**Palucca, Gret (b. Margarethe Paluka, 8 June 1902, Munich, Germany; d. March 22, 1993, Dresden, Germany)**

**Summary**

Gret Palucca took a distinctive improvisational and pedagogical approach to German modern dance in a career spanning four different political systems in Germany. After studying and performing with Mary Wigman, Palucca founded her first school in Dresden during the years of the Weimar Republic. Personifying the androgynous and career-oriented New Woman of that era with her slight, boyish frame, bobbed hair, energetic leaps, and thriving solo career, she and her dancing became the subject for many artists affiliated with the Bauhaus schools in Weimar and Dessau, among them Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee, László Moholy-Nagy, and Marianne Brandt. Despite her Jewish heritage, she continued to teach in Nazi Germany until the beginning of the Second World War and even performed her abstract solos throughout the war. Immediately after the Second World War, she reopened her school in the then Soviet Sector and was able to hold onto it as the only school teaching modern dance in the German Democratic Republic (East Germany), a nation that repressed modernism in favour of socialist realist approaches to ballet and folk dance. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, Palucca was honored in 1992 by the then unified German government for her contribution to dance and to the preservation of modern principles. Her artistic survival complicates the often-assumed apolitical stances of modernism and dance.

**Early Life and Training**

When Palucca was four years old, her cosmopolitan upper-middle class family—her father was born in Constantinople and her mother was a Hungarian Jew born in Nuremberg—moved to San Francisco for a few years. In 1909 her mother returned alone with her two children to Germany and settled in Dresden, where Palucca started to take ballet lessons with Heinrich Kröller, who utilized expressive principles of early German modern dance to enhance his ballet choreographies. Although she was critical of ballet, Palucca’s training in the classical form enabled her ability to jump and leap, differentiating her from other German modern dancers grounded in earthbound movement. After witnessing *Ausdruckstanz* pioneer Mary Wigman’s original performance in Dresden in 1919, Palucca enrolled as one of her first students and later became a member of Wigman’s company along with Berthe Trümpy and Yvonne Georgi. Reviews often described Palucca as the most talented dancer in the company. Palucca struck out on her own with a solo concert in 1924 before leaving the Wigman company in 1925.

**Major Contribution to the Field and to Modernism**

Palucca was known for her solo improvisations that eschewed narrative frames and emphasized choreographic investigations through highly physical, energetic, and abstract movement. Her focus on the structural form of dance and her abstract vocabulary situate her within modernist paradigms. Her use of improvisation caused a controversy among critics during her early career, because they argued over the artistic value of Palucca’s improvising. Unlike other protagonists of German modern dance, who used improvisation as a choreographic took, Palucca improvised as a stage form. Critics also emphasized her unique physicality and abstraction in these improvised dances.

Palucca’s leaps highlighting line and directionality in space inspired Kandinsky to publish ‘Tanzkurven: Zu den Tänzen der Palucca’ (‘Dance Curves: The Dances of Palucca’) in 1926.[[1]](#endnote-1) Kandinsky abstracted Palucca’s body into a stick figure and her dancing into converging lines and curves. He celebrated Palucca’s dancing as dynamic abstract form rather than as universalized expression. While the older generation of Bauhaus masters such as Kandinsky and Paul Klee depicted Palucca with a masculine emphasis of geometry and energy, a younger generation of artists hailed Palucca as the embodiment of the New Woman. Palucca, like images of the New Woman appearing in women’s fashion magazines, embodied an androgynous and athletic femininity coupled with a strong career drive. As a dancer, Palucca’s growing stardom made visible the tension between masculine modernism and female consumer culture.[[2]](#endnote-2) Her career is a reminder that modernism was not only pictorial, abstract, disengaged from social structures, and distinct from mass culture as posited by later U.S. critics Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg. Rather, her modernism intervened in contemporary cultural debates even when she took seemingly apolitical stances in relation to German national art policies.

