

The dancer

Anita Berber

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Anita Berber was a German dancer and actress, who lived at the beginning of the twentieth century. In respect to her eccentric and excessive life she is often referred to as a vamp or femme fatale. She is famous for her performances, her unique fashion style and her often provocative and lascivious manner.

Life

Anita Berber was born at the 10th of June in 1899 in Leipzig, Germany as daughter of Felix Berber and Anna Lucie Thiem. Soon, her parents got divorced and Anita grew up at her grandmother's house in Dresden. Being 15 years old she moved to Berlin where her mother, her grandmother and two of her aunts lived together in a living community.

During the upcoming three years she studied acting and impressionistic dance, additionally she performed on a variety of stages in cities all across Germany, including her first solo-performance at the “Hochschule für Musik“, Berlin.

In 1919 she married Eberhard von Nathusius, son of an upperclass family in order to escape the cramped living situation and the necessity of deference to her related coresidents, but left him only three years later in favor of her lesbian girlfriend Susi Wanowsky.

At a performance in Hamburg in 1920 at the revue - founded by Celly de Rheidt - she danced together with the homosexual Sebastian Droste (real name: Willy Knobloch), who started a career as an expressionistic dancer, painter and poet. Two years later both of them traveled to Vienna, Austria where they developed the dance-performance “Tänze des Lasters, des Grauens und der Ekstase“ (dances of vice, horror and extasy).

In the following month after the premiere of their performance at the “Großes Konzerthausaal“ in Vienna, both Droste and Berber were being arrested for theft and, respectively, personal injury. Finally they were banished from Austria and forced to travel to Hungary.

Consequent to Droste stealing from Berber he, who died in 1927, cleared out to New York, bringing Berber to move back to Berlin where she later on got to know the american dancer Henri Châtin-Hofmann whom she married in September 1924.

Henri became her partner performing “Tänze des Lasters, des Grauens und der Ekstase“ (dances of vice, horror and extasy) in a variety of places, like Hamburg, Amsterdam, Stockholm and across Eastern Europe in the year 1926.

In 1927 Anita Berber came across a music performance of her father and met him after the show. He did not want to speak to her and prompted her to go.

During one of the tours of Anita and Henri in 1928 across the Near East, she collapsed on stage during a performance and was later on diagnosed with tuberculosis in an advanced phase. The couple's travel back home was often interrupted, because of Berber's critical health and their lack of money and could only be finished by donations collected by Berlin artists.

Anita Berber died on the 10th November 1928 at the “Bethanien-Krankenhaus“ (Bethanien-Hospital) in Berlin-Kreuzberg at the age of 29.

Expression through Excess

Anita Berber was known and also famous for her eccentric and excessive lifestyle. She mixed her professional life as a dancer with her everyday life, vanishing boundaries of staging and being into one indistinguishable essence of her needs. She did not subject to conventions of society and chose to express herself anyway she wanted to.

The provocation that many people perceived by what she was, can either be seen as inevitable apparition of her need to expression, or as planned and wanted. It can be assumed that she was aware of the effect she had on others and the media, so at least something about her behavior can be seen as an intentional claim for attention and egocentric self-affirmation. Some say that her egocentric view on life is caused by a total lack of a vision of the future that was widespread among the minds of expressionism. Lacking the ability to look forward to something inevitably lead her to the only thing that was graspable, the now and then, exaggerated to the extreme.

Dancing naked was one aspect many people of that time found provocative and outrageous about Anita Berber, resulting in multiple reports to the police. Berber rejected the assumption of many that her, dancing naked, was all about erotic or pornography. For her it was primarily a way of expression.

Anesthesia and Stimulus

One major role in Berber's life was taken by drugs, mostly cocaine and morphine, but also alcohol. She was addicted by the age of 21. The drugs she took, were legally bought by mail order from the company Merck, located in Darmstadt. Her two solo-performances “Kokain“ (cocaine) and “Morphium“ (morphine) are seen as her most important pieces of art reflecting her personal life.

The twofold character of the drugs‘ influences as described by the Czech dancer and writer Josef Jenčik after seeing one of Berber’s performances, manifest themselves in an ongoing fight between the healthy and the poisoned body, between visions and paralyzation.

Gesamtkunstwerk

In addition to her own artistic work as a dancer she influenced and participated in other ones by artists like Constantin Holzer-Defanti, Lotte Pritzel, Charlotte Berend-Corinth and Dora Kallmus. These artworks often showed Anita Berber in lascivious or even pornographic scenes. The most famous one would be by the expressionistic painter Otto Dix “Das Bildnis der Tänzerin Berber“ (portrait of the dancer Anita Berber). She was also drawn to the medium film, as one part of the expressionistic body of art. She participated in about 25 movies of that time, including Oswald’s “Das gelbe Haus“ (the yellow house) and “Anders als die Andern“ (different than the others), which founded the genre of sexual education in film, and Fritz Lang’s “Dr. Mabuse, der Spieler“ (Dr. Mabuse, the gambler).

Influences

Anita Berber, although her life was very short, had a great effect on the society of her time. Being among the first ones where the media constantly reported about, the often scandalous, news and events of life. Additionally her fashion-style was seen as revolutionary and influenced many, including Marlene Dietrich. This resulted in many young girls adoring her for what she was and the attributes that were attributed to her.

“Anita Berber already was a legend. She was only famous for two or three years, but did already become an icon. Depraved bourgeois girls copied Berber, every cocotte wanted to look like her as close as possible. Post-war-erotic, cocaine, salomé, final perversity, such terms built the corona of her glory. By the way the experts knew that she also was an excellent dancer.“¹

Klaus Mann

¹ (translated from German, by the author)

Sources

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