

MODERN DANCE IN BULGARIA IN THE 1920s. MARGITTA ZONEWA

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In Bulgaria, dance modernism as part of the performing arts is closely connected to the development of expressive dance in German-speaking countries in the 1910s and 1920s and its spread across Europe in the interwar period. Representatives of its major branches were more or less regularly active on the local scene. In general terms, these were: the New School Hellerau, where Margitta Zonewa¹ (1908–?) had her start; Viennese Dance Modernism, represented by Sonja Georgieva (1903–1935) who trained under the Austrian dancer Gertrud Bodenwieser²; Rudolf von Laban's school, followed notably by Lid(i) a Wolkowa (1901–1943); and Mary Wigman's school, whose follower, albeit in her own interpretation, was Maria Dimowa (1901–1944). While Margitta Zonewa and Sonja Georgieva settled in Germany and Austria, respectively, and only had guest performances in Bulgaria, Lidia Wolkowa and Maria Dimowa remained in their homeland throughout the

¹ The spelling of the names of the Bulgarian dance artists who worked and were popular in German speaking countries follows the German transcription.

² From 1933 until her tragic death in 1934 Sonja Georgieva was a member of Gertrud Bodenwieser's dance group, as was her sister Katja Georgieva. There are no records of Katja Georgieva having performed in Bulgaria. In 1938 she emigrated to Australia as part of the Bodenwieser Dance Group.



Margitta Zonewa in Germany

1930s, staging solo dance concerts, performed on the Sofia National Opera stage, with Maria Dimowa starting a rhythmic gymnastics and artistic dance school.

A major driver of the second wave of European dance modernism, which came to be known as *Ausdruckstanz* ("dance of expression") in the 1920s, was the Life Reform movement (*Lebensreformbewegung*) popular primarily in Germany and Switzerland in the first two decades of the 20th century. It emerged in response to the turbulent industrialisation and urbanisation processes in Western societies. Various

physical practices developed and spread within *Lebensreform* that aspired to guide the body “back to nature”, explore the natural body and movement in order to make it a direct conveyor of the energies and forces of life. Their ambition was to create a new identity for the modern, liberated body in the age of mechanical reproduction.³ Expressive dance left behind the tradition of ballet, countering its coded language and weightlessness with an individual understanding of dance and one’s own artistic nature, while the weight of the body was used as momentum to create movement. The concept covered a heterogeneous range of choreographic languages and teaching methods united by certain major principles. Susanne Franco groups them in several main directions: dance is acknowledged as independent from the other arts; body movement is explored as closely bound to emotional and mental processes and reflects the rhythm of the cosmos; the dancer’s role is that of creator – interpreter; and improvisation is of major importance in the artistic process.⁴

Emergence of modern dance in Bulgaria: background

In Bulgaria, the new dance and physical culture that developed in the post-Liberation period and especially during the 1910s and 1920s did not produce any such radical or alternative reactions as the Life

³ See Toepfer, Karl. *Empire of Ecstasy*. University of California Press, 1997, p. 22.

⁴ See Franco, Susanne. *Ausdruckstanz: traditions, translations, transmissions*. In: *Dance Discourses: Keywords in Dance Discourse*. (Eds. Franco, S., & Nordera, M.). Routledge, 2008, p. 80.



Sonja Georgiewa on the cover of *Moderne Welt* Magazine, Austria, 1929.

Reform movement, not least because Bulgarian society had very different industrialisation and urbanisation rates. Where this new culture first emerged was court life and then the *Yunak* societies for general physical education.⁵

During the first two decades of the 20th century ballroom dance and gymnastics spread on a wider social scale: they were incorporated in regular and boarding schools, dance schools and salons open to all appeared. They were seen as part of the modernisation of society, the development of a new urban culture and an attempt to embrace and adapt European modernity to local life.

⁵ It is worth noting that girls’ divisions of the *Yunak* Gymnastic Societies were established as early as the first years of the 20th century.

Over the first decades of the new century, the emerging dance and physical culture scene in Bulgaria saw the development of specific hybrids between gymnastics and folk dance (Ruska Koleva); Pesho Radoev's ballet school, which opened in 1914, trained performers for the dance scenes in the Opera Association's shows and staged its own productions, too, developed as teaching tools to promote the art of ballet and open to the public. But the scene did not prove a fertile ground for ideas or practices that would lead to new forms of theatrical dance.

