

# Activating Dance Records

## Conceptualizing research into the Swedish, Nordic and global archives pertaining to the Russian dancer Anna Robenne

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### ABSTRACT

This article explores the following research question: In what ways can activations of dance records (archived materials and other recordings of activities) be conceptualized to contribute to the making of a critically productive dance history in the digital age? Drawing on an extensive study of the Russian dancer Anna Robenne, the article focuses on the archival explorations (or road trip) as such, and in particular the multifaceted ways in which the records themselves can be active agents in processes of memory making and history production. Adopting recent theoretical developments concerning the concept of pluralization in archival studies, the exploration discards the conventional and rather static understanding of records as neutral containers of facts to emphasize instead an inclusive and infinitely evolving process. Working within an interdisciplinary archive-oriented realm, the author reflexively makes use of practices and methods belonging to both art history and classical and contemporary dance tradition. The article first maps recent pluralizing approaches within archival studies including re-theorizations of the key concepts of records, provenance, value and representation. It then conceptualizes archival activation through examples from the archival road trip. The article concludes by offering the reader clear arguments for archival pluralization in the form of intimate, invasive, and imaginary activation, and demonstrates the importance and relevance of closely, critically and imaginatively engaging with records. The article highlights the role the archive can play in breaking down cultural barriers and re-evaluating notions of dance historiography, heritage and cultural identity.

### KEYWORDS

Anna Robenne, dance archives, archival multiverse, archival activation, imagined records, impossible archival imaginaries, body as archive, records continuum, practice as knowledge, digital archives.

ISSN 2002-3898

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<http://ojs.statsbiblioteket.dk/index.php/nts/index>

Published with support from Nordic Board for Periodicals in the Humanities and Social Sciences (NOP-HS)

# Activating Dance Records

## Conceptualizing research into the Swedish, Nordic and global archives pertaining to the Russian dancer Anna Robenne

And I can't wait to get on the road again  
 On the road again  
 Goin' places that I've never been  
 Seein' things that I may never see again  
 (Willie Nelson)

### INTRODUCTION: AN ARCHIVAL ROAD TRIP

In this article I return to an extensive archival road trip that I undertook to conceptualize the process of activating dance records (archived materials and other recordings of activities).<sup>1</sup> It started in 2013 in the Swedish city of Gothenburg, expanded into a Nordic and then global and digital context, and eventually was brought to a temporary close back in Gothenburg in 2017. Initially, I journeyed to find out more about the Russian dancer Anna Robenne, who spent most of her life “on the road” and who made interesting but by and large ignored contributions to Swedish dance in the years around 1920.<sup>2</sup> While reconstructing her story or stories still interests me, the ambition of this article

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1. My research has been conducted within the overarching framework of the interdisciplinary project *Turning Points and Continuity: The Changing Roles of Performance in Society 1880–1925*. See the journal's introduction for further information.
  2. In previous historiography, Näslund (1984) mentions Robenne in a few lines, associating her with the theatre's failure to create a lasting ballet company, and pitying the fact that the dancers mostly performed in operettas. Ek (1978) includes repertoire lists where Robenne is present but wrongly labelled as a visiting company. Fromell (1929) chronicles the Stora Teatern repertoire and briefly presents Robenne's work, including a photograph. While otherwise echoing Näslund (1984), Hellström Sveningsson (2016) does not discuss Robenne. Drawing on research by Karin Helander, Sörenson (2007, 147) mentions Robenne in a text on children's theatre. However, none of these texts engage with visual archival materials, nor do they expand on the local dance context in Gothenburg in the years around 1920 or address international connections and intertexts. Instead, the picture of Gothenburg dance remains typically meagre, negative and closed.

is different. I will focus on the archival explorations as such, and in particular look into the multifaceted ways in which records can, in the words of archival theorist Terry Cook, be “active and ever-evolving agents themselves in the formation of human and organizational memory.”<sup>3</sup> In what ways can activations of dance records and archives be conceptualized to contribute to the making of a critically productive dance history in our digital age?

I am adopting recent theoretical strands within archival studies about the concept of pluralization to explore the road trip and its activations of dance records. This means leaving behind the conventional and rather static understanding of records as neutral containers of facts to emphasize instead a pluralizing, inclusive and infinitely evolving process. As suggested by archival scholar Anne Gilliland, a pluralization of contexts, provenances and perspectives can impact on the contestation of hegemonic narratives and the formation and articulation of individual and collective identity, as well as on cultural values and struggles for equity and social justice.<sup>4</sup> By applying so called pluralizing theory to activations of dance records I wish to open up for new and constructive questions and approaches that can motivate, inspire and influence present and future history-making. Testifying to the ways in which records can create and mediate human encounters and interactions, such exchanges form an important part of my archival activations. Working within an interdisciplinary archive-oriented realm, I draw on practices and methods belonging to both art history and classical and contemporary dance tradition, including how these have been mediated to me in the Swedish and also the international context.

