**Kraus, Gertrud (1901-1977)**

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**Summary**

Gertrud Kraus, a Jewish dancer, choreographer, and teacher, was a prominent representative of Viennese Ausdruckstanz and later a key figure in establishing modern dance in her new homeland of Israel. She performed her solo recitals on stages in the capitals of Europe and the Middle East with great success, and choreographed for her own dance group and for theatre and opera. Characterized by a search for self-expression that was associated with deep social consciousness and humanism, her works resulted from her profound personal identification with struggles for social justice. Exemplary was the cycle *Songs of the Ghetto,* set to music by Russian-Jewish composer Joseph Achron and performed at the 1930 Dancers Congress in Munich. Although such works brought Kraus international success, the rise of National Socialism and the Nazi threat to Jews and leftists led to her emigration in 1935 to Eretz Yisrael, as the land of Palestine was called by Zionists at the time. Arriving at a time of conscious creation of Hebrew culture, Kraus soon became a dominant figure in the dance scene of the 1930s and 1940s, and she is considered one of the founders of modern dance in Israel.

**File: Kraus-Aria on G String-1920s.jpg**

Figure 1Kraus-Aria on G String-1920s

Source: Picture Archives of the Austrian National Library, Vienna

**Training**

According to her own report, Kraus' engagement in dance was accidental – she studied piano from 1915 to 1920 at the State Academy of Music and Performing Arts in Vienna to be a concert pianist. Her first introduction to dance occurred only after graduation, when she accompanied the modern dance classes given by Elinor Tordis at the Academy. During one class Kraus stunned Tordis and her students when she stood up from behind the piano to perform a solo exercise of her own. She then decided to study dance formally, and after a year and a half she joined the company led by Gertrud Bodenwieser. Kraus then opened a studio in Vienna in 1926 and premiered a concert of her own choreography.

**Major contributions to the Field and to Modernism**

Along with other representatives of Ausdruckstanz, Kraus rejected ballet technique in favour of emotional expression and unique individual design. From the beginning of her career, she presented solos as well as group dances. Her characteristic style gave equal emphasis to gesture and locomotion, incorporated a clear sense of shape and structure, and displayed a striking musicality and theatricality. Her dramatic costumes used rich materials that extended the shapes of the body into space.

Kraus' social awareness found expression in the mass performances she directed with Rudolf Laban, who believed that dances for large groups of amateurs could serve as a substitute for traditional folkdance and renew the social solidarity that had been lost in modern industrial society. In 1930 Kraus worked with Laban on the annual dance parade of the professional unions in Vienna. Three years later she staged the large-scale dance drama *Eine Stadt Wartet (A City Waits*), to music by Marcel Rubin on an open-air stage. The work depicts a village youth (performed by Kraus) who ‘encounters the idle rich as well as homeless beggars and oppressed workers. The bodies of the dancers became the city, their arm positions suggesting steeples and roofs. [The work] included Kraus’s own protest against the “demon machine,” a scene in which dancers imitated pistons and cogwheels. But the work ended affirmatively, to suggest that progress remained possible’ (Anderson 93). Although the fascist subtext of mass dance was realized by Laban’s later works, for Kraus the work expressed her socialist sympathies. This was her last work in Vienna, for it took place, coincidentally, on the very day Hitler was elected Chancellor of Germany.

Despite her interest in mass and group choreography, the solo remained Kraus’s primary form of expression. Similar to works by her German contemporaries Laban, Mary Wigman, Kurt Jooss, and Harald Kreutzberg, Kraus’s solos embodied social and philosophical ideas and commentary on her time and place. The *Unknown Warrior* (1920s) pays tribute to a youth dying in the battlefield, perhaps an allusion to the massive losses of the First World War. In another well-known solo, *The Weary Death* (1926, to music by Franz Salmhofer), Kraus danced the figure of Death costumed in a purple robe with one bare arm, using pale mask-like make up on her face. Her portrait of Death, weary from years of slaughter, refused to continue his work, in contrast to Kurt Jooss’s personification of Death in *The Green Table* (1932). In a dance suite of Biblical figures, also from the 1920s, Kraus presented portraits of strong women such as *Judith, Ruth,* and *Hagar*.

