arrived, or were they in Sullivant Hall?

LV: They were in the Department of Physical Education. But wait— there’s something else that just came to mind. I had already been over here — you see, I knew people from Connecticut, who were students and so forth— and they were going to do *Shakers*,⁹ and I was supposed to come and check it. I had done at least one of those kinds of visits, so I had been here, and felt I knew the people. And then to be offered a job that paid you for the whole year! So I thought that that was “coming up” a little bit, and maybe I should take advantage!

CF: Right. So, you arrived. Did you bring the [Dance Notation Bureau] Extension with you or did you make the Extension when you got here?

LV: I think it was Helen’s vision, the Extension, as to how to have it as a separate thing. And we also brought the library — because we brought all the originals here, and then people like Diane McIntyre and a couple of others who went on to do interesting things — we fed all the originals through the copy machine, and kept the originals here and sent the copies back to the Bureau. So that was a job, with the library! It took a long time. And that was because we were thinking that if the world blows up, you know, we must have this preserved. So that was one of Helen’s suggestions, that the Bureau should be taken care of — that sort of thing — and so we did.

CF: Did Helen hire you specifically to come and take that on, or did she hire you to teach?

LV: Both!

CF: Did she hire you to teach Limón technique, or...

LV: I never taught Limón technique here, because I was busy teaching the Notation. And then I got started with Alexander [Technique], and ended up teaching that too. So, it kept growing!

CF: Yes. Tell me, what was the department like – I mean, how many faculty, approximately, were here then? I know it was smaller than it is now.

LV: Well, Helen was the Head, and we were over there [Physical Education Department] where Ann Lilly was teaching swimming, and that sort of thing. I’m not sure when she came in as Helen’s assistant — a little later, perhaps. Vickie Blaine was around, and she was already teaching, I think. It was in the same building as Physical Education, so it was just gradually pulling away until we had to move to the old laundry, somewhere up the road — and then, finally, got to where we are now. But that was after we had been elsewhere, I think.

CF: A lot of moving around. I’m sorry that it looks like we’re going to run out of time, and I hope that we can pick this up later at another date, but I’d like to hear your thoughts about the role that the Laban material — Laban Studies, Labanotation — really played in those years for the department — much of which I personally experienced! How did that evolve? When did Odette Blum come in? That wing of the department was solid by the late ‘70s...

⁹ *Shakers* was a work choreographed by Doris Humphrey in 1930.

LV: I don't know, I'd have to figure that out. Odette came about two years after me — she would know when she came. That was because it (Notation) was made obligatory, and we needed more people to teach. Then we took it on into Directing from Score, and worked on things like that. And Motif [Writing] was added, and we had summer workshops for that. So it would go on all year. And then we brought in Loren Bucek and Ann Kipling Brown to do classes for children in the summers. So we just played around, and we could invite other people — and then we had the computer...

CF: One thing that occurs to me, taking a historical view looking back, is that your connection with ICKL and the really global connections that you established through the Notation material, must have been very important for the department — in terms of its growth, its reputation, the people you knew and connected to. Would you have any thoughts about that?

LV: Well, we just went on with ICKL: International Council of Kinetography Laban (she laughs, seemingly amused by this complicated title), and it still goes on! So, that way we went to England and France and Germany and China and so forth, for our conferences.

CF: I think in many ways that put OSU Dance Department on the map in a way it wouldn't have been. I wonder if you have an opinion about that.

LV: Well, I don't know. We just did what we did...

CF: I know there's so much more to say, but maybe we should jump to your development of Laban Writer, and your decision to go into the "software business"?

LV: (She chuckles.) Well, I don't know *how* we got started on that, except — no, I don't know. I *do* know how we started working on it: we had to borrow the secretary's little tiny computer over the week-end! And then — who was the first young man I had to work with, because I didn't know any computer stuff — we were all learning.

CF: Scott Sutherland?

LV: No. It was before Scott. He was next. I'll have to think about that... Anyway, he just worked on it during the week-ends because that's when he could get the computer from the secretary.¹⁰ And then I had two or three others that came, and Vickie [Blaine] raised some money somehow, and Eileen Fox was helpful from New York — and so we just got started!

CF: Well, the parallel is striking: there you were in New York, working with the Head of the New York Public Library to tell you how to make a library to set up what would become the Bureau, and then here you were at OSU and you're realizing "the digital age is upon us"! I mean, it was visionary on your part! But it sounds like — and I don't want to put words into your mouth — it sounds like the same sort of impetus: to preserve the work in a way that is meaningful for its time.

LV: Hmmmm.

CF: Would you say?

¹⁰ Nena Couch's oral history with Lucy (2002) identifies this person as George Karl.

LV: Well, *maybe*...

CF: Okay, I'm going to stop speaking for you. (We both laugh at this.)

LV: I didn't know what I was doing, particularly. I didn't have a great plan. I was just messing around!

CF: Okay, I'm going to ask you one more question, and maybe we can come back and continue this conversation another time. But it again strikes me, having been in Cleveland recently to talk with the Cleveland Modern Dance Association people, that it was a group of women, starting in somebody's basement, and working in each other's basements to get dance happening. And again, the parallels strike me as obvious: you've got a group of women here in Columbus — you, Helen, whoever else joined the effort, doing the same thing! Meanwhile, all of this is happening at the same time that the Women's Movement is coming of age. So I'm wondering what you observed: I'm curious about what sort of challenges you saw Helen face, or that all of you faced, as a group of women in the university? Women are still in the minority here, but back in those years... More broadly, let me reframe all this: I'm generally curious about the big achievements in the department during those early years and later, and also about major challenges that were met under Helen's leadership.

