



The Role of Dance in the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games

Why Competition became Festival and Art became Political

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Five Olympic rings: the symbol of the modern Olympic Games. At one time there were also five Olympic Art Competitions: architecture, sculpture, painting, music, and literature. But, what about the art of dance? Where was dance in this mix of art competitions? In order to comprehend fully the role of dance at the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games, it is essential to take a brief look at the historical background of the Olympic Art Competitions.

When the enthusiastic young Frenchman, the Baron Pierre de Coubertin, achieved his dream of reviving the Ancient Olympic Games as an international festival in the spring of 1896, with Athens as the first modern host city, he also desired to combine art with athletic feats, as in the ancient model. However, the first modern Games was not the time to introduce his artistic aspirations, and the succeeding two Olympic Games faced many obstacles. In Paris 1900 and St. Louis 1904, combining the Olympic Games with a World's Fair in each instance did not bode well for adding art competitions, and the survival of the Olympic Games was threatened.

When Athens clamored loudly soon afterwards to host the Olympic Games permanently, since Greece was the original home of the Ancient Olympic Games, the Baron was not pleased; his vision was to share the Games with the world each Olympiad. However, while in Greece in 1896, Coubertin agreed to interim Games in the city of Athens. It was to be the 10th anniversary of the modern Games, but Coubertin would not be in Athens since he had intentionally made other plans: a Paris Conference on Arts and Letters, which he hoped to include in future Games. In his invitation letter to artists and other dignitaries around the world, Coubertin wrote that

the purpose was to study "...by what means and under what forms the Arts and the Letters could participate with the celebration of the modern Olympiades and, generally, associate with the practice of Sport for its benefit and ennoblement."¹

The program for the Paris conference included the following artistic components: architecture, dramatic art, choreography ("Processions, parades, coordinated movements in groups" were noted as "Dances"), decoration, letters, music, painting, and sculpture.² The conference resulted in a "...unanimously approved resolution that the forthcoming Olympiad in 1908 should contain competitions for all the arts. The winners for the best works of architecture, painting, sculpture, music and poetry, inspired by sport, were to receive Olympic medals."³ The word dance never appeared in the list of arts to be contested, and time constraints did not allow for the art competitions to come to fruition for the London Olympic Games in 1908.

The groundwork, however, was laid regarding the rules for future Olympic Art Competitions, and in 1912, on the occasion of the Vth Olympiad in Stockholm, Sweden, the Olympic art competitions had their debut. With the cancellation of the 1916 Games due to WWI, the next art competitions did not take place until the 1920 Antwerp Olympic Games, followed by Paris in 1924, Amsterdam in 1928, and Los Angeles in 1932. Dance was noticeably absent from any Olympic art competitions throughout these years.

Berlin Olympic Games 1936

In 1936, dance was one art form that the Germans wanted to add to their Art Competitions during the Olympic Games, along with Gold and Silver Smithing, and Works of the Screen (sport film). Expanding the subcategories in each of the five art disciplines, which would have increased the number of medals as well as the number of potential participants, was the German goal for the Berlin Games. Approval by the International Olympic Committee, however, was required and none was forthcoming, not for the addition of Dance, nor for Gold and Silver Smithing or Works of the Screen.⁴

Dance, however, played a significant part both before, and during, the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin, Germany. Nazi organizers sought to draw international attention to the achievements of their leader, Adolf Hitler, and one way to succeed was through the popular medium of dance. Noted German choreographers and dancers of the day were enlisted to play a part in the Olympic program: Rudolf von Laban, Mary Wigman, and Harald Kreutzberg. In her book, *Modern Dance in Germany and the United States: Crosscurrents and Influences*, Isa Partsch-Bergsohn details Laban's extensive involvement with Olympic preparations as follows: "Laban, a master at arranging mass scenes in choral dancing, was commissioned to direct the triumphal celebration of German Dance at the Dietrich Eckart Freilichtbühne (Outdoor Theater) and to organize a Great International Dance Competition in July 1936."⁵ The dance celebration to inaugurate the Dietrich Eckart stage at the Olympic grounds took place on the opening night of the Games.⁶

