Migration and Memory: The Dances of Gertrud Bodenwieser

BY CAROL BROWN

I'm speaking to you. Ready the space, make it possible, make it real.

Mark/sign/imprint/trace/seal.

Step together, stop, wind, unwind, step turn schlinger, breathe.

And speak to me in this silence.

In the reaches of my memory a figure is held in language and gesture. She is re-membered in certain movements and habits of style. She is distant and close, inside and outside, part omnipotent presence and part invisible trace; a "dancemother" whose image was interiorized through the process of learning how to dance. Composed of fragments of memory, mythology, and history, her story is less biography than biomythography, for I never knew her, yet I know her still.



Invitation to Bodenwieser's first solo concert in 1914 in Vienna: Image by Franz von Bayros.

My earliest knowledge of dance as an art form was inscribed through a series of "quotes" from the past, for it was the Viennese Ausdruckstanz choreographer Gertrud Bodenwieser (1890-1959) whose words and ideas animated my dancing. I came to know Bodenwieser through the teachings of her former dancer Shona Dunlop-MacTavish, with whom I trained in New Zealand from 1972-85. When I moved to the UK in the late 1980s, curiosity and a hunger for the familiar led me to meet with other former Bodenwieser dancers now residing there: Hilde Holger, the late Bettina Vernon, Evelyn Ippen, and Hilary Napier. All of these women, including Dunlop-MacTavish, received their primary dance training with Bodenwieser, danced in the Tanzgruppe Bodenwieser in Vienna (1923-38), and, with the exception of Hilde Holger, danced in Australia with the Bodenwieser Viennese Ballet (1939-58). Significantly, they also all developed independent careers as dancer-choreographers and teachers in various parts of the world, including Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, China, India, and England.

I have listened to their stories, studied their personal archival collections of photographs, programmes, and writings, and learned some of their dances. More recently, and with the assistance of a Lisa Ullman Scholarship, I traveled to Canberra, Australia to visit the Gertrud Bodenwieser Archives in the Australian National Library. Alongside this activity and over a period of 15

years, I have been involved as a dancer in a series of reconstructions of Bodenwieser's dances, *The Demon Machine* (1924), *Slavonic Dance* (1939), and *Joan of Arc* (1946).

Now listen, I want the feeling of listening, of listening and leaping, of leaping into listening. Put rhythm, pulse, and humming space into movement and remember, you must lift your chin and take your gaze outward in order to be seen.

The armkreis.⁴

I am not a dance historian but a working choreographer and dancer based in London. This activity of research and retrieval has been in part a quest to make sense of the disjunctive experience of growing up in one part of the world, the southern hemisphere, while learning to dance in the style of another part of the world, the Viennese style of Ausdruckstanz. It has also been part of a genealogical quest, a process of re-membering an artistic legacy largely invisible within dominant narratives of modern dance history.

To engage in genealogy involves recognizing the inscriptions of the past on the present. Genealogies of performance can be said to excavate the lineage of behaviors still at least partially visible in contemporary culture. Such an approach is indebted to Michel Foucault's notion of a "critical genealogy" as "writing the history of the present." Accordingly, history is concerned less with tracing origins than tracing displacements. Genealogy in this sense is about engaging in a choreography of memory and history at the site of the body in motion.

The 'I' stretches through the tendons and spilling, spinning, tripping, moves to another place. Never to close the circle, keep it open, keep it whole. The schöpfkreis.⁶

Gertrud Bodenwieser, in setting her own body in motion, also set other bodies in motion, and these movements were configured according to the evolving paradigms of her practice as dancer, educator, and choreographer. This is the story of her/my body. In the process of my "becoming dancer," it was her movement ideas, her language, and her philosophy that were translated to me. Or were they? History is about the construction of narratives from the present traces of the past. The transmission of dance knowledge between generations is a malleable process through which traces of dances and their movement fundamentals become reinscribed. The authority of these traces must always be circumspect, however, because the dance artifact exists only in the moment of its performance. As Ann Daly writes, dances are "by definition in constant evolution over time and through space."

