

**ERICA MILEE  
1908 - 1996  
“ONE STEP FURTHER”**

**by**

**Stephanie Ray**

As a senior project for the Department of Dance at the Ohio State University, I decided to recreate the score of “Espantapajaros” (“The Scarecrow”) by the late German choreographer Erica Milee. Under the guidance of Sheila Marion, I was able to read the score and rehearse it for several months. The most exciting part of reading this score was that this piece shows the imaginative work that Milee did and the fun she had with the children she taught. Described as pert and agile, she was a major contributor to dance in Germany and South America.

If not buzzing around Germany in her VW Beetle or attending a Neumiere premiere, the choreographer Erica Milee would most likely have been found teaching classical ballet, modern, or folk dance to children or amateurs (Koegler; 9). She had a fondness for working with these types of dancers as opposed to professionals, perhaps a reflection of her patient and playful personality. Studying under several influential dance professionals, she acquired a dance vocabulary ranging from Portuguese Ballroom dancing to stylized modern techniques. She developed several strong friendships with other prominent choreographers of the time, as well as with well known dance notator Albrecht Knust (Peters; 104). Erica spent her life creating institutions for dance in both Hamburg and Paraguay--leaving a strong legacy for young dancers.

She was born on July 27, 1908, into a very well-to-do and artistic family. Erica began dance classes at the age of five and continued taking lessons throughout childhood. Her first teacher, Gerda Zimmermann, introduced her to classical ballet and modern dance (Koegler; 9 - 10). She also encouraged Erica to become a part of the movement choirs led by Rudolf von Laban. In 1922, Laban had begun work combining both speech choirs and choric dance. The term *movement choir* came into existence when one of Laban’s students commented, “We are a moving choir” (Encyclopedia of Dance; 476). The main emphasis of a movement choir was to collectively express an idea or emotion through movement. Guided by trained leaders, simple group compositions were developed and often shown at community festivals.

In her mid-teens, Erica went to the Folkwangballett in Essen, Germany (Koegler; 8). The Folkwang Schule had been founded in 1927 and served as an academy for drama, music and dance. It was out of this academy that the Folkwangballett was established; and this period in Erica’s training proved to be very useful for her because most of the

choreography was done in a “Central European Style” (Dictionary of Ballet; 352). With her experience in the movement choir, Erica felt as if she had a strong enough base with different European and community dance styles to begin teaching. And, it was in her twenty-first year that she moved back to Hamburg and opened her own studio.

At this time, the political climate in Germany was turning ugly. Adolf Hitler had been appointed the chancellor by Hindenberg, and many “known” Jewish artisans were already being put on Hitler’s “Black List”. Despite these turbulent times, Erica continued her work in Germany until 1933 (Wildgrens;76). During this time, she joined the Jewish Arts Organization. In spite of the political and religious tension in Germany, Erica managed to perform and choreograph until the beginning of WW II. By this time, working and living conditions for all performing artists had deteriorated badly in Europe, particularly in Germany.

After working under very difficult conditions for six years, Erica decided to emigrate in 1939. Insistent on leaving her homeland, which was now in turmoil over the treatment of Jews, Erica made her way to Paraguay and established the ‘Escuela Municipal da Danza’ in Asuncion. Here she built up a tour group which performed classical, modern and folk dance from South America (Peters; 106). She started several new projects and traveled to Brazil regularly with her own movement choir.

Since movement choirs had emerged from the social and political issues which arose in Germany from 1918 to the early 1930’s, these ensembles provided, for a lot of young people, a communal sense of the possibility of building and contributing to a new society. It was in Paraguay that Erica choreographed and recorded through Labanotation, “Burlesque de las Papas,” a theatrical dance performed by one adult and either nine or eleven children. This work was specifically written for six older children and five younger children and was a product of her work with students at the ‘Escuela Municipal da Danza’ (Koegler; 10). The children began dispersed in the corners of the stage moving in and out of center stage in a circular formation. Most of the dance consisted of circles. Then the performers break off from a large group, danced in smaller circles at the four corners of the stage, and then come together again to form one big circle in the center (Burlesque De Papas).