File: Kraus-Weary Death-1929.jpg

Figure 2Gertrud Kraus, The Weary Death, 1926, photographer unknown.

Source: Picture Archives of the Austrian National Library, Vienna

Kraus designed movement for theatre and opera as well. She directed the movement, in part, for Nikolaus Lenau’s *Faust* (1926, directed by Franz Wenzler, Wiener Kammerspiele Theater) and for Sholem Asch’s historical tragedy *Shabtai Tzvi* (1926, directed by Alex Stein, the Yiddish theatre the Vilna Troupe). Among the prominent operas she choreographed was Marc Lavry’s *Dan HaShomer* (*Dan the Guard*, 1945, Palestine Folk Opera), the first opera composed in Hebrew.

Teaching dance was another significant field for Kraus during the course of her artistic career. Naomi Aleskowsky, Kraus’ leading student and dancer, describes a typical dance class: ‘The dance class focused on a movement theme that she [Kraus] has developed with all the parts of the body in its entirety. Then she elaborated it musically, until it became an extended movement phrase’ (Eshel 64). The two approaches employed were movement improvisation stemming from an association of an emotion, being worked out until it was realized as a shape in space. The other approach started from improvisation or an abstract form leading to an evocative artistic idea. However, whether Kraus began from within, the emotion, or from without, the formal manner, form and dynamics shaped the atmosphere and movement of her creations. Her dance classes resembled a laboratory where students experienced movement, improvisation and composition, and the integration with the arts. The classes did not rely on a systemic movement technique but rather on creativity, and the students’ movements was accompanied by beautiful music Kraus herself played.

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In 1931, and again in 1933, Kraus toured Palestine and Egypt, and in 1935 she decided to immigrate to Palestine, leaving behind her successful career in Europe. Her newly found homeland presented her with radically different political, cultural, and geographic conditions, and as a result she could not replicate her Viennese works from the 1930s. Yet she persevered and changed her dances and style to accommodate her new circumstances. Her most significant contribution to theatrical dance in Eretz Yisrael were her works with her dance group, performed frequently with the Palestine Orchestra from 1937 to 1940, conducted by Lavry. From 1941 to 1947 Kraus joined the Palestine Folk Opera, where she had to create dances adjusted to both the operas' scores and audience tastes.

Despite the difficult conditions created by the Second World War and the Jewish struggle for independence in Palestine, her all-female troupe evoked admiration and excitement. Well-known dances from this period include the powerful duet ‘Death and the Maiden’ from *Dream of a Creator,* depicting the vision of Franz Schubert’s life struggles (1938, set to Schubert’s Unfinished Symphony). In this story about youth and destruction Death looms over the Girl who tries to escape, but eventually she succumbs to its power and is led to its realm; *Shirat Artzi* (*The Poetry of my Land*, 1939, set to Lavry’s 1937 symphonic poem *Emek*),presented pictures of the pioneers' life in Eretz Yisrael, ending with the Horah dance*;* and *Davka* (*In Spite*, 1944, set to music composed by Kraus), a theatrical dance for six men holding daggers that was presented at the at the first folklore festival at Kibbutz Daliah. The masculine and militant dance was performed at time when the news of the Holocaust reached the Jewish settlement, emphasizing the wish to dance in spite of all difficulties (Manor 73).

In 1948 Kraus was invited to teach dance and perform at the Brandeis Camp institute, California. There she was exposed to American modern dance and to the choreographers Agnes De Mille, Antony Tudor, and Martha Graham. This encounter with a dance style motivated by formal rather than emotional concerns left Kraus in an artistic crisis. At the same time the influence of European modern dance on Israeli dance was in decline. Upon returning to Israel, Kraus founded the Israel Ballet Theater (1950-1951) with the goal to create a sustainable platform for artistic dance. A year later Kraus met Jerome Robbins, the American choreographer who was considering immigration to Israel, and both planned performances of their choreography. Around this time Talley Beatty, another American choreographer touring Israel with his company, created for Ballet Theater a dance that brought together, for the first time in Israel, the influences of European and American modern dance. Beatty’s dramatic dance *Fire in the Hills* (set to original music by Chanan [Hans] Winternitz for piano and drums), about an Arab attack on a new Jewish settlement in Eretz Yisrael, was the highlight of the company’s second and last program. However, although the company attracted the best of Israeli dancers and presented a new dance style, the reviews were unenthusiastic. In addition, Robbins’ decision to leave Israel and a lack of financial support all hastened the closure of the company.