Does Bodenwieser's movement writing still linger in the rippling action of the spine, the *welle* (the wave)? In the openness of the pelvis as a leg circles in a horizontal arc, the *beinkries* (leg circle)? In the circular movement of arms whipping above the head, the *schlinge* (the loop of a knot)? Does my own ongoing research into performance states and the body as a sculpture of time and space signal a continuation or a break with her legacy? What traces remain of her dancing?

Profile

In the brief history of modern dance, Bodenwieser acquired a reputation as the source of a particular lineage of dance, the Viennese school of Ausdruckstanz. Emerging in the period between the two world wars in Central Europe as a radically modern and innovative genre, Ausdruckstanz is generally regarded as a drive towards a more personal form of expression



Dancer Shona Dunlop in the role of Cain in *Cain and Abel*; 1940; Sydney, Australia. Photographer Unknown.



Exotisches (Exzentrisches) Orchester; Vienna, 1926; Photographer unknown.

in dance, literally dance of expression. Bodenwieser in Vienna was regarded as a key personality in this field but, being an Austrian Jew, she was largely erased from the official canon of Central European Dance, which emphasizes the triumvirate of Mary Wigman, Rudolf von Laban, and Kurt Jooss.⁸

Gertrude Bodenwieser was born in Vienna, Austria in 1890 and died in Sydney, Australia in 1959. She was strongly influenced by contemporary thinking on movement and the body and cites François Delsarte, Jacques Dalcroze, Bess Mensendieck, and Rudolf von Laban as major influences. In keeping with contemporary modes of representation, she viewed the dancing body as a vehicle for the expression of the sensory and psychic realms. Later in her career, and through her dance dramas, she also recognized the power of the dancing figure as an instrument of social critique. In



Dancer Hilary Napier, photograph by Margaret Michaelis; Sydney, Australia, nd.

Images of Bodenwieser's dances from the period before the Second World War reveal a strongly sculptural line together with an acuity of expressive intent not unlike the sculptures of Rodin. But she was also strongly influenced by expressionism in painting and had ties to the Viennese Secessionist movement. Artists she collaborated with included Franz von Bayros and Felix Albrecht Harta, who was a member of the Hagenbund group and under whose auspices she performed her first solo recital in 1919. In an evening titled "Dances-Grotesque," she performed Silhouette, Hysterie, Spanishcer Tanz, Cakewalk, Burletta, and Groteske. This diversity of subject matter, which included impressionist works, dances derived from popular culture, Freudian themes, the burlesque, and the parodic was to characterize much of her oeuvre. The critic Alfons Torok reviewed this performance within the context of the expressionist movement in the arts. He wrote:

Everything that the artist offered us was new, unquestionably new. We saw here for the first time what dance shows to advantage, what has been characteristic of the painting, poetry and music of the young for some time: the unconditional rejection of everything handed down and the honest search for new, purely personal expressive values.¹²

Working with a range of modern and romantic composers including Rachmaninov, Debussy, Reger, and Rubinstein in her first production, it was evident that for her, music and dance were inextricably entwined. This was a key difference between her work and that of Wigman and Laban, for whom the Absolute Dance meant a liberation from the requirement of music. Bodenwieser's musicality was clearly influenced by the ideas of Jacques Dalcroze, whose movement scales corresponded to musical forms and structures in a closely symbiotic way.

Bodenwieser carved out a distinctive style of modern dance. Her work was characterized by fluidity, the use of sculptural forms, tableaux vivants, and visionary content. Key components of her style were *spannung* (tension) and *entspannung* (relaxation). As she describes it:

The new dance...wishes to embrace all the human feelings, not only harmony, lightness and charm, but also passionate desire, immense fervor, lust, domination, fear and frustration, dissonance and uproar. The new dance does not content itself with being enchanting and entertaining only; it wishes to be stirring, exciting, and thought-provoking.¹³

Following the success of her solo career, Bodenwieser formed her own company, the Tanzgruppe Bodenwieser, in 1923. This company toured successfully throughout Europe and to North America and Japan in the period between the two world wars. As an educator, Bodenwieser was professor of choreography from 1926-38 at the Vienna State Academy of Music and Dramatic Art, where she was responsible for developing an innovative training and

education in modern dance which included gymnastics, improvisation, art history, dance history, and design. In the context of Ausdruckstanz, Horst Koegler wrote that Bodenwieser was "the most important and creative personality produced by Vienna in this field."¹⁴