Professional ballet and modern stage dance made were introduced in Bulgaria almost simultaneously in the early 1920s, mainly through guest performers. Even before the Sofia Opera ballet company was founded in 1928, classical dance had entered the Bulgarian cultural space while it was reinventing itself and in its modernised versions as presented by Russian ballet dancers, including Tamara Karsavina, Boris Kniazeff, etc. During the first postwar decade, Bulgarian stages also welcomed performances by representatives of modern dance movements such as Rita Sacchetto from Germany, New School Hellerau dancers Valeria Kratina (a number of times between 1921 and 1929) and Margitta Zonewa (1926/7), Viennese dance modernism representatives Grete Wiesenthal (1927), the Bodenwieser Dance Group (1929) and Bulgarian dancer Sonja Georgiewa (several times between 1928 and 1934), as well as the company of Czech dance artist Milča Majerová (1929), and more.

Dance in all its varieties was met with enthusiasm both by the public and the artistic intelligentsia. It was seen as a new phenomenon in Bulgarian culture and

quickly became a subject of critical reflection, with classical ballet and modern stage dance shows being interpreted in the light of various artistic ideals. When it came to terminology, the 1920s dance discourse was beset by chaos. 'Ballet' was basically used as an umbrella term for all types of stage dance (except folk dance), 'modern dance' referred mainly to the new ballroom dances, and modern stage dance was variably called 'natural dance', 'ideational dances', 'pure choreography', 'the art of plastic movements', 'artistic ballet', 'Secession dance', etc.

In the 1920s the differences between classical ballet and modern dance were most convincingly argued within the modernist aesthetical discourse. New developments in dance were explored primarily by art critics and artists aligned with the Bulgarian modernism, with especially insightful analyses by Chavdar Mutafov, Sirak Skitnik, prof. Alexander Balabanov – eminent Ancient Greece scholar, philologist and close friend of Valeria Kratina, composer Ivan Kamburov, writer and theatre critic Svetoslav Kamburov-Furen and several others. They shared the view that modern dance derived its value from the liberation of man and from the triumph of spirit over matter – dance de-materialises the body, converting it to energy, will, spirit.

Margitta Zonewa

Margitta Zonewa is the first Bulgarian performer associated with modern dance who is known to have held solo dance concerts in various cities in Bulgaria during the second half of the 1920s, but she remains virtually unknown to dance historiography. Margitta Zonewa was born in 1908 in Sofia. In 1922 she left to study in the New

School Hellerau outside Dresden. The school was the successor of the Hellerau School of Music and Rhythmic Gymnastics founded in 1910 by music pedagogue Émile Jaques-Dalcroze and closed in 1914. The New School Hellerau opened in 1919, headed by Dalcroze's direct students Christine Baer-Frisell and, on her invitation, Valeria Kratina who was already a famous dance performer at the time, with her own dance school in Munich. They were also joined by music pedagogue and Dalcroze's former associate Ernst Ferand.⁶ They tried to preserve the legacy of the renowned music educator but also to steer the school in a new direction by shifting the content focus onto the principles of movement as such and the creative approaches to it. The curriculum was no longer based on the practice of one single person and it combined rhythmic and musical instruction with physical education and dance classes held by Valeria Kratina. She introduced principles adopted from Rudolf von Laban, promoting improvisation and a freer relationship between dance and music, purposeful work with the rhythm of movement using percussions or even in silence. The overall objective was to go beyond the scope of rhythmic gymnastics and consciously pursue the reinvention of dance as an art form. Still, researchers posit that the new style of the Hellerau School preserved the connection between dance and music to a large extent. It remained tangible in many of the choreographies of

Kratina herself, which is why they were perceived as a more moderate version of the expressive dance which rose in status to avant-garde art in the work of Rudolf von Laban and Mary Wigman.

When Margitta Zonewa arrived in Hellerau in 1922 at the age of 14, the school was an eligible international hub for rhythm, music, and physical education. Later she trained in Berlin. According to press reports, before coming to Bulgaria she had guest performances in a number of German cities – apart from Berlin, she performed in Hamburg, Dusseldorf, Dresden, and Hanover. Margitta Zonewa did a handful of shows in Bulgaria. In late 1926, she gave a 'ballet matinee' in *Svoboden Teatar* ('Open Theatre') in Sofia, and then in Stara Zagora, Plovdiv, and Ruse. In February 1927, she staged a dance concert in the *Royal Theatre* in the

⁶ In 1925 the New School Hellerau moved into the Laxenburg castle near Vienna and was called Hellerau-Laxenburg. Valeria Kratina's dance group composed of her students toured Europe, visiting Bulgaria, in 1927. In 1930, Rosalia Chladek took over the management of the school.



Tamara Karsavina in London, 1927.