File: Kraus-Fire-1940s-Himelreich.jpg

Figure 3Gertrud Kraus, Fire 1940s. Photographer: Alfons Himelreich.

Source: Picture Archives of the Austrian National Library, Vienna

In the 1940s Kraus stopped dancing, but her last choreographic work was *Samson Oratorio* by Handel created in 1955 in the celebrations for the new city of Ashkelon. In 1962 Kraus was appointed professor at the Dance Department at the Jerusalem Rubin Academy, and turned her creative energies to creating visual art - sculpture, drawing, and oil painting. In 1968 Kraus was awarded the Israel Prize for Lifetime Achievement.

**Legacy**

More than a decade after Kraus’ death, Aleskowsky reconstructed three of her works for the1988 Israel Festival: Batsheva Dance Company performed *Allegro Barbaro* (1938), the Kibbutzim Dance Company performed *Carousel* (1942), and Moshe Efrati’s Kol Demama Dance Company performed *Schubert’s Dream* (1944)—but the dances did not remain in repertoire. In 1990 Aleskowsky reconstructed *The Poet’s Dream* (1943) for the Kibbutzim Dance Company, and the company performed again *Carousel* and *Schubert’s Dream* in Vienna at the Tanz’90 festival on a program called Expressionismus.

Kraus’s legacy thus lies not in her specific dances but rather in the many dancers, choreographers, and artists she influenced. Kraus knew how to develop the creative talent of others. During her years in Vienna, she inspired Mia Slavenska, Manon Chafour (also known as Manon Erfurt), Hans Wiener (later Jan Veen), Fritz Berger (later Fred Berk), Katya Delakova, Claudia Vall, and Stella Mann. In Palestine and later Israel, three generations of dancers passed through her studio (1935-1971), and even when she stopped creating, many young dancers and creators came to her doorstep to hear her opinion and learn from her experience. Among them were Ze’eva Cohen, Aleskowsky, Hilde Kesten, Yonatan Karmon, and Zvi Gotheiner.

**List of Selected Works**

*Guignol* (the 1920s)

*Vodka* (1920s)

*The Unknown Warrior* (1920s)

*Aria on a G String* (1920s)

*The Diplomat* (1920s)

*Judith* (1920s)

*Ruth* (1920s)

*Hagar* (1920s)

*The Strange Guest* (1926)

*The Beast* (1926)

*The Weary Death* (*Der Müde Tod*, 1926)

*Faust* (theater, 1926)

*Shabtai Tzvi* (theater, 1926)

*Songs of the Ghett*o: *For Whom? Lullaby, Song of Songs, Hassidic Dance* (1930)

*Jewish Boy* (1930)

*Lamentation* (1930)

*Jewish Girl* (1932)

*Hasidic Dance* (1932)

*A City Waits* (Ein Stadt Wartet, 1933)

*Tree* (1936)

*Sun* (1936)

*Allegro Barbaro* (1938)

*Dream of a Creator* (1938)

*Dances of Tranquility Suite*: *Song at Evening*, *Night*, *Sun* (1938)

*The Poetry of My Land* (*Shirat Artzi*, 1939*)*

*Horah* (1941)

*Carousel* (1942)

*The Golden Cage* (opera, 1943)

*The Poet’s Dream* (1943)

*Davka* (1944)

*Schubert’s Dream* (1944)

*Dan the Guard* (opera, 1945)

*Samson Oratorio* (1955)

**Further Reading**

(Anderson)

(Eshel)

(Himmelreich)

(Ingber, The Gamin Speaks -- An Interview with Gertrud Kraus)

(Ingber, Identity Peddlers and the Influence of Gertrud Kraus)

(Kraus)

(Manor)

(Manor, Influenced and Influencing -- Dancing in Foreign Lands)

(Sorell)

(Vernon-Warren)

(Galili)

(Yad Gertrud Kraus)

(Hartel)

(G. Kraus)

(G. Kraus, Gertrud Kraus Teaches at the Rubin Academy, Jerusalem)