Most of the locomotion in the piece was either hopping or skipping in the circles. Because it was written for young children, they often walked in and out of the different spatial patterns. At times, the children either traveled or sat on their knees and then rolled backwards over their shoulders. The dancers covered all of the available space, they moved smoothly from one pattern to another. Erica’s “laid back” and fun side are very evident in this piece. The dance ended with the children together in a cluster, center stage. This piece involved a lot of ritual or folk dancing (Burlesque de las Papas).

In 1959, Hamburg became a hot spot for dance once again, and Erica returned to Germany. Now fifty years old, she opened a third school for children and amateur dancers in Eimsbuttel, Germany (Koegler; 10). According to friends, it was hard to tell she was aging at all due to her continued enthusiasm. She never lost sight of her ambition to continue dancing and pass along her knowledge to students. A very focused woman, she had been fortunate enough to be involved with the dance world in Germany until the horrors of the 1930's became overwhelming. And, while estranged from her home in Europe during the 40's and 50's, she continued to learn and grow and returned to Germany, working as a teacher and choreographer continuously through the late 80's. It was during this time, specifically between 1959 and 1962, that she worked very closely with Albrecht Knust to notate some of her choreography. In 1960, they recorded both "Espantapajaros" ("The Scarecrow") and "La Golandaria" (a Paraguayan ballroom dance from the 19th century).

The dance which inspired "La Golandaria" included several spatial patterns ranging from straight lines and sharp angles to circular formations. Erica intended this dance for four dancers, two male and two female. The music for this piece began in a 3/4 tempo with the dancers in a straight line. They moved from couples back to the straight line by simply walking in a deep plie and several turns. As the dancers changed formation, movements were sharp and pointed in a specific direction, leading the dancers toward the next formation. It's during these transitions that the women lifted their skirts and swung them side to side. At the mid point of the piece, the tempo changed to a 4/4 medium to fast tempo, and Erica began to play with a lot of level change (La Golandaria;1960). Through partner work, partnered turns and walking in both high and low levels, this piece was very exciting.

In "Espantapajaros" or "The Scarecrow," the dancer performing this piece begins center stage, slowly rocking back and forth on his heels. These small rocks grow into steps, lunges and turns. As the scarecrow continues to dance, the movement becomes faster and more exciting until suddenly he is snapped back onto the pole, finishing the dance by returning to the movement at the beginning of the piece. Much like the change of tempo in "La Golandaria," this piece switched midway from a 4/4 tempo to a much faster 2/4 tempo (Espantapajaros;1960).

As my project grew in both length and commitment, so did the intent. The more I worked with the movement, the more I wanted to manipulate and discover the potential within the structure of this piece. I contacted libraries from all over the world to find information on Erica which opened my mind to different ideas about the purpose of this project. The more I found out about Milee's desire to make dance fun for all people of all ages, shapes and sizes, the more I felt a desire to continue with this movement idea. Instead of simply

recreating the dance, I decided to find a way to explore both the past and the present through this dance. My work became based on the juxtaposition of time both past and present. The score had been notated in 1960--and was being recreated 38 years later. I worked on finding ways to make these changes apparent through movement.

To reflect the dramatic changes that have occurred in technology since the dance was first created and performed, I wanted to change this theatrical work into a videodance. The more I played with the movement in this type of "mind set," the more intuitive I became about finding means of revealing time change through the video. This idea is the reason behind the two settings in which the video was shot. The first is a quiet field of corn with few buildings and no commotion, but the second is a corn field erected from cement surrounded by office buildings and rush hour traffic. I wanted to explore how far one can take given material from nearly forty years earlier, update it, but not lose sight of the original idea.

