**Wigman, Mary** (1886-1973) aka Karoline Sofie Marie Wiegmann

Hedwig Müller

## Summary

Mary Wigman was among the most important dancers and choreographers in Germany during the first half of the twentieth century. As a modernist, she sought out new artistic directions and radically rejected dance conventions and traditions, particularly classical ballet. Together with her teacher Rudolf Laban, she pioneered German Ausdruckstanz. She initially developed her style as a solo dancer, then as a basis for group choreography and as a pedagogical method. Wigman believed that a dance should be derived from subjective feeling and that a dancer must seek an individual form for his or her dance expression. Between 1920 and 1942, she ran a Dresden-based dance school that was the focal point for modern dance in Europe. From there, her artistic influence spread to many countries across Europe and the Americas, even reaching as far as Japan. Her choreographic career peaked between 1920 and the onset of the Nazi dictatorship in 1933. During the Nazi years, she continued to choreograph and perform, ending her career as a dancer in 1942, when she closed her school in Dresden. She then focused on teaching, first in Leipzig until 1948 and then in West Berlin until 1967. She still did choreograph on occasion, although it was her pedagogy that impacted later generations, in particular students who later became leading figures within Tanztheater (‘dance theatre’), a German movement that in turn became globally influential.

## Training and Early Career

Mary Wigman's path toward dance was not a straight one. She grew up in an upper-middle-class family that considered marriage and motherhood the proper purposes for a woman's life. Her rebellion against the narrow moral and social conventions of her upbringing and her search for a medium with which she could express her own emotions led Wigman to dance. Classical ballet, however, was completely alien to her because the dancers had to obey a prescribed technique. At that time, there was no established modern dance movement in Germany. Although Isadora Duncan had started her dance revolution in Germany with her first performances in 1902, Wigman knew nothing about it in Hanover. Later, after attending one of Duncan's performances, Wigman rejected her style of dance: she thought it was defined far too much by external influences such as the experience of nature or musical impressions.

In 1910, Wigman began an apprenticeship as a gymnastics teacher at Émile Jaques-Dalcroze's Institute in Hellerau near Dresden. As a music educator, Dalcroze was convinced that people who felt rhythmic harmony in their bodies and who concerned themselves with artistic beauty would not only become good musicians but would also live their everyday lives according to the ancient Greek model unifying body, soul, and mind. His ideas about movement were certainly very closely tied to musical rhythm. Wigman regarded this as a submission of the body to another art form, so she began working with improvised movement without musical inspiration or accompaniment. That was the start of what she later called ‘absolute’ dance, a dance that was free of conventional narration or virtuosity, obeying only the internal experience and the corporeal rhythm of the dancer and searching for the new and the unknown.

On the recommendation of her friend the expressionist painter Emil Nolde, Wigman turned to Rudolf Laban. In the years before the First World War he had founded his Schule für Bewegungskunst (literally ‘School for Movement Art’) in Munich; in the summer the school took up residence on Monte Verità in Ascona, Switzerland, home to a well-known colony dedicated to life reform. Avant-gardists with various worldviews had gathered there to live their lives close to nature, free from social constraints and far from large industrialized cities, and to dedicate themselves to artistic, philosophical, and political ideas for the improvement of human life.

Wigman worked with Laban for seven years. He had conducted mathematically precise studies on the human body's natural movement abilities and the dancer's relationship to space, and he outlined the theoretical foundations for his movement analysis in a series of books. It was with Laban that Wigman first experienced the freedom of her body. Dance became her instrument and she used it to express what moved her internally through external movement. Accordingly, she primarily choreographed solo dances for herself. During the early years of her career, her feelings found expression not in lyrical and gentle forms but rather through fierce, violent, raging, kicking, twisted, and distorted movements—as evidenced in her first solo titled *Hexentanz* (*Witch Dance*), which premiered in Munich in 1914.

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Caption: Mary Wigman, *Witch Dance II*, 1926, Photograph: Charlotte Rudolph, courtesy of the German Dance Archive, Cologne.

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During the First World War, Wigman lived in Zurich, where Laban had moved his school. There she encountered the Dada movement, whose radical rejection of all traditions as well as formal or artistic hierarchies quite closely matched her own goal of a free dance. In 1919, Mary Wigman returned to Germany, in 1920 she opened her own school in Dresden, and in 1921 she founded her first dance troupe, whose members included Hanya Holm and Gret Palucca. She never formulated a particular dance technique but rather created a pedagogy by which students were to learn to find individual forms of movement attune to their own psychological perceptions.

