**Hoffman (Hoffmann), Gertrude (Catherine/Kitty nee Hayes) (b. ca. 1886, San Francisco, California; d. 21 October 1966, Los Angeles, California)**

**Summary**

Gertrude Hoffman (Hoffmann) was an early twentieth-century Broadway dance director and performer, the first woman to receive a dance direction – or choreographic – credit on Broadway. From her first credited choreography for *Punch, Judy & Co* (1903), through her retirement in the early 1940s, she was known for her clever and innovative staging of women’s precision choruses for both the Broadway and international stage. As a solo performer, however, she is remembered as an impersonator of other vaudeville and theatre performers and concert dancers, developing a vaudeville feature act called *The Borrowed Art of Gertrude Hoffman*. She developed and performed in the first U. S. productions of the Ballets Russes repertoire (1911-15), became the first woman admitted to the Theatrical Managers’ Protective Association and, after buying herself out of her previously signed contracts, set up her own producing organisation. In the 1920s and 1930s, she created and staged dance specialties for The Gertrude Hoffman Girls, precision dance teams of twelve to twenty-four performers. Her troupes appeared in the Shuberts’ annual Broadway revues and musicals, as well as in ‘picture palaces’ and large cinemas in America and Western Europe. She retired as the Second World War closed access to the European entertainment industry.

**Training**

Born Catherine or Kitty Hayes in San Francisco, ca. 1886, Hoffman was trained there by a Mme. Mindel Dreyfus, probably in the variety of techniques then known as ‘fancy dancing’. She appeared in musicals and light operas in the Bay area, as well as in productions starring performers she would later imitate, such as the actress Olga Nethersole (in the melodrama *Sappho*) and the comic Eddie Foy (in *Topsy Turvey*). She made her New York debut in the comedy *The Night of the Fourth* (1901) by George Ade. She married that play’s German-born songwriter/conductor, ‘Baron’ Max Hoffmann, and changed her professional name to Gertrude Hoffman. A close collaborator, her husband served both as musical director for her projects until she retired in the early 1940s.

**Contribution to the Field and to Modernism**

Some dancer/choreographers are modernists because they devote their lives to a personal vision. Gertrude Hoffman was a modernist because, throughout her long career, she anticipated the changing requirements of dance in popular entertainment. After performing her way to New York, she both danced and staged dances for Broadway and roof garden theatres in the new Times Square district. She earned her first dance direction credit for the musical extravaganza *Punch, Judy*, *& Co.*, which she choreographed for Oscar and William Hammerstein’s Paradise Garden Roof Theatre in 1903. *The New York World* (6 July 1903) praised her contribution: ‘She trained the 60 young women of the chorus, arranged all the “business” for the ensemble work and the various stage pictures that go toward making a pleasing spectacle’. The earliest description of her choreography appears in a Charles Darnton review of *The Parisian Model*: ‘a whole row of girls who shake out a tune with bells that they wear and then lie on their backs with their musical legs in the air, kicking out a tune’ (*New York Evening-Herald*, 20 November 1906). In addition to working as a dance director for many Broadway and roof garden productions in the 1900s, Hoffman maintained a concurrent career imitating popular performers, such as Eva Tanguay, Anna Held and Harry Lauder. Apart from Tanguay, who instituted a well-publicised feud with her, most of Hoffman’s ‘subjects’ applauded the parodies, knowing that her imitations increased their publicity and fame.

Hoffman’s importance in American ballet and concert dance began with her imitation of Maud Allan’s celebrated solo *The Vision of Salome*, which Hoffman premiered at the Hammerstein’s Roof Theatre in 1908, anticipating (and ruining) Allan’s American debut. The popularity of the number led Hoffman to re-focus her career on impersonation, and she developed a vaudeville feature act known as *The Borrowed Art of Gertrude Hoffman*. To maintain novelty, she varied imitations of Broadway stars with those of major figures in concert dance. She added Allan’s *Spring Song* to her repertoire, along with imitations of Ruth St. Denis in *Radha*, Isadora Duncan and the ballet dancer/diver Annette Kellermann, now billing her act as *The Gertrude Hoffman Review*.

