Interrupted Continuities

Modern Dance in Germany

An historical photoessay by Susan Allene Manning and Melissa Benson

Ed Note: This photo essay was originally an exhibition displayed in the Brooklyn Academy of Music lobby lounge from 1 October to 8 December 1985 as part of the Next Wave Festival humanities program. Dance historian Susan Manning curated the exhibition with the technical assistance of Melissa Benson.

The roots of today's modern dance first appeared in Germany and America. In the decade preceding World War I, American and German dancers independently evolved new dance forms that opposed the tradition of narrative and spectacular ballet. Yet the new forms probably would not have developed if the two traditions had not come into contact. When American dancers Isadora Duncan and Ruth St. Denis appeared in Germany after 1900 they became immediate sensations and catalysts for German dancers. In the '20s, the movement known as *ausdruckstanz* (literally "dance of expression") came to dominate the German concert stage and opera house.

Under the Third Reich, ausdruckstanz lost its artistic vigor, and the direction of influence reversed. Many German dancers emigrated to America in the '30s and contributed to the establishment of American modern dance. After World War II ausdruckstanz nearly disappeared in divided Germany, while American modern dance achieved a worldwide reputation.

Beginning in the late '60s, modern dance reappeared in Germany as *tanztheater* (literally "dance theater"). Taking ausdruckstanz as precedent, the choreographers of tanztheater elevate expression over form and view dance as a mode of social engagement. Their aesthetic opposes the formalism of both classical ballet and postmodern dance. Last season's appearances by Pina Bausch, Reinhild Hoffmann, and Susanne Linke at the Brooklyn Academy of Music continued the encounter between German and American modern dance.

The Solo Form: New Roles for the Sexes

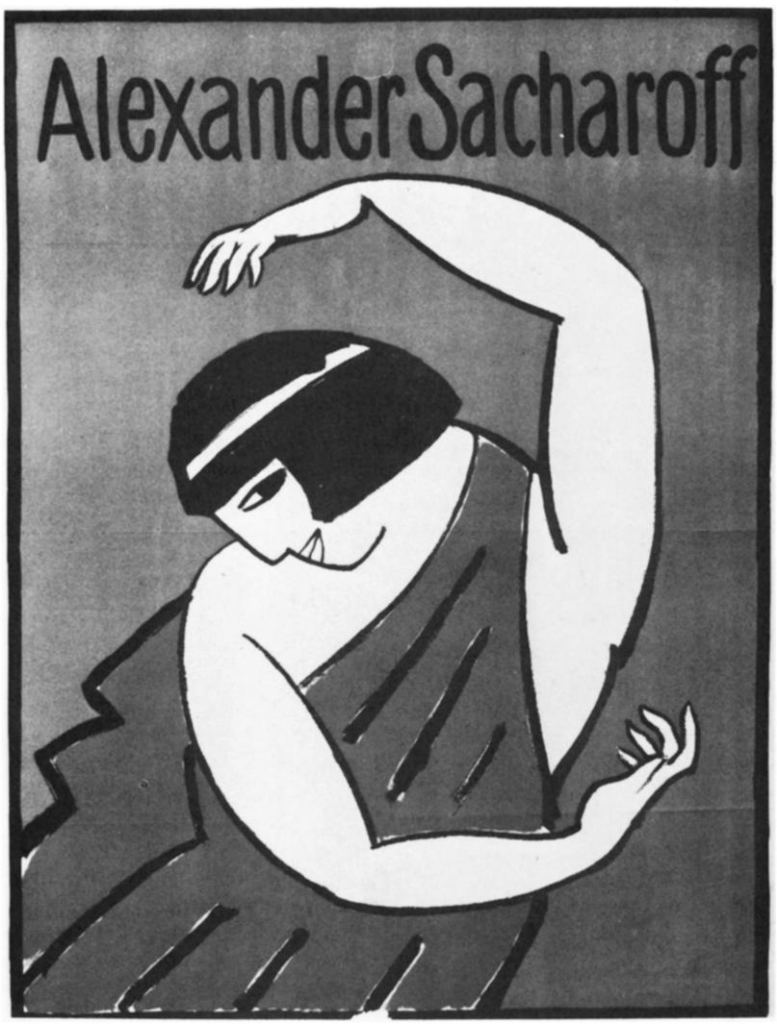
> *"The dancer of the future . . . will dance not in the form of nymph, nor fairy, nor coquette, but in the form of woman in her greatest and purest*

1. *The German public was the first European audience to take Isadora Duncan seriously. Following her first appearances in 1902–03, Cosima Wagner invited her to choreograph Richard Wagner's* Tannhäuser *at Bayreuth in 1904. That same year she met Gordon Craig in Berlin and opened a school for girls in the suburb of Grunewald. (Watercolor by Abraham Walkowitz)*

expression. She will realize the mission of woman's body and the holiness of all its parts . . . She will dance the freedom of woman."

—*Isadora Duncan,* Der Tanz der Zukunft
("The Dance of the Future"), 1903

The new dance that appeared at the turn of the century involved a new sociology of the dance scene. While the narrative and spectacular ballet of the 19th century required large, expensive companies and authoritarian company managers, the new form required little more than a dancer, an accompanist, and an empty stage. In the 19th century the dancer was rarely presented alone but rather served as the focal point of spectacle. The dancer was almost always female, who had come to embody the



2. Alexander Sakharoff studied visual art before turning to dance. Beginning in 1910 he appeared in Munich, where the sensuality of his impersonations received much acclaim in artistic circles. (Anonymous poster courtesy of Münchner Stadtmuseum, Munich)

Victorian conception of woman: either an ethereal ballerina—woman as angel—or an overstuffed chorus girl—woman as whore. She did not choreograph her own movement; rather, she executed the steps arranged for her by the ballet master, who was, without exception, a man.