Palucca continued her successful solo carrier while opening her own school in Dresden in 1924-25, shortly after she married Friedrich Bienert, a member of a wealthy and influential Dresden family. Her short-lived marriage–they divorced in 1930–gave her access to regional art circles, which defined themselves less as bohemian than as bourgeois, while her husband’s money and advertising acumen impacted her publicity. Reviews often stressed Palucca’s impressive technical skills, but at times questioned her choreographic potential. Critics also compared Palucca’s isolation and simultaneous use of different body parts to primitive dance, an aspect of her dancing that situates her inside modernism’s appropriation of the primitive. At the same time, Palucca improvised and choreographed predominantly to classical music and often relied on such music for an investigation of movement vocabulary and choreographic structuring.

After the National Socialists came to power in 1933, she continued her career. For the opening ceremony of the Berlin Olympic Games in 1936, Palucca performed in front of over a hundred thousand spectators and Adolf Hitler. She danced a waltz, surrounded by twenty-three hundred girls sitting in circles on the stadium floor, thus participated in one of the milestones of Nazi propaganda. Palucca was hailed as the ‘most German’ of all dancers.[[3]](#endnote-3) Yet, she was Jewish and her school was closed in 1939, despite Palucca letting go of her non-Aryan faculty. Nonetheless, cultural bureaucrats still provided her with a permit to perform her solo work at private events until 1944.

Despite the near complete destruction of Dresden by bombing in 1945, Palucca immediately started dancing and teaching after the war ended a few months later. She reopened her school the same year, dancing until 1950 and teaching until 1990. Throughout these forty-five years in Dresden, Palucca negotiated the changing socialist cultural politics in East Germany. Officials in the Soviet occupational sector initially courted her to stay. Yet, soon socialist realist bureaucrats of the East German state repeatedly questioned her modernist approach to dance and pedagogy and even put her school under state control. Often, Palucca threatened to leave for West Germany and did so briefly in 1959. Concessions by the East German state and most likely her domestic partnership with the physician Marianne Zwingenberger, which lasted over twenty-five years, made her come back and continue the work at the school. Despite these culture wars and a lesbian relationship that stood in stark contrast to socialist family values, Palucca became an important national icon and received numerous awards.

Among the three state conservatories in the German Democratic Republic, Palucca’s school was the only one providing modern dance training and improvisation besides ballet technique and folk vocabulary. Relabeling her approach Neuer Künstlerischer Tanz (‘new artistic dance’), Palucca actively participated at high levels in the cultural politics of the socialist East Germany. She used her political influence to short-circuit censorship and socialist realist indoctrination, but also to repress other approaches to modern dance. She resisted all efforts to preserve her choreographies and pedagogy, citing the unique individuality of her work and the impossibility of capturing improvisation.

**Legacy**

Palucca’s continual investigation of improvisation as a performance practice undermines the often-assumed modernist focus on finished product, foreshadowing the post-modern highlighting of artistic processes. However, Palucca’s legacy is not so much her choreographic work or pedagogy, but her students’ impact on dance in Germany. Among her pupils were such notable German modern dancers as Marianne Vogelsang and Dore Hoyer. Yet, most importantly, Palucca and the Palucca School influenced several generations of choreographers and dancers in East Germany. Tom Schilling, the choreographer of the Tanztheater (Dance Theater) at the Komischen Oper Berlin studied briefly with Palucca. Arila Siegert, the only East German dancer and choreographer who actively engaged with *Ausdruckstanz* in her reconstructions and choreographies, owed her understanding of modernism to Palucca. The opera director Ruth Berghaus was also trained by Palucca and started as a choreographer before turning towards opera. Nearly all the next generation of choreographers that influenced East German and, after reunification, German dance studied at the Palucca School. Among them are Susanna Borchers, Irina Pauls, Raymond Hilbert, Stephan Thoss, Birgit Scherzer, Mario and Silvana Schröder.

