

BEARING THE CROSS OF CROSSING BORDERS

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(supplemented  
with slides  
brief 1924 tape recording of Cherniavsky Trio  
playing "Spring Song," etc.)

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Amongst those dancers who in the first decade of this century ventured to liberate the human form from the hide-bound attitudes of the times was Maud Allan. Although for a few years her fame eclipsed that of her contemporaries and her influence on the cultural/artistic, social/moral ethos of Edwardian England was, at least for two years, pervasive, Maud Allan has no niche in the pantheon of 20th century dance pioneers. Indeed, today her name has fallen into disrepute, her critical record into obscurity, the nature of her dancing misunderstood.

To understand this fall from grace this paper considers two specific facets of Maud Allan's career, pock marked as it was with artistic - and moral - border crossings. The first of these facets is related to her identity as an artist, the second to her identity as The Salome Dancer. In a historical perspective these two identities may be usefully regarded as separate and distinct from each other, albeit sharing a common artistic discipline.

As a dancer Maud Allan deserves to be taken seriously inasmuch as she so effectively harnessed movement to music; as The Salome Dancer she is best treated as one who, seeking relief from a blistering personal pain, in her role as Salome ventured beyond the hitherto sacrosanct moral borders of the day.

A multi talented artist of incisive intelligence, Maud Allan saw herself and by her musical peers was admired as, above all else, a profound and superbly educated musician.

(Incidentally, her first piano teacher - in Toronto - was Clara Lichenstein, mother of Pauline Donalda, internationally known Canadian opera singer in the first half of this century.) Throughout her long life eminent musicians such as Ferruccio Busoni, Joseph Szegeiti, Artur Rubinstein, stood in awe of her remarkable musicality.

When she took up dancing, therefore, this extreme musicality was her defining trait, one which would so markedly distinguish her dancing from that of her contemporaries. When she abandoned a promising concert pianist's career for that of a dancer rather than crossing a border, she fused the two arts into one. That this was a touchstone - quite possibly a conscious intent of her art - is even suggested when, as Miss Maud Gwendolyn Allan, on November 24 1903 she made her debut in Vienna as a dancer of "musically impressionistic mood settings."

Five years later a London critic, discussing her Chopin dance interpretations, declared that "she dances music." (In 1987, my 95 year old uncle Jan Cherniavsky, who during a 16 month tour accompanied her at the piano, made exactly the same comment.)

This trait was so central to her art that it is worth quoting the following paragraph from Crawford Fritch's Modern Dancers and Dancing, published in 1912:

One of the felicities of her accomplishments is her ability to pass with the music from the major to the minor key or vice versa. When a phrase first occurs in one key and then in another, it is repeated in her dances with just

that modification of aspect and accent which express the change of mood. The faith with which her movements follow the mood of the composers is only probably fully recognized by those who are musicians as well as connoisseurs of the dance. Her translation of music has not seldom the rare quality of translations, of being finer than the original.

Some eighty years later the late Etienne Amyot, founding Director of the BBC Third Program and for many years an extremely well connected figure in London's cultural community, recalled his impressions of Maud Allan's dancing:

"I met," he wrote to me, "Maud Allan in 1928. I was introduced to her by Arnold Bax, the British composer. One evening she danced for a few friends in her large and lovely garden to a gramophone. In the soft twilight it was something to watch. What was so essentially different from her and most other dancers was her extreme musicality; that absolute and perfect co-ordination between movement and the rhythm of the music - whether of the hands, the eyes, the swing of the neck, the twist of the leg."

On July 28 1936, Mr. Amyot accompanied Maud Allan, aged 63, in her last public recital, given at Redlands Bowl, California:

"I remember we rehearsed in a large room in the home of Jimmy Whale - the film producer of Showboat, The Invisible Man, and many other excellent films. I watched her rehearse - with the aid of a gramophone. I knew she was at least 60 - and looked it. But the moment she started to move, it was as if she had recaptured youth. Jimmy Whale, who also watched her for those two days, later said to me 'She

performs like Eleanora Duse, and projects what she is feeling at the time.' I think this really sums up her actual interpretation. She depended more on the movements of the head and the expression on the face - such was the fundamental basis of her 'technique' - if you can describe technique in such a way, technique being in truth the constant repetition of the self-same thing. And so her "inspiration" was the feeling of the moment- as indeed it was with Isadora Duncan - the flung out arms, the turn of the head, the throwing back of the head etc etc."

To appraise Maud Allan the artist fairly one must cross psychological borders and, taking stock of her emotional state of mind, ask why she danced. The occasional spasms of stage terror mentioned in the diaries she kept for three years following her arrival in Berlin in 1895 were no doubt extremely debilitating. But, since she nonetheless took up a stage career, they barely explain her decision to abandon the piano totally and, it would appear, overnight. (Throughout her 40 years' friendship with my father's family, and particularly during her tour with the Cherniavsky Trio, she adamantly refused - as if the mere thought paralysed her - to play the piano for or with them during their many hours of informal music making; years later, however, she is known to have practiced - but only in total seclusion, the music room door locked.)

The execution in 1898 of her beloved brother Theo for "The Crime of a Century," committed in April 1895 six weeks after her departure for Berlin, was surely the underlying albeit obscure factor in her decision to "dance music" rather than play

it and why, for that matter, she became such a fascinatingly complex person. Theo's execution permanently, totally and absolutely twisted her entire being.

