

# Performativity of Gender by Early Modern Dancers on and off Stage. The Case of Elmerice Parts and Gerd Negro

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**Abstract:** Elmerice Parts and Gerd Negro were among the first female modern choreographers in Estonia. The present article takes a close look at how they *did* gender in their early modern dance productions and how they performed gender in their daily lives in the 1920s.

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This article investigates how Estonian early modern dancers<sup>1</sup> represented women and performed gender on and off stage in the 1920s. Modern dance started developing in Western Europe and North America in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. It opposed itself – at least at the beginning – strongly to ballet, a form of dance that dominated Western dance stages at the time. Modern dancers discarded classical ballet technique, defined by formalised movements and positions of the arms, feet, and body, and chose their own movements. The first female modern dancers, according to Sally Banes and Karl Toepfer, did not just break the rules of their art form, but cultural norms for women as well, by claiming liberty for the female dancing body – freedom to create new expressive vocabularies of movement and freedom from prevalent and widespread plots (Banes 1998; Toepfer 1997).

Choreographing is an activity that is closely linked to gender. There is no “pure movement,” Heili Einasto argues, as the dancers are always gendered (2002a, 36, 43). As modern dance pieces were not only performed by women, but also created by them, female choreographers had an opportunity to express themselves and comment upon their situatedness, their dilemmas, their ways of being in the world through their dance compositions, as Tomko has pointed out (2007, 105). Wendy Oliver and Doug Risner are convinced that dance art reflects gendered sociocultural patterns. “Choreographers, dancers, dance teachers, critics, and all those who are part of the dance world,” they explain, “are first and foremost individuals who were shaped by the culture in which they grew and developed” (Oliver and Risner 2017, 1). Gender itself, as Judith Butler argues, is not a fact or a stable identity, but some-

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1 I use the term *early modern dance*, shortly *modern dance* in this article as a generic term. In Estonia, the terms *barefoot*, *modern* (meaning contemporary), *plastic*, *free*, and *new* dance were used between the 1910s and the 1940s.

thing we *do* (Butler 2010); it is a sum of acts of gender. This means that the content of seemingly self-evident notions like “woman” or “man,” “feminine” or “masculine” is, in fact, fluent and subject to change.

The aim of this article is to explore how Estonian female choreographers *did* gender in their early modern dance productions in the 1920s and how they performed gender in their daily lives. The focus of the research lies on Elmerice Parts (1878–1974) and Gerd Neggo (1891–1974) – two under-researched choreographers and dancers. The article seeks to find out whether they represented “traditional” or modern women on stage and, additionally, what kinds of lives they lived. The main source material of this article is printed media articles: reviews written by critics and announcements advertising dance events or informing the public about the dancers’ doings (for example, travels or performances abroad). Unfortunately, very few personal notes of the choreographers have survived. This fate is shared by many dance artists who fled Estonia in the 1940s. In order to understand how gender revealed and manifested itself in Parts’s and Neggo’s choreographies, I analyse how the reviewers described their dance productions and movements. It must be said, though, that neither of the two made gender an explicit subject of their dance art.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, as the dance pieces were composed by female choreographers and presented by female artists, the question concerning gender performativity is justified. In order to be able to say how the dance artists performed gender in their daily lives and whether they led a “traditional” – or, on the contrary, a modern – life, I compile their biographies and compare their life stories with the idea of the “traditional woman” from the 1920s. The choreographers’ biographies are composed using data published in the printed media; the idea of a “traditional woman” is constructed on the basis of different research publications.

This article is structured as follows. In the first section I introduce Judith Butler’s notion of performativity and give a short overview of what is meant by *doing gender*. In the second section I examine how Elmerice Parts and Gerd Neggo *did* gender off stage. First, I discuss the dominant gender roles and stereotypes ascribed to women in Estonia during the period analysed, then I compare the protagonists’ lives with them. The third and the main section of the article is dedicated to Parts’s and Neggo’s dance productions. Relying on the reviews and announcements published in printed media, I describe the characteristics of their dances and dance movements. The approach of this article is contextual, and, in its orientation, historical. As the research is conducted from a gender perspective, it can be consid-

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<sup>2</sup> The only exception was a dance named *Woman* which Elmerice Parts brought on stage in 1927.

ered feminist. Gathered data allows me to see how the female choreographers' self-presentation was represented in the context of gender norms of the time. Did it change during the 1920s? If it did, how? In other words, how did Estonian modern dancers use the freedom to create their own dances?

### **Gender performativity**

Judith Butler famously presented the idea that gendered behaviour is learned behaviour. This means that no-one is born as a "woman" or a "man," but learns to act as one while growing up. Gender is not a fact, the gender theorist claims, rather "the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender" (Butler 2010, 190). By acting day-to-day as a "woman" or a "man," one creates the idea of "womanliness" or "manliness" and, in doing so, defines the content of the aforementioned terms. In other words, gender is a sum of gender acts. Gender, according to Butler, does not have "an internal essence" (2010, xv): a substance independent or autonomous of the acts of gender. The gender theorist agrees with Simone de Beauvoir, who claims: "to be a woman is to have *become* a woman, to compel the body to conform to an historical idea of "woman," to induce the body to become a cultural sign, to materialize oneself in obedience to an historically delimited possibility, and to do this as a sustained and repeated corporeal project" (Butler 1988, 522). Acts of gender are "corporeal signs" (Butler 2010, 185). It is the body, as de Beauvoir notes, that one needs to compel to conform to an idea of "woman" or "man." Dance art – similarly to gender – does not get by without the body. Therefore, dance is always gendered. While dancing, the dancing body performs gender.

