

**Rudolf Laban and Kurt Jooss:**  
**the good, the bad and the very (un)fortunate**

In his autobiography, written at the great age of 26, Jooss wrote: "I landed at the Stuttgart Academie of Music with the idea of becoming a singer, but I was most dissatisfied. I studied drama and with great success, but I remained empty [...] A chance meeting introduced me to Rudolf von Laban and to the world of dance, which was quite unknown to me."<sup>1</sup> Later Jooss was to recall this meeting in more detail in his interview with John Hodgson - as a member of the German Youth Movement Jooss had dance classes learning German folk dance. His unnamed teacher knew the editor of *die Tat* which had published two articles by Laban. This teacher asked the editor where Laban lived and they were delighted to learn that Laban was in Stuttgart.<sup>2</sup> How fortunate then that Laban had settled in Stuttgart in the post-war instability that had left him unable to stay in Switzerland; the history of European Modern Dance may have been quite different if Jooss and Laban had not come together at this time. Jooss recognised this himself saying "It's unimaginable luck to meet someone like Laban and to have him as a master. I think that was the greatest gift the gods could have given me."<sup>3</sup>

Jooss described to Hodgson how he and Laban met one Sunday afternoon in July 1920 and that the following week they, Jooss and his teacher, went for a class with Laban where he gave Jooss the task of 'You are a slave and you'll be sacrificed' to improvise. Evidently Jooss's response was adequate because Laban agreed to teach them both after the summer holidays but only if they brought with them a group as he did not want to teach them alone. So in September Jooss and nine others attended for their first class with Laban. The next day they were told by Dussia Bereska, Laban's assistant, that he was ill and could not teach them anymore. Jooss and his teacher were somewhat sceptical about this but it transpired that this was true. This left Jooss in a predicament as he appears to have given up his place at the Academie to study with Laban. Laban suggested Jooss study with Mary Wigman, which he refused, but he did take a class or two with Rudolf Böde. However even

after experiencing just the first meeting and the one class, Jooss had recognised that it was Laban who had what he was looking for; he went back to Laban and demanded that he teach him. This resulted in Laban teaching Jooss for “five most fascinating months” during which he had individual classes and later small group classes.<sup>4</sup>

Family circumstances forced Jooss to leave Stuttgart to return to his father’s farming estate but he found it unbearable; by September 1921 Jooss was back with Laban staying with him until the summer of 1924. During this time Jooss described himself as ‘student, dancer and later regisseur with Laban in Mannheim, Stuttgart and Hamburg’, travelling all over Germany with the Tanzbühne Laban.<sup>5</sup> It was an intensive time for Jooss during which he gained much experience as a dancer/performer, as a teacher, as a student and, as A. V. Coton put it, “one of the dancer models Laban used in his research”.<sup>6</sup>

Jooss witnessed and experienced Laban as a choreographer by dancing in such works as *die Glebendenten* (1921) an abstract choric dance, *Himmel und Erde* (1922), a tragi-comic pantomime and *Gaukelei* (1923), a dance drama. He was exposed to a range of subject matters and styles and experienced dancing as a soloist, in duets and trios and in large group pieces; he danced in silence, to percussion, to music composed by Friedrich Wilckens (musical director of Tanzbühne Laban) and to works by composers such as Tchaikovsky and Berlioz.<sup>7</sup> Jooss remembered Laban as a choreographer: “We could never copy; never do what he said because he never said anything. He only ever said very vague things and we had to work it out. [...] With *Gaukelei* usually he got us to improvise what he wanted to see and if he liked it he liked it and if he didn’t like it he said ‘no, find something else’”<sup>8</sup>

This creative process seems to have had considerable influence over Jooss for as a choreographer he too worked through improvisation to generate dance material – for example Jooss recalled Ernst Uthoff’s contribution to the creation of the role of The Standard Bearer in *The Green Table*: “He got very excited about that dance and often tried out movements with the flag, what he could do with the flag. I didn’t invent all those movements. They came from his enthusiasm for the flag [...] he found one movement and then another and my work was to put them properly together and to balance them and to set the accents where I thought they belonged.”<sup>9</sup> Unlike Laban Jooss’s use of improvisation was supported by a strong dance technique developed after his time with Laban during the mid 1920s-early 1930s.

We might too see Laban’s influence in Jooss’s choreographic works in the wide range of subject matter – from the comic *Company at the Manor* (1943) to the epic *The Green Table* (1932), from the political satire of *Chronica* (1939) to the parable *The Prodigal Son* (1933, re-worked 1939) - and in the equally wide-ranging accompaniments Jooss used for his work from specially composed works by Frederick Cohen and Robert Goldschmidt to extant music by Stravinsky and Strauss, all arranged for two pianos by Cohen.

Jooss also experienced Laban as a teacher although his influence on Jooss in this area is harder to discern. Laban did not teach identifiable steps or gestures but encouraged his students to use their bodies as a means of communication so that the body could employ any movement to express a choreographic idea. Jooss said “the education he gave us was to dissolve every form into its ingredients.”<sup>10</sup> The summary of Laban as a teacher as “more of a catalyst than an instructor, more of a coax than a coach” seems a fair description of Jooss’s experience<sup>11</sup> for he recalled that during those first five months with Laban he worked on Eukinetics and Choreutics at a time when nothing was systemised: “He just threw some ideas

here, some ideas there [...] and spoke in unrelated phrases now and then [...] He didn't give us any kind of straight thing, we had to straighten everything out ourselves."<sup>12</sup> Jooss clearly did straighten things out because his understanding and absorption of Laban's theories is evident in much of his extant work to the extent that he described his most well-known work, *The Green Table*, as "really a showpiece of Eukinetics – and also of Choreutics."<sup>13</sup>

The Tanzbühne Laban performed extensively with Jooss dancing in a number of works by Laban and with Laban. He describes Laban's abilities as a dancer/performer: "There would be simple, simple movement and lots of hands [...] and his face was very sort of speaking or expressive. But of course in his dance he never had the ambition to jump or turn or be a dancer – he was a mover with a rather uncomplicated rhythm [...] his stage presence was the most impressive thing [...] it was wonderful to see."<sup>14</sup> Jooss's own stage presence, particularly in the role of Death in *The Green Table* was frequently commented on by critics of the time – John Martin for example described Jooss's performance as "beautifully effective."<sup>15</sup>

