

## Remembrance with a future – Reenacting Mary Wigman

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I stole the title of this talk – „remembrance with a future“ – from the Academy of Arts in Berlin, where it was used in 1984 as , at the highpoint of dance theater, suddenly an echo of expressionist dance was heard(1). The last survivors of the great uprising united from all over the world for workshops and discussions. Two years later the Academy celebrated Mary Wigman's 100<sup>th</sup> birthday. And Hedwig Müller and Quadriga published a clear and informative biography with helpful bibliography list which gathered everything that was known about Wigman at that point in time.

When Mary Wigman died in Berlin in 1973, she was only a legend. She purposely left no technique to hand down, unlike her American colleagues Humphrey, Graham, Hawkins, Cunningham, Horton.... she wanted to produce thinking, creative artists, not imitators. Reconstructions never helped anyone, she said. A believer in the Present, she predicted the death of her art, and accepted it.

Or not? I quote Mary Wigman:

*„A dance piece has its time, just as the dancer is caught in his own time, which allows him to use his body as an expressive instrument. That is the fate of dance. We have all experienced it and must recognize it. But this >process< is not in vain. All experiences and creations made from that experience receive and fulfill their purpose. They live and continue to effect, under the skin, in a way under the surface, stimulating and fertilizing others. If it is a truly creative idea, it will rise from its burial place, and, freed from the weight of its ballast, emerge again at the right place and at the right time.“ (2)*

How true. Today the old idea is revived. And we see today „A Mary Wigman Dance Evening“ as it might have been performed in Carnegie Hall in 1930-31 with a red curtain, small chrysalis chandeliers over the audience and very unusual timing: a three minute dance, then a pause with soft piano music, then a four minute dance and another pause to change costume. We see, not the fiery, demonical 40-year-old dancer who conquered New York, but a 27-year-young man, long-limbed, who comes from the equator in South America, who celebrates nine dances from the cycle „Swinging Landscape“, „Visions“ and „Celebration“ as if he had absorbed this movement language with his mother's milk. Many questions – about her, about him, yes. Dust? no.

How can this happen? What moves young dancers today to concern themselves with the work of Mary Wigman, or any other „Ausdruckstaenzer“ (expressive dancer). What kind of barriers must they overcome to abandon their own thought and movement patterns in order to achieve what we call today „reenacting“? Why and how can they approach a shadowy apparition which is only available in film, taken with an unmoving camera, in posed photographs, in personal description or in reviews? When did it catch their interest and why? It seems to agree with the hybrid nature of contemporary dance, to follow the spirit of the times, to move forward while looking back.

Young choreographers, inspired by a boom in dance theory, excavate like archeologists, searching for the roots of an endangered species. They dig into the archives, dive into the thoughts of the artist and examine documents. What results is, as Martin Nachbar calls it, nothing more than a 'Reconstruct', for dance is the most fleeting of the arts. It expires with the person who created it, its originator. Nachbar's performance „Urheben/Aufheben“, uses a clear concept which makes his own search and frustration with Dore Hoyer's phenomenal, for him totally foreign dance technique its theme. Fascinated by the incredible intensity of the dancer who, although she danced with Wigman, was never her student, Nachbar encounters her as a concept artist with all the necessary questions and permissible breaches – with the amazement and the helplessness of a young man.

Fabiàn Barba is completely different. He takes Wigman literally, he sub merges himself in her world. He transforms himself. He is, like Nachbar, trained in Release Technique, a graduate of PARTS in Brussels. He will tell you himself of how he allowed himself, in Wigman's words „to unite himself with space and to let his movements breathe. I find his motivation amusing. He always wondered why his classmates giggled when watching old videos in dance history class. And how different it was for him. He found something of the remembered culture of his dance teacher in Ecuador in the aesthetic codes of Ausdruckstanz.

The French sociologist and philosopher Maurice Halwachs (3) says that the collective memory of a family remains alive for 100 years. Could his theory apply to a dance family whose memory is anchored in the body? The fact that unconscious feelings and messages can reach relatives after several generations is accepted by brain research today, apparently an effect of mirror neurons. They store reactive patterns in the brain which, when we witness a similar event or even a feeling, make us feel as if we are experiencing it ourselves.(4) Claudia Jeschke at the Tanzkongress 2006, referred to Jan Assman who connected 'communicative memory' to the existence of living bearers of experience. This shortterm memory of a society lasts for 80 years or two to five generations.(5) In Wigman's case it is, so to speak, five minutes to twelve. We, the old ones, are the witnesses who can pass on some of the spirit, the pulse and feeling for space of our former teacher, Mary Wigman.

The Mary Wigman Society decided last year, as owner of the rights (to Wigman's work) to establish an artistic committee consisting of people who had experienced this era personally. This committee would help dancers to understand this dance language which now is neither 'spoken' (danced) or taught, just as Waltraud Luley brought Dore Hoyer's „Afectos Humanos“ as close as possible to Martin Nachbar. None of the three of us who were lucky enough to work with Fabiàn Barba on the Wigman dances had ever seen Wigman perform onstage. This is a deficiency. But perhaps also luck as I would die a thousand deaths if I had to compare the Hoyer original which I knew so well with a copy.