Gender seems "real" or existent regardless of the fact that there is no gender – only acts of gender. Gender is performed continuously; one acts constantly as a "woman" or a "man" and this action makes them thereby "real" to some extent. "In the act of performing the conventions of reality, by embodying those fictions in our actions," Dino Franco Felluga explains, "we make those artificial conventions appear to be natural and necessary. By enacting conventions, we do make them "real" to some extent [ . . . ], but that does not make them any less artificial" (Felluga 2015, 214). It is possible to claim, though, that "reality" is a sum of acts. For example, the acts of gender determine what one considers "natural" or "normal" for "women" or "men." The actions then again are subject to change. The series of acts through which the body becomes its gender, Butler (1988, 523) states, are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time. Therefore, it is possible to claim that by changing the actions, for example the acts of gender, we change the "reality." Female entertainers who work on-stage have a special position here: their gender performances

or acts of gender become visible to a great number of people. By presenting alternative acts of gender, they might pave the way to different or new ways of *doing* gender.

The acts of gender are repeated every day. The fact that gender is achieved through repetition makes it possible to say that gender is performative (Meyerhoff 2015, 2). Butler does not equate performativity with performance. According to her, performativity “consists in a reiteration of norms which precede, constrain, and exceed the performer and in that sense cannot be taken as the fabrication of the performer’s ‘will’ or ‘choice’” (Butler 2011, 178). Performativity excludes any action from the part of the performer: her or his will remains hidden once and for all; the performer is unable to control gender performativity, Gay Morris (2005, 125) explains. “This is because the performer is inside or part of the gender system, and therefore cannot avoid it” (Morris 2005, 125). Whilst performativity contests the very notion of the subject, performance presumes one and connotes for Butler wilful control (Osborne and Segal 1994, 33).

Butler argues that as gendered subjects and performers of gender we are “compelled to ‘cite’ the norm in order to qualify and remain a viable subject. Femininity is thus not the product of a choice, but the forcible citation of a norm.” (Butler 2011, 177) As Sarah Nettleton and Jonathan Watson have shown, numerous everyday norms regulate bodies and their functions (Roach Anleu 2006, 357). “Such norms specify appropriate body shapes, sizes, appearance, gestures, movements, types of adornment, and clothing. [. . .] In contemporary Western societies, femininity tends to be defined as the absence of masculinity, and gender norms specify separate roles and expectations for men and women” (357–8). The concept of gender norms should not be understood as accepted or set standards, rather they should be seen as beliefs nested in people’s minds (Cislighi and Heise 2020, 407).

As Butler has shown, gender is performative, meaning that gender is not something that one is, but what one *does* daily by repeating gender norms and enacting certain activities. This applies both off and on stage: while living everyday life and when performing on stage. The fact that female modern choreographers composed their own dances allows us to ask how they decided to perform or present gender in their dance productions. Was their female stage character in accordance with an idea of the image of the “traditional woman” of the 1920s or did she deviate from the dominant norm? What kind of reality did their compositions present?

Dance scholars have used interpretative strategies of feminist theory since the 1980s (Tomko 2007, 103, 105). Ann Daly has described the pertinence of feminism to dance studies as following: “Dance is an art form of the body, and the body is where gender distinctions are generally understood to originate. The inquiries that feminist analysis makes into the ways that the body is shaped and comes to have mean-

ing are directly and immediately applicable to the study of dance, which is, after all, a kind of living laboratory for the study of the body – its training, its stories, its way of being and being seen in the world" (Daly 1991, 2). A great overview of the conducted research on dance and gender is given by Elizabeth Claire, Wendy Oliver and Doug Risner, and Linda J. Tomko.

Estonian dance history has been scarcely researched, especially from the gender perspective. Heili Einasto has shed some light on gender relations in contemporary Estonian dance productions. She (Einasto 2002a; 2002b; 2017) has analysed how choreographers represented gender in their dance productions in the 1990s, gender relations in the ballet productions *Coppélia* and *Cassandra*, both staged by the Estonian National Opera, and different choreographed versions of the Estonian national epic *Kalevipoeg* from the gender perspective.

### **Performing gender off stage**

In order to be able to say something about Elmerice Parts's and Gerd Neggo's dance productions, we need to understand the social environment where the dance artists created their dance productions and – most importantly – acted as women. First, I describe the features society ascribed to a "traditional woman" at the time and then I portray a modern woman who differed from her. As the urban environment, with its theatres and intelligentsia, constituted the main milieu where the stage art evolved and dancers circulated, the following focuses on an urban woman. Outside the city environment the terms "traditional" and "modern" probably had a different meaning. Class affects social norms "so that expectations for 'normal' women's and men's bodies differ in different social groups" (De Casanova 2004, Leeds Craig 2002, Lovejoy 2001 quoted in Roach Anleu 2006, 359). Cities grew rapidly at the turn of the century: at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century 19% of the population lived in cities, by 1922 Estonia had already 27% urbanites (Ainsaar 1997, 43).