Her most significant works were generally considered to be her dance dramas, large group ensemble works with clearly defined themes and narrative structures. In 1936 a review appeared in *Der Wiener Tag* of Bodenwieser's Festival Recital. The reviewer describes the impact of the dance drama *Die Mesken Luzifer (The Mask of Lucifer)*:

Die Mesken Luzifer portrays on the stage what Kant calls the radical-evil, in a threefold appearance, as Intrigue, Terror, and Hate. One feels actually transported into our own times. Lies, slander, oppression, terror, hate, and viciousness explode from this group of young dancers. Magnificent as the movement is, suddenly reinforced by the sharp cries of their voices, as opposing groups hurl at each other their lashing slogans: "Rasse gegen Rasse!" [race against race], "Masse gegen Masse!" [mass against mass], "Klasse gegen Klasse!" [class against class]. Magnificent too, when one group of human beings again and again subjugates the other, ad infinitum, until at the end, Lucifer puts his foot on the necks of all.¹⁵

This work, performed in 1936, must be viewed as a critique intended to jolt audiences into consideration of the impending convulsions of Nazism and totalitarianism. The perspicaciousness of Bodenwieser's artistic vision was a quality frequently commented upon by her dancers.

Rupture

In 1938, forced to flee from Vienna, Bodenwieser boarded a train with a group of her dancers, her pianist, Marcel Lorber, and some extras or "hangers on," as Hilary Napier described them to me, those fortunate enough to falsify their involvement with the Tanzgruppe Bodenwieser as an exit strategy out of Austria and into Colombia where they toured for the best part of a year. This point of departure, this radical displacement, was also the beginning of the history of the artist in exile. Divorced from the cultural milieu that had fueled and sustained her practice, Bodenwieser's artistic identity shifted. She was forced to perform the role of a survivor and partake in the traffic of "souvenir culture." Unlike many of her contemporaries, Bodenwieser had never entirely dismissed the value of certain traditions of dance culture. Ballet was part of her syllabus and the Viennese waltz was practiced as a technique and compositional form. As a touring artist no longer moored to trends



Poster art advertising New Zealand tour, 1947; courtesy of the personal collection of Hilary Napier (UK).

and developments of modernism in Europe, her repertoire increasingly came to emphasize the performance of the readily identifiable over the startlingly new. Undoubtedly, the contingencies of survival made accessibility the key to longevity. As Dunlop-MacTavish's autobiography attests, the experience of performing in the center of a bullring in Colombia for an audience of thousands required strong performances and a bold spectacle.¹⁶

The convulsions of Nazism, the Holocaust, and the Second World War eradicated much of the evidence of Bodenwieser's work and reputation within Europe. It is to Australia, where Bodenwieser settled with her remaining dancers in 1939, that one finds most evidence of her choreography, teaching, and life and where she is remembered still in the work of those influenced by her.

Shirley McKechnie has described Gertrud Bodenwieser's impact upon Australian dance as "profound and long-lasting." Yet her distance from Europe and North America made this legacy largely invisible outside of Australia. In April, 1998 I traveled there to research this impact.

Bodenwieser at the Beach

Bodenwieser's story is one of transmigration, of exile and survival, of movement from center to periphery, from Austria to Australia. Things got lost in the process but, like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, the residual traces of her life, its pattern, are found in a series of boxes marked MS 9263 in the Manuscripts Room of the National Library of Australia in Canberra.

The fragments of her life that remain include photographs, writings, notes for dances, interviews with former dancers, and a few early film clips. In sifting through what remains, I realize that my image of Bodenwieser is somehow iconic, a fleshless abstraction, and that here in some of the personal details and anecdotal stories I begin to know her as a person. There are recollections of her walking to her small studio in Pitt Street, Sydney. She wore black, had a monocle over one eye, and tied her black hair in a chignon. In her handbag she carried her polyester dancewear, black bib trousers, a white shirt, and black pumps. In class, her dancers wore tunics with colored sleeves and danced with bare legs and feet. She is called "Madam Bodenwieser" or "Frau Gerty." They bow to her at the beginning and end of class and pay by placing their money in a glass jar at the end of the piano. She enjoyed playing bridge.

