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## **Siobhan Davies RePlay: (Re)visiting the digital archive**

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### **Abstract**

*This article provides an in-depth description of the many layers and processes involved in constructing a digital dance archive; Siobhan Davies RePlay. Three years after the archive went 'live' the article revisits its development and explores the impact of the archival process on the artists and researchers involved. It traces the ways in which a digital archive can be seen as an extension of the artist's work, reflecting back on the artist's creative methods and influencing future projects. By looking out to other digital dance projects the article will assess the ways in which digital archives contribute to a growing number of digital dance resources and build a new environment for the making, teaching, viewing and appreciation of dance.*

### **Keywords**

Siobhan Davies

dance

archive

digital

choreographic object

memory

Archives have long been a valuable source of information and knowledge. When the archive is a digital archive, and when the subject of the archive is dance, there are immediate challenges in determining ‘what’ can be archived, how the archive should be structured, and whom the archive is for. As one of the most ephemeral and intangible of the art forms, dance has generated relatively few records over time and those records that do exist frequently lack the necessary metadata to make them easily transferable to the online environment. This is the broad context in which Siobhan Davies RePlay began its development towards the end of 2006. RePlay is a digital archive of the work of British choreographer, Siobhan Davies. As a ‘born digital’ archive with no pre-existing hard copy version, it is the first of its kind in the United Kingdom and one of only a few similar collections worldwide. Perhaps unusually for what is traditionally thought of as an archive, RePlay features the work of a living choreographer who continues to make work, so the archive not only offers access to Davies’ work from the past but is developing and growing in parallel with Davies as she continues to make work into the future.

This article will describe the journey of the building of RePlay, the relationships that developed through the construction process and the impact these relationships have had on this and other related archival projects. I will also discuss how RePlay has prompted thought about the different ways in which dance generates and produces knowledge, and how that knowledge might be shared by viewers and archive users. By recalling the important discussions with those teams involved in making and thinking about the development of other digital choreographic objects during a period that was

coincidentally rich in artist-led digital dance resource development, the article will also consider the broader impact and effect of RePlay on its users, including dance artists, researchers and audiences.

With the opportunity in this article to reflect on RePlay within the context of a rapidly changing environment for the documenting and archiving of dance and performance over the last few years, because of the increasing availability of digital technologies, I conclude by briefly considering the changing role of the archive within contemporary dance practice and scholarship. I look to Lepecki's essay (2010), which explores the way artists encounter archives, and which offers a valuable reference point to question the relationship between artist and archive. His essay draws attention to the inevitable paradox inherent in the notion of the archive; what is made available through inclusion and what is made visibly absent through exclusion. Moreover, as RePlay is a digital collection, which expands over time, and allows users to generate (and simultaneously eliminate) their own objects using the scrapbook tool, it operates as a doubling of this paradox by eroding any notion of a stable, fixed 'archive' of records and objects. Lepecki's proposition that the archive is marked by a series of 'failures' (2010: 30) is thus a valuable touchstone as I revisit the conversations, compromises and decisions that shaped the construction of RePlay.

**Siobhan Davies: Artist, choreographer, collaborator**

Siobhan Davies is one of the United Kingdom's most significant and prolific choreographers. She has been making work since the beginnings of what quickly became established as 'contemporary dance' in the United Kingdom. Initially a dancer with the

newly formed London Contemporary Dance Theatre in the early 1970s, Davies choreographed her first work for the company, *Relay*, in 1972. Since that first work she has continued to choreograph for many of the major companies in Britain, including Rambert, English National Ballet and The Royal Ballet. In 1988 she formed her own company, now Siobhan Davies Dance, to make and tour work on the middle-scale, marking a clear turning point in Davies' career. Since that time she has continually challenged her own creative methods and collaborative processes. Prior to 1988 her work was characterized by her deep interest in complex choreographic structures and movement organization. This then fed her interests in her work post-1988, which explored how movement could be sourced deep within the body, resulting in movement that revealed and celebrated the unique qualities and idiosyncracies of each of her dancers in new ways.

Since taking up residence in her own studios in south London in 2006, which is not only a home for her own work but hosts a number of other artist-led organizations, her work has shifted again into quite radical new directions. Her work is now more consciously responding to different sites in which the work is made and performed. It is frequently devised for gallery spaces and other non-theatre venues, often in collaboration with other artists (including film-makers, composers, visual artists, writers and designers), which in some ways recalls her formative years as a visual artist, prior to her career in dance. But this recent work not only enables her to continually challenge her own relationship with dance but draws attention to the richness of dance and the particular knowledge accumulated over time by choreographers and dancers; a knowledge that is not always made visible or understood by those beyond the discipline.

