

MARY WIGMAN

PERSONALITY



"Nature did not cast me for the role of a soubrette, and I must find myself in that type which is most nearly my own."

- Interview, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, December 13, 1931



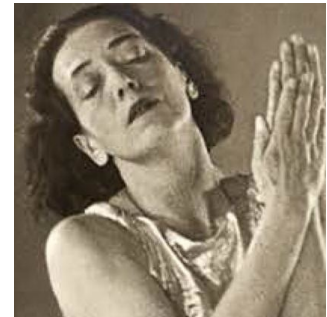
"She just was a cosmopolitan. She could savour, she had sense of humour. She made the most humorous jokes. But when it came to work, she was also strict and rigorous. She just was an all-round person." (Susanne Linke, Wigman's student)

THEORETICAL APPROACH & CULTURAL INFLUENCE

"a grotesque dance" (from Dvd "The Soul of Dance")



"Wigman worked on three levels, which she wanted to be connected. First, the physical level of movement ("Bewegung"), the psychological level of being moved ("Bewegtheit"), and the mental level of movability ("Beweglichkeit"). These are beautiful words of hers. This is exactly what we actually have to work with today to be able to create a certain quality in moving." (Norbert Servos)



Sascha Waltz was also taught at a Wigman school. Even if the Wigman legacy has fallen partly into oblivion, without M.W.'s groundbreaking work, contemporary dance would look different.

"The dance is speech, communication, language of the body in motion. The medium of expression is the body. It is the vessel from which we pour out our desires for expression. It is interpreter, herald, instrument."

"First demand on a dancer: To establish the conception of the body as a rhythmic instrument rather than a mere physical torso."

"Dancing is motion, the conversation of inner, invisible animation into visible bodily movement. What inspires the body? An inner, indefinable, undeniable urge that desires a visible, definable expression." (p.87)



"A dance creation cannot be "made", it must grow, and the choreographer needs the patience of a gardener." (from "The language of dance", p.131.)

"The teacher's task is to find his way to the student in order to recognize his kind of talent, which he must respect as an independent world. It is essential that the teacher does not impose his ego upon his student, nor should he ever take himself as a criterion." (p. 128)

“What matters is to make visible the world of one’s feelings and visualizations, to purify and depersonalize the experience of the private “I” through the medium of dance.” (p. 122)

“The longing for self-expression so characteristic of our age is driving today’s girls to seek satisfaction in dancing. (...) regardless of whether or not they are qualified by nature to adopt it as their medium of expression. (...) That dancing exerts an enormous influence on today’s women cannot be denied, but it is through many different motivations that it is forced upon them in the end. To many it is an emotional outlet. To some, and mainly to those whose work lies in other directions, it is relaxation and inspiration, a delivery from the monotony of routine. To others again it comes as a solace, and they endeavor to find some compensation in it. And among numerous other reasons there remains the aspect of escape from care or trouble. Among this motley, restless, and eager crowd seeking to placate their longings through dancing, we sometimes find the really gifted dancer who discovers in this medium her vocation. The talent of such a dancer asserts itself quickly, demanding recognition. Instinctively she accepts this medium of self-expression, an art form achieved through and dependent on the body.” (p.105)

The Dance and Modern Woman (1927)

KEY POINTS:

- BREATH > influence on a certain type or character
- INDEPENDENCE FROM MUSIC
- “MERE BODY INTO INSTRUMENT”
- WHIRLING MOVEMENT (VORTEX) → TRANCE
- “IRRATIONAL SPACE OF THE DANCED DIMENSION”
- REALM OF CREATIVITY / SANCTUARY / “celebrate a union with space”
- INVISIBLE PARTNERSHIP (a dialogue in which the dancer holds a conversation with himself and with an invisible partner)
- MASK → TRANSFIGURATION : “almost a demonic translation of my face. I fell in love with it at first sight. But when I put it on my face, I had a very peculiar feeling. Instead of having a soothing effect, it was upsetting. It underscored the personal where it should have depersonalized.”

The mask belongs to an older tradition and in many traditions the mask is transcendent.

“I was horrified by myself. Horrified by exposing this part of me that I had never surrendered to in this nudity before. But isn’t there a part of a witch hidden inside everyone who’s 100% woman?”

