

THE GREEN TABLE- A DANCE OF DEATH

By nature my talents are practical, but ever since I have been able to think for myself clearly, my strongest wish has been towards philosophy and the arts. That I became a dancer, I see gratefully as a special gift of destiny. The dance, of which I was unaware, came to me, and I was as one sleeping being awoken by bright morning sunlight. (Markard ,1985, p.29)

Kurt Jooss tells us in few lines his story, background and history. In this essay, I will analyse the figure of Kurt Jooss, his famous ballet *The Green Table*, and the historical and artistic context that influenced his work.

Born the 12th of January 1901, in the small village of Wasseraufingen, not far from Stuttgart, Kurt Jooss grew up studying piano, voice and drama. To pursue his dreams of becoming a musician, he attended the Stuttgart Academy of Music. However, even by following his desire to succeed either in music or drama, he found himself dissatisfied and decided to go back to his father's estate. Just before leaving Stuttgart, he met Rudolf Laban, who introduced the young Jooss to the world of dance. After a short period spent in his father's farm, he realised he needed to re-join Laban and become a dancer. Although he had little dance training, he shortly became Laban's student and choreographic assistant, dancing as the main male role in his new work *Die Geblendeten*. During the time Jooss was with Laban, he met Sigurd Leeder, who became his long-time collaborator. Together, they presented the piece *Two Male Dancers*, where Jooss developed for the first time his interest in the "dance of death", crucial for his future ballet master piece.

In September 1927, he moved to Essen, founded with Rudolf-Schulze Dornburg the Folkwang School and became the director of its Dance Department.

In November 1931, Jooss received an invitation from Les Archives Internationales de la Danse, in Paris. He was asked to participate to an international choreographic competition, where he brought a new piece: *The Green Table*.

Premiered in Paris in July the 3rd 1932 with a 35 minutes' piece with music by F.A. Cohen. *The Green Table* opens with a group of ten dancers, the *Gentlemen in Black*, having a discussion around a table covered by a green cloth (Walther, 1993, p.61). The opening scene shows two opposite forces, equal in number and behaviour. Gradually, however, they lose their temper, start to spy on each other and slam the table. By the end of the scene they pull out a small handgun, they release their guns in the air and the stage goes dark: War has been declared. The figure of Death, originally performed by Jooss himself, appears in a completely dark and bare stage, similar to a "gladiator in the guise of a skeleton". (Walther, 1993, p.63). The next six scenes illustrate different sides of the war: *The Farewells*, the separation from the loved ones, happening between the young soldier and the young lady; *The Battle* and *The Partisan*, the war itself; *The Refugees*, solitude and misery; *The Brothel*, the touching emptiness and the atmosphere of forced entertaining; *The Aftermath*, the psychologically injured survivors.

The ballet ends with the *Gentlemen in Black* once again around the green table to show the hypocritical negotiations and the indifference to the consequences of the war.

Jooss drew an initial inspiration in 1922, close to the city of Lubeck, from the medieval fresco of *Totentanz* (Dance of Death) (Walther, 1993, p.54) and at the same time from Germany's collapsed economy. Jooss, during an interview, states about *The Green Table*: "it's not a ballet, it's a dance of death" (TheJoffreyBallet, 2012, 0min 5s to 0 min 7s). The ballet, in fact, reflects about the social and political issues of the time, topics shared by many contemporary artists of Jooss, such as political corruption and militaristic policies (Bergsohn, 2003, p.13). A strong inspiration for Jooss's *Weltanschauung* and choreography came from the magazine *Die Weltbühne* and particularly from the political writing of Kurt Tucholsky. He stated that the Weimar Republic was on his way to defeat and disaster (Sorell, 1993). Tucholsky wanted the people to see dangers awaiting, trying to explain that the German

feeling of frustration after the war would not resolve through a corrupt game of politics in which the wrong people were kept in power. Moreover, he provoked his audience to fight hypocrisy and avarice. According to Sorell (1993, p.5) "It's safe to say that Kurt Jooss saw in Kurt Tucholsky his literary mirror images". We could say that Jooss wanted to prevent the next World War with a satirical ballet while Tucholsky wanted to stop a tragedy with a typewriter.