Indeed, Laban planned a huge event, training a thousand dancers who were then divided into 22 groups for his production, *Vom Tauwind und der Neuen Freude* (Spring Wind and the New Joy). What might have been heralded as innovative and captivating was suddenly banned after the final dress rehearsal on 20 June before 20,000 invited guests at the Dietrich-Eckart outdoor theater. Dr. Josef Goebbels, Reich Minister of Propaganda, was in attendance and promptly dismissed Laban's work as a poorly-choreographed piece, one that was intellectual, and had nothing whatever to do with Germans. Of course, the worst possible scenario at the time of Nazi ideology was to create anything intellectual. Goebbels was outraged that Laban was attempting to use the Nazis for his own goals and immediately prohibited the performance of Laban's work. Obviously, Laban's dance philosophy was not in keeping with the view of the National Socialists. In short, Goebbels favored traditional German dance; he was not appreciative of the avant-garde modern dance which often attempted to deliver a message, or tell a story, on an intellectual level. The opening night of the Olympic Games did include Kreutzberg's choreography as well as Wigman's choreography (in which she also danced), but Laban was out of the Olympic picture for good.⁷

The International Dance Competitions

Laban's personal situation deteriorated rapidly following that fatal dress rehearsal. However, as recently appointed head of the Deutsche Meisterwerkstätten für Tanz (German Master Studio for Dance), Laban organized and coordinated the international dance competitions scheduled for 15-31 July in the Berlin theater at Horst-Wessel-Platz. An international jury was chosen to judge the dance works for their overall artistic value and cultural significance. Examples of specific criteria included technique, musical accompaniment, and costumes.⁸ Performance groups were not limited to a specific dance genre, but a group was required to be comprised of a minimum of 10 members. Invitations were sent to all nations competing in the Olympic Games and each nation was encouraged to send its best dancers and dance ensembles to Berlin for this artistic prelude to the Games. National Socialist Germany was anxious to demonstrate its openness to the world.⁹

A program from 1936 entitled "Internationale Tanzwettspiele Anlässlich der 11. Olympiade Berlin, 1936" (International Dance Competitions on the Occasion of the 11th Olympiad Berlin, 1936) specifies in detail "die Künstler und ihre Tänze" (the Artists and their Dances) and cites 14 countries, along with names of their respective dancers and dances. Countries participating in the competition included Australia, Belgium, Bulgaria, Canada, Germany, Greece, India, Italy, Jugoslavia, Netherlands, Austria, Poland, Rumania, and Switzerland.¹⁰

One country that was noticeably missing from this international dance gathering in Berlin was the United States of America. Five months before the Olympic Games began, an article in the *New York Times* noted that Martha Graham, one of the country's leading dancers, refused an invitation from Germany to represent the United States in Berlin at the Olympic Games. Details of the invitation were as follows: "Miss Graham received her invitation from the dance division of the German Ministry of

Culture and it was signed by Rudolf von Laban, president of the Deutsche Tanzbuehne,' by the president of the organization committee of the Eleventh Olympic Games, and by the Reichminister of Volks-aufklarung, und Propaganda.'"¹¹

Graham's reply was clear and to the point:

I would find it impossible to dance in Germany at the present time. So many artists whom I respect and admire have been persecuted, have been deprived of the right to work for ridiculous and unsatisfactory reasons, that I should consider it impossible to identify myself, by accepting the invitation, with the regime that has made such things possible. In addition, some of my concert group would not be welcomed in Germany.¹²

The organizers tried to convince Graham that, if she would consent to coming to Berlin, her Jewish dancers would "...receive complete immunity." Graham, however, was not dissuaded. No American dance group went to Berlin in 1936.¹³ It is interesting to note that Graham was deemed so essential to the international competitions, as the leading protagonist of American modern dance, that she had received an invitation from Goebbels himself by short-wave transmitter, even before the official invitation arrived at the close of 1935.¹⁴

England, France, Sweden, and Russia also declined to send performers to Berlin.¹⁵ One nation, however, that answered the call enthusiastically was Canada. Russian-born ballet dancer and teacher, Boris Volkoff, had defected from the Moscow State Ballet while performing in China in 1924, and was enjoying success with his student productions in the city of Toronto. According to an article in *The Beaver*, "He simply saw Berlin as a wonderful opportunity to promote Canadian dance. He knew that the best way to capture Canadian attention was to win international recognition."¹⁶ Volkoff's program for Berlin included an interesting variety: a group ballet choreographed to classical music, a polka solo to the music of Strauss, and a North American Indian-inspired ballet, among others.¹⁷ When the Volkoff company arrived in Berlin, "They were told to stay close to the theatres, restaurants and their accommodation and not to wander."¹⁸ Few signs of trouble were evident, since Goebbels had ensured that Berlin was cleansed of anti-Semitic signs and flagrant Nazi literature. The city was in order and Berliners were polite. The taped, broken windows of Jewish stores were the only indication of underlying trouble.¹⁹