My excitement at getting to know her as a person is, however, mixed with a feeling of slight disappointment. In examining the images of her work, it becomes clear that the really distinctive style evident in the shapes and forms of her period in Vienna becomes



Photograph from Acts of Becoming, choreographed and performed by Carol Brown. Photograph by Sally MacQuarrie.

gradually diluted at a distance. The sense of a schism or rupture becomes more complete as her original Viennese-trained dancers are replaced by young Australian dancers whose strong able bodies seem to lack the sophisticated nuance of expression of their predecessors, and whose endeavors appear to be oddly imitative rather than innovative.

Images from her Viennese period revealed Bodenwieser's dancers to be ecstatic, theatrical, and sensual performers, giving form to dances that appeared to be carved in flesh in a moment of rapturous engagement. The dancers' strong curvilinear forms draped the space, evoking the sensuous and psychic life of a Klimt and were cut in dramatic narrative like a Kokoschka. They are startling and uncanny. In Australia, this emphasis upon the grotesque, the parodic, the eccentric, and the bizarre, so inspired by expressionism in the visual arts in Europe, is gradually superceded by allegorical dance dramas drawn from biblical and historical themes, and dances which focus on themes from the emergent culture of colonial Australia, for example, *Cane and Abel* (1940), *Grecian Suite* (1950), *Waltzing Matilda* (1954), and *Trilogy of Central Australian Suite* (1956). Images from these and other works in the period following her arrival in Australia reveal a softer, less angular line, a more flowing, less compact use of energy, and an expansive use of space. They appear to be less concerned with embodying psychological states than with illustrating a theme or representing a story.

I wonder if it is too painful to go beyond this level of literality. Bodenwieser lost not only her cultural standpoint through the Diaspora of the war, but her family to the horrors of the Holocaust. Amongst her archives is a series of letters between her and the Red Cross. They detail how her husband and artistic collaborator, the theatre director Frederic Rosenthal, was captured by the Nazis in France and transferred to Auschwitz in 1942 from where he was never recovered.¹⁸

Memento mori: In a clear plastic envelope I find a white lace handkerchief with the word "GERTY" lovingly inscribed in one corner.

Bodenwieser had moved from being a radical artist to becoming part of an emergent dance culture and something of a pioneer of modern dance in Australia. This necessitated a different relationship to culture. Although the work continued to be part of a European art mindset, the conditions of culture gave it a very different shape. The newness of the art form to Australia meant that audiences had to be developed. Without the support structures to enable her to focus on creation, Bodenwieser was required to teach dance classes, in schools, factories, and in her own studio, and by this method cultivate modern expressive dance as a new art form, one that was legitimized as part of the emergent cultural foundations of a colonial society.

Photographs, previously taken in a way that emphasized the sculptural qualities of her choreography, come to look posed against backcloths. The images of Margaret Michaelis are an exception to this. In a series of photographs of Bodenwieser's dancers on the beach in Sydney, she captures the vitality and flowing lines of some of Bodenwieser's most accomplished dancers, Hilary Napier and Shona Dunlop-MacTavish. These images also capture the contradictions of a cultural translation in moving from landlocked Vienna to Sydney at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.

Reviews in local papers during the company's tours throughout Australia become descriptions of the physical characteristics of the dancers rather than discussions of the work in relation to Kant, Nietzsche, or Freud. From dances of extreme states, and with the loss of the cultural milieu from which these stemmed, she seems to arrive at a kind of manufactured desire, performing Europeanness as a crowd pleaser. Costume drama in the form of narrative and character-based dance replaces the cold line of her previous cubist-inspired impressionist concert dances and her movement studies based on themes of disturbed states such as *Hysterie* (1919), *Dekadenz* (1928), and *Tanz der Hexe* (1935).

Did she grow tired or was this about the contingencies of survival, about "making do"? Her dance company, renamed the Bodenwieser Viennese Ballet, toured extensively throughout Australia under the auspices of the early Arts Council of Australia. In their tour season February-April 1951, the Bodenwieser Ballet gave forty-four performances for over 30,000 viewers. Frequently, the company performed a matinee as well as an evening performance in the same day, and each performance was at least two hours long. The dancers had very little to survive upon, and eked out a living by taking odd jobs around their classes and rehearsals.

