

UNIVERSITÉ DU QUÉBEC À MONTRÉAL

ILLUMINATING *LUNA*:  
AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF MEANING  
IN A MONTRÉAL “*NOUVELLE DANSE*” EVENT

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BY  
DENA DAVIDA

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## **Abstract**

### **(l'anglais est suivi par une traduction en français)**

“Illuminating Luna” sets into motion an ethnographic study of a contemporary dance event, uniquely conceived by Québécoise choreographer Ginette Laurin and her dance company *O Vertigo* who are situated in the cosmopolitan city of Montréal. It is here that choreographic dance world practices are socio-cultural behaviours. The *Luna* event evoked a multiplicity of meanings for participants as they interacted cooperatively to create and enjoy the extra-ordinary occasion of the *Luna* dance performance. As developed by dance anthropologists studying traditional and social dance forms, the dance event framework here becomes a template for understanding the nature and meaning of a contemporary or (as some call it in Québec) “*nouvelle danse*” event.

The parameters of this research project are not limited to public performances of the *Luna* choreography, but included the entire span of the event from conception to aftermath and a wide range of participant groups. This project delineates a detailed account of what were the various activities, who was involved and what they did, and where and when the event was situated, but especially, why they participated. The quest for meaning is at the heart of the *Luna* project and takes two specific forms: (a) how the dance event made meaning as part of a repertoire of activities in the lives of its participants, and (2) the kinds of meanings that were formulated about the *Luna* performance.

This study is a continuity of Kealiinohomoku's project (1969/1970) in which she elaborated the ethnic characteristics of classical ballet. Her proposal that all dances are ethnic was later carried forward in an anthology edited by Marcus and Myers (1995) that further explored the interdisciplinary relationships between artists and anthropologists within the “arts marketplace” of museums, galleries and festivals. This research also draws on Novack's published doctoral research (1990) on Contact Improvisation, Wulff's study (2000) on the professional life of ballet dancers and Fisher's

cultural analysis (2003) of the *Nutcracker Ballet*. It is also grounded in discourses and theories from the emerging field of dance anthropology, benefits from the recent tradition of doing “anthropology at home”, and from current developments in aesthetics, “sensuous scholarship”, reception and perception theory, and the cultural studies of dance.

Data collection employed in this case study includes extensive fieldwork over a two-year period, 30 in-depth interviews and 4 focus groups (data recorded and transcribed). They also involved field photography and the collection of various documents as well as other kinds of artefacts (videotape, poster, CD ROM, etc.). Written materials were entered into a computer database, and later coded one paragraph at a time, assisted by NUDIST software. Interpretation of the data in the final text weaves together the ideas, theories, views and beliefs of participants, researcher and theoreticians.

The findings reveal a dance practice that, although little known to the public in general, is highly valued by its own subculture of ardent practitioners: dance artists, students, specialists, personnel and spectators. Through the case of one large-scale event, the *Luna* study delineates some of the unique characteristics of contemporary artistic dance: a long creative process, the professional status of its artists, an internationalist (and indigenous) aesthetic, the remounting and transformation of the event as it tours to different cities, and the many disparate kinds of meaning and modes of interpretation among its participants. But most of all, this ethnographic study of *Luna* offers anthropologists and dance researchers a methodology and rationale for examining the meaning of contemporary, artistic dance practices in the holistic context of “the dance event” framework.

Keywords : Dance anthropology, contemporary dance, ethnography, cultural studies of dance

## Résumé

« *Luna Révélée* » met en mouvement une étude ethnographique sur un événement de danse contemporaine original, conçu par la chorégraphe québécoise Ginette Laurin et sa compagnie de danse *O Vertigo*, oeuvrant dans la ville cosmopolite de Montréal. C’est ici que les pratiques chorégraphiques font du monde de la danse l’objet d’analyses en tant que comportements socioculturels. L’événement de *Luna* a suscité une multitude de significations chez ses participants, tout au cours de leur collaboration jouissive au processus de création de cette occasion « extra-ordinaire » de la performance de la chorégraphie *Luna*. Tel qu’élaboré par des études anthropologiques de la danse étudiant les formes de danse traditionnelles et sociales, la notion de l’événement de danse devient ici un cadre de référence pour comprendre la nature et la signification d’un événement de danse contemporaine (ou, comme l’appellent certains au Québec), de « nouvelle danse ».