The effects of her brother's execution on Maud Allan the artist and on Maud Allan "The Salome Dancer" were varied, yet they share one common factor: as if in silent protest, each "crossed borders" with daring abandon. As an artist, the most striking example is the way she fused music and movement. Equally remarkable is the way the themes of her repertoire so unambiguously fall into two main parts - the celebration of life, the sorrows of death. The celebration of life, of an Eden-like innocence such as in retrospect she had enjoyed before the family's fall from grace is typically represented by her rendition of three works, each pivotal to her success (and to a lesser degree, perhaps, to that of her dancing peers) - Mendelssohn's Spring Song, Strauss' Blue Danube, Rubinstein's Valse caprice. The sorrows of death are deeply etched in Chopin's Funeral March, his Study in C Minor (visualized as "A Soul in Bondage") Sibelius' Valse triste and, of course, that most morbid and tasteless of items yet so central to her identity, The Vision of Salome. Above and beyond the borders of these two themes was a third, drawing for inspiration primarily on Chopin's Mazurkas and Waltzes. These works belonged to the serene realm of the creative imagination - timeless, not of this world, and therefore without any borders other than those prescribed by Maud Allan herself. Little wonder she treasured these items above all others.

The significance of The Vision of Salome to Maud Allan's career and reputation was enormous yet, in an ironic way,

costly. It was costly because, while it brought her international fame and a great fortune, its sensational success overshadowed her identity as a seriously committed artist. That is not to say, of course, that her performance as Salome was the less artistic; indeed, for a very original and tragic reason it was undoubtedly performed with greater intensity and artistic control than any of her other "dance interpretations."

This view is based on the relationship of The Vision of Salome to Theo's execution. The entire action of the Vision of Salome encouraged - or required - her to identify the Baptist's execution and, more forcefully his decapitated head (which she embraced and kissed) with Theo's. The scenario, therefore, allowed her to sublimate her personal trauma in, to satisfy the hunger of her boundless imagination with, an apparently creative performance, all the while giving artistically controlled vent to her fiercely repressed passions. ("No one knows my feelings," she wrote in her diary during Theo's trial, "and nobody ever shall.") Therein lay the inspiration behind The Salome Dancer's intensely personal performance. I would also suggest that Maud Allan's performance of The Vision of Salome was a remarkable example of "border crossings." Goaded by her commitment to artistic perfection (with its parameters of self discipline) and transcending the contours of an exploitive scenario, she transformed - metamorphosized - her personal trauma into an apparently original and stunning tour de force. Her performance must have been indeed astonishing if only because for its sensationalism the entire concept of The Vision of Salome was a tawdry melodrama of fin de siecle decadence, performed to music of undisguised mediocrity.

Quite apart from this psychological or, if you will, emotionally motivated element, The Vision of Salome was, as Carol Bishop persuasively argues in a recent article, undoubtedly influenced by early German expressionism; however, I would maintain that the source of the apparently phenomenal intensity of her performance as Salome - surely a key factor in its overall effect - lay deeply imbedded in her personal trauma. The same may be said, incidentally, of her interpretation of other dances with similar themes, such as Chopin's Funeral March. One has only to read Morgan Powell's description of this dance, consider the intricate relationship between private pain and creativity, to understand why - presumably in relation to her feelings - this was, so she protested to a Toronto interviewer, her "favorite" work - as it was, no doubt, her mother's. At her mother's funeral Maud bid a fond farewell by performing this dance, at the end of which she threw herself upon the open coffin.

There is no reason to set up borders between Carol Bishop's and my approach to discussing Maud Allan's art. Indeed, there is every reason to respect both, and thereby explore means of integrating them - and any other interpretations that others might put forward. Such an approach would provide more than a one dimensional model and would be particularly appropriate, given the classical Greek tradition of striking a balanced harmony between the head and the heart.

In the course of her career and in a purely "social" sense Maud Allan "The Salome Dancer" crossed many moral borders, such as tiresomely familiar charges of nudity, painted toenails, dancing without tights, and so on. None of her



contemporaries challenged so many of these taboos. From this viewpoint she was indeed a pioneer, for once she had crossed these borders, others followed. Yet, while she naturally exploited these crossings to her initial advantage, she did so at the cost of acquiring a public notoriety that she was soon enough unable to shed. This was a major reason (amongst others) why she was denied wider recognition as an artist rather than as "The Salome Dancer" and all that epithet stands for.

The courage and determination she displayed at the start of her dancing career was in large measure motivated by an emotional need to satisfy the gruelling demands of her extraordinary mother. Writing two years after Theo's execution (and long before Maud had abandoned the piano) this woman, aged 48, warned her daughter as follows:

Your sorrow with your personality ought to give your playing a charm that can not be taught. Now don't lose the opportunity to allow the public to judge what you can do. . . . You must make a name for yourself if you are to gladden our last days, for nothing else would make up our loss but your showing the world that you as well as your brother were ambitious. Now, my dear, clench your teeth tight and say "I will, if it takes every moment of my time. I WILL, I SHALL, and NOTHING will prevent it. . . . Don't forget what I have said and don't get discouraged, FOR THERE IS NO SUCH WORD AS FAIL!"

Maud Allan did as she was told, enjoyed success beyond her mother's wildest dreams, but ultimately failed to gain the lasting recognition as a serious artist she yearned for.

Her failure to establish a school that would produce informed disciples was, undoubtedly one very practical reason for her failure. Without disciples to protect and advance her heritage as an artist, without video to preserve that heritage, her art was at best doomed, as Carol Bishop puts it, to be "misunderstood and at worst, misrepresented." Given what recent research has already uncovered, the time has surely come for an "agonizing re-appraisal" of her art and an informed effort to discuss her significance in the evolution of modern Western dance.

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