

Lisa Ullmann as a Producer

Rudolf Laban (1951)



When in the late 1930s I witnessed Lisa Ullmann working with groups of teachers, employees and workmen in Plymouth - and in other larger towns of the South - I was convinced that the recreational art of movement created in these places had a sure quality of its own, which had to be more closely scrutinised. Lisa Ullmann was at that time a teacher at the Jooss-Leeder dance school in Dartington Hall, Totnes, but her activity for the *Workers Educational Association* in Plymouth was entirely her own - and independent of the dance school at which she was employed. The style of her private work was an entirely new one in England and had not met with much interest or encouragement from her employers. This is not surprising, for as far as we go back in the history of dancing, we find that the communal dance forms had aims other than the production of entertaining performances. The difference is not exactly that which exists between the amateur and the professional art production, for amateurs very often compete with professional casts in producing exactly the same material for entertaining stage performances - if mostly on a slightly lower level of skill and effect on the general public. What was characteristic of Lisa Ullmann's productions was the choice of subjects and the working methods with which the art of movement was perfected. In olden times one would have defined the subjects - as well as the working methods - as *ritualistic* because they had more of a community aim and character in which the aesthetic pleasure was not an end in itself, but became the expression of a communal tendency towards certain values and aspirations of a social and religious kind.

The production of this kind of art work in olden times, and in various civilisations, was the task of priests who had the gift to represent the longings and dreams of a community in communal performances. One has to think of times far away when, besides the courtly or popular theatre, the temple dances and mystery plays flourished. These temple-dances and mystery plays were not always connected with definite cults or recognised religions - although the priests of the various religions have often appropriated them in order to support and propagate their myths and dogmatic beliefs. In reality, however, the ancient mysteries and, for example, the *No* plays in Japan

- and more recently the morality plays of medieval times - dealt with general values of a relatively universal kind. They were real performances for *everybody* - believers and non-believers of special forms of theology - and appealed in the first instance to the natural feelings, longings and convictions in which the humane tendencies of the human race were stressed.

There is a lot of idealism in the theatre, but, on the whole, the necessary commercialism of successful theatrical performances does not allow the professional producer and player to linger in these lofty levels of humane interest. The difference between an ambitious actor or film star, on the one hand, and the other type of performer - which we might call the mystery player - will be obvious to everybody.

It is now interesting to see how a producer's talent such as Ullmann's has followed - almost unconsciously - a trend pointing towards a form of the art of movement in which dreams similar to those of the ancient temple-dancers and mystery players are realised in our time. One circumstance, and this is the festive character of her creations, is revealing in this respect. Lisa Ullmann has never dreamt of securing for her productions continued performances and long runs for a large public. Some of her works could surely have been performed in the usual way, but she was simply not attracted and not interested in this kind of commercialised continuous run. Whether her works were culminating points in movement or drama courses, or whether she put her talent in the service of community work, the plays were performed once or twice as festivals only - either for a public or even without a public - and no repetition was attempted. I personally feel that such reticence was overdone because festivals can be, and have been, repeated periodically. However this might be, there is here a beginning and a spirit of which we must become more clearly aware of than hitherto. The great number of creations with which Lisa Ullmann has given joy, and which I have watched now for more than twelve years, cannot be commented upon here in detail. All I intend to do is to depict a few of the characteristic aspects of her dance plays and dance dramas and the inner logic which I see in the whole development of her work.

The first of Lisa Ullmann's work which I saw in Plymouth in 1938 - and in the following years in other places - had always an intimate connection with Courses in which she tried to introduce people into what might be called the *mysteries of movement expression*. The content of these early plays - which are apt to defy any description in words - were neither stories or plots of everyday happenings and events; nor were they artistic choreographic arrangements of rhythmical movements and pictorial groups - as we are used to seeing them in the theatre. All that could be said of them is that the conflicting *powers* of certain inner attitudes of man - and their clash with one another - were either dissolved into communal harmony, or the tensions died away into a final silence and a motionlessness of an almost tragic character.

Now, as to these powers, one could only very inadequately compare them with general emotions such as anger, love, hatred, despair and so on. Each time one saw a very specific instance or nuance of such general emotions - with a fine distinction of mixtures and developments - very much as they happen in the lives of human beings on different occasions. The display of these psychological forces was however never crystallised around a definite adventure or story.