In the 20th century dancers rejected this institutional setup. The male dancer made a comeback. Whether male or female, dancers turned toward solo forms. The dancer became at once choreographer, performer and manager; dance became an intensely personal expression of the self. The new dance freed men and women to experiment with the wider range of sexual roles then possible after the demise of Victorianism. Female soloists such as Isadora Duncan and the Wiesenthal sisters appeared as images of the new woman—independent of a male partner and free to create her own identity. Male soloists such as Alexander Sacharoff appeared in a variety of androgynous roles, no longer limited to the role of partner to the ballerina.

3. Berta and Else Wiesenthal trained at the Vienna Court Opera Ballet before beginning their careers as independent dancers in 1907. Like Isadora Duncan, they focused on the translation of music into motion and made special use of the repertory of the Viennese Waltz. (Photo by Hugo Erfurth Dresden)

Physical Culture and the Avant-Garde

> *"I want to raise rhythm to the status of a social institution and prepare the way for a new style . . . that may become the basis for a new society."*
>
> *—Emile Jaques-Dalcroze, letter to philanthropist Wolf Dohrn, 1909*

The new dance paralleled the popular physical culture movement. Women especially took to exercise as a means to physical and psychological health. Many dancers opened schools geared toward laymen that emphasized the artistic potential of physical culture.

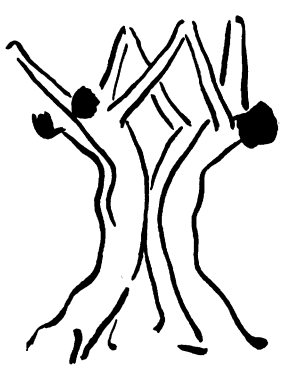
The institute founded by Emile Jaques-Dalcroze at Hellerau in 1910 mingled the influences of physical culture and art. Dalcroze, a musician

by training and an educator by inclination, set out to develop a method of teaching musical concepts through movement. His method, today called eurhythmics, drew on the principles of physical culture. He also devised a new performance form based on a closer integration of movement and music. To demonstrate his ideas he collaborated with Adolphe Appia to stage Gluck's *Orpheus* in 1912 and 1913. The demonstrations struck a responsive chord among visual and theatrical artists, who heralded *Orpheus* as the sign of a new union of the arts. At Hellerau ideas drawn from popular culture and the avant-garde intersected and pointed the way toward ausdruckstanz.

Ausdruckstanz in the Weimar Republic: Rudolph Laban and Mary Wigman

> *"The dancer in a movement choir discovers an awakened sense of movement in his inner being by representing himself not as an individual but as part of a greater living group."*
>
> *—Rudolf Laban, "Vom Sinne der Bewegungschöre" ("On the Meaning of Movement Choirs"),* Schrifttanz, *June 1930*

> *"My group does not dance feelings. Feelings are far too precise, too distinct. We dance the change and transformation of spiritual states as variously manifested in each individual."*
>
> *—Mary Wigman, "Tanzerische Wege und Ziele" ("The Ways and Goals of the Dancer"),* Neue Rundschau, *November 1923*



4. Among the students at Emile Jaques-Dalcroze's Institute at Hellerau were Mary Wigman, Suzanne Perrottet, Marie Rambert, and Michio Ito. Among the artists who came to observe Dalcroze's work were Serge Diaghilev, Vaslav Nijinsky, George Bernard Shaw, Harley Granville-Barker, and Max Reinhardt. (Drawing by Paulet Thevenaz)

Rudolf Laban opened a school in Munich in the same year that Dalcroze founded Hellerau. A prolific writer, Laban gave theoretical definition to ausdruckstanz. He believed that modern industrial society divided man against himself and that dance could restore man's original harmony with the cosmos, hence restoring the natural bonds of community. To facilitate this process he innovated a form suitable for large groups of amateurs, the "movement choir." He saw the movement choir as a means of promoting a sense of community among members of a fragmented society.

Laban also established the formal basis for ausdruckstanz with his concept of "free dance." This concept emphasized the spatial dimension of movement and was performed without music or to a simple rhythmic accompaniment. Laban's formulation was shaped by his work with dancers at the Monte Verita artists' colony in the Swiss Alps. An exceptional group of dancers gathered there, including Mary Wigman. She was a former student of Dalcroze who became Laban's closest collaborator during World War I.

After the war Wigman toured Germany and gained an immediate following. Her dances embodied the spirit of expressionism, its pervasive angst, and escape into ecstasy. For Wigman, the soloist's projection of the spontaneous self no longer sufficed. She required a form that transcended the individual, a requirement fulfilled by her use of masks, and by her all-female group. Her dances revolved around the relationship of the leader and the group.

5. After World War I Rudolf Laban's students founded movement choirs in association with trade unions, church groups, and the network of Laban schools. The movement choir shown was led by Albrecht Kunst in Hamburg around 1925. As a form that straddled social dance and theater dance, movement choirs required from 12 to 1200 participants, depending on the performance context. In this way the movement choirs realized Laban's idea of festival—performance created for a specific community occasion. (Photo courtesy of the Martin Gleisner Collection, Laban/Bartenieff Institute of Movement Studies)

