Historical Introduction
to Nelisiwe Xaba, *Fremde Tänze*
Johannesburg
by Eike Wittrock

Guten Tag meine Damen und Herren, good afternoon ladies and gentlemen and welcome to the 27th edition of the Dance Umbrella Festival, proudly brought to you by the National Lottery Distribution Trust Fund. Please switch off all mobile devices or put them on flight mode. Unless you are an authorized photographer appointed by the Dance Umbrella you are not allowed to take any photographs or video recordings during the performance. In the event that there is load shedding, emergency lights will come on, and the Goethe-Institut will safely fly us out of the country.

For today’s historical introduction I would like to draw your attention to a female performer from the beginning of the 20th century that has been more or less forgotten by dance history and who—through her marginalized and suppressed position—redirects the focus to forgotten aspects of dance history itself and the political mechanisms of exclusion that are at work in archives and genealogies of dance. Sent M’ahesa is a prominent exponent of the exoticist tendencies of German modern dance and was at her time widely recognized as a pioneer of that genre alongside choreographers such as Rudolf von Laban und Mary Wigman.

Exoticism is a crucial pillar of German modern dance. It was a motor for several liberations in dance: movement style, narration, performer-audience relationship, and costume. Like several other performers of that era, Sent M’ahesa eventually moved out of the focus and now only appears as a footnote to dance history, whereas artists like Wigman or Laban secured their own legacy by establishing their schools and idealizing their own biographies.

Sent M’ahesa is the pseudo-Egyptian stage name of a German dancer, who was born as Else von Carlberg in 1883. She debuted in the Künstlerhaus München in December 1909 with a program of *Altägyptische Tänze*—Old Egyptian Dances—and toured widely in
Germany and abroad. In the 1920s she stopped dancing and eventually moved to Schweden where she ran a country guest house. Sent M'ahesa is a prime example of the exoticist imagination of early German modern dance, of its application of folklore and ritual into dance performance that nevertheless worked with spectacular show techniques. Also, she was—like many pioneers of modern dance—an independent female artist, overseeing her own artistic production, being director, performer, manager, light and costume designer in one person, travelling with her work independently in small theatres. Especially for Sent M’ahesa’s work, the role of the costume in the performance is not to be underestimated; often the choreography is a play between dress and movement, using the structure and shape of the garment to create geometric effects.

M’ahesa’s most famous creations were simple dances in abstract modern costumes that were intended—and perceived—as Egyptian. A contemporary description stresses how her creations were very free interpretations of old Egyptian reliefs that transported their geometrical designs into a modern play with flatness and sculpturality that had much more to do with contemporary design (like art nouveau) than with “the pyramids.” A close look at her dance programs reveals though how this archeological imagination of Egypt is anything but precise and is geographically very open. Her program of Altägyptische Tänze—Old Egyptian Dances—like that presented in Leipzig in February 1914, consisted of two parts. The first is called “Indian Melody” (with music by a German composer), containing a temple dance, a war dance, and an Old Semitic dance, followed after a short break by a Siamese dance, a cymbal dance, and a sword dance; performed with Chinese folklore music and a piece by French composer Georges Bizet. It is interesting to note how this wild mixture of elements in accounts of that time was perceived as introducing a mythical, ritualistic dimension into modern dance.

In an approach that from today’s perspective appears more like a decorative and superficial pastiche of exoticist elements, through the fantasy of spatial and temporal distance Sent M’ahesa attempted a more expressive, more emotionally truthful form of dance. Sent M’ahesa’s dance evening shows the width and breadth of exoticist modern dance programs from the beginning of the 20th century: in little miniatures, each lasting only of several minutes, separated by costume changes, switching genres of music; mixing,
juxtaposing, and collaging sources for her own artistic interest, Sent M’ahesa presented a series of imaginary dances from all over the world.

*The accompanying PowerPoint includes images from the following sources:*

Photo slide 2
Historic photography of Sent M’ahesa, taken from Hans Brandenburg’s seminal publication *Der Moderne Tanz*. (Photo by Wanda von Debschitz-Kunowski; from Brandenburg [1913] 1917:20)

Photo slide 3
Historic photography of Sent M’ahesa, taken from Hans Brandenburg’s seminal publication *Der Moderne Tanz*. (Photo by Wanda von Debschitz-Kunowski; from Brandenburg [1913] 1917:22)

Photos slide 4
Historic photography of Sent M’ahesa, taken from Hans Brandenburg’s seminal publication *Der Moderne Tanz*. (Photo by Wanda von Debschitz-Kunowski; from Brandenburg [1913] 1917:19)

Photo slide 5
Historic photography of Sent M’ahesa, taken from Hans Brandenburg’s seminal publication *Der Moderne Tanz*, 1913. (Photo by Wanda von Debschitz-Kunowski; from Brandenburg [1913] 1917:19)

Photo slide 6
Evening program for M’ahesa’s dance production *Altägyptische Tänze* (Old Egyptian Dances), Leipzig, 1914. Walter Kujawski Scrapbook, Theaterwissenschaftliche Sammlung Schloss Wahn, University of Cologne

Photo slide 7
Historic photography of Sent M’ahesa. (Photo by Hanns Holdt; from Thiess 1920)

Photo slide 8

Photo slide 9
Historic photography of Sent M’ahesa. (Photo by Hanns Holdt; from Thiess 1920)

References