Disjuncture. Broken history and a broken life. Her life and work in pieces before me. She is positioned at the juncture: Between one side of the world and the other; absent and present; between pre and post. I am writing in a room full of manuscripts. I am re-writing. An abbreviated life. Dances slip into fingerprinted stories. Familiarity of vocabulary. I cannot return to. She is slipping from view. I have held her once. In my bones but I cannot remember the German that formed these movements.

Bodenwieser's good students have sought to hold on to her legacy and have lovingly preserved what remains.

Beneath the anecdotes and the ephemera of her life are their stories, woven into their telling and representation of "Gerty." I find myself becoming curious about their own self-effacement in privileging Bodenwieser's voice. Words,

tributes and adulations weigh her dancers down; in speaking her story they neglect to tell their own. Looking after the past, holding on to it, is considered anathema to a contemporary independent dancer, yet for many of these older women, trained in modern dance, their close association bred a fierce loyalty and lifelong tutelage.

Endings

I was once asked by a well-known British choreographer, who is it, that invisible presence sitting in the corner of the studio as you rehearse? This all-seeing eye, this omnipotent presence watching your every move and perhaps shaping them too as censor and sage, was considered by this choreographer to be an essential part of being a dancer/choreographer. At the time, I thought of Bodenwieser, sitting on a stool in the studio, peering through her monocle and speaking in staccato English, "breathe and reach through the space." Holding on to the idea of Bodenwieser is both a genealogical process and a form of identification, a passport for navigating my way in the world as I move between the contemporary dance cultures of New Zealand and Europe. But is this genealogical quest, necessary as it is, not also a kind of lifelong tutelage, a being-held-in-the-gaze of Madam Bodenwieser? Must I commit matricide to continue?

As a dancer-choreographer living in the present, I take on a composite identity. There is something still of Bodenwieser in my movements, but there are other movements belonging to other bodies, the bodies of "my" dancers, the bodies known



Carol Brown and Lisa Tornn. London, 1999; Photograph by Mattias Ek.

and unknown but witnessed and nudged against in the studio, in the street, in the witnessing of an event, in a photograph, in an image held in the bones. I am continually quoting a whole series of strangers and there is no authenticity to any of this. It is in working through these differences, between the "I" and the "not-I," between present and past that the writing of movement occurs. Though I continue to think at times in an originary way as though Bodenwieser was somehow the "mother of invention," I recognize that she is part of a backstory, something hidden from view but there, a co-presence but not a co-author. This debt to the past is a form of identification; a cross-generational signal of desire for authentication and the fixing of a tradition that is inherently unstable. It is also a way of continuing to signify the occupation of center stage by a woman.

Were I to reinhabit these movements would I be performing a kind of pastiche, a postmodern quotation of a certain cultural style? Or would I be keeping in circulation a tradition of dance which, by virtue of its ephemerality, would otherwise be hidden from view and effectively lost? In her own lifetime Bodenwieser moved through a series of different phases of artistic activity. Just as she teased her audiences with her dance parodies and grotesque dances that played with the traditions of the past, so she reshaped her oeuvre in response to the changing circumstances of her life. She effectively undid the past, not just in relation to her own history but also in relation to the traditions of dance that preceded her. The challenge is to continue to ask questions of the past, to be aware of the peristalsis of movement memory that may be intergenerational, and to recognize the potential of the theatre as a museum of the body.

The experience of exile and survival created an aura of scarcity around Bodenwieser's work. The reverberations of this were felt by her students and dancers, many of whom have worked hard to hold onto this tradition through their teachings and reconstructions of her dances and writings, some of them even competing for ascendancy

as the authentic arbiter of that style. In the solo *Acts of Becoming* (1995), I have attempted both to pay homage to this inheritance, and critically engage with it, through setting in motion an interaction between Bodenwieser's movements and texts and my own inventions. It finishes with the words:

And why stop? You must keep going. Remember your body is not the same today as it was yesterday. Be what you are becoming and not what you might have been. The impuls.