The focus of this article is to conceptualize the activation of records, not to make an empirical study of Robenne’s life and work, and I will therefore not go into much detail about the records and archives explored during the road trip. Nevertheless, to give the reader an idea of the magnitude and also the obstacles of the research journey, I will list the most important archives and related features here. The Theatrical Collections at the Museum of Gothenburg (henceforth TMG) form the home base of my exploratory journey and hold the most comprehensive collections of Robenne materials. I started there, and I will be returning there to reconnect and share the new knowledge and conceptualizations that have emerged through the research process. To get a better understanding of how Stora Teatern valued Robenne as an artist, I explored administrative and political accounts at Regionarkivet (Regional archive for the West Swedish Region and the City of Gothenburg). At the Social Sciences Library in Gothenburg I manually browsed mostly microfilmed daily newspapers, to pluralize Robenne’s local dance context. The Swedish Emigrant Institute in Växjö helped me access digitized passenger lists and records on emigration, immigration and naturalization, which yielded information on Robenne in a mainly American and to some extent European context. Throughout the road trip I have iteratively browsed the Internet – a precarious and evolving archive

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3. Cook 2001, 29.

4. Gilliland 2017.

– to look for Robenne materials, and found among other items vintage posters and photographs for sale.

I also explored databases featuring digitized newspapers and the online catalogue WorldCat.org. To find out more about Robenne’s career in Finland, Norway and Sweden, I consulted the Theatre Museum and the National Library in Helsinki, the National Library in Oslo, the National Library in Stockholm, and the Ernst Rolf Collection in Falun, Sweden. It has not been possible within the scope of my project to visit Russian archives, but I have explored Russian newspaper databases and Russian materials in Helsinki archives and at the 3Våningen Archive and Library in Gothenburg, as well as to a limited extent the Russian Internet.<sup>5</sup> Brought together, all the above explorations have resulted in a complex assemblage of both existing records and records that I wish were there but are not, providing an incomplete picture of Robenne’s life and work. On a positive as well as critical note, this means that it is possible to change and add to it, now and in the future.

In the following, the article maps recent pluralizing approaches within archival studies including re-theorizations of the key concepts of records, provenance, value and representation before moving on to a section conceptualizing archival activation through examples from my road trip. To conclude, the article discusses ways in which pluralizing conceptualizations of extensive archival activation and research might contribute to the making of dance history in the digital age, in Swedish contexts and more broadly.

## **PLURALIZATION IN THE ARCHIVAL MULTIVERSE**

Since the 1990s, and in tandem with the development of digital technologies, the understanding of what an archive is and what it does has changed considerably.<sup>6</sup> Rooted in postmodern theory, social justice and human rights research,

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5. I am not a native Russian speaker, and I am thankful to translator Kajsa Öberg Lindsten, dance historian Peter Bohlin, doctoral student Olga Nicholaeva, and theatre historians Johanna Laakkonen and Liisa Byckling for helping out with the Russian issues. The searches for Robenne in digitized Russian newspapers at the National Library in Stockholm resulted in no findings, even though Bohlin tried various spellings in Russian. Robenne’s date of birth varies in the records, and I have not been able to determine if “December 1, 1899”, as stated on her Petition for Naturalization in the USA in 1937 is correct. I have not been able to find out when and where Robenne died, though there is reason to believe that she died sometime after 1950 in New York.
  6. This re-assessment became manifest in the 1990s, but it is important to note that prior to that date, and going back to the early 1970s, these questions were being raised and critiqued both within and outside the archive field. In line with Caswell (2016, 10), I find it interesting to note how little interdisciplinary exchange there has been between the humanities and archival studies. Caswell argues that this has to do with a gendered and classed bias, constructing “archival labor as a feminine service industry and archival studies (if it is ever even acknowledged as

and postcolonial as well as indigenous thinking, these complex and diverse changes encompass differing worldviews and pertain to diverging traditions and contexts across the globe.<sup>7</sup> As suggested by Gilliland, the concept of the *archival multiverse* helps describe the more recent ways of understanding and theorizing the ever-shifting and infinite character of archives (in the broadest sense of the term).<sup>8</sup>

Following on from this, *the record*, which is a fundamental archival studies concept, has undergone both substantial and diverging developments and re-theorization.<sup>9</sup> A pluralizing approach, which is what I am interested in here, can be found for example in Australian scholar Shannon Faulkhead's suggestion that a record can be "any account, regardless of form, that preserves 'memory or knowledge of facts and events.' A record can be a document, an individual's memory, an image, or a recording."<sup>10</sup> Looking at the dance archive through the pluralization lens, a record can be a pointe shoe, a digitized newspaper advert, oral history, operetta music, a building and a stage where a dancer performed, or even muscles and minds remembering specific training and performance practices.