- WITCH DANCE: “still fresh and provoking that there’s a dancer on the ground, presenting a crouching witch armed with claws, furiously stamping her feet. Someone who’s not afraid to show an ugly character, filled with compulsion and lust for life.” (Norbert Servos)
- THE WITCH / hidden aspect of the femininity: “She acted out a part of her very self. And this was indeed important for her entire history of becoming who she was. Dealing with her body also always includes experiencing sexuality, acting out her erotic dynamics. Only when she experienced very satisfying and very passionate love affairs, this kind of dances emerged.” (Hedwig Müller, Wigman Biographer)
- SOLO DANCE / GROUP DANCE / CHORIC DANCE
- Finished Forms of Composition: Functional Dances (Step Dances, Jump Dances, Swing Dances) and Emotional Dances (1. Melody; 2. Dance Song; 3. Fantasy; 4. Mystic Dances; 5. Elemental Dances)
- SERVICE TO HUMANITY

PURPOSE FOR DANCING

from the book "MARY WIGMAN
LIFE AND WORK OF THE GREAT DANCER", ed. Quadriga

M.W. was asked why she became a dancer and she answered: "*Because dance in its origin is living life and it tells of life in its symbolic reflections. For this purpose I wanted to claim responsibility, with every fibre of my being.*" (p.9)

"*Everything that had to do with musicality and the musical-rhythmic education at Jaques Dalcroze in his method could not interest me at all! What interested me was just the fact that they said: "Now tell that with your body."*" (p.30)

"*I was almost crazy. I was very confused: dancer, stage. Yes, for God's sake, I had never thought about something like that, not a second. I had thought of nothing really. And suddenly a world unfolded, for which it was worth fighting for and getting into it.*" (p.44)

"*I wanted more! And I threw myself in the compilation/preparation of a dance technique, a concept, that for the new, free dance did not exist yet. Also Laban did not show any particular interest for it. Here there was no model and no guide. I was a beginner that, totally on my own, started an exploration that exists for a dancer: the discovery of the own body and its transformation from body to instrument.*" (p.50)

WHAT PEOPLE TOLD HER...

"*"My dear girl, go home and be a Hausfrau - you'll be happier", a teacher assured me. "You'll never be a dancer." But I had to dance. There was nothing else I wanted to do.*" (p.27)

"*Dear Wigman, though there was only one really harmonious movement in your whole program, I admit that you are a dancer, you may even be a great dancer.*" (Laban, p.40)

(Mary had to embody wrath. Laban shouted at her:) "*You clown, you grotesque monster, with your terrific intensity you ruin my whole theory of harmony!*" "*He was furious about what he called my super-self-expression, declaring that the movement itself was wrath and needed no individual interpretation.*"

STORY

- 1886 Hannover. (Wilhelm II parade). Father: bicycle shop, time of economic recovery. From a *middle class family*.
- her family earned wealth through diligence and discipline. This experience shapes her character.
- Her parents foster Marie's gift for languages and her joy of movement.
- She diverted from the established idea to have a family and be a wife and made her own lifestyle.
- at the age of 17 she begins to travel and visit some metropolises. She is fascinated by dance performances.

Back the in Europe, serious dance was limited to ballet. After watching a performance of Anna Pavlova, one of the master Russian dancers, she writes in her diary: "There's an abyss between you and me with no bridge to link us. I could humbly bow my head before you. But my longing drives me into another direction, finds its way on uneven roads."

- 1910-1920 She enrolls for becoming a **teacher for rhythmic**s. Studies with Emile Jacques Dalcroze* in Eurythmics - **Hellerau**. Zürich. *rhythmic-musical feeling ("rhythmisch-musikalisches Empfinden") / Aesthetics (<Ancient Greece) / cosmic harmony /





union of body, mind and spirit / “the body (...) should be the key to the harmonic development of the personality” (Müller) / “Through the body urges the Eurythmics, i.e. the expression of the order in the whole person, in the soul, and the harmony is taught through this gymnastic dance.

(From the Dvd “The Soul of Dance”)

Dalcroze’s Hellerau stagings attract the European avant-garde. His dance productions combine musical, emotional and physical experiences. It was the time of reform dresses or even shorts (no more corsets!) This rhythmic (fluent and regular movements) was aimed to positively affect the students’ lives. But for Mary Wigman this was not enough.

“She had continuously complained during her education. For her, the combination of music and movement was too much schematic. She sensed early that she wanted to be independent from that. She wanted to create a dance that could stand for itself and would not be a mere illustration of music.” (Norbert Servos, dance theorist)

- **Suzanne Perrottet** (rhythmic teacher in Hellerau)—> she is different: classes are held outside, in the nature. Her students gain freedom of movement so they can develop ideas of their own. They focus on individual feelings. She works in an unconventional way. There is immediately a close alliance between the two. Both are looking for new ways to move and express something. They were both working on their own, hiding from Dalcroze, because he would not understand them.
- She goes to Rome, she wants more, she wants to find herself, give space to an urge she has inside and that she could not express at Dalcroze’s school.
- Encounter with psychiatrist Hans Prinzhorn —> he is interested in/works with the therapeutic effect of physical activity for mentally ill people;
- Painter Emil Nolde —> movement and expression
- Expressionism —> wild forms & very bright colors / M.W. researches the earthiness / primitive origin (“Urwüchsigkeit”) that the expressionists showed in their paintings: she dances in the ecstasy of their “wild”
- Freedom from the music
- **Monte Verità** 1913 (Ascona, Lago Maggiore, Switzerland) - a place where artists and intellectuals of all kind (from anarchism to occultism) meet and discuss new world orders related to a freer unfolding of the personality. Time of the “**Wandervogel**” movement, the time of the raw foodists, the time of nudism. (Nude sunbathing was virtually required from any guest on Monte Verità!).