In the 1920s there was discussion in conservative circles as to whether a woman was capable of working professionally like a man. Some believed that a woman was mentally and intellectually incapable for what were at the time perceived to be "men's professions," among them all kinds of leading positions. (Reinfeldt 2013, 17) One of them was Doctor Reinhold Kleitsman, a specialist in gynaecology and midwifery, who claimed in an article that intellectual work caused nervous and mental illnesses for women, and was therefore harmful (Kleitsman 1925, 13). The attitude towards women who decided to prove otherwise and educated themselves in universities was, according to Kai Reinfeldt (2013, 20), unfavourable. The reason was that a woman was believed to belong at home, where she was to be responsible for children and housekeeping (Reinfeldt 2013, 15, 19, 24; Sakova 2006, 126).

A married woman was placed under her husband's guardianship by the Baltic Private Law Code. According to the law, "the husband had the right to represent her in court proceedings, file claims on behalf of his wife without her authorisation, and participate in criminal proceedings when she was a victim." Additionally, "the husband was entitled to demand spousal obedience from his wife and choose the place of family residence" (Kiirend-Pruuli 2020, 4).<sup>3</sup> However, the subjugation of women was not complete: in public-law matters, men and women were alike before the law (Kiirend-Pruuli 2020, 4). This enabled Estonian women to receive the right to vote already in 1918.

The role of women in the public sphere changed significantly during the 1920s (Kiirend-Pruuli 2020, 4; Kurvits 2013, 163). In addition to gaining suffrage they established several women's organisations, received the right to acquire higher education, and were increasingly engaged in paid employment (Kurvits 2013, 163). Women, who actively participated in the world, sought education, and had their own careers were considered modern or New (Marks, Patterson quoted in Kurvits 2013, 140). The features attributed to her were rationality, toughness, and maturity, the characteristics usually ascribed to men. In order to stress her independence and freedom, a modern woman adopted "manly" liberties – among them smoking – and traits; marriage was not a priority for her (Poska-Grünthal 1936, 29). "One got rid of everything strikingly feminine," Lilli Ibrus, a young Estonian woman revolutionary from the beginning of the last century, remembers, "cut her hair short and wore – if possible – single-coloured clothes. One attended a party in a dark dress, and with uncurled hair, some girls did not even dance." (Kruus quoted in Väljataga 2019) Ida Urbel, who studied with Neggo in the mid-1920s, remembers her teacher as a slim and boyish woman who wore trousers, large earrings and held a cigarette between her fingers (Aumere 1989, 9). Despite the growing number of New Women, the idea of a "traditional woman" prevailed – at least in the written press.

As Roosmarii Kurvits' research on the visual representation of women in the Estonian media shows, printed media presented an Estonian woman primarily as a housewife in the 1920s – her duty was to manage the household, take care of herself and her husband, and to love. The majority of the pictures in newspapers represented women as the weaker gender, requiring (male) guidance and protection. (Kurvits 2013, 170–71) Thus, it is not surprising that a "traditional" Estonian woman was considered tender, weak, childish (Poska-Grünthal 1936, 29), gentle, sensitive, refined (Kivimaa 2005, 34), passive and insecure (Hinrikus 2011, 40). In printed

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<sup>3</sup> Estonian family law was liberalised in some respects in the 1920s: consensual divorce was legalised in 1923 and civil marriage established in 1926 (Kiirend-Pruuli 2020, 4).

media Estonian women were generally used to symbolise private life and the domestic sphere (as opposed to the public sphere) (Kurvits 2013, 170). Notably, Kurvits argues, Estonian and foreign women were represented differently. While the ideal Estonian woman was presented predominantly in “traditional” domestic roles, foreign women were mainly entertainers or wives of important men (172). Photographs of Estonian female choreographers and dancers in written media transmitted a different image of Estonian woman. A female dancer, standing alone at the centre of the picture in a dance costume, proved that she as well can lead a professional and independent life.

Elmerice Parts and Gerd Negro undoubtedly were examples of modern and independent women. They rejected traditional domestic roles of women, educated themselves abroad in the field of modern dance<sup>4</sup> – barely known in Estonia back then – and continued their careers as professional dancers, choreographers, and teachers. Both of them were married, but neither of them had biological children (Elmerice and her husband Kaarel adopted three children). It is not known whether they did not want to have children, or they could not have them due to medical reasons. As not having children was one of the few reasons Estonian society accepted divorce (Sakova 2006, 127), both marriages can be considered liberal. The married status of the choreographers did not seem to have affected their careers negatively; this fact shows their husbands’ tolerance and openness, especially when considering the Baltic Private Law Code.

### Performing gender on stage

Now I take a close look at how Elmerice Parts’s and Gerd Negro’s dance pieces and dance movements were characterised by the critics. The focus of the research lies on their solo dances and Parts’s and Herman Oginsky’s duos from the 1920s. The data originates from the reviews.<sup>5</sup> The latter were found with the help of the

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4 Parts studied aesthetic gymnastics in Berlin in 1913 with Hedwig (Hade) Kallmeyer, plastic dance in Saint Petersburg in 1916 with Claudia Isachenko and modern dance with Jutta Klamt in Berlin in 1922 (Kompus 1938, 202, Maripuu 2018). Negro studied with Ella Ilbak in Tartu, with Anna Behle in Stockholm between 1919 and 1921, and with Rudolf von Laban in Stuttgart, Mannheim, and Hamburg from 1921 to 1924. In 1926 she opened her dance studio in Tallinn, which shaped a generation of dancers. She changed the opening date to 1924 in the 1930s. Additionally, Negro popularised women’s gymnastics – a field that seems to have grown more important for her with time. (Maripuu 2016)

