**Kreutzberg, Harald (1902-1968)**

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## Summary

Harald Kreutzberg was among the most widely known German dancers from the mid-1930s through the early 1960s, and he was certainly the most famous German male dancer of the twentieth century. Though he achieved worldwide recognition as a result of his partnership with the German dancer Yvonne Georgi in the late 1920s, his fame expanded and endured entirely through his solo dance concerts around the world over four decades. Early in his career, Kreutzberg aligned himself to an expressionistic approach to dance, and he remained faithful to the expressionistic aesthetic until the end of his life. But his expressionism, rooted in a highly theatrical mode of performance, always accommodated his acute awareness of what pleased audiences whenever and wherever he performed. He was important in moving modern dance to a global, popular level of appreciation.

## Career

Born at the time of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Kreutzberg consistently identified himself as Austrian, although he grew up in the German cities of Breslau and Dresden. His father was a businessman and his mother, a teacher, came from an affluent family. He made his first theatrical appearance at the age of seven, in an operetta staged in Breslau. About the same time, 1909 or 1910, he began to study ballet under Emma Grondona, ballet director for the Leipzig Municipal Theatre. But by 1919, he was enrolled at the *Kunstgewerbeschule* (School of Arts and Crafts) in Dresden to study fashion illustration, and in 1921, while he worked as an illustrator for a Dresden clothes retailer, he attended a lay course in dance offered by Mary Wigman’s school. Wigman invited him to become a regular student at her school. His first public performance as a solo dancer and as a choreographer was, however, with the Ellen Petz-Kainer Ballet Company in Dresden in 1921.

When Max Terpis, one of his fellow students in Wigman’s school, received appointment as ballet master in Hannover, he invited Kreutzberg and another Wigman student, Yvonne Georgi, to join the ensemble in 1923. The Hannover production environment was quite favourable to modernist innovation in dance, with choreography developed in relation to newly composed music. Kreutzberg performed solos within ensemble productions but began collaborating with different women, including Georgi, to produce chamber concerts that featured solo dances and duets. In 1924, when Terpis received appointment as ballet master for the Berlin Staatsoper (State Opera), Kreutzberg followed him. In Berlin, Kreutzberg received his first serious acclaim as a dancer for his solo performance in Terpis’s ballet *Die Nächtlichen (The Nocturnal Ones)* (1924), with music by Egon Wellesz. Nevertheless, he found the creative environment in Hannover more congenial, so he returned there in 1926.

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Figure Kreutzberg in *Apocalyptic Angel*, c. 1929, photo by Siegfried Enkelmann

Source: <http://www.sk-kultur.de/tanz/kreutzberg/kreutzberg4.htm>

In Berlin, however, Kreutzberg had begun working with the composer Friedrich Wilckens on the Terpis ballet *Don Morte* *(Count Death)* (1926). From then on, Wilckens was Kreutzberg’s life-long partner, manager, accompanist, and composer. It was apparently for *Don Morte* that Kreutzberg shaved his head; the bald head was for the rest of his life a distinctive feature of his identity. In Hannover, he developed an intensely creative partnership with Yvonne Georgi. The period (1926-1931) of this partnership was perhaps the most inventive and imaginative of his career. He and Georgi experimented with vigorously modernistic themes, movements, music, costumes, scenographic effects, and concert structures. Though they danced a few remarkable duets in the concerts, particularly *Persisches Lied (Persian Song)* (1927) and *Fahnentanz* *(Flag Dance)* (1929), their immense popularity rested on the stark contrast between their styles of solo dance.

In 1927, Kreutzberg also began working with the stage director Max Reinhardt on a production in Dortmund of *Das Mirakel* (*The Miracle*). This led to an invitation from Reinhardt to appear as Puck in the director’s Salzburg Festival production of *Midsummer Night’s Dream*, which then went to New York the following year. In New York, Kreutzberg produced a concert in partnership with Tilly Losch, with whom he had worked in Vienna. By then he was aware that he would not find a stronger dance partner than Georgi. Not only did he produce duo concerts with Georgi, he was a soloist in several Hannover ballets choreographed by Georgi, which enabled him to achieve an appointment in 1929 as ballet director at Leipzig. Although he choreographed several ballets in Leipzig and Berlin and continued to perform in numerous other ballets, theatre and opera productions, and screen dances, Kreutzberg never distinguished himself as a choreographer of ensemble dances. His art reached its greatest manifestation through solo dances, either of his own choreography or that of others.

