



Mary Wigman ~ Photo: Orgel Kühne

My Mary

Personal Reminiscences
of Learning from Wigman

1954–1959 and beyond

Emma Lewis Thomas, January 2016

My Berlin: 1954

SLUBSLUBSLUB... the bus sidled up to the curb in Charlottenburg, Berlin, and stopped. A figure hurriedly descended the stairs from the upper level, and as the bus departed, stepped off and fell flat on the street.

With cries from passengers, the bus stopped and the driver descended. (in German): “Why did you try to get off when the bus started?” he scolded.¹ Regaining my breath and opening my eyes, I stammered, “This is my stop!” I got up, dusted myself off, and walked toward the apartment building where I had rented a room.

This early memory of Berlin life recurs often—of living among disciplined people on the politically free “island” of West Berlin—half a city arbitrarily slashed in two in 1947, occupied by British, French, and U.S. forces in the Western Sector; the other half, East Berlin, under Soviet Russian military control that extended beyond the city limits into the DDR (East Germany). *Berlin-Ost*, Berlin West. On each side, life was very different—but the people were the same: structured, organized, proud, helpful, forward-looking, disregarding (not discussing) the past.



Mary Wigman and Nahami Abbell from Chicago, my best friend during the years I lived in Berlin and studied with Mary. Nahami was a gifted soloist who performed in Mary's 1950s–60s opera Berlin productions: *Saul*, *Sacre du Printemps*, and *Alcestis*. She created and performed original solos—some on Biblical women, some inspired by the writings of Franz Kafka—in Berlin and Paris, with rave reviews.

Because the Soviets, as Allies, “liberated” Berlin in 1945, they took the spoils. East Berlin occupied the center of the city: the beautiful Brandenburg Gate, *Unter den Linden* Boulevard, *Potsdamer Platz*, Humboldt University, Museum Island in the Spree River, the Berlin Opera, the *Komische Oper*, and the *Schiffbauerdamm Theater* where Bertolt Brecht and his wife, Helena Weigel—upon returning to Germany after years of exile spent in Denmark, Sweden, Finland, crossing Russia in 1941 via trans-Siberian railroad to Vladivostok, then by boat to Los Angeles, where they lived for nine years in Santa Monica as unwilling participants in the German exile artist community—wielded their unique theatrical genius as playwright, director, and actor in their well-funded, solidly established, successful and politically Marxist Berliner Ensemble.²

West Berlin had the fashionable residential neighborhoods—Wannsee, Dahlem, Grunewald (where Isadora Duncan had opened her first European dance school in the beginning of the 20th century), Charlottenburg (with its partially destroyed castle but intact bust of Nefertiti on display in one of the guardhouses), half the tower of the *Gedächtniskirche* at the end of *Kurfürstendamm* (*Ku'damm*) in the French sector, which was already acquiring fashionable shops selling clothing, perfume, ski clothes and trendy beauty shop makeovers near the *Maison de France*, where one could get dinner *à la française*, with a comely evening's escort, male or female, if enough deutsche marks or an American Express card were handy. It was at the nearby Ritz, best restaurant in the West and a favorite of Mary's, where a German waiter, in his best American accent, offered me desserts: “oranges in Cointreau, ice cream, and our delicious horse sh_t.” To my shocked face, he smiled and (in German)



Portrait of Mary Wigman dancing
by Ernst Ludwig Kirchner

explained: “We call this ‘*Pferdeäpfel*’ (Horse Apples).” And it was, indeed, delicious—a pile of individual small round cream pastries covered with chocolate, very like profiteroles!

I adjusted to the occupied city as an island of freedom surrounded by the Soviets, moving around via subway, bus, and an electric train (*S-Bahn*) that was controlled by the East. We walked a lot, to save time and coins for home-cooked meals in the many small bar-restaurants and for the delightful pastries sold in the bakeries among the ruins throughout the city. One could even order fresh rolls (*Semmel*) delivered daily to your door by 7:00 a.m! Wigman dancers who defected from the East lived in rooms with *Kachelöfen* (tiled stoves) that had been left intact in the destroyed houses surrounding Wigman’s Rheinbabenallee School—a mansion that survived the war, not unlike her Dresden studio on *Bautzner Straße* that also survived the bombing of Dresden.

Chilly damp fog surrounded us, few street lights existed, more than half the buildings in West Berlin lay in ruins—a contrast to my previous year as a student in Paris.