As the archive has grown alongside Davies' experimentation with different performance modes it could be said that the virtual environment of the digital archive has become another site for her to consider how her work is encountered and shared. For example, a growing interest for Davies and an increasingly important dimension of her work has been the conversations she has had with experts from a wide range of other discipline practices (such as neuroscience, anthropology and architecture); which have identified crossovers in thought and practice, thereby stimulating thought about how dance can play a larger role in our cultural and intellectual life.

The history of Davies' career and its different phases has thereby provided a rich resource for the archive. Creating the archive would mean not only conserving Davies' own creative outputs but would hopefully provide a valuable mirror on, or entry to, the broader history of contemporary dance in the United Kingdom. Moreover, its purpose was always to extend far beyond a documented history of Davies' work, preserving the work for future generations, by providing a considered space for encountering dance, the traces that dance leaves behind and how those traces may be generative of new dance performances, artefacts, documents and objects.

### **The beginnings**

The archive project took root some time before 2006. As a practising artist and a researcher who had been closely studying Davies' work, I had been able to observe Davies' working methods in rehearsal over many years. But accessing the work once made and beyond the live performance/event (on video) was, and still is for much dance, notoriously difficult. By 2006, Davies had accumulated a large collection of records

associated with her work and always wanted her dance to be available and accessible so she frequently made copies of videos to send to those requesting them; but there was no systematic method of distribution, no checks on what use was made of those videos and there was little in the way of an ordered catalogue of materials. Her work was therefore hard to find, difficult to view and apart from a small number of broadcast performances and commercially available videos of her work, which in themselves provided only a partial and in some cases ‘inaccurate’<sup>1</sup> record of her work, her choreography, once no longer performed live, had largely disappeared from public view.

Following an initial conversation with Davies and some of her company staff, I embarked on a proposal to raise funds to create an archive of her work; to collect, organize, preserve and importantly allow more viewers to experience the work. This last ambition led to the decision to create a digital archive, intentionally free to access and which would be attractive for a very wide range of users, both within and beyond the dance research/practice community. Interestingly, Davies began to remake some of her earlier choreography in the mid-1990s to explore how these works would resurface and ‘speak’ to different audiences.<sup>2</sup> Her ‘restagings’ were, and continue to be, deliberate revisions rather than reconstructions,<sup>3</sup> reflecting Davies’ desire to allow the work to evolve because of the different dancers and her own changing interests. The embodied archiving of the work through this process prompted another important dimension to the archive project, which was to find a design and structure that would avoid each work appearing to be ‘fixed’. We set out to feature all versions of any single choreography, as it might exist through moving and still image, as well as the various voices that might provide commentary on the work, thus allowing users to formulate their own reading of a

work according to what they discovered. It could be said that the archive continued Davies' project of remaking work for different contexts, but in this case the digital world.

A substantial grant was secured from the Arts and Humanities Research Council<sup>4</sup> to develop the archive over a 30-month period between 2006 and 2009, without which the project would not have been possible. A team of three researchers at Coventry University led the project, working in close collaboration with Davies and her team throughout the project. As a project leader, and a dance scholar with no prior experience of either archiving or of the digital environment, I recruited co-researchers with expertise in technical media.<sup>5</sup> But there was no archivist on the team. Although this may now, on reflection, seem naïve, it did mean that we were not beginning with established archiving standards that would then be translated for a digital platform. We sought advice from many experts including members of our Steering Group,<sup>6</sup> but much of the knowledge of how to archive and what to archive was accumulated as the project progressed. Experienced archivists warned us that we probably would not be able to complete the project in the time frame, citing copyright as one of several challenges that would likely be a barrier to a successful outcome. Perhaps our naivety or dogged determination protected us from believing their warnings.

We set about an intensive period of work to collect, identify and digitize material, and to design the interface. The project progressed with effort largely focused on the parallel processes of managing a complex technical challenge and nurturing the development of a novel and hitherto untested creative output. It was apparent early on the archive development that whilst the archive required an architecture; a 'back-end' that could benefit from the intelligence sourced from other digital projects, the Davies archive

would be a unique resource, particular to Davies because of the specificity of her choreography as well as her own interest in how her work should and would be represented through the archival structure.

Encouraged by the University to publicize the project and to provide a useful description of the project for external events, one of the first tasks was to create a short promotional video, outlining the scope of the archive and the range of content. The film became a proxy for the archive and although efficient in providing information about the project in general it unhelpfully misrepresented the project in a reductive, simplified manner. As a first object of, and generated by the archive, it illustrated to us how the purpose of an archive is diminished if distilled in that way. It was clear that although there were numerous decisions to be made about structure, organization and design of the archive, its strengths would lie in providing access to the full collection in an unmediated, non-didactic way, to encourage the user to find his or her own engagement with the archive.