Bulgarian capital and again in the three cities mentioned. Zonewa then returned to Germany where, much like many other European dance artists, found success beyond dance, too – reports in the newspaper *Literaturen glas* ('Literary Voice') show that in the 1930s she studied singing, performed in operas and operettas, and appeared on the silver screen. The newspaper quoted German press reviews highlighting various characteristics of her performances "where no gesture or tone is out of place", as well as her versatile training, "natural temperament and necessary grace".

The handful of reviews for her second concert at the *Royal Theatre* suggest that part of her programme consisted of dances to Romantic and Modern music pieces – including the more emotionally charged *Nocturne* by Chopin and *Andante doloroso* by Grieg, as well as performances based on modernised versions of character dance – Liszt's *Hungarian Rhapsody*, Poppy's *Andalusians* based on Spanish motifs. Margitta Zonewa also danced to Bulgarian music based on folk motifs – such as *Bulgarian Bolyar Dance* by a young Lyubomir Pipkov who was studying in Paris at the time, and *Bulgarian Motifs* whose composer is unnamed. It seems she was developing them specifically for her second concert in February 1927 during her stay in Bulgaria to replace the oriental dances mentioned in a 1926 newspaper report. And in fact it would appear that Margitta Zonewa was the first to interpret Bulgarian folk dance elements using modern dance, to a much greater extent than Ruska Koleva and earlier than Maria Dimowa who took an interest in this approach in the 1930s.

Margitta Zonewa's repertoire was typical for any modern dance artist touring the

European stages at the time, with the incorporation of solo dance based on traditional Bulgarian motifs a particular highlight. Individuality and individual identity are at the core of the artistic project of Modernism, including European modern dance, and it has two main projections – individuality as an expression of the universal (the universal soul) and individuality as an expression of the collective, as defined through organic affiliation concepts such as *race*, *ethnicity*, and *nation*. Edward Ross Dickinson notes that even before World War I, the world of dance was showing an increased interest in folk dances across Europe, not just as a source of a new movement language, but also as a way to express the characteristics of the various communities.⁷ Representatives of early modern dance who incorporated elements of the dances of different nations and ethnicities in their performances, modernised various character dances, or "invented" folk dances, were perceived as "cosmopolitan nationalists." They assumed that "people of different nations were fundamentally different, but that each of these fundamentally different forms of humanity was part of the larger project of humanity as a whole, an expression of some particular aspect of blend of its varied potentials".⁸ In the postwar decade, however, dance, whose chief means of expression is the body, started to be seen as a locus of tension in terms of national identity, which was perceived to be under threat due to the effects of modernity⁹. As Ramsay Burt reminds us, Julia Kristeva pos-

⁷ Dickinson, Edward Ross. *Dancing in the Blood*. University of California, 2017, p. 124.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Burt, Ramsay. *Alien Bodies*. Routledge, 1998, p. 16.

ited that the concept of national identity was about origins – about where the individual comes from and how he or she relates to the collectivity and to “the cultural and religious memory forged by the interweaving of history and geography.”¹⁰ Obviously, it would be going into speculative territory to suggest that Margitta Zonewa’s interest in Bulgarian motifs in her dancing was driven by a need to claim her own national identification or to test it, try it on after her relatively long absence from the country, and while she was an adolescent, too. Fascination with various images, forms, and elements of Bulgarian tradition was especially current at the time of her stay in Bulgaria and thick in the air. Stylised folk elements, foregrounding the language of myth, the return to distant parts of Bulgarian history, and in general the construction of various reincarnations of the national, but through artistic means adopted from modern European movements, was among the most significant strategies for reviving Bulgarian art – painting, literature, music – in the 1920s.

Since there are no pictures or thorough descriptions of Margitta Zonewa’s solo work on the Bulgarian stage, it is hard to gain a more rounded idea of the specifics of her performance, style, and choreographic approach. A report in the *Komedia* (“Comedy”) newspaper¹¹ tells us that Zonewa’s concert in the *Royal Theatre* in February 1927 attracted a large audience, the theatre was full and she was enthusiastically applauded after each piece. The anonymous author finds that the dancer had made progress since her performance

the previous year and “achieved greater grace and flexibility;” and they make a point to highlight her “greater depth and involvement in the performance of the dance.” They point out that the programme was “thoughtfully arranged” which gave the show “great artistic value”. Indeed, the young performer (if the available information on her year of birth is to be trusted, Margitta Zonewa was 18 or 19 at the time of these first performances of her career) appears to have enjoyed widespread acclaim among critics, and it would seem among audiences, too. After her February concert of 1927, two critical reviews came out written by active public figures, writers, and art critics: Botyo Savov and Konstantin Galabov, who left a key testimony on how the dancing of Zonewa, who is in essence the first Bulgarian representative of modern dance, was valued against the “cultural projects” (per K. Galabov) and the general cultural discourse of the time.

