**Åkesson, Birgit Anna Ida (b. 24 March 1908, Malmö, Sweden; d. 24 March 2001, Stockholm, Sweden)**

**Summary**

Birgit Åkesson is considered one of Sweden’s foremost modern choreographers. In the late 1920s and early 1930s she studied at Mary Wigman’s school in Germany. After completing the Wigman course, she found it difficult to stay in Germany because of the rise of fascism, and in 1934 she made her choreographic debut in Paris. Critics described her as an intellectual choreographer and ‘the Picasso of dance,’ due to her use of acrobatic and often angular body postures. Frequently choreographing for theatre and opera, her works at the Swedish Royal Opera during the 1950s and 1960s introduced a modernist dance technique to the classically trained company. In 1963 she co-founded the Choreographic Institute in Stockholm, later renamed the University of Dance and Circus. Åkesson had a keen interest in non-Western culture and she undertook research on traditional dances in African and Asian countries, publishing an account of dances south of the Sahara in her 1983 book *Källvattnets mask* (*Mask of the Spring Water*). In the history of Swedish dance, Åkesson and Birgit Cullberg became known as ‘The Mothers of Modern Dance’.

**Early career**

Birgit Åkesson studied at Mary Wigman’s school in Dresden, Germany between 1929 and 1932. After receiving her certification from the school, she moved to Berlin and worked with the theatre director Max Reinhardt. Her debut as a choreographer took place in Paris in 1934, and critics applauded her solo dances, many of which still showed the influence of Wigman’s expressionism. In 1936 she opened a dance school in Stockholm, offering courses in improvisation, dance gymnastics, pantomime, modern dance, and theatrical dance composition. During the Second World War she spent her time teaching and continuing to develop her own dance technique.

**Major contributions to the field and to modernism**

In her mature works Åkesson rejected Wigman’s expressionist style in favour of abstraction. Several of Åkesson’s early works were danced in silence, but the first work of importance was *Öga: sömn i dröm* (*Eye: sleep in the dream*) to music by Swedish composer Karl-Birger Blomdahl, danced by Åkesson herself and premiered in 1953. This dance was the beginning of a fruitful cooperation between Åkesson and leading composers, poets and visual artists with works performed at the Swedish Royal Opera in Stockholm.

In *Sisyfos* (*Sisyphus*, 1957) she worked together with Blomdahl and the poet Erik Lindegren, who wrote the libretto. The dance was inspired by the work of Dag Hammarskjöld, Secretary-General at the United Nations, and it articulated in a poetic manner human beings’ struggle in finding meaning in a destructive world. Her choreography for Blomdahl’s space-opera *Aniara* (1959) was one of the highlights of her career. One of the solo dances for the female space-pilot Isagel has been referred to as a modernist version of Fokine’s *The Dying Swan* (1907).

In her later career, Åkesson found it interesting to work with dancers from different genres and mix dance styles. These explorations included a televised dance called *Dygnets timmar* (*The Hours of the Day,* 1967) performed by the ballet dancer Erik Bruhn. She also worked with African-American modern jazz dancers Dyane Gray and Georges Mills in *Rytmisk ballad i vit natt* (*Rhythmic ballad in white night*, 1966). Her last choreographies from 1990, *Dagrar (Hues of Light*) and *Höstlöv* (*Autumn Leaves)* were created for Swedish television together with the dancer Chiang Ching, who had studied both traditional Chinese and modern dance.

Åkesson also had a scholarly interest in dance and wrote articles on the subject. In some of them she described the basic principles of her own work. She believed it was imperative that movements should not be used for illustrating a story, and she argued for an aesthetic in which movements could exist on their own accord, often performed in a slow tempo using sculptural body shapes. Her approach to compositional form in her solo work was to make the first movement an emblematic and integral part of the structure of the dance as a whole, an ideal that is most visible in her work *Blå afton* (*Blue Evening,* 1946). These ideals remained in her choreographies, even when she started working with larger mixed media projects for opera and theatre.