If Jooss found so much to admire in Laban – his extraordinary, radiant personality as he put it<sup>16</sup> as well as his skills as choreographer, dancer and teacher – why did Jooss leave Laban in 1924? What had become so bad about what had been so good? Jooss was absolutely clear about this, putting his separation from Laban down to his ambition, his jealousy of the women surrounding Laban - particularly of Bereska, who took responsibility for the group when Laban was away - and that Laban made Jooss very unhappy by completely withdrawing from him; Jooss remembered that Laban once said to him: "You are spoiling every sound idea which I ever had."<sup>17</sup> In the end it seems that Jooss did not want to be in the atmosphere that had developed in the group in Laban's absence. He told Laban he wanted to

leave “and of course we had a horrific row and Laban said ‘You can’t leave me, you owe me your education.’”<sup>18</sup>

Jooss’s decision to leave was made easier by the offer of a job in Münster from his friend Hans Niedecken-Gebhardt. However Jooss felt this break from Laban very deeply stating “I was so in love with Laban that I couldn’t bear to be not with him.”<sup>19</sup> Interestingly, in his autobiography, written soon after his separation from Laban, he wrote much more dispassionately that “I needed independence for my further development so, with great regret, I left the Tanzbühne Laban.”<sup>20</sup>

How did Jooss’s leaving affect Laban? He left with his company for a tour which ended in Zagreb. Jooss’s roles were covered by a new member of the company, Karl Bergeest, but, as Preston Dunlop reports, he seems not to have been too successful.<sup>21</sup> Unfortunately although the company as a whole had some success they did not make enough money to cover the cost of the tour and were forced to abandon it; after the summer Laban returned to Hamburg

In Münster Niedecken-Gebhardt was artistic director of the theatre whose productions of Handel’s operas and oratorios reflected a surge of interest in the composer’s work in Germany.<sup>22</sup> He was already established as a director of some repute staging the operas and oratorios with movement an integral part of his productions. Recognising that he needed “a movement specialist, someone trained to deal with the various tasks that his progressive style demanded”, Niedecken-Gebhardt approached Jooss.<sup>23</sup> Fortunately for Jooss this offer came at a time when he was becoming disillusioned with the Tanzbühne Laban. Thus he was engaged as ‘movement regisseur’ to assist with opera and drama performances. Coton describes this role as someone who was “not only a dance arranger but someone who exercised a control

and supervision over the ways in which actors and singers disposed of themselves on the stage”.<sup>24</sup> The musical director there was Rudolf Schulz-Dornburg, also known for his pioneering and innovative productions,<sup>25</sup> with Frederic Cohen employed as opera conductor and Hein Heckroth as stage designer.<sup>26</sup>

In addition to hiring his friend and dancer Sigurd Leeder (whom he had met and worked with in Hamburg) Jooss was also able to engage dancers from the now defunct Tanzbühne-Laban including his future wife Aino Siimola,<sup>27</sup> and have them work with him on the opera productions and in his own work for, in addition to his work in the theatre, Jooss was able to create his own independent dance group, the *Neue Tanzbühne*. With Cohen, Heckroth, Leeder and Siimola Jooss had around him for the first time the creative team who were to work with him for the next two decades.

At this point then Jooss’s work with his dance company existed alongside his work in the theatre each equally important for, according to Jooss, in the following three years he and the *Neue Tanzbühne* “made a name for ourselves in Germany [...] [while] the Münster theatre [...] became famous through its powerful productions.”<sup>28</sup> Evidence of the latter is seen in an English review of the Münster production of Purcell’s opera *Dido and Aeneas* in 1926. “Münster is not a great city, the resources of its opera house are modest [...] And still it was the best performance of *Dido* that I for one have seen [...] One’s hat is raised to the manager Niedecken-Gebhardt, and to the ballet-master Kurt-Joos [sic] who are men of ideas [...] The scene of the sailors and the witches in Act 4 was brilliantly animated.”<sup>29</sup> Undoubtedly this was a very important time in Jooss’s development not only as a choreographer but in becoming immersed in theatre practice and the ways of the theatre.

Meanwhile Laban turned much of his attention to writing with contracts for two books (*Des Kindes Gymnastik und Tanz für Kinder* and *Gymnastik und Tanz* (both 1926)) for his students and the teachers he had trained but more importantly “to protect his own ideas from plagiarism”<sup>30</sup> He also strove to protect his name and reputation by developing an accreditation system for those teaching his work - they had to have earned the Laban Diploma and keep it up to date by attending annual vacation courses. Although burdensome in organisation and administration it kept a sense of community between those working in Laban’s name and was a source of income. In addition he had formed a new group, the *Kammertanzbühne*, which performed in Hamburg, and created several works which were well received eg *Don Juan* (1925) and *Narrenspiegel* (1926).

It is difficult to tell what, if any, was the relationship between Jooss and Laban at this time. Hodgson writes somewhat vaguely “For a while the paths of Laban and Jooss only crossed from time to time [...] Jooss remained ever on the look-out for chances of reconciliation with his master.”<sup>31</sup> Preston-Dunlop however states more definitively: “In 1925 and 1926 the three men [Jooss, Leeder and Laban] and Bereska met on and off, but with intense discussion.”<sup>32</sup> The discussions were about Laban’s movement notation system to which Jooss, and Leeder, were very committed. Jooss is credited by Laban<sup>33</sup> with suggesting one of the most important developments in his system, that of aligning the system vertically.

