**Ernst Uthoff (1904- 1993)**

Sydney Jane Norton

**Summary**

Ernst Uthoff was a German-born dancer, choreographer, and company director who received his dance training from two pioneers of *Tanztheater* (‘dance-theatre’)—Kurt Jooss and Sigurd Leeder. He was one of the original members of the *Folkwang-Tanzbühne* (Folkwang Dance Stage), a company that Jooss and Leeder co-founded in 1927, and Uthoff created and performed several important roles for Jooss. As a performer he is best known for his roles of the Standard Bearer in *The Green Table* (1932) and the Libertine in *Big City* (1932). In 1934 Uthoff fled Nazi Germany together with his wife, the Hungarian dancer Lola Botka, Jooss, and other company members. The troupe settled at Dartington Hall in England, where its dancers opened a Jooss-Leeder school and performed under the name Ballets Jooss. Ballets Jooss toured South America in 1941, during which time the Chilean government invited Uthoff, Botka, and solo dancer Rudolf Pescht to remain in Chile to establish a school of contemporary dance. The three settled in Santiago that same year, co-founding the *Escuela de Danzas* (School of Dance). Soon after, Uthoff, Botka, and Pescht established the *Ballet Nacional Chileno* (National Ballet of Chile), a state-financed company based at the University of Chile in Santiago. *Ballet Nacional Chileno* was one of Chile’s first nationally-sponsored professional dance companies, and it is still flourishing today.

File: uthoff1.png

Figure Uthoff as a young dancer in Germany.

Source: Courtesy of the Uthoff family.

File: Uthoffstdbearer.png

Figure Ernst Uthoff as the Standard Bearer in The Green Table, 1932.

Source: Courtesy of the Uthoff family.

**Training**

Uthoff began studying dance with German modern dancers Kurt Jooss and Sigurd Leeder, both of whom had trained with Rudolf Laban, an early proponent of *Ausdruckstanz* (expressionist dance). In 1927, Jooss and Leeder moved to Essen to co-direct the dance department of the Folkwang School and to establish the *Folkwang-Tanztheater-Studio,* which became known as the *Folkwang-Tanzbühne* after 1930. Uthoff, an original member of the company, became Jooss’s studio assistant.

Unlike other central European modern dancers who rejected the technical strictures and conventions of classical ballet, Jooss and Leeder regarded ballet as a fundamental training element for modern dancers. Students and company members took daily ballet classes in addition to modern dance, and incorporated visual elements of ballet into their performances. Dancers from the Folkwang School also studied eurythmics, music appreciation, dance history, and dance notation. In 1942 Uthoff introduced this curriculum to students in Santiago.

File: uthoff2.png

Figure Ernst Uthoff

Source: Courtesy of the Uthoff family.

**Major Contributions to the Field and to Modernism**

As Jooss’ student and a performer with the *Folkwang-Tanzbühne,* Uthoff developed an early awareness of dance-theater as a means of expressing social concerns. His most famous role was the Standard Bearer in Jooss’ *The Green Table*, a modern rendition of the medieval dance macabre. The work is an eight-episode ballet that comments on the futility of and anguish caused by war. The Standard Bearer wears white and creates fluid and audible circular movements with his flag. He represents the naïve and tragic purity of purpose that exists among youthful enthusiasts of war. *The Green Table* premiered in 1932 in Paris and won first prize for new choreography at the *Concours de Chorégraphie* (Choreographic Contest)*,* an award that spirited the *Folkwang-Tanzbühne* into international acclaim.

Many modern dance pioneers, including Isadora Duncan, Mary Wigman, and Rudolf Laban, eschewed plot in order to liberate the dancer’s movements from predefined scenarios and structures. But Jooss, Leeder, and later Uthoff chose to combine narrative with movement and theatrical elements—exaggerated gesture, elaborate costumes, masks, props, and dramatic lighting—to create powerful choreographic works that conveyed social truths. These dance creations became known as *Tanztheater* (dance-theatre), a term later used to describe productions by such artists as Pina Bausch, Suzanne Linke, and Johann Kresnik.