My Paris: 1953–54

Upon finishing college in 1953, I traveled to Paris with the Middlebury College French MA Program, financed by scholarships from the French government and a U.S. Fulbright Travel grant. (Thank God, when they surrendered the city in ’44, the German army had not, as Hitler ordered, blown up Paris!) I studied politics at Sciences Po and contemporary literature at the Sorbonne, while taking extra-curricular weekly ballet lessons in “French style” (fast footwork, killingly difficult barre) and thrice-weekly modern dance lessons (technique and improvisation) in a Pigalle studio with **Jerome Andrews**³, **Jacqueline Robinson**⁴, and **Karen Waehner**⁵. This American, French woman and German girl had one common experience: STUDY WITH MARY WIGMAN. They revered her teachings the way young Polish nuns revere the catechism, quoting Mary often in class and improvisation.

As the year progressed, we gave one or two studio performances of our own works, and, to everyone’s surprise, mine were applauded and praised! Thereafter, my three fellow dancers began a campaign to convert me to dance as a profession and to send me to study with Wigman.

They succeeded. I enrolled in a two-week summer dance program with my younger sister, Marnie², at the Rigiblick Hotel in Zurich, Switzerland, took Mary’s classes, and asked permission to join her professional dance training program in Berlin. She told me that the first two weeks were provisional, a sort of audition, but that I should come in the fall.

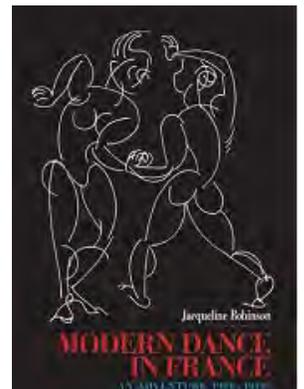
That’s how I happened to be in Berlin, riding a bus from 27 *Rheinbabenallee* in the U.S. sector to Charlottenburg in the British sector—and falling flat on my back from the upper level.

Learning from Wigman 1954 → 1959

Classes at the Wigman Schule were tough. Fifty-minute sessions began at 9 a.m. and ended at 1 or 2 p.m. with 10 minute intervals between. We began the day with strenuous gymnastic exercises and went on to explore the familiar aspects of dance training: technique, dance qualities, improvisation, composition, music (drumming, accompaniment), ballet (with a rather weak teacher), dance history (primarily Kurt Sachs auf deutsch), a few “national” dances taught by practitioners of Spanish, Bharata natyam, German folk forms such as $\frac{3}{4}$ time Ländler and Waltzer. For a complete description of the movement training, please refer to Joan Woodbury’s article in the *Bearnstow Journal*⁷.



Jacqueline Robinson



Robinson’s book on
French Modern Dance



Mary teaching in Rheinbabenallee, 1957. The third and fourth dancers behind Wigman are Americans Betty Bowman (leaning left) and Nahami Abbell (leaning right).

Fortunately, we were free to pursue our own choreography in the afternoons, signing up to use the studios for free. Often Ulrich Kessler, composer and pianist, and Wolfgang Wölfer, a young pianist/composer, were available to create music for our choreographic attempts. Both were extremely helpful collaborators (and of course, we paid them extra for their time).

While in Berlin, Kessler wrote music for three of my dances: *Lady Macbeth*, *Cathedral* (based on several trips to Chartres in France), and something about a chair. A young U.S. G.I., David Porter⁸, wrote music for two e.e. cummings poems that he sang while I danced. Later a young U.S. violinist,

Carl Nashan⁹, improvised Bluegrass fiddle sounds for my Agnes DeMille-inspired hoedown piece, and two poems by Emily Dickinson that I recited while dancing. A special triumph was creating “Orpheus Descends to the Underworld,” a group improvisation assigned for my *Tänzerische Reifeprüfung* (dance performance exam) in spring 1956. Live musical and percussion accompaniment enhanced the Wigman experience.

The Body

My first year at Mary’s school was spent getting to know my own body, learning how to open up to training the dance instrument. I clearly remember her first admonitions to us as dance students in Berlin:

“Go home and stand before a mirror.

Look at your body.

Naked.

Take a good look, for this is your body (pause) —

and it is the only one you will ever have.

This is your dance instrument.

Get comfortable with it.

Learn to know it and to love it, for through this body you will speak to others for the rest of your life —

and thank the gods for giving you such a remarkable instrument!”

The shock was great! No dance teacher had ever suggested that I accept my body, much less love my own body as is— and then work toward improving my abilities. Too many negative dance words had come my way, from teachers who, though well-meaning, undermined my incentive to progress, encouraging fear of failure.