Les paramètres de ce projet de recherche allaient bien au-delà des performances publiques de la chorégraphie Luna, pour englober l'événement dans son intégralité, de la conception jusqu'à l'après-événement. On y fait la description détaillée de la nature des différentes activités (quoi), de l'identité et rôle de ceux qui y ont participé (qui), du lieu et de la date de l'événement (où et quand), mais surtout, de ce qui a poussé ces individus à participer (pourquoi). La quête du sens était au cœur du projet Luna et a pris deux formes particulières : (a) la façon dont l'événement de danse a créé un sens par rapport à un répertoire d'activités dans la vie des participants, et (2) les sortes de significations formulées concernant la performance Luna.

Cette étude est un prolongement du projet de Kealiinohomoku (1969/1970), qui a exploré les caractéristiques ethniques du ballet classique. Sa proposition que toute danse est ethnique a été reprise dans une anthologie publiée sous la direction de Marcus et Myers (1995) qui a fait une exploration plus poussée des rapports interdisciplinaires entre les artistes et les anthropologues au sein du « marché des arts » des musées, des galeries d'art et des festivals. Cette recherche s'inspire aussi de la thèse de doctorat publiée par Novack (1990) sur l'Improvisation en Contact, l'étude de Wulff (2000) sur la carrière des danseurs de ballet, et l'analyse culturelle du ballet *Casse-Noisette* de Fisher (2003). Elle est fondée sur les discours et les théories du domaine de l'anthropologie de la danse, se nourrit de la tradition récente de faire « de l'anthropologie chez soi », et des nouveaux développements dans le domaine de l'esthétique, « sensuous scholarship » (recherches à travers les sens), la théorie de la réception et de la perception, et les études culturelles de la danse.

Les méthodes de collecte de données utilisées dans cette étude de cas comprennent un travail approfondi sur le terrain d'une durée de deux ans, trente entrevues en profondeur et quatre groupes de discussion (dont les propos des participants ont été enregistrés et transcrits). Parmi les méthodes utilisées, on retrouve également des photographies sur le terrain et la collection de divers documents ainsi que d'autres types d'artéfacts (vidéo, affiche, CD-ROM, etc.). Les documents écrits ont été entrés dans une base de données informatique, puis codifiés, paragraphe par paragraphe, à l'aide du logiciel NUDIST. L'interprétation des données dans le texte final a permis de faire la synthèse globale des idées, des théories, des opinions et des croyances des participants, de la chercheuse et des théoriciens.

Les résultats ont révélé qu'une pratique de danse, bien que peu connue du public en général, était très valorisée par sa propre sous-culture constituée de praticiens passionnés : artistes, étudiants, spécialistes, membres du personnel et spectateurs. À partir du cas d'un événement d'envergure, l'étude *Luna* a décrit quelques-unes des caractéristiques toutes particulières de la danse artistique : un long processus de création, le statut professionnel de l'artiste, et l'esthétique internationaliste (et indigène), la re-création d'un événement 'en tournée', c'est-à-dire transposé et transformé dans différentes villes, et les nombreux et disparates types de sens et de modes d'interprétation parmi les participants. Mais avant tout, cette étude ethnographique de *Luna* offre aux anthropologues et aux chercheurs dans le

domaine de la danse une méthodologie et un fondement pour explorer les significations des pratiques de danse artistique contemporaine dans le contexte holistique de « l'événement de danse ».

(Traduit de l'anglais par Rachelle Renaud)

Mots clés : Anthropologie de la danse, danse contemporaine, ethnographie, études culturelles sur la danse