At different times from the mid-Fifties to the mid-Sixties Susanne Linke, Katharine Sehnert and I were students at the Wigman Studio Berlin. In spite of her decreasing strength, Wigman's aesthetic impressed us through the powerful metaphors of her dance language and her poetic speech, although the pathos of her gestures seemed to us, young as we were, exaggerated. Our artistic idols were rather the avant-garde: Dore Hoyer and Manja Chmièl.

At this point I'd like to concentrate on a few examples of my practical work of recollection – although there are many American re-creators who revived Wigman's and Hoyer's work and who should be mentioned here: the ex-Wigman student Emma Lewis Thomas, former professor at the University of California, Mary Newhall who worked with Allison Beth Hankins on Wigman's „Hexentanz“ at the University of New Mexico or Betsy Fisher from the University of Hawaii who has toured Europe and Asia with her research and performance group and others. In general, Wigman's innovations appear to have fallen on more fertile ground in the dance universities in the USA than in Europe. Many Wigman students emigrated to America. Remnants of this dance language appear in German or English dance schools, although they may bear the label „Palucca“ or „Laban“. The remains of the ideas were melded with other, more physical techniques. The expressionistic tradition appears in Sasha Waltz's work, especially in the intensity of the movements for large groups. She had begun to dance with a Wigman student. But where would contemporary dance be today if there had not been a fundamental change at the beginning of the 20. century.

Unexpectedly it was the ballerina Sylvie Guillem who asked herself this question. She is the most famous seeker (of Wigman). While she was working on a trilogie about movement for French television, she found a video of the „Hexentanz“ from 1926. Mary Wigman? Never heard of her. She was completely astonished to find out that this she-devil was not a contemporary dancer. A fascinating chapter of the past opened before her: „quite modern, not at all old-fashioned, dusty or uninteresting“ (6) she said. She, who could until then dance anything was amazed: „how difficult it is for

me to approach this personal style.“(7) She tried to read this foreign language from the film, to understand it and to infuse it with her own voice.

We met, with my colleague Leanore Ickstadt, in 1998 in the Tanz Tangente Berlin to clear up some stylistic questions about „Hexentanz“ and „Sommerlicher Tanz“ (1929). She told me that in her dance history class at the Paris Opera, Martha Graham had been identified as the first modern dancer. She also accepted the fact that dance in general was a French invention. Basta! Actually, German Ausdruckstanz was first accepted in France in 1986 when Jacqueline Robinson – Wigman student in Paris – translated Wigman's book „The Language of Dance“ into French. Even though Karin Waehner lived in Paris since 1952 and her student, Angelin Preljocaj, is therefore indirectly a Wigman student.

The French edition of the Wigman book was also an important source for Fabiàn Barba, because the dances that he wanted to choreograph anew in Wigman's style were described there in detail. As his knowledge of German was limited, he was forced to search through the archives for the last scraps in English and French.

Back to Sylvie Guillem. Leanore and I were very nervous before our first meeting with this dance wonder. We knew that she was difficult and rebellious. That she said „non!“ very often. We knew that she wanted to include the Wigman dances in her first solo appearance as a contemporary dancer at the Holland Festival in den Haag. I was lucky that she agreed to an interview and that she accepted me as a Feldenkrais practitioner to help with her stiff neck.

She described her own transformation, her search for the New without pointe shoes: „It's like learning different languages – I want to know a lot of languages right now. I have more fun doing that and trying to find myself in that: who I am and who I could become. And I speak through others because I simply don't have the courage to do my own thing. It's true that there are a lot of choreographers now, they talk and talk and talk but all they say is not very interesting and has been said long time ago. . .“(8)

She approached Wigman with sensitivity and great musicality. She found the dances difficult, although they appeared to be easy. We noticed that, like most classical dancers when they dance „modern“, she used her arms and legs as if they were peripheral. The impulse for the movement did not come from her center, from the solar plexus or her tummy. It seemed important to us that she learn to give her torso more volume and her back more depth in order to give breath to the flow of the movement on all spatial levels. I used techniques like Body-Mind Centering or Ideokinesis. It was difficult to convey this way of sensing in such a short time, but the resistant forces in the torso that lead to forceful transversal convolutions were typical for expressionist dance, in order to give shape to the emotion.

