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| Hoffman, Gertrude (1886- 1966) |
| Catherine/Kitty née Hayes |
| Gertrude Hoffman (Hoffmann) was an early twentieth-century Broadway dance director and performer, and the first woman to receive a dance direction — or choreographic — credit on Broadway. From her first credited choreography for *Punch, Judy & Co* (1903), through to 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 the 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*. Hoffman developed and performed in the first U.S. productions of the Ballets Russes repertoire (1911-15), was 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 precision dance teams, known as The Gertrude Hoffman Girls, comprised 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 when the Second World War closed access to the European entertainment industry. |
| [File: Salome.jpg]  Figure 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->  [File: MaudeAllen.jpg]  Figure 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> Summary Gertrude Hoffman (Hoffmann) was an early twentieth-century Broadway dance director and performer, and the first woman to receive a dance direction — or choreographic — credit on Broadway. From her first credited choreography for *Punch, Judy & Co* (1903), through to 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 the 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*. Hoffman developed and performed in the first U.S. productions of the Ballets Russes repertoire (1911-15), was 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 precision dance teams, known as The Gertrude Hoffman Girls, comprised 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 when the Second World War closed access to the European entertainment industry. Training Born Catherine Hayes in San Francisco in 1886, Hoffman was trained 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 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*). Hoffman made her New York debut in the comedy *The Night of the Fourth* (1901) by George Ade, later marrying the play’s German-born songwriter/conductor, ‘Baron’ Max Hoffmann, and changing her professional name to Gertrude Hoffman. A close collaborator, Max Hoffmann served as musical director for her projects until she retired in the early 1940s. Contribution to the Field and to Modernism Throughout her long career, Hoffman 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 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 her imitations increased their own 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, later 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 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). From 1927 on, she developed Gertrude Hoffman Girl acts for ‘Prologs’ (short vaudeville shows that 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.  Bolstered by her success in commercial theatre, Hoffman acted as a spokesperson for dancers. She seems to have served as a link between the divided ballet, concert dance, and modern dance communities in promoting improved working conditions for dancers through the American Dancer Association. Legacy Hoffman is often included in dance history 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. Although many decades passed before women choreographers became common on Broadway, Hoffman served as a role model for dancers wanting to move from performance into the multiple areas of staging and dance direction. |
| Further reading:  (B. N. Cohen-Stratyner)  (B. N. Cohen-Stratyner)  (Brooklyn Public Library)  (Marvel)  (Wake Forest University) |