1927 saw the first German Dancer’s Congress take place in Magdeburg in June. Laban was one of the organisers and it grew out of the Theatre Exhibition already planned for the city. It attracted some eighty or so delegates, including Jooss, who were given lectures and performances including an evening of work by Laban at which *Ritterballet*, *Titan* and *Nacht* were performed.<sup>34</sup> After the conference Laban, Jooss, Leeder, Bereska, Albrecht Knust and

others gathered together to work on Laban's notation system. The final decisions were made and the system was ready to be trialled; Laban worked on a booklet of the system's principles, while Knust explored its efficacy through notating Laban's *Titan* after the Magdeburg performances and then using the score to remount the work successfully in Hamburg.<sup>35</sup> How fortunate that Jooss and Leeder had this interest in kinetographie for Labanotation (as the system became known) played a crucial part in the preservation of the Jooss's repertoire - at the Jooss-Leeder School in Dartington in the late 1930s Ann Hutchinson, trained by Leeder, notated Jooss's four signature works. Jooss was one of only a few choreographers able to read the notation of his own works and he used Hutchinson's scores often to remount his work.<sup>36</sup>

In 1927 it was time for Jooss and Leeder to move on; Schulz-Dornburg, Jooss and Hein Heckroth co-founded the *Folkwangschule für Musik, Tanz und Sprechtheater* in Essen, supported financially by the city, with Jooss as director of the dance department. Cohen, as pianist/composer/conductor, and Leeder and Siimola as dancers were employed by the Essen opera as well as joining *Folkwang Tanztheater Studio* (Jooss' new company founded in 1928) with Leeder also teaching at the school. This company became the permanent ensemble of the Essen opera and toured as the *Folkwang-Tanzbühne*. Once again Jooss had his creative team around him and now had a school to train professional dancers for his company. This enabled Jooss and Leeder to draw on their several years of experience working in Münster, to develop the ideas and theories of Rudolf Laban and to reflect on their other individual dance experiences, which now included a brief time in Paris and Vienna where they had studied ballet. In the school these influences were channelled into a curriculum which included "a modified form of classical training as a supplement to modern technique," eukinetics, choreutics, dance improvisation, composition, dance notation and so on,<sup>37</sup> while in

performance these influences were channelled in to what Jooss called ‘Dance Theatre’ the “form and technique of dramatic choreography, concerned closely with libretto, music and above all with the interpretive artists.”<sup>38</sup>

The second German Dancers Congress organised by Jooss and others, in Essen in 1928 was attended by three hundred or so people from all forms of dance in Germany. There were performances, including Laban’s *die Grünen Clowns*, and discussions focussed on how the new German dance should evolve - should German modern dance co-operate, or (in Jooss’s case particularly) synthesise with ballet to work in the theatre, or whether (as Wigman insisted) should ballet be denounced in favour of [her] absolute modern dance?<sup>39</sup> Opinions were strongly divided. Laban and Jooss, on the same side and reconciled perhaps, both recognised that modern dance needed the financial and artistic support of theatres and opera houses to survive. Wigman was totally opposed to this but, somewhat ironically, after the Congress, her acclaimed ensemble was forced to disband for lack of funding. The other significant event of the Congress was that Laban introduced his notation system to the delegates which “was welcomed wholeheartedly”.<sup>40</sup>

The relationship between Laban and Jooss changed during 1929. Laban’s Central School had been in Hamburg since 1923 but was moved to Berlin where Laban’s Choreographisches Institut had been established in 1926. When the Institut was forced to declare bankruptcy the establishment moved again, this time to amalgamate with Jooss’s department at the Folkwangschule in Essen where Jooss was firmly established.<sup>41</sup> Jooss recalled that he was “quite ready to arrange things and make it so he [Laban] was the uppermost god there [...] I’ll do this for him so we [can] come together.”<sup>42</sup> How fortunate that Jooss was in a position to make this happen. However it seems Laban’s standing in the school was not how Jooss

envisaged for essentially Jooss remained in charge and Laban was employed for only a few hours of teaching and examining. Quite how Laban felt about moving to Essen is not known. Nonetheless Jooss believed that “Laban needed me somehow [...] I had never stopped making every effort to have peace between us again because [...] my heart was so dependent on Laban. I was really more than a son, I was a loving devotee.”<sup>43</sup>

Laban’s 50<sup>th</sup> birthday was celebrated at the end of 1929. Amongst a plethora of performances and articles acknowledging Laban’s work and influence was Jooss’s creation *Pavane on the Death of an Infanta*. It is the earliest of his surviving ballets and in it we see Jooss exploring the aims of his dance theatre. The story unfolds of a princess shackled by the confines of the manners of court and her attempt to free her spirit. This narrative is told only in dance (no mime) with the dance existing only to tell her story. But it is not a mere ordering of events for the ballet reveals the feelings of the Infanta in her situation. The courtiers move with cold articulation keeping their distance from the unhappy Infanta. With curving pathways she moves amongst the rigid straight lines of the courtiers but they take no notice. The rhythm of her movements - free flowing and impulsive – contrast strongly with the strict rhythm of the courtiers’ constant pavane, bound by the dance forms’ insistent 4/2 metre in their impacted step close pattern. Her central movements, reaching out to the faceless people around her, are rebuffed by their desire to be separate from her. Coton<sup>44</sup> called it “a perfectly proportioned miniature dance drama” where the aural, visual and emotional elements are integrated to make a brief but complete theatrical dance work. How fortunate that Jooss and Laban were reconciled and that Jooss made this work for Laban, and how fortunate are we that the ballet was notated so that it can be with us still when so much of Jooss’s other work is lost.

Once re-established the relationship between Jooss and Laban seemed to flourish. In the summer of 1930 they worked at Bayreuth on the production of Wagner's *Tannhäuser* conducted by Toscanini. This brought together dancers from Laban's *Kammertänzbühne*, Jooss's Essen dancers and dancers from Laban's *Choreographisches Institut*. Jooss was billed as Laban's 'choreographic collaborator': "Quite how much Jooss helped him [Laban] with the choreography is open to dispute [...] Jooss himself took the view that his collaborative role had been considerable."<sup>45</sup> The production would seem to have been successful according to contemporary reviews, although Frederick Spotts, in his history of Bayreuth, wrote that the Bacchanale was performed "to suggest an orgy. Some found the choreography bold and exciting; others saw it as chaste gymnastics."<sup>46</sup> The relationship between Jooss and Laban at this time was in such good order that Jooss and his wife asked Laban to be god-father to their first child;<sup>47</sup> any remaining animosity between them must have disappeared by this point.