Faulkhead's expanded understanding of records opens up for multiple activations of traces that at first sight can seem rather fragmented, irrelevant, silent, dry (as in paper or written text not being very good at representing the physicality and fluidity of dance) or two dimensional, or that even can be lacking altogether. To this expanded view can be added Gilliland and Caswell's concepts of "imagined records" and "impossible archival imaginaries" that considerably counterbalance and challenge dominant and constrictive understandings of evidence and truth.<sup>11</sup> The imagined record and the imaginary archive – which includes thinking about how we encompass the known existence of an archive or records which are unavailable – provide very useful insights in relation to social justice because they emphasize the necessary reliance on or absence of justice, because records have been destroyed, lost through

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existing) as imparting merely practical how-to skills." My study aims to contribute to bridging this gap.

7. Gilliland, McKemmish and Lau 2017, Hamilton et al. 2002. From the humanities, Borggreen and Gade's (2013) anthology is an excellent example of this, representing critical and creative approaches to the archive from an arts perspective.
8. Gilliland 2017.
9. While it is relatively unproblematic today to extend the concept of the record to any recording of activity regardless of form, the relationship between the record (and recordness) and memory is a complicated one. As has been demonstrated by Derrida and Nora and their followers, the archive (and the record) can be seen as standing in place of memory or erasing memory, at the same time as they can be a touchstone for memory. In terms of defining the record, Geoffrey Yeo's writings on both the characteristics of the record and on representation are widely considered to be some of the best and most rigorous in the field.
10. Faulkhead 2009, 68, including cited work.
11. Gilliland and Caswell 2016, 55.

dispersal, falsely created in place of other perspectives, or never created at all. In the case of Robenne I draw on this way of thinking to address the imaginary and affective presence of something “Russian” in the records, as well as to grapple with my own imaginings of Russian records (existing or not). The employment of imagined records and (impossible or not) archival imaginaries serves to counterbalance and challenge both positivist historiography and the art of the historian.

Insisting on the context of the record, the concept of *provenance* has also undergone profound theoretical reformulation and expansion. The mainstream Western understanding referring to the origin, ownership and custody of something has been challenged in several ways within the field. For example, “the continuum” seeks both to fix the record as authentic and reliable and to view “recordness” and fixity as travelling and transforming in space-time.<sup>12</sup> While acknowledging the dynamics and contentions within such an approach, I am mostly interested in an understanding of provenance as a pluralist, inclusive and infinitely evolving process, one that expands far beyond the conventional and rather static organizing principle. As discussed by archival scholar Michelle Caswell, among the most productive expansions are the emerging collaborative and participatory approaches emphasizing that “archivists and users are active participants in the provenance of records, and are therefore important stakeholders in their custody, mediation and uses.”<sup>13</sup> This pluralist and participatory understanding of provenance has inspired the activations of records performed during the extensive archival research journey, as well as my ideas about future projects.

Another critically productive key concept in archival studies is *value*, which refers to the relationship between the record and what it represents, and brings with it the processes of appraisal and selection at play in the archive. Value is socially constructed, materially present and tightly linked with the archival context, its power structures and expertise. It “always exists for someone in a particular place at a particular time.”<sup>14</sup> This leads to the final key concept to be introduced here, namely *representation*, the process by which archivists and at times also other stakeholders construct metadata, search tools that facilitate access to collections. In addition archivists, as well as scholars and other interested persons, also produce texts and various search tools to either help or hinder access to collections. As pointed out by archival scholar Elizabeth Yakel, representation is a “fluid, evolving, and socially constructed practice”, exceeding what was understood by the traditional term archival “description”.<sup>15</sup>

Here I see a potentially productive resonance between the ways in which “archival description” and “art historical description” – the latter being a systematic verbal method for providing a basic account of a visual study object

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12. McKemmish 2017.

13. Caswell 2016, 6.

14. Caswell, 2016, 8.

15. Yakel 2003, 2.

– have been challenged by recent reflexive methodologies emphasizing the performative, or co-creative and relational character of descriptions.<sup>16</sup> Rather than providing a fixed representation, a description sets things in motion and can open up objects and records to new and critically engaged approaches.<sup>17</sup> This is not to be understood as alien to or incompatible with the scholarly imperative to properly account for the various steps in an analytical process, but only as indicating that the instable, evolving and at times even personal character of descriptions calls for reflexive methodologies, something that has been emphasized for example by archival scholar Anna Sexton within a mental health context.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, it can be suggested that methodologies involving imagination and affective stances are useful when seeking new approaches and paths for history production.