### **An exchange of knowledge**

Fundamental to the success of the project was the establishment of a mutually supportive working relationship between the research team and Siobhan Davies Dance. This was achieved through regular dialogue, formal meetings, the creation of the Steering Group and a clear sense of roles and responsibilities. Work developed along a number of discrete but interconnected themes, namely the technical tasks of ingestion, digitization, metadata creation, copyright clearance and the creative tasks of website/interface design and editorial/curatorial direction. Finding a structure that accommodated what were

sometimes conflicting priorities and which supported the working relationship between the Coventry team, Davies' team and the web developers, Bullet, put pressure on everyone; pressure that was mostly productive, not always comfortable but was fundamental to the archive's development.

The intention was always to include all materials relating to Davies' work post-1988 with a selected number of works included prior to this time to help the contextualization of the later period. Davies had a large collection of filmed records of works in rehearsal and performance, in various formats, hundreds of photographic images, publicity materials (posters, fliers, press releases, press previews and reviews), performance programmes and other miscellaneous objects. Beyond the company's collection there existed a fair number of published articles and scholarly materials, including a very small number of Labanotation scores of her work; all of which we hoped to include. It was expected that company dancers and others associated with Davies' work would contribute or loan many more additional materials for inclusion. Although we did receive a small number of interesting artefacts from various donors, many verbal offers of contributions did not materialize so relatively little content was sourced this way.

### INSERT FIGURE 1

**Figure 1:** Screenshot from Siobhan Davies RePlay.

Whilst the 'everything included' ambition was retained it became clear that there needed to be negotiation with Davies about what should be included and what should be left out. Her view was that some material was inappropriate for inclusion because it would misrepresent her work in how it was captured or documented, or because it was work she

did not wish to see again. Past work, effectively lost to the viewer, was about to re-enter the public domain, bringing with it memories and associations that might be uncomfortable for Davies or others who feature in the work. She talked sometime after the launch of the archive of how she had to adjust to the realization that her work could be viewed by anybody, at any time, anywhere in the world, which was initially unsettling for her. Through a carefully curated process it was agreed to omit some content and over time, this was limited to only a small number of videos, images and related objects.

Early on in the process we decided to purchase a proprietary digital asset management system rather than opt for an open source solution. At that stage, working with 'open source' software would have meant investing a lot of time in coding and developing the system to meet the demands of the archive so a proprietary system was selected because it could be tailored to our needs more efficiently, thereby enabling us to complete the work in the time available. Though probably the right decision at the time, we now recognize that the ongoing costs and contractual agreements relating to a proprietary system, and the unpredictable future of technological advances, present ongoing challenges for sustaining the archive.<sup>7</sup>

Notwithstanding the volatility of the digital environment, once the right file formats were identified, to ensure optimum sustainability and to comply with accepted industry standards for online distribution, many hours were taken up with the digitization of materials; a task that needed technical expertise but was highly repetitive. It became clear that the metadata schema as the backbone to the archive required very careful consideration. With no accepted metadata standard for dance/performance materials for

online platforms we developed a schema based on Dublin Core<sup>8</sup> but modified it to accommodate the particular nature of the dance content. The aim was to find a structure that would support the range of media whilst maximizing interoperability. The individual dance works and creative projects provided the organizing principle. We used 'Series Title' to draw together multiple objects under a single dance work/creative project. A profile record provides a 'biography' of each, describing the work/project and providing full production credits of the 'original' work (including casts from restaged works where applicable). Content relating to each Series Title is then organized by media type (video, image, text and so on). All content associated with any one work or project is then fully searchable. Inevitably with such complex decision-making, a question arose early on in the process of metadata development. We encountered a tension between the desire to categorize and label content in a way that replicated that which was determined by the artistic team at the time of the work's creation and presentation to the public; and the need to find a structure and reliable search terms that would be accessible for the general user, to ease access and discoverability of content via meaningful searches. Trying to reflect the specific roles of individuals within the creative team, and accurately capture the particular constituent parts of a choreographic work, can sometimes complicate the need for a simple set of organizing categories for archival purposes.

The need to provide clear and accurate metadata for each object on the archive also required specialist knowledge; knowledge not only about the names of all involved in each production, touring venues and so on, but when more sensitive editorial decisions were needed in relation to different versions of a work, we needed to defer to someone with direct experience of the work. One of the characteristics of Davies' working method

is that she establishes close relationships with her dancers so many have stayed with her over many years and have a very valuable ‘insider’ view of the work. Fortunately, Deborah Saxon, a dancer with Davies’ company for many years,<sup>9</sup> was willing to join the archive team to make selections about which version to include when there were multiple copies of performance extracts and to provide valuable metadata. Saxon’s involvement was critical to this process and it was clear that as another ‘ghost writer’ in the project she could not be entirely neutral in her decisions. The trust that Davies placed in Saxon’s stewardship promoted a productive and positive experience for everyone. Indeed, the trust she placed in Saxon enabled Davies to devolve many of the decisions she would have to make about how she and the dancers would be represented through the archive. A similar trust was extended to Sanjoy Roy, who publishes frequently on Davies and authored the ‘About’ page for the archive. Over time, the trust that she had in the project at the outset seemed to develop and was felt by the whole archive team, allowing the team to work with greater autonomy, making editorial decisions and taking more control over content and design.

