

## book review

### **Hitler's Dancers: German Modern Dance and the Third Reich**

by Lilian Karina & Marion Kant  
translated by Jonathan Steinberg  
Berghalm Books New York/ Oxford ((2003)  
German Edition Verlagsgruppe Dornier GmbH (1996)  
Second updated Edition 1999

Karina and Kant's book attempts to fill a gap in the understanding of dance in Europe in the 20th century through shedding further light on the role of German modern dance in the emergence and consolidation of National Socialism in Germany. It is an attempt to find answers to some pertinent (and perhaps to some Laban Guild Members painful) questions:

1. Why was modern dance the only "modern" arts genre the Nazis welcomed? Why was it not considered degenerate as was expressionism in graphic art, atonalism in music, and abstract formalism in architecture?
2. Why should dance be the exception to the general demolition of self-serving myths that protected Nazis in past-war Germany?
3. Why has a 'conspiracy of silence' been observed around the subject of German Modern Dance during the 1930 -1945 period?
4. Does it really matter now anyway?

To the last question the opinion of the authors is "Yes", because their researches have revealed how quickly artists can be corrupted by proximity to power or wealth, and how fictitious the idea of 'art for art's sake' actually is in practice.

Many opinions expressed by the authors are controversial. To my knowledge some of them are definitely erroneous). They question established accounts and tarnish the accepted images of some very great figures in the history of dance, including Rudolf Laban. The book is in four parts.

PART 1 by Lilian Karina, an anti-Nazi professional dancer who worked in Germany in the 1920s and 1930s and went into exile in Sweden, questions why the German dance community accepted Nazi censorship and the exclusion of Jews from orchestras, ballet and dance companies without murmur or protest.

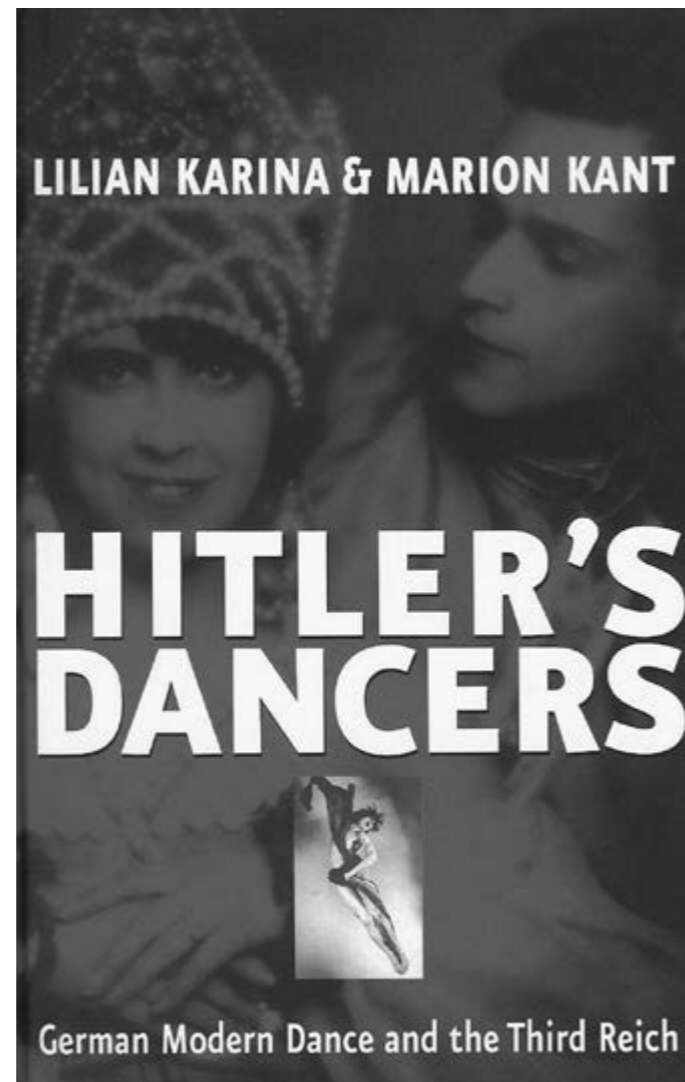
PART II by the dance historian Dr Marion Kant focuses on *The Nazi Ministry for Popular Enlightenment and Propaganda*, which gained absolute control of dance, opera and theatre in the 1930s.

PART III, also by Dr Kant, explores the ambivalence of the Nazi regime towards Jazz and swing dance.

