

Riding the Wild Surf

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"Anita Berber – Goddess of the Night"

**Ballet of the Theater and Philharmonic Orchestra
Thuringia**

Theater Gera

Gera, Germany

June 17, 2016

by Ilona Landgraf

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Two months ago Jiří and Otto Bubeníček mounted the ballet ["Doctor Zhivago"](#) in Ljubljana. Last week the Czech Republic, their home country, honored them with the

Gratias Agit for promoting the nation's reputation abroad. Just this Friday the brothers gave their country a further reason for being proud of them: the premiere of "Anita Berber – Goddess of the Night" in Gera, Thuringia. This ballet traces the life and character of the scandalous German dancer, actress and self-promoter, a phenomenon of the "golden 1920s". Choreography for the production is Jiří's. Otto designed the set and costumes. Both brothers are responsible for the staging. This one acter, "Anita Berber", again showed the Bubeniceks' gift for storytelling.

For the first time the brothers had commissioned music for new choreography. Their choice fell on British composer Simon Wills, for whom collaboration with a ballet company also was a debut. The score, played live by the Philharmonic Orchestra Altenburg-Gera under the baton of Takahiro Nagasaki, makes one prick up one's ears. It is melodious but not cloyingly sweet. Snappy popular



rhythms of the '20s are included. The composition is either congruent with or contrary to the stage action. Sometimes it alludes to the protagonist's internal but not external state. Surges, like waves, carry the action forward but sometimes also lag behind like after thoughts or suspensions of breath.



Choosing Gera for Anita Berber wasn't by chance. It is the native town of the painter Otto Dix, whose 125th birthday is being celebrated this year. Close to the end of

her career and three years before her premature death in 1928, Berber posed as model for Dix. The resulting painting can be seen in the Kunsthalle Stuttgart. It shows the red-haired Berber in a close-fitting, bright red dress, her face a powdered white mask, red lips and eyes made up dark. In the ballet, however, the painting doesn't survive. Immediately, in the very first scene, having just posed for Dix (Predrag Jovicic), Berber (Anastasiya Kuzina) becomes furious about being depicted as aged and destroys the canvas. Her pose in the painting — right hand on hip, bent elbow thrust out, a shoulder raised, plus a provocative gaze towards the horizon – is Berber's



signature and is featured again and again throughout the rest of the ballet.

Ten scenes show Berber's rise to stardom and also the pressure on her imposed by the public. If one is made a star and is carried on others' hands, one has to play that role! How much was Berber's self-dramatization part of

her character and how much was due to trying to live up to others' expectations? Her persistent abuse of cocaine and alcohol make a clear differentiation impossible.



A dubious influence on Berber was Willy Knobloch, known as Sebastian Droste (Mattia Carchedi). Droste becomes Berber's dance partner and the creator of their sensually overloaded dances. He loves profligate stagings with morbid touches such as "Dances of Debauchery, Horror and Ecstasy". One scene shows him and Berber, both still drowsy after an all-night party, their bodies entwined in a series of sexual poses. For this episode Berber wears her most provocative costume – a black, full body leotard of fishnet design with a brazier sewn-in. She then collapses trembling due to drug withdrawal symptoms. Or was this a rehearsal of her notorious dance "Cocaine"? Droste, himself a drug

addict, introduced Berber to hard drugs.



Their relationship is marked by physical attraction, power plays, manipulations; self-dramatizations and a shared appetite for sex. Positive emotions are rare; human warmth is nonexistent. By immersion in excess, both Berber and Droste seem to strive for emotional satisfactions beyond those ordinary life has to offer.

On stage, Berber and Droste make audiences gasp with their scantily clad, sensually charged cabaret performances. At parties they immediately become the center of attention. They serve as their generation's role models. Every one seems fanatically driven to be similarly extravagant, excessive and shameless. Away with morale, bring on life! Female admirers copy Berber's dance style as well as her fashions.



Otto Bubeníček designed the series of nifty costumes cut according to historical examples. They include: sequin dresses; a silver outfit that looks like fish skin; a skirt of golden string; elegant headwear; a striped suit for Droste; also a black pants suit for Berber – she was the first woman to wear one. Some costume changes take place on stage because nudity was normal for Berber.

Significantly, she is put into some costumes by the hands of others.

An object of sexual desire, Berber makes men pant after her. Even though she was capricious and known for rampaging, she is generally willing. At one masked ball, though, she sits trophy-like on a bar stool and is ill-tempered. Droste shields her while accepting money from potential clients yet doesn't permit them to approach the diva. Aptly, the men wear gray pig masks.

Five faces (from a video projection of the movie "Metropolis") look down on this scene, their expressions being a range of reactions to the goings-on.

Berber, being bisexual, also flirts with a woman (Daria Suzi) – a cold blonde in a high-necked, red checkered costume – but then beats the woman up.



Another scene recalls Berber's career as an actress in lust and horror movies by director Richard Oswald (danced by Viktor Koldamov).