Hoffman significantly expanded her repertoire of imitations in 1911 with *La Saison des Ballet Russes* (*The Ballets Russes Season)*, a programme of Diaghilev productions adapted by Theodore (Fedor) Kosloff. A Bolshoi-trained dancer, Kosloff had danced for the Ballets Russes during its earliest seasons. He now staged three of the company’s early ‘hits’ – Michel Fokine’s *Schéhérezade,* *Cléopâtre* and *Les Sylphides* – with Hoffman performing the plum roles of Zobéide and Cleopatra. Her enterprise was not appreciated by producers who hoped to bring the real Ballets Russes to New York, but it certainly added to wider knowledge of the company when it did arrive in 1916. The Hoffman show continued to add novelties, extending the Orientalist theme with an imitation of Max Reinhardt’s *Sumurun* in 1915.

Following the long, but money-losing tour of the Ballets Russes programme, Hoffman returned her focus to popular theatre choreography. She performed her last engagement as a dancer in 1923, doing ‘everything from an angelic, fluffy-skirted toe dance to…spirited, colourful interpretations of Muscovite folk dancing’, staged for her by Michel Fokine (*Chicago Journal*, 21 April 1923).

Hoffman’s dance direction assignments included revues and operettas, most often for the Shuberts, for whom Max Hoffman frequently worked as musical director. Her New York studio trained precision dance teams as the choruses for her shows or for feature acts. The 16 Gertrude Hoffman Girls, for instance, appeared in the 1925 Shubert revue *Artists & Models*, doing a ‘spider web dance’ while attached by hand and ankle straps to the curtain. From 1927 on, she developed Gertrude Hoffman Girl acts for ‘Prologs’ (short vaudeville shows which alternated with films at ‘picture palaces’ or cinemas. Unlike many of her rivals’ more specialised precision groups, Hoffman’s troupes worked with a variety of dance vocabularies, including tap, acrobatics and circus techniques. The troupes were popular additions to musicals and revues throughout Western Europe from the mid-1920s until the late 1930s, most often for the Graumont Theatres. A *Vanity Fair* caption for the 1925 *Artists & Models*, mentions ‘a triumphant year at the London Hippodrome and the Moulin Rouge in Paris…a replacement contingent in Paris and another in a Berlin extravaganza’.

Bolstered by her success in commercial theatre, Hoffman acted as a spokesperson for dancers. She seems to have served as a link with the divided ballet, concert dance and modern dance communities in promoting improved working conditions for dancers through the American Dancer Association.

**Legacy**

Hoffman is too often included in dance history only as a novelty, ‘borrowing’ European ballet for American popular theatre. However, that episode was only one aspect of her professional biography. Multi-talented, she pioneered in establishing her stage name as a ‘brand’, from *The Borrowed Art* to the many troupes of Gertrude Hoffman Girls. She invented her career, rising from chorus dancer to dance director with choreography that spanned categories, from concert dance to precision lines. She created and re-created her career but always maintained leadership roles in dance. Although many decades passed before women choreographers became common on Broadway, she served as a role model for dancers wanting to move from performance into the multiple areas of staging and dance direction.