Absorbing this lesson and putting it into practice took a year. A full year. It compensated for Mary’s constant hammering on my back and bellowing in class: “Bend your back, Junior!¹⁰ Not so stiff, give! Curve the body into the movement! Give yourself to it!” And after my correction, “*Ja, Ja, besser.*” [okay, better]

The Dance, Not the Dancer

Mary saw the dance rather than the dancer. Our task was to subordinate our individuality to movement. That is, your body instrument was intended to dig deep into your own feelings, then create movement, sculptures in space. As you moved, it was the movement that counted, not the individual doing it. By training the body to understand space, one could speak through gesture without words, without sound.

This was difficult and demanded that we understand spatial relationships in a quasi-architectural way and acquire individual skills to relate them through our bodily attitudes while traveling through space. If one's body were "inharmonious," then only disharmony was conveyed; if one's body were "harmonious"—with no elbow sticking out here, hip resisting tracing a curve, head falling heavily in the direction of a fall rather than resisting descent as a counterweight—then the movement achieved understanding.

While training, I took yoga lessons from Herr Weening. A Buddha-like gentleman in his 50s, he had seen Wigman perform in her hey-day. "She had a harmonious body," said he. "I do not think she was capable of moving inharmoniously, even in her dark dances." Later in life, I understood his remark. If one looks at her pictures, they convey absolute harmony even when projecting dark themes—such as *Hexentanz*.



Mary Wigman, *Hexentanz*, 1926

Space — Raum

While dancing, the performer is never alone. Space (*Raum*) is with you. Always. Mary insisted that we recognize this entity. From your first "wobbly bow," to the proud "*Verbeugung*"¹¹ of the experienced soloist, you are making others aware of the realm where your innermost being is revealed. Your intent must be clear to you, even when it means something totally different to your audience.



Brecht's *Caucasian Chalk Circle*

"Space is your partner. whether benign or adversarial, you are not alone. Take this into your composition." —Mary Wigman

Agitprop theater did not interest her unless it moved beyond delivering a "message," toward sincere theatrical self-expression—as was the case with Bertolt Brecht's Berliner Ensemble, particularly in movement-driven productions like *Mutter Courage*, staged with the camp-following mother pulling a cart in circular movements on a round revolving stage, or *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* where movement slashed across from stage right to stage left until the final scene, in which two

women pull a small stumbling child ruthlessly back and forth center stage. Or Martha Graham, with live orchestra, performing a solo, *Judith*, donning the helmet she will wear as she enters the tent to kill Holofernes—a piece Martha danced in Berlin in September 1957 for the opening of the *Kongresshalle*, a building financed by U.S. money. This ceremony took place shortly before the premiere on the 27th of Wigman’s version of Stravinsky’s *Sacre du Printemps* at the Berlin *Städtische Oper*, which Martha attended¹². Brecht, Graham, and Wigman all exploited their theatrical space to the fullest, drawing the spectator into their own Raum—releasing the onlookers only after they experience the artist’s spatial sculpture, the movement, the dance.



Martha Graham as Judith



Kongresshalle 1957 (the “Pregnant Oyster”)



Mary Wigman’s *Bewegungssprache*: Proben zu *Le Sacre du Printemps* von Mary Wigman mit Dore Hoyer (Mitte) in der Rolle des Opfers im Jahr 1957. [Mary Wigman’s movement language: Rehearsal of *The Rite of Spring* by Mary Wigman with Dore Hoyer (middle) in the role of the “Sacrifice” in 1957]. E.L. Thomas—priestess kneeling, arms raised, right of Hoyer and left of Majid Kashaf, man holding rope, head bowed.



Sacre rehearsal showing “Raum”—space that would become a raked oval tilted stage right, creating a uneasy setting and difficult dancing in Stravinsky’s ritual striving toward freedom—in surrounded Berlin

This basic principle informed my later work in theater, music, and dance: “Train in space, be aware of the ‘matrix’ in which you function. Create your message in this transformed space—that you make me, the spectator, share with you.”

Whether working with dancers restaging court choreographies from Italian dance manuscripts written in the *trecento*, or actors in Australia creating a WWI tank crew deserting the battle-field to save their lives by going into hiding, or performing *Tea with Kammy*, a contemporary modern dance piece by Shelley Cushman of North Texas University, featuring a refined lady who strips off her long gown to perform a sexy bump-and-grind parody while chatting unperturbedly with her genteel companion, I focused on Mary’s teachings of *Raum*¹³.



Movement and Meaning

Movement is organic and universal. (Eat your heart out, post-moderns.)