At the end of the summer Laban took up his new post at Berlin's State Opera at Unten den Linden with "the most prestigious ballet company in Germany."<sup>48</sup> He was responsible for choreographing new opera productions, personally responsible for the opera ballet (their standard of performance, company class, rehearsals and so on), the opera ballet school for children, and separate dance evenings for the opera ballet. This was an enormous undertaking for Laban without any of his usual supporters (Bereska for example) against an increasingly unstable economic and political background. He must have been successful as his one year contract was extended for another three.<sup>49</sup>

Jooss meanwhile returned to Essen trying to work, as was everyone, in what had become extraordinary circumstances. Jooss, like his company members, had been too young to see military service in World War I but they all experienced the aftermath; nearly two million

Germans had died, another four million were wounded while the cost in materials, lost talent, despair and injured minds was incalculable. The 1920s has seen some economic recovery and political stability, but economic recovery - which allowed industry to thrive, the infrastructure to develop and finance for municipalities and states to subsidise theatres, opera companies and so on – used foreign loans. Jooss and his Folkwang Tanzbühne Essen undoubtedly benefitted from this but then experienced the change in circumstances as the economic situation worsened (when foreign investors called in their loans following the Wall Street Crash in 1929) leaving many actors, musicians and dancers unemployed.<sup>50</sup>

At the end of 1931 Jooss was invited to compete in *Le grand concours de chorégraphie* organised by Rolf de Maré and *Les Archives Internationales de la Danse* (AID) in Paris. However he was unable to register for the competition as “New difficulties from the city of Essen again harshly crossed my most beautiful plans. Now I am stuck again and don’t know how to finance the project [...] I am still hopeful of some private people [...] but [...] one cannot know whether begging will have even a glimpse of success.”<sup>51</sup> The money came from somewhere and Jooss and his company journeyed to Paris in June 1932 for an event which was to change all their lives.

Participants in the competition came from all over Europe (but there was no representative from Britain and little from the US) and presented dance in a range of styles - from classical ballet to folk dance, German modern dance to historical dance and much more – covering a huge range of themes and subjects.<sup>52</sup> Jooss remembered that “a few were very good [...] and some were rather rubbish.”<sup>53</sup>

Was it significant that Laban was one of the two choreographers on the sixteen person jury?<sup>54</sup> He brought his wealth of experience as a dancer, choreographer, teacher and theorist in modern dance while Max Terpis, the other choreographer, had been a student of Mary Wigman, was a dancer, teacher and choreographer who had stated his admiration for both Wigman and Pavlova at the second German Dancers Congress in 1929. The final marks for the competition show that Jooss won by some considerable margin,<sup>55</sup> thus there is no suggestion here that it was fortunate for Jooss that Laban was on the jury although exactly how Jooss's work compared with the others is impossible to tell. Some of the competitors work was a of a very high standard – Trudi Schoop went on to tour with some success in the US, Rosalie Chladek continued teaching and choreographing to great acclaim for many years while Oskar Schlemmer's work is well respected and researched. On the other hand several of the choreographers seemed to have vanished without trace (eg Caird Leslie and Janine Solane) while others are remembered for their careers as dancers rather than choreographers (eg Boris Kniaeff). Nevertheless one may wonder how well Jooss would have fared if any of the Americans (Doris Humphrey or Martha Graham for example), the Russians (George Balanchine or Serge Lifar) or the English (Frederick Ashton or Ninette de Valois) had competed. It is however very possible that *The Green Table* with its contemporary subject matter, its unique dance language, its simple but effective designs, its original music, its fine dancers and superb crafting in terms of composition may still have been judged in first place. The fact that it has been in the repertoire of companies all over the world must be testament to *The Green Table's* valid claim to be an admirable winner, paving the way for it becoming a classical work of the modern dance repertoire. How did Laban feel about Jooss's victory? According to Doerr<sup>56</sup> "Laban was overjoyed even to tears for his student."

Jooss and his company returned to Essen 25,000 French francs better off and with the promise of a two week season in Paris later in the year. They were extremely busy for their Paris season was quickly followed in November by the premieres of two new works *Big City* and *A Ball in Old Vienna*. These, together with *Pavane on the Death of an Infanta* and *The Green Table* - always performed as the final ballet of the evening - completed what has become known as Jooss's signature programme.<sup>57</sup> Jooss and his company toured this programme locally through to the end of 1932.<sup>58</sup>

1933 saw the company begin the year touring in Holland and Belgium, just as Hitler became Chancellor; the Nazification of culture and the anti-Jewish policy began to impact on Jooss, his company and his work. In March, Frederick Cohen, the company's Musical Director and composer, and two other company members were discharged from employment at the theatre by the municipality.<sup>59</sup> Fortunately Jooss had separated the company from the theatre (and thus from the municipality) and so, under private management, was able to keep the company together – after which it was known as the Ballets Jooss.

During April and May the company had a three week season in Paris and then toured in Switzerland. In June the Ballets Jooss had their first season in London before returning to Essen. The consequences of Jooss's 'inclination to Judaism' <sup>60</sup> began to impact; he wrote of this time: "During August the daily difficulties with the NSAP are constantly increasing [...]. Finally [in] mid-September, two weeks before the planned Dutch tour, Jooss is warned through the freemasons: He is to leave Essen and Germany immediately, because the Gauleitung have decided to take him into protective custody (i.e. concentration camp). An immediate, adventurous plan is successful and two days later the entire ensemble crosses the Dutch border."<sup>61</sup> So, as a direct consequence of increasing political pressure and activity,

Jooss and his company left Germany. He, like many other artists, but not Laban, found he could no longer live or work under the Nazi regime<sup>62</sup>; his personal beliefs were contrary to all that Nazism propagated.

How did Laban cope with this Nazification of culture at his job in Berlin? Many Jewish children from the school and dancers in the ballet were forced to leave; music by Jewish composers was forbidden; the choice of repertoire was driven by Nazi policy. The burning question has to be why did not Laban leave or resign? In answer Preston-Dunlop<sup>63</sup> writes “For many liberals, the awfulness was seen as so irrational, so bizarre, that it surely could not last. [...] he may have thought [it could] be survived, even turned into a support for dance.” Kolb<sup>64</sup> however suggests, that Laban collaborated “to enjoy the advantages the new regime had to offer” for over the next few years the Nazis offered, and Laban held, several posts. These included: Director of the German Dance Theatre in which he organised all dance productions in the Reich; Director of the Master Academy of Dance; and Choreographer of the Opening ceremony of the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin.