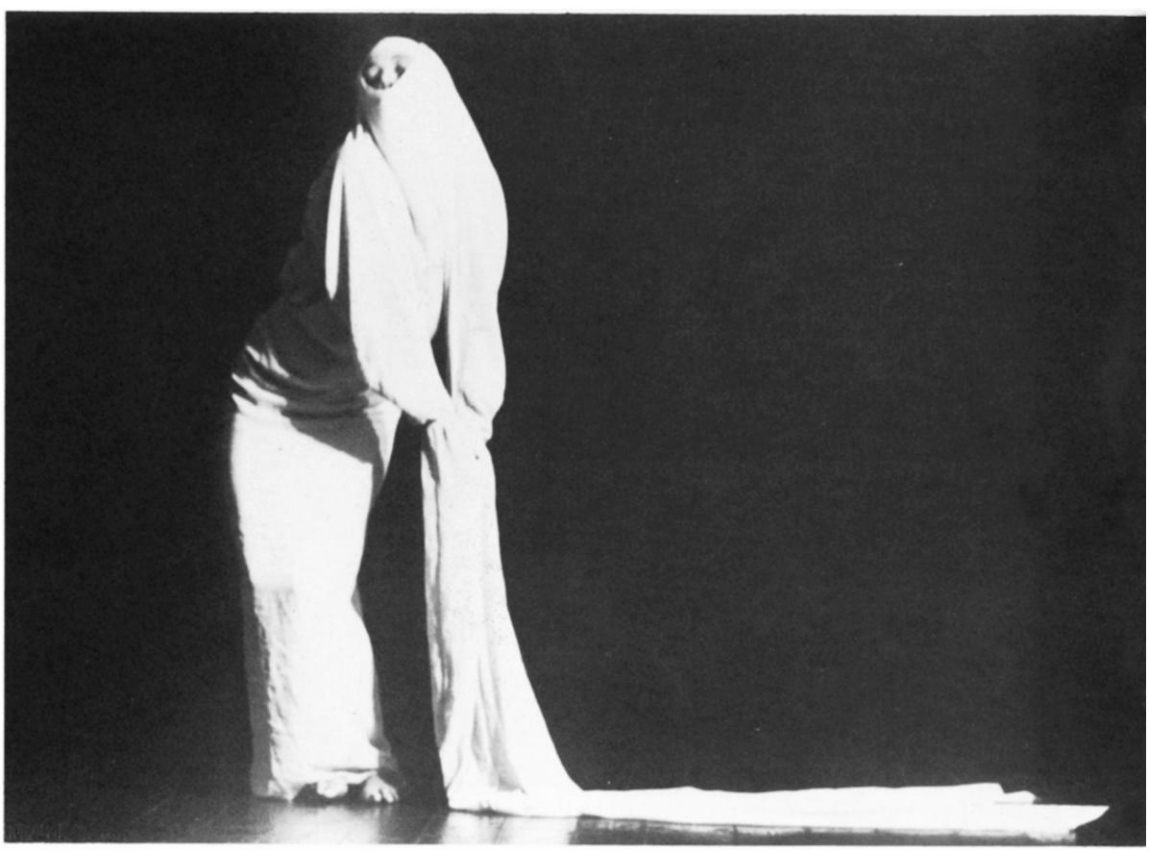
Laban's ideology and Wigman's example dominated German dance in the '20s. Laban founded more than 25 schools across Germany while Wigman established a Central Institute in Dresden and several branch schools. As a term, ausdruckstanz signified the styles and forms of dance propagated by their many students and followers. Their followers, fiercely partisan, debated the merits of one approach over the other. Laban advocated egalitarianism and the desire to make dance accessible and integral to everyday life. Wigman espoused elitism and the belief that only a chosen few could communicate the spirit of the time through dance. Their aesthetics defined the end points of the ausdruckstanz continuum.

Alternate Visions: Valeska Gert, Oskar Schlemmer, Jean Weidt, and Kurt Jooss

> *"Because the average German has no self-confidence, he considers great art only that which he does not understand and which bores him. Mary Wigman fulfills these expectations of the educated middle class and therefore has acquired a national reputation."*
>
> —*Valeska Gert, "Mary Wigman und Valeska Gert,"* Der Querschnitt, *May 1926*

> *"The dance entitled* The Worker *involved hard work. I was myself a worker, a gardener who plied his trade eight to ten hours a day, and my limbs sensed the fatigue. But I did not want to represent the worker as he toiled, rather the worker as he made life more beautiful."*
>
> —*Jean Weidt,* Der Rote Tänzer, *1968*

6–9. The Visions *cycle (1925–28) marked the high point of Mary Wigman's solo choreography. Pictured are:* Dream Figure *(1927) at top left,* Ghostly Figure *(1927) at bottom left,* Space Shape *(1928) at top right and bottom right. Her costumes became masks as the persona of a transformed self eclipsed her everyday self. Her solos were neither autobiographical nor overtly feminine, as were Isadora Duncan's; rather, she projected an image of gender that escaped and confounded the conventional distinctions between masculinity and femininity. (Photos courtesy of the Mary Wigman Archive, Academy of Arts, West Berlin)*



10. Like Mary Wigman, Valeska Gert confounded the conventional image of femininity projected by Isadora Duncan and other female soloists, but she did so in the spirit of satire and parody rather than as a means for transcending everyday reality. (Photos courtesy of the Dance Collection, New York Public Library at Lincoln Center, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations)

Only a few dancers stood apart from the dominant aesthetics of Wigman and Laban. One was Valeska Gert, a Berlin cabaret dancer who also appeared in films and on the stage. Gert knew Bertolt Brecht, and her theory of the social function of dance in many ways paralleled his theory of theater. Once she asked Brecht to define epic theater. He replied, "What you do."

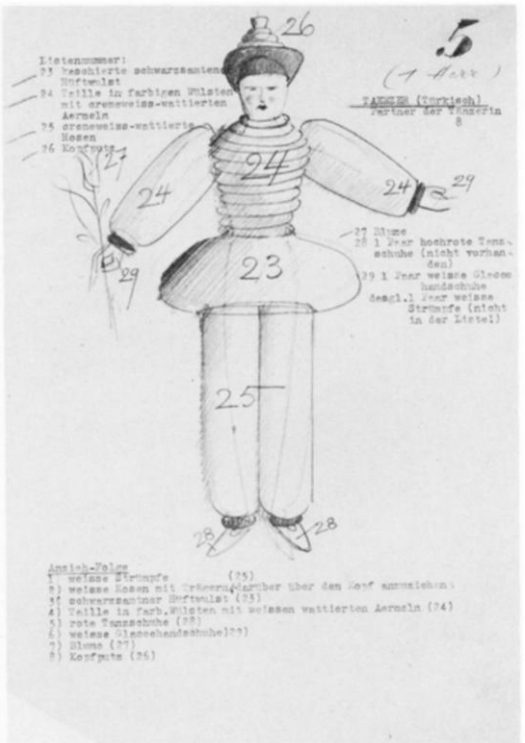
Gert employed stereotyped roles and forms drawn from popular entertainment—*Tango, Charleston, Variety, Circus, Sport, Clown*. Her deadpan expression distanced her self from her performance; in this way she mocked and commented on the forms she used. Gert called the dancer a transition between the old theater and the new and believed that new forms could arise only from the breakdown of old forms. She considered the movement choir a false path toward the theater of the future because it posited a sense of community where none existed.