Berber stretches his patience. She arrives too late at the set and, moreover, is drunk to oblivion. Reportedly, she was restored by



drugs, coffee and ice cubes and her act as sex object amidst a bunch of men in black swimsuits comes off flawlessly. As for the initial scene in Dix's studio, the stage is revolved cleverly in imitation of a movie camera slowly panning the scene.

Also shown is the historic context of the "golden twenties": that aftermath of World War I, the Great Depression of 1929 which brought an end to the flowering of art, culture and science. First, soldiers with gas masks march and parade in front of Otto Dix's monumental painting "Dance of Death 1917". Their parody contrasts with the horrible reality of Dix's picture. When the soldiers are marched off, bank notes rain down on young women who laugh hysterically.



I liked especially two distinctly humorous but lighter sequences. One is deliberately overdecorated. It takes place in a cabaret, where two female boxers (Carolina Micone and Yuri Hamano) in black-and-white ringed leotards fake a fight in front of a very glitzy curtain of strings. Their fighters' audience sits at side tables and a cheerful umpire (Kristian Matia) with a bow tie supervises. Is this a wink to the history of the Bubeníček family? The twins' parents were part of the "5 Bertis", a group of renowned circus acrobats. The boys almost followed in their footsteps but fate had them enroll instead for ballet at the Prague Conservatory.



The other lightly humorous scene takes place in a ballet studio, where Droste tries to get Berber to do barre exercises. Alas, a femme fatale, she absolutely refuses to surrender to classic discipline. Instead she throws herself from one glamorous pose to another.

One of Berber's frequent breakdowns is followed by a stay in a sanatorium, to which – in the Bubeníček's version – Dix commits her. All patients are in bulky, white plastic skirts. They move trance-like, three light zones defining their space. Only when a man – Henri Châtin Hofmann (Filip Kvačák) – turns up does Berber regain her sanity.



Berber acquired him as new dance partner, but the star hype continued. Berber collapses again. She is robbed of her valuables by Droste, who absconds to the United States. Henri abandons her to pursue his own career. Again, Dix appears on the scene, gently guiding its course.

Dix dresses Berber in the harlequin costume she had worn as a teenager for a performance with Rita Sacchetto's troupe in Berlin. At first, Berber remembers the playful solo she had danced but soon begins to rip the harlequin costume off. Her mask-like make-up is almost smeared beyond recognition. She fails to get in touch with her father, the internationally famous violinist Felix Berber (played by violinist Markus Dreßler). Suffering from tuberculosis, Berber dies alone. Yet her influence persists,

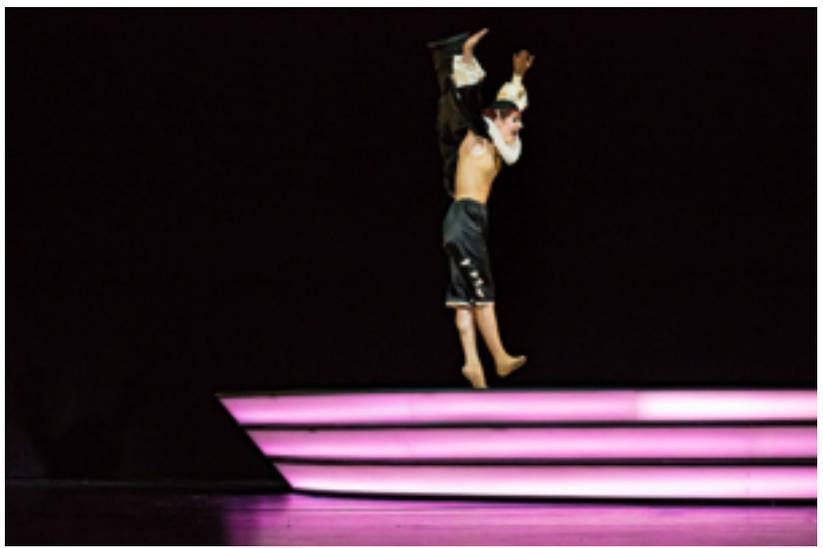


as shown by a topless, smoking beauty who comes to take a seat next to Berber's corpse.

Jiří Bubenicek invented an abundance of dance for the entire ensemble. The corps de ballet was much involved, either as party guests, cabaret customers, film crew, sanatorium patients or soldiers.

Carchedi was an aptly arrogant and demanding Droste, demoniac in appearance. Watching the dancing of Kvačák as Henri was like seeing the Bubeníček themselves. Kuzina made Berber skittish and impetuous, capably captivating men and women alike with her provocative look. Astonishing were her instantaneous shifts from moving at lightning speed to savory posing. She is a full-fledged diva! Towards the end, Kuzina's Anita Berber dropped her affected behavior which had become her second skin, and let this woman's true personality shine.

The Bubeníček's have no set style but surprise with refreshing ingenuity. They are resourceful, love detail and have a sure sense for accents, timing and intensity. Jiří once said in an interview that he wants to make the dancers look good. Again, he was very successful in amalgamating that with substantial artistic content.



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