The "Field of Corn" as titled by it's creator, OSU Department of Art Professor Malcolm Cochran, is the perfect example of the past recreated in the present. This sculpture was built around five years ago in Dublin, Ohio--and included the replanting of a strand of Osage Orange trees at one end of the plot. This piece of modern art is "a poignant and ironic post modern memorial to the passing of the Dublin landscape from that of a farming economy to that of a frenzied metro area" states OSU Professor Candace Feck. I feel that this sculpture is a metaphor for the world at large and helps to tie the past and present together in my video.

With all of the footage shot, I began to concentrate harder on the four month search for musical accompaniment. The score itself stated "Musik von Porter". Due to the time period, as well as Milee's fascination with popular music, I began with Cole Porter. Despite the help of several librarians, professors and professional musicians I found nothing. Attempting to use everything from obscure musicians named Porter to the song "Scarecrow" by Benny Goodmann, it seemed as if the name on the score had been wrong. However, I was still left empty handed. With the help of Natalie Gilbert in the Department of Dance at OSU, I found a very interesting piece of music titled, "Travis" written by Bela Fleck which fully conveyed the intention behind my video performance of the dance.

I chose this piece over other possibilities because the piece itself holds true to both folk and modern music. By integrating both classical folk sounds played on the mandolin and banjo and current musical techniques on the guitar and drums, I feel that this piece holds true to the original spirit of the dance and my own desire to place it in both historical and contemporary settings. In a sense, dance is eternal. Both the videotape and musical selection used to create it are essential in conveying the value of preservation of dance.

The piece “Travis” is from the album *Uncommon Ritual* with Edgar Meyer, Bela Fleck and Mike Marshall. These three play music that covers several styles including bluegrass, jazz, the blues and world music, with just a little R&B on the side. Of the three, Meyer is the best known to audiences of country, bluegrass and jazz. Bela Fleck and the Flecktones have been in the spotlight for years as a mainstream popular bluegrass band. And here Fleck gets to work with other artists. The song, “Travis,” was written by Fleck and highlights his preference to playing the guitar.

In the late 1970’s Mike Marshall and David Grisman, melded together bluegrass, jazz and world music styles into an amalgam called “dawg” music. It seems that the common ground between these musicians is their strong personalities producing music that interests, surprises and excites. (Goldsmith; liner notes) This piece has made my videodance created through this project much more complete.

In the latter years of her life, Milee continued to work on various projects. During the late 60’s and early 70’s, Milee became involved with the Hamburg Ballet. Her interest was sparked by the work of American choreographer John Neumiere (Peters;104 - 105). An American ballet dancer, Neumiere had left Chicago in 1969 to accept a position as the ballet director and chief choreographer in Frankfurt. Growing in popularity, Neumiere joined the Hamburg in 1973. (Encyclopedia of Dance; 603) Erica was already one of the greatest benefactors to the friends of the Hamburg Ballet, helping to organize and support the dancers and administration. Due to her ability to promote events and spread the news about an upcoming dance performance, Erica was quite an asset to Hamburg’s public relations. Both she and Neumiere became key players in building the Hamburg Ballet into one of Germany’s top companies, performing at the opera house and on occasion at other local venues.

Erica Milee had been lucky enough to spend most of her life as a wonderful and successful dancer, teacher, wife, choreographer and beloved patron of the arts. In later years, she spent most of her free time taking trips to Israel and investing her time in travel all around the country (Koegler; 10). Primarily she spent her time watching and learning several of the traditional folk dances still performed at annual and religious festivals in the country. Because she had always had such a passion for the traditional dances in Europe and South America, one can imagine that Erica was very happy studying these forms in Israel toward the end of her life. She continued to be very active within the arts world until she passed away in 1996 at 88 years of age in her beloved city of Hamburg. Milee was an important pioneer in bringing traditional dances back to the forefront of modern times. My videodance was created with this very idea.

## Works Cited

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