The above-outlined pluralizing approaches are critical, as they open up for transformational activities such as activist and grassroots community-based archiving, participatory methodologies, feminist archival praxis, and artistic interventions, for example relating to multisensory heritage and independent dance archives.<sup>19</sup> As indicated before, if the record and its provenances are understood as not static, they can more readily be activated, and thus potentially influence the contestation of hegemonic narratives, the formation and articulation of individual and collective identity, cultural values and struggles for equity and justice. In Robenne's case, the ways in which her "Russian" identity was constructed and expressed changed as I followed her on the road grappling with Russian archives and records that might or might not exist. This in turn was a way to contribute to a contestation of Swedish historical constructions that exclude popular and polyvalent, but non-canonized dancers such as Robenne.<sup>20</sup>

In the following I will engage with some aspects of my archival road trip to conceptualize the three ways of activating records that I have found most productive from my humanities perspective. Following Australian continuum theorist Sue McKemmish, I adopt a stance where records are understood as dynamic features that are "always in a process of becoming" or, to quote Willie Nelson's famous song, are "on the road again".<sup>21</sup>

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16. For example the study of scenography, which in the Swedish context is part of art history, has expanded to include potentially all environments and has been theorized as a performative encounter, inviting the historian to be receptive to new materialistic, affect-oriented and post-human frameworks. For a useful overview, see McKinney and Palmer 2017.

17. von Rosen 2016, 146–148.

18. Sexton 2015.

19. Flinn 2011, Sexton 2015, Carbone 2016, Terracciano (forthcoming 2018), von Rosen 2017, Cifor and Wood 2017, as well as von Rosen, Meskimmon and Sand (forthcoming 2018).

20. For further discussion of Swedish and international critical dance historiography, see Hammergren 2002.

21. McKemmish 2001, 334 (including reference to earlier publication by McKemmish).

## INTIMATE, INVASIVE AND IMAGINARY ACTIVATIONS OF RECORDS

As an art historian I have been trained to engage intimately – deeply, closely, sensitively, creatively as well as systematically – with in particular so-called visual (and always also more than visual) objects.<sup>22</sup> As a former dancer I carry with me a knowledge of intimate, thorough, repetitious processes of engagement with movement materials, including both physical demonstrations and video and other visual representations.<sup>23</sup> Following on from this, the aim of this section is to open up a space for *exchange*, where my practical experiences of extensive and embodied activation of records can be conceptualized through archival studies theory. As explained by education scholar Sharon Todd, an exchange is something more and other than both an ordinary meeting and a conflict. Todd points to the provocative potential of an exchange proper because of its demand for real change by all engaged parties.<sup>24</sup> So, in the following, my experiences from the archival road trip will take part in an exchange with archival studies theory. In the words of Caswell, this is a way “to demonstrate respect” and open up a space for interdisciplinary exchange, where records and their relations play a central part.<sup>25</sup> I will start at the TMG, and look into an intimate and perhaps rather ordinary – but nevertheless exciting in its own way – art history and dance inspired exploratory practice, seldom viewed as theoretically interesting from a humanities perspective. This is expressed by philosopher and feminist scholar Elisabeth Grosz as follows: “Knowledge is an activity; it is a *practice* and not a contemplative reflection.”<sup>26</sup>

### *Intimate activation*

At the TMG archive, some of the physical Robenne photographs were placed on a table for me to examine. I began by producing written descriptions, including formal, semiotic and social dimensions, as well as adding questions and free associations. This was complemented by visual notes – photographs as memory aids and drawings – representing main features and selected details in the records. After a time, the possibility also arose to engage with digitized versions of some of the visual materials in the museum’s online database. It must be acknowledged that the digitized records are different from the physical ones, and that intimate activation can set these differences in motion. While the material records remain more directly bound up with past production processes as well as with the artist’s contexts, the digitized records have lost their

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22. Mitchell 2005.

23. I was educated at the Royal Swedish Ballet School and have worked at ballet companies in Sweden and toured abroad. The dancer experience has been analysed and used as a methodological tool in von Rosen 2016, drawing on practice-based research by dancer and rehearsal director Cecilia Roos, and philosopher-dancer Susan Kozel.

24. Todd 2010, 252.

25. Caswell 2016, 15.

26. Grosz 1995, 37.

distinct, tangible materiality, and can take on a plurality of sizes and be manipulated in innumerable ways. Engaging intimately with both types of records awakens material, corporeal and affective dimensions, as well as time-specific protocols and structures accessible in and through the records, to be further analysed and interpreted. This process includes activation of corporeal imagination, something that will take on different trajectories for different explorers and audiences, but that nevertheless, I suggest, is valuable when seeking to approach past dance practices and circumstances.

