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Elizabeth Bergman (ejbergman)

Mary Wigman (1886–1973)
THE PHILOSOPHY OF MODERN DANCE

Wigman first studied eurhythmics with Dalcroze, then worked in movement with Laban. As if in revolt against her first teacher, her early compositions were executed in silence—her way of asserting the independence of the art of dance. Her choreographic career, which began with the Witch Dance *of 1914, extended into the 1960's. Centered in Germany, where she maintained her own school, Wigman also toured in Europe and the United States. Though the American modern dancers were intrigued by her work, the two nationalities actually developed their forms quite independently.*

The critic Margaret Lloyd described Wigman's dance as "largely an ecstasy of gloom, stressing the demonic and macabre, as if to exorcise through movement the secret evils in man's nature." Though this description succeeds in characterizing a majority of her pieces, it does not recognize the lighter, lyrical side of her repertory seen in dances like Shifting Landscape *(1930). The emphasis on the somber is confirmed, however, in this article with its references to Wigman's concern with man and his fate, and with its contrast of ballet and modern dance, the latter admitting the dark and earthbound qualities of the dancer's movement.*

The dance is one of many human experiences which cannot be suppressed. Dancing has existed at all times, and among all people and races. The dance is a form of expression given to man just as speech, philosophy, painting or music. Like music, the dance is a language which all human beings understand without the use of speech. Granted, the dance is as little an everyday expression as music: the man who begins to dance because of an inner urge does so perhaps from a feeling of joyousness, or a spiritual ecstasy which transforms his normal steps into dance steps, although he himself may not be conscious of this change.

In short, the dance, like every other artistic expression, presupposes a heightened, increased life response. Moreover, the heightened response does not always have to have a happy background. Sorrow, pain, even horror and fear may also tend to release a welling-up of feeling, and therefore of the dancer's whole being.

SOURCE: From *Europa*, I, No. 1 (May-July, 1933).

There is something alive in every individual which makes him capable of giving outward manifestation, (through the medium of bodily movement) to his feelings, or rather, to that which inwardly stirs him. . . .

I feel that the dance is a language which is inherent, but slumbering in every one of us. It is possible for every human to experience the dance as an expression in his own body, and in his own way.

What we expect from the professional dancer is the creative dance in its most intense representation. We never insist upon such an intense representation from the lay-dancer. The professional dancer is distinguished for his particular qualifications, and for his artistic contribution to the dance. He must have the divine capacity to portray the difficult language of the dance: to recreate and objectify what he feels inside of himself.

The same desire for artistic liberation, for exaltation, for personal ecstasy, for bodily movement, in short, for activating his own imagination is also present in the non-professional dancer, and therefore gives him the right to seek for himself the intense expression of the dance.

We all know that the body is an end in itself. The dancer must learn, however, when and how to control his body. He ought not to regard his body simply for itself. He must transform and cultivate it as an instrument of the dance. The dance begins where gymnastics leave off. There are subtle differences between these two forms, and it is somewhat difficult to demarcate between them. Suffice it to say, the differences are neither in the kind or in the style of bearing, but rather in those unexplainable disparities which cannot be easily put into words. The single gestures, isolated in themselves, do not make the dance, but rather the manner in which the gestures are connected in and by movement: the way in which one form of movement is organically developed from its preceding movement, and the manner in which it leads as organically into the next movement. That which is no longer apparent or obvious, which may be said to "lie between the lines" of dancing, is what transforms the gymnastic movement into that of the dance.

To recapitulate: dancing is a simple rhythmic swinging, or ebb and flow, in which even the minutest gesture is part of this flow, and which is carried along the unending tide of movement.

The dance always remains bound by the human body, which is, after all, the dancer's instrument. However, with the emotion which stirs him, and the spirituality which uplifts him, the dance becomes more than mere physical movement in space, and the dancer more than its mobile agent. From then on, it represents the internal experiences of the dancer. To put it another way: we dance the mutation or change of our spiritual and emotional conditions as they are alive in our own body, in a rhythmic to and fro.