In 1929, Kreutzberg and Georgi embarked on the first of three enormously popular concert tours of the United States within the space of two years. The tours reached across the American continent and were so successful in awakening American enthusiasm for German modern dance that American modern dancers began to feel a competitive stress that required them to pursue a dance aesthetic that was uniquely or authentically American. But at the end of the third tour, the Kreutzberg-Georgi partnership dissolved. Georgi’s ambitions were much larger than Kreutzberg’s: despite her dark, captivating beauty, she was no longer deeply interested in dancing herself and wanted instead to choreograph large-scale ensemble pieces and move toward a synthesis of ballet and modern dance, which her appointment as ballet mistress at Hannover allowed her to do. Kreutzberg never wanted to leave the stage; he always wanted to perform solo, and his artistic ambitions were fulfilled only when he performed solo.

Without Georgi, Kreutzberg enjoyed escalating success with his solo dance concerts. His popularity in the United States, where he toured every year from 1931 to 1937 and again in 1938, was perhaps even greater than it was in Germany and Austria. Until 1937, he had given more concerts in the USA than he had in Germany and Austria. In 1933, he began a partnership with the American dancer Ruth Page, and their brief collaboration (1933-1934) proved almost as successful as his partnership with Georgi. Unlike Georgi, Page projected a happy, mercurial temperament that supplemented rather than contrasted with Kreutzberg’s emphatically affable persona, and in 1965, Page cast him as Death in her own Chicago production of Carl Orff’s *Carmina Burana*.

When the Nazis assumed power in Germany in 1933, Kreutzberg continued to enjoy great success. Although he was never a member of the Nazi Party and although he never faced serious inquiry by the Allies after the Second World War, he nevertheless was much more than compliant in his relations with the regime. The Foreign Ministry sponsored numerous tours to other countries, and he was an occasional performer in operas and theatre pieces supported by the state. In 1936, he performed a ‘Weapon Dance’ in conjunction with the Berlin *Olympische Jugend* (*Olympic Youth*) dance festival sponsored by the Nazis with choreography by Hanns Niedecken-Gebhard, a master of Nazi mass spectacles, with whom Kreutzberg had worked in Hannover and Göttingen as part of the innovative Handel oratorio revivals that took place there in the 1920s. With Niedecken-Gebhard, he also played the role of Pan in another mass spectacle, *Triumph des Lebens* (*Triumph of Life*, 1939), in Munich.

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Figure Kreutzberg in *The First Man*, 1939, photo by Siegfried Enkelmann

Source: <http://www.sk-kultur.de/tanz/kreutzberg/kreutzberg5.htm>

Kreutzberg’s solo dances did not contain any overt Nazi propaganda. His expressionistic style of dancing remained largely unchanged from what it was during the Weimar Republic. But most historians acknowledge that when his partnership with Georgi ended, his dancing became less innovative, less daring, less complex, and more cheerful, more devoted to spirtual and mythic themes, and more removed from any relation to the world outside the theatre. He found appreciative audiences wherever he performed—Japan and China (1934), Eastern Europe (1937-1938), The Netherlands (1939-1941) and many other countries—but he functioned more as an entertainer than as an artist with the power to revise perception of the body’s capacity to move or signify.

The Nazis urged him to develop a heroic dance persona, and he explored this idea in several pieces, but audiences responded most enthusiastically to his embodiment of mischievious or wily figures from German mythology, most notably *Till Eulenspiegel* (1927/1932/1940). In 1942, Kreutzberg performed memorably in G.W. Pabst’s film *Paracelsus*, in which, as the acrobatic jester Fliegenbein, his feverish, highly expressionistic dance signifies the character’s succumbing to the plague from which Paracelsus will save him. Though the dance is quite gripping, the film clearly identifies the expressionistic approach to movement with a contagious, severely diseased condition. In this way the film aligned with the Nazi condemnation of expressionism, even while borrowing and adapting stylistic devices from the artistic movement.

