

# SALOME IN MODERN DANCE

BY

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Thirty miles from where we meet today, on the Eastern shore of the Dead Sea, is the site of Machaerus, the fortress of Herod Antipas. There John the Baptist denounced Herod, was imprisoned by him and then executed. There Salome danced for Herod and, prompted by Herodias her mother, demanded the head of the Baptist in return. These are the outlines of a story which has been told over and over by artists, with countless variations and elaborations, through the ages.

The modern era, so far as retellings of this story are concerned, started about the middle of the nineteenth century, when writers and visual artists alike began to turn to it — first a few, then a few more, ever increasing, until there were literally thousands of nineteenth-century versions of the story, in fiction, poetry, and drama, in painting and sculpture. The social and aesthetic forces which caused this upsurge of interest, at just this time, in a rather obscure Biblical story, are too numerous and too complicated to go into now. What matters for our purposes is simply that modern dance came into being when Salome was all the rage.

There was considerable influence on dance from the other arts. Here, for example, is Gustave Moreau's painting, "The Apparition" (1876), in which John's head has risen up accusingly in front of Salome and she falls back in shock and fear. And here is Stasia Napierkowska in a 1911 photograph. Napierkowska may have danced with the Russian Imperial Ballet, and she definitely danced in American vaudeville. Put the painting and the photograph together, compare the two, and the resemblance is so close that it is easy to think — as I do — that the young dancer consciously modelled her pose after the 35-year-old painting. The point which is illustrated here is that dances of the modern era owed debts to the other arts: here in posture, elsewhere in costuming and staging, and above all in interpretations of the personality and motivation of Salome.

The greatest indebtedness can be traced to the work of three artists who worked in three different media: an Irish-born playwright who wrote a play in French, a 22-year-old English graphic artist, and a German composer. I refer of course to Oscar Wilde, whose play, *Salome* (1891), was illustrated by Aubrey Beardsley (1894), and provided the libretto for Richard Strauss's opera (1905). It would be difficult to exaggerate the extent to which subsequent representations of the Salome story, including those in dance, have been influenced by one or the other or all three of these artists.

Beardsley's influence, being visual, is the easiest to illustrate. Probably the most famous of all of his drawings is "The Peacock Skirt", in which Salome wears this marvellous creation. The skirt is irrelevant to the story, but it is visually memorable — so that when Tamara Karsavina danced as Salome for Diaghilev in 1913, her entrance was made wearing this cape. A London reviewer wrote: "the spirit of Aubrey Beardsley was, one felt assured, haunting the house last night". Then in 1922, in Alla Nazimova's silent film, *Salome*, the costumes and sets were even more specifically Beardsleyesque. Beardsley's drawings had saturated the public consciousness.

Similarly, Oscar Wilde's conception of the story has set the pattern for a host of twentieth-century tellings of the tale. Wilde was not the first to write about a Salome who lusts after John the Baptist — an interpretation of her character which has no basis in fact — but it was he who popularized this reading. And Wilde did make certain innovations in the play which are all his own. For example, to the four central characters (Salome, John, Herod, and Herodias) he adds two others: the young Syrian named Narraboth, and the page of Herodias. Then Wilde links these characters in a sort of daisy chain of unrequited desire; to wit: the Page wants Narraboth, but Narraboth wants Salome, however Salome wants John, and John wants only God. And then of course there is Herodias's somewhat shaken desire for Herod, and Herod's more than avuncular interest in Salome. And

none of these longings is fulfilled except — one does sincerely hope — John's love for his Maker. The play is, as one critic has said, "a play about varieties of love". Indeed it is! Love sacred and profane, heterosexual, homosexual, incestuous, necrophiliac: Wilde's one-act play is a veritable supermarket of sexual pathology; and other artists have been shopping in it ever since.

Practically the first to do so was Richard Strauss, who took Wilde's version intact (except translated into German) and set it to appropriately lurid music. The opera, *Salome*, was an immediate hit in 1905, and over the next two years, as its impact swept across Europe and then the Americas, Strauss's success etched the Wildean version of the story deeply into the popular imagination. It also brought the Dance of the Seven Veils into opera houses around the world. Now the dance was of course only one scene in the opera, but it generated much more than its share of excitement. Perhaps this was partly because, while you cannot photograph an aria, you can photograph a dance. And the popular press, with recently acquired skills at mass-producing photographic images, fed the fires of the rage for *Salome*. The *Salome* craze acquired a nickname: it was called "Salomania". The fad had grown to such proportions that the opera house could no longer contain it; and *Salome* dancers sprang up everywhere. One of the first was Loie Fuller.