Als **Wandervogel** wird eine 1896 in **Steglitz (heute Berlin)** entstandene Bewegung hauptsächlich von Schülern und Studenten **bürgerlicher** Herkunft bezeichnet, die in einer Phase fortschreitender Industrialisierung der Städte und angeregt durch Ideale der **Romantik** sich von den engen Vorgaben des schulischen und gesellschaftlichen Umfelds lösten, um in freier Natur eine eigene Lebensart zu entwickeln. Damit stellte der Wandervogel den Beginn der **Jugendbewegung** dar, die auch für **Reformpädagogik**, **Freikörperkultur** und **Lebensreformbewegung** im ersten Drittel des 20. Jahrhunderts wichtige Impulse setzte.

- Reformist’s movement in general, accompanied by a strong youth movement: they longed to be independent of their parents’ generation and make their own experiences.
- —> Laban / “**Schule für Kunst**” “I heard the drum from a far distance. I followed that sound and arrived at a meadow to see a man in shorts, holding





a drum, surrounded by young women who moved around. "I'd like to take part." And he said: "Go behind that bush and get undressed and come over."... "And it was as if I had come home".

- Practicing nude. Barefoot (Earth, Groundedness) They see dancing as the expression of a self-determined life. The gout decides to lead a simple life without any comfort (no heating, no water, almost no money...they live off of what nature has to offer... **"Art over food"**)

- Accent on movement; play & dance (i.e. "high-dramatic gestures as if you would see the spirit of the world") Her dances are the immediate expression of her experiences (without any formal structure!)

- M.W. is offered a contract as a teacher for rhythmic gymnastic with Dalcroze, but Laban shows her another possibility she had not thought of. "That's a real pity! You are actually a dancer and you belong to the stage."

- M.W. becomes Laban's closest assistant. Good affinity between them.

- She observes how Laban helps physically or mentally ill

patients of the sanatorium to move the body again, to establish a new relationship to the body and with it to contribute to their healing process. Beginning of a dance therapeutic approach that Laban was practicing.

- M.W. moves to Munich to assist Laban in his work: she begins to work as a dance teacher and dancer.

- "inner-necessary" "mystical-necessary" (Kandinsky) key points in Laban's work.

- 11 February 1914 first performance on stage —> success (Rudolf von Delius wrote about her: "No adjustments, no masquerades, no acting. (...) deep simple honesty. Here nothing has to be presented or mimed, nothing draped and transferred into a scene.")

- M.W. experiences the width that is contained in her dances. She is convinced that the human being is not "the master of nature, but its instrument, part of a cosmos, whose laws are reflected in the change of the seasons, in the transformation of light and darkness, of up and down, of strong and weak, of birth and death." (p.51)

- Laban's "rabbit tester"

- "Laban's vision is to liberate people to freely live their own lives. (...)"



Suzanne Perrottet joins the Monte Verità as well and becomes a couple with Laban. She gets a child from him as well. M.W. has fallen in love for him as well, but she is not corresponded. Deep crisis. *"The grief of not being accepted by Laban as a woman and lover gave her the strength to transform all that pain into dance. He, on the other hand, perceived these dances as the source of her talent and her unique identity."* (From the dvd "The Soul of Dance")

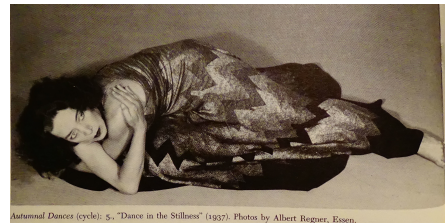
- *Dadaism & the "Galerie Dada"

- M.W. as a "faustischer Mensch"

- 1915: critically ill (tuberculosis) fighting for life —> healing ... working on new dances.

*"Agonising wandering
alongside powerful walls,
despaired searching on obscure paths.
I share your grief.
Yet my will steps over you
toward the goal it has set itself."*

- Close connection to nature. She considers her illness as part of the natural process of becoming and passing. *“it was about intensely living everything that you’re going through. Be it suffering, grief, hurt, loss, loneliness or happiness and enthusiasm. All that had to be drawn out of the unconsciousness and transformed into a conscious experience.”* (Norbert Servos)



Autumnal Dances (cycle): 5. "Dance in the Stillness" (1937). Photos by Albert Reizner. Essen.

- 1918 after the I World War goes back to Germany.