Having decided on the architecture for the archive we turned our attention to the ‘front-end’, to find a user interface that would be attractive, accessible and be sympathetic to Davies’ aesthetic. Considerable time was spent agreeing on layout, particularly of the landing page, colour palette, and the style and placement of text. Because Davies was beginning to develop a significant digital presence, with a comprehensive company website offering access to her current programme, we were mindful of finding a distinctive design for the archive but one that would support and be compatible with her

other web presence. One of the key aims of the archive, an aim that was shared by Davies and the archive team, was to improve access to Davies' work through the archive, and to dance in general. In other words, we were keen to attract visitors who may not have initially been searching for dance but would nonetheless find the archive through related searches. We also wanted to ensure that Davies' expert collaborators featured in the archive so serendipity might play a role in connecting users with archive content. Additionally, the archive was always intended to be a useful resource for a wide range of learners, teachers, researchers and artists so the design and functionality needed to bear these aims in mind. We wanted the design to illuminate and not diminish the dance, to aid understanding and engagement with dance, both live and 'online'.

Establishing agreements with everyone who was asked to contribute to the archive turned out to be one of the main challenges. With little if any guidance about how to approach artists, and other owners of artistic content, in order to gain their approval for online distribution we took a commonsense approach to establishing processes and generating agreements that would meet our needs and protect the contributor. This was very time consuming and resulted in numerous iterations before agreements, designed for different groups of contributors (dancers, photographers, musicians, composers, etc.), could be signed-off. This required cooperation between Siobhan Davies Dance's own legal advisers and the University's lawyers. Considerable time was spent locating individuals who may have featured in a very small number of productions but were nonetheless important to include. More time was spent negotiating licenses with music publishers and agreeing terms. We launched the archive with confidence that we had proceeded with due diligence. Since the launch, only those who have requested to be

added to the archive have contacted us; nobody has lodged any protest about inappropriate inclusion.

## INSERT FIGURE 2

**Figure 2:** Launch of Siobhan Davies RePlay, 2009. Photo: Nicholas Ripley

### **Authorship, identity and collaborative processes**

A number of interesting discoveries were made during the efforts to secure agreements. Initially, Davies was confident that the Company owned the rights to much of the content but research revealed that copyright resided elsewhere. This is common for most recordings of live performance, which depend on a large creative team (choreographers, dancers, composers, designers, film-makers and so on). For historic works, there are rarely contracts in place that set out how the work may be distributed in the future – and particularly for work that was made prior to the advent of the World Wide Web, there is frequently nothing in company contracts that permit online distribution. This requires all who feature in the work to be contacted and terms agreed. We were determined to ensure that the agreements would allow free access to the content, not limited to educational use only, but which would protect those who contribute to the archive so the work would only be used for personal use and not for commercial gain. What also emerged was that different artists have different expectations and concerns. Some were understandably nervous about giving over their work to an unknown process, but the most interesting aspects of talking with dancers was that the archive prompted them to reflect on their own contribution to the choreographic process.

Many choreographers work collaboratively with their dancers, setting creative tasks and inviting dancers to develop their own material, which is then shaped, moulded, edited and structured by the choreographer. In that process, the dancer becomes a contributing artist to the process; their material may be used, transformed, even discarded.

Choreographers such as Davies are careful to acknowledge the contribution of her dancers but in approaching the dancers, questions over 'ownership' emerged and stories and even scars, buried in the past, resurfaced in unexpected ways. It reinforced the importance of close dialogue between all involved to achieve clarity and trust in the process. Negotiations with the estates of artists can be time consuming and complicated. Living artists who contribute their own content encounter their own representation through the archive, which can be disturbing for them. This was instructive for everyone, to recognize that reviving work for migration from the 'live' to the online environment can be complicated. It may be that the transient, ephemeral nature of the live performance allows the dancer to feel that his or her live presence is sufficient to claim a stake in the work, but when the same work is recorded and becomes a 'permanent' record in the archive of the choreographer, the agency of the dancer is somehow diminished.