PART IV is a very extensive Appendix of documents of source material, mainly from *Federal German Archive* sources, and also from theatre, opera and dance archives, including those in Cologne, Leipzig, Stockholm, the NRCD at Guildford and the New York Public Library.

First published in 1996 in German, the book created considerable debate and was discussed across Europe in nearly seventy reviews. As it is now three years since the English edition was published I cannot recall ever having seen it mentioned in the Laban Guild Magazine. Only

having been given a copy very recently, the book came as a shock to me as I think it may be to many other Guild members who from the 1940s onwards became interested and involved in the practice of 'Modern Dance' or the 'Art of Movement' as the work of Rudolf Laban and Lisa Ullmann was called in Britain.



To me personally, the book was quite disturbing as it questions my acceptance of Laban and raises questions of ethical responsibility. Can artistic productivity abolish moral responsibility? In the 1940s I was just beginning my career as dancer and teacher. I was naive, romantic, unrealistic, a politically ignorant dreamer that believed one should do things for interest and love and not for money. The Laban approach led me to a lifetime interest and career. I wept bitter tears when Laban died in 1958.

One cannot dispute the content of the enormous number of original documents displayed in the *Appendix* which make the book a valuable resource for those wishing to do further research. I think, however, it is valid to think more deeply about the motive of the authors whether: in the

service of truthfulness in dance history; to emphasise the importance of morality in life; or to discredit present-day Laban institutions by discrediting Laban as a man?

Karina and Kant, in my view, show a certain arrogance, self-satisfaction, destructiveness and lack of compassion themselves in failing to consider more deeply what it must have been like for humane people to have to struggle to exist and work within the stranglehold of the Nazi state, where fear and cowardice and betrayal were survival tactics. Who knows how we ourselves would have reacted? By limiting themselves to the period 1930-45 and singling out Rudolf Laban, part of the (and his) story is missing. British and American views of him from the 1940s onwards do not appear to have been sought. We are only criticized for a 'conspiracy of silence'!

#### **Some quotations (about Laban) from the book *Hitler's Dancers:***

p.16 "**Laban's readiness, and that of many other important dance artists, to accept the anti-Semitism of the Nazi regime as fast as they could makes later excuses of ignorance impossible.**"

p.35 "**Rudolf Laban's opinions on the African-American population in the U.S. and that in Africa reveal his racism and contempt for other ways of life and other races.**"

p.17 "**From 1934 onwards Laban declared his closeness to Nazi ideology again and again. He emphasized the 'German' in dance; on every occasion he displayed his anti-democratic attitudes.**"

p.100 "**Laban's 'emphasis on leadership and followers, his insistence on discipline and obedience ... the surrender of individuality and rationality, and delegation of individual will to a higher authority' ... may have arisen from his military experiences.**"

p. 101 "**Laban's book 'Ein Leben für den Tanz', with its overtones of vocation and sacrifice, created an atmosphere of cult leadership which Laban cultivated and which survives in Laban disciples still today.**"

p. 102 "**Both Laban and Wigman had already turned the 'German' in dance into the distinguishing mark of their artistic endeavour. Both were anti-Semitic and acted on their views.**"

p. 19 **In relation to Laban's dream of a Higher Institute of Dance – "of course one could object to his rather one-sided and narrow conception of dance".**

p. 126 **Laban too despised anything 'intellectual' ". His "entire dance theory incorporated spiritual, emotional, and sub-conscious energies and dismissed intellectual approaches as distorting and useless, or harmful and damaging".**

p. 20 "**Laban considered himself above petty considerations and procedures. He was the genius who was lifted beyond normal constraints.**"

p.101 **In Laban, "Nazi meglomania had found the dance meglomaniac genius who could meet its insatiable need for show and spectacle, dressed up in the mystifying language of race, instinct, cult, bonding, hierarchy, subordination and self-abnegation".**

p. 118 **Martha Graham refused the invitation to dance at the 1936 Berlin Olympics. "She could neither travel to, nor dance in, Nazi Germany. She rejected a system that treated distinguished artists with the brutality and barbarity of the Third Reich ... She had expressed moral outrage, something her German colleagues had not even considered".**

In the light of the derogatory statements made about Laban I think it is important that Laban Guild Members should know about these, and consider why Laban was able to find a home in England during the war and why his ideas flourished here. The damage to the image of Laban as a man and the importance of his approach to movement study and dance which the book can cause is too serious to be ignored, but the book's statements must be known in order to be answered. A few of the most important ones are included above.

*Sally Archbutt*