## Major Contributions to the Field and to Modernism

If Laban represented the part of Ausdruckstanz that philosophized and systematized movement, then Mary Wigman represented its choreographic side. She was interested in the individualistic aspect of the new movement culture. For her, individual freedom meant the freedom to express one's subjective perception of the world and one's own mind. In 1923, she wrote, ‘We dance the changes and shifts of emotional states as they occur in their particular way in each individual and as they become, in the language of dance, the mirror of the person, the most immediate symbol of all living existence’ (Wigman 1923). This was a perspective that linked her choreographic and pedagogic work with other modernist currents, above all with expressionism.Wigman's philosophy of life was greatly influenced by Friedrich Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and by the idea of a fated cycle of eternal death and rebirth.

At the center of Mary Wigman's dance and pedagogy were attention to one's own personality and experiencing one's own body. In a programmatic text on the development of dancing, she wrote, ‘Compulsive searching, pushing for expression without regard for content or shape, expression for its own sake. Randomness, chaos, intoxication of the body itself, which is felt, experienced, loved, and exaggerated’ (Wigman, nd). For Wigman, these were preconditions for any expression in dance. Thus her dance fulfilled the need for corporeal experience and expression felt by many people in the 1920s. It was primarily young women who felt drawn to Mary Wigman's dance. While men like Harald Kreutzberg also came to study with her, Wigman's emphasis on a self-determined, independent understanding of the body made her a role model for young women of that time. This also applied to her professional life given that she, as a woman with a school that sometimes included eleven locations, ran her own large business.

Mary Wigman's dance explicitly demanded taking oneself seriously. For her, the conflict with one's own person was the search for a new self-conception both as a dancer and as a woman. She used movements that society regarded as masculine, such as powerfully dynamic movements. In so doing, she liberated dance from its standardized gender prescriptions and turned against the compulsory heterosexuality that had characterized classical ballet. For that reason, the focus on existential human feelings, experiences, and emotions that provided the content for the dances of Mary Wigman and her students was an emancipatory act. Her work was the genuine foundation for Ausdruckstanz.

Music had little importance for Wigman's dance. Whereas Isadora Duncan had regarded music as reflecting natural structures and sounds that the dancer then embodied, Mary Wigman occasionally danced with no music at all. She only rarely used existing compositions; from her Dresden period on, she often had the pianist who worked at her school compose the music only after the choreography was finished. She also frequently used ‘noise music’ accompaniment with gongs and drums, which she also used for improvisation and teaching.

Her dances came about as improvisations and meditations in which she penetrated elementary feelings. Wigman particularly molded the dark corners of the psyche: fear, desperation, conflict, the strange, the superhuman, the demonic. The inner impulse would lead to dance-like movements commensurate with those feelings. For her, dancing and choreography were not rational processes but rather led by the dynamics of a psycho-corporeal experience.

Wigman did not regard her dancing female body as virtuous and sacred in the way that Duncan did, but rather saw the body as natural, even primitive. Regarding the creation of her best-known dance, the second *Hexentanz* (1926), she wrote:

Sometimes at night I slipped into the studio and worked myself up into a rhythmic intoxication in order to come closer to the slowly stirring character. … When, one night, I returned to my room utterly agitated, I looked into the mirror by chance. What it reflected was the image of one possessed, wild and dissolute, repelling and fascinating. The hair unkempt, the eyes deep in their sockets, the nightgown shifted about which made the body appear almost shapeless: there she was – the witch – the earth-bound creature with her unrestrained, naked instincts, with her insatiable lust for life, beast and woman at one and the same time.

It was wonderful to abandon oneself to the craving for evil, to imbibe the powers which usually dared to stir only weakly beneath one’s civilized surface. (Wigman, 1966, 40-41).

However, a dance was not yet completed with the discovery of irrational movement. The dance only achieved its final form and stage-readiness in the process of rationally reflexive structuring, as Wigman indicated in her maxim ‘Without ecstasy, no dance; without form, no dance’(qtd. in Bach 1933, 19). For Wigman, only conscious choreographic treatment could transform a dance from merely expressing the individual dancer's personality into an existential expression that could apply to everyone.