LV: I think I've never been terribly aware of all that! I was just going along — I'm really not part of the Women's Something-or-Other (she laughs).

CF: You are; you just don't think about it. But I get that.

LV: I just went ahead!

CF: You did what you wanted to do... On balance now, when you took the job and left New York, did you ever think you'd stay this long? Did you look at it as a permanent move or did that just happen?

LV: No. Because nothing had been permanent, so I just came along, and I guess I just stayed. I sort of didn't plan ahead very well, didn't have some (long term) idea.

CF: Is there anything you would particularly like to share that we haven't discussed yet about the department? What it has meant to the state — or the nation? Anything about Helen's leadership, and her legacy? Those are perhaps rather grand topics — but after all, you have seen the department from its beginnings in the College of the Arts until the present day.

LV: Mm-hmm.

CF: You've seen a lot happen there, and experienced the impact of it...

LV: I think I never paid much attention to the management end of things. It all seemed to be very helpful to me, and Helen was always the one sort of nudging, and saying "Well, you could do this..." or "Why don't we start having summer events?" and I don't know — she sort of made it possible, and it happened, but I didn't have any plan. No great vision!

CF: Well, I suspect you are being a bit too humble about your own vision, but I hope we can talk about it another time. It seems to me you had a vision for what Labanotation could be as a dance preservation and educational tool, if nothing else.

LV: Well, we were exploring what it could do, and that was fun. But I didn't have a vision like she did. *She* was the one who would often tell *me* — and then I'd have to think about it...

CF: Anything you'd like to say about the place of Notation today?

CF: I don't really know *where* we are with it — it's changing, I know that. I don't attend ICKL anymore. That's just my choice; it's going along fine. I'm not in the field, so I can't really say. There's difficulty keeping the Bureau going in New York, which is too bad. And it's sort of out of vogue at the moment. And it's cut out of the universities, which is too bad. But there we are!

CF: It must give you some consolation to think that because of Helen's leadership, and your initiative, at least those many works are preserved. So they *can* be of use, when the time is right. Wouldn't you say that OSU has played a really amazing role in that way?

LV: It has!

CF: Would you mind saying it in your own words? Because my words won't be part of footage...

LV: (She laughs).

CF: Well, I just mean, perhaps talk about that a bit.

LV: Uh-huh. Well, I think we're preserving them (the notation scores and teaching materials) in the library here, and we've got to get that fixed up a little better, so that's one of my concerns at the moment. But it's there — so we need to get busy!

CF: Okay! Well, on that note, let's get busy! Thank you so much. It's really so interesting to learn a little more about your time in the department.

MDB: I have one question. I'm curious about the fact that with Labanotation, and writing in the curriculum, as well as the Alexander technique — those are such great supplements to a well-rounded education at OSU — I'm curious about how you would describe what the students took away from that education. With the Laban work, and your teaching of Alexander, what do you think the students were equipped with when they left?

LV: I think you'd have to ask the students!

MDB: What were you hoping they would take away?

LV: I just enjoyed working with them, and that was what I had to teach, so I taught it. And I think the Alexander work is very important. I've benefited very much from it, and I think others have too. And that was something that I studied through a sabbatical. They didn't really give sabbaticals here,

but I took one. I went away and studied Alexander more intensively with my teacher.¹¹ And then I came back, and Helen said “When are you going to teach it?” And I said, “I’m not certified to teach it.” Well, she started assigning me to teach it (she laughs) — sometimes as many as three classes per quarter! And it was fun, and the students seemed to like it, and it’s still going on.

CF: You mentioned it’s been helpful to you; I know it’s been helpful to the students — obviously so, as it’s still going on. Also, the Barteneiff Fundamentals! Would you comment, perhaps, on how they have personally been helpful to you?

LV: Well, all these things have to do not with a particular technique, but you’re working with *yourself* all the time, and studying things that have to do with movement — but they’re anatomical things. You learn more about appreciating what we have, and how to take care of it, in that way— and how to *watch* what you’re doing. So it’s your instrument, and you have to take care of your instrument!

CF: Yes.

LV: But it’s not too hard. It’s just to be *aware*. Mm-hmm.

CF: Indeed. Thank you.

JD: I think you still teach Alexander in your home?

LV: I have two students that I brought along with me.

CF: Lucy, I don’t know whether we’ll be able to schedule another time, but I think there’s more to say.

LV: Oh.

CF: Was it too taxing, having to think back about all of that?

LV: No.

CF: It’s really so interesting! Because of your longevity in the field (she laughs at this as a reference to her age) — Okay, your longevity, period. Alright! You’re ninety, let’s just acknowledge that. It’s amazing. But what I mean is your longevity in the field!

LV: Mmm. Yeah.

CF: You’ve done a little bit of everything, and you’ve done it for a long time, and you’ve seen so much change and evolve.

LV: Hmmm.

¹¹ In the 2002 interview with Nena Couch, housed as part of the OSU Oral History project, Lucy notes that she studied with Marjorie Barstow in Lincoln, Nebraska during the academic year 1977- 1978.

CF: You know, most of us don't have that kind of perspective.

LV: Well, I came at a time when a lot was happening...

CF: You did, and that's rich for us to find out about, so I hope we can talk again.

LV: Uh-huh.

CF: Thank you so much. It's been such a pleasure. (She laughs at this).