5 Most of the reviews were published in Estonian daily newspapers: *Postimees* and *Päevaleht*. Additionally, following newspapers published articles about Parts’s and Negro’s dance performances in the 1920s: *Kaja*, *Koit*, *Lõuna-Eesti*, *Naesterahva Töö ja Elu*, *Oma Maa*, *Põhja Kodu*, *Pärnu Postimees*, *Pärnu Päevaleht*, *Rahva Sõna*, *Sakala*, *Tallinna Teataja*, *Vaba Maa*, Pärnu edition of *Vaba Maa*, and *Üliõpilasleht*. Articles were also published in the magazines *AEG*, *AGU*, *Looming*, and *Kiri ja Kunst*. DIGAR speeds up researcher’s work remarkably, although, instead of

Estonian article portal DIGAR; as a search word different name formats (Gerd Negro, G. Negro, Negro, Elmerice Parts, E. Parts, Parts) were used. When the number of search result was too small, a dance title was used as a keyword. I found a total of 88 articles and announcements. In the articles I looked for phrases describing, characterising, and portraying Parts's and Negro's dance productions and dance movements. Reading the reviews in a chronological order, one notices that during the decade there was a shift in how the female dancers and their dance productions were described by the critics. I surmise that this change was called forth by the change of their dance aesthetics which allowed the dancers to present gender in different forms and put on stage different kinds of female figures.

A considerable amount of dance criticism was written by writers, theatre directors and theatre critics. According to custom, most authors signed their articles using initials or pseudonyms; occasionally, neither of the two was used and the article was left unsigned. Due to this, not all the reviewers' names are known, which makes it impossible to say how many critical articles – if any – were written by women. The majority of the reviews with known authorship were written by Rasmus Kangro-Pool, literature and theatre critic, Jaan Pert, art and literature critic, writers Karl August Hindrey, Bernhard Linde, Artur Adson, Henrik Visnapuu, Johannes Semper, and the theatre director Voldemar Mettus. All of them were keenly interested in the new art form – the modern dance. Most of them eagerly visited modern dance performances, both in Estonia and abroad. It is known that Kangro-Pool saw Rudolf von Laban's dance performance *Prometheus* in Hamburg (R. K.-P. 1924), and Semper visited Mary Wigman's and Tanzbühne Laban's dance performances in Berlin (1982a, 1982b). Both choreographers were representatives of the *Ausdruckstanz*<sup>6</sup>. Thus, it can be suggested that the critics who covered modern dance performances in Estonia were in general supporters of the modernisation of Estonian culture and positively inclined towards modern dance.

I am aware that limiting the analysis to printed media articles and critics privileges certain types of text (review or announcement) and authors (critics). The collected data primarily originates from the texts written for publication to give an

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the researcher's attentiveness, the number of found articles depends on algorithms and the number of digitised newspapers and magazines.

6 I understand the notion similarly to Susanne Franco (2007, 80): "The term defines a heterogeneous group of choreographic languages and teaching methods that became known in the German-speaking regions in the early twentieth century. These languages and methods agreed on certain major principles: dance was aesthetically independent from the other arts; body movement was closely bound to emotional and mental processes and reflected the rhythm of the cosmos; the dancer's role was that of creator-interpreter; and improvisation was of major importance."

overview of the dance performance and evaluate it. In a diary or a private letter, the dance productions would have been recorded differently. Every reviewer had their understanding of the art of dance, personal taste, and inclinations.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, the reviews give a researcher a rare opportunity – maybe the only one – to learn something about early modern dance in Estonia through the reception of Elmerice Parts's and Gerd Neggo's dance productions and to get an idea of how the choreographers presented gender on stage.

### **Elmerice Parts's dances and dance movements as described by the critics**

Parts began her solo dance career in 1920. During the eight years she spent choreographing and performing, her dance aesthetics changed remarkably. At the beginning of the 1920s she was described as a *hovering* and *graceful* dancer (here and later – all the quotes and notions from the articles are translated by the author, with the translation in italics); in the second half of the decade, she performed dances that were called *erotic* and *acrobatic*, had a *horrifying* effect and contained *grotesque humour* or *comedy*. Her dance partner was Herman Oginsky (also known as Kolt-Oginsky and Heiko Kolt, 1902–1977), a son of a circus artist with ballet training (ETBL).

Estonian critics characterised her dances and dance movements in 1921 as follows. *Round dance (Ringmäng)* passed by, according to a critic, *hovering like a vernal fairy tale* (A. S. 1921), the dance was said to be full of *playful grace* and *joy* (A. S. 1921; A. S. 1920). *Berceuse* allowed the dancer to demonstrate her *lightness and grace* (W. M-s. 1921): hovering her hands back and forth the dancer *created an image of something so tender, lyrical, and carefree impossible to describe* (Kompus 1921). In 1922 Parts returned from Berlin with a program *The New Dances (Uued tantsud)*. According to a critic, the dancer's movements were *freer than before*, and more *ravished in passionate ecstasy* (Pr. Elmerice Partsi... 1922). *Enthusiasm for Victory (Võidujoovastus)* was *full of drive and force* (Pr. Elmerice Partsi... 1922); the dance was described as *impressive, beautiful, and fascinating* (W. M-s. 1923; R. R. 1924). *Tango* was *forceful, enrapturing, and impressive* (R. 1924); *lithe, lissom, full of élan and force* (R. R. 1924). *Grotesque (Grotesk)* was performed in a mask; it was described as an *impressive and enrapturing* dance piece displaying *angular movements* and *frozen postures*, which made it seem *nightmarish* (R. R. 1924). *Fountain or Fontaine (Purskkaevul)* was also praised as an *impressive and enrapturing* dance composition in which the dancer

