
Hilde Holger: Legacy of an Expressionist, Emigrant, Innovator

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Introduction

Hilde Holger (born in Vienna in 1905, died in London in 2001) was a pioneering Austrian Expressionist dancer, dance educator, choreographer, and therapist. Her life spanned the entire twentieth century with its devastating major conflicts, and tremendous artistic developments. Holger wholeheartedly believed in the transforming power of modern dance. Her Central European *Creative Expressive Ausdruckstanz* (Expressionist dance) made her part of the wave of revolutionary 'natural' movement which swept across Europe beginning in the late 19th century. The dance developed out of the influence of American dancer Isadora Duncan, and European teachers such as Émile Jaques-Dalcroze, alongside that of other modern dancers and pioneers. These included Rudolf von Laban, Kurt Jooss, Mary Wigman, and Gertrud Bodenwieser (Holger's teacher), and *Wiener Secession* (Viennese Secessionist) artists such as Gustav Klimt, Egon Schiele, Richard Teschner, Anton Josef Trčka (Antios), Hagenbund artists such as Oscar Kokoschka and F.A. Harta, theatre director Max Reinhardt and others. Amongst these artists, there were many Jewish women dancers and teachers of dance.

Hilde Holger's mother and aunt encouraged her early love of dance and movement. Holger's daughter, Primavera Boman-Behram, regarding Holger's early life, Jewish identity and influence on her dance oeuvre, writes: "She was born Hilde Sofer. When she was very young, her father Alfred Sofer, died and her mother married Heinrich Wohl from Poland who was a very religious Jew. Her grandfather [on the other side] was Siegfried Schreiber. Alfred's brother, Hilde's uncle and his side of the family became Catholic as so many did then (in efforts to thwart the Nazi laws and save themselves). My mother had dance as her religion, but respected and was interested in all religions" (Boman-Behram, 2019).

In 1919 at 14, Holger was sent to study with Gertrud Bodenwieser, director of dance at the Vienna *Staatsakademie für Musik u. Darstellende Kunst* (State Academy for Music and the Performing Arts). Bodenwieser initially discouraged Holger from dancing. However, after only two years of study, she became Bodenwieser's assistant. Holger participated in establishing the Bodenwieser Dance Group and by 1923 was giving her own solo recitals.

Holger, in recollecting Bodenwieser, writes: "Bodenwieser, known as 'Frau Gerty', was 'what you might describe as self-made. There was nobody in her time who could have taught her as much as she demanded' because of her overwhelming drive, and fertility of



Hilde Holger in *Nature*, photographer unknown

creative imagination, teaching and rehearsing for hours, and then going out to the theatre and parties afterwards" (Holger, 1999, 77).

Bodenwieser was lauded in Vienna for over 100 diverse and dynamic group works, especially her sensational *Demon Machine* (1923), where the dancers enact a synchronized, piston-like, ever increasing frenzy. Bodenwieser and other intelligent, emancipated women (especially Jewish) dancers, et al., like Holger took part in salons along with the radical Viennese Secessionist painters and other avant-garde artists. The Secessionist style, both in painting and dance, was characterized by a sense of "on-going movement", decorative elements, curvilinear forms (circles, waves, figure eights and spirals) and arabesque patterns intended to "reveal the inner sensuous and psychic life" (Brown, 1990, in Grayburn 1990, 16). Holger's own choreographic works demonstrated this Secessionist style, as well as others, and were, experimental, innovative and of humor. An undated letter from her assistant described her work:

"The dances and technique training following Holger's own first solo evening in 1923 in the Secession drew from both fluidly curvilinear and more strongly percussive and angular forms; from Bauhaus, to the shimmering of a prism, like a bubble suspended in the air. In contrast was (Holger's) stark Madonna-visage, clothed in a red vel-

vet robe in a *Bouree* from Bach" (unpublished manuscripts, Boman-Behram collection, translation, Waltz, 2003).

Holger's performance in the *Haus der Secession* (Secessionist House), with its renowned Beethoven frieze by Gustav Klimt, was followed by performances in France, Poland and Czechoslovakia. In 1926 Holger left the Bodenwieser Group to establish her own dance school in Vienna's Palais Ratibor building. She produced works with both political and Jewish themes: *Wacht auf!* (Wake Up!) in 1926 which included a movement chorus; *Four Pictures from the Time of the Paris Commune*, in 1927; *Hebräischer Tanz* (Hebrew Dance) in 1929; *Kabbalistischer Tanz* (Kabbalistic Dance) in 1933; and *Ahasuerus* (the Biblical Persian king in the Purim story) in 1936.