Along with what were known as ‘demonic’ dances in which movements were directed toward the floor and the lower part of the room dominated, Wigman also choreographed feelings of pathos-infused solemnity and dignity that she particularly saw in focusing on death as a transition into another existence. In these dances, bodies and movements primarily thrust upward toward the upper part of the room. Examples include *Zeremonielle Gestalt* [*Ceremonial Form*] (1925), *Monotonie* [*Monotony*] (1926), *Feierliche Gestalt* [*Solemn Form*] (1928) and *Todesruf* [*Call of Death*] (1931). In addition to her demonic and her solemn works, Wigman also created light, buoyant dances set to simple melodies or musical themes. Her dance programs and cycles, such as *Szenen aus einem Tanzdrama* [*Scenes from a Dance Drama*] (1923/24), *Die Feier* [*Celebration*] (1928), or *Schwingende Landschaft* [*Shifting Landscape*] (1929), always included all three types of dances.

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Source: Mary Wigman, *Monotony Whirl*, 1926, Photograph: Charlotte Rudolph, courtesy of the German Dance Archive, Cologne

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Like many avant-garde artists, Mary Wigman did not concern itself directly with politics. Yet from 1933 to 1936 she was fascinated by Nazi aesthetics, especially by the emphasis on the irrational. During these years her works, especially her group works, conformed to the gender prescriptions and heroic content of Nazi art, particularly *Frauentänze* [*Women's Dances*] (1934). However, her emphasis on individual autonomy and the subjectivity of creative expression eventually put her at odds with the official dance ideology. Wigman considered emigrating to the United States in 1937, but decided to remain in Germany because she felt bound to her homeland. As she wrote about her decision in her diary, ‘My country, my language, my feelings, my thoughts – my dance’ (Wigman 1937). After 1937 she withdrew from working on group dances and went on extensive solo tours. In 1942 she gave her final performance and sold her school in Dresden. During these years, as well as after the Second World War, Wigman came to believe that she was not supporting the Nazi system. Yet historians have seen her accommodation with Nazi aesthetics and the Nazi state in a different light (see citations in Kant, Manning, Müller).

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Source: Mary Wigman Dance Group (from left: Guri Thorsteinsson, Mary Wigman, Berthe Bartholomé Trümpy, Hanya Holm (kneeling), Scenes from a Dance Drama, 1924, Photograph: d’Ora, courtesy of the German Dance Archive, Cologne

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## Legacy

Wigman's work fundamentally changed dance as an artistic form in Germany. She was a pioneer who made the creation of modern dance based on natural body movements possible. Wigman toured throughout Europe, and made three well-publicized tours of the United States from 1930 to 1933. Yet it was her many students who established their own careers, opened dance schools, and founded companies who propagated the idea of a dance based on the personality of the individual. Among the dancers who extended Wigman’s influence were Birgit Åkesson in Sweden, Erina Brady in Ireland, Jacqueline Robinson in France, Ruth Abramovitsch in Canada, Hanya Holm in the United States, Renate Schottelius in Argentina, Gertrude Bodenwieser in Australia, and Eguchi Takaya and Kuni Masami in Japan.

In the 1950s, Mary Wigman no longer had a strong influence on the artistic development of dance in Germany, given the dominance of classical dance at the time. It was only in the 1960s that young dancers reengaged with the individualist conception of Ausdruckstanz. Above all, Mary Wigman's studio in Berlin produced Gerhard Bohner and Susanne Linke, who, along with Pina Bausch, Johann Kresnik, and Reinhild Hoffmann, were among the founders of German *Tanztheater*.

## Selected Works

*Hexentanz* (*Witch Dance,* 1914)

*Ekstatische Tänze* (*Ecstatic Dances*, 1919)

*Die sieben Tänze des Lebens* (*Seven Dances of Life*, 1921)

*Szenen aus einem Tanzdrama* (*Scenes from a Dance Drama*, 1923/24)

*Das Tanzmärchen* (*Dance Fairy Tale*, 1925)

*Hexentanz* (*Witch Dance,*1926)

*Zeremonielle Gestalt* (*Ceremonial Form*, 1925)

*Monotonie* (*Monotony Whirl*, 1926)

*Totentanz* (*Dance of Death*, 1926)

*Die Feier* (*Celebration*, 1928)

*Feierliche Gestalt* (*Solemn Form*, 1928)

*Schwingende Landschaft* (*Shifting Landscape*, 1929)

*Totenmal* (*Call of the Dead*, 1930)

*Opfer* (*Sacrifice*, 1931)

*Todesruf* (*Call of Death*, part of *Opfer,* 1931)

*Frauentänze* (*Women's Dances*, 1934)

*Tanzgesänge* (*Hymnic Dances*, 1935)

*Herbstliche Tänze* (*Autumnal Dances*, 1937)

*Abschied und Dank* (*Farewell and Thanksgiving*, 1942)

*Le Sacre du Printemps* (*The Rite of Spring*, 1957)

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