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7 The role of a critic becomes clearer when one considers Artur Adson's opinion of Parts's dance productions and regards the fact that he never expressed his opinion publicly. Had he done so, we would probably see Parts's dance productions slightly differently. (Adson and Tuglas 2011, 421)

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managed to surprise a critic with her powerful *tempo of the arms* (R. R. 1924). Almost everyone was mesmerised by Parts's dance *Wedding Guest (Pulmapoiss)* where she used elements of Estonian folk dances (-a- 1924). It was an *intense* and *merry* dance with an *enrapturing rhythm* (R. 1924).

Parts was described by the critics at the beginning of her career predominantly as a *hovering, graceful, and jolly* dancer. Soon after her dance pieces were described prevalently as *forceful, fascinating, and captivating*. Based on the reviewers' opinions one could say that after some time Parts's choreographic handwriting gained in forcefulness. Could the reason for the change lay in her studies with Jutta Klamt, a representative of modern dance, in 1922?

Parts and Oginsky performed in Estonia in 1926 and in 1927. On this occasion, the general critical sentiment was disapproving (Parts-Oginsky tantsuõhtu 1927; R. K.-P. 1927; Parts-Oginsky õhtu 1927; K. Rumor 1927) and one notices that critics were losing their interest. Parts's and Oginsky's most popular dance productions were *Machine no. 13 (Masin nr. 13)* and *Morphine b (Morfium b)*. *Machine no. 13* was accompanied by *machine noise* (W. M-s. 1926) and performed in costumes that hid the dancers' faces (W. M-s. 1926). The production displayed mechanical movements and postures (Parts-Oginsky tantsuõhtu 1927), it was characterised as an *interesting* piece presented in a *powerful* and *extraordinary* way (Parts-Oginsky tantsuõhtu 1927; J. K. 1926). According to a critic, the dance presented the soul of the machine (Elmerice Partsi ja Herman Oginsky... 1926). The number did not convince all the reviewers, though. Some of them were left indifferent: "one complex of movements followed the next one [. . .], one could begin, skip, or end with a random one. The question was how exactly / aptly a human being can copy a machine" (R. K.-P. 1926). For others, *Machine no. 13* resembled a circus act and did not come close to art (R. K.-P. 1926). This made the dance according to the critic *inanimate* (Os. Ri. 1926). In 1927 the dance, now titled *Machine (Masin)*, was performed on a metal plate in costumes that revealed the dancers' faces (W. M-s. 1927b). *Morphine b* depicted, with *feeble convulsive movements and facial expressions, morphine's weakening and destructive effect on the human body and soul* (W. M-s. 1926). Facial expressions helped to turn the dance into a horrifying vision of *some kind of opium den* (Linde 1926). According to some critics, the dancers *depicted the horror of collapsing impressively* (R. K.-P. 1926; W. M-s. 1926). *Kristin and Kristof* seems to have been one of Parts's and Oginsky's *erotic* dances. Some reviewers mention the female dancer's *legs pointing up to the sky* (W. M-s. 1926; R. K.-P. 1926; K. Rumor 1927). Did the author suggest an imitation of intercourse? In the dance production *Woman (Naine)* Parts *moved her breasts voluptuously* and the movements of her hips were *as sinuous as those of a belly-dancer* (R. K.-P. 1927). The movements seemed *angular* to the critic



Figure 1. Elmerice Parts and Herman Oginsky in the revue *It's Going Already Better* (*Es geht schon besser*) at the Kurfürstendamm in Berlin, 1926. Photo by Zander and Labisch. Published by 'Uhu' 02/1926. Vintage property of ullstein bild. Courtesy of Getty Images.

and hence had a *repulsive effect* (R. K.-P. 1927). In another dance production Parts distorted her mouth and eyes by pulling them, twisted the middle of her body, and opened her legs (Parts-Oginsky tantsuõhtu 1927). Reportedly she kept her mouth open to express strong passion (R. K.-P. 1927). Acrobatic elements were allegedly displayed in *Arena*, where Parts wrapped herself around Oginsky's body while he made pirouettes (Elmerice Partsi ja Herman Oginsky... 1926). Their art of dancing caused a heated dispute among critics. A significant number of reviews dealt with the question of whether it was art or *belonged to music halls*<sup>8</sup> (R. K.-P. 1926; Parts-Oginsky õhtu 1927). It seems that their repertoire was too bold and daring for local reviewers. Additionally, critics highlighted Parts's poor technical skills (R. K.-P. 1927).