Jooss's work needs to be seen in the context of the Weimar Republic, which was established in Germany, in 1918, following the German defeat after the First World War and the collapse of the German empire. The constitution of the Weimar republic provided universal suffrage for both women and men, direct election of the president and a government responsible to parliament. The political situation during the Weimar republic was characterised by a strong instability: the middle class (*bourgeoisie*), especially, was sceptical about a democratic system associated with the cost of reparation (Treaty of Versailles, 1919). In Germany, the crisis deteriorated and inflation soared. Starting from the summer 1923, the president Gustav Stresemann introduced a new economic policy in order to reconcile with France. Thanks to the Dawes plan of 1924, Germany took advantages of international loans, especially from the United States, that would have helped the economy of the country to recover. With the Dawes plan started a period of easing of tensions, fully recognised with the Locarno treaties (1925) that defined the relationship between France and Germany. In 1926 Germany was admitted in the League of Nations; and two years later fifteen countries, among Germany and the Soviet Union, signed an agreement in which they committed to not use war as a tool to resolve any controversy (Briand-Kellogg pact). Following the stock market crashed of New York in 1929, the apparent moment of peace crushed completely. The results of the economic crisis hit all Europe, but Germany was the one that felt it the most for its deep link with the American economy. The guidance of the Country passed to a

new catholic leader, Heinrich Brüning, in 1930, who carried out a strong policy of privations to pay back the reparations. Part of Brüning's plan worked and, in 1932, during an international conference, the German reparations were reduced and suspended for three years. However, on the other hand, the results were tragic: 6 millions of Germans were unemployed and the socialist movements were slowly growing and found many participants among a resentful population. Between 1932-33, after three attempts, the National Socialist German Workers Party took the power. The 30th January 1933 the president of the Republic Paul Hindenburg elected Adolf Hitler chancellor and head of the government. The 2nd August 1934 Hindenburg died and Hitler claimed vacant the nominee of President. He blended the role with the one of chancellor, proclaimed the end of the Weimar republic and established the German Reich.

During this complex historical and political period, the arts flourished. In Germany, especially, new movements emerged, such as Expressionism, in which Kurt Jooss's *The Green Table* found many similarities. This new movement found its origin with a group called Die Brücke (the bridge). The aim of this new program was to build a bridge between neo-romanticism and a new style that would have taken the name of expressionism. This new avant-garde was characterised by a research of the reality that surrounds us. Some of the Brücke exponents looked at war as a tool to define a new social order. A world war was seen as an instrument that could help to purify Europe and end all the old political systems. Many artists joined the army to fight as volunteers on the frontline, but the result was only an understanding of the tragic effects of war. For others, war became the main subject, a new inspiration, a nightmare and an obsession.

After the war, Expressionism acquired extreme, realistic connotations, which moved towards a brutal, tough and harsh representation of reality. Some of the most important artists of this period were Otto Dix (1891-1969), Max Beckmann (1884-1950) and George Grosz (1893-