Meanwhile, the Ballets Jooss performed in Holland in September and left for the United States in October (1933) where they were very well received.<sup>65</sup> After the USA performances the company returned to Europe and toured independently for about six months but, unsurprisingly perhaps, were forced eventually to disband. Later, through Beryl de Zoete, Jooss was introduced to Dorothy and Leonard Elmhirst - owners of the Dartington estate and leaders of the experiment in rural reconstruction and cultural education there.<sup>66</sup> This was “a combination of fortunate circumstances on both sides. Jooss desperately needed a refuge for himself and his group. The Elmhirsts [...] were looking for an artist of international standing and experience, with a coherent philosophy of dance.”<sup>67</sup> So it was that not only Jooss but also

the Jooss-Leeder School were established at Dartington in the summer of 1934, for Leeder, some staff and over twenty students left the Folkwangschule in Essen to resume their work at the new school in England. Given the circumstances they had left behind finding themselves based on a 4000 acre estate of farm and woodland, purpose built dance studios, The Barn Theatre for performances and excellent accommodation for staff and students must have seemed incredulous.<sup>68</sup>

In September 1935 The Ballets Jooss was ‘refounded’ at Dartington so that Dartington became “the home, headquarters and training ground of an international ballet [company]”.<sup>69</sup> Dartington gave Jooss space and time to create new work; Jooss, in return – through the quality of his work and the performances of it by The Ballets Jooss across the USA, Canada and Europe (during 1935-1939) - helped to give Dartington an international reputation as a centre for the arts, while tours in England helped to confirm Jooss’s place, and that of his company, in the British performing arts world of the 1930s.<sup>70</sup> It was a prolific period for Jooss during which he re-worked some of his old ballets (*Big City* for example) and created several more.

Two of these new works evidence Jooss’s continued political stance - *The Mirror* (1935) and *Chronica* (1939). Both are completely lost surviving only in photographs and in writings of the time. *The Mirror* was described as a sequel to *The Green Table* with Jooss attempting to show the problems of peace in the aftermath of war, principally that of unemployment (very topical in Britain in the early 1930s) while *Chronica*, a satire on dictatorship, was a blatant comment on the political situation of the time, even if it was disguised by being set in the Italian Renaissance.

With Jooss making works like this the political situation in Germany and Britain must have been at the forefront of all concerned with the company and at the school. Communications from friends and family in Germany must also have conveyed the situation there to the refugees and it was, of course, widely reported in newspapers, film, and on the radio in Britain. The political situation in Britain was of equal significance with unemployment and poverty key issues alongside dealing with Hitler's policies and actions in and beyond Germany. We know that Jooss visited Germany more than once after his escape to Dartington but Jooss has stated unequivocally that "there was no contact" with Laban.<sup>71</sup> Was this Jooss saying, in effect, that he could not condone Laban staying in Germany?

Laban's work on the festival opening of the Berlin Olympics has been well documented by Preston Dunlop and Doerr. Sufficient to say that at the final rehearsal Goebbels was most displeased by what he saw, fearing that Hitler would consider Laban's work too "intellectual"; rather than face Hitler's disapproval Goebbels "dropped the whole thing."<sup>72</sup> Laban was dismissed from his post as director of the Master Academy and his sphere of influence was steadily reduced; later he was harassed by the Gestapo over proof of his Aryan ascent and his affiliation with societies, specifically the Free Masons. He became ill, he had no work and so no income and he looked to friends and former students for support. In August 1937 he travelled to Paris for a dance conference at the invitation of Rolf de Maré and then stayed "to help set up a 'European dance pavilion' for the World's fair."<sup>73</sup> He still sought work in Germany but to no avail; he spent the end of 1937 living in abject poverty declining mentally and physically.

It seems Jooss and his wife, needing a holiday at the end of 1937, drove to the South of France; alerted by Lisa Ullmann to Laban's situation they met him in Paris and persuaded

him to come to England - in spite of their political differences Jooss's feelings towards Laban appear unchanged. How fortunate that Jooss was in a position to offer Laban a home through the generosity of the Elmhursts; the history of dance in Britain may have been very different had Jooss not chosen to share his good fortune.<sup>74</sup> As it was Laban was granted permission to stay in Britain for six months. Both Doerr and Preston Dunlop credit Lisa Ullmann as being Laban's saviour as she nursed him through those first months at Dartington. At first he was too ill to work and then it became clear that there was little work for him in the Jooss-Leeder School. Later Laban was to write "It was my illness, my own indecision and without doubt also the general situation which limited a lively participation in the common work at Dartington".<sup>75</sup> However by the time of his 60<sup>th</sup> birthday in November 1939 Laban was well on his way to recovery. Jooss, now a well-established figure in British cultural life, as ever was supportive of his one-time master – he wrote in a celebratory article in *The Dancing Times* "Laban is not just a great *maître de ballet* among others of our time. His part in the history of dance is much more significant and essential [...] actually he created an entirely new conception of dance."<sup>76</sup>

When the Nazis invaded Poland on September 1, 1939 Britain declared war on Germany two days later but the Ballets Jooss continued touring in England. *The Green Table* was immediately dropped from the repertoire, *Chronica* was not. Then, under a contract negotiated before the war started, at the end of December 1939 the Ballets Jooss left for a tour of the US, with Cohen as director. Jooss did not go with them "on the grounds that he wished to remain in and with England in its struggle against the Nazis and the belief that the time would come when his services in one form or another might be made use of".<sup>77</sup>

This was not to be, at least not in the short term for Jooss was interned at Huyton camp (Liverpool). In the interview with Jooss (1973) Hodgson seemed incensed that Laban was not interned when Jooss was: “He was the biggest risk [...] You had been here since ’34! Between ’34 and ’39 you were clearly working in a very defined area. Laban came [...] straight from Hitler’s bosom”. Preston Dunlop<sup>78</sup> suggests Laban was not interned “on the grounds of his ill health” but he did have to move from the coastal area around Dartington. At first he and Ullmann moved to the Elmhirst’s London flat and then to Newtown in Wales; she embarked on her mission to bring Laban’s work to the notice of British educators while Laban, finally granted a work permit, continued to write and lecture, supporting Ullmann as she spread the word. Given Laban’s apparent pro-Nazi stance before he came to England how bizarre that his contribution to the war effort came when the British Air Ministry asked him to help them understand parachute jumping<sup>79</sup> and through the contribution that he made with Frederick C Lawrence, an engineer and co-director of Paton Lawrence and Co., to helping the workforce in a variety of factories to achieve maximum output.