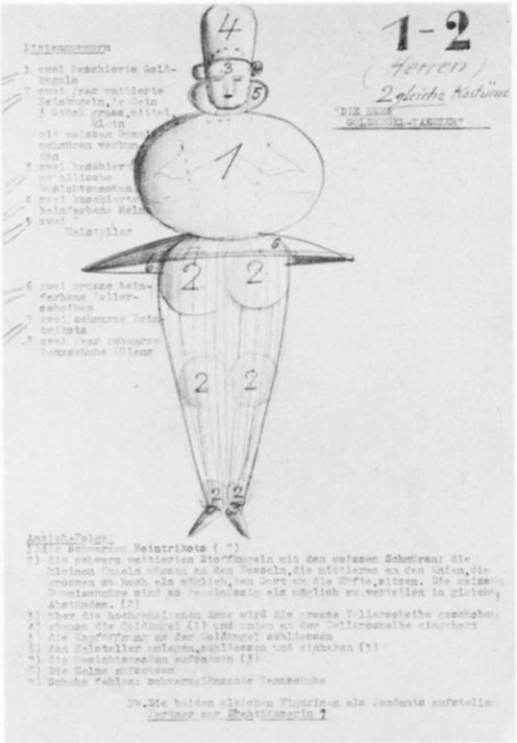
Oskar Schlemmer presented another alternative. He organized a stage workshop at the Bauhaus in which students experimented with a new form of abstract theater. Like Gert, Schlemmer parodied pre-existing dance forms, but his satire was mixed with an exploration of form for its own sake. He masked his dancers in body-distorting costumes as a way of exploring the body's spatial configurations. In Schlemmer's works the dancer functioned like a puppet or puppeteer; the performer's expressive self disappeared.

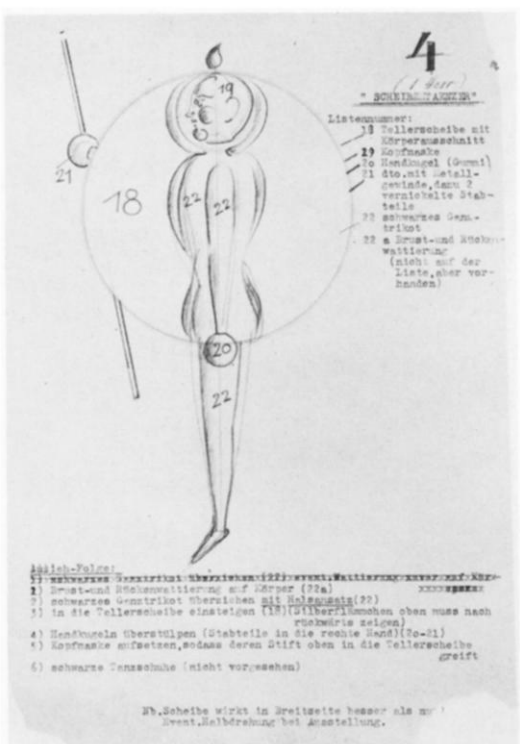
11–14. Although Oskar Schlemmer first conceived of the Triadic Ballet *(1916–19) during World War I, the work was not realized until after the war. The work echoed both the metaphysical intent of ausdruckstanz and the satiric intent of Valeska Gert's work. (Collection, The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Sarah Goodwin Austin)*

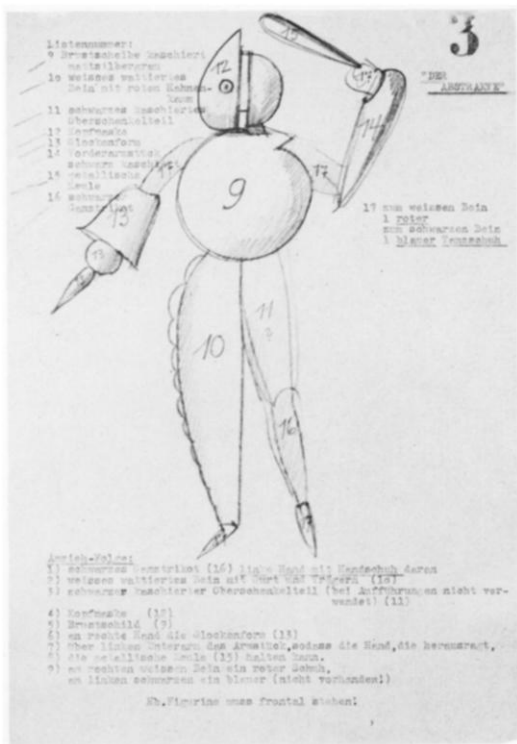
Dancers by and large remained aloof from national political issues, for their conception of dance's social function derived from the utopian humanism of Dalcroze and Laban. As political factionalism intensified during the closing years of the Weimar Republic, however, a few dancers finally felt compelled to take sides.