A clear illustration of Davies' concern to acknowledge the contributions of her dancers is the way she describes the dancers in performance programmes as (variously) co-creators. In the archive, this concern led to the inclusion of a large number of dancer 'scratch tapes'; short films of the dancers in the studio working on making movement material. The scratch tapes provide invaluable access to what is largely an unseen and private process, the rehearsal. For many years Davies has used simple hand-held cameras for dancers to record their own making process in the studio, in response to tasks

provided by Davies. The captures have been used primarily as a memory aid for the dancer, rather than an evaluative choreographic tool. As glimpses in to the dancer's thinking and moving, these short videos offer the archive user a chance to see how dancers solve physical challenges and process information into the body. They also offer insight to the development of a choreographic work by showing how material in rehearsal takes shape over time and evolves into the final work, sometimes changing very substantially or even disappearing altogether. But because it is research in the body, traces of movement material may be detected and have influence on the individual dancer as well as the choreography in quite significant ways.

### **Online tools for access**

As the project continued, more questions arose about how users would navigate through the archive. We developed a simple scrapbook tool to enable users to save content by theme or topic, to aid analysis and comparison of content. Anxious to provide examples of how the scrapbook could be utilized, a number of guests were invited to create a scrapbook and provide an accompanying narrative, which would tell the user why choices were made and what attracted them within the archive. As an indication of the importance of the social relationships that were nurtured and revealed through the archive, Davies made personal invitations to these guests who she personally trusted with her content, confident that they would provide a thoughtful response to the archive. These scrapbooks are now available on the archive.

Confidence in the value of the archive wavered from time to time, prompted more by concern about completing the work when there were tensions about whether to prioritize

the 'look' or the structure of the archive, rather than doubt about its intended purpose or impact. Concerns about functionality and usability led us to consider an area within the archive dedicated to providing users with tools to aid learning through the archive. At the same time, dialogue increased with the research teams developing the other 'choreographic objects' and some of their innovative work was influencing our own project. With the help of our special advisor to the project, Scott deLahunta, we began work on a micro site as part of the archive to offer a different way of engaging with content. Initially playing with the idea of a 'learning space' within the archive we then moved towards an emphasis on design and to providing a more in-depth analysis of a single work or project. By selecting two relatively recent works, *Bird Song* (2004) and *In Plain Clothes* (2006) we were able to gather materials from the dancers (their notebooks/reflections), stage, set, costume, lighting and sound designers (sketches, plans, prototypes), composers (scores) and Davies herself (her creative sources) – materials that are often discarded soon after the dance work is completed, or remain buried in the personal collections of those who have been part of the dance making process. A structure was developed that in its design would provide a visual entry point to the work and assist users who may be unfamiliar with how to engage with dance. The user would be able to 'peel open' the choreography and access all the many layers of construction to see how the dance develops from research to rehearsal to final work. Eventually named 'Kitchen' to reflect the idea of the ingredients, which become cooked to form the final work, Kitchens for each of these two works were added to the archive. Although designed as objects in their own right, and more closely mirroring the choreographic process in their development, Kitchens are one of the more interactive aspects of the

archive, allowing the user to excavate one work. Each becomes a micro archive within the archive.

Each Kitchen emerged as much out of the relational nature of the dance making process as the relational focus of the Choreographic Objects workshops that reflected back on the relationships that were built, or where pre-existing, were cemented through the building of the archive. Relationships were characterized by an ongoing dialogic process; a process that negotiated between a focus on research enquiry and the desire to produce an attractive and accessible archive; between the archive as research output and as choreographic output; and between the archive as a deconstruction, or reconstruction or even new construction of Davies' body of (past) work. As subject of the archive, such dissection of her making process and reconstitution of the work in a virtual environment was at times a disconcerting experience for Davies who voiced in conversations and project meetings a range of responses as work from the past gradually resurfaced and unsettled/unpicked what she thought she knew or felt about a work that had until that point existed mostly only in memory. Davies spoke of her simultaneous pleasure and anxiety about seeing work that felt 'dated' or irrelevant to her current practice. But she also spoke of her shift in regarding the work as *the* work rather than *her* work, acknowledging her separation or detachment from earlier work coupled with a concern that the archive might fix or 'pin down' a work.