Following Parts's career through the critics' descriptions and depictions of her dance productions and dance movements, one sees that her repertoire and dance aesthetics changed significantly with time. She began as a *hovering, graceful, and jolly* dancer. Soon afterwards her dance pieces were described prevalently as *forceful, fascinating, or captivating*. A noticeable change in her dance aesthetics took place in 1926, when she joined forces with Oginsky. According to the critics, their dances had a strong *erotic* undertone. During her career, Parts put on stage, among others, a *graceful, forceful* and an *erotic* female figure. Parts's and Oginsky's dance compositions represented female sexuality in relation to a man without tying it to a marriage plot, which is common to most dance productions, according to Baner (1998, 89). Neither did the dance artists concentrate on depicting emotions; instead they illustrated the functioning of a machine or demonstrated an effect of morphine. Parts brought on stage a woman who was familiar with opium-dens and most probably knew the effect of the opiate. This woman, similar to representatives of the *Ausdruckstanz*, presented a different representation of the dancing body, in particular the female dancing body, than the high-art dancing or the light entertainments the audiences were used to (Baner 1998, 131). Instead of *hovering* to the music from the romantic period, the female dancer performed to the sounds of metal plates, distorting her face and mouth.

### **Characteristics of dances and dance movements: Gerd Negro**

Negro began her solo dance career soon after returning from Germany in 1924. As a former student of Rudolf von Laban, she became one of the main Estonian representatives of the *Ausdruckstanz*, or the "new dance," as it was named in Estonia. Many

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<sup>8</sup> In Estonia Parts and Oginsky performed in theatres, whereas in Germany the dancers performed mostly in revues like Nelson-Theatre on Kurfürstendamm in Berlin (Das russische Tänzerpaar Parts-Oginsky 1926) or music halls like Alkazar in Hamburg. In Alkazar they performed together with the German dancer Anita Berber.

critics underlined the fact that Neggo's artistic work differed from that of the plastic dancers, meaning that her dance compositions were independent from music and did not interpret it (KAH 1924; -ns. 1924; J. P. 1924; I. K. 1924; M. L. 1925; -a- 1925; -n. 1927). Contrary to the *impressionist sweetness* of the plastic dancers, Neggo's dance movements were described as *precise, bold, expressive, energetic, unique, forceful, light, and full of tension*. From the reviews one learns that her steps were long and hand movements broad (K. M. 1927; ArA. 1927). The choreographer expressed herself using the *lines drawn virtuously by the body through space*, her instruments of interpretation were *a straight line, a broken line, a circle, a dot line, and a game of rare and unique rings*, a critic summarized (I. K. 1924). Her dance pieces were not inspired by an emotion, another reviewer explained, but by rationality (I. A. 1927). As she *negated literature, associations, and substance* (J. P. 1927a), the reviewers considered her dance performances abstract (J. P. 1924). Her dance productions joined *feminine charm* and *masculine force* (Gerd Neggo kammertantsude... 1924), according to another source, *sober and masculine seriousness* flowed out of them (-in. 1925). Unfortunately, reviews written about Neggo's dance evenings do not contain as detailed information about the dance pieces as the ones written about Parts's. In many cases a considerable proportion of the article contained rather general descriptions of Laban's principles. Perhaps, due to the abstract character of Neggo's dance productions, the critics found it difficult to describe them and introduced her teacher's visions of dance instead?

Three of her dances were labelled as abstract by a critic: *Phantom (Fantoom)*, *Dance of Drive (Hootants)*, and *Nightly Journey (Õine teekond)* (J. P. 1927a). *Phantom* allegedly had a *mysterious atmosphere* (El. 1927) and displayed *aerial lightness* (-s. 1927). In *Dance of Drive* the dancer was told to demonstrate *force* and *boldness* (-s. 1927); although, according to another critic, the composition *lacked drive* (H. H. H. 1927). *Nightly Journey* portrayed a traveller's urge to return and the compulsion to continue on her or his path (ArA. 1927). The dance piece had a *gloomy atmosphere* and *expressively displayed the darkness and gloominess of the night and the fear of the night* (J. P. 1927b). *Ostinata* and *Grotesque (Grotesk)* were described as unique and exotic dances that displayed *elemental force* and contained comic elements (-ns. 1924, W. M-s. 1927a; J. P. 1924). *Arlequinade (Harlekinaad)* included elements of pantomime (J. P. 1927a), the dance composition demonstrated *force* and *boldness* (-s. 1927) and charmed one of the reviewers with *the playfulness of transitions, impetus of jumps, and grace* (ArA. 1927). *Dance to Estonian Motifs (Tants eesti motiividele)* was according to a critic a *light and a jumping dance* (J. P. 1927b), displaying light and elastic movements (El. 1927).

Neggo introduced a female figure unknown to the Estonian modern dance stage up to then. Her dance pieces and dance movements did not resemble those of the

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Figure 2. Gerd Negro in dance pose, 1925. Photo by J. ja P. Parikas, Courtesy of the Estonian Music and Theatre Museum.

plastic dancers the local audience was used to seeing. Her female stage figures lacked *impressionist sweetness* and, instead of *hovering movements*, they used *energetic* and *forceful* ones. From the reviews one learns that Negro's choreographic works were not inspired by emotion, but rationality. Rationality, along with a certain soberness and abstractness that were characteristic to her dance productions as well, was the quality that differentiated her female stage figures from the ones performed by Parts in the duets with Oginsky. The latter's stage performances featured a passionate, sensual, and voluptuous woman.