Jean Weidt dedicated his career to furthering the proletarian cause through dance. First in Hamburg and later in Berlin, he organized dance troupes of young workers that performed both on the concert stage and









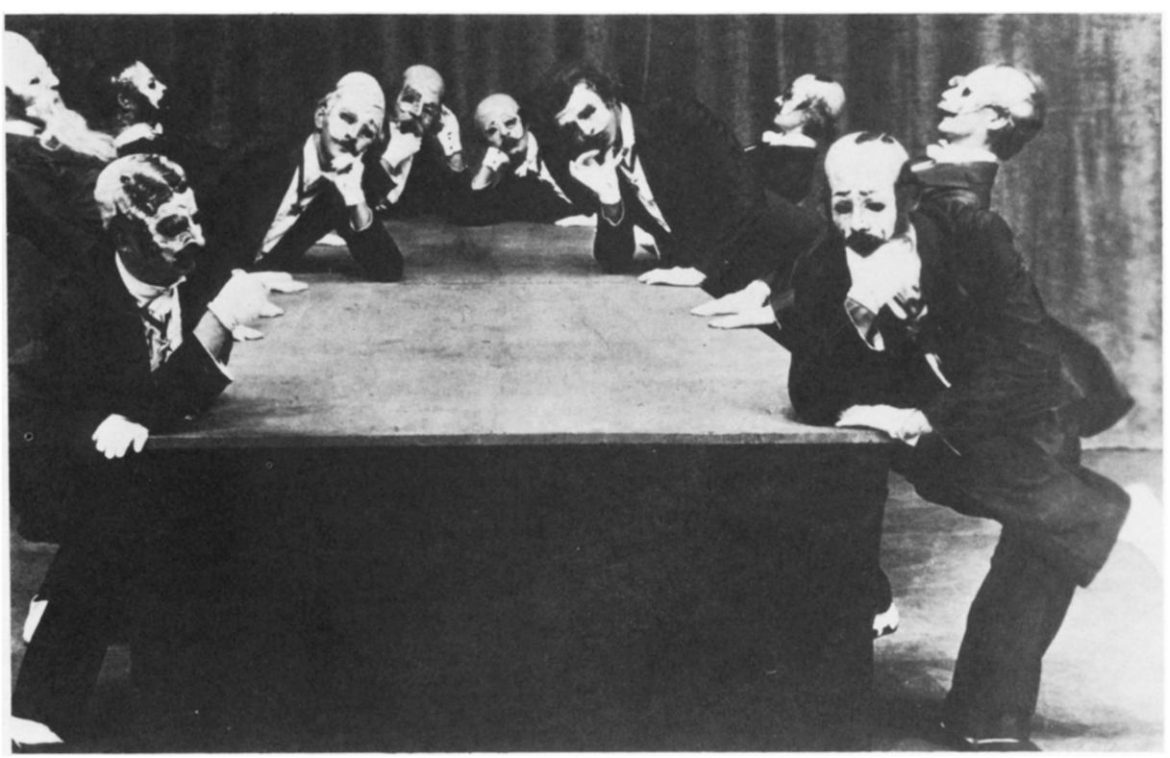
at Communist Party rallies. Known as the Red Dancer, Weidt went into exile when Hitler came to power.

Kurt Jooss was another dancer who took sides, although he never explicitly supported any one party. Originally a student of Laban, Jooss employed sharply-observed social caricature in his works beginning in the mid-'20s. Not until the early '30s did he create an explicitly political work: *The Green Table* was an anti-war ballet. Like Weidt, Jooss went into exile once Hitler rose to power.