The end of the war produced no fundamental change in his approach to dance. Kreutzberg resumed performances as soon as he was permitted in 1945, appearing in Salzburg and Innsbruck, Austria. By 1946 he was touring in Germany, Switzerland, and Hungary, and by 1947 he was giving concerts in the USA. International engagements proliferated, and soon he began the first of three (1948, 1950, 1952) hugely suuccessful tours of Latin American countries. Many pieces he performed had been part of his repertoire during the Third Reich, and his new pieces tended to follow the mythic-symbolic style of dance he perfected during the 1930s. In 1946, he began conducting every summer until 1956 a course in dance in Bern, Switzerland. From the mid-1950s until the mid-1960s, he continued to tour internationally and accept numerous guest appearances in theatrical productions. He was widely honored, for his modernism adapted well to the postwar environment. He represented a benign continuity with the prewar glories of expressionistic dance without evoking the controversies and disturbing emotional shadows embedded in the work of other veterans of that astonishing era, such as Mary Wigman, Yvonne Georgi, and Dore Hoyer. He was visiting Spain when he suffered a heart attack that put him into a coma; he died three weeks later in Bern on April 25, 1968.

## Contributions to Field and to Modernism

Kreutzberg was an important modernist for several reasons. First, he showed the viability of the solo dance concert for decades after most dancers had lost all confidence in the format. After the death of Anna Pavlova in 1931 and the retirement of Niddy Impekoven in 1934, no other dancer demonstrated the vitality of the solo dance concert as successfully and durably as Kreutzberg. It is a heroic challenge for a solo dancer to sustain the engagement of an audience for an entire concert, and no one since Kreutzberg has come close to matching his achievement in this format. Second, Kreutzberg showed that a man could enjoy a prosperous life as a modern dancer who was not dependent on an appointment to a theatre or association with a school. Indeed, he demonstrated that modern dance was not dependent on women to secure an audience or develop themes. His major dances invariably present a male figure who seems supremely alone, uncircumscribed by affiliation with any group, institution, setting, or sector of reality. Third, he developed a modernist approach to dance that accommodated radically different political and cultural contexts, from the turbulent era of the Weimar Republic to the totalitarian world of the Third Reich to the precariously liberal and affluent early decades of the Cold War era.

Kreutzberg’s dance aesthetic was intensely theatrical; he always embodied a character. He delighted in the use of masks, spotlights, bizarre costumes, flowing robes and capes, and eccentric ornamentation. His choreography relied heavily on acrobatic movement and often grotesque gestures. He was especially effective at revealing the expressive power of his hands and fingers. His athleticism imbued his dances with an acceptable male aura, even when he presented a frankly androgynous persona. While he could perform great leaps and execute complicated coordinations of steps and arm movements, especially in relation to comic effects, perhaps his most engaging movements consisted of turnings, twistings, gyrations, or rotations in which intense energy seemed to spiral out of or into him, causing him to rise upward or downward to the floor. He was more enthusiastic about contemporary music earlier in his career than later; after 1935 he consistently used music by long dead composers and almost no music written at the time he constructed a dance. But for many pieces he did use music composed by Wilckens, who wrote the music after he saw what the dance looked like.

