**Kurt Jooss (b. 12 January 1901, Wasseralfingen, Germany; d. 22 May 1979, Heilbronn, Federal Republic of Germany)**

**Summary**

Kurt Jooss is often understood to be a founding figure in dance theatre, both for his choreography *Der grüne Tisch* (*The Green Table*, 1932), which continues to appear today on international ballet programs, and as the teacher of Pina Bausch, who was his most famous student. Jooss was particularly vocal towards the end of the Weimar Republic about the need for modern dance to reincorporate into its expressive capacities more classical forms of technique in order to continue to move forward with the project of establishing dance as an independent art of the theatre. He became director of the Dance Department at the Folkwang School in Essen first in 1927, a position he left when he and his company fled Nazi Germany in 1933. After the war, he returned primarily to the Folkwang School and there taught a new generation of dancers from 1949 through 1968. Although Jooss is often central to histories of German dance, he is an exemplary case study for its transnational circulation, in terms of his own movements and those of his company members and students, as well as in the survival of his four notated works in international ballet repertoires—*Pavane on the Death of an Infanta* (1929), *Big City* (1932), *A Ball in Old Vienna* (1932), and *The Green Table*.

**Training**

Jooss was one of the two most influential students of Rudolf Laban, with whom he trained between 1920 and 1924. The other, Mary Wigman, developed Laban’s earlier emphasis on the mystical properties of the body, whereas Jooss collaborated with his teacher during a period in which Laban was experimenting with a more systematized language for codifying movement in an attempt to legitimize dance through written form. Jooss’s interest in the inherent expressive properties of dynamic movements comes from this work with Laban’s effort studies or eukinetics, developing into Jooss’s belief that movements and the relationships between them had psychological relations to meaning. In the mid-1920s, Jooss also studied classical ballet in Paris together with his colleague Sigurd Leeder before returning to Germany, where Jooss advocated for a fusion of trainings because, in his opinion, classical dance as it stood ignored emotions to focus on external forms whereas modern dance was too focused on the internal to consider outward forms.

**Major Contributions to Modernism**

In the credo Jooss issued alongside his Folkwang Tanzbühne’s (Dance Stage) 1932 performance at the Grand Concours International de Chorégraphie (International Competition for Choreography) in Paris, at which *The Green Table* took first prize, Jooss articulated his vision for dance as ‘an autonomous Art of the Theater, an art which can not be rendered by the spoken word; its language is the expressive movement of the human body in purified and stylized form’.[[1]](#endnote-1) In this credo’s insistence on stylization as well as expressivity, Jooss reiterated and extended the controversial proposition he had made in opening the 1928 German Dance Congress: the need to reconcile ballet and modern dance into a more hybrid independent form, a dance capable of standing on its own as a form of theatre that he called *Tanztheater* (dance theatre). This idea of dance theatre was a compromise between the *Theatertanz* (theatre dance) of the opera stage in which dance was in service to an externally generated narrative, and the *Absolute Tanz* (absolute dance) in which dance was framed purely by its own laws of composition, with little or no plot. Jooss advocated this proposal as a way forward from what he called the ‘barbaric’ inward focus of modern dance,[[2]](#endnote-2) as well as from the decorative nature of classical dance that he saw as incapable of taking on contemporary issues. This ideal is visible both in elements of Jooss’s choreographic legacy and in the Jooss-Leeder method of training, which was never systematized into a codified movement vocabulary but remained a set of principles.

The most well-known exemplar of Jooss’s vision was *The Green Table*, a dance of death in eight scenes that began and ended with a group of masked figures (The Gentlemen in Black) gathered around a table deciding with clean white gloves to wage war. In between were scenes of archetypal figures during wartime, moving to the rhythm stamped out by the figure of Death. Although the dance seemed to contain traditional balletic vocabulary on the surface, the particular physical idiom of each figure showed Jooss’s modernist conviction that the innate meanings of movement were capable of carrying the narrative. While the slippery war profiteer, for example, moved in circular patterns, the partisan teetered between on and off balance while deciding whether to attack the soldiers. In working with such choreographic principles, Jooss explored the possibilities for a socially critical dance narrative that would be embedded in the form itself, rather than externally grafted onto it. *Green Table* became the first of a series of dances that staged human experiences of overwhelming cultural-historical situations, including dictatorship (*Chronica*, 1939), and the aftermaths of war (*The Mirror*, 1935) and *Weg im Nebel* (*Journey in the Fog*, 1952). He also dealt with the intricacies of day-to-day social relations in such works as *Großstadt* (*Big City*, 1932/35).