Regarding the darkening socio-political climate and Holger's relationship to her Jewishness, her daughter Primavera Boman-Behram, writes: "I believe when a relative took her for a holiday to Sweden in the late nineteen twenties, that is when she came up with her stage name of Hilde Holger dispensing with her Jewish sounding surname *Sofer* (which is the same word in Hebrew for the traditional scribe of Jewish scripture). After all, she was a blonde with blue eyes. I feel she had a premonition (of the Holocaust); I have so many letters telling of the start of what was literally unbelievable horror. Just as she was aware of the art the Bauhaus produced in Germany, Hilde was aware of her own Jewishness" (Boman-Behram, 2019).



Die Golem by Holger, 1937, photographer unknown

Her daughter makes note of two solos with Jewish themes: the *Hebraischer Tanz* from 1929, and the *Golem* from 1937.¹

Holger's Teaching

Holger's approach to pedagogy, like Bodenwieser's, exemplified the enlightened, Viennese progressive approach to education and to child development. Students were required, as in Bodenwieser's curriculum, not only to train in dance technique, but of parallel importance, they were to create their own dance work. A socialist and humanist, Holger taught "children of aristocrats, and children of workmen", often giving them free classes.

Movement in classes and choreography by Holger, Bodenwieser, and other expressionist dance teachers "contained elements of *Tieftanz* (deep dance), motions on the floor, sustained torso mobility, pairings, swings" (Jackson, 2013, 6), successional movement (both centripetal and centrifugal) arising from the center, upper body, and breath. In training her students, Holger, like Bodenwieser, utilized the ballet *barre*² for its efficacy and strength, however, like Bodenwieser she believed that eventually when a student became a performer "(That) dancer, freed from the traditional forms of dance, should develop his or her own physical 'language' which the audience should immediately understand" (Bleier Brody 1990, 4).

Holger's dance, life and work in the progressive artistic atmosphere of 1920s, early '30s Vienna, led by the vanguard of Jewish artists, educators, doctors, all collapsed in the face of Nazi persecution. With the closure of her prominent school, she was forced to dance clandestinely in an artist's studio and she re-trained, learning *Heilmassage*³ with an orthopedist at the Rothschild Hospital in order to be able to support herself in exile.

In the impending cataclysm, her mentor, Bodenwieser, went on tour with her company to Bogota, Colombia. As a Jewish artist she was not able to return to Austria, annexed by the Nazis; her theatre director husband Friedrich Rosenthal was later murdered by the Nazi regime. Able to secure a visa through her student Shona Dunlop enabling her to reach New Zealand, and later Australia, Bodenwieser resettled and greatly influenced the modern dance there.

In 1939 Hilde Holger fled Vienna, reaching Marseilles and then by boat she continued to far off Bombay. Though saved by her own emigration, tragically, almost all of her family members perished in the Holocaust. In Bombay, after initial dire financial hardships (necessitating her sleeping on the examination table of a doctor friend), Holger met and married an Indian Parsi homeopath and medical doctor, Adi Boman-Behram. They had their daughter Primavera in India, and Holger opened her school, introducing (through teaching and lectures), the Central European expressionist dance to India's radically different culture. For example, Holger had to display a sign on her studio door, "Ladies Only" because in India, dancers were considered to be prostitutes. Holger was successful as a teacher and performer, dancing in a maharajah's palace and meeting Gandhi. She had many Parsi students, who were more emancipated in terms of educational opportunities for women.



Juhu beach - 4 girls with sticks, 1944, photo by Charles Petras

In 1948, when India became independent of British rule, the Muslim-Hindu violence of India's Partition was deeply abhorrent to Holger. She said she would not go through war again, and emigrated once more, with her husband and daughter, settling in London. Initially teaching in a church hall, and again, encountering prejudice because she was seen as a German refugee; a cup of tea was thrown at her by an irate Hampstead resident, who considered Holger to be a "bloody foreigner". Nevertheless, she persevered. Holger opened her studio in her Georgian house in bohemian Camden Town. It was there in her basement studio she continued to teach for more than 50 years.

