

REMEMBERING HAPPINESS

GERMAN MODERNIST DANCE PAST AND PRESENT



Let us begin with some dates. In 1967 Dore Hoyer, the great Expressionist solo dancer, puts an end to her life in Berlin: in the same year and in the same city Gerhard Bohner, a more recent pioneer of the new dance-theater form, presents the first full-evening performance of his own choreography. One year later dance revolutionary Johann Kresnik becomes resident choreographer for the city ballet in Bremen, where he will be instrumental in helping reawaken dance to the political concerns of the day. In September 1973 Mary Wigman, who paved the way for the new dance, dies at age 87; almost at the same time Pina Bausch begins the work in Wuppertal which will lead to her world-wide recognition. Is this merely a series of coincidences, or is it a natural transition?

What might seem like a direct pass of the baton from one generation to the next was actually a covert inheritance. For the rebellious spirit of the Expressionist dancers had not survived the Second World War unscathed, and during the restorative rebuilding underway in the newly established Federal Republic, the one-time avant-garde dance was deemed old-fashioned and outmoded. In both the political and the cultural sectors *No experiments* had become the motto of post-war Germany. Expressionist dance continued to endure in a very few refuges like the Wigman Studio in Berlin, where Gerhard Bohner and Susanne Linke were enrolled, or at the Folkwang School in Essen where Pina Bausch and Reinhild Hoffmann were among the dancers studying with Kurt Jooss. What Bausch and Hoffmann took with them upon graduation from the Folkwang School was not so much the aesthetics of their Expressionist mentors; instead, what they put to good use was their sense of a newly regained open space in which the horizons of the dance were once again free to unfurl.

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According to the Expressionists, the external motions of dance should be a visible expression of those inner, invisible motions so appropriately named *emotions*. As Pina Bausch would later describe it, their choreographies grew as it were from the inside toward the outside. Freed from subservience to traditions and handed down techniques, the artist simply began working to create a new form that would suitably express his/her most deeply felt emotions. Any movement could thus be a dance movement. This affirmation of feelings and emotional expression was decidedly anticlassical; it functioned as a powerful force for change; and it provided the newly emerging dance form with its name:

Expressionist dance. Barefoot, liberated from the bondage of confining corsets, the dancer was free to give expression to the world of inner experiences. The dancer had become the author of his/her own choreographies, and dance was the medium for the dancer's self-realization. But although self-realization was an end in itself, nevertheless a decisive step had been taken: the body as *the power-house of emotion* had been (re)discovered, and that power-house was determined to be free of the inherited serfdom in which it found itself. The old, feudal system as represented by classical ballet was quite literally thrown off its conservative, vertical axis.

The enthusiasm released by the new dance reawakened the long suppressed yearning for freedom from every kind of bodily constraint. In place of insipid illusions and pretty appearances, for the first time ever what Rudolf von Laban had called the *shadow side* of human nature took over the dance stage. The classical technique, with its perfectionist ideals, had formerly been revered as stupendous, but now had become the target of the new dance's rebellious rage. Barefoot dancers sought natural, organic movements and began to reclaim an elementary language of expressive forms. In that process they also began to attract unprecedentedly large audiences for dance among the general public. These barefoot explorations of new terrain beyond the limitations of the established theaters were never richer or more versatile than in the period 1910–1930. What gave wings to their work was their insight that the sources of dance lay not only in joy, but also in distress, that beneath the pain slumbered a longing, like a dim recollection of past happiness or a vague memory from another time and place.



REINHILD HOFFMANN *Machandel*
Foto: Klaus Lefebvre

TANZTHEATER SKORONEL
Foto: Burkhard Peter

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A Brief Look Back

The Second World War brought all this to an end. In the post-war years the theaters prescribed themselves a strict regimen of political abstinence: classical dramas were considered *safe*. The dance world followed suit and a wave of classical or pseudo-classical choreography flooded the ballet stages. Most of these works were of mediocre quality, afflicted with the same homely staleness and naivety that tainted so many of the state-sponsored cultural products of the Adenauer era. The pathos of empty gestures, the notion of dance as an elegant entertainment for an evening's diversion, in short, everything the pre-war Expressionist dancers had fought to overthrow quickly re-established itself. Ancient dramatists and mythological themes were exhumed, but the explosive power inherent in these works was kept carefully under wraps. Instead, a plush and stilted bourgeois conventionality reigned supreme, as if Expressionist dance had never happened, as if a cleansing and tightening of dance methods had never happened. Even efforts such as Kurt Jooss' attempt to enrich the classical inheritance with freedoms derived from the expressive dance could scarcely establish a foothold. Although Jooss tried to re-establish a dance company in 1951, his endeavor collapsed a mere two years later, and would not be successfully repeated until 1963.

