

JOHANN STRAUSS: FRANTIC ECSTASY **Feminist Free Dance in Posters 1900–1933**

1

MAK – Press and PR
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Press Release
Vienna, 2.6.2025

The MAK, too, will be joining the celebrations on the occasion of Johann Strauss' 200th birthday, albeit from an unexpected perspective. The poster exhibition *JOHANN STRAUSS: FRANTIC ECSTASY. Feminist Free Dance in Posters 1900–1933* will be showing how the beginnings of expressionist dance were linked to the Viennese waltz. This form of artistic dance experienced its heyday in Vienna between 1900 and 1930 and was heavily inspired by Strauss' music. Individual forms of rhythm, gesture, and emotion superseded the movements of the Viennese waltz. In the MAK Poster Forum, 40 posters advertising the spectacular performances by Gertrud Bodenwieser, Grete, Elsa, and Berta Wiesenthal, Anny Day-Helweg, Maria Ley, or Gertrude Barrison will be on show.

The beginning of the 20th century marked one of the most turbulent and creative periods in Austria: Political instability, profound social upheavals, and a vibrant intellectual and artistic scene shaped the cultural climate in Vienna, the capital of a disintegrating empire and later of a young republic. In this atmosphere—between Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis and the artistic awakening of the Vienna Secession—Vienna proved to be receptive to a dance form that radically broke with the past as “free dance.”

Free dance was a clear departure from the language of classical ballet. Its pioneers explored a connection between inner experience and outer movement, the body became the primary instrument and a seismograph of the soul. It was characteristic of this style to dance barefoot, thus allowing for grounded, natural movement. Flowing garments replaced the stiff corset and emphasized the natural shape of the body—the dance was literally given a “reform dress.”

The pioneer of free dance was the American dancer Isadora Duncan (1877–1927), who celebrated her first major solo successes in London, Paris, Moscow, and subsequently also in Vienna. At a time when women were

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fighting for equality, female dancers were able to work not only as performers but also as choreographers, educators, and heads of their own schools. Free dance became an important field of female self-empowerment.

The earliest and most influential protagonists include the Wiesenthal sisters: Grete (1885–1970), Elsa (1887–1967), and Berta (1892–1953). Trained at the ballet school of the “Wiener Hofoper” (Vienna Court Opera), they rebelled against the strict discipline and left the institution to follow their own paths. On the occasion of the opening of Cabaret Fledermaus, they debuted with their new dance style and the audience immediately got carried away with storms of enthusiasm. Even decades later, their interpretation of the “Blue Danube Waltz” still captivated the audience.

2

The central figure was Grete Wiesenthal. Her later husband, graphic artist Erwin Lang (1886–1962), created the poster for her dance performance *Der Geburtstag der Infantin* [The Infanta’s Birthday]. The son of women’s rights activist Marie Lang created many more posters for his wife. Wiesenthal’s artistic work can be interpreted as a feminist act of self-determination.

One highlight of free dance was marked by Gertrud Bodenwieser’s (1890–1959) work. She headed a dance school and founded the internationally successful “Dance Group Bodenwieser.” Her work was characterized by impressive group choreographies in which social dynamics and social problems of modernity were addressed. The political development forced Bodenwieser, who was of Jewish descent, to emigrate to Columbia in 1938 and later to Australia. Her exile is symptomatic of the abrupt end of free dance in Austria due to National Socialism.

JOHANN STRAUSS: FRANTIC ECSTASY furthermore presents posters by Gertrude Barrison (1880–1946), Anne (Anny) Day-Helweg (1898–1975), Eva Maria Deinhardt (1896–1977), Stella Kramrisch, (1896–1993), Maria Ley (1898–1999), Hedy Pfundmayr (1899–1965), Riki Raab (1899–1997), or Cilli Wang (1909–2005), as well as many other dancers.

Press photos available for download at MAK.at/en/press.



Exhibition Venue

MAK Poster Forum

MAK, Stubenring 5, 1010 Vienna

Exhibition Dates

17.6.–2.11.2025

Opening Hours

Tue 10 am–9 pm, Wed to Sun 10 am–6 pm

3

Curator

Peter Klinger, Deputy Head, MAK Library and Works on Paper Collection

MAK Admission

€ 16.50/15.50*; reduced € 13.50/12.50*; every Tuesday 6–9 pm:
admission € 8/7.50*

Free admission for children and teens under 19

* Ticket price online

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