“We all have the same instrument: one head, two arms, two legs, and a torso. Generally, all joints move the same way.” —MW

“Explore possibilities: for example, take the human hand. How remarkable! What can one do with it? Focus on your hands. Explore possibilities. Let’s try...” —MW

Then Mary would lead us in a “dance” hour of improvised composition, with inspired focus on the five-fingered appendage usually hanging at our sides, or outstretched as an arm extension sideways, perpendicular, or balled into a protesting fist. Subtleties were explored individually, leading to movement diversity and rhythmic exploration. Fast, medium, slow. The sessions with her were mesmerizing, with dancers caught up in continuity that lasted the entire hour. Group dancing called for differentiated movement; choral dancing required synchronized movement, synonymous but often not identical. One danced in all her classes—“technique is only what you can do well.”

“Learn to breathe—learn to move—learn to use movement memory so you will not always have to THINK about the next gesture, it will come *vom selbst*.” —MW

In the early days of my UCLA teaching, I focused on how to teach dance history through movement, with a “Western Civ” orientation. (My class fulfilled this requirement alongside upper-division classes in the History Department taught by Eugene Weber, my role model in lecturing, who had also attended the Sorbonne and Sciences Po in Paris.) This meant learning as much as possible about early dance through pictures, music, and symbols from hieroglyphics to dance descriptions and notations. I had performed in Mary’s staging of Carl Orff’s *Carmina Burana* in Mannheim in 1956 and was fascinated by early dance & music. I began seeking out *Renaissance* and *Baroque* dance mentors. Many musicians had analyzed and interpreted the music and a handful of dance scholars were busily correcting their oft misguided interpretations. Musicologists did not know the dance steps or how to merge them with the music.



I spent hours in the *Bibliothèque Nationale* in Paris reading Italian manuscripts from 1440 to 1490 to decipher the courtly dances described. Here, Mary’s lessons about the body, how it moves naturally, where it is in space, and how it conveys meaning were invaluable.



Frank Cofrancesco Cathy Milne Carl Daugenti
performing bassadanza, *Zoglioxa* [Joyous One]

Her principles allowed me and my student conspirators (collaborators?) to find the meaning in the movement. Some examples from Domenico’s ca.1440 ms: Tuscany, Italy: In *Leoncello*, a gentleman pursues a lady and captures her as part I ends; in Part II she pursues and ensnares him in return. In *Mercantia*, one lady dances with three men, “selling” her charms by dancing flirtatiously with each in turn. In *Sobria* four men capture a woman inside a square and tease her, plucking at her hair and whispering salacious teasings in her ear, allowing her to escape only as the dance ends.

These dances provided entertainment on long evenings indoors or on the meadows outside the palace even earlier than recorded in Boccaccio’s *il Decamerone* in 1448. Dance games persisted and became a part of courtly protocol, then theater and opera, eventually setting the format for modern symphony music (fast, slow, fast). Wigman’s principles helped me work out how to bring these dances “*wieder auf die Beine*” (to life; literally, “on two legs again”).

All my students participated in dance labs throughout the term, moving—with skill, or with sheer diligence—as instructed in the 15th, 16th, 17th, 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries.

“There is a dance in every body.” —ELT

CONCLUSION

The principles learned from Mary Wigman have supported my work throughout my dance life, whether performing, teaching, lecturing, choreographing, directing, or writing. Enumerated below are some of my own concepts, inspired by her and by my personal and professional activities with the theater works of **Bertolt Brecht**, **Heiner Müller**, and **Robert Wilson**—often collaborating with Polish-American professor and theatre critic, **Andrzej Wirth**.¹⁴



Bertolt Brecht



Heiner Müller



Robert Wilson



Andrzej Wirth

“Train in space, be aware of the matrix in which you function. Create your message in this transformed space that you make me, the spectator, share with you.”

“Learn to breathe—learn to move—learn to use movement memory so you will not always have to *THINK* about the next gesture, it will come *vom selbst*.”

“My tool is the human body, which must acquire awareness, be comfortable with the being that inhabits it, and become open to interpreting dance material by doing it. Performing it. Living it. Commenting on it in motion. Making it real. Allowing it to live again. Today. Now. Immediately.”

“Read text with movement eyes. It is not words on a page, but thoughts and feelings and actions that need to be tried out. Theater is a living medium.”

“Edit. Discard excess in all parts of the message. Concentrate on the crux of the matter [*den Kern der Sache*]. Intensify rather than spinning out.”

“Rehearsal is a learning process; use trial and error, interpretation, revision, shortening, drawing out, playing with pauses, breath, rhyming, joking in movement—allow the self to come out within the context.”

“Process constantly changes and evolves in performance—let it.”