Biography of Carol Brown:

Carol Brown, choreographer, dancer and writer, currently lives in New Zealand where she teaches choreography at the National Institute of Creative Arts and Industries, University of Auckland. A version of "Migration and Memory: The dances of Gertrud Bodenwieser" was presented by Ms. Brown as part of a performance program in Philadelphia at the Kumquat Dance Center in the winter of 2000. At that time Dance Advance expressed interest in posting a version of her lecture on its web site Archives and this article is the result of that request. Carol Brown has engaged in a number of projects in Philadelphia supported and enabled by funding from Dance Advance, including the making of several works for Group Motion Company (*The View from Here 2000*, *Strata, Sprawl* and *The Idea of Sea 2001*), an inter-disciplinary collaboration with Nicole and Jorge Cousineau and Gin MacCallum (*Crevice 2004*) and a professional development workshop for choreographers in 2005.

Footnotes:

- **1.** Text spoken by the author as part of the solo performance *Acts of Becoming*, an homage to the artistic legacy of Gertrud Bodenwieser. First performance Performing Arts Technology Studios, University of Surrey. 14 Mar. 1995.
- 2. Hilde Holger was in the Tanzgruppe Bodenwieser from 1926-29; Bettina Vernon danced in Bodenwieser's company from 1936-44; Evelyn Ippen from 1934-44; Hilary Napier 1937-47 and Shona Dunlop MacTavish from 1935-48.
- **3.** For a fuller explanation of these women's involvement in the company, see Shona Dunlop-MacTavish, *An Ecstasy of Purpose: the life and art of Gertrud Bodenwieser* (Dunedin: S.D. MacTavish, Les Humphrey and Associates, 1987), and Bettina Vernon-Warren and Charles Warren, eds., *Gertrud Bodenwieser and Vienna's Contribution to Ausdruckstanz* (Amsterdam: Harwood, 1999).
- 4. Text from Acts of Becoming.
- **5.** Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon, 1978) 31.
- 6. Text from Acts of Becoming.
- **7.** Ann Daly, "Dance History and Feminist Theory: Reconsidering Isadora Duncan and the Male Gaze," *Gender in Performance: The Presentation of Difference in the Performing Arts*, ed. Laurence Senelick (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1992) 245.
- **8.** Contemporary commentators frequently made comparisons between Gertrud Bodenwieser and Mary Wigman. See T. Sperlinger, "The Central European School of Dance," *The Dancing Times* 219 (Dec. 1928): 317-324.

- **9.** Gertrud Bodenwieser in Marie Cuckson, ed., *The New Dance*. (Vaucluse: Rondo Studios, 1970) 79.
- **10.** Bodenwieser's dance dramas were group works which followed narrative structures carried over several scenes. They include *The Masks of Lucifer* (1936) and *Cain and Abel* (1941), both with music by Marcel Lorber, and *Errand into the Maze* (1954), music by Menotti.
- 11. Performance at the French Room in the Vienna Konzerthaus as part of the New Union for Painting, Graphic and Plastic Art exhibition cited in Gunhild Oberzaucher-Schüller, "A Driving Force towards the New. Bodwenwieser-exponent of Ausdruckstanz," Vernon-Warren and Warren 21.
- **12.** Alfons Torok, "Dance Evenings," *Der Merker* 11 June 1919 in Oberzaucher-Schüller, Vernon-Warren and Warren 21.
- 13. Gertrud Bodenwieser in Cuckson 79
- **14.** Horst Koegler, "Dance in Vienna" *Ballett International* 5 (1982): 12.
- **15.** Rev. of *Die Mesken Luzifer, Die Wiener Tag* 21 June 1936, trans. Emmy Taussig. Gertrude Bodenwieser Archive MS 11/5.
- **16.** For a fuller explanation of Bodenwieser's tour of Columbia see Shona Dunlop-MacTavish, Leap of Faith: *My Dance through Life*. (Dunedin: Longacre Press, 1997).
- 17. Shirley McKechnie, "From Gertrud Bodenwieser to Meryl Tankard." Ballett International/Tanz Aktuell 11 (Nov. 1996): 37.
- **18.** Declaration of Death, Doctor Otto Hecht's Chambers 18 July 1949, papers of Gertrud Bodenwieser (National Library of Australia, 13/3 MS 9263).



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