

LABAN AND THE BERLIN STAATSOPER

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THE course of Rudolph von Laban's career, as a pioneer of the dance, has been volcanic; periods of calm have been succeeded by tremendous upheavals, changing everything precedent. To trace the underlying principle of this development is not easy. Extremes follow each other, opposite poles are juxtaposed, vestigial contradictions may be carried over from the past. These eruptions make it no easier to clear up the numerous misconceptions that have be-



come attached to Laban's work. Laban, a true artist, yet with a touch of the comedian, seems satisfied with the situation. Sometimes he seems deliberately to intensify the obscurity. He keeps the bourgeois on the jump. This is a little hard on those who think they have mastered part of his work; no sooner does understanding begin to dawn, than they are suddenly confronted with a brand new and entirely different Laban.

This Puckish quality naturally creates obstacles in carrying through his ideas. Though it makes his personality more brilliant, unattainable, almost unreal, it hinders the sympathetic exploiter of this material in reaching a suitable development. The bubbling over of ideas, the intoxication of an inexhaustible, continually rejuvenated supply of conceptions has prevented any work from developing to maturity. Laban hardly completes a

Sketch of Laban by Heinrich Heckroth

large scale plan. As soon as an idea has definitely shaped itself, he is no longer interested in it. It is discarded as quickly as possible and the development turned over to the immediate circle of his pupils. Thus its fate depends on them.



Laban has not always been surrounded by people in a position to interpret his inspiration. While he has succeeded in the exhaustive development of his theory, especially in his *Tanzschrift*, a large part of his art remains only blocked out. Even Mary Wigman, although a completely individual artistic personality, had difficulty in breaking through Laban's enchanted circle. Her life work is the complete development of a brief period in Laban's career. She has exhaustively—magnificently—developed every possibility. We now realize what might have arisen from the later stages of Laban's evolution could he but have found a creative interpreter.

Laban's line of development is an abridged version of the history of the dance. All the landmarks, all the applications, from ritual magic to physical culture, from feudal plays to democratic socialization, all the stages which exist in the dance between the poles of art and of life, find a new application to the present day in Laban.



The Berlin Staatsoper, although perhaps not so tradition-ridden as the Munich or Paris operas, is one of those institutions that rarely make contact with what is contemporary—and then with ill grace. The fact that a large corps de ballet has been dragged along for years without ever being put to any real or worthy use proves the case. It is therefore well worth noting that only with the help of Laban has some of this dead weight been jettisoned.

In the program of the Berliner Staatsoper as a whole, the ballet is only a "marvelous vestigium" as Laban himself once called it. It has survived from the time of the court theatre. Attempts to reform the ballet, like those of Max Terpis, Laban's

predecessor, were shattered against internal obstacles. The stubborn survivors of the classical ballet could not ally themselves with the new movement.

But considering everything, it was not so very daring, after all, to summon Laban, Protean magician of the new dance, to direct the ballet of the Staatsoper just as his development had reached a new turning point. Laban had abandoned that complete opposition to ballet technic which had characterized his previous work of construction. Once an ideology for the new dance had appeared on the scene, it became possible to turn back to or utilize the still serviceable elements of the ballet. The change from revolutionary to evolutionary was complete. Laban is equipped as no other to carry out the reconstruction of the ballet.

But this is a question of organization rather than of creation. He has given us, in a few opera ballets, certain interesting choreographic accomplishments, but the main emphasis has been on educational work. The already mentioned wrecking processes led to the elimination of the most important solo dancers. The gaps had to be filled with new, youthful material. Another important phase of Laban's reconstruction work was the establishing of kinetic archives. The dances presented on the stage of the Berlin Staatsoper are recorded in Laban's *Tanzschrift* and form the basis for a highly significant dance library.



Still, Laban's work for the Staatsoper will hardly be of crucial importance in the development of the dance as a whole. In this field the Berlin theatre has no real significance. The Krolloper, the only state opera institution with a conscious responsibility toward contemporary creation, has been closed. It is hard enough to get the state theatres to recognize the present; how can we expect them to worry about the future?

The decisive development of the dance must materialize outside these institutions. Laban's ideal still remains the self-sufficient, self-reliant dance theatre, but this realization lies far in the future—at least for Europe. It should take the form of an experimental theatre where all possible choreographic combina-

tions could be worked out, where various intermediary forms, the relation of the dance with the spoken word, with the kinetic scene and with the moving light could be cultivated.

These possibilities do not concern the Berlin Staatsoper. Perhaps they are Utopian questions which do not belong to the terribly prosaic reality of our day. But the fact that they bob up again and again, always with the same—even increased—strength, demonstrates their right-to-live for the future.

Laban is over fifty and as ballet master of the Berlin Staatsoper is quite an important gentleman. He has been given the greatest distinction possible. Laban among the prominent bourgeois . . . let us not be overcome with astonishment.