Folk, Ballet, and Modern Dance in Competition

The anticipated effect of the international dance competitions was not fulfilled, due in part to the variation in artistic standards among both soloists and ensembles, and to the three distinct dance genres competing against one another. The folk genre comprised a large part of the German repertoire, since traditional German culture had been recently promoted by Goebbels and the National Socialist Government.²⁰ One example was the Gewinner Winzer-, Trachten-und Tanzgruppe (a folklore dance group wearing typical costumes of the Moselle valley) from Penzberg which enjoyed the popular appeal of its three dances: Kronentanz (crown dance), Schuplattler

(Bavarian 'slapping' dance), and Mühlrad (mill wheel dance.)²¹ The Germans also showcased Mary Wigman and Harald Kreutzberg, the leading European modern dancers of the time and well-known for their North American tours.²²

The Bulgarians, Rumanians, and other European countries also focused on the folk genre, as did the Indians by showcasing a Hindu myth based on their classical dance tradition.²³ The Yugoslavs, however, apparently captivated the audience with their program of six stylized Croatian folk dances two days before the Olympics began. In a 1944 publication, *Kroatische Volksweisen und Volkstänze* (Croatian Folk Melodies and Folk Dances), Dr. Vinko Zganec stated the following:

German newspapers spared no kudos in their enthusiastic reports and reviews of the Croatian dances. And that's not all: the audience, numbering an impressive 3,000, became so excited that they burst into spontaneous applause in the midst of the performance itself and set to clapping in time with the music, thus accompanying the dances with an expression of genuine empathy, and sharing the dancers' enthusiasm for their art.²⁴

It was not only the folk dancers from Croatia who captivated the audience; a prima ballerina with the Zagreb National Opera, Mia Slavenska (real name: Mia Corak), also made her mark. According to a 1997 article by Branko Franolic in the *Croatian Times*. "In 1936 she won first prize at the Dance Olympiad in Berlin, which took place alongside the Olympic Games. She danced with Kreutzberg and Wigman, and her spectacular success there led to guest appearances ... in Paris ... and ... in London."²⁵ Both folk and ballet genres garnered success, as did the modern dance. Notable performances by a full complement of German dancers included internationally acclaimed Mary Wigman and Harald Kreutzberg.

Prizes and Politics

It was not until the award ceremony at the close of the competitions that Laban, as chief of the adjudicators, addressed the international participants and stated that "...one could not measure artistic achievement as in sport with a stopwatch and meter measurement, especially when such a variety of genres were incomparable, such as the folk dance and ballet."²⁶ In fact, it would have been nearly impossible to create enough categories for proper comparison and, therefore, everyone was to receive a diploma. More than diplomas were awarded, however; medals and other prizes were given to the outstanding dancers and groups. Among those receiving special recognition were Germans Harald Kreutzberg and Mary Wigman, Mia Corak-Slavenska from Yugoslavia, and the group from India. What began as an international dance competition, therefore, became an international festival.²⁷

Apparently, it had been clear to the Canadians when they arrived in Berlin that Laban had preferred an international dance festival as opposed to a competition from the start, but the Nazis wanted a competition in hopes that it "...would bring easy glory to the predominant German groups."²⁸ As for the Canadians, Volkoff and his dancers were pleased with their performance and reception by the audience, but they

did not receive any special awards. Volkoff, however, "...glowingly reported on the virtually valueless diploma, medal and silver cup;"²⁹ he was given in an attempt to capitalize on this Olympic opportunity and expand his popularity at home.

What became of Laban and Wigman, the two most noted German modern dancers, after the conclusion of the dance competition-turned-festival? Rudolf von Laban left Berlin to recover from the rigors of the past weeks, but was immediately placed under house arrest by German authorities, subjected to investigation about his past (particularly his membership in the Freemasons from 1917-1918), and had to prove his Aryan ancestry through documentation, which he did. His work as head of the German Master Studio for Dance was subsequently diminished, as was his salary. When his contract expired on 31 March 1937, Laban was jobless. Nazi officials placed him in an apartment at Schloss Banz cloister, in Bayreuth. When schoolchildren wanted to arrange summer courses in Frankfurt and Hamburg from Laban, they were cautioned not to support him or they would forfeit their chance to take part in the exhibitions, "Kraft durch Freude" (Power through Joy). In November 1937 Laban managed to escape to Paris, and, in 1938, he went to England, where he gradually recovered from poor health, both physically and mentally.³⁰ He died in 1958, but not without leaving to the world his systematic method of recording dance movements known as Labanotation.³¹

As for Mary Wigman, she realized that the Nazis had no use for her after the Olympic Games, and she was now alone in her fight for German modern dance. Once an internationally recognized dancer, both she and her work were now categorized as degenerate. The Nazis saw her as an intellectual – an expressionist – and she was treated as such. Support for her school was cancelled. Cultural isolation became difficult for Wigman; many of her Jewish friends had quietly left their homeland by 1936. She eventually ignored Nazi ideology, ceased to compromise her work (which she admitted to having done in the past), and restored herself as an artist.³² Wigman died in West Berlin in 1973.