Drawing on what performance theoretician André Lepecki terms “the body as archive”, I used enlarged versions of the digital images to re-enact Robenne’s poses and gestures in order to better acquaint myself with her knowledge and practice of dance and let myself be inscribed by them.<sup>27</sup> In doing this I made use of my own background as a dancer, which has made my body a living repository of knowledge. I would like to emphasize that this is a methodological approach that *does not exclude* people who are interested in dance but lack professional training. In line with this open and inclusive approach, it is well worth pondering dance historian Lorraine Nicholas’s argument for a situated and generous explorative space: “So as dance artists, dance scholars, enthusiastic lay dancers and followers of dance in performance we should look to our own memories of a past in dance to find a prototype for a useable dance history that gives meaning to individual experience as part of wider historical forces.”<sup>28</sup> Hence, employing my own dance knowledge to physically engage with the dance archive helped me access (as process and practice) some of Robenne’s dancing as a multisensorial and embodied heritage – hyper-material, rather than intangible – and be more respectful of her work and efforts.<sup>29</sup> This was not an attempt to reconstruct historical events, but a way to *care* for records, very much in line with a feminist materialist approach to archives; it was a way to get to know them better, and to set them in motion kinaesthetically – as in body mirroring.<sup>30</sup>

As one example, I engaged with photographs of Robenne in the operetta *Röda rosor* (Die Ideale Gattin, The Ideal Wife) from a 1919 Gothenburg production. I tried out her ambiguous combination of classical and Fokin-inspired dance technique, reflected upon what seemed to be rather poor pointe shoes, and explored what it might have felt like to dance in a black bathing suit with white ruffles, a choker and fluffy wrist bands. This became a way of activating and recasting material and affective space, time and physicality in a co-cre-

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27. Lepecki 2010 and Bernstein 2009. For an overarching discussion on the technologizing of dance, see Bleeker 2017.

28. Nicholas 2017, 17.

29. See Jackson 2010, 254, for a sharp questioning of the immaterial-material dichotomy. Many immaterial or dematerialized activities can in fact be understood as hyper-material when approached from certain perspectives.

30. Caswell and Cifor 2016. For an art and dance history approach to caring for records, see von Rosen 2016b.

ative dialogue with the records, rather than, for instance, dismissing Robenne as a dancer with rather poor technique (as it might appear) performing an uninteresting role (as some of the reviewers wrote). What I am seeking here are the useful effects of carefully and dialogically translating the visual records into both written and embodied representations to function as working materials during my exploratory journey.



Figure 1. Anna Robenne in *Röda rosor* (Die ideale Gattin / The Ideal Wife) 1920. Photo credit: Olsson & Hammarqvist. Teatersamlingarna i Göteborgs stadsmuseum, GTM: 4603:15.

Thus, my intimate activations were intended to set things in motion: to produce useful questions, find directions for further inquiry, and prepare for more specific methodological and interpretive work. It was crucial to stay in motion and acknowledge ambiguity in the records, rather than fixing interpretations

too early in the process.<sup>31</sup> This links up with the ways in which a record-centred approach to activation can help conceptualize what became the crucial intimate dimension of my practices and experiences during the road trip. In the article “The Archive is Not An Archives: Acknowledging the Intellectual Contributions of Archival Studies” (2016) Caswell powerfully argues that “the use of records fundamentally changes them, becoming part of their provenance”.<sup>32</sup> In line with this, my *usage*, in lifting the Robenne records out of their archival boxes and into the light (or finding them in the database) and describing them, can indeed at least potentially be understood as a profoundly transformative activity. Archival theorist Eric Ketelaar further explains the ways in which records can be theorized as moving entities rather than fixed objects. “Every activation of the archive not only adds a branch to what I propose to call the semantic genealogy of the record and the archive. Every activation also changes the significance of earlier activations [...]. Current uses of these records affect retrospectively all earlier meanings, or to put it differently: we can no longer read the record as our predecessors have read that record.”<sup>33</sup> From my perspective it is certainly true that during my road trip I have “read” – or better, engaged with – the Robenne records in ways that differ from those of previous scholars, who have had little or no interest in them. Indeed, I have stepped forward as an active participant taking part in the re-formulation of records, “dancing cheek to cheek with them”, and leaving behind the ideal of a (seemingly) distant and neutral scholar presenting one “true” interpretation (something that is stultifying anyway, when it comes to art). I have found such intimate and floating openness important, especially when one is up against a narrow, fixed and devaluing dance history – as is the case in my Swedish and local Gothenburg contexts.<sup>34</sup> As expressed by archival researcher and feminist art and performance historian Amelia Jones, the idea is “to allow ourselves to be moved and, if ever so slightly, *changed* by the work we ‘relationally’ engage. The point is to activate and *become activated* by the traces of past performative works, all the while retaining an awareness of how these processes of activation are occurring.”<sup>35</sup> With this in mind, let us now – if you are willing to join me – follow a more expansive, outward-reaching but equally pluralizing character of the road trip.

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31. For a related discussion of the strategic usefulness of suspending interpretation of scenography and image based work, see McKinney and Butterworth 2010, 173–4.

32. Caswell 2016, 6.

33. Ketelaar 2001, 138.

34. As the details of Gothenburg’s local performing arts historiography are probably not of much interest to an international readership I will not explore them further here. For further reading, see note 2.