### **Meeting the public: Transmission and interaction**

The completion of the Kitchens by the launch of the archive in June 2009 became a priority, particularly for the Company, who were keen to feature them prominently on the

archive. But as we neared the launch we agreed that the Kitchens could be a distraction from the main purpose of the archive, which was to provide access to the content in a largely unmediated way. Remembering our earlier experiment with the promotional film, we wanted to avoid an inappropriate single representation or reading of the two works. The Kitchens helpfully challenged us to consider a less conventional archival structure but in drawing attention to them, we had inadvertently threatened to undermine the principal purpose of the archive. As a consequence, they moved from landing page (as 'main feature') to being rather hidden within the pages for each dance work. It was important not to erase them from the archive altogether and they continue to be intriguing for users as an example of how a choreography is constructed. The development of the Kitchens and the negotiations about their place within the archive was an instructive process and strengthened the team's relationship. They now sit within the archive as a fascinating insight to the development of the archive itself; the process of archiving dance is exposed through the creation and placement of the Kitchens. This process also highlighted the different kinds of knowledge that the archive could transmit and involved Davies more directly in asking questions herself about the archive in relation to her own creative process. In trying not to be didactic the archive reflected back to Davies that as a choreographer she is an autodidact, having no access to resources such as RePlay to support her in her development as a dance maker.

In the final year we conducted a phased series of tests targeting a wide range of potential user groups to gain feedback about the archive as it was taking shape. Initially there was anxiety about making public an unfinished archive, equating the release of the archive

with releasing an unfinished choreography. We were also nervous that feedback would ask for more than the project could deliver. But the responses were very valuable and led to many modifications and guided the final stages of development. One unexpected outcome of the testing process was that other choreographers approached us wanting a similar archive of their own work, recognizing that a digital archive would not only conserve their work but could bring a wider audience to their dance. Behind some of the requests seemed to be an unvoiced question about the privileging of Davies as subject of the archive. The archive as concept seemed for some to be upholding the traditional role and function of the archive: that being the preservation of materials relating to those whom society judges as worthy.

A final test for the project came in the days leading up to the launch. We discussed keeping 'archive' in the project title because of its association with the idea of an historical collection of work necessarily in the past, and consequently we changed the name to 'Replay' to capture the main purpose of the archive and to suggest a more active role for the user. Replay is now RePlay to distinguish the archive from the Company's other web presence: Relay. More recently this has been reviewed again and two years after the launch the homepage now provides a strapline under 'RePlay' to make clear this is Davies' archive: 'The Archive of Siobhan Davies Dance'. Additionally, the company is reviewing its entire web presence, partly in acknowledgement of the need to make clearer the relationship between the company website and RePlay and partly to remove the potential confusion between RePlay and 'Relay'.

A significant support for the development of RePlay came from the community of practice established through the AHRC-funded Choreographic Objects workshop

series,<sup>10</sup> which brought together teams of researchers working on various digital dance resources. The workshops provided a retreat from the daily work on the project and prompted reflection about the relationship between the archive and the choreographic work that featured within the archive. Acknowledging that the archive should and could not replace the ‘live’ work, the workshops helped us to think about how the archive is a powerful tool for making visible and disseminating the knowledge that is in the dance work, and how the archive tools can help users exchange that knowledge. The dialogue that characterized the workshop meetings prompted the artists to think about their own relationship to their ‘objects’, the value they place in the object and the influence the object making had on their dance making. Moreover, it helped us, the archive team, to reflect on our own creative engagement with Davies and the object, and the triadic nature of the interrelationship between Davies, the archive and ourselves.

The launch of the archive was celebratory, acknowledging what had been achieved and the strong collaboration behind the archive, coupled with an anxiety that the archive could never be complete. Knowing it would continue to be unfinished as new content would need to be added each time Davies embarked on new project, and the site would need to be regularly refreshed, the end of the funding period was an anxious time, having to put trust in the stability and resilience of the site. We also wondered how the archive might enhance or change the viewer’s experience of Davies’s choreography. A period of mourning followed immediately after the launch for some of us, prompted by recognizing the intensity of the development process, the attention given to its novelty and ‘firstness’ and the loss of time for reflection, and the formulation of a robust strategy to sustain the archive. With ongoing real costs involved in updating the archive, adding content,

funding licences, server costs and staff time, the future now depends on the University Library and funding being sourced directly by Siobhan Davies Dance.

### **Post-launch: The future of the past**

Since launching the archive, Davies has become increasingly interested in digital technologies in connection with her work and has experimented with different modes of performance making as well as different sites for her work. These new ventures present challenges in terms of the archival process because the new content does not sit easily within the existing structure. Davies is also enthusiastically collecting traces of the making process, documenting sketch material, jottings, scores and so on, all of which will enrich the archive. This fascination with artist process has led to another collaborative project between Coventry University and Siobhan Davies Dance; The Library of Processes, which is developing a 'digital venue' for accessing what artists choose to collect of their making process.<sup>11</sup> As her work continues in new and interesting directions the archive evolves too, but in retaining its layers of construction and revealing the relational process of its development it has also become a nostalgic lens through which her past work can be viewed.<sup>12</sup> But retelling history is not the primary purpose of RePlay. The juxtaposition of dances spanning a broad time period tends to flatten the chronology, collapsing history and creating a fictionalized account of the past, whilst simultaneously revealing new insights and new connections between disparate content.