**Selected List of Works**

*Punch, Judy & Company* (1903)

*Down the Pike* (1904)

*Me, Him and I* (1904)

*When We Were Forty-One* (1905)

*The Duke of Duluth* (1905)

*Tom, Dick and Harry* (1905)

*Moonshine* (1905)

*The Man from Now* (1906)

*A Parisian Model* (1906)

*The Honeymooners* (1907)

[Ziegfeld] *Follies of 1907*

*Salomé* (1908)

*Spring Song* (1908)

*Radha* (1909)

*La Saison des Ballets Russes* (*The Ballets Russes Season*) (1911)

*From Broadway to Paris* (1912)

*Sumurun* (1915)

*Dance and Grow Thin* (1917)

*Artists and Models* (1925)

*A Night in Paris* (1926)

*A Night in Spain* (1927)

*Vanities of 1930*

**References and Further Reading**

Cohen, B. N. [1977] *The Borrowed Art of Gertrude Hoffman*. *Dance Data*, 2: 2-19. (An overview of Hoffman’s career with, with photographs of her in various roles, a 1912 playbill for a performance of her *Saison des Ballets Russes* and essays from the souvenir programme)

Cohen-Stratyner, B. N. (c. 1978) ‘Gertrude Hoffman: Salome Treads the Boards’. *Essays in Dance Research / CORD Dance Research Annual*, 9: 23-32. (Conference presentation written to follow Lacy McDermon’s lecture on Maud Allan’s thwarted North American performances)

**Websites**

Marvel, I. (2012) *The Gertrude Hoffman Collection*. (An article on the Gertrude Hoffman Girls featuring rare images and ephemera) http://travsd.wordpress.com/2012/03/26/the-gertrude-hoffman-collection/

Marvel, I. (2011) *Introducing Gertrude Hoffman*. (An illustrated overview of Hoffman’s career) http://brooklynology.org/post/2011/04/14/Introducing-Gertrude-Hoffman.aspx

**Archival and Scrapbook Collections**

Gertrude and Max Hoffman Papers, Wake Forest University. (Materials primarily focusing on the couple’s musical careers)

Gertrude Hoffman Collection. Brooklyn Collection, Brooklyn Public Library. (Contains photographs, scrapbooks, programs and newspaper clippings documenting Hoffman’s professional life)

The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. (Includes the Robinson Locke Scrapbooks, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, and clippings collections in the Billy Rose Theatre Division, Jerome Robbins Dance Division and the Music Division which are major sources of information about Hoffman’s choreography and shows)

**Paratextual Material**

There are many images on the New York Public Library Digital Gallery:

http://digitalgallery.nypl.org/nypldigital/dgkeysearchresult.cfm?parent\_id=1846203

I suggest the following pairing:

Gertrude Hoffman as Salomé, 1908. Photograph by Frank C. Banks. New York Public Library Digital Gallery.

http://digitalgallery.nypl.org/nypldigital/dgkeysearchdetail.cfm?trg=1&strucID=182231&imageID=y680254237-f&parent\_id=1846203&snum=&s=&notword=&d=&c=&f=&k=1&sScope=&sLevel=&sLabel=&sort=&total=9&num=0&imgs=20&pNum=&pos=6

(Y680254237-f)

AND

Maud Allan in *Vision of Salomé*, 1910. Photograph by Foulsham & Banfield. New York Public Library Digital Gallery.

http://digitalgallery.nypl.org/nypldigital/dgkeysearchdetail.cfm?trg=1&strucID=1932656&imageID=1994543&word=Allan%2C%20Maud&s=3&notword=&d=&c=&f=2&k=1&lWord=&lField=&sScope=&sLevel=&sLabel=&sort=&total=5&num=0&imgs=20&pNum=&pos=4

Programme page for *Gertrude Hoffman’s Revue*, featuring ‘Entrance to an Express Station of the New York Subway’, Colonial Theatre, 1913. New York Public Library Digital Gallery.

http://digitalgallery.nypl.org/nypldigital/dgkeysearchdetail.cfm?trg=1&strucID=193560&imageID=99b314\_027015&total=64&num=60&word=title\_id\_list%3A1947313&s=1&notword=&d=&c=&f=&k=1&lWord=&lField=&sScope=images&sLevel=1&sLabel=Jerome%20Robbins%20Dance%20Division%20program%20files&sort=&imgs=20&pos=64&e=w

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