**Valeska Gert (b. Gertrud Valesca Samosch, 11 January 1892, Berlin, Germany; d. uncertain, ca. 15-18 March 1978, Kampen, Sylt, Federal Republic of Germany)**

**Summary**

Valeska Gert was a dancer, actress, and cabarettist best known for her radical solo performances during the Weimar Republic. She attracted attention for her physical stage choices and presence, which were often discussed in terms of the grotesque, and for her commitment to making work that staged contemporary issues without mystifying them, as she claimed many of her contemporaries did. She also acted in many plays and films by well-known modernist directors. During the Nazi years, Gert left Germany and, among other activities, ran the Beggar Bar in New York City, one of the more successful exile cabarets and the second of the seven venues she opened during her career. After her return to Germany in 1949, her work changed substantially, both stylistically and in terms of medium, as her aggressive performance style softened and she relied increasingly on spoken text. In the decades after her death, she became an icon of rebellious and experimental performance for younger artists across Europe.

**Training**

Gert’s minimal dance training occurred, along with other famous German dancers of her time including Anita Berber, at the ballet school of Rita Sacchetto, to whom she had been sent by her acting teacher Maria Moissi. She claims that the modern dance satire was born at a 1916 recital by Sacchetto’s students, in which she presented a piece called *Tanz in Orange* (*Dance in Orange*) that parodied classical physicality. Gert subsequently began to show her own solo work while also performing in various plays, including under the theatre director Max Reinhardt from whom she took many formative elements of her style, including the power of the bare stage.

**Major Contributions to Modernism**

Gert came into her own in the late 1910s doing solo performance evenings in concert halls and political cabarets. These events consisted of a series of brief sketches that materialized carefully observed elements of the social, cultural, and artistic moment. Her prostitute piece *Canaille* (*Riffraff*, 1919) was, according to Gert, the ‘first socially critical dance pantomime’[[1]](#endnote-1) Her thematic engagement with low culture was further exemplified by performances about boxing matches and traffic, which corresponded to her stated intention to stage simple, human topics that could be understood by all. In this sense, she followed many modernist artists in identifying with marginal figures, gaining acclaim for presenting material from the boundaries of the socially and aesthetically acceptable. Critics often described her performances as shedding light on more shadowy corners of the world.

However, what is important about Gert is not just the themes she chose for her performances during the Weimar years (1919-1933), but the stylistic choices she made in taking that material into her own body. In this she is often seen as exemplary of the grotesque dancers of the period. Gert’s movement vocabulary was limited to what she deemed necessary for a particular performance, often derived from exaggerated forms of pedestrian observations. Her performance *Der Tod* (*Death*, 1922), for example, consisted first and foremost of standing in place and increasing and then decreasing the tension of her body, causing one viewer to suggest the distinction between a more poetic form of dying and the shuddering death that Gert staged. Although she claimed that her dances were not improvised, they had a high degree of variability because Gert allowed herself to experience both the scenarios and characters within them with each performance and the exchange that engendered with her audiences. It was her charisma together with the hyperbolic quality of her performance style that led to her roles in plays by famous modernist directors, as well as appearing in several silent and sound films including three directed by G. W. Pabst— *Die freudlose Gasse* (*The Joyless Street,* 1925), *Tagebuch einer Verlorenen* (*Diary of a Lost Girl*, 1929), and *Die Dreigroschenoper* (*Threepenny Opera*, 1931).

After the Nazis came to power in 1933, Gert was barely able to perform in Germany. The combination of her Jewishness, the political left-orientation of her work, and her avant-garde modes of experimentation earned her two places in Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels’s 1934 photo book *Das erwachende Berlin* (*The Awakening of Berlin*), and even her performances with the Jüdischer Kulturbund (Jewish Cultural Union) were curtailed after she made negative comments to the British press. She remained based in Germany but performing primarily in other European cities until 1938, when she left for the United States. She ran one of the more successful exile cabarets in New York from 1941 to 1945, named the Beggar Bar because, as she explained to a reporter, she had to beg together the money and fittings to open it. One of her waiters was Tennessee Williams, who described her in his memoirs as ‘incomparable’[[2]](#endnote-2) After the Beggar Bar closed due to licensing problems, she tried another cabaret venture before returning to what became West Berlin via a fourth cabaret in Zurich. Her fifth and sixth cabarets failed, and she retreated to the cabaret that she had opened in 1951 on Kampen auf Sylt, where she remained until her death.

While most studies of Gert’s modernism have concentrated on her Weimar period, her style underwent substantial revision through her period of exile and her return to Germany. Like many exile modernists, it is not enough to discuss Gert’s artistic exile as interchangeable with her political exile and remigration, in particular because her circumstances made being an outsider into a much riskier position during the postwar years. Her grotesque performance aesthetic softened, as did her thematic material. Although there remained a critical edge to Gert’s work, much of her later material changed from sharp satire to a commentary on contemporary life that was often hidden in more fantastical tales. While Gert had already experimented with sound in performance by the late Weimar Republic, she later turned increasingly to a more text-based mode of literary cabaret that was supported by her physical presence, as she wove stories, for example, about an American nightclub soloist performing the same song at three different stages of her life. Such shifts belong not only to the range of forms within German cabaret, but also to the prehistory of dance theatre.