Charlotte Rupolph in Mary Wigman's *The Language of Dance*, Wesleyan University Press

Mary Wigman has described her experience of creation: ". . . the hand seizing the mantle which clung to the body, stretching high, rearing up, then with three long strides into the dark and empty space, a rhythm compelling the arm to reach up—the movement theme for *Song of Fate* was born. I could hear the cry of despair within me. Behind it was the proud and defiant: 'Nevertheless!' " (*The Language of Dance*)

The idealistic substance of the dance, and of the dance creation, are the same as that of other creative and interpretative arts. In any event, it treats of man and his fate,—not necessarily the fate of men of today, nor of yesterday, nor even of tomorrow. But the fate of man caught in his eternal and perpetual web forms the old and yet ever new theme of the dance-creation. From the crudest reality to the sublimest abstraction, man is personified in the dance. All his struggles, griefs, joys are thus represented. Man himself forms the general theme for a limitless and ever significant congeries of variations.

"What idea do you think of when you dance?" A question which is often asked me, and which is difficult to answer. For the process which we call thinking has really nothing to do with the dance. The idea for a dance may come to a creative artist in his sleep, or at any moment of the day; that is to say, it is suddenly there. The idea finds root in one's consciousness without the conjuration of thought. Just as a melodic theme comes to a composer without his knowing why or where, so an idea of movement, a dance-theme, occurs just as spontaneously to the dancer. It often happens that the dancer carries the germ of the dance-theme inside of himself for a long time before it is released. It gives him no peace until it begins to take shape and form as movement. Once this theme, which is the eventual starting point of the entire dance, is at hand, the real work on the dance-creation begins; its composition and its interpretation. This formative period keeps the dancer in a constant state of excitement until the idea of the dance has reached its final point, until it has matured into a work of art. When this moment has arrived, the dance-creator becomes the dance-interpreter. It is absolutely necessary then that the dancer portray the dance in a way that will convey the meaning and force of the inner experiences which have inspired him to conceive this dance.

The primary concern of the creative dancer should be that his audience not think of the dance objectively, or look at it from an aloof and intellectual point of view,—in other words, separate itself from the very life of the dancer's experiences;—the audience should allow the dance to affect it emotionally and without reserve. It should allow the rhythm, the music, the very movement of the dancer's body to stimulate the same feeling and emotional mood within itself, as this mood and emotional condition has stimulated the dancer. It is only then that the audience will feel a strong emotional kinship with the dancer: and will live through the vital experiences behind the dance-creation. Shock, ecstasy, joy, melancholy, grief, gayety, the dance can express all of these emotions through movement. But the expression without the inner experience in the dance is valueless.

A definite change in dancing, particularly in Germany, has been taking place these past twenty years. The revised mode of terpsichorean expression we designate as the "modern dance" in contrast to the "classic dance" or the ballet.

The ballet had reached such a state of perfection that it could be developed no further. Its forms had become so refined, so sublimated to the ideal of purity, that the artistic content was too often lost or obscured. The great "ballet dancer" was no longer a representative of a great inner emotion, (like the musician or poet) but had become defined as a great virtuoso. The ballet-dancer developed an ideal of agility and

lightness. He sought to conquer and annihilate gravitation. He banned the dark, the heavy, the earthbound, not only because it conflicted with his ideal of supple, airy, graceful technique, but because it also conflicted with his pretty aesthetic principles.

Times, however, became bad. War had changed life. Revolution and suffering tended to destroy and shatter all the ideals of prettiness. Traditions, aged and cherished, were left behind. How could these old and broken-down traditions remain firm throughout this awful period of destruction? Youth seeking for some spiritual relief could no longer turn to these anile panaceas. And so youth destroyed whatever appeared static, superfluous and moribund; and in its stead set up its own spiritual demands, its own material challenges.

What this new youth demanded of life and mankind, it also demanded from the artistic expression of its time, namely, the honest reflection of its own emotional experiences in symbols of artistic creation and interpretation. It demanded this positive reflection from its literature, drama, poetry, painting, architecture, music and the dance. All of these new things were direct outgrowths from its spiritual restiveness, its material challenges.

It is therefore easy to understand why this new youth should be attracted to the modern dance, the latter being one of the things which grew out of the youth's new world. The modern dance is the expression of youth and of today, and it is as positive in its expression as all the other modern arts. . . .