Jooss, after nearly six months in internment, and following a change of government policy, was released to go to Cambridge where he and Leeder restarted the Jooss-Leeder School with initial support from the Elmhirsts.<sup>80</sup> Jooss again was very fortunate; such was his standing in the cultural life of Britain that soon he came under the patronage of Alice Roughton<sup>81</sup> and was supported by the likes of John Maynard Keynes. But, from the time of his release from internment, Jooss fought to be allowed to join his company in America. By mid-1942 there was no company for Jooss to go to – after touring across the US the company had gone to South America criss-crossing the continent for fourteen months giving over 300 hundred performances. Eventually the company returned to New York and performed briefly on Broadway before finally disbanding. One by one those who wished to return to England did

so. In August 1942 Jooss was able to reform the Ballets Jooss in Cambridge; with male dancers at a premium, he was forced to dance again in the company, so that “[he] did the work of three men – choreographer, artistic director and dancer”.<sup>82</sup> The company managed to maintain its high standards of technique and performance and, despite the appalling wartime conditions, toured for thirty-five to forty weeks of the year.

In the aftermath of the war, early in 1946, the Ballets Jooss’s first post-war tour took them to Belgium, Germany and Holland with ENSA, in British uniforms – one can only speculate what this must have been like for Jooss and Leeder and the few other German members of the company. They then travelled to America where they incurred huge losses and a season in Paris was also unsuccessful.<sup>83</sup> After nearly twenty-five years of working together Jooss and Leeder were at a crossroads with no school and a company in dire financial straits; in August 1947, in the post-war financial climate, the Ballets Jooss had to disband - Jooss and Leeder went their separate ways.

Were Jooss and Laban in contact at this time? Laban and Ullmann had worked closely together with Laban rethinking, adapting and extending his theories to suit the new initiatives forged by Ullmann so that Laban’s work found its way into industry, actor training, movement therapy and so on.<sup>84</sup> By 1946 his work was well established so that the Art of Movement Studio was founded in Manchester. Just as Laban’s work was becoming firmly established in Britain Jooss’s time here came to an end. We do not know if they had contact before Jooss went to Chile in May 1948 (where three former Ballets Jooss dancers had settled establishing what was to become the Chilean National Ballet) nor if during the following year Jooss discussed with Laban what must have been a momentous decision – to return to

Germany to direct the dance department at the Folkwangschule in Essen with the condition that he had an independent Dance Theatre company, as in 1932.

The Folkwang Tanztheater der Stadt Essen was established in 1951 with the repertoire of the Ballets Jooss, and some of its soloists, transferring to it. During the two years of its existence the company toured the UK and Europe and received very good reviews, indeed it was described as “Germany’s premier ballet company.”<sup>85</sup> Mary Clarke reviewing the company’s season at Sadler’s Wells in 1953 suggested that the new works did not compare favourably to *The Green Table* although she was very complimentary about the quality of the dancers and dancing. Jooss recalled that it was during that season in London in 1953 that he saw Laban for the last time.<sup>86</sup>

Jooss and Laban’s paths had crossed for some thirty or so years and clearly it was mutually beneficial even as the fortunes - artistic, personal and financial - of each waxed and waned. It is evident from the many interviews which Jooss gave that his admiration of Laban never faltered even if their political views were different. Laban does not seem to have been interviewed about Jooss in the way Jooss was about Laban, but a letter dating from Christmas 1938 makes clear Laban’s opinion of his former student. Jooss thought Laban’s words significant for he published the letter in subsequent Ballet Jooss programmes: “Your work has developed in an individual and original manner, its source is as clear and its enthusiasm as genuine as it was when I had the privilege to introduce you to the noble Art of Dancing [...] I see through your work [...] a great hope nears fulfilment: that the language of movement might become apt to express things which can only be stated by the dance [...] you have to admit [...] you are a poet who can give utterance to the eternal ideas of humanity as well as to the problems of our own day in the language of an entirely new art.”<sup>87</sup>

Laban signs the letter 'in true friendship'; perhaps it was the depth of this friendship which allowed the good, the bad and the very (un)fortunate not to stand in the way of an interesting and stimulating relationship between two great men of European modern dance. That it was of profound significance to them both is not in doubt.

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<sup>1</sup> Kurt Jooss, *Mein bisheriger Lebenslauf* cited in Anna Markard and Hermann Markard, *Jooss* (Cologne: Ballett-Buhnen-Verlag Rolfe Garske, 1985): 29.

<sup>2</sup> Kurt Jooss, interview with John Hodgson (1973), transcribed by Cat Harrison, edited by Dick McKaw, unpublished

<sup>3</sup> Jooss, Hodgson interview.

<sup>4</sup> Jooss, Hodgson interview.

<sup>5</sup> Jooss cited in Markard, *Jooss*, 31.

<sup>6</sup> A.V. Coton, *The New Ballet* (London: Denis Dobson, 1946): 16.

<sup>7</sup> See the comprehensive list of Laban's dance works in John Hodgson and Valerie Preston Dunlop, *Rudolf Laban: an introduction to his work and influence*, (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1990).

<sup>8</sup> Jooss, Hodgson interview.

<sup>9</sup> Transcription of a tape-recorded interview between Kurt Jooss and Tobi Tobias for the Oral History project, The dance Collection, New York Public Library, September 1976.

