

DANCING INTO THE ABYSS

Modern dance in Germany during the early years of the Nazi regime as presented in an exhibition at the "Akademie der Künste" in Berlin

By Giora Manor

There are historians who think that the microphone and radio broadcasting were the tools that made Hitler's meteoric ascent to power possible. Without modern public-announcement systems and broadcasting he would not have been able to hypnotize his supporters attending the mass-rallies nor frighten the nations of central Europe by his speeches into submission. His voice much more than the rather meager content of his speeches, and the choreography of the mass-meetings his lieutenants staged carried the menacing message.

With the help of the weekly news-reels shown in thousands of cinemas all over the world in those pre-television times, the banners, the flaming torches, the immense light-domes created by the architect Albert Speer, who was later to become, during the Second World War, Hitler's minister of armament production, reached an audience of millions.

Hitler and his evil but clever minister of propaganda, Dr. Joseph Goebbels, were well aware of the value of modern means of communication. The Olympic Games of 1936, to be held in Berlin, the site having been decided upon long before the Nazi's ascent to power in 1933,

offered them an unprecedented opportunity to show the world that they were 'civilized', acceptable rulers and not the barbarians they really were. The Nazis were even willing to suspend the racist Nuremberg Laws for the duration of

the games in order not to risk the cancellation of the international meeting, as these infamous laws would prevent the attendance of black, Jewish and other "Non-Aryan" athletes.

They seized the opportunity to create a pageant of youth, beauty and harmony at the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games in the newly constructed stadium.

All this is not surprising. What is astonishing is the fact that all this pageantry was choreographed by some of the leading artists of modern dance, which, by the way, was in those days still commonly called "German dance".

Rudolf von Laban, Mary Wigman, Harold Kreutzberg, Gret Palucca and many other well known dancers actively participated in the preparation and execution of the artistic performances of the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin.

Modern dance since its inception at the beginning of the century has always been a progressive movement, striving to free dance of the constraints of classical ballet and its strict rules; a style of free self-expression, of unfettered individualism.

Most of its leading exponents were quite naturally drawn towards socialist and progressive political movements and their ideas, as expressions of their own artistic and aesthetic ideals. If so, how did the Nazi propaganda machine succeed in drawing these artists of free spirit and individualism into serving their purposes?

A large exhibition held recently at the "Akademie der Künste" (formerly of "West Germany") in Berlin endeavours to supply the answer.

The creators and curators of this immense, well documented exhibition, the dance historians Hedwig Müller and Patricia Stockmann, assembled hundreds of documents, photos, exhibits and films constituting a picture-history of sorts, depicting the development of modern dance in Germany, from its beginnings and right into its decline and virtual demise during the Nazi regime.

The visual concept of the exhibition is very original. Coming to Berlin for the opening, I expected to be confronted with large blow-ups and powerful graphics. But Müller and Stockmann decided to use only original photos and other materials of the period; hence hundreds of small photos, in formats used in the 1920s and 1930s. This makes the spectator lean forward and observe the

exhibits closely. Each wall in the labyrinth tracing the development of modern dance in Germany is broken by vitrines holding albums, artifacts, newspaper clippings, giving the exhibition an atmosphere of an aquarium. Each wall holds one or more small video-screens, where original films run in loops, showing the dancers in real movement. These film-clips are potent tools of communication which lead the spectator to closer perusal of the adjacent written documents and photos.

Perhaps of even greater importance than the exhibition itself, which is going to be shown next year in several towns in Germany and abroad, is the accompanying catalogue. It constitutes a well documented and lucidly written, comprehensive history of modern dance in Germany.

The Lure of the Masses

Classical ballet never played an important part in Germany's many municipal opera houses. The dancers were regarded as some sort of relatively unimportant "extras" needed to fill the vast stages and the choreographer not as an independent artist, but as a junior assistant to the director of the performance.

The early modern dance creators, at the beginning of the 20th century, wished to change the rather frivolous image of dancers and dance as mere entertainment and to make it into a serious art form. Though the first modern dance pioneers were Americans, such as Loie Fuller and Isadora Duncan, who, unable to receive a positive response to their revolutionary art form at home came to Europe to perform, its main innovators and exponents were Europeans, mainly Germans. Indeed modern dance was generally called "German dance" until after the Second World War.

Its main leaders, such as Rudolf von Laban and his disciple Mary Wigman and her students, brought to bear the principles of Expressionism already well established in the visual arts and music before the outbreak of the First World War, on the art of dance. "The dancing self" being the leading principle of modern expressionistic dance naturally led its exponents to creating and perform their own solo dances. Indeed one of the names given to it in its early days was "Podiumtanz", a German expression meaning "dance on a rostrum", i.e. a temporary structure erected in a hall, as opposed to a proper stage in a theatre. The individualistic solo dance as a vehicle for the "dancing self" did not preclude some of the modern dance artists' interest in wider social issues and their participation in progressive political activities.

In the July 1933 issue of "Der Tanz" there was a report by Lewitan about the event in Warsaw. But on the front page his name as publisher and editor has already been replaced by that of Conrad Nebe, a "proper Aryan".

Below the masthead there was an "important announcement" which it is



the encounter with a wider, 'normal' public feasible. My goal was to create a performance which would expose the participating retarded dancers to the general view on such a level that would astonish the spectators causing them to change their attitudes.

Exposure to the public eye through a stage performance involves taking into account the rules of staging as well as stage discipline and behaviour. During the rehearsals for "Hearts & Flowers" the therapeutic sessions became charged with the ambitions of the dancers and the teachers alike.

For example: turning around one's axis is usually a simple, natural move, but not in this case. For the retarded turning around is an involved task: from where does the turn start, in which direction does it go, how quick or slow does it have to be? What is its axis, where does it end? What preceded it and what comes after it?

I would like to point out the difficulties involved in flexing a leg, in kneeling as opposed to getting-up and the whole range of movements involving contradictory components, such as moving versus stopping.

One of the main difficulties is the process of remembering. Remembering a movement phrase requires such components as from where, to where, when, how many times it has to be done and how to coordinate one movement to synchronize with another one. All this is a challenge to a retarded person, requiring willpower and perseverance.

The "Hearts & Flowers" performance enables each participating club, home or institution to try and organize its own group and prepare a dance for the program.

Today, after 13 years of continuous activity there are 16 active dance groups, in all parts of the country. These groups include some in Arab towns and villages. The participants come from all

the different institutions - governmental, public and charitable - dealing with young as well as adult retarded. The whole establishment takes part in the "Hearts & Flowers" performances.

During the year each instructor's work is coordinated and supervised, carried out in the local groups. Twice annually the dance groups meet for two performances each, which become a mini-festival of sorts, which generates much excitement. There is the challenge of fulfilling the given task and the emotional experience involved. These meetings are attended by about 250 instructors and dancers.

The performance challenges the teachers and their charges on two levels: one being that of the show presented to the audience, the other in what goes on simultaneously behind the scene. This aspect, hidden from the spectators, involves remembering the tasks in their correct order, changing of costumes, presenting the persona and acting the role in each dance, remembering entrances and exits and getting used to the alternating darkness and strong lights of the stage.

All these are far from easy for the instructors and their charges. Many long hours of rehearsals are finally expressed in 4-5 minutes of performance.

The applause after each dance is the reward for the retarded participants presenting the powerful potential of their endeavour. The applause is an incentive to continue to face difficult challenges and not to discouraged. ✓