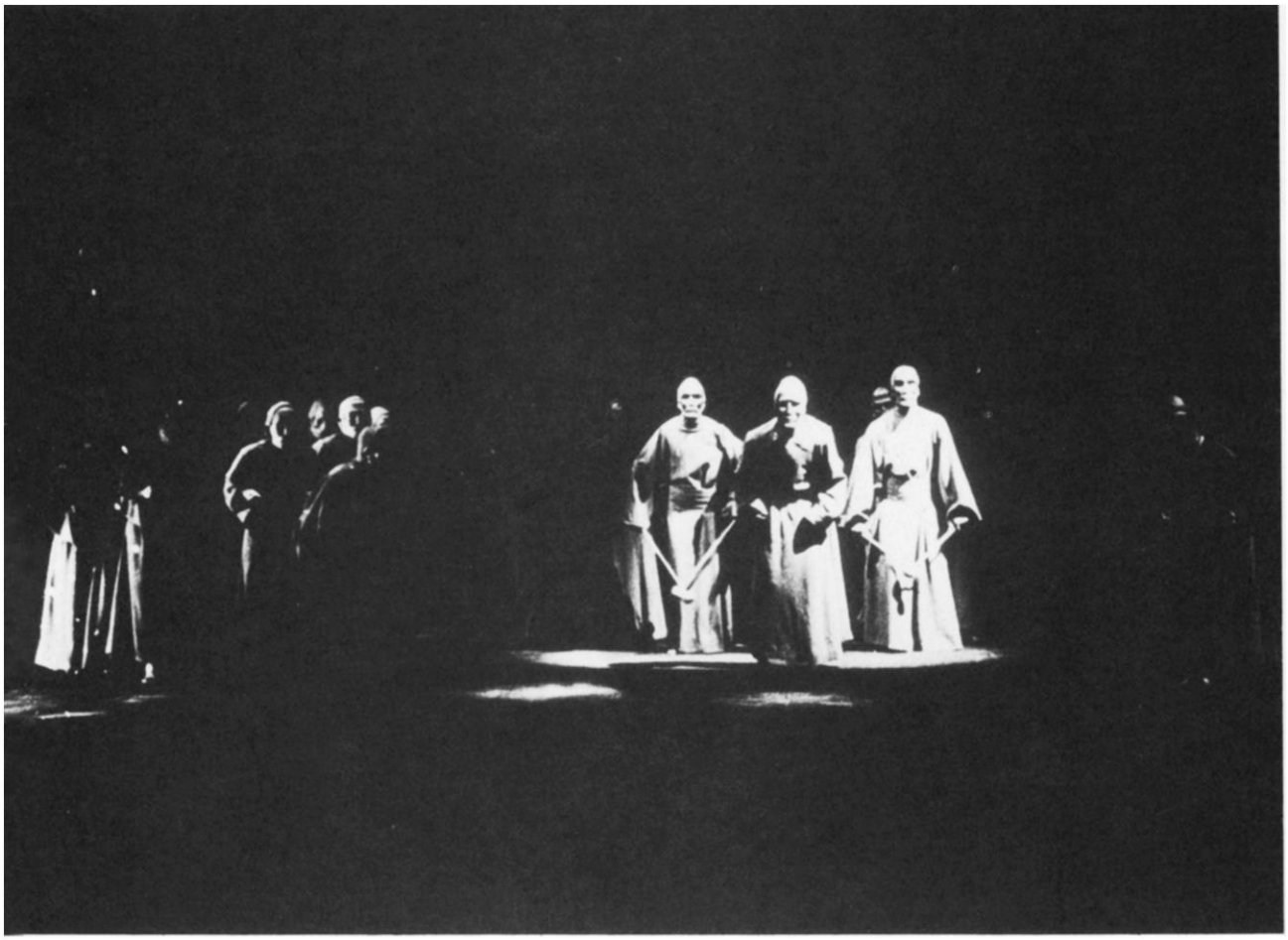
1930 Dancers Congress

> *"The chief opposing camps are headed, respectively, by Mary Wigman and Rudolf Laban, but there are innumerable lesser divisions and alliances. In fact, there is apparently a great game of politics being played which is at least as absorbing as the business of making and performing dances."*
>
> —*John Martin, "A Futile Congress,"*
> The New York Times, *20 July 1930*

Dancers began to organize themselves in the late '20s. The 1930 Third Dancers Congress drew 1400 participants, including dance critic John Martin. The Congress marked the high point of the German modern dance movement as well as its demise, for strident debate threatened the unity the Congress intended to create. At issue were the relations between professional and lay dance, the role of dance within the theater and opera house, and the social function of the dancer.



15. The Green Table *(1932) is a dance of death led by a martial figure personifying war. The masked diplomats who frame the scenes are exempted from death, suggesting their culpability in perpetuating war. (Photo courtesy of the Dance Collection, New York Public Library at Lincoln Center, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations)*



16. In Mary Wigman and Albert Talhoff's Totenmal *(1930), a women's chorus represents the wives and mothers of soldiers fallen in World War I. The chorus attempts to call back to life their loved ones, represented by a men's chorus. The attempt succeeds only temporarily, for the men retreat once they realize that the living do not sufficiently cherish their memory.* Totenmal *sounds the cult of the fallen soldier, a theme that pervaded the political rhetoric of both the left and the right. (Photo courtesy of the Mary Wigman Archive, Academy of Arts, West Berlin)*

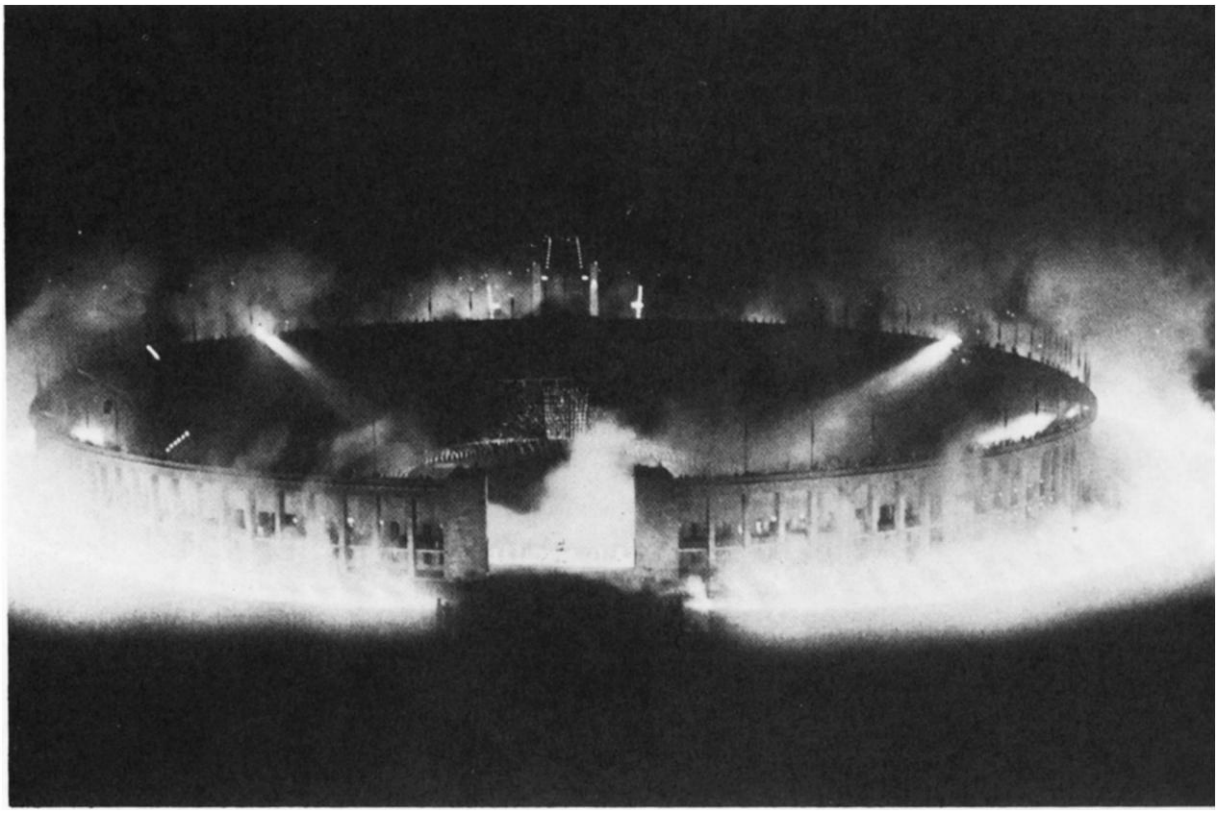
In collaboration with poet Albert Talhoff, Wigman staged *Totenmal* at the Congress. Wigman and Talhoff intended the work, a memorial to the fallen of World War I, to point the way toward a new form of dance theater above politics. In the end, however, the work became mired in political ambiguity. As one critic said, it "affected both sides, both pro-war and anti-war."

