

## EXPRESSIONISM IN THE DANCE

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**P**ICTURES in American newspapers of young dancers banded together in the Dance Repertory Theatre and many conversations with Americans indicate that in the States an increasingly optimistic new movement in art is afoot. By attempting to assimilate the fruits of the most recent artistic developments in Europe, it aims to establish an authentically national art of the dance. That this movement is now spreading far beyond the small circles of initiates is indicated by Mary Wigman's enormous success on her first appearance in America.

We in Europe may observe with interest how American artists are now employing in the dance new ideas which it was our privilege to see born. This significant movement coincides with an undeniable period of stagnation in the Old World, which has prevailed for several years. Let me briefly present the situation. Before the War, the golden age of the Russian ballet, in Russia itself and in France; emergence of the masterpieces of ballet art through the genius of Diaghilev; cooperation of the most famous painters, musicians and choreographers. But even as these peaks were attained, signs of disintegration were visible. The old tradition was sterile and uncreative. Pretty games with flowers were unsuited to the times.

Here and there reformers appeared. Isadora Duncan, dreaming priestess of a new dance creed, led the way not only to a new dance art, but to a pernicious new popular style. Abortive Atticism followed in her wake. We must however acknowledge a debt to Duncan, if only for having shown that something new had to come.

Then Jacques Dalcroze. His lordly temple of the dance, built in Hellerau, near Dresden, stands unused now. His contribution was a carefully worked out correlation of musical and body movements; the results of his studies he employed chiefly in

pedagogy. Wonderful indeed was his liberation of the child's body and therefore of its soul; a bold thing at the time. The pure art of the dance was for him of secondary importance. His concern was the dance as one element in the activity of the harmoniously cultivated man, the dance as a vitally necessary unit in the pattern of human existence. In Hellerau Dalcroze gave performances of Gluck's *Orpheus* and of certain works of Claudel which already hinted at a new art of the theatre (the sacred festival play in Richard Wagner's sense, but poles apart from Bayreuth). But since leaving Hellerau Dalcroze has devoted himself more and more concentratedly to pedagogic studies. With the War and the separation which it brought, further development along the lines laid down by Dalcroze came to a halt.

However, for this very reason, the artistic impulse broke through again all the more powerfully when the revolution came. It is the glory of Rudolf von Laban to have understood and synthesized the new forces at work. I think I may take it for granted that the essentials of this new order in the dance are familiar; its perfect representative is Mary Wigman. It is not necessary to dwell longer upon the details of the expressionistic period, but rather to consider what has resulted from it.

A short digression is in order here. The German does not consider art as a luxury but as an all-important element of his life and culture. And he is serious about the responsibility which this conception of art entails. It distinguishes him from almost every other race. Enormous sums are devoted yearly to the popular cultivation of the arts; for this reason also the ethical content and not the appeal to the senses most concerns the German. This tendency has been strengthened by the privations and spiritual crises of the War. With such a bias toward profundity, a work of art is not regarded merely as a means of communication between man and man but as the revelation of a divine idea through men. Thus judgment of a work of art is focussed not on purely esthetic qualities but rather on the question: To what extent does it become an experience of the spectator? The essence of the German art ideal today lies in the stimulation to activity of the public itself, in the development of a receptivity to experience which shall create a new social culture.

Such a conception always seeks contacts with primitive culture and, by bodily appropriating primitive forms, it attempts to reconstruct the ideal conditions of savage ceremonial art. Its adherents busy themselves with the vestiges of religious dances in Africa, grow intoxicated at the mystic power discernible in the dances of Java and India, and respectfully scrutinize the background of the Japanese and Chinese theatres. They also investigate their own land and find traces of ancient cults in its national ceremonies and in its folk customs and dances.

Furthermore this conception involves the abandoning of the conventions of the baroque theatre which, nevertheless, still determine the dominant and generally recognized dramatic form. The contrast between actor and spectator disappears, the frame of the stage is shattered. Whoever participates in this common experience cooperates in the ritual.

Here we must record the most important event in the dance revolution: the creation of the "Bewegungschor"—the chorus of lay dancers, a new type of non-professional activity, established by Rudolf von Laban.