**Legacy**

Gert was extremely self-conscious in her self-presentation, writing numerous articles as well as four autobiographies over the course of her career, which are notable not only for the contradictions between them, but also for what they exclude. It is also worth pointing out that many well known stories confirming Gert’s modernist centrality originate in these books, for example, the anecdote in which she asked Bertolt Brecht what epic theatre was, to which he replied: ‘what you do’.[[3]](#endnote-3) She worked to articulate an image of herself as a modernist leader and a central but forgotten figure in Weimar dance, later in her life complaining repeatedly of having been written out of Germany’s dance history by the Nazis.

After a difficult period immediately after her remigration to Germany, Gert was rediscovered first by German avant garde film makers in the 1960s and later by choreographers. She has increasingly become the object of dance scholars who see her as an early performance artist and as a progenitor of the German dance theatre that emerged in the 1970s. In 2006, the Institute for Theater Studies at the Freie Universität Berlin (Free University) named a guest professorship after her.

**Kate Elswit**

**Selected Artist’s Writings**

Gert, V. (1931) “Dancing,” translated and reprinted in *Schrifttanz: A View of German Dance in the Weimar Republic*, eds. V. Preston-Dunlop and S. Lahusen, 13-16. London: Dance Books, 1990.   
--------. (1931) *Mein Weg*. Leipzig: A.F. Devrient Verlagsges.

--------. (1950) *Die Bettlerbar von New York*. Berlin: Arani.

-------. (1968) *Ich bin eine Hexe: Kaleidoskop meines Lebens*. Munich: Franz Schneekluth Verlag.

--------. (1973) *Katze von Kampen*. Percha am Starnberger See: Verlag R.S. Schulz.

**Selected Works**

Selected Choreographies:

*Tanz in Orange* (Dance in Orange, 1916)

*Japanische Groteske* (Japanese Grotesque, 1917)

*Kanaille / Canaille* (Riffraff, 1919)

*Tango* (1919)

*Die Kupplerin* (The Madame, 1920)

*Tod / Der Tod* (Death, 1922)

*Jazzband* (1924)

*Sport* (1924)

*Charleston* (1926)

*Boxen* (Boxing, 1926)

*Nervosität* (Nervousness, 1927)

*Verkehr* (Traffic, 1928)

*Japanisches Theater* (Japanese Theatre, 1931)

Selected Films:

G. W. Pabst, *Die freudlose Gasse* (The Joyless Street*,* 1925)

G.W. Pabst, *Tagebuch einer Verlorenen* (Diary of a Lost Girl, 1929)

G.W. Pabst, *Die Dreigroschenoper* (Threepenny Opera, 1931)

F. Fellini, *Giulietta degli Spiriti* (Juliet of the Spirits, 1965)

Cabarets:

Kohlkopp (Cabbage Head, 1932, Berlin)

Beggar Bar (1941-45, New York)

Valeska’s (1946, Provincetown)

Café Valeska und ihr Küchenpersonal (Café Valeska and her Kitchen Staff, 1948, Zürich)

Bei Valeska (Valeska’s Place, 1949, West Berlin)

Hexenküche (Witch’s Kitchen, 1950-56)

Ziegenstall (Goat Shed, 1951-1978, Kampen auf Sylt)

**References and Further Reading**

De Keersmaeker, A.T. (1981) ‘Valeska Gert’. *TDR: The Drama Review* 25 (3): 55-66.

Elswit, K. (2012) ‘Back Again? Valeska Gert’s Exiles’ in *New German Dance Studies*, eds. S. Manning and L. Ruprecht, 113-29. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

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Kolb, A. (2007) ‘“There Was Never Anything Like This!!!”: Valeska Gert’s Performances in the Context of Weimar Culture’, *The European Legacy* 12 (3): 293-309.

Norton, S.J. (2007) ‘Dancing Out of Bounds: Valeska Gert in Berlin and New York’. In *Female Exiles in Twentieth and Twenty-First Century Europe*, eds. M. Stanley and G. Zinn, 97-120. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

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Müller, H. and P. Stöckemann (1993) *‘… jeder Mensch ist ein Tänzer’: Ausdruckstanz in Deutschland zwischen 1900 und 1945*. Giessen: Anabas-Verlag.

Peter, F.-M. (1987) *Valeska Gert: Tänzerin, Schaupielerin, Kabarettistin*. Berlin: Edition Hentrich.

**Documentary**

Schlöndorff, V. (1977) *Nur zum Spaß, Nur zum Spiel: Kaleideskop Valeska Gert*. Munich: Biskop Film.

**Paratexts**

See scans of three images in separate file titled REM.Gert.images. Permission must be requested from the Theatre Studies Collection at the University of Cologne

**Notes**

1. V. Gert (1968) *Ich bin eine Hexe: Kaleidoskop meines Lebens*. Munich: Franz Schneekluth Verlag, 47. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. T. Williams (1976) *Memoirs*. London: W.H. Allen, 71. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. V. Gert (1968), 56. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)