

JURY JURY IN THE HALL - WHO IS THE FAIREST OF THEM ALL?

The First International Artistic Dance Competition, Warsaw, Poland, 1933

by Giora Manor

International dance competitions are not a new phenomenon. In classical ballet, such competitions as those held at Varna, Bulgaria or Tokio, Japan, in Moscow, Russia or Jacksonville, U.S.A. have become mini-olympics of sorts. But the situation concerning modern dance is completely different. Since the beginning of the 20th century, modern dance has always been primarily concerned with individual expression and originality, not technical brilliance. Each choreographer and dancer – and in many cases this means the same artist – is expected to create dances which defy comparison with the work of others and the more original the better. How are the jurors in such competitions to adjudicate and decide which is best?

In classical ballet, there are at least objective and normative criteria to go by, while personal taste and preference is the main (perhaps only) yardstick in modern dance.

Technique as such is nearly irrelevant in modern dance, but important in classical ballet. Therefore, the jurors of ballet competitions have to watch an endless progression of White, Black or Dying Swans, Sleeping Beauties, innumerable galant Corsaires and never-ending final pas de deux from "Don Q". In any case, the task of the jurors is not to be envied...

Should one think there are many (perhaps too many) dance competitions today, a look at what took place in Europe in the 1930s could provide us with an interesting comparison.

The 1930s saw a number of international modern dance competitions. In 1932 Kurt Joos was the recipient of the first prize for his "Green Table", a modern ballet which became a classic work of art, at the competition held in Paris. Often, however, the prize winners vanish into oblivion soon after the ballyhoo of public relations is over.

No less than 125 artists participated in the "First International Concourse in Artistic Dance" held in Warsaw, Poland, in June of 1933. Unsurprisingly, of these, only 23 were men.

One finds in the list such well-known names as Gertrud Kraus from Vienna, who became the doyenne of modern dance in Israel. In the program her name is misspelled with a double "ss" and she is not mentioned at all by the critics and reviewers, so perhaps her company did not make it to the competition after all. Lotte Goslar, today the head of her "Pantomime Circus" based in New York was in 1933 was a young talented dancer of satirical, grotesque dances, but did not even get an honourable mention. This caused Josef Lewitan, the editor of



Ruth Sorel-Abramowitz - "Salome"

the influential German dance monthly "Der Tanz", who was himself also one of the jurors, to complain in his account of the events in Warsaw. Ellinor Tordis from Vienna, the teacher of Gertrud Kraus also participated. Another important artist from Vienna, Rosalia Chladek, who received second prize, is still active in teaching. According to the competition program she represented Czechoslovakia, because though she became the head of the Dance Department of the State Academy of Austria, was born in Moravia and held Czechoslovak citizenship until after the Second World War.

125 artists participated - unsurprisingly only 23 of them were men.

The first prize went to Ruth Abramowitch-Sorel, a Jewish ballerina from Berlin, who had to leave Germany because of Nazi persecution

Well known male dancers such as Alexander von Swain and Rolf Arco from Germany also took part.

The first prize went to Ruth Abramowitch-Sorel, a ballerina of the Berlin Opera Ballet, for her solo "Salome", which all critics found gripping and sensual. As an artist of Jewish extraction, she found it impossible to continue working in Germany under the new Nazi regime. She stayed on in Warsaw, and then went on tour all over the world, appearing also in Tel Aviv. She settled in Canada, but returned to Poland after the war where she taught until her death in 1974.

There is a bitter irony in the fact that the

German ambassador to Poland was one of the sponsors of the competition and he held a reception to honour the winners, including the Jewish ballerina who was expelled from his country by the Nazi government he represented.

The participants were exponents of many kinds and styles of dance, but they belonged mainly to the expressionist modern dance movement. But there was also a contingent of dancers from Indonesia, who received "special mention", since the judges were at a loss, as to what category they belonged. There were also exponents of classical ballet but they were overshadowed by the many impressive, well-known modern dancers.

The large Polish contingent received only the 6th, 7th and 8th place about which Polish newspapers commented extensively. To balance the delicate relationship between the classical and the modern components and to appease the wounded national feelings of the hosts, a special award for classical dancers (donated by Rolf de Mare) was given to the French ballerina Lycette Darsonval and another to the best Polish participant, Olga Slavaska.