<sup>10</sup> Jooss, Tobias interview

<sup>11</sup> Hodgson and Preston-Dunlop, *Work and Influence*, 37.

<sup>12</sup> Jooss, Hodgson interview.

<sup>13</sup> Kurt Jooss cited in Michael Huxley, "The Green Table – a Dance of Death", *Ballett International*, 5, no. 8/9 (1982): 9.

<sup>14</sup> Jooss, Hodgson interview.

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<sup>15</sup> John Martin, “Kurt Jooss Ballet Cheered at Debut”, *New York Times*, November 1<sup>st</sup> 1933.

Jooss did not put himself as the central performer in his works; the company were often complimented on their ensemble playing within which individuals were first rate dancers, both technically and artistically.

<sup>16</sup> Jooss, Hodgson interview.

<sup>17</sup> Jooss, Hodgson interview.

<sup>18</sup> Jooss, Hodgson interview.

<sup>19</sup> Jooss, Hodgson interview.

<sup>20</sup> Jooss cited in Markard, *Jooss*, 35.

<sup>21</sup> Valerie Preston Dunlop, *Rudolf Laban: an extraordinary life* (London: Dance Books 1998): 93. Somewhat ironically Karl Begeest later joined Jooss’s company and created the role of ‘The Profiteer’ in *The Green Table*.

<sup>22</sup> Hans Redlich, “Handel in our Time”, *Proceedings of the Royal Musical Association*, 80, no.1 (1953): 87-99.

<sup>23</sup> Isa Partsch-Bergsohn, *Modern Dance in Germany and the United States: Crosscurrents and Influences* (London: Harwood, 1994): 35.

<sup>24</sup> Coton, *New Ballet*, 16.

<sup>25</sup> Partsch-Bergsohn, *Modern Dance in Germany*, 35.

<sup>26</sup> Fritz Cohen worked with Jooss from their time in Münster through to 1942 composing ten ballets and arranging scores for three others. He was musical director and pianist for the Ballets Jooss and joint director, with Jooss and Leeder, of the Jooss-Leeder School of Dance at Dartington. When the Ballets Jooss were forced to disband on their US tour (1942) he stayed in America where he directed opera and taught at Black Mountain College, North Carolina and at Kenyan College, Ohio. In 1946 he became founding director of the Juilliard Opera Studio retiring in 1963. Hein Heckroth worked with Jooss in Münster, Essen and

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Dartington designing some 24 ballets for him. In his post-Jooss years Heckroth is most well-known for his Oscar winning designs for *The Red Shoes* (1948) and *The Tales of Hoffman* (1959).

<sup>27</sup> Leeder was a dancer in the Ballets Jooss and also ballet master and teacher at the various schools associated with the company. He worked with Jooss until 1947, when he established The Sigurd Leeder School of Dance in London. He moved to Chile to become Director of the Dance Department at the University of Santiago in 1959, and then to Switzerland in 1964 to again open his own school. Aino Siimola danced in the Tanzbuhne-Laban, joined Jooss in Munster and followed him to Essen. Markard described her parents' professional relationship as "artistic partners" and "close collaborators" and that "together they direct[ed] the Folkwang Tanztheater and later Ballets Jooss." (Jooss, 157) She returned to Essen with Jooss in 1949 and continued to work with him until the mid-1960s when ill-health forced her to retire.

<sup>28</sup> Jooss cited in Markard, *Jooss*, 35.

<sup>29</sup> N.a. "Purcell's *Dido* in Germany" *Musical Times*, 67, (1926): 317-318. Some of Heckroth's designs for the production can be seen at [http://www.euterpevenezia.it/attivita/rivista/VeMu\\_33\\_10-22\\_focus\\_on.pdf](http://www.euterpevenezia.it/attivita/rivista/VeMu_33_10-22_focus_on.pdf) [accessed 03.09.2015]

<sup>30</sup> Preston Dunlop, *an extraordinary life*, 99.

<sup>31</sup> John Hodgson, *Mastering Movement, the life and work of Rudolf Laban* (London; Methuen, 2001):97.

<sup>32</sup> Preston Dunlop, *an extraordinary life*, 117.

<sup>33</sup> Rudolf Laban, *Principles of Dance and Movement Notation* (London: MacDonald and Evans, 1956): 8.

<sup>34</sup> Preston Dunlop, *an extraordinary life*, 126.

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<sup>35</sup> Preston Dunlop, *an extraordinary life*, 133.

<sup>36</sup> Clare Lidbury, *Kurt Jooss: Big City* (London: Dance Books, 2000): 9.

<sup>37</sup> Markard, *Jooss*, 145. This adaptation of ballet for modern dance training pre-dates by five years or so the Nazi policy of introducing ballet technique as part of the curriculum for modern dancers. See Susan Manning, "Dance in the Third Reich," in *Choreographing History*, Ed. Susan Leigh Foster, (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995):165-176.

<sup>38</sup> Jooss, cited in Markard, *Jooss*, 39. For an exposition of Jooss' movement language see Jane Winearls, *Modern Dance – the Jooss-Leeder Method* (London: A and C Black, 1958).

<sup>39</sup> Horst Kogler, *In the Shadow of the Swastika – Dance in Germany 1927-1936* (New York: Dance Perspectives Foundation 1974): 11.

<sup>40</sup> Preston Dunlop, *an extraordinary life*, 137.

<sup>41</sup> Evelyn Doerr, *Rudolf Laban: the dancer of the crystal* (Maryland USA: Scarecrow Press, 2008).

<sup>42</sup> Jooss, Hodgson interview.

<sup>43</sup> Jooss, Hodgson interview.

<sup>44</sup> Coton, *New Ballet*, 57. Edited extracts of *Pavane* can be seen at

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HzGQFXj9izQ&list=PL8sv\\_3DwR1TzGWc48jUM7AZbxgdEZcs5o&index=13](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HzGQFXj9izQ&list=PL8sv_3DwR1TzGWc48jUM7AZbxgdEZcs5o&index=13) [accessed 03.09.2015]

<sup>45</sup> Preston Dunlop, *an extraordinary life*, 157.