Bulgarian modernity studies explore the national, individual, and cultural identity crisis in the decade following WWI in some breadth and depth. The most succinct and also the most commonly cited one is Ivan Elenkov’s analysis, part of his monograph *The Native and the Right-wing* (“Родно и дясно”). In it, he studies the way Bulgaria’s defeat in the 1912 and 1918 wars and the dissolution of the post-Liberation national ideal of a unified ethnic Bulgarian realm “provoked a different sense of the Fatherland – not so much of its unity in institutional, political, or sociological terms, but in the inclination to seek community in its spiritual dimensions. Arriving at an identity in this context is closely related to the reconstruction of the “Bulgarian ethos” as a space for the perfect “authenticity”, the most deeply rooted foundation

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Балетна вечер. – Комедия, 1927, бр. 105, с. 4. [A Ballet Evening. – *Komedia*, 1927, No. 105, p. 4.]

of Bulgarian uniqueness"¹². Constructing a timeless "true", "renewed" identity, searching for the "positive archetype" were recognised as a unification solution for the "atomised, dissolved Bulgarian whole". One of the strategies for finding the common foundation was to activate collective community identifications based on race, blood, land; to seek in tradition and history, in the search for the "typically Bulgarian", in the quest to "capture the Bulgarian spirit": "And so the reimagined concepts of the "spirit" of the Bulgarian Middle Ages, the "spirit" of the Bulgarian Renaissance, the "national spirit", the "Bulgarian character", the "soul of the Bulgarian woman", etc. were created."¹³ Turning to the "substance", the "primal", the "pull of the native" was also meant to build fortifications against the onslaught of the new phenomena of modernisation, industrialisation, urban life; with the "Bulgarian character" called on to redefine itself both against itself and against Europe and the world, with which its interaction was growing more and more intensive.

This discourse on an own definition of a Bulgarian identity taking place between the Wars¹⁴ was also reflected in the reception of Margitta Zonewa's Bulgarian tour. Botyo Savov's review of her February show is dominated by enthusiasm for what he sees as an incarnation by the artist of a generalised and authentic image of the Bulgarian. He interprets the dancing to Bulgarian motifs through the narrative of a national spirit manifesting through folk-

¹² Еленков, Иван. Родно и дясно. С., 1998, с. 130. [Elenkov, Ivan. *The Native and the Right-wing*. Sofia, 1998, p. 130]

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ During the 1930s the discourse takes on a nationalistic tone.



Maria Dimowa in *Mothers' Lament*, 1935

lore, stressing not so much the movement framework of the dance but its energy work: "In the *Bulgarian Bolyar Dance* Margitta expressed the whirlwind, compelling power of the Bulgarians escalating from heavy dynamics to a soul-liberating, flighty *rachenitsa*..."¹⁵. Among the achievements of the *Bulgarian Motifs* performance he counts the individual artistic transformation, spiritualization and rediscovery of folklore which is tied to tradition, to the past, to the rural: "We have seen these dear *rachenitsas* danced in our villages, but now we had to see them in a whole new setting: transformed in the outer poetry and inner music of this young Bulgarian woman". The

¹⁵ All quotes from: Савов, Ботьо. Маргита Цонева. – Вестник на жената, 1927, бр. 274, с. 2. [Savov, Botyo. *Margitta Zonewa*. – *Vestnik za Zhenata*, 1927, No. 274, p. 2]



Valeria Kratina (1892-1983), German dancer and pedagogue

performer's youth, with added admiring comments on her beauty, became a motif in the process of creating an idealised image of her. Sharing his memories of his first encounter with her art, the author notes: "the clear skies of life's early years spoke in her multicoloured eyes. In her humility lies something I wait for, something I believe in: a flower of our phenomenal genius that is already speaking to the world". The beauty motif grew into another argument in favour of the lofty status of modern stage dance that evolved out of "wild" ballroom dancing; the artist's youth was tantamount to the youth of Bulgarian art which was announcing itself on the European stage.

For his part, Konstantin Galabov sees in Margitta Zonewa's dancing a direct realisation of one of the period's main cultural projects, namely the conscious Europeanisation of Bulgarian culture whilst keeping its "features": "she gave us a Bulgarian art, evolved and enriched to the level of Western ballet"¹⁶. In his article, the notable writer and critic offers the most in-depth analysis of her dancing, especially through the terms used to show his appreciation. The article was published in the *Iztok* newspaper published by the *Strelets* Intellectual Society, which was headed by Galabov himself.