When Ballets Jooss performed in Santiago, Chilean audiences were intrigued by the company’s socially-minded choreography. They were also drawn to the company’s mission of bringing the art of modern dance to underprivileged and rural audiences. Dances with a social message, such as *The Green Table* and *Big City*, appealed to government arts representatives as well as to intellectuals and artists who identified parallels between Jooss’ dance-theatre and social dramas by Bertolt Brecht. Once the *Ballet Nacional Chileno* was established, works by Jooss were incorporated into the permanent repertoire. By 1944, however, Uthoff had begun choreographing and staging impressive works of his own. He premiered many successful ballets such as expressionist versions of *Coppelia* (1945), *Drosselbart* (1946), and *Petrouchka* (1952), all of which addressed themes already choreographed by his mentor. But Uthoff would soon break out on his own with inventive and contemporary works, many of which were connected with Chilean cultural experiences. Among the director’s greatest choreographic achievements are *Carmina Burana* (1953), a large-scale multi-media ballet set to music by Carl Orff that involves a full-size symphony and chorus; *Alotria* (1954), a comic circus ballet; and *Milagro en la Alameda* (*A World of Fantasy*, 1957), which addresses the social conditions of Chilean children in poverty. Set to music by Héctor Carvajal and Josep Bayer, *Milagro en la Alameda* incorporates elements of farming culture; *cueca*, a Chilean dance form; and folklore.

File: roncal.png

Figure Virginia Roncal as the fairy in Milagra en la Alameda, late 1950s.

Source: http://www.scielo.cl/scielo.php?script=sci\_arttext&pid=S0716-27902002005600002

Uthoff’s later choreography incorporated more elements of classical dance, while still adhering to the logical development of character and theatrical narrative that characterizes dance-theatre. He was a meticulous choreographer and teacher, dedicating months to the preparation and rehearsal of each ballet. He required of his dancers that they not simply master the steps, but that they painstakingly interpret their roles to ensure that each instant of movement was performed with precision and imbued with meaning. Naturalism, expressiveness, and emotional commitment were the key elements that Uthoff and his team cultivated in their students and company members. In both of these realms Uthoff and his team created a supportive environment in which dancers could master basic classical training without relying on the rigors of pointe work or flashy virtuosity. During his time in Chile Uthoff facilated an exchange program between *Ballet Nacional Chileno* and European companies, in which Chilean students received scholarships to study at prestigious dance academies abroad. In addition to choreographing and directing the company, Uthoff also designed the scenery and conceived the lighting design.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s Uthoff and *Ballet Nacional Chileno* embarked on several highly successful Latin American tours, and in 1964 the company performed at Lincoln Center in New York City. Uthoff retired in 1967 and received Chile’s National Art Award in 1984.

**Legacy**

In many ways, Uthoff’s greatest legacy is the company he founded and led from 1942 to 1966, the *Ballet Nacional Chileno.* Under his leadership the company developed into a compact and highly professional group of dancers, whose contributions have transformed and enriched Chile’s cultural terrain. Through dedication to classical training combined with his vision of the dancer as total interpreter, Uthoff gave form to disciplined and technically sound dancers who could perform a wide range of dramatic and musical interpretations. Several principal dancers from *Ballet Nacional Chileno*—Patricio Bunster, Blanchette Hermansen, Virginia Roncal, Maria Elena Aranguiz, Malucha Solari, and Heinz Poll—became acclaimed choreographers and teachers in their own right. Uthoff’s eldest son Michael has also greatly furthered his father’s legacy by restaging *Carmina Burana* for the Nashville Ballet.

In fact, Michael’s career as performer and choreographer has continued the transnational circulation of dance modernism that had shaped the careers of Uthoff and Botka. As a young man Michael Uthoff moved to New York City, studying at The Julliard School, the School of American Ballet, and the Martha Graham School of Contemporary Dance. Michael danced with the José Limon Company and was principal dancer with the Joffrey Ballet where, in a 1967 production of *The Green Table*, he danced the Standard Bearer role that his father had created thirty-five years before. Michael has served as artistic director of the Hartford Ballet in Connecticut and of Ballet Arizona, and is currently artistic and executive director of Dance St. Louis. Michael and his brother Andras provided crucial information for this entry, as did Daniela Muller, a former student of Lola Botka.

File: Arizonaballet.png

Figure Members of the Arizona Ballet perform Ernst Uthoff's Carmina Burana during the 1990s.

Source: **http://www.jekyns.com/images/dance/image5.html**

**Selected Works**

*Danza Lírica* (Lyrical Dance) (1942)

*Aída* (1944)

*Danza de la Victoria* (Victory Dance) (1944)

*Hänsel y Gretel* (1944)

*Coppelia* (1945)

*Drosselbart* (also known as *El Príncipe Mendigo*) (1946)

*La leyenda de José* (The Legend of Joseph) (1949)

*Czardas en la Noche* (Czardas of the Night) (1949)

*Don Juan* (1950)

*Petrouschka* (1952)

*Carmina Burana* (1953)

*Alotria* (1954)

*El hijo Pródigo* (Prodigal Son) (1955)

*Milagro en la alameda* (A World of Fantasy) (1957)

*El Saltimbamqui* (The Acrobat) (1961)

**Further Reading**

(Canepa Guzman)

(Ehrmann)

(Ehrmann, Chile)

(Marks)

(Montecinos)

(Reynoso)

(Uralskaya)