In the 1920s the number of women who worked professionally and chose the profession of a choreographer and/or a dancer rose rapidly. Parts and Negro were two of them. As choreographers of their own dance pieces, they decided themselves what to put on stage and how. Reading the reviews of Parts's and Negro's dance evenings closely one learns that the dance artists on stage performed women who were characterised by the critics as *graceful*, *jolly*, *forceful*, *erotic*, and who *used their reasoning to create dance productions*. Ascribing gracefulness to a female was not and is not anything new, but demonstrating her forcefulness, displaying her eroticism and rationality meant bringing a New Woman on stage. This woman did not require male guidance and protection like a "traditional woman"; on the contrary, she was mature and rational. She used comic or grotesque effects and cast aside the implicit requirement that the stage dance had to look pretty. Sally Banes has pointed out that early modern dancers partly proclaimed their independence from men simply by excluding the marriage plot from their dances altogether (1998: 213). The marriage plot did not interest neither Parts nor Negro. Parts's and Oginsky's dance productions seem to have displayed, instead, the corporeal or physical side of love. Perhaps the boldness of Parts's and Oginsky's dance productions played a role in the critical tone of the reviewers?

### Conclusion

Judith Butler claims that gender is not a fact, but something we *do*. In other words, there is no one way of being a woman or a man and the content of these ambiguous notions is in a constant flux. The starting point of this article was to understand how the Estonian female choreographers and dancers performed gender off and on stage in the 1920s: did they conform or, on the contrary, contradict the dominant gender norm? The focus of the research was on the solo dance productions of Elmerice Parts and Gerd Negro and Parts's duos with Herman Oginsky. The main source of information were the reviews and announcements published in the Estonian printed media. The 88 articles were found with the help of the Estonian

article portal DIGAR. In the texts I looked for phrases describing, characterising, and portraying Parts's and Neggo's dance productions and dance movements.

Parts and Neggo presented gender on dance stages in different ways. In the early 1920s Parts's female figures seem to have been consistent with the idea of a "traditional woman." They were described by the critics as *graceful, hovering, and jolly*. Soon after that, the female figure was characterised in the reviews predominantly as *forceful* – this applied both to Parts and Neggo. The dominant gender norm was challenged by Neggo's *abstract* dances, which were *not inspired by an emotion, but by rationality*. A "traditional woman" was considered to be weak, insecure, and rationally incapable. Parts's and Oginisky's *erotic* dance productions prefigured something radically new, presenting female sexuality in relation to a man. The private lives of the female dance artists were probably as unconventional as their art. Both Parts and Neggo seem to have lived as independent and modern women. Merely the fact that they worked professionally can be considered unprecedented in their time and must have inspired many young women. The dance artists proved that a woman does not have to dedicate herself to motherhood and housekeeping.

The choreographers demonstrated to their audiences that gender can be done in different ways. Various acts of gender create the idea of gender, Butler claims. This ties the idea or the understanding of gender at a certain time to the acts of gender. This means that by changing how one enacts gender, one changes the idea of gender. By presenting untraditional female figures in their dance productions, Parts and Neggo contradicted the dominant gender norms of their time. In doing so they contributed to the broadening of the meaning of the notion *woman* according to their own beliefs and understandings of womanliness. Finally – the stage was theirs.

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S U M M A R Y

**Soo performatiivsus esimeste moderntantsijate loomingus ja elus. Elmerice Partsi ja Gerd Negro juhtumiuuring**

*Anne-Liis Maripuu*

**Võttesõnad:** varane moderntants, soo performatiivsus, 1920. aastad, Elmerice Partsi, Gerd Negro, Judith Butler

Käesolevas artiklis otsin vastust küsimusele, kuidas kujutasid Eesti varased moderntantsijad ja koreograafid oma tantsulavastustes naisi. Lisaks sellele huvitab mind, missugused naised nad ise olid. Kas nende lavategelased ja nende endi elukäigud olid „traditsioonilised“ või iseloomustas neid moodsus? Moderntantsule pandi Lääne-Euroopas ja Põhja-Ameerikas alus 20. sajandi alguses. Selle eestvedajateks olid peamiselt naised, kellele uus tantsustiil andis ennenägematu võimaluse luua ise oma tantsud. Varased moderntantsijad ei kasutanud balletitehnikat ning hülgasid baleriinile kohustuslikud kostüümielemendid. Uurimuse fookus lasub kahel tantsijal ja koreograafil, Elmerice Partsil (1878–1974) ja Gerd Neggol (1891–1974). Vaatluse all on nende 1920. aastate soolotantsud ning Partsi ja Herman Oginsky (ka Kolt-Oginsky ja Heiko Kolt, 1902–1977) duod.

Judith Butler on seisukohal, et sool puudub stabiilne identiteet, sest sugu „tehakse“. Väljaspool seda performatiivsust sugu ei eksisteeri. Terminite *naine* ja *mees* või *naiselik* ja *mehelik* sisu on ajas muutuv, sõltudes praktikatest, mille taasesitamist peetakse kas „naiselikuks“ või „mehelikuks“ ehk sellest, kuidas sugu „tehakse“. Naiseks ei sünnita, vaid naiseks saadakse, on Judith Butler veendunud sarnaselt Simone de Beauvoir’iga. Kuidas sugu „tehakse“, on ajas muutuv: 1920. aastatel olid ettekirjutused „naistele“ ja „meestele“ teistsugused kui praegu. Missugused naisekujud töid Eesti esimesed naiskoreograafid lavale? Kas nende looming aitab kinnistada ideed naise „traditsioonilistest“ rollidest või panustas selle kummutamisele? Koreograafide arusaamad jõuavad tantsuks transformeerununa suhteliselt suure vaatajaskonnani, mistõttu on oluline, kuidas nad üht või teist sugupoolt laval kujutavad. Esitades laval alternatiivseid olemise viise, tutvustab koreograaf oma publikule teistsugust või uut soo „tegemise“ viisi. Sellega panustab ta ühiskondliku normi muutmisesse, mida me soolistatud subjektidena oleme paratamatult sunnitud tsiteerima.