To help support the further development of the archive, funding was secured since the launch for two major projects to enhance and exploit the archive, and to circulate the knowledge further within RePlay. The first of these, the Digital Dance Archives (DDA)

project<sup>13</sup> has produced a web portal to search a number of online dance collections, including RePlay. The site includes a developed version of the scrapbook to allow users to add notes and annotations, to resize and organize content to provide a more interactive thinking space. The site also offers a visual search tool so users can search by colour, shape and gesture. The key purpose of the portal is to provide users with a chance to search across different dance collections so the content in RePlay is viewed alongside widely different dance content, situating Davies' work within a much larger dance and cultural context. A key aspect of the DDA project was to work closely with users and in particular other dance artists to find out more about how professional dance artists use and engage in the archival process. Two choreographers were commissioned to create a response to the DDA site, Oliver Scott and Efrosini Protopapa, resulting in a physical performance and a scrapbook from each, which documented their own research into the archive and their making process. Their re-enactment demonstrated how the digital content can be taken back into the body but the re-enactment was 'not to fix a work in its singular (originating) possibilization but to unlock, release, and actualize a work's many (virtual) com- and impossibilities, which the originating instantiation of the work kept in reserve, virtually (Lepecki 2010: 31)'. The work has since been added to the DDA as another kind of choreographic object, offering a further iteration or meta-archive through the remixing and reimagining of the content.

A different kind of re-imagining or re-enactment of the archive was made possible through the JISC-funded D-TRACES project<sup>14</sup>, which enabled us to work directly with dance students who built scrapbooks and used the Jerwood Bank micro site on RePlay as a model for creating their own blogs to document and reflect on their choreographic

processes. The project led to the archive being embedded within the dance curriculum at Coventry University in a more meaningful way, 'unlocking' new readings of the archive and increasing the students' confidence with using digital dance resources, whilst providing them with a model for their own process of self-archiving.

Both these projects have generated important feedback about who is using the archive, what they are doing with it and where further enhancements can be made. One consequence is that we are now reinstating the 'learning space' as a place within the archive that directly supports learning and teaching, providing users with navigation routes through the archive, offering themed-based searches and questions to prompt active learning.

The archive was therefore always intended to benefit those situated within dance scholarship, practice and teaching, but just as its impact has extended beyond dance it is important to acknowledge the broader cultural and artistic context in which the archive developed. The archive could be said to blur the division between archive and creative project, taking advantage of digital technologies in ways that have since been adopted by other artists and companies. There were few comparable archives when we were building RePlay but web projects such as The Forsythe Company's Synchronous Objects (<http://synchronousobjects.osu.edu/>) and Motion Bank (<http://motionbank.org/>), Richard Alston's The Alston Studio (<http://www.thealstonstudio.com/>), and projects emerging now such as The British Black Dance Archives Project (<http://blackdancearchives.co.uk/>) and the Rambert Dance Company archive (<http://www.rambert.org.uk/archive>) all of which are exploiting digital technologies for archival purposes. But importantly, there is

no model or template; each project defines its own digital presence because of the particularity of the artist's practice.

## **Conclusion**

Projects like Siobhan Davies RePlay demand a lot of those who build them. Expert practices collide, tensions emerge and dissolve as the project develops and relationships are tested then become stronger. RePlay reveals those complex relationships between artists, researchers, designers and media technicians. Inevitably, future funding will play a role in sustaining RePlay further but it already has a place within the embodied memories of those who have created it, used it and featured within it. However, the digital environment is inherently unstable so RePlay is perhaps more vulnerable than a physical archive in that it is subject to rapid developments in technology and software upgrades. In building the digital archive we collected a hard copy archive of sorts, but whilst the physical materials may decay over time, the digital object is even more fragile; subject to a more unpredictable erasure and disappearance. Lepecki reminds us that:

It is the archive itself – either as memory (cultural or personal) or as bureaucracy (cultural or political) – that predicates, from the start, its own onto-political performance as one of endless memory ‘failures’ – thanks to its constitutive (and unavoidable) acts of exclusions and misplacements. By dictating what deserves a place in it, and what should be excluded from it, by determining what is to be properly filed and what is (purposefully or inadvertently) to be

‘misplaced’ in it, the archive reveals itself as a true Foucauldian *dispositif*, ‘distributing the visible and the invisible, generating or eliminating an object which cannot exist without it’. (Deleuze 2006 339 quoted in Lepecki 2010: 30; *italics in original*)