Her *Gesamtkunstwerk* (total artwork) approach combined her Viennese experimental collaborations with composers, designers, and creative expressive movement, incorporating her humanist philosophy, early studies with Bodenwieser, influence of India, her love of nature, rhythm and elemental forms.

In London she continued this progressive, pedagogical approach: to train the body according to one's individuality, and with the help of music, make one free from physical and psychological inhibitions. The philosophy and teaching methods of Holger have been influential sources in dance movement therapy practice and on other dancers (as well as regarding my own beliefs).

Holger's Idea of Technique

Holger believed in putting a dancer through the discipline of the ballet *barre*. Her rationale was that a dancer had to know how to train the body with aesthetic line and strength, to organise movement and the *barre* was a means of doing this. However, her ballet *barre* was her own. She also certainly drew from her training with Bodenwieser. Holger describes Bodenwieser as "a volcano erupting with ideas...very inspiring (who) never overrode the individual, letting us create for ourselves" (Hirschbach 1990,14). However, Bodenwieser "accepted the relevance of ballet as a system of training though not as choreographic medium" (Brown 1990,18).

What was unique about Holger's *barre* work, was, in Holger's words, that "a modern dancer works from head to hip" (Waltz, Holger interview, 2000). Sometimes this meant hanging from the wall *barre* three feet off the ground. Sometimes it meant circling a hoop laid on the floor, bending the torso, arms and legs to follow its circular shape, in order to strengthen and make supple the spine. Differing from the sedate ballet *barre*,² Hilde's *barre* was dynamic, and done on the move, curving and arcing the back in attitude, in travelling and turning *frappé* done at the *barre*, and moving into the center of the room, in spirals, and figure eights. In contrast was the flat profile and angles of the Egyptian step, or the extended arms, flexed wrists and outstretched legs of what she called the 'Picasso' step. Changing levels, direction, in turns, jumping and travelling steps (still using ballet turns and jumps including *tour en l'air*, *tour jeté*, and *sissonne*), always moving from the torso, and with arms stretched out through the fingertips, the *barre* and center work were a mixture of influences from her beloved Bruegel *Kunsthistorisches Museum* (Vienna Art History Museum), rollicking paintings, Indian temple carvings, Cubism, rhythmic gymnastics, humour and Zen-like concentration.

Holger also influenced and was influenced by the Viennese marionette designer Richard Teschner, seen in Holger's pendulum movement using short bamboo sticks, or in her *Villon* choreography with several students suspended over one long pole, bent from the waist, ribs or head.

Music

Holger's appreciation of music, especially rhythm, was of primary importance to her. Her pupil Feroza Seervai (2002) reported that in the classes in India they danced to Bach, Corelli, and Debussy. Holger found Rudolf von Laban's work, (as one of the founders of *Ausdruckstanz*) to move without music, too cerebral. I earlier mentioned his protégé Mary Wigman, another of the Expressionist modern dance pioneers, particularly known for her philosophy of *Gesamtkunst*, a synthesis of dance, music, costume, and masks, who, however, held the dance to be paramount:

"...most come through music to movement. Almost all our dancers embody music, dance what's foreign when they could make their own. Free oneself from music! So must all! Only then can dance develop into what one hopes from it: toward free dance, toward pure Art. The body is the dancer's instrument"

"...*Die meisten kommen ueber die Musik zur Bewegung. Fast alle unsere Moderner Tanzer u. Tanzerinnen verkorporn Musik, tanzen Fremdes und koennten vielleicht Eigenesschaffen. Freiwerden von der Musik! Das mussten sie alle! Erst dann kann sich die Bewegung zu dem entwickeln, was alle von ihr erhoffen: zum freien Tanz, zu reiner Kunst. Der Korper ist das Instrument des Tanzers* (Wigman ,1913, Tagebuch, Binder & Szeemann 1990, 20). (The English translation is provided by the author and also in: Wigman, 1990, 20).

Holger's attitude to music was not as severe as Wigman's. However, Holger embodied in her dance, a rhythmic incisiveness underpinning the movement and allowing it to work as pure dance without music. Her collaborative work with composers freed her to compose dances first, and then commission the music.