Literary studies identify two main programmatic lines of the society: the Europeanisation of Bulgarian culture whilst preserving own identity; and achieving a fusion in art between the irrational and the rational (associated with the East and West, respectively), the subjective and the objective, the individual and the universal. This is seen as a symptom

of the impulse to reign in the avant-garde attitudes from the post-WWI period.¹⁷ The trend is easily identifiable in K. Galabov's review of Margitta Zonewa's work. At the very beginning, attempting to describe the atmosphere of the show

¹⁶ All quotes from: Гълъбов, Константин. Балерината Маргита Цонева. – *Изток*, 1927, бр. 56, с. 1. [Galabov, Konstantin. *The Ballerina Margitta Zonewa*. – *Iztok*, 1927, No. 56, p. 1]

¹⁷ For more, see: Антонова, А. Синтетичната душа на изкуството (върху възгледите на литературен кръг "Средец"). https://litternet.bg/publish16/al_antonova/sintetichnata.htm (most recently accessed on 20.01.2020). [Antonova, A. *Art's Synthetic Soul (on the Views of the Sredets Literary Society)*.]

and the experience it brought, the author writes: “Illuminated footlights, then semi-darkness, a beam of bright light from the arch, music and ecstasy! The ecstasy of a young body yearning to be liberated from its mortality, to become music (...) I stopped listening to the orchestra – I only listened to the ecstatic movements of her young body. Because true ballet is always music, transformed into movement”.

This is one of the rare descriptions in Bulgarian critiques of modern dance to comment on its ecstatic quality, both in terms of the quality of performance and as a type of reception strategy. In the context of modern expressive dance “ecstasy” is used to describe a kinesthetic-sensory potential of movement in dance wherein its energetic forces are channeled towards creating a symbolically charged image of the dancing body as transcending the self into an intense spiritual experience¹⁸, where the external and the internal merge into one. Through it Galabov describes the impact of dance: it moves the viewer into a trancelike state – the stage interacts with him or her via the body’s movement directly and immediately, through the irrational. However, Galabov takes an interesting and meaningful turn here. He singles out Margitta Zonewa as “the first Bulgarian ballerina with a cultural understanding of her art,” curiously not meaning, for example, that she projects a specific understanding of the place and meaning of dance in culture and society, as we would take it today, but something very specific. He is referring to the mission conferred onto dance (and

consequently, art) to bring the irrational to comprehension. Galabov is expressing his view of dance as a transformation of music – the most irrational of arts – into movement, and appreciating Margitta Zonewa’s performance both for her talent to achieve it and for the incomprehensible, “extra-empirical,” that is, transpersonal, abstract spiritual reality combined with “trepidations known to each soul,” that is, they become recognisable, comprehensible, “such that they could be felt”. So the “cultural understanding” here is the awareness of the mission and boundaries of dance’s expressive capabilities – its task was to make the metaphysical dimensions expressed in music visible and palpable, by combining the irrational (the influence of music on dance) with the non-irrational as defined by the specifics of the body language on stage.

There is no way to know whether this combination of the abstract and the recognisable was an intentional element of Margitta Zonewa’s dancing, or Galabov’s words reflected mostly his expectations and views on art’s mission. In his review, Botyo Savov, with a romanticised passion, puts a greater emphasis on the “incomprehensibility” of her dancing and is mostly occupied with how “the very music of her soul was dancing”, how “inexpressible, mysterious language of the soul shone through” her dancing, stressing the performer’s smooth movements and expressive arms – elements that are also characteristic of the dancing of her teacher Valeria Kratina which was also markedly theatrical; therefore it can be expected that Margitta Zonewa used theatricality too.

Konstantin Galabov’s words suggest that part of Margitta Zonewa’s repertoire explored themes such as “psychic pain”

¹⁸ See Huschka, Sabine. *Aesthetic Strategies of Trance-gression: The Politics of Bodily Scenes of Ecstasy*. – *Dance Research Journal*, 51 (2), 2019, pp. 4–17.

and were suffused with a tragic feeling. He divides it into psychological dances (following “the psychological character of music”) and what we today would call more *formalist* dances, meaning pieces that did not suggest “trepidations of the soul” but merely follow “the beauty of rhythm”.

Finally, it can be assumed that the aesthetics of Margitta Zonewa’s dancing belonged to the more moderate versions of the German *Ausdruckstanz* spreading throughout Central and Eastern Europe in the 1920s. Her brief presence on the

Bulgarian stage provoked an immediate reaction, exerted some influence on shaping criteria and making sense of the specifics of modern dance, and helped enhance the feeling that Bulgarian culture was a part of the European cultural processes between the wars.

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