IDENTITY PEDDLERS AND THE INFLUENCE OF GERTRUD KRAUS

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Abstract: Gertrud Kraus, Jewish expressionist modern dancer, directed a company and school both in inter-war Vienna and in Tel Aviv after she fled the Nazis in 1935. This paper examines her work as both a Diaspora and Israeli dance artist and her influence on the identities of different dancers who in turn affected American audiences, students and dancers. Those emigrating to America from Vienna before and during World War II included Jan Veen, Fred Berk, Katya Delakova, and Claudia Vall; from Israel they included Ze'eva Cohen and Zvi Gotheiner whose latest work, "Gertrud" premiered in 2007 in New York.

Words like ghetto, holocaust and Diaspora no longer refer just to Jews as Vertovec points out in his article "Religion and Diaspora."[1.] Diaspora now is a multi-faceted word and an ever increasing number of self conscious communities call themselves diasporas. Current Diaspora concepts suffer from a conflation with migration, minority and trans-nationalism, he says and that creates a muddle and a failure to distinguish the historical Jewish phenomenon with its dimensions of exile and centuries of migration. I believe it complicates and threatens to belittle a discussion about the Viennese-Tel Aviv dancer named Gertrud Kraus.

As we look at Kraus's experiences we see she embodies both the dichotomy of the Diaspora Jew and the new Jew who experienced a homecoming to the Land of Israel. Oral histories conducted over several years plus information from publications all show Kraus to be an important figure for three reasons: firstly for her own work, secondly for bridging space and time—and by that I mean both physical continents and bridging theories of expressionist dance to post-modernism despite the disconnect of European free-dance due to the Nazi regime. Thirdly, and no less importantly, Kraus inspired other dancers in their identity search no matter what country they moved to. With the exception of one of her dancers all appeared to be secular in their up-bringing and outlook yet Kraus guided them and they each contributed to a deepening of Jewish culture and pride through dance.

Born May 5, 1901 in Vienna, Kraus trained to be a concert pianist and also accompanied dance at the Viennese State Academy of Music and Dance before setting out on her own choreographic career. She worked in the cauldron of Vienna's inter-war period, producing dance in the Expressionist style. Kraus knew the work of Schoenberg and his radical de-structuring of traditional musical tonality; she also knew other artists destroying the conventions of order in traditional art and she spent hours arguing in coffee houses, She was a rebel and a modern free woman, taking action in socialist halls, and marching even while helping von Laban to create festival processions honoring Viennese workers. One sees that Kraus was part of the assimilationist Jewish life in Vienna, along with her non-observant Jewish family as Shorske describes in his book *Fin-De Siecle, Vienna Politics and Culture.*[2.]

Paramount in this period of Viennese liberal Jewry were writers, musicians, painters and psychologists. The creator of the Zionist movement, Theodore Hertzl, first considered the solution to Austrian anti-Semitism to be urbane assimilation [3.] Sigmund Freud, too, found his own solution to anti-Semitism by withdrawing socially from academic intelligentsia before he, too, abandoned Vienna for London to escape the Nazis.[4.]

Before Kraus left, her reputation in dance was secure. She won attention in Munich at the 1931 *Tanzerkongress,* an international congress featuring 1400 dancers in seven days of performances along with debates and lectures. It's amazing that single performances could be acknowledged and especially one with Jewish content, but that was the case with Kraus's dance cycle called "Songs of the Ghetto" performed by her company and given fine notice by the Berlin arts critic Fred Hildenbrandt. A journalist from the Vienna *Taglatt* newspaper interviewed Kraus and she said that "form and technique have been abandoned, and the paramount element is expression of personality." As a musician, I think she regretted this and proved in her classes and work to still be interested in form. Also, she was herself charismatic and dancers were drawn to Kraus including Fritz Berger (later the New York dancer known as Fred Berk), Hans Wiener (later the important Boston dancer a.k.a. Jan Veen), Katya Delakova, Claudia Vall, and Stella Mann. Manon Erfurt, left Kraus's Vienna studio for Berlin where she became a leading ballerina of the Berlin Opera. Another student of Kraus's was Mia Slavenska**,** famous for her later work in the Denham's Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo. "With Kraus I discovered endless possibilities for expression and creative freedom in dance."

The year of the congress was a big year for Kraus. Hardly thirty, she had success with her group works and solos, filling concert halls in many major European cities. She was known for her reliance on literary sources and narrative logic, and she also had unique qualities seen in her solo "Weary Death." In her dances, female bodies moved as if they came from an eerie, secret unmapped corner of European culture, according to Karl Toepfer.[5.] Also, in the year she was thirty, she made "The Grand Tour" as the European promoters and artists called it, traveling by boat and train to the Middle East. She toured again in 1933 first to Alexandria, then Cairo, to the new city of Tel Aviv, and then ancient Jerusalem and on by train to Beirut.

Kraus returned to Vienna deeply affected by the visions, sites and images of characters blending with her ideas of biblical figures. She created new dances such as her solo "Miriam" which in turn influenced her performers and students who themselves became teachers, dance directors and choreographers including Fred Berk. He was deeply affected by her new subject matter and her new rhythms and images. He recalled working on a dance she called "The Wailing Wall." For that, he explained to me, she stretched a sheet across the studio and stacked the dancers so their faces lay one atop each other like the building stones of the wall or he said, "we peered out at odd angles" evoking memories of people from the past.