In classes, Holger kept time on bamboo sticks, or a tambourine in rhythmic, sharp, syncopated beats and very fast tempi, accelerating when she felt frustrated by her students' execution of movement or when someone came late (causing a number of broken tambourines!). She often used phrases, which she repeated many times but diminished the amount of repetitions from four times to two times, then as four singles. Canons and repetition were frequent devices, as in the motion of hoops like driving pistons, or the dynamism of diving *penché* out of high *bouffée* steps. We employed percussion instruments in repeating rhythmic patterns, the accompanist (usually David Sutton-Anderson) played or incorporated his rhythms in our movement, and even joined the dancers at the *barre* before hopping back to the piano.

In an interview with her on the subject of teaching young children, she likened the training of a dancer to that of the musician: "If a child already learns an instrument, this is of great help, too, in teaching dancing. You know when you are learning an instrument, I'm sure the teacher taught you how to play the piano: you can't hammer the piano, you can't play without sense...You must go according to the rules of the instrument. It is the same for dance. I put you at the *barre*, you have to be sometimes very accurate what we are doing or you can't teach anything in that particular art. It means the child needs to discipline herself or himself" (Waltz, 2000).

Improvisation

When I began studying with 'Mme' Holger in 1996, she was 91, constricted by arthritis, and teaching from a stair lift at the bottom of the stairs, though age had not constricted her sharp mental capacity, or the percussive incisive tempo of her bamboo sticks on a tambourine. Holger's two-hour classes were made up of an hour of technique: *barre*, then center and moving across the floor, followed by an hour of improvisation. Holger gave us what were essentially dance problems to solve. For example, how would you move in the cubicles formed by a pattern on the floor of randomly placed bamboo sticks? Or, working in pairs, move into the hoop, then your partner moves into the hoop (how would you move together?); or putting the hoops on the floor and using a low movement, going from one hoop to the other. Props were important, and the variations were endless. The problems were intellectual, physical, and relational, as we tried each other's movement, worked as partners or as a group. If I ever sat out to watch, which wasn't often because it wasn't allowed, I was amazed by the beauty, and complexity which emerged out of very basic, pure movements.

Though I had missed the 1960's era of Hampstead Theatre performances, her studio still displayed the fantastic array of objects at the back of the studio, such as instruments, different sized hoops, bamboo sticks, and mats, a mahogany *barre* which she had brought from India. Props extended the movements and became metaphors for war, ritual, societal convention, and humor, always within a framework of abstract movement, even when dealing with dramatic ideas verging on mime.

Nature played an enormous role, affecting Holger's eye as a dancer, as movement of waves, birds, penguins, whales, frogs, lizards, etc.,

became abstract movement vocabulary. Even the nature programs on television were a source of inspiration for her.

Her use of video and film was up to date, and Holger often invited her pupils in the evening to view a video recording of choreography or classes.

There was Holger's experience of India influencing her teaching using its art, sculpture, music, colors and forms and of course, its dance. While in India, Holger writes, she did not attempt to choreograph Indian dance. However, she made several dances in the West, notably *Apsaras* (1979) that then drew from these experiences, and also she used Indian hand movements, the turn of the hip and flexed foot, strong accents and rhythms in technique classes.

Other sources of influence were literature and psychoanalysis. Although as far as I know, Holger herself did not undergo analysis, she was exposed to it when she was young for it was all pervasive in the Viennese milieu. An example was a dance of Bodenwieser's called *The Rhythm of the Unconscious*, from 1921, drawn from Freud's book *Interpretation of Dreams* (1899). Holger reconstructed it in May 2000 for the Austrian Cultural Institute centenary event at Sadler's Wells.

Holger's Philosophy of Dance

Holger, a dedicated pedagogue, was very keen to articulate her philosophy and ideas about the importance of dance in general education. The Expressionist *Ausdruckstanz* dance form influencing Holger developed in a period that stemmed to a great extent from Émile Jaques-Dalcroze's philosophy of harmonious dance and musical education. She regarded dance education as a powerful vehicle for the development of inner personality, serving to awaken "both limbs and spirit" and artistic instinct, giving (the child) a feeling for "beauty... color, line and rhythm" (Holger, 1939,1940). Her aim in dance education followed principles of natural movement within a framework of serious discipline, without forcing the individual into becoming a "living automaton." Her aim in her children's classes was to refine the precious natural sense for movement and to unfold the creative ability which every child possesses, children of every background, who might grow up to be architects, musicians, or housewives. If a child was having trouble in school, she advised the parents to send them to dance! Her emphasis on individual development, on the concept of encouraging play, imagination, and feeling in children without recourse to the imposition or imitation of adult values or sentimentality, resonates for me in concepts of client-centered therapy work. Holger also writes of the role of dance education in inculcating a taste for "cooperative work, through utilizing the child's talent in group work, in discouraging exhibitionism, in which natural abilities and energies are brought into play without an undue display of egotism" (Holger, *ibid*, 1939, 1940).