35. Jones 2013, 68.

### *Invasive activation*

Already from the inception of the Robenne case study, I engaged with the complexity and plurality of digital features in very diverse online environments. When browsing through digitized newspaper collections – be they American, Norwegian, Finnish or Swedish – I encountered a plethora of records pertaining to Robenne.<sup>36</sup> Not only did these searches provide access to many contexts in which Robenne performed at various periods of time, they also caused the exploration to move across borders between languages, countries and even continents. This type of expansive, cross-border activation can be conceptualized as *invasive*, when understood through the previously mentioned “records continuum”, a pluralizing and multidimensional model for the creation, capture, organization, and amplification of records. McKemmish explains how the dynamic relation between archival fixity and movement can be theorized: “Pluralisation involves disembedding the record from its original multiple organisational and/or personal contexts and carrying it through spacetime. Thus recordkeeping processes fix the content and structure of records, preserve their integrity by ensuring they are tamper-proof, and link them to ever widening layers of rich metadata about their multiple contexts of creation and use. This enables them to be accessed, used and interpreted in other spacetimes.”<sup>37</sup>

As an example of invasive activation, in databases of Finnish newspapers and magazines one finds a plethora of adverts for the Chat Noir, other cabarets, and related performance contexts during the period 1917–20. The adverts feature Robenne’s name written in bold black letters to signify her role as a leading artist. Even though such records do not often describe exactly what Robenne danced, or indicate how she danced it, they nevertheless witness to the physicality, bodily presence, practices and skills of a hardworking and professional artist. Moreover, they connect the dancer’s body with past audiences that obviously wanted her on stage, as well as with material spaces and places, whether represented in other records or still existing as architecture (buildings as archives) that can be visited and further explored. The many Finnish adverts could in turn be linked up with similar adverts and other records positioning Robenne in Swedish and Norwegian cabaret contexts, further emphasizing her role as a successful artist in this realm. Here the sheer multiplicity of records, very difficult to access and get an overview of without the help of search engines, demonstrates Robenne’s popularity as a performer during this period of time.

The invasive activation causes a much richer – and always becoming – composite image of Robenne’s life and work to emerge, challenging the typically meagre dance historiography. Moreover, the invasive activation could

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36. When searching the digital Russian newspapers we (Bohlin and I) did not manage to find her, even if several Russian versions of her name were tried out. Obviously, the Russian context has to be further explored, but this is beyond the limits of my present project.

37. McKemmish 2017, 139.

make use of all sorts of records, even those lacking representational metadata and of ambiguous provenance, for example visuals found on sites such as eBay.com or Pinterest.com. From a positivist or fact-centred point of view, these scattered records would be considered to have low value as evidence, but viewed through the activation lens they can help in making new connections and bridge knowledge gaps. For example, a 1926 photograph of Robenne as “Catherine the Great” at a charity spring ball held at the Lorraine Hotel in New York to support a psychiatric clinic, made me more attentive, even in the Gothenburg context, to her socially engaged performances in settings other than traditional theatrical venues.<sup>38</sup>

Adding to the pluralizing dimension, the invasive activation also *created* archives when copies of the records discovered through the digital searches were collected on my computer. This made it easier to relate records from certain repositories to materials found in other contexts. Most striking, perhaps, are the ways in which the invasive composite image or, in the words of philosopher and art historian Georges Didi-Huberman, “critical montage”, consisting of many images, gaps, and frictions, indicates the multiple ways that Robenne featured in media.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, as pictures and other records move and spread prolifically and perhaps also provocatively across geographical and other borders, they can always be part of the invasive-activation process, and thus help enrich as well as counter the previously scanty accounts of Robenne. Expressed differently, they can potentially form dream spaces that help us imagine new and different dance histories. It is worth noting how skilfully Robenne played with images and stereotypes, as well as was played by them, in presenting herself as a specifically Russian dancer.

### *Imaginary activation*

References to Robenne’s Russian background, persona, dance training and escape from the revolution, as well as her high-ranking artistic contexts, have surfaced throughout the archival road trip, often in contradictory and rather mysterious ways. While most of what is stated in the records in regard to something “Russian” probably has nothing to do with truth and facts, by operating through stereotypes it does create powerful imaginary spaces that have to be taken into account. For example, when Robenne arrives in Stockholm in December 1918, she feeds the journalist a dramatic narrative about escaping the revolution, including the week-long imprisonment of her “husband”, lawyer “Ivan Mitkewitj”, and having to abandon her work as a dedicated dance artist and leave behind “many costumes.”<sup>40</sup> This story operates through accessible images and narratives of the time, and serves to highlight Robenne as a talented dance artist forced to leave her country and all her belongings.

Looking at this story from an archival perspective, one is tempted to search

38. “Ms Anna Robenne at Spring Ball”, 1926.