Later in his paper, Lepecki recasts ‘failure’ as ‘difference’, and argues for difference as the creative act of re-enactment. Without RePlay, the continuing existence of Davies’ work would depend largely on the memories of those who had viewed the work live, and on the embodied memories of the dancers and others involved in the creation of the work. RePlay does consciously exclude and perhaps even misplace some content so could be described as a Foucauldian *dispositive*. But what RePlay does do is construct a new kind of critical space for thinking about dance and doing things with dance. It has already generated new art/dance objects and writings, sometimes, as in the artist commissions, foregrounding ‘difference’ and ‘unleashing history and dances toward afterlives’ (Lepecki 2010: 46), which would not have emerged without the archive. It has also introduced new audiences to Davies’s work and to dance in general (which our various user impact surveys and webometrics analyses reveal) and stimulated new collaborations, which continue to influence dance making and thought. For Davies it has provided her with a valuable resource to think about her own making process, and the different ways in which her work documents itself in its production. So the archive, in its impermanent presence in cyber space, may be little more than a moment in time, existing only fleetingly in its relationship with the user, the artists who feature in it and the ghosts of

the archive team. Its legacy might be to remind us that the dance also exists in the here and now, and of the inevitable failure of the technology of the day (in this case the digital file) to capture and document performance. But Siobhan Davies RePlay occupies a very potent *presentness* through its animation of the past and its evocation of the corporeal, visceral and kinetic nature of the dance, which we hope will sustain its ongoing life as a pertinent and valued choreographic object.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Davies is aware that some of the films made of her work are edited for a television audience, or for another format, which may not provide a version of the work that she is happy with, or which provides a clear and ‘true’ record of the live performance.

<sup>2</sup> Davies spent some time remaking earlier pieces. For a detailed discussion of her restagings see Whatley (2005).

<sup>3</sup> For a succinct discussion about the different views on ‘reconstruction’, ‘restaging’ and other terms to describe how artists return to remake work, see Jordan (2000) and Thomas (2003).

<sup>4</sup> The award was made as part of the AHRC Resource Enhancement Scheme.

<sup>5</sup> The Coventry team included Ross Varney (Research Assistant) and Paul Allender for the early part of the project and then David Bennett as the project’s Senior Research Fellow.

<sup>6</sup> The Steering Group included members of the research team, Siobhan Davies Dance, Gill Clarke MBE (Independent Dance) and Ann Ogidi (DCMS).

<sup>7</sup> Recent research into alternatives to the proprietary software confirm that there remains no realistic alternative as using Open Source software would require considerable cost and expertise to re-engineer and sustain the full functionality as currently provided in RePlay.

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<sup>8</sup> Metadata or ‘data about data’ provides a context for objects of interest in the form of ‘resource descriptions’. The modern ‘metadata’ field that gave rise to Dublin Core and other recent standards emerged with the web revolution of the mid-1990s (see <http://dublincore.org/>).

<sup>9</sup> Deborah Saxon was brought into the project because of her invaluable knowledge of those involved in many years of Davies’ rehearsals and performances. She brought an ‘insider’ view and was trusted by Davies and the other dancers to make careful decisions about which versions to include when there were multiple versions of images and videos.

<sup>10</sup> The Choreographic Objects workshops were funded through the AHRC Beyond Text programme and enabled the research teams from four digital dance projects that were in development to meet with social scientists to share and learn from each other’s experiences of building digital resources; see <http://projects.beyondtext.ac.uk/choreographicobjects/index.php>.

<sup>11</sup> The Library of Processes is an AHRC-funded Collaborative Doctoral Award. The Ph.D. student is David Bennett, who previously worked on RePlay, so is exploring links between RePlay and the new digital library.

<sup>12</sup> Davies’ most recent project is an interesting illustration of her growing interest in retracing the past, in the possibilities of ‘archive’ and in developing her work in collaboration with other practitioners within new contexts. The collaboration with filmmaker David Hinton has resulted in a film made entirely of found footage from early films and photographs from the beginning of the twentieth century: *All This Can Happen* (2012). Davies and Hinton ‘look back at the earliest days of the moving image; the flickering dance of single frames creating an illusion of movement.... Cinema can

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capture life in a way that live performance cannot, but film also decays. The counterpoint of past and present, of stillness and movement, builds up a choreography of images, memory and how a sense of self comes to be',

<http://www.siobhandavies.com/dance/dance-works/all-this-can-happen.html>.

<sup>13</sup> The Digital Dance Archives project was funded by the AHRC. The project was led by Rachel Fensham (University of Surrey) in collaboration with Sarah Whatley (Coventry) and John Collomosse (Surrey). Besides RePlay, the site includes several collections hosted by the National Resource Centre for Dance at Surrey, including those featuring work by Rudolf Laban, Extemporary Dance Theatre, Ludmila Mlada, and materials associated with Revived Greek Dance and Natural Movement.

<sup>14</sup> Dance teaching resource and collaborative engagement spaces (D-TRACES).