Dance Therapy

Holger worked extensively with special needs, and mixed different ability groups in performances and classes, and pioneered, wrote and gave lectures on the subject in the 1970's and '80's. Her son Darius, born in London, was a child with Down's syndrome, influencing Holger to pioneer both integrative and special classes for children to improve coordination, body movement and concentration. She

used her son as an example in the classroom for spontaneous, natural movement. Her system of dance therapy drew from her philosophy of dance as a healing art and mind-body technique that released tension. Differing from her more directed use of movement in technique classes, Holger's therapeutic work drew from the patient, rather than from a formula. She delineated selection of patients for dance therapy, as those with depression, Down's syndrome or senility. Her assessment and diagnosis of patients came from observation of the individual, their needs, their walk and listening to them. She focused on building mental and physical strength by concentrating on moving the able parts, rhythm group work and concentration. She suggested patients making their own compositions in spatial configurations, moving to music and improvisation with instruments and objects. Planning for groups encouraged interaction in pairs (swinging, touching hands, holding arms, and kneeling).

Conclusion

In this essay I have described Holger's sources for her artistic philosophy, which centred on an aesthetic, educational and therapeutic belief in dance as a healing medium. Her techniques employed strong use of the torso, rhythm, isolation of different parts of the body and co-ordinating use of limbs and body, use of props, percussion instruments, Eastern elements, and structured improvisation in individual movement and interaction with other people. These techniques are highly adaptable in a therapeutic setting. Her technique emphasised individual expression, discerning, fine, subtle movements, also forceful use of the body and strong use of rhythm; curvilinear and directional spatial patterns, cognitive problem solving, spontaneity and emotional playfulness. Her therapy work concentrated on building up from the material she found by observing, listening and talking to the patient. I draw and adapt from her work elements such as strong body action, rhythm, curvilinear patterns, techniques of movement, specific exercises and interactional improvisation that are motivated from an inner sense of movement, rather than imposed from outside.

Motivating her work in therapy were several factors: her original exile; three continental migrations; brutality of war; personal loss; financial hardship; marital difficulties (divorcing and then remarrying Adi Boman-Behram again at 84); and her son Darius's special needs. She continued to teach until she was 96, only a few months before her death in 2001. Though she was no longer able to walk because of crippling arthritis, nonetheless, she was a role model for lifelong creativity. Holger's abiding humanism, imbued with a progressive, emancipated, Viennese Jewish socialism, professional dedication, and fierce interest in the life and work of her students, reveal an inspiring example of an incredible life. Her daughter, Primavera Boman-Behram, has been archiving Holger's fantastic collection of photographs, manuscripts, paintings, costumes, and memorabilia which she had discovered after Holger's death in four trunks Holger's mother had shipped to India from Vienna, and then Bombay to London.⁴ It depicts through her extensive materials, costumes, photos, and memorabilia, a life and work spanning both the vibrancy and darkness of twentieth century artistic achievements and this Jewish artist's seminal contributions.

Notes

¹In Jewish folklore, the most famous Golem was a giant man fashioned from the mud of the Vltava or Moldau River by Rabbi Judah Loew to protect the Jews of the 17th century in the Prague Ghetto.

²A ballet *barre* has two meanings: firstly, it is the first half of a ballet class. Secondly it is an actual object, a banister-like of wooden dowel (note the wooden *barre* Holger brought with her from India to England) attached to the dance studio wall, allowing for the dancers to stabilize themselves while doing exercises at the beginning of the class.

³Holger was trained in *Heilmassage* or Swedish massage at Vienna's Rothschild Hospital by an orthopedic doctor as a means to support herself in exile. He also taught her exercises with a hoop including movements of curving around the hoop while on the floor. These strengthened the spine which she incorporated into her dance teaching.

⁴See the Holger website, www.hildeholger.com.

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