

# The review

Alexandra Carter reviews

## SISTERS OF SALOME

Toni Bentley  
Yale University Press, New Haven and London  
ISBN: 0 300 090 390

In her introduction to *Sisters of Salome*, Toni Bentley establishes a fascinating premise. Drawn by the allure of the dancers in a Parisian strip show, she recognises the mutual qualities possessed by strippers and ballerinas alike: their sexuality, vulnerability, grace – and their power within their own world. Thus inspired, Bentley investigates the worlds of four women who danced naked in Europe at the beginning of this century: Maud Allan, Mata Hari, Ida Rubinstein and Colette. She identifies the historically doubtful but legendary Salome as their symbolic prototype: the *femme fatale* who seduces with her dancing body.

Mata Hari fabricated her life story and her dancing persona, a fabrication matched by that of the case against her in the famous treason trial. Like Wilde's Salome, she too was murdered. Ida Rubinstein was able to indulge her minimal talents as performer and producer by virtue of her wealth and her judicious choice of collaborators, several of whom she shared with Diaghilev, much to his *chagrin*. Maud Allan made her life's work the cultivation of a Victorian respectability to counteract the charges of indecency and vulgarity so easily appended to the Salome-type dances which made her career. And lastly, Colette, the writer and music hall artiste who courted sexual scandal with her near naked performances, but who was the only one of the symbolic sisters to come to terms with her fluctuating sexual identity and achieve lasting success.

In her well-written prose, Bentley presents a rich social, sexual and performance panorama. She reveals the paradox that Salome's dancing sisters were, in their real lives, sexually deeply ambiguous. The contradictory Allan, the courtesan Mata Hari, the sexually disinterested Rubinstein, the bisexual Colette. These are fascinating tales of how the dancers, their audiences and the social *milieu* construct images of women who, with their mute bodies, perform sexuality on stage.

Jonathan Still reviews

## DREI MINUTEN MIT DER WIRKLICHKEIT (THREE MINUTES WITH REALITY)

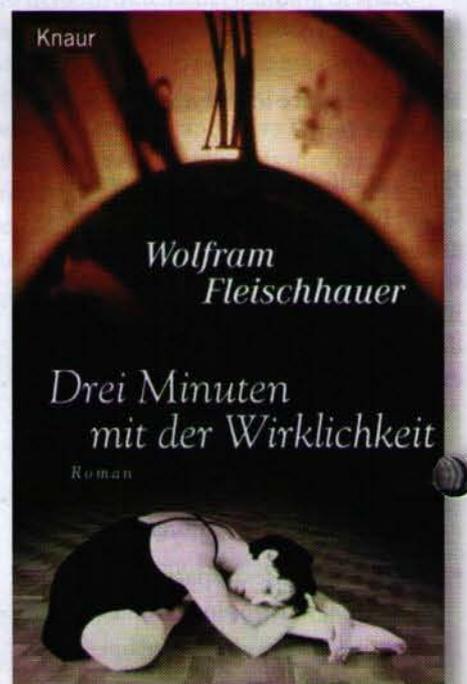
Wolfram Fleischhauer  
Knauer Taschenbuch, Munich  
€8.90 paperback

It is not every day that a novel makes it to The Review, least of all one written in German. However, *Drei Minuten mit der Wirklichkeit* represents a landmark in writing about dance; if nothing else, this must be the first thriller in which Benesh Movement Notation helps solve a crime.

At one level, it is a fast-paced, nail-biting detective novel, a political thriller and a love story, in which dancing, dancers and dances play a central role. Beneath the surface, though, it is an extraordinarily profound meditation on the nature of dance – what it is, what it means, what it can do. The epigraph to the novel is Yeats' famous line "How can we know the dancer from the dance?", and this is Fleischhauer's cleverest trick – we end up caring about dance, about the origins of tango, about notation, because we care about his protagonists, the young ballet dancer Giulietta Battin, star crossed lover of Argentinian tango dancer Damián Alsina.

Fleischhauer believes that art is about the unspeakable, and the unspeakable is everywhere in this story – emotional, political, cultural or historical home truths which cannot – yet, paradoxically, *must* be expressed. And thus it is in dance, and in particular Damián's tangos, that the unspeakable is encoded. "There are many things that you only see once you write them down", he says to Giulietta, "It shows the structure of a work. The inner logic." At the time, she is not convinced – but will later realise that this is the key to finding and understanding Damián.

In some ways, Giulietta is an unlikely heroine – young, immersed in an insular ballet world, and hopelessly infatuated with an apparently mad-bad-and-dangerous-to-know Latin tearaway. But Damián's disappearance causes her to translate this adolescent, naïve passion into an insatiable lust for knowledge, a force powerful enough to prise the most bizarre and unpalatable truths from ancient suppression.



Berlin, Argentina and the dance world are brilliantly observed, even down to the sometimes complex and awkward relationships between choreographers, ballet masters and notators. There are quotable lines everywhere – on dance, music, life and philosophy: towards the end, of the novel, for example, her dancing transformed by experience and knowledge, Giulietta asks ballet master Heert why he didn't explain the political undertones (which she now understands) of *Tango Suite* to the dancers. "I used to" he replies. "But not any more. I grew up in a different era. I was also a dancer, yes. But we wanted a better world, not just a better job."

Most of all, though, *Drei Minuten mit der Wirklichkeit* is a dissertation on tango (the music, history, meaning and cultural context of which suffuses every page) and an apology for the study of dance: contemplate it long and hard enough, Fleischhauer seems to say, and you will understand more about the world you live in; examine it even harder, and it might change your life.