Now Loie Fuller had actually performed as *Salome* back in 1895. Loie Fuller's 1895 *Salome* was not a notable success, particularly in contrast with her highly popular Serpentine Dance and her Dance of Fire. Perhaps the timing was not right. By 1895 the *Salome* story was rampant in literature and painting, but it had made only minor inroads into the performing arts. It was Strauss's opera ten years later which, directly and indirectly, put *Salomes* onto a thousand stages. And when Loie Fuller performed an entirely different version of the story in 1907, called *La Tragédie de Salomé*, it found a much more receptive audience.

The most popular *Salome* of the time was Maud Allan, who performed her "Vision of *Salome*" first in Munich, then elsewhere on the Continent, and had her greatest success in London. Allan became one of the biggest stars in English variety; in 1908 she was held over at the Palace Theatre in London for more than 200 performances. Her dance, as you can imagine, was controversial, not only because of the skimpy costumes, but also because of her rather ghoulish play with the head of the Baptist — very much in the Wildean tradition.

Maud Allan's success was such that, as a 1909 magazine article says, soon there were "All Sorts and Kinds of *Salomes*". Every vaudeville house, every music hall and variety theatre, in the provinces as well as the great cities, had a *Salome* performer. In October 1908, no fewer than 24 dancing daughters of Herodias could be found on the stages of New York City alone.

When classically trained ballerinas performed as *Salome*, as Tamara Karsavina did in 1913, they tended to doff their toe shoes and to adopt costumes and even mannerisms from variety and music hall. The rose painted on Karsavina's thigh for each performance was as flashy in its way as any gimmick ever dreamed up by a vaudeville artiste. Even with the rose, however, Karsavina's *Salome* was generally considered unsuccessful; and virtually all subsequent attempts to bring *Salome* as a solo performer onto the concert dance stage have been failures. It should be acknowledged that Mia Slavenska had a certain amount of success with her version, which she performed off and on from 1936 until the early 1950s; and no doubt one could think of other isolated successes. But the fate of Rosella Hightower, who choreographed and danced the role as a solo in 1950, and who was castigated by the critics, is much closer to being typical. Hightower, by the way, is one of the relatively few to have danced as *Salome* on point.

If the pioneers of modern dance were Loie Fuller, Isadora Duncan, Maud Allan, and Ruth St. Denis, only Duncan of this pioneering group never performed as *Salome*. There are some reports that St. Denis did a *Salome* dance in Europe as early as 1906; but these reports have not been confirmed, and they possibly result from a confusion between the Dance of the Seven Veils and St. Denis's early dance called "Radha, the Dance of the Five Senses". St. Denis herself did nothing to set the record straight; in fact, she added to the confusion. In 1909 a Chicago newspaper quoted her as saying, "I preceded all the classic dancers except Isadora Duncan. I appeared at the Hudson Theater in New York in my oriental dances long before any of the *Salomes* were astonishing human folk. My day was before that of Gertrude Hoffman (sic), Maud Allan (sic) or Lotta Faust. They were all followers". St. Denis did not actually say here that she had performed as *Salome*; but, especially since Hoffmann, Allan, and Faust were famous for that role, the casual reader might have drawn that inference.

In fact, St. Denis did not get around to the part until 1931, but she kept the Dance of the Seven Veils in her repertoire until at least 1950. St. Denis's version of the dance of the seven veils was quite her own. She really performed seven separate dances, each with a different piece of fabric. It is doubtful whether Miss Ruth's interpretation of Salome had any appreciable effect on later versions, coming when it did in her career and in the development of modern dance; but the theme did lend itself gracefully to her particular style.

From Ruth St. Denis to Martha Graham is of course one of the important transitions in the history of modern dance; and it is instructive to contrast the work of the two women on this subject. St. Denis's *Salome* has virtually no story, no drama, but manages to achieve a certain prettiness and an exotic quality. It is primarily a work of decorative art. Martha Graham's *Herodiade* (originally titled *Mirror Before Me*) is none of these things.

In her early years with Denishawn, Graham had frequently appeared in exotic parts, with exotic names and costumes, but she had turned away from all that when she set out on her own. Not surprisingly, her *Herodiade* (1944) represents a radical departure from previous dances based on the Salome theme. So different is it that some have claimed it has nothing to do with that theme. Certainly there is no dance of the seven veils, and it is not even known whether the main character, called "A Woman", represents Salome or Herodias, or both, or neither. Isamu Noguchi, who collaborated with Graham for many years and who designed the scenery for *Herodiade*, calls her "Salome". Most critics call her "Herodias". But perhaps it does not matter what we call her; for, as Ronald Gold wrote, "as is usual with Graham, the myth is used as the take-off point for psychological exploration". In this respect the dance is true to its literary source, no Wilde's play but Stéphane Mallarmé's poem; for the poem too takes off from the familiar myth, rather than simply retelling it. And there is no doubt that the poem does relate to the original Biblical story, even if in mysterious and ambiguous ways.