Kreutzberg’s aesthetic appealed to very different historical eras and cultures because he presented a small, enclosed world that existed only in the theatre. He scrupulously avoided dances that made concrete references to social realities or complex emotional conditions; rather, he favored symbolic incarnations of mythic figures and archetypes from a remote eternal realm that intersected with popular consciousness. Even in his most ambitious and serious dances, like *Der ewige Kreis* *(The Eternal Circle)* (1938) and *Der Engel Luzifer* *(The Angel Lucifer)* (1950), he presented Death as a mysterious but friendly figure, not frightening or demonic but somewhat seductive, a kind of reliable guide to a vast, encroaching zone of darkness. But the charm that defined most of his dances derived from his well-developed sense of humour, his continual delight in himself, his imperturbable optimism, his affability, his playfulness, his eagerness to please, his pleasure in clowning, and his resolute refusal to take himself seriously. When he worked with Georgi, some critics observed that his dances seemed more feminine than hers, and in the fascinating *Fahnentanz* duet, his costume and movements equalled and perhaps even exceeded hers as embodiments of femininity, as if he were competing with her in determining how to construct it. But from the mid-1930s onward, Kreutzberg eliminated such daring sexual ambiguity from his dances. In doing so, he greatly compromised or suppressed a large measure of his choreographic imagination and his capacity to contribute to modernism. He is therefore also important in revealing the depth of sacrifice the male dance artist had to make to achieve high status in the modern dance culture and thrive alone within it.

## Selected Works

**Solo Dances**

Kreutzberg created around 125 solo dances. The identification of which dances are major will never be entirely accurate, because the documention of his work is incomplete or inadequate to determining the qualities or impact of many individual pieces. He revised or retitled many of his dances, and some works, such *Aus einem alten Kalender*, are suites consisting of three or four separate dance solos in different moods.

*Walzer-Groteske* *(Grotesque Waltzes)* (1923)

*Aufruhr* *(Uproar)* (1925)

*Geistliche Vision* *(Spiritual Visions)* (1926)

*Drei irre Gestalten* *(Three Mad Figures)* (1926)

*Apokalyptische Engel* *(Apocalyptic Angel)* (1927)

*Engel des jüngsten Gericht* *(Angel of the Last Judgment)* (1928)

*Tanz des Hofnarren* *(Dance of the Court Fool)* (1929)

*Kriegerischer Tanz* *(Warrior Dance)* (1929)

*Königstanz* *(King’s Dance)* (1930)

*Der Tanz des Henkers* *(Hangman’s Dance)* (1931)

*Till Eulenspiegel* (1932 revised from 1927)

*Gesänge des Todes* *(Songs of Death)* (1934)

*Gesang der Nacht* *(Song of the Night)* (1935)

*Landsknechtslied* *(Peasant’s Song)* (1935)

*Vagabundenlied (Vagabond Song)* (1936)

*Zwei Gestalten des Todes* *(Two Figures of Death)* (1936)

*Orests Verdammnis* *(The Damnation of Orestes)* (1937)

*Der ewige Kreis* *(The Eternal Circle)* (1938)

*Der trunkene Fischer* *(The Drunken Fisherman)* (1939)

*Der erste Mensch (The First Man)* (1939)

*Der verliebte Gärtner* *(The Gardener in Love)* (1940)

*Li-Tai-Pe* (1941)

*Aus einem alten Kalendar* *(From an Old Calendar)* (1942)

*Gute Laune* *(Good Humor)* (1944)

*Böser Traum* *(Evil Dream)* (1945)

*Teufelsbeschwörun*g *(Devil’s Oath)* (1946)

*Don Juans Ende* *(The End of Don Juan)* (1948)

*Der Engel Luzifer* *(The Angel Lucifer)* (1950)

*Wächter des Schattenreichs* *(Guardians of the Shadow Realm)* (1951)

*Divertimento im Stil der Commedia dell’arte* *(Divertimento in the Style of Commedia dell’arte)* (1952)

*1600-1700-1800-1900* (1953)

*Das Stundenglas* *(The Hour Glass)* (1954)

*Wanderer-Phantasie* *(The Wander’s Fantasy)* (1957)

*Brot* *(Bread)* (1959)

**Duo Dances with Yvonne Georgi**

Kreutzberg developed pair dances with a variety of female partners, including Elinor Obstfelder (1922), Melanie Furstenberg (1923), Frida Holst (1923-1924), Aenne Osborn (1924-1925), Elisabeth Grube (1925-1926), Tilly Losch (1928), and Ruth Page (1933-1934), and he produced a couple of pair dances with male partners, Max Terpis (1923) and Rudolf Kölling (1924). But his major achievement in this format was his collaboration with Yvonne Georgi (1924-1931), and all the works listed here were created in collaboration with Georgi.