39. Didi-Huberman 2004.

40. “Rysk danskonst på svenska estrader”, 1918.

for records that could either confirm or deny it. Robenne so to speak treading on shaky archival ground when telling her dramatic narrative and providing details to render it more vivid and truthful. According to Gilliland and Caswell, imagined records “can function socially in ways similar to actual records because of the weight of their absence or because of their aspirational nature.”<sup>41</sup> As a scholar I am confronted with something “Russian” that both is affectively present in and through the Robenne’s records, and is elusive and inaccessible in terms of other absent records. In the following I will explore this dynamic relationship between activating Russian affective imaginaries in the existing records and the ambition to find out more about actual Russian records.

In the programme for the Swedish Fenix cabaret, under the heading “True Russian Dance” Robenne is described as “sinfully beautiful” and her dancing as “bloody”.<sup>42</sup> In a review from her Gothenburg debut – in the operetta *Röda rosor*, in October 1920 – she is referred to as “the Russian dance diva” and after her *Balettföreställning* (Ballet Performance) in November 1920 she is credited with having “the rhythm, imagination and love of dance” characteristic of the Russians.<sup>43</sup> In addition, a Russian drama performed at a neighbourhood theatre is described as having “hot passions: hatred, love and jealousy”, and while the Nordic audience will find the “erotica” difficult, a “Slavic audience will appreciate it.”<sup>44</sup> In America “the Russian” component becomes central when several papers tell that Robenne is a former dancer of the “Imperial Russian Ballet”.<sup>45</sup> Stereotypical ideas about Russians as passionate, erotic, and naturally rhythmic are intertwined with Robenne being linked to something “Russian” that is both personal and political, where she comes across as a skilled and dedicated high-ranking artist, forced to live and work in exile.

When exposed to the multiple “Russian” characteristics in the records exemplified above, I could not help imagining Russian archives that might give more substance to Robenne’s background, education and early career. It is intriguing how those imaginary archives and records brought me into contact with a number of real scholars, archivists and librarians who shared with me their knowledge of the Russian language, Russian archives and dance history. While those dimensions of the road trip made me palpably aware of the Western bias of my exploration, including the problems arising due to my inability to speak Russian, my desire to find out more was also triggered. Indeed, “imagined-but-unavailable records can serve as fertile sources of personal and public affect that is not only a significant human and ethical consideration in itself but also can be activated and manipulated for a variety of political and

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41. Gilliland and Caswell, 2016, 53.

42. “Äkta rysk dans”, 1918. My translation of “bloody” is kept very close to the Swedish original “blodig”.

43. “Röda Rosor”, 1920; “Balettföreställningen” (no date). My translations.

44. ”Premiären på Artzybaschevs ’Svartsjuka’ ”, 1919; “Rysk dramatik på Lorensbergsteatern”, 1919. My translations.

45. See for example “She’s a danseuse”, 1925.

social ends.”<sup>46</sup> To this I would add historiographical ends, as what I am doing here counters or challenges the standard relationship between solidly existing records as fact providers and historical as-true-as-possible accounts.

What I think can be gained in the case of Robenne by acknowledging the power of imaginary and even impossible records, is much in line with feminist attempts to “suggest new relationships between archival evidence and the construction of knowledge, and how to locate and uncover them.”<sup>47</sup> In a future project, if such a thing can be imagined, I would be interested in what Ketelaar terms “returning” my findings, including the ideas about imaginary Russian records, to the place where my archival explorations started, to open up for a collaborative project with the archivists and other people at TMG, as well as for an expanded audience.<sup>48</sup> As suggested by Gilliland and Caswell, “we can and should envision new ways that archival description, retrieval and use can be reworked to take absences – and their attending affects – into account, and in situations where our ethics and humanity demand it, striving to turn impossible archival imaginaries into possibilities.”<sup>49</sup>

### **CONCLUSION: ACTIVATING DANCE RECORDS – SETTING HISTORIOGRAPHY IN MOTION**

In the words of archival scholar Kathy Carbone, records “can be active, energetic forces that evoke emotional and creative responses, channel human connection and action, and provide intellectual, aesthetic, and sensory experiences in a variety of contexts.”<sup>50</sup> In recognition of this, and as I have tried to demonstrate in this article, I suggest that a multilayered activation of records can help open up the dance archive to more productive, creative and critical dance histories and engagements. By applying pluralizing theory from archival studies, I argue that the entangled themes of *intimate*, *invasive* and *imagined* activations of records can help us grasp significant dimensions of extensive archival research.

When engaging *intimately* with records, closely and thoroughly, as in “dancing cheek to cheek”, perception is emphasized and prolonged to keep reception and interpretation open and dynamic so that new sensations and findings can emerge.<sup>51</sup> The intimate activation operates through a performative encounter, taking on sensorial, embodied, material, affective, and kinaesthetic

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46. Gilliland and Caswell 2016, 55.