Almost all of Lisa Ullmann's compositions of movement were

thoroughly prepared beforehand and written down in movement notation. Very little was left to improvisation on the spot - and such improvisations were afterwards even organised and transposed into notation. The activity of production could be divided variously into: preparatory movement, invention and subsequent rehearsals to a certain perfection – all to be seen in Lisa Ullmann's creative efforts - even if the theme gained dramatic expression in the sense of the story of an underlying event.

Dramatic compositions are of course easier to describe - they always served special purposes. Drama clubs asking for the movement interpretation of a play were led to an understanding of the *display of movement powers* behind the story and the plot. Lisa Ullmann has in this way interpreted many plays from all periods of history - such as, for instance, the morality play *Everyman*. On one occasion the movement *power display* in Shakespeare's work was discussed and *Winter's Tale* represented - not as a mime of the single scenes - but as the flow of conflicting emotional powers which rises and ebbs like the waves of the sea. Modern plays and even ritualistic compositions have been interpreted by Lisa Ullmann in this way. As an example, one might mention how she arranged the movements at a semi-religious festival at Blackpool. Here, not only angels and devils, but modern men in their conflicts arising from the clash of their working activities with the social conditions and the ecclesiastic beliefs of their time, were seen to fight out their power play on the stage. This performance, with the church dignitaries in their splendour, in a spot-lit dress circle, gave the most intense impression of mystery-playing and of its contrast with ordinary theatre. It should be noticed that Lisa Ullmann was regarded as an artist who understands how to depict the powers of man's inner life in movement. Lisa Ullmann also composed dramatic scenes for certain occasions - for instance for the British Drama League in a historical cycle of the tragedy of the love between man and woman.

The aim in all these movement scenes with dramatic content remains the same as in the pure movement scenes; the people and especially the performers are made aware of the rhythm of inner powers which move man. This is also the aim in another kind of production of Lisa Ullmann's in which she attempts to introduce people into the history of the art of movement. Careful study of old manuscripts is one of the self-imposed duties of a producer - for from such sources, not only ideas, stories and subjects, but also a revival of the actual forms of movement of a former period of history, can be found. Lisa Ullmann, in a cycle of lecture rehearsals, has in this way dealt with the remarkable event of the birth of modern dance-drama in the eighteenth



century. Jean George Noverre, a choreographer who merits to be named alongside the famous poets and musicians of the past - indeed a Shakespeare of the art of movement - brought with his *ballet d'action* an entirely new note into theatrical dancing. How Noverre dealt with the old Orestes-Clytemnestra legend shows a personification of psychological powers translated into movement which is the first step of modern dance drama.

Lisa Ullmann has often shown the powers of repentance and despair in group movement, attracted by the historical allusion which Noverre used in his dances of the furies around Orestes, after he killed his mother Clytemnestra in blind rage. Vigano, a follower of Noverre, chose in one of his choreodramas, *The Vestale*, another kind of inner conflict in which one of these priestesses succumbs to the turmoil caused by the clash of her love for a young patrician with her celibacy vows.

In witnessing Lisa Ullmann's own movement poetry one becomes aware of delightful and profoundly touching shades of movement expression - the working of the inner powers to which man is subject and that without referring to the ritualistic background of the play. In the revivals of dance compositions created in olden times, Lisa Ullmann succeeded, excellently, in revealing for instance, the old theme of rival wooers - always of ritualistic significance. The rival wooers were also a favourite theme of the *Comedia dell'Arte*, and in the revival of plays of this kind, Lisa Ullmann depicted the traditional characters as persons possessed by certain psychological powers and efforts.

All these attempts to make people enjoy and benefit from the awareness of the powers of life may - but must not invariably - be presented to spectators; some of Lisa Ullmann's own creations were produced to be seen. It is characteristic of her whole work that she brought out short dance plays for a kind of children's dance theatre. These productions were supplementary to educational dancing in school and one might say that they were also the counterpart to dance performance - for which Lisa Ullmann trained teachers in her Studio. Production plays a great role in Lisa Ullmann's community work - which is perhaps the main source of a new *ritualistic* art.

Vice President Gordon Curl discovered that this writing by Rudolf Laban has been preserved in Sally Archbutt's Collection since her extensive work with Lisa Ullmann and Ellinor Hinks on Laban's archives at Surrey University in the 1970s. We are indebted to Sally Archbutt for permission to reproduce this shortened version of Laban's tribute to Lisa Ullmann.