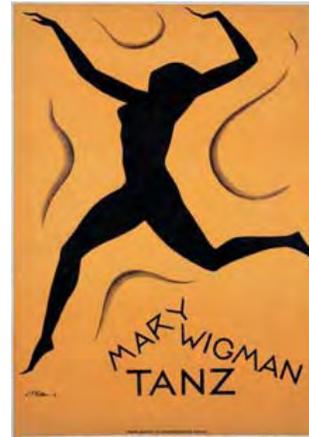
December 27, 1972: Mary’s last definition of dance to me

“I have always understood dance as an artistic language of its own—everything I have seen, I have lived, I have gone through, has proved this fact:

Dance, as any other art, is a symbolic language that lifts one from the level of every day life to an artistic level. Art is something above every day level.

You can say what you want, you can tell me . . . you can kill me for that, but that is what I believe in.”¹⁵

Emma Lewis Thomas
Professor Emerita, U.C.L.A.
Santa Monica, CA
2016



Endnotes

1. All quotations are from the author's memory and 1972–73 recorded interviews. They are my translations. These include direct quotations of Mary Wigman's remarks.
2. On my first visit to the Berliner Ensemble, I saw Helena Weigel in Brecht's adaptation of Gorki's "die Mutter." Amazing—and a decade later the subject of my doctoral dissertation. Upon leaving the theater, I noticed two automobiles parked across from the entrance: a Rolls-Royce and a '30s English sports cabriolet. I asked the *Pförtner* [Doorman], "Who owns those cars?" With pride, he responded, "The Rolls belongs to Miss Weigel; the sports car to Mr. Brecht." I thanked him and walked away, thinking: "Politics do not matter—when you are a star, you get the car."
3. Born 1908, Jerome Andrews attended Cornish School of Arts; studied with Martha Graham, Hanya Holm, and Sigurd Leder; partnered Ruth Page; and taught with Alyse Bentley. He moved to Paris in 1952 and, defying the balletic environment, taught modern dance until his death 1994. He was a major teacher for modern dancers in Paris such as Clara Gibson Maxwell, among others.
4. Jacqueline Robinson was a tall blonde, beautiful mover with a harmonious body that languidly sloughed through the air with the resistance of an indifferent lover. Married to an engineer, Jacqueline rarely seemed to break through to her inner impulses when she danced. An accomplished writer, she accurately pegged her era in *Modern Dance in France: An Adventure 1920–1970*.
5. Karen Waehner was Wigman trained, earthy in stance, strong arms and legs framing a solid body that could scream, shout, leap wildly, caress, or take your hand in friendship. Deep, non-verbal, moving with Karen was bearing one's soul in movement. She was acknowledged as his foremost choreography teacher by Angelin Preljocaj, of Aix-en-Provence Dance Center (personal communication, Berlin, fall 2011).
6. Later graduating from Sarah Lawrence College, Marnie danced with Martha Graham for 10 years, then moved to Berkeley, CA with her husband, David Wood. Beginning as his unpaid assistant, she eventually chaired the Theatre Department at U.C. Berkeley and now lives in New York, where she continues to teach, choreograph, and write about dance.
7. Woodbury, Joan. 2004. "The Wigman Experience," <http://bearstowjournal.org/wigman-woodbury-exp.htm>.
8. Subsequently pursuing a career in conducting, Porter completed a doctorate and most recently taught at the University of Colorado in Colorado Springs.
9. Nashan played with the Berlin Symphony, the Philharmonia Hugarica in Vienna, and spent many years with the Minnesota Orchestra, formerly Minneapolis Symphony.
10. "Junior" was my nickname from high school days. Mary always called me that, and I danced under that name in Germany.
11. Formal theatrical bow.
12. Wigman's influence can be seen in Graham's 1980 *Sacre* choreography, particularly in the use of the rope encircling the Chosen One.
13. Mary gleefully told us about a student in Dresden who took her audition classes. After two weeks, she painfully informed him: "Look, you are a lovely young man, but you are not a dancer. Try your creativity in some other field, perhaps art." After begging her, he finally gave in, and wrote his parents, "I must leave; but note, that at Wigman's school, Space is RED!" [*Raum ist rot*] Indeed, recently in one studio all walls and the ceiling had been painted red.
14. A member of the post WWII writers' "Gruppe 47," Wirth taught in the U.S. from the mid-60s–80s. In 1982 he founded "*Angewandte Theaterwissenschaft*" [ATW, Applied Theatre Studies] in Giessen, Germany that spawned the innovative "*Giessener Schule*" in German performance that still holds sway. The first person to identify and name "post-dramatic" theater and "theatre without an audience," Wirth developed Brecht's teaching/learning theatre concepts into 21st century theatrical practice.
15. Personal interview December 27, 1972, audiotape recording, published in *Journal of the Association of Graduate Dance Ethnologists, U.C.L.A., 1979, p. 15.*