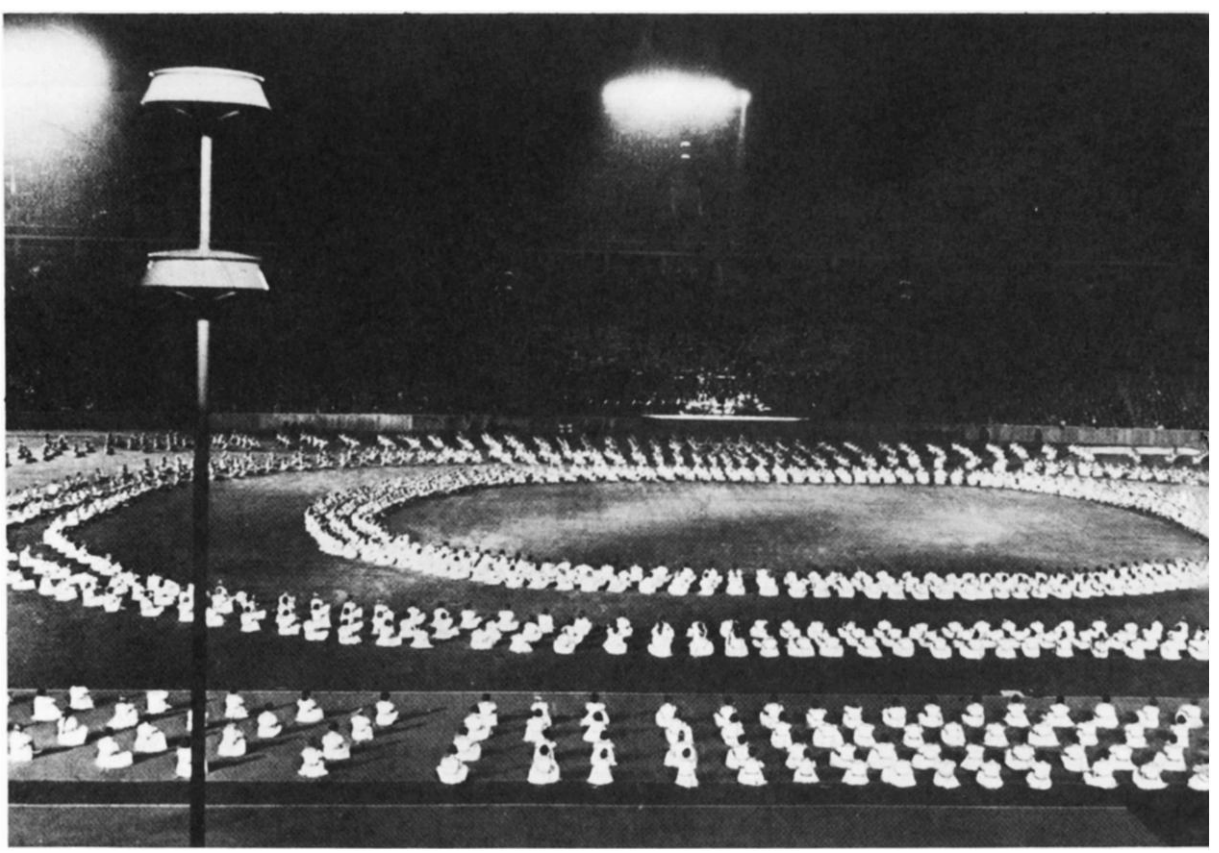
Nationalist and socialist factions polarized the Weimar Republic. The ambivalence of Germans caught in the middle rendered them politically ineffectual. The Dancers Congress mirrored the factionalism of Weimar politics and *Totenmal* its ambiguity.

The Third Reich

> *"State certification is required for all dancers. . . . Candidates of Aryan origin are eligible to take the state examination upon reaching age 18. In addition to possessing a middle school certificate, they must present a certificate of good health signed by a state doctor, a certificate of good conduct issued by the police, a written biographical statement, and proof of at least one year's study at a dance school certified by the Ministry for Popular Enlightenment and Propaganda."*
>
> *—Ministry for Popular Enlightenment and Propaganda directive No. 26, 29 July 1934*

In the Third Reich dance came under the authority of Josef Goebbels'





Ministry of Culture, which issued a stream of directives setting standards for prospective dancers, including proof of Aryan origin. The Ministry sponsored large-scale dance festivals in Berlin in 1934, 1935, and 1936. In addition, the Ministry established a Central Institute for Dance in Berlin, which dictated a standardized curriculum of ballet, folk dance, and "German Dance," as ausdruckstanz was now called. Never before had dance received such recognition or subsidy on the national level. While the National Socialists branded modernist movements in the other arts as degenerate, they appropriated ausdruckstanz with the dancers' passive support.

The Nazis staged immense spectacles by enlarging the scale of the movement choir, as in *Olympic Youth,* the opening night presentation of the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games. Wigman, Harald Kreutzberg, Gret Palucca, and other modern dancers participated along with thousands of Berlin schoolchildren, who executed precision patterns on the field of the Olympic stadium. Moving in unison ranks, the boys and girls glorified the presence of the Führer, who reviewed them from the stands. The movement choir had become the basis for mass propaganda.