Berk was from an orthodox Jewish family who had apprenticed him to a goldsmith and Kraus saved him from that drudgery. He said his real religious feelings were opened up through her group work when he could feel connections in a mystical way. He said Kraus "always encouraged us to make our own work and that it should have our personal view within

a bigger framework." He decided to enter the Viennese international dance competition in June 1934 with his solo "The Tyrant." In it Berk veiled his criticism of Hitler by using a more universal image of a despotic Egyptian pharaoh and it was so successful that he won a bronze medal from the city of Vienna.

Kraus was a humanitarian with leftist socialist values, only convinced to consider a whole new life elsewhere when a clandestine cell of communists approached her while performing in Prague in 1934. They wanted her to make dances for party propaganda. Kraus understood that central Europe would only use art as a one dimensional "placard" and she wanted no part of that; she said " I felt I had no flag and I only wanted to leave Europe behind."

Another who felt stateless was Claudia Vall. She chose to work with Kraus after studying at Hellerau and at Vienna's Academy of Music and Dance where she had been a student of Gertrud Bodenweiser. Vall preferred the warmer less demagogic Kraus who gave Vall a chance for self-expression. During this period, Vall also performed in Max Reinhardt's Viennese production of "The Miracle Worker." Vall's journey continued after she left Kraus, dancing in Venice with Angiola Sartorio's modern troupe until Vall escaped the fascists to Cuba and then the United States.

Kraus traded her renown and success in the capitols of Europe for pioneering life in the land of Israel for Tel Aviv with no apparent means of support. This move brought her to an entirely new environment of Hebrew theatre and performances, Within the year she established herself as a performer, her physical facility undiminished, working publicly with other dancers including performances with the Ornsteins. She formed her own troupe and became the official choreographer of the Palestine Opera, probably a unique situation for a modern group rather than the usual ballet company working within an opera context. She found the new culture of Tel Aviv stimulating, also choreographing and performing for the Palestine Orchestra as well as with Habima, the national theater. There she choreographed "Emperor Jones" and also appeared as a witch in the production, pounding the ground in terrifying knee crouches traveling in a kind of crazed circle, her hair thrashing up and down as she bounced, fingers flaying their shapes exaggerated with Balinese extensions her power and charisma apparent in a short grainy film made during a Tel Aviv performance sometime in the '40s.

As in Vienna, Kraus also became a renowned teacher and influential confidant in the arts world she helped to develop in Israel. In addition to her performances and company work, she taught in Jerusalem at the Rubin Academy of Music and Dance, in her Tel Aviv studio, in kibbutzim, and in Haifa up until the end of her life on Nov 30, 1977. Her piles of notebooks in her studio/apartment with countless sketches, the majority abstract yet showing a lively use of space, line, and shape. They leave evidence in her unique hand of her fascination with abstraction and variation. She worked with these in classroom and in rehearsal which took place in the city she loved, even on rooftops.

In her rehearsals and classes, Kraus, a native German speaker also intermingled English and Hebrew. Her migration created her own lexicon which could be multi-lingual per sentence. Kraus's student Ze'eva Cohen, who studied with her from age 5 in 1945 until she was 16, remembered that [6]."talked in so many different languages we could only infer what she meant. We simply called her words 'Gertrud.' She was like the oracle, talking in tongues you couldn't understand. We intuited, somehow knew her intent."

Kraus's last piece "Vacation" was choreographed in 1951, light-hearted despite the period of food rationing. Like all the works created before it, "Vacation" built its components on improvisation. Jerome Robbins had come to Tel Aviv and had proposed working with her to form the Israel Ballet, but then returned to the United States to make his career. Kraus picked herself up and continued teaching though she soon closed her company and delved more into her fine art work.

Ze'eva Cohen left Kraus and Tel Aviv for bigger opportunities in the early '60s coming to NY to perform with Anna Sokolow's company. Then Cohen became a founding member of the groundbreaking co-operative, Dance Theater Workshop in its familiar spirit of Israeli socialist/co-operative values. Later Cohen developed her own solo voice solo in a touring show; and developed her teaching in the dance program she founded and directs at Princeton University. Lately, with Kraus tools, Cohen has explored biblical themes she made universal in the personages of Hagar and Sara in the dance called "Negotiations."

Turning attention to the dancer Fritz Berger, who fled Austria in 1939, we can trace his route from Kraus's studio to his own in Vienna to theatres there and then in Switzerland, Holland, England, to Cuba. There performed with Claudia Vall who had also escaped to the island. They used their European folk knowledge and also their modernist dance ideas in programs they also created in the United States when they secured precious entry. Vall stayed in Los Angeles where she discovered they had a very different taste in modern dance so she became a teacher of professional children for the new medium of television**.** Fred Berk went to New York where he joined forces with Kraus dancer Katya Delakova, performing in the New York area where they learned the audiences preferred looking to the future with Israel than backwards to European Jewish experiences. They toured to colleges, synagogues and Jewish Community Centers. They also connected and performed with other émigrés including Hanya Holm.