47. Gilliland and Caswell 2016, 69.

48. Ketelaar 2017.

49. Gilliland and Caswell, 2016, 73.

50. Carbone 2015, 51.

51. Using dance as a metaphor for intimacy evokes the material and affective dimensions of dancing the archive that many contemporary artists and choreographers have engaged in. This will not be further explored here, but for examples see Borggreen and Gade 2013, Carbone 2015, and the work by Anne Collod, Martin Nachbar, and Boris Charmatz.

– and thus intensely relational – dimensions. In particular it has the capacity to challenge an understanding of archives and records that devalues or excludes materials pertaining to practices of memory, “the repertoire” to use performance studies scholar Diana Taylor’s term, or multisensory heritage such as situated bodily presence, gesture, sound, practical knowledge, etc.<sup>52</sup> And it can also create possibilities for analysing formal (for example shape, colour, relationships and composition in an image or other setting), semiotic (the play of signs and their structural systems) and social (such as political and economic power structures) dimensions.

What I have termed *invasive* activation has a pluralizing, cross-border character, conceptualizing a prolific as well as potentially provocative movement to challenge fixed and stable situations, contexts, imaginings, and histories. In my examples, the transition from physical records, such as often singular photographs and odd press clippings, to a digital realm including databases and search engines, helped the fragmentary images and records to come in contact with a plethora of related traces in a web of significance. In particular, records conventionally ascribed low value (as for example adverts) came to be significant in the process of understanding Robenne’s ability as a dancer. Metaphorically, the invasive activation can be thought of as accessing a river where archival fragments can move in all sorts of directions, find their way to previously dry and infertile grounds, and contribute to the growth of new and different dance histories and audience engagements.

Historians have always (mostly) written their accounts on the basis of a residue of all the possible evidence – what is available and what is not, what they choose to look at and search for and what they do not. Gilliland and Caswell counter this and take it a step further when arguing that imagined or even impossible records and archives are often necessary if one is to work towards some particular goal of social justice. When transposed to the realm of the dance archive the imaginary approach challenges historiographies drawing on existing records, including the understanding of them as deliverers of so-called facts, as well as the practices of the historian, because the imagined archive or record is an epistemological challenge by which, and within which my exploration has sought to navigate. So, by leaving behind still dominant positivist understandings of records, *imaginary* activation captures the potentially powerful ways in which dreamlike and affective dimensions of existing as well as non-existing records can take on transformative functions in an emerging web of significance. This includes both the affective spaces activated through the records’ content, and the ability of the researcher (and other interested people) to imagine records that might or might not be there. In situations where the documentation of dance history is scarce, such as in the case of Robenne, it is, I suggest, hugely important to find imaginary and even utopian ways of thinking, acting and writing differently.

I would further like to emphasize that the activation and pluralization of

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52. On “practices of memory” and “multisensory heritage”, see Taylor 2003, and von Rosen and Nilsson 2017.

records creates possibilities for acknowledging the collaborative and participatory dimensions of historical inquiry. My exploration of Robenne's life and work echoes performance studies scholar Heike Roms's suggestion that we can "reconceive of the archive as a collaborative effort of caring for an artist's legacy."<sup>53</sup> Indeed, when viewed through this lens my exploration involved a great deal of collaboration with archivists (many of them female), the receipt of e-mails from a relative of Robenne, and scholars and friends willing to involve themselves in the Robenne case. This resonates with "a feminist ethics of care approach" to archives, as advocated by Caswell and Marika Cifor, emphasizing how archivists, scholars, and all concerned parties in a web of relationships have "an affective responsibility to responsively empathize with each of the stakeholders."<sup>54</sup>

According to McKemmish "oral forms of records, literature, art, artefacts, the built environment, landscape, dance, ceremonies, and rituals" have hitherto by and large been "excluded from the professional meanings given to *record*, *archive*, and *archives*."<sup>55</sup> It can further be argued that a pluralizing approach to dance record activation signifies a paradigm shift, challenging both positivist and interpretivist mindsets, so that downplayed or excluded multisensory heritage and histories – often *herstories* – can both take and be given space in new webs of significance. To bring this to a temporary close, I suggest that archival pluralization in the form of intimate, invasive, and imaginary activation emphasizes the importance and relevance of closely, critically and imaginatively engaging with records, especially when it comes to the role the archive can play in breaking down cultural barriers and re-evaluating notions of dance historiography, heritage and cultural identity.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to thank Andrew Flinn, Erik Mattsson and the two anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments on a draft of this article, and Anne Gilliland, Michelle Caswell and Kathy Carbone for generously sharing their knowledge of archival studies.

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53. Roms 2013, 48.

54. Caswell and Cifor, 2016, 41.

55. McKemmish 2011, 123.

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