Uurimuse peamiseks allikaks on Eesti trükimeedias ilmunud artiklid: kriitikute arvustused ning teatud tantsuetenduste ja koreograafide tegemiste kohta (nt esinemine välismaal). Artiklite leidmiseks kasutasin Rahvusraamatukogu digitaalarhiivi DIGAR, kokku õnnestus mul leida 88 artiklit ja teadaannet. Nimetatud allikad ei võimaldanud teada saada, kuidas tantsijannad end laval väljendasid, vaid kuidas (peamiselt meessoost) kriitikud nende loomingut arvustasid. Kuna koreograafide endi tantsualaseid märkmeid säilinud ei ole, pakuvad nimetatud allikad peaaegu ainsat võimalust Eesti varase moderntantsu kohta midagi järeldada. Partsi ja Negro loodud naisekujude iseloomustamiseks analüüsisin fraase, millega kriitikud kirjeldasid ja iseloomustasid nende tantsuloomingut ja liigutusi. Koreograafide elukäikudele hinnangu andmiseks koostasid nende biograafiad ja võrdlesin neid 1920. aastatel valitsenud ideega „traditsioonilisest naisest“. Koreograafide biograafiad panin kokku trükimeediast pärit info põhjal, idee „traditsioonilisest naisest“ konstrueerisin teemakohaste uurimuste põhjal.

Partsi ja Negro kuulusid kahtlemata moodsate ja iseseisvate naiste hulka. Nad harisid end välismaal ning töötasid seejärel elukutselistel tantsijate, koreograafide ja pedagoogidena. Mõlemad olid abielus, bio-

loogilisi lapsi ei olnud kummalgi. Nad tõestasid, et naisel on võimalik realiseerida end väljaspool kodu. 1920. aastatel ei peetud kodust väljaspool tegutsevat naist „traditsiooniliseks“, valitses arvamus, et naise koht on kodus, kus tema peamiseks vastutusala on lapsed ja majapidamine. „Traditsioonilist“ naist peeti õrnaks, nõrgaks, lapsikuks, leebeks, tundlikuks, passiivseks ja ebakindlaks (Poska-Grünthal 1936; Kivimaa 2005, 34; Hinrikus 2011, 40).

Missuguse naise töid Parts ja Neggo oma tantsulavastustes publiku ette? Partsi looming muutus tema karjääri jooksul märkimisväärselt. 1920. aastate alguses kirjeldasid kriitikud teda kui *hõljuvat, graatsilist ja rõõmsat* tantsijat, veidi hiljem iseloomustati tema tantsuloomingut kui *jõulist, haaravat ja kütkestavat* (siin ja allpool olen artiklitest pärit terminid kirjutanud kaldkirjas). Veelgi enam muutus Partsi esteetika 1926. aastal, kui tema tantsupartneriks sai Herman Oginsky. Kriitikud kasutasid nende etteasteid arvustades sageli termineid *erootiline* ja *akrobaatiline*.

Neggost sai Rudolf von Labani õpilasena Eestis „uue tantsu“ (Saksamaal nimetati seda stiili terminiga *Ausdruckstanz*) esindaja. Erinevalt plastilistest tantsijatest, keda kriitikute sõnul iseloomustas *impressioonistlik magusus*, kirjeldati Neggo tantsuliigutusi kui *täpseid, julgeid, ekspressiivseid, energeetilisi, unikaalseid, jõulisi ja kergeid*. Kuna koreograaf *eitas literatuuri, assotsiatsioone ja sisu*, mõjus tema looming mitmete arvustajate sõnul *abstraktsena*.

Neile allikatele tuginedes võib väita, et 1920. aastate jooksul eemaldus koreograafide loodud naisekuju üha tugevamini „traditsioonilisest“. Kui Partsi 1920. aastate alguse *graatsiline, hõljuv* ja *rõõmus* lavakuju ei erinenud kuigivõrd „traditsioonilisest naisest“, siis *jõulisuse* lisandudes mõned aastad hiljem eemaldub ta sellest mõnevõrra. Väljakutse valitsevale soonormile esitas Neggo oma *abstraktse* tantsuloominguga, mida anonüümse kriitiku sõnul *ei inspireerinud emotsioon, vaid mõistus*. „Traditsiooniline naine“ oli teatavasti tundlik ja intellektuaalselt saamatu. Partsi ja Oginsky *erootilised* tantsud kujutasid endast midagi radikaalselt uut, presenteerides naist kirgliku, sensuaalse ja iharana.

Tuues lavale „ebatraditsioonilisi“ naisekujusid, näitasid koreograafid, et sugu saab „teha“ mitmel moel. Nad demonstreerisid, et naine võib olla *graatsiline, jõuline, mõistuslik, erootiline*. Sellega esitasid Parts ja Neggo väljakutse valitsevale soonormile ja aitasid muuta arusaamist sellest, mida pidada „naiselikuks“ või „mehelikuks“.

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