Both Delakova and Berk were ambitious and they were committed to present Jewish values and the positive ethnic images creating The Jewish Dance Guild Company, inspiring young people including Joyce Mollov to explore Jewish themes in their work; Berk branched out and co-directed the Merry-Go Rounders Company with Doris Humphrey aimed at children with a professional cast of dancers including Jeff Duncan. At the 92nd St Y, Berk established the Jewish Dance Division, primarily featuring Israeli folk dance, as well as another company

he called “Hebraica” bringing the verve and pride in the new country of Israel through dance to a post-Holocaust community wanting no remembrance of European Jewish life. Berk also directed the Israeli folk dance festival in New York. His most powerful period in New York and teaching throughout the United States was from the 1940s until the 1970s. His effect on many performers and teachers was profound but here we will consider Meredith Monk.

Way before Monk’s fame as an avant-garde interdisciplinary artist, as a young dancer she studied and performed for Berk at the 92nd St. Y in “Hebraica.” Kraus‘s influence could be traced Fred Berk and his influence on Monk. She said recently[7.] that his movement fit her her body, but more than that, Monk said “I was inspired culturally by Berk. My parents were not necessarily ashamed of their parents from the old country and some shtetl in Europe but they didn’t want to discuss anything about it. I was passionately wanting to know where I came from, what were my roots. Fred was a big catalyst for me and an inspiration. I’m a universalist, but I still value what was passed on and I value my grandparents’ tenacity and bravery coming to the United States. That’s what I wanted to honor when I did my first stand alone film, ‘Ellis Island.” In a way it was an ode to my grandparents who surmounted that inhuman view of humanity perpetrated at Ellis Island with the inspections and it’s what we see today with our view of foreigners.”

In the early 1970s Zvi Gotheiner left Kraus and also came to New York from Tel Aviv where he had been in last choreography workshop. He became a serious dancer during his army years, joining the Batsheva Dance Company and studying independently with Gertrud. “She taught us complicated subjects, about abstraction and about rhythm especially counterpoint and syncopation;. How did I learn the organic feeling of a rhythm in five? She had us say ‘Paprika schnitzel’ over and over.”

What did it mean to Israeli young people who hadn’t grown up on a diet of these German foods? “She was an enigma,” he said but an endless source of inspiration. “We came to her with our questions and maybe we just assumed she could help us. You got a whiff of an answer as we learned to play with variations. Once she said in class after an especially heartfelt study by one of us, ‘Yes but can you do that on a ladder?’ Maybe all her questions captured something of her preoccupations with process which turns out to be very post-modern.”

Gotheiner came to New York, first as a soloist for the Feld Ballet and he has taught professionals in New York and on tour since 1987, ironically, for the last fifteen years in Kraus’s original city of Vienna. He choreographs for his company ZviDances, and last March his company premiered Gotheiner’s work called “Gertrud,” an ode to Kraus. Some inferences were clear in the non-narrative piece. For the backdrop he used sketches from Kraus’s notebooks**.** His dancers also speak including fragments such as:

‘Gertrud: How do you make a dance?’…
‘It’s simple…’
‘What is it to be an artist?’…

'What's the point of entry?...
"The point of no return…"

Kraus emigrated east instead of west when precious visas were still available to a Jew. In Palestine/ Israel she found a home that centered her, creating a kind of home page allowing her amazing links with all who visited her, with students, performers, audiences and other artists. Her quest for excellence and honesty showed the way to explore who one really was, grounding that person wherever he or she resided. Her family of dancers have fanned out from Vienna and from Tel Aviv discovering their identity over and over as singular artists, yet connecting people in their community and in their country using both specific and universal images and ideas. She inspired by example and with her moral compass, she expressed in movement a relentless imagination with a ferocious intellect. Gertrud Kraus has affected generations of theatre goers and dance artists from the 1920s until our first decade of the twenty-first century, carrying on her piercing quest as she moved both literally and figuratively.

Endnotes:

1. Steven Vertovec, "Religion and Diaspora," Peter Antes, Armin W. Geertz, Randi R. Warne eds., *New Approaches to the Study of Religion*, Vol. II, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter V II, 2004, 275.

2. Carl Schorske, *Fin-De-Siecle Vienna, Politics and Culture,* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980, 363.

3. Ibid., 161.
4. Ibid., 186.
5. Karl Toepfer, *Empire of Ecstasy: Nudity and Movement in Germany Body Culture, 1910-1935***,** 191.
6. Interview with author, March 16, 07 in New York
7. Interview with author by phone, Nov. 2, 2007

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---, Interview by author of Ze'eva Cohen at Westbeth, New York City, Cohen's home, March 17, 2007.
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---. Interview by author of Gertrud Kraus at her home studio, at Café Ditza in Tel Aviv and at her artist's home in the art colony of Ein Hod, Israel from March, 1972 until January, 1977.
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---. Interview by author of Claudia Vall at her home in Studio City, California and by telephone, Nov. 17, 2006; September 29, 2007; October 1, 2007.
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