17. & 18. Olympic Youth *(1936) worked on two levels. On one level, the spectacle glorified athletics and youth by presenting the familiar motifs of the Olympic Games—the interlocking circles, the flags, the torch's flame. But on another level, the spectacle glorified the offstage presence of Hitler, who became the focal point for the discipline and devotion exhibited by the unison ranks of dancers. (Photos courtesy of the Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University)*

The Survival of Ausdruckstanz and the Emergence of Tanztheater: Pina Bausch, Reinhild Hoffmann, and Susanne Linke

> *"The question I ask myself is how this 'nation of poets and thinkers' could have started two world wars. These are the problems I am constantly exploring on the stage and in the work with my dancers."*
>
> —*Johann Kresnik, "Politician of Dance Theatre,"* Ballett International, *May 1985*

> *"I am not so much interested in how people move as in what moves them."*
>
> —*Pina Bausch, quoted in* Pina Bausch Wuppertal Dance Theater or the Art of Training a Goldfish

19. In the late '60s, Johann Kresnik staged dances as political agit-prop. But over time he combined his political themes with psychological themes, as in Family Dialogue *(1980). (Photo by Held-Zentsch)*

Its association with National Socialism drained ausdruckstanz of artistic vigor. Hence it is not surprising that ballet came to dominate both East and West Germany after World War II. Ironically enough, it was the Nazi promotion of ballet as light entertainment that made the ballet boom possible.

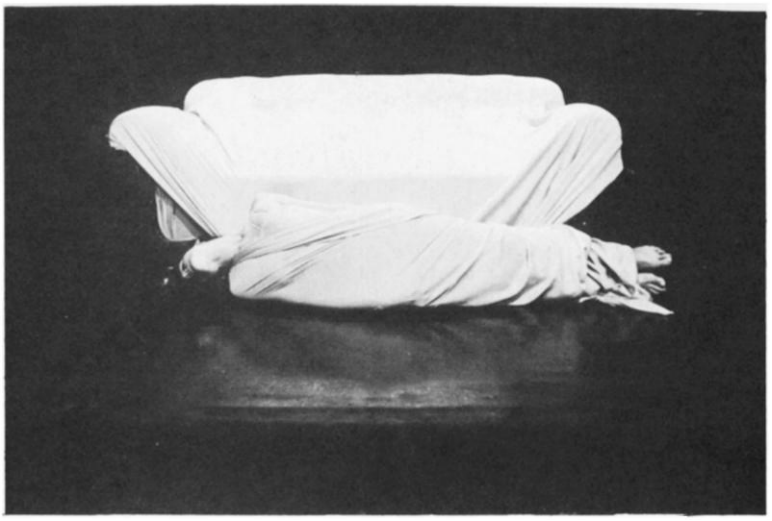
As West Germany turned toward reviving the classics and rebuilding the network of municipal repertory theaters, modern dancers received less and less recognition. Without fanfare Wigman opened a studio in West Berlin, and Jooss resumed his teaching position at the Folkwang School in Essen. For the few young dancers desiring an alternative to ballet, the Folkwang School provided the only opportunity for formalized training. One of the few was tanztheater choreographer Pina Bausch, who entered the Folkwang School in 1955 at age 15.

Ausdruckstanz fared somewhat better in East Germany than in West Germany, for dance pedagogy integrated modern dance techniques with Soviet methods for ballet training. Weidt returned from exile to East Berlin and worked to establish an amateur dance movement. Palucca, originally a student of Wigman, reopened her school in Dresden under government sponsorship and trained a generation of choreographers.

Stirred by the student movement of the '60s, young dancers in West Germany became dissatisfied with the orthodoxies of ballet technique and the hierarchies of ballet companies. Fusing techniques drawn from experimental theater and American modern dance with ballet, they called their work tanztheater to differentiate it from *opernballett*.

Johann Kresnik, a dancer with the Cologne Opera Ballet, was one of the first to assert choreographic rebellion by creating dances as political agit-prop. His career represents one extreme of the sociology of the current dance scene: as director of the Bremen Ballet until 1980 and of the

20. Pina Bausch's He Takes Her by the Hand and Leads Her into the Castle, the Others Follow *(1978). Like Kresnik, Bausch interweaves the political and the psychological. The spectator never knows if the images are intended as psychological projection or exaggerated realism. (Photo by Gert Weigelt)*



21. Reinhild Hoffmann's Solo with Sofa *(1976). Both Hoffmann and Susanne Linke have worked in a solo form that recalls the solos of Mary Wigman in their use of the costume as mask. (Photo by Gert Weigelt)*

Heidelberg Ballet today, he works within the system of well-subsidized municipal ballet companies established during the '50s. Yet the fundamental premises of his work agitate against the world view of the traditional ballet audience. In his tanztheater, the subversion of the system becomes content and form.

Another early tanztheater choreographer was Gerhard Bohner, a ballet dancer who had also studied with Wigman. In contrast to Kresnik, his career reflects the other extreme of the current scene, the situation of the "free dancers" who find their vision unrealizable within the municipal repertory system. Bohner's agitation for reform with the Berlin Ballet in the '60s led to his dismissal. Since then he has worked as a freelance choreographer. Because West Germany provides almost no patronage for dancers outside the repertory system, Bohner is one of the few dancers who manage to survive on their own.

Like Kresnik, Pina Bausch directs one of the few municipal repertory companies receptive to tanztheater. Her Wuppertal Dance Theater is unique among German troupes in that it performs twice as much abroad as at home. Hence it is not limited by the demands of a local repertory theater audience, and in this way recalls the touring soloists and companies of the ausdruckstanz era.

In contrast to the "poor theater" of ausdruckstanz, Bausch's dances employ a visually rich production style. And yet, like dance in the '20s, her work elevates expression over form. Her association with the Folkwang School directly connects her to the tradition of ausdruckstanz, and her work continues Jooss's vision of a socially critical dance theater. Whereas Jooss focused on the public issue of the corruption of power, Bausch turns to the more private issue of relations between men and women. However, she does not ignore the sociological dimension of the psychology of gender. Indeed, the feminist subtexts of her works call attention to the politics of the personal.

Reinhild Hoffmann and Susanne Linke share Bausch's concern with feminist issues and the female perspective. Significantly, they too have worked at the Folkwang School. Their work also exhibits similarities to the ausdruckstanz tradition: the revival of the solo form, the use of the costume as mask, and the emphasis on expressive abstraction.

Dance is the only West German art today in which female artists play a leading role. Why this is so remains a provocative question.