Those who have written about Graham's *Herodiade* emphasize its power and impact. They call it astonishing, terrifying, gripping, amazing, disturbing, and — among a host of other adjectives — beautiful. Graham seems to have achieved two highly different effects simultaneously. On the one hand the dance is introspective, self-searching: an exploration of the psyche. On the other hand it is, as John Martin wrote, "as dramatic as if there were gunplay and counterplot" — "an unforgettable theatrical experience".

I think it is safe to say that the successful dance versions of the Salome story are those which have conveyed the drama of the story and not just presented her dance in isolation. Martha Graham achieved high drama with only two characters; but for the most part the dramatized dance versions have used full cast. Until the 1930s, dance seemed still to be in the shadow of Wilde and Strauss — in this sense: that choreographers were content to deal with Salome's dance, and leave the story to playwright, composer, and (increasingly) screenwriter. But in the 'thirties there began a trend which I think continues today — a trend within dance to explore kinetically the full possibilities of the Salome story, including its wide range of narrative and dramatic possibilities.

Perhaps it began in 1932, in New York, with Senia Gluck-Sandor's *Salome*, in which Felicia Sorel danced the title role. But a more significant date is 1934, when Lester Horton, working in the dance-obscure of Los Angeles, staged the first of his six versions of the story.

Each dance-theatre interpretation of the story has introduced innovations. Gluck-Sandor, for example, stayed fairly close to the Wildean plot, but left out the dance of the seven veils and introduced a note of pity to mitigate the horror of Wilde's stark ending. With Lester Horton, each of the six versions introduced innovations, so that over a twenty-year period the work evolved into something entirely of his own making.

Joy Montoya was his first Salome. Horton's biographer describes the choreography of the 1934 version as "relatively calm and restrained". This was Horton's first choreodrama and he stayed close to Wilde's play, a production of which he had in fact directed earlier that same year.

Bella Lewitzky was his Salome for the next three editions, two different ones in 1937 and one in 1948. Some of the changes were made to suit the capacities of changing personnel in his company. Accordingly, Lewitzky was a sensuous Salome, fire to Montoya's ice. Other changes simply represented Horton's progressive involvement with the ongoing

project. By 1948, for example, he had begun using his own score for percussion and voice.

Carmen de Lavallade was Salome in the last two versions, and Horton re-choreographed to take advantage of her lyrical qualities. By now it was entirely Horton's: concept, choreography, score, costumes, and staging. He had become

increasingly interested in the abstract patterns discernible in the story. In 1948 his program notes called it "A study in the pathology of decadence". For the 1953 production he changed the work's title to *Face of Violence*, accentuating this evolution toward abstraction, or perhaps toward a kind of transcendence.

The last twenty-five years have seen a proliferation of dance-theatre Salomes. Ruth Page performed a duet for several years which she called *Salome and Herod*; and then she created a full-scale dance-drama which she first called *Salome*, later *Daughter of Herodias*, and finally *Retribution*. If John Martin's biography of Miss Page is accurate, the ballet was only performed one time (in 1954); and then she became involved in other projects.

Peter Darrell's *Herodias* (1970) took a number of liberties with the received story, including the casting of two Herodias, one old, one young. Here John the Baptist is seen between the two Herodias. Darrell cast a man in the part of Salome in order to suggest pre-bubescence; and Salome dances on his/her hands in imitation of medieval depictions which show her thus.

Lindsay Kemp's *Salome* (1975) had an all-male cast. Here Kemp, as a leonine Salome, assails John the Baptist. In the production I saw in London in 1977, which was otherwise a visual orgy of camp theatrics, the one note of sanity, or even dignity, was struck by Herod, played by Anton Dolin, a

name of no little importance in dance history.

And that brings us more or less to the present. I have had to omit mention of many versions of the Salome story simply for lack of time. I should at least mention, however, that Lester Horton's *Face of Violence* has been revived and is in the repertory of the Cincinnati Ballet Company – here is a scene from a 1971 production; and that Martha Graham's *Herodiade* is periodically performed both by her own company (here is Pearl Lang in 1975) and by the Batsheva Dance Company here in Israel.

The most recent Salome of all premiered in Copenhagen in November of last year. The scenario, the choreography, and the production were by Flemming Flindt, who also took the role of Herod.

The following list includes all the dance versions of Salome I have so far identified. There are blanks, where I am lacking information; no doubt there are also omissions and errors. I will be very grateful to anyone who would help me to fill in the blanks or correct the errors or omissions.

I will close with the traditional Hebrew greeting, but I will do so with a certain sense of irony, as the name Salomé, (Shlomit in Hebrew) has the same etymological source, the same Semitic root, as the word, "Shalom".  
Make of that what you will! □



Loie Fuller as Salomé, Paris, 1885