1959). These artists proclaimed the idea of art for a better society, anti-war and philosophically linked with the idea of *Zeitgeist*. Hegel, in fact, used this term as part of his historical philosophy, believing that art reflected, by its nature, the culture of the time in which it is produced (Whitford, 1984, p13-31). Jooss's *The Green Table* captured this *zeitgeist* in the ballet's opening tableau: Leaders in a war room hold around a green conference table. The Expressionism shared its philosophy of art with the architecture school of the Bauhaus. What drew the creation of the Bauhaus was the fear of the glumness of the industries and their products, as well as the worries about the idea that art could lose aim in society. As it is possible to read on Art History website, "Creativity and manufacturing were drifting apart, and the Bauhaus aimed to unite them once again, rejuvenating design for everyday life." Though the Bauhaus discarded much of the academic traditions of fine arts, it rediscovered the practical skills, techniques and crafts proper of the old medieval art system. Kurt Jooss, as well, passes through a similar way of thinking. *The Green Table*, in fact, is a mature example of this technique. He uses elements of classical ballet, such as turn-out, demi-pointe, arabesques, extensions, turns and other ballet steps. However, there is no *pointe* work or any other feature that could suggest virtuosity. He eliminated the gracefulness, elegance, ethereal quality, and other affectations of classical ballet. Other elements in common with the Expressionism and the Bauhaus is the harsh irony and the caricature. The structure of the dance is sarcastic, like the formal dry humour used by many expressionists. In the scene of the *Gentlemen in Black*, the diplomats are repeating their routine without being attentive to the real consequences of their decisions. The solemnity of their discussions is contradicted by the music that accompanied the scene: a tango, which emphasises the ironic picture.

The year after the premiere of *The Green Table*, in 1933, Jooss, along with other artists, was forced to flee Germany after the Nazis asked him to dismiss some of his Jewish dancers. Other artists, instead, decided to remain in Germany and paint the horror of the war, as Otto

Dix (1891-1969) did. He was 23 years old when he volunteered for military service in 1914, and he was virtually consummated in the intensity of his commitment to show the horrors of war. Mutilated veterans, prostitutes, victims of sexual abuse, poverty, and crime are among his pictorial subjects. Between 1932-33, when *The Green Table* premiered, Dix worked on *Flanders*, a large canvas part of the triptych *Der Krieg* ("War", 1929–1932). The painting displays a field in the Flanders where three devastating battles were fought. Dix's canvas introduces war in the form of a battlefield where bodies and mud predominate; the one rotting and merging into the other, in contrast to war-time propaganda images that were glorifying the idea of war. Through this cruel picture, Dix commemorated the victims of the First World War hoping to prevent others (Fiorini,2014).

Even though the piece premiered more than 80 years ago, it is still very relevant and restaged all over the world. The deep connection between the ballet and its nature of strong political piece of art allows different companies to perform it again. The Polish National Ballet, in 2014, to commemorate the tragedy of the First War World, presented a triple bill called *1914*. The triple bill included a new creation by Robert Bondara, a repertoire piece by Jiří Kylián and *The Green Table*. Poland, situated in the middle of Europe, shared its loss and suffering through these three pieces. *The Green Table's* opening scene, especially, is not too far from the reality that can be seen on our televisions when watching an international summit or congress (Foyer,2014). Jeanette Vondersaar restaged the piece with the Polish National Ballet as well as with other companies, for example Introdans. Vondersaar, after a career as principal dancer, became assistant to Anna Markard, Jooss' daughter, and responsible for the future restaging of the piece after her death. Jooss insisted on having classically trained dancers, and this might be the reason why ballet companies keep this ballet alive. What is essential, though, according to Vondersaar, is the embodiment of the characters rather than pure technical skills, especially for the role of Death. She says:

Death. It is the most complex. The dancer has to be tall. A shorter person just doesn't work. He has to be someone with personality who can command the whole stage. He must also have control, musicality and an understanding of the different moves; he's a war machine, he's death, he's passionate. (Foyer, 2013).

It is possible to say that *The Green Table* can be seen as a reflection of its time. It is politically anti-war, with an anticipation of the horror of the Second World War and it is in line with the principles of the school expressionism; it is an example of irony and, at the same time, fine technique. Kurt Jooss created a work that still shows how much, nowadays, a dance piece can be used as a tool to fight a political movement, support ideas and demonstrate how cruel war can be: "While peace is always in short supply, war continues unabated and the ballet has never lost its relevance" (Foyer,2013).

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