It is possible that the amateur dance has replaced the playing of music in the home because of the extraordinary popularity of phonograph and radio music, and this for reasons quite apart from the obvious influence of sports and gymnastics and the increase in the power of the human body as a creative instrument. Everyone has some impulse to express himself as an artist, to free the expressive forces working within him no matter how meagre they may be. The technical excellence of mechanical music stifles this impulse, for it raises unfair comparisons with amateur music. We forget that it is better to approach a work of art through our own efforts, that active personal participation wins a greater share in an artistic experience than serving a machine whose flow of tone enchants us. Unquestionably the apparent perfection of instruments for mechanical music has made the dilettant timid; he prefers to cultivate a field in which such painful competition need not be feared.

This opens up unexpected possibilities in the dance. Since, as we have seen, one can dance without technical knowledge or at any rate with only a minimum of technical preparation, every



young girl has taken to artistic gymnastics. She dances incessantly, a fact whose importance cannot be over-estimated. This activity, spiritual and physical, exhilarates our young, increasing their vital forces and strengthening optimism. The lay dancers seek to express their experiences and longings in art forms, to materialize what would otherwise slumber unexpressed. The dance is a confessional, with more life than a diary. Through this unconscious "artistic" activity of her body the dancer analyzes her own psyche.

Herein lies the great importance of the new dance for the individual. In relation to the dance chorus, the "Bewegungschor," it has another profound and more educational significance: the union of man and his fellows and the dedication of all to the service of a common ideal. (Not at the will of a leader but at the will of the group.) This aspect of the new communal art has already sufficiently stimulated certain political parties of the Left and certain movements in the Catholic church to try to use the dance chorus for propaganda.

It should be clear that this result of our dance revolution is quite without influence on the art of the stage. It is possible that from this nucleus an entirely new method of practising an art will grow gradually; that out of the untapped reservoirs of the folk-soul a new culture will flow which will eventually overcome our bourgeois esthetic. But such a reorganization cannot occur overnight and I will make no vague prophecies.

One point, however, must be driven home. Any confusion of this artistic and cultural ideal with the form of our present theatre must lead to serious error. It has already caused the new dance art to come to grief. All the little girls whose amateur dancing we so admired have decided to be artists. They have stormed the stage and achieved "success." Not for long, it is true, yet long enough, however, to wreck the public's firm preconceptions and demands. A flood of dilettantism is already destroying the newly born love of the dance. The Munich Dance Congress and the Talhoff *Totenmal* were sad confirmations of this decline.

It has availed nothing that Mary Wigman has demanded the greatest physical and spiritual discipline in her school. Out of her own group determined champions of a long-departed style



stream all over Europe. Laban has created, in his *Tanzschrift und Harmonielehre*, a method of distinguishing the dancer from the dance-as-a-work-of-art and of writing down and analyzing the dance as one would a piece of music. Harold Kreutzberg and Yvonne Georgi have sought new correlations with the ballet, and Palucca has found the way to a "new objectivity." Oskar Schlemmer has made original experiments in light and color at the Bauhaus, Valeska Gurt has overwhelmed us with her portrayals of primitive types and Kurt Joos in the Folkwangschule in Essen is working on a new dance technic. But all this has been in vain.

Despite these individual manifestations, the goal is still far distant, the flowering still to come. The cultivation of the lay dance needs time to develop. Important technical conventions have been taken away from the dancers of the stage. It may be, perhaps, that the ballet (still the only dance which has a characteristic technic) will spring again to life. But even in the ballet nothing has happened since Diaghilev's death; Bronislawa Nijinska, best equipped of all perhaps to make a fresh start, has fruitlessly dissipated her energies since her failure in Vienna. In England the ballet is being cultivated, but too much in the old tradition; and in Russia the discrepancy between the revolutionary spirit of the dance and the tradition-choked ballet style in which this spirit is expressed has not yet been overcome.

For all these reasons we look with much curiosity toward America. According to your news dispatches a renaissance of the dance may be under way. America is at the beginning again, and is excited, perhaps, about much that for Europe is old and done. It is going through an artistic development now which seems superficially to be much the same as ours of 1918: but the sociological ground is quite different, and may be healthier. Perhaps much that we were unable to accomplish will be achieved; America may learn from our errors, not blindly repeat them. But above all what has happened among us should be considered and reflected upon, not simply ignored.