Performance tours by individual exponents of Expressionist dance still continued, and established theaters occasionally commissioned choreographic works from Expressionist dancers, but such events remained few and far between. Anyone who attempted to foster the further development of modern dance found him/herself fighting a losing battle. The restorative epoch of rebuilding West Germany simply had not planned for experimental theater work along such untrodden paths. It thus comes as no surprise to learn that in West Germany, in sharp contrast to the situation in

neighboring countries, the achievements of the post-modern dance were virtually ignored. The cause of this was not any lack of interest on the part of choreographers, but rather the aloofness of the established theatrical culture and the dearth of financial support for independent initiatives. Just as official institutions were unwilling to preserve their dance legacy, so they were equally reluctant to assimilate new influences from abroad. Unwilling to deal with the *shadow side* of their own recent history, they preferred to forget the past.



LAOKOON *Winter Ade*



LAOKOON *Jeanne d'Arc*

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A New Departure

It fell to the granddaughters and grandsons of the Expressionist dance revolutionaries to harvest the first fruits of freedom. Pina Bausch declared in an interview that *honesty* and *precision* are the most important teachings she gathered during her work with Kurt Jooss. Those two qualities correspond to the depth of feeling and clarity of emotion which Laban claimed as the principal virtues of the new dance. And while among members of the founding generation this preoccupation with affect had all too often skidded off into irrationality, the new dance-theater choreographers were able to give it a solid footing in reality. Once the spell of pretty appearances had been broken, they could again follow in the footsteps of the pathfinders and resume the pursuit of those truths which the body's reality demanded. Behind the dark side of the individual's character (which the Expressionist dancers had already begun to explore) lay the pressures of society at large, pressures which, among other things, are responsible for keeping the war between the sexes raging. Behind the "eternal cycle of birth and death" lay the cycles of the marketplace, where the necessity of economic survival forces everyone to sell themselves. Clearly discernable, contemporary individuals began to emerge from the shimmering characters. The "eternal basis" of human character could now be defined within its social conditions.



SUSANNE LINKE, URS DIETRICH *Affekte*
Foto: Ridha Zouari

The human body has become lost in a strange and foreign land, in a peculiarly alien absence of happiness. The body stands in the icy air of the marketplace and the laws of supply and demand hold sway. Following on the heels of the first-generation protagonists, a large number of independent choreographers have long since embarked on their own paths, surveying and exploring the new free spaces. For the first time since the early days of Expressionist dance, West Germany can again boast an independent dance scene worthy of the name, with its two main centers in Berlin and Munich, the cities which provide the most financial support for the free dance scene. In Cologne too, where independent dance has for so long gone largely unnoticed, a new interest is beginning to form. In this more favorable climate, performers in other branches of the independent theater scene are also benefiting from the freedoms which their pioneering colleagues in dance-theater fought for and achieved.

With an air of amused superiority, dance-theater has placed itself above the conventions of the traditional theater and (re)discovered a form which moves both the performers and their audiences. Dance has regained that intensity which inevitably arises when a painfully false victor's smile fades and the genuine needs are unmasked. In its re-examination of the perpetually valid themes of the Expressionist dance, in its attempt to offer an honest account of the shadow side of human nature, the new dancetheater has rediscovered the possibility of dancing freely, of dancing into a state of freedom. In the intensity of horror lies the power to overcome it; enduring the *angst* is the first step toward breaking its paralyzing spell and gaining new mobility. If one is able to grieve one gains the strength that can transmute lamentation into condemnation; and the power of that condemnation can liberate. Grief thus leads toward a sense of yearning which has always had a rightful place in the body. It is not the mind, but the soul that yearns within the sensitive body; the soul makes the body painfully aware of what is lacking; yet it also excitedly heralds what is yet to come.

In its best moments, this too is the message of free dance.

Norbert Servos