

AN INSIGHT INTO THE HISTORY OF MODERN DANCE IN LATVIA: ANNA KERRÈ'S SCHOOL OF PLASTIC DANCE (1924 –1937)

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Summary

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In the 1920s, features of modernism were visible also in the Latvian dance scene. In the first decades of the 20th century, the term 'modern dance' was not in active use in Latvia nor elsewhere in Europe. In the first decades of the 20th century, the more common terms used by dance professionals and critics in Latvia were 'plastic dance' and 'rhythm-plastic dance'. But, at the end of 1920, the term 'artistic dance' also appeared. As in the first decades of the 20th century, the term 'modern dance' was not yet settled in Latvia. In the 1920s and 1930s, 'plastic' and 'rhythm-plastic' dance schools worked very intensively, and these can be seen as pioneers of new modern dance traditions in Latvia.

At that time, new dance schools and studios, which followed innovative dance trends in Europe, were formed one after another. Anna Kerrè's School of Plastic Dances was one of the largest dance schools in Riga. Kerrè began her creative work in Latvia in 1922 as a solo dance interpreter, but, after two years, she founded a plastic dance school. This research paper traces Kerrè's creative and pedagogical work principles, characterizing the specifics of the work of her school, searching for influences, as well as comparing her school with other dance schools in Latvia.

Anna Kerrè (Trocenko) was born in the Caucasus in 1889. She came to Latvia from Russia, where she studied dance with the actress and plastic dance instructor Claudia Sokolova-Isachenko. The dance school's first concert took place at the Latvian National Theatre on December 4, 1924. Kerrè characterized both her and her students' performance style as 'ancient Greek', 'oriental', 'Indian' and 'grotesque'. In the published concert programme, the director explained her art and teaching principles, which were inspired by "ancient sculptures, Etruscan vases, and Assyrian dishes". Her goals were expressed in the statement "to create a new Hellenistic physical beauty in theatre" (RMM¹⁸, inventory number 228035).

As can be confirmed by the published opinions in the Latvian press, varied modern dance tendencies can be observed in the work of Anna Kerre's School of Plastic Dances, with particularly vivid manifestations of early modern dance characteristics.

¹⁸ RMM – *Rakstniecības un mūzikas muzejs* (The Museum of Writing and Music, Riga).

The influence of Isadora Duncan on the formulation of the choreographer's artistic principles can be clearly seen – an enthusiasm for ancient Greek culture, the idea of the unity of the body and soul, and attempts to demonstrate the beauty, naturalness and simplicity of body movement. Dance is the depiction of human spiritual experience with music. Kerrè followed the principles developed by her teacher Sokolova-Isachenko, in particular, she paid attention to gesture expression (which is considered even more valuable than the technical virtuosity of the dancer), the quality of the movements, plastic and flow. The school's teaching subjects also included the eurhythmics of Émile Jaques-Dalcroze, which was a key feature of dance schools of that era in Latvia and elsewhere. Anna Kerrè's developed performance programs reveal another early modern dance trend, the so-called 'exotic dance', though to a lesser degree than in the 1920s, but it was still a part of choreographic productions in the 1930s. Often, the choreographer included elements of religious rituals of ancient or Asian cultures in the performances, which Kerrè called 'temple dances'. In 1926, one could see a large scale performance by the school, a tragedy in one act from the life of the ancient Phoenicians, which the title *Feniķija*. The violin and piano music for the tragedy was composed by Jānis Suhovs. Many critics considered it one of the most successful of Kerrè's choreographic performances (Kroders 1926; Siliņa 1926: 171–172).

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The school achieved its first international success and recognition in 1928, when it was awarded the Grand Prix at the Paris Dance and Physical Culture Olympics, which included participants from 70 nations. At the same time, Kerrè was awarded a professor's degree in plastic dance. Her students Leonora Bergfelde, Vilma Tiltiņa, Antonija Indriksone and Emma Šnickis participated in the Paris Olympics.

In the choreographer's later performances, one can sense the vivid form of expression, thematic and conceptual development of German modern dance, which differs from the aestheticized performances based on the exotic character or ancient cultures, but this tendency did not become a dominant one in the artist's creative work. The influence of classical dance appears in the performances and school programmes of the 1930s, and this tendency reflects the direction of European modern dance of that era. It is possible that one of the reasons for the lack of success for Kerrè's school at the 1932 dance competition organized by the International Dance Archive was an excessive keeping to the early modern dance aesthetic, since the 'Duncanist' and 'exotic' style was no longer considered current at the end of the 1920s and early 1930s in Europe.

There was no consensus in press publications regarding the quality of the choreography and performance of the productions of Anna Kerrè's school. Often the artist was criticised for not following the

principles of dance composition and a lack of a sense of style, and for an excessively eclectic programme. Still, the active press interest and many critics' reviews confirm that the work of Anna Kerrè's school had a significant role in the landscape of the Latvian modern dance. Many critics confirm the fact that there was competition among the largest schools in Riga (the schools of Beatrise Vignere, Anna Ašmane, and Anna Kerrè), even though the schools formulated their initial goals differently. The main method of Anna Ašmane's Music and Rhythmic School was the eurhythmics of Jaques-Dalcroze, but the school also offered artistic dance courses. Beatrise Vignere's Physical and Aesthetic Education School initially combined music and choreography education methods, but, over time, the school's work principles focused fully on the study of dance performance. Since its founding, Anna Kerrè formulated the direction of the school's work to reflect its name – 'Plastic Dance School' (later 'Plastic Ballet School'). As a result, the interests of all three schools converged and competition was created in the field of dance performance.

Regardless of the criticism received and setbacks, which are still a vital part of creative work, Anna Kerrè's school can be considered a significant phenomenon in Latvian dance history. The artist, with both her creative and educational work, made modern dance ideas popular and relevant in the Latvian cultural environment of the 1920–1930s, attracting many new dance enthusiasts.

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