**Legacy**

When Åkesson published her book on African dance in 1983, it evoked an interest in her abstract aesthetics by young choreographers. It also led to the production of a documentary by Swedish television, consisting of material from her fieldwork during the late 1960s and 1970s in countries south of the Sahara, and archival footage from her earlier works. The positive reception inspired Åkesson to create her last dances for television and to restage a solo from *Sisyphus* called *Persefones dans* *(Persephone’s Dance),* a dance now considered part of Sweden’s modern dance canon. In 1998 the dance archive in Cologne, Germany produced an exhibition and a book about Åkesson, underscoring her significance not only for Swedish modernism but also for European modernism at mid-century.

**Lena Hammergren**

**Selected Works**

*Blå afton* (*Blue Evening*, 1946)

*Fruktbarhet* (*Fertility,* 1946)

*Movement* (1947)

*Öga: sömn i dröm* (*Eye: Sleep in the Dream,* 1953)

*Minor Seconds, Major Seventh* (1955)

*Sisyfos* (*Sisyphus,* 1957)

*Aniara* (1959)

*Riter* (*Rites,* 1960)

*Spel för åtta* (*Play for eight,* 1962)

*Rytmisk ballad i vit natt* (*Rhythmic Ballad in White Night*, 1966)

*Dygnets timmar* (*The Hours of the Day,* 1967)

*Dagrar / Höstlöv* (*Hues of Light/Autumn Leaves*, 1990)

*Persefones dans* (*Persephone’s Dance,* 1957/1990)

**Artist’s Writings**

Åkesson, B. & Engdahl, H. (1998) *Att ge spår i luften: Föreläsningar, samtal, möten*, Lund: Propexus förlag.

Åkesson, B. (1983). *Källvattnets mask: Om dans i Afrika*, Stockholm: Atlantis.

Åkesson, B. (1994) *Le masque des eaux vives: Danse et chorégraphiques traditionelles d’Afrique noire*, Paris: UNESCO/L’Harmattan Publishers.

Åkesson, B. (2010) *Mask of the Spring Water: Dance as a Source of Culture in Africa*, Dar es Salaam: Mkuki na Nyota Publishers.

**References and Further Reading**

Hall, F. (1953) “Birgit Åkesson: Post-Expressionist Free Dance”, in *An Anatomy of Ballet*, London: Andrew Melrose.

Hammergren, L. (1991) *Form och mening i dansen: En studie av stilbegreppet med en komparativ stilanalys av Mary Wigmans och Birgit Åkessons solodanser*, (diss.), Stockholm: Theatron-serien, Stockholm University.

Peter, F-M. ed. (1998) *Birgit Åkesson: Postmoderner Tanz aus Schweden*, Cologne: Wienand Verlag.

**Paratexts**

<http://www.sk-kultur.de/tanz/akesson/akesson3.htm>

Åkesson in 1934, her dance showing the influence of her Wigman training, photo by Charlotte Rudolph, VG BildKunst, Bonn

<http://www.sk-kultur.de/tanz/akesson/akesson7.htm>

Åkesson most likely in *Movement* (1947), photo German Dance Archive

<http://www.sk-kultur.de/tanz/akesson/akesson10.htm>

Åkesson in *Öga: sömn i dröm ,* photo Hans Hammarskiöld, German Dance Archive

[www.filmarkivet.se/sv/Film/?movieid=511](https://collaborate.northwestern.edu/owa/redir.aspx?C=1TbLDkxO8E2J7blWzVhNnn-n15EVYNAImHfs3JkDLKfWP-DLmN3DhfkPwHRs61zH61Ryv6j4eqw.&URL=http%3a%2f%2fwww.filmarkivet.se%2fsv%2fFilm%2f%3fmovieid%3d511" \t "_blank)  
A Swedish film/television archive, with Åkesson's solo dance Movement (from a broadcasting in 1954)

[www.filmarkivet.se/sv/film/?movieid=44](https://collaborate.northwestern.edu/owa/redir.aspx?C=1TbLDkxO8E2J7blWzVhNnn-n15EVYNAImHfs3JkDLKfWP-DLmN3DhfkPwHRs61zH61Ryv6j4eqw.&URL=http%3a%2f%2fwww.filmarkivet.se%2fsv%2ffilm%2f%3fmovieid%3d44" \t "_blank)  
The same archive, Åkesson's dance Fruktbarhet (1946) in a series of three dances under the label "Tre danser"