*Marsch* *(March)* (1926)

*Grave* (1926)

*Tanzpolonaise* *(Dance Polonaise)* (1927)

*Gavotte* (1927)

*Baskische Tänze* *(Basque Dances)* (1927)

*Variationen* *(Variations)* (1927)

*Persisches Lied* *(Persian Song)* (1927, a revision, with music by Erik Satie, of the pair’s first version from 1924, *Persisches Ballett*, with music by Egon Wellesz)

*Romantische Tanzszene* *(Romantic Dance Scene)* (1928)

*Polozwezkische Tanzszenen* *(Polovtsian Dance Scenes)* (1928)

*Kujawiak* (1928)

*Zwei spanische Festtänze* *(Two Spanish Festival Dances)* (1928)

*Prelude* (1928)

*Böse Träume* *(Evil Dreams)* (1929)

*Fahnentanz* *(Flag Dance)* (1929)

*Bäuerlicher Tanz* *(Farmer’s Dance)* (1929)

*Potpourri* (1929)

*Walzer* *(Waltzes)* (1929)

*Pavane* (1930)

*Hymn* (1930)

*Playing* (1931)

*Miniatures in the Spanish Style* (1931)

*Spielerei* *(Games)* (1931)

*Spanische Tänze–aus Carmen* *(Spanish Dances from Carmen)* (1931)

*Rosen aus dem Süden* *(Roses from the South)* (1931)

**Group Choreography**

From 1923 until 1966, Kreutzberg performed dance roles in numerous ballets, operas, operettas, and plays choreographed and directed by others. Most of his group choreography was for dance scenes in plays, operas, or operettas directed by others. This list identifies his major contributions as a choreographer of ensembles.

*Jedermann* *(Everyman)* (1927)

*A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (1927)

*Robes, Pierre & Co.—Kriminal-Tanz-Sketch* *(Robes, Pierre & Co.—Criminal Dance Sketch)* (1928, with Yvonne Georgi as co-choreographer)

*Schöpfung der Welt* *(Creation of the World)* (1929)

*Karusselfahrt* *(Carousel Ride)* (1929)

*Petruschka* (1929)

*Planeten* *(The Planets)* (1931)

*Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* *(The Master Singers of Nuremberg)* (1933/1957)

*Olympische Jugend* *(Olympic Youth)* (1936)

*Moira ton Mykenon* *(The Fate of Mycenae)* (1956)

*Hoffmanns Erzählungen* *(The Tales of Hoffmann)* (1961)

*Berner Totentanz* *(The Bern Dance of Death)* (1962)

**Film and Television Appearances**

*Paracelsus* (1942)

*Walpurgisnacht* (1953)

*Labyrinth* (1959)

*Tanz. Ein Film um die Muse Terpsichore* (1960)

*Glück, Tod und Traum* (1961, Austrian TV, ballet by Yvonne Georgi)

*Harald Kreutzberg—Erinnerungen eines Tänzers* (1961, West German TV)

*Harald Kreutzberg—Der ewige Kreis* (1961, West German TV)

*Harald Kreutzberg—Bilder und Tänzer* (1961, West German TV)

*Es war getanzter Traum. Harald Kreuzberg, Tänze und Gestalten* (1983, Austrian-West German TV)

*Harald Kreuztzberg: Der ewige Kreis und Walpurgisnacht* (1989, TransTel TV)

*Harald Kreutzberg: Tänzer und Tanzpoet*. (1990, TransTel TV)

## Archival Sources

The great majority of archival material on Harald Kreutzberg is deposited in the Deutsches Tanzarchiv Köln. The New York Public Library Dance Collection contains about 200 items related to Kreutzberg, including correspondence with various dance personalities and four short films made between 1949 and 1954. The Library of Congress contains photographs by Arnold Genthe of Kreutzberg and Tilly Losch performing together in New York in 1928. The Getty Museum in Malibu, California contains photographs of Kreutzberg taken by the Americans Edward Weston and Arnold Genthe as well as photographs taken by several notable European photographers, including Lotte Jacobi, Madam D’Ora and Herbert List.

**Further Reading**

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