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## films: harald kreutzberg's dances of death/by john mueller

In a performing career that stretched from the 1920s to the 1950s, the German modern dancer Harald Kreutzberg (1902-68) created and performed in a wide variety of specialized dance and dance-mime works. In solo concerts or in partnership with Yvonne Georgi or Ruth Page, his roles ranged from the zanily comic to the savagely macabre.

An idea that fascinated him, as it did other German choreographers like Kurt Jooss and Mary Wigman, was the dance of death, a grim constant in dance history that goes back to medieval times.

Available in 16mm are two valuable films featuring Kreutzberg. Each shows him in a different commentary on the dance of death.

One of these is a brilliant short made in 1952, *The Eternal Circle*. The other view of Kreutzberg is on the 1943 German feature *Paracelsus*, a drama set in medieval times in which the dancer puts in a brief but stunning appearance as a disease-bearing jester.

"*The Eternal Circle*" (Der Ewige Kreis). In the late 1930s Kreutzberg created *The Eternal Circle*, a solo stage work in which he played multiple roles. There were six rather grimly pathetic characters in the piece, each destined to strut and fret briefly on the stage until inevitably meeting and succumbing to the sardonic figure of Death. The characters were differentiated by the choreography, by costumes and by grotesque, stylized masks. By contrast Kreutzberg's Death figure was not masked—one saw his shaved head ominously protruding from an encompassing black cloak. Kreutzberg apparently affected the character changes by lighting devices and by briefly vanishing behind black upstage curtains in a manner similar to that used by Death in Jooss' *The Green Table*.

When Kreutzberg came to work on the film version of this dance with director Herbert Seggelke in the 1950s, he reduced the number of characters to five: a bleary reveller or drunkard who is joined in a last, fatal drink by Death; a vain woman who sees the lurking figure in her mirror as she preens; a criminal who frees himself from a handcuffing rope only to be strangled by it; a wench or prostitute whose scatterbrained street dance is mocked by Death; and an aged king whose power topples with his crown and who watches, mesmerized, as his staff becomes a pendulum ticking away his last, impotent moments.

On film it is possible, of course, to deal with the multiple role characterizations with considerable ease. But what is remarkable is how the dramatic and choreographic point of the dance work is carefully maintained and enhanced in the film version. Seggelke and Kreutzberg apply special film techniques, but these are used with such restraint and cunning that one scarcely notices. The film should furnish an object lesson to all gimmick-prone makers of dance films.

One of the most impressive of these effects occurs in the opening dance of Death. Kreutzberg was filmed crouched on the ground with his massive black cape spread out around him. From this position he rose, swirling, to full height. The film uses this footage in reverse so that the figure of Death seems to sink menacingly into the ground as his cloak oozes in an unnatural manner out from around him.

Another extraordinary moment occurs in the final, fatal section of the wench's dance. The passage is in stop-and-start slow motion so that she meets her doom by falling gradually to the ground



(Photo: Gertrud Bingel)

Harald Kreutzberg with one of his death masks.

in a rapid series of helpless and incoherent jerks.

The highly supportive music for the work is by Friedrich Wilckens, Kreutzberg's accompanist.

With the cooperation of Deutsche Condor Films, the Eastman International Museum of Photography and the National Endowment for the Humanities, *The Eternal Circle* is once again available in the United States in an English-titled version. The film runs twelve minutes, is in black and white, and rents for \$7 from Dance Film Archive, U. of Rochester, Rochester, NY 14627.

It would be an excellent film to program with a film of *Green Table*—if there were a film of *Green Table* available.

*Paracelsus*. Another view of Kreutzberg's immense theatrical talents is provided in a feature film made in Germany during World War II. The film dramatizes the struggles of a medieval doctor, Paracelsus, as he works to overcome scientific and medical misunderstanding, small-mindedness and backwardness in the battle against plague.

If the film had a propagandistic point, it presumably was to present Paracelsus as a glorified antecedent to Adolf Hitler though, in the doctor's rebellion against established bureaucratic authority, one could as easily come to a subversive point of view. At any rate, the Nazi censors apparently didn't see or care to see anything objectionable—and the film does end on an upbeat note extolling German nationalism.

Two of the greatest figures in German cinema worked on the film—G. W. Pabst directing and Werner Krauss acting the title role. Nonetheless the film is, overall, static and preachy. It's decidedly inferior in just about all respects to Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* which deals with similar subject matter—although sequential screenings of the two films would be a fascinating exercise.

Kreutzberg's role is a fairly small one but he does account for by far the best scene in the film. He plays a mischievous, mute, disease-bearing jester or juggler who has accidentally been smuggled into a town barricaded against outsiders because of the plague. (If one sees *him* as the Hitler figure, the film is *really* subversive).

He comes to a noisy, crowded beer-hall and leads the mob in a compulsive dance of death—a horrible, convulsive, hypnotic ritual—until he collapses senseless in Paracelsus' arms. Thus the scene begins on a raucous, spirited note and ends in ominous terror.

*Paracelsus* runs 105 minutes, is in black and white, has German dialog, and can be gotten with or without English subtitles. It rents for \$35, leases for \$600, from Trans-World Films, 332 South Michigan Ave., Chicago, IL 60604. □