In her autobiographical solo „Classic Instinct“ Sylvie Guillem puts herself next to Mary Wigman, which I really enjoyed. The piece is like an installation in nighttime n out-of-doors in the evening, as if she had to dream away the difference in time. In „Sommerlichen Tanz“ she appears in a cinematic thunderstorm. The fragments of Hanns Hastings Tango for piano are swallowed up by the Scherzo from Bruckner's 9<sup>th</sup> Symphony. The seductive waves of the arms – Wigman's subtext: infatuated gaiety in flickering heat – she contrasts with the virtual flapping of Odile from Swan Lake. What's the difference? is what she asks. As a witch can she drape herself completely in white and use her own experience of wild fury. She claws the air with her left hand, because it is stronger than her right hand, the one Mary Wigman used and she says why: „To do what she does it's not possible. You have to be her to do it like her, to have her life, her personality, her feelings, her visual imagination and her feeling for timing.“(9)

How free can a dancer be in his choice of means in reviving a work? When Cesc Gelabert performs Gerhard Bohner's „Im (Goldenen) Schnitt I“ we see how close he comes, how he understands the essence and the exactness of the mechanics of this masterpiece. But we also see how

he makes this work his own. The fact that he knew Bohner and that Bohner chose him to perform the dance is a great advantage.

*Reenacting Wigman* is minute, precision work. The subtexts must be understood. Much has been lost. There are no films of six of the dances in Barba's program, only photos, newspaper reviews and Wigman's drawings or descriptions. New creations „after Wigman“, as Barba has attempted here, can only emerge when the movement language has been absorbed, the gliding, the vibrato, the spinning and use of space, the 'touching and being touched' as Hellmut Gottschild (10) described Wigman's fascination. This is my own opinion.

We worked together on „Raumgestalt“ from the cycle „Visionen“, part of Wigman's preparation for her first choric work to Albert Talhoff's poetic hymn „Totenmal“, homage to the dead of the First World War. The costume material created a mighty „fantastical bird“. (11) A wing of velvet and silk, 4 yards long, produced the movement of flight. So we raced through Berlin for a half a day searching for the right fabric, and he stayed up nights sewing the layers together. This is also reconstruction. Wigman said of the dance, „It was man's work that far exceeded my strength“. (12) Fabiàn whirled the wing wildly in the air, faster and faster until he collapsed. He feels that the wing is not heavy enough for him. We couldn't find the heavy siver-grey velvet and tried to make do with a lighter velvet. Another problem. The music for this dance by Will Goetze was lost. Fabiàn Barba found a musician (Sascha Demand) who composed music to „Raumgestalt“ in the expressionist mood (13). „A balancing act between art and science?“ (14)

There was another vague dream which developed in an opposite direction: the failed revival of the 1957 creation „Frühlingsweihe“ at the Städtischen Oper Berlin. Mary Wigman thought it her best work. Nothing remained of the choreography, just the score Stravinsky's „Le Sacre du Printemps“, photos, euphoric reviews, Wigman's notes and colored sketches. And naturally the memories in the bodies of the few living dancers. Can one in this case as archeologist glue the pieces together?

Gerhard Brunner thought Yes! The journalist, theater director, university teacher – one of the most knowledgeable experts in dance – made up his mind to produce this work again: as the crowning glory of a (yet to be established) Berlin Ballet – which unfortunately was never established. That was 10 years ago. Utopia? As an ally I tried everything to find survivors who might know parts of the choreography which was carried mainly by Dore Hoyer's own wild choreography and performance of the victim's role. I searched for dancers from Gsovsky's Berliner Ballet and in the USA for former Wigman student Brigitta Herrmann and Emma Lewis Thomas, who as „maternal figure“ stood behind Dore Hoyer, and memorized every step, every gesture and practised them at night in her room.

We dreamt: could Sylvie Guillem dance the Victim? or preferably Michaela Isabel Fünfhausen, a student of Luley's and Folkwang who was already familiar with the reconstruction of Hoyer's dances? Susanne Lincke had a wonderful idea: she imagined the choric scenes as a series of still pictures which would melt into each other – freed of ballast. She is also a Wigman and Hoyer expert, her reconstruction of „Afectos“ came closest to the original, in my opinion. She continued this reworking of fragments in 2008 in her piece „Quasi Normal“ for the Jeanne Ruddy Dance Company in Philadelphia. She concerned herself there with the act of (self) expression. Her sources were Wigman's solo „Niobe“ and Hoyer's choreographic sketches. In „Quasi Normal“ Brigitta Herrmann wandered like a sleepwalking guest from yesteryear. (15) Asking herself if she dared do this, Susanne Lincke's inner query was „What would Mary say?“

The 'Sacre' idea collapsed together with Brunner's resignation and the dissolution of two of the Berlin ballet companies. Yet, when I phoned him last week in Zurich he was ready to start. He knew a place where it was possible.... an idee fixe? It would seem so, for the clock is ticking. Will this delay be deadly for the survivors?

On Nov. 13 2009 Mary Wigman would have been 123 years old. What would she have said?

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translation: Leanore Ickstadt

## Sources

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- 13 Sascha Demand also composed the music for F. Barba: for „Zeremonielle Gestalt“ und „Drehmonotonie“ . The original music by Will Goetz was lost.
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