- 1919 real big success in Zürich with the “ecstatic dances” and others.

Suzanne Perrottet remembers some controversial opinions: “...That woman is heavy. She is not beautiful. She is not light, she doesn’t wear a nice costume.” “The audience was used to seeing female dancers as lovely, sweet appearances. But Wigman...she had character.”

M.W. was trying to convey deeper experiences and feelings with her dances.

“There was no audience anyway. My mother and my sister were sitting in the stalls. I bowed down to no response at all. Nothing. Pause. Silence. I felt like a complete and utter fool.”

Wigman reacts to the audience’s ignorance with enormous willpower. Nothing can stop her, not even the 1920 general strike in Dresden, keeping her stuck for three weeks. Since she cannot travel, she continues performing in Dresden, and with sudden success. More and more people fall for her charisma.

- November 1920 the theater is entirely sold out. (peak of her career)

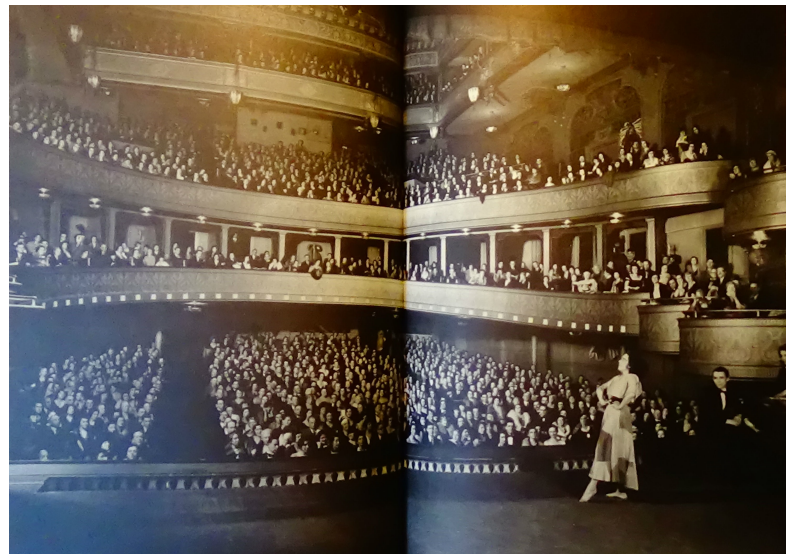
Kurt Schwaen (M.W.’s Pianist): “Seeing M.W. dance was truly an experience. An experience for every single one. I’d say there was no collective experience while watching Wigman dance. Everyone felt individually struck and addressed. Her performance did not appeal to the masses.”

Wigman often emphasized that there’s no deeper meaning in her dances. They rather show whatever you wish to behold. She could transport varying moods through her movements. Wigman considered dance to be an art form of itself, that actually doesn’t need music to exist. It is not the melodies that move the dancers. Wigman herself was **able to convert her emotions into movement**. There was no “as if” just the plain emotion. (film 33.16 min)

- swing between depression and frustration, a sense of rejection and joy, praise, satisfaction and sense of mission (“and you have the feeling, yes, why are you actually here, why do you exist, what is the purpose in all of this?”) (p.69)

- “the greatest dancer of Germany” she wanted to bring the dance to Germany...2 tours per year (30-40 shows per season) traveling alone, initially through provinces often on meagre stages booking local pianists and then in all Europe.

- she founds the “Wigman Schule” in Dresden → pedagogics of self-realization and freedom of expression, consciousness, independence, individualistic style.



All students share the search for their individual expression through dance.

“Character dance” (=“Ausdruckstanz”)

- 11 performances in NY. 1st show at Carnegie Hall, New York City

Tour: Washington, Chicago, Kansas City, Los Angeles. → sold out

- Many Wigman Schools were opened in America, because they provided the framework for modern dance classes, even today. New York, Greenwich Village, Waverly Place (1st Wigman School where the former Wigman student Hanya Holm was asked to manage the school: enrolling here was considered quite progressive.” (FILM 37.30 MIN Claudia Gitelman, dance theorist NY) —> “FROM MERE BODY TO INSTRUMENT” (written as slogan on the brochure for advertising the school).

- 1936 she choreographed parts of the Olympic Games opening ceremony (Olimpia Stadion, Berlin). Her hopes of continuing her work under the Nazi regime remain unfulfilled. Her artistic commitment cannot be compromised. Shortly afterwards, at age 56, she says forever goodbye to the stage with her last solo dance “Farewell and Thanks”.



MARY WIGMAN STUDIO
LEITUNG: MARY WIGMAN
WEST-BERLIN-DAHLEM · RHEINBÄNALLEE 35



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 Mary Wigman - Leben und Werk der großen Tänzerin - Hedwig Müller

Presentation by Lara Tovazzi, University of Roehampton, 6th December 2016

