

# Dance

## DANCE VIEW

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# The Bauhaus Works Were Prophetic

**A**mong the restagings of early 20th-century avant-garde productions that have been seen in the last few years, Debra McCall's reconstructions of Oskar Schlemmer's "Bauhaus Dances" were especially successful.

Just over a year ago, Miss McCall, under the auspices of The Kitchen, presented six of the brief but pungent studies in abstract form that Schlemmer created in the Bauhaus School's Theater and stage workshops in Germany from 1928 to 1929. Now, at the Guggenheim Museum, she has reconstructed four more dances from this series — three for live performers and one for a pair of huge dangling spiral-shaped marionettes that resemble giant silken toys.

"Metal Dance," one of these works has been reviewed this way: "The curtain rises. Black backdrop and black stage floor. Deep down stage, a cave lights up, not much larger than a door. The cave is made of highly reflecting corrugated tinfoil set on edge. A female figure steps out from inside. She is wearing white tights. Head and hands are enclosed by shiny silvery spheres. Metallically crisp, smooth and shining music sets the figure to performing crisp movements . . . this whole thing is very brief, fading away like an apparition."

The point about this review is that it was not written last week but printed in a Swiss newspaper in Basel, the *National-Zeitung* in 1929, when Schlemmer took his original productions on a European tour. The remarkable fact is that this review, quoted in Hans M. Wingler's definitive documentary book, "The Bauhaus," is descriptive of the "Metal Dance" just presented under the sponsorship of The Kitchen and Goethe House. The accuracy of Miss McCall's staging vis à vis this review testifies to her scholarly integrity in reproducing "lost" dances with such vitality. It is also proof of the theatricality of Schlemmer's highly minimal and terse forms. What is so striking about "Metal Dance" in 1984 was exactly what the Swiss reviewer noted when he said, "this whole thing is very brief, fading away like an apparition."

At the same time, this magic instant radiated nothing of the conventionally ephemeral. On the contrary, its effect left a powerfully strong imprint, created by the choice of materials: strong metal forms from which the dancer emerged and whose gleam still registered in the mind's eye after a blackout eclipsed the entire vision.

Metal was very important to the Bauhaus movement — both a Utopian and practical effort. Its design school aimed at uniting technology and art. Man's life was to be bettered, not dominated, by the machine through this marrying of architecture, crafts and art. Among the designer workshops that were prominent in the Bauhaus's existence as an institution in Germany from its beginnings in 1919 until it was shut down by the Nazis in 1933, was its Metal Workshop. As Mr. Wingler notes, the Metal Workshop "did superior work" under the leadership of Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, a painter usually remembered for wider artistic achievement. Today, everyone who uses an ordinary sleek cylindrical coffee pot owes something to the Bauhaus Metal Workshop.

Whatever specific metaphorical message Schlemmer, himself a painter and sculptor, envisaged in "Metal Dance," it was typical of his concerns. Metal, technology's most obvious symbol, creates the environment in "Metal Dance." It is a shiny but cold palace. And yet man, in true Schlemmer fashion, is literally at the center of things here.

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On the small stage of the Guggenheim Auditorium, the black curtained space consisted of the following set (recreated by Paula Sloan with Pat Drucker, Nancy Ralph and Ulrich Stimmung). Two huge metal forms resembling horizontally pleated panels framed the stage. Two pairs of narrow metallic cylinders stood between these bent tilted shapes. Out of the dark recess in the center, a dancer in white tights stepped forward. Although this figure in the 1929 Basel performance was a woman, Miss McCall cast a man here, Brian Hanna, encased in a metal helmet and carrying two metal balls in his hands. He stepped forward and went into a plié. Stepping into ballet's second position, he brought both balls to the front with outstretched arms, bent his knees again, brought the balls to his head and suddenly jumped before blackness eclipsed him.

The lingering image of the body in plié was of an accordion-pleated form — assuming the same shape as the abstract metal panels. The difference was that one form was infused with the breath of life.

Miss McCall's program note declares: "Metal Dance" concerns the stage as a spectacle of illusion. Light, metal and figure combine to reflect and dissipate the architectural order, while the figure evokes a mystical quality."

Abstract forms contained metaphysical meaning to many modernist artists and Schlemmer was no exception. In 1926, his quest to rediscover the essence of theater directed him to search "for the origin of theatrical play." The visual artist in him made him define his creation of new forms as "providing the eyes with what is due them: everything in the realm of the visual, the show. The elements of that realm are form, color, light, space and movement."

Schlemmer's movement concerns were thus, to a degree, subordinate to those stemming from his training as a visual artist. One of the new reconstructions, "Flats Dance" or "Dance of the Stage Wings" uses three moveable screens as stage wings behind which offstage activities are implied. Hands or legs shoot out from the panels and occasionally a dancer in full figure (Nancy Ellen Stotz, Juliet Neidish or Jan Hanvik) comes out or points enigmatically. With their unstated drama of the unseen, these devices are now familiar. But the 1929 Basel reviewer could still find these dismembered limbs and activities not only "silly" but "frightening and mysterious."

In two new reconstructions in the "Hoop Dance" series, two big spiral forms in the abstracted shape of a body descend from above. As Miss Neidish placed several real hoops around herself, the same circular shapes were amplified in the marionettes. The Basel critic called these hoop figures "looking like the Michelin Tire man." At times, Miss Neidish moved her own hoops into scalloped concentric designs. She also moved them in overlapping positions until they "dissolved" into one hoop. It was striking to see the analogy between the spectacular metal bobbing metal figures — who appeared animate — and the human who manipulated forms as part of architectural space.

These are, one is tempted to say, merely exercises. Where can they lead? They lead, for instance, directly into the work of Alwin Nikolais, who has just been awarded the Legion of Honor by the French Government for his creativity. Like Schlemmer, he says things best in abstract form and has never separated man from his environment. The "Flats Dance" has served him, with his own originality, numerous times as a theme with sophisticated variations.

Remarkably, Schlemmer's ideas allowed him to foresee that dance would be the performing art most open to the new in the 20th century. Shortly after he presented his celebrated "Triadic Ballet," in 1922, he wrote: "The theatrical dance today can become a starting point for a regeneration. Unencumbered by tradition — unlike opera and plays . . . the dance is independent and predestined to drive gently into the senses what is new." Looking ahead in a prediction that could now apply even to Balanchine's pure-dance ballets, he defined space and the body as the dancer's instruments. Like Bach's music, which could be called abstract, he said, "the abstract dance is to be a creation, born of itself, sufficient in itself."