Conclusion

The Nazis wanted an international dance competition associated with the Olympic Games; in the end, it became a festival. German dancers in the 1930s had to conform to the restrictions of the regime's ideology, or not perform. Art, including dance, was to be made accessible to everyone, that is, to the masses. Hitler's philosophy was that of community: "we"-- not "I" or "you." The regime's restrictions against expressionism and intellectual works, therefore, took their toll on Germany's leading dancers of the era, especially Maty Wigman and Rudolf von Laban.

Endnotes

- ¹ Richard Stanton, *The Forgotten Olympic Art Competitions* (Lausanne: International Olympic Committee, 2000), 6.
- ² Ibid., 7.
- ³ Ibid., 14-15 (The arts competitions from 1912 through 1932 included architecture, sculpture, painting, music, and literature. See pages 34, 58, 79, 95, and 149.)
- ⁴ Ibid., 156-161.
- ⁵ Isa Partsch-Bergsohn, *Modern Dance in Germany and the United States: Crosscurrents and Influences* (United States: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1994), 92. Note: Isa Partsch-Bergsohn was a former student (dancer) of Maty Wigman at the Music Academy in Leipzig during WWII.
- ⁶ Hedwig Müller/Patricia Stöckemann, *Everyone is a Dancer: Dance of Expression in Germany between 1900 and 1945* (Giessen: Anabas-Publishing, 1993), 164. (from Carl und Liselott Diem-Archiv, Deutsche Sporthochschule, Cologne, Germany. Translated from German by Paul Nissler, Ph.D. candidate in the Department of German and Slavic Languages, Penn State University, University Park, PA, January 2004).
- ⁷ Partsch-Bergsohn, *Modern Dance*, 92-93.
- ⁸ Müller/Stöckemann, *Everyone is a Dancer*, 164, 168.
- ⁹ Ibid., 168.
- ¹⁰ *INTERNATIONALE TANZWETTSPIELE* (Berlin: Maurer & Dimmick GMBH., 1936), 3. (translated from German by Richard Crum, Berlitz. translator, June, 2002).
- ¹¹ "German Invitation Refused by Dancer," *New York Times*, March 13, 1936, 10:6. (Note: Dr. Theodore Lewald was President of the Organizing Committee for the Games of the Xlth Olympiad, *American Olympic Committee Report 1936*, p. 21.)
- ¹² Ibid.
- ¹³ Müller/Stöckemann, *Everyone is a Dancer*, 169.
- ¹⁴ Ibid., 168-169.
- ¹⁵ John Ayre, "Berlin, 1936: Canadian Dancers at Hitler's Olympics, *The Reaver*, 76, No. 1, February-March 1996: 36.
- ¹⁶ Ibid.
- ¹⁷ Ibid., 36-38.
- ¹⁸ Ibid., 38.
- ¹⁹ Ibid.
- ²⁰ Müller/Stöckemann, *Everyone is a Dancer*, 169.
- ²¹ "Curriculum Vitae" of the Gewinner-, Trachten- und Tanzgruppe, from <http://www.tanzgruppe.winningen.de/ges> (accessed 23 June 2003), and *INTERNATIONALE TANZWETTSPIELE*, 10.
- ²² Müller/Stöckemann, *Everyone is a Dancer*, 170.
- ²³ Ibid., 169-170.
- ²⁴ Dr. Vinko Zganec, *Kroatische Volksweisen und Volkstanze* (Zagreb, 1944), 44-45. (translated by Richard Crum, Berlitz translator, June 2002).

²⁵ Branko Franolic, "Mia Slavenska on the London Stage," *Croatian Times*, Issue 20, October/November 1997, from <http://www.croatianmall.com/croatia/franolic/miaslavenska.htm> (accessed 23 June 2003).

²⁶ Müller/Stöckemann, *Everyone is a Dancer*, 170.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ayre, *Berlin, 1936*, 40.

²⁹ Ibid., 42.

³⁰ Müller/Stöckemann, *Everyone is a Dancer*, 170.

³¹ Terry Kirby, "Eight years after the revolution started, modern dance arrives in its £22m home," *Independent*, 06 February 2003, from <http://enjoyment.independent.co.uk/theatre/news/story.jsp?story=375937> (accessed 23 June 2003).

³² Partsch-Bergsohn, *Modern Dance*, 94.