<sup>46</sup> Frederic Spotts, *Bayreuth: A History of the Wagner Festival* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1994): 152.

<sup>47</sup> Jooss, Hodgson interview.

<sup>48</sup> Preston Dunlop, *an extraordinary life*, 159.

<sup>49</sup> Preston Dunlop, *an extraordinary life*, 164.

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<sup>50</sup> Koegler, *Shadow of the Swastika*, 11.

<sup>51</sup> Jooss cited in Markard, *Jooss*, 43.

<sup>52</sup> See “Les Participants au Concours de Chorégraphie” in Archives de la Danse, no.0  
<http://mediatheque.cnd.fr/ressources/ressourcesEnLigne/aid/> [accessed 03.09.2015]

<sup>53</sup> Kurt Jooss, *The Kurt Jooss Lectures* (Hull, Hull University AVC, 1972).

<sup>54</sup> In addition to Laban and Terpsis there were three dancers (Albert Aveline, Carlotta Zambelli and Alexandre Violinine, all from the classical school) a conductor (Vladimir Golschmann) and two theatre directors (Henri Varna and Serge Volkonsky), two artists/designers (André Masson and Ferdinand Léger), two musicians (Florent Schmidt and Gabriel Astruc) and two representing the AID (Rolf de Maré and Pierre Tugal).

<sup>55</sup> Eduard Szamba, “Tanzbriefe” *Der Tanz*, August 1932, 6-8. Szamba’s points for 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> places do not clarify the winning margin – he gives Chladek 2<sup>nd</sup> place with 1048 points and Gunther 3<sup>rd</sup> place with 1079. Most likely Chladek’s points should have been 1084.

<sup>56</sup> Doerr, *Laban*, 170.

<sup>57</sup> These four ballets are Jooss’s only extant work.

<sup>58</sup> Markard, *Jooss*, 45.

<sup>59</sup> Markard, *Jooss*, 53.

<sup>60</sup> Jooss, Hodgson Interview.

<sup>61</sup> Kurt Jooss, Biographical note, c1975, cited in Markard, *Jooss*, 53.

<sup>62</sup> Laban was not alone in this. Other dancers who stayed after Hitler came to power included Mary Wigman, Albrecht Knust, Rosalie Chladek, Gret Palucca and Dorothee Günther. See Manning, *Third Reich*, 175

<sup>63</sup> Preston Dunlop, *an extraordinary life*, 174-6.

<sup>64</sup> Alexandra Kolb, *Performing Femininity*, (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009): 276.

<sup>65</sup> John Martin, “Art of Jooss”, *New York Times*, November 5, 1933.

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<sup>66</sup> Michael Young, *The Elmhirsts of Dartington*, (Totnes: The Dartington Hall Trust, 1996): 226

<sup>67</sup> Victor Bonham-Carter, *Dartington Hall – The history of an Experiment* (London: Phoenix House, 1958): 130.

<sup>68</sup> See the advert for the “Jooss-Leeder School of Dance” cited in Markard, *Jooss*, 57.

<sup>69</sup> Bonham-Carter, *Dartington Hall*, 131.

<sup>70</sup> Clare Lidbury, “Kurt Jooss and Sigurd Leeder: Refugees, Battle and Aftermath” in *German –speaking Exiles in the Performing Arts in Great Britain from 1933*, Eds. Charmian Brinson and Richard Dove, (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2013).

<sup>71</sup> Jooss, Hodgson interview. However Lilian Karina and Marion Kant, *Hitler’s Dancers* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2004): 59 cite Laban’s ‘farewell letter’ to Marie-Louise Lieschke in which Laban writes “Jooss assures me of his willingness to help but is overburdened ‘with such cases’” suggesting that Jooss and Laban were in contact but that Jooss was not able to do anything in the circumstances.

<sup>72</sup> Lilian Karina and Marion Kant, *Hitler’s Dancers* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2004): 121

<sup>73</sup> Doerr, *Laban*, 179.

<sup>74</sup> Hodgson, *Mastering Movement*, 99.

<sup>75</sup> Letter from Rudolf Laban to Dorothy Elmhirst, dated 12<sup>th</sup> January, 1941 in the Dartington Archive [DWE Arts 8.B]

<sup>76</sup> Kurt Jooss, “Rudolf Laban on his sixtieth birthday”, *The Dancing Times*, (December 1939): 129.

<sup>77</sup> Francois Lafitte, *The Internment of Aliens* (London: Penguin Books, 1940): 154.

<sup>78</sup> Preston Dunlop, *an extraordinary life*, 210.

<sup>79</sup> Jooss, Hodgson interview.

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<sup>80</sup> Christopher Martin, *Report to the Dartington Hall Trustees*, (7<sup>th</sup> February 1941): 3, in the Dartington Archive [T/AA/1]. With so many staff interned, and many of the international students having left, the Jooss-Leeder School at Dartington had been forced to close. By the time Peter Wright joined Jooss in 1944 training of students was done on the road – see Peter Wright, “Wright on Jooss”, in *Kurt Jooss: 60 years of The Green Table*, Eds. Andy Adamson and Clare Lidbury, (Birmingham: The University of Birmingham, 1994): 50-62.

<sup>81</sup> Alice Roughton was a wealthy, somewhat eccentric psychiatrist well known for her anti-war views. She was extremely generous opening her house in Cambridge to her patients and to refugees from across the globe; these included Jooss and his family.

<sup>82</sup> Fernau Hall, *Modern English Ballet* (London: Andrew Melrose, 1948): 188.

<sup>83</sup> Hall, *English Ballet*, 189.

<sup>84</sup> Hodgson, *Mastering Movement*, 110.

<sup>85</sup> J. Stewart Barker, “Ballets Jooss 1953”, *Dance and Dancers*, (April 1953): 8.

<sup>86</sup> Jooss, Hodgson interview. Laban died in July 1958. Jooss retired from the Folkwangschule in 1964 - a resurgence of interest in his dance works from the mid-1960s culminated in the Joffrey Ballet Company's presentation of the four signature works in 1976; he died in March 1979.

<sup>87</sup> Rudolf Laban, Letter to Kurt Jooss dated Christmas 1938, published in subsequent programmes.