Although Jooss’s early twentieth century use of the term ‘dance theatre’ is often central in connecting dance during the Weimar Republic (1919-1933) with later twentieth century dance theatre, even once we acknowledge his different use of the term, this connection requires following a path outside of Germany. Jooss and his company left in 1933, rather than fire his Jewish composer Fritz Cohen and two Jewish dancers. They established a home base at Dartington Hall in England, while travelling extensively in Europe as well as North and South America. During this time, the company disbanded and reconvened several times. Most of Jooss’s collaborators and company members left to continue their own work in places through which they passed. By the time that *The Green Table* was performed again for West German audiences in 1951, only one member remained of the original nineteen-person cast. The rest were dancers who had studied with Jooss along the way, as well as those who had trained at the Folkwang School under the Nazi years. Jooss also continued to maintain his connections with former dancers upon his return, organizing for example an international summer school in Essen during 1960, 1961, and 1962. In this sense, to see Jooss as central to modernism’s contribution to dance theatre is to see a much more transnational modernism. When the Joffrey Ballet started performing *The Green Table* during the Vietnam War, for example, it was because Robert Joffrey had seen the work on tour with the Chilean National Ballet, which had been started by former Jooss dancers.

**Legacy**

Jooss’s legacy is two-fold. On the one hand, there is *The Green Table*, a choreography that has international circulation on ballet programs. By contrast, most of Jooss’s other works remain much less well remembered, as do the struggles that resulted in the disbanding and reassembling of his company five times. On the other hand, there are the students who came through the postwar Folkwang School to become the next generation of dance theatre choreographers, including Reinhild Hoffman, Susanne Linke, and Pina Bausch. It is impossible to watch Bausch’s early works without seeing Jooss’s physical training style, in particular the high contraction and the figure eight of the arms that takes the upper body through central and circumferential movement. And yet, at the same time, the later twentieth century form of dance theatre differs substantially from Jooss’s earlier vision that was so optimistic about the comprehensibility of bodies. While this dance theatre legacy is significant in a German context, it is also important to consider Jooss’s relevance beyond the borders of the nation-state.

**Kate Elswit**

**Selected Artist’s Writings**

Jooss, K. (1928) ‘Tanztheater und Theatertanz’. Reprinted in H. Müller and Stöckemann, P. (1993) ‘*… jeder Mensch ist ein Tänzer’: Ausdruckstanz in Deutschland zwischen 1900 und 1945*, 76-77. Giessen: Anabas-Verlag.

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Jooss, K. and D. de Morroda (1933) ‘The Dance of the Future’, *Dancing Times* 275: 453-455.

**Selected Works**

*Pavane auf Tod einer Infantin (Pavane on the Death of an Infanta,* 1929)

*Der grüne Tisch* (*The Green Table*, 1932)

*Ein Ball in Alt-Wien (A Ball in Old Vienna,* 1932)

*Großstadt* (*Big City*, 1932/35)

*Der verlorene Sohn* (*The Prodigal Son*, 1933/1939/1956)

*Chronica*  (1939)

*Juventud/Dithyrambus* (*Youth/Dithyrambus*, 1948/1951)

*Weg im Nebel* (*Journey in the Fog*, 1952)

*Die Feenkönigen* (*The Fairy Queen*, 1959)

**References and Further Reading**

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**Documentaries**

Joffrey Ballet of Chicago (2013) *The Green Table*.

Lashmore, D. “Around the Green Table.” *Omnibus*. Aired 17 June 1976. BBC1.

Partsch-Bergsohn, I. and H. Bergsohn (2001) *The Makers of Modern Dance in Germany: Rudolf Laban, Mary Wigman, Kurt Jooss*. Dance Horizons.

Wangenheim, A. v. (2001) *Kurt Jooss: A Commitment to Dance*. WDR/BBC.

**Paratexts**

See the file titled REM.Jooss.images. Permission must be sought from the Jooss Archive at the German Dance Archive in Cologne.

**Notes**

1. Archival material in Kurt Jooss Archive, now held by Deutsches Tanzarchiv Köln. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. See H. Müller (1985) “Jooss and Expressionism” in *Jooss: Dokumentation von Anna and Hermann Markard*, ed. A. Markard (15-17). Cologne: Ballett-Bühnen Verlag Rolf Garske. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)