**Jens Richard Giersdorf**

**Selected Dance Works**

*Tanzrhythmus* (*Dance Rhythm*, 1922)

*Tänze der Zeit* (*Die Qual, Der Zwiespalt, Der Wahn*) (*Dances of Time: Agony, Dichotomy, Delusion*, 1923)

*Tanzabstraktionen* (*Dance Abstractions*, 1924)

*Leicht* (*Lightly*, 1924)

*Schwunghaft* (*Roaring*, 1925)

*Mit Schwung* (*With a Swing*, 1926)

*Technische Improvisation* (*Technical Improvisation*, 1927)

*Leicht I und II* (*Lightly I and II*, 1927)

*Mäßig bewegt* (*Moderately Moved*, 1928)

*Tanzrhythmus II* (*Dance Rhythm II*, 1929)

*Leichter Rhythmus* (*Light Rhythm*, 1930)

*Drei Ausdrucksstudien* (*Three Expressive Studies*, 1931)

*Drehtanz* (Spinning Dance, 1932)

*Walzer* (2. Fassung) (*Waltz* 2nd Version, 1933)

*Zwei Tanzrhythmen* (*Two Dance Rhythms*, 1933)

*Tanzlied* (*Dance Song*, 1934)

*Impressionen* (*Impressions*, 1936)

*Walzerfantasie* (*Waltz Fantasies*, 1937)

*Reigen* (*Round Dance*, 1938)

*Variationen* (*Variations*, 1939)

*Bagatellen* (*Bagatelles*, 1940)

*Aufschwung* (*Upswing*, 1941)

*Aufforderung zum Tanz* (*Invitation to the Dance*, 1942)

*Walzer der Musette* (*Musette’s Waltzes*, 1943)

*Fantasien um Carmen* (*Fantasy About Carmen*, 1944)

*Fiesta* (*Fiesta*, 1945)

*Trauergesang* (*Mourning Song*, 1945)

*Auftakt* (*Prelude*, 1946)

*5 Lieder ohne Worte* (*5 Songs Without Words*, 1947)

*Walzer* (*Waltzes*, 1948)

*Aus den Tiefen* (*From the Depths*, 1949)

*Variationen* (*Variations*, 1950)

**Artist’s Writings**

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Duvoisin, H. and R. Radrizzani, eds. (2008) *Gret Palucca. Schriften, Interviews, Tanzmanuskripte*, Basel: Schwabe Verlag.

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---------- (1984) ‘Personality as the Life of Modern Dance: an Interview with Gret Palucca,’ *Ballett-International* 7 (2): 24-25.

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**References and Further Readings**

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Erdmann-Rajski, K. (2000) *Gret Palucca. Tanz und Tanzerfahrung in Deutschland im 20. Jahrhundert. Weimarer Republik, Nationalsozialismus, Deutsche Demokratische Republik*, Köln: Deutsches Tanzarchiv Köln.

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**Suggested Paratexts**

Wassily Kandinsky, Two large parallel lines supported by simple curve, Zeichnung, 1925 © Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden.

Digital file courtesy of German Hygiene Museum

<http://dhmd.de/fileadmin/user_upload/sport/pressebilder/wassily_kandinsky.jpg>

Gret Palucca with Double Shadow, Fotografie: Charlotte Rudolph, 1925   
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Digital file courtesy of German Hygiene Museum

<http://dhmd.de/fileadmin/user_upload/sport/pressebilder/Gret%20Palucca%20with%20Double%20Shadow.jpg>

Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Tanzender Frauenakt, Gret Palucca (Dancing Female Nude, Gret Palucca), 1929. Public Domain.

<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ernst_Ludwig_Kirchner_-_Tanzender_Frauenakt,_Gret_Palucca_1929-30.jpg>

Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Dancer Palucca, c. 1930.

<http://library.artstor.org.turing.library.northwestern.edu/library/iv2.html?parent=true>

**Notes**

1. Kandinsky, W. (1926) ‘Dance Curves: the Dances of Palucca,’ in *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art* vol. 2 *(1982)* eds. K.C. Lindsay and P. Vergo, Boston: G.K. Hall, 519-23. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Funkenstein, S.L. (2012) ‘Gret Palucca and Bauhaus Visual Culture,’ in *New German Dance Studies*,” eds. S. Manning and L. Ruprecht, Urbana: University of Illinois Press. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Stabel, R. (2001) *Tanz, Palucca! Die Verkörperung einer Leidenschaft*, Berlin: Henschel Verlag, 77, 111. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)