The German and Austrian contingent came out with flying colours, which is not surprising, as in those days modern dance was still called 'German dance' by many.

The range of age and artistic maturity between the competitors was very wide. Mature performances by well known artists, such as von Swaine, Chladek, Sorel or soon to become famous, for example Afrika Doering (from Germany) or Bertha Trumpy (from Switzerland) were followed by teenage students, mainly from Poland.

Among the young students participating was Irene Getry, who today lives and still works in Tel-Aviv. She was then 12 years old, the pupil of Viktoria Dulinska, who entered several of her students in the competition. Like most participants, Getry performed three works; a "Viennese Valse" to music by J. Strauss, "Vision" to music by E. Grieg, choreography by one "Devilier", (a name she herself invented, as all three dances were her own creation) and "Signum temporis" to music by I. Gold, the latter described in the program as "an eccentric dance", a familiar term meaning extremely stylized or Cubistic.

Getry's "Signum temporis" ("Under the Sign of the Times") was very well received by the audience. It was a parody of the then fashionable American "Black Bottom", danced to the rhythm of a Charleston. "But I didn't get a prize, because the judges found that though I was only a 12 year old girl, I danced 'like a grown up dancer... In the end I got a doll as a consolation prize."

Irene Getry's chief recollection of the events is the pandemonium and vying for rehearsal time before each performance, which took place twice daily. She remembers how impressed she was by the Polish dancer Paula Nirenska, who "had no remarkable technique, but a very strong stage personality." In her opinion, Ruth Sorel's "Salome", which was very

sensual, was inferior to her other dance, "Mother", which was "very original". There was very little movement in that dance, Ruth stayed most of the time on one spot, in a wide 'second position' and in spite of this limitation succeeded in creating a very moving dance.

The competition, which took place from June 9-16, was initiated and organized by the publisher of the periodical "Muzyka", M. Galinski, under the auspices of the Polish government.

"Due to the competition the contemporary situation of the art of dance was illuminated by powerful lights."

A remarkably large number of Jewish artists participated in the competition. Apart from those already mentioned, there was the very young girl Mussia Daiches, a child prodigy ballerina, who had also performed in Tel-Aviv. She was later arrested by the Germans, interned in a concentration camp, where, after she refused to dance for her captors had her ankles broken by them, to make sure she would never dance again. After the war she went to the U.S.A. and later lived in Israel until her death in 1980. Another was Judith Berg, who is an

The 1930s was a period of international dance congresses and competitions. Apart from those in Paris and Warsaw, there was a similar one held in Vienna in 1934. In Germany, every other year since 1928, a large congress had taken place until the Nazi Minister of Propaganda, Goebbels took over and turned the event into a tool of Fascist indoctrination.

Lewitan summarizes the Warsaw competition in the "Der Tanz", July, 1933 issue: "The entire ambitious program of the competition was realized in a fascinating fashion. The phrase "wenn auch spannend", which he uses is a gentle hint at the turmoil and glitches accompanying the complicated logistics and technical problems of the large gathering. He adds that "due to the competition the contemporary situation of the art of dance was illuminated by powerful lights".

Lewitan's last remark points out what is, after all, the real task and purpose of any artistic competition; not bestowing titles and distributing prizes, but rather providing an opportunity to make the wider public aware of the problems and achievements of contemporary art.

[We wish to thank Judith Berg-Fibich (New York), the "German Dance Archive (Koeln), Jacek Luminiski (Warsaw) and Rosalia Chladek (Vienna) for their help in gathering together the documents concerning the Warsaw Competition of 1933.



Afrika Doering



Olga Slavaska



George Groke

expert of Jewish dance and lives in New York with her husband Felix Fibich. (Thanks to her the program and other materials about the Warsaw Competition are now in the archives of the Israel Dance Library in Tel-Aviv).

The list of jurors included many famous names: Rudolf von Laban, Elisabeth Duncan, the younger sister of the pioneer of modern dance, Gertrud Bodenwieser, the then head of the modern dance department of the State Academy in Vienna, Valeria Kratina, Josef Lewitan, Rolf de Mare, (the founder of the "Ballets Suedois"), the dancer Max Terpis and many Polish artists, including stage-director Leon Schiller and composer Aleksander Tansman.