

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

i

CHAPTER ONE

THE MADONNA FROM DRESDEN

I

CHAPTER TWO

DANCE IN THE NEW NINEVEH

29

CHAPTER THREE

BERLIN'S NAKED GODDESS

45

CHAPTER FOUR

REPERTOIRE OF THE DAMNED

85

CHAPTER FIVE

EXIT BARON VON DROSTE

115

CHAPTER SIX

A CARRION SOUL

139

CHAPTER SEVEN

rites of Mourning

165

THE DANCES OF DEPRAVITY, HORROR AND ECSTASY

173

BIBLIOGRAPHY

197

INTRODUCTION

Anita Berber was a very beautiful girl and a dancer. And she danced primarily in nightclubs in the nude. If you think what we see now on stage, you know with Broadway's nudity and all, it's like going to a kindergarten, compared to Berber's "Dance of Lust." I loved her too much to call her dirty. She was exotic and strange and that's what made her so special.

—Lotte Lenya on *The Dick Cavett Show*, 1975

On the evening of July 13th, 1928, at the beginning of her solo "Dance in White," Anita Berber collapsed on the cabaret floor of a Beirut tourist dive-bar. A few hours later, a physician at a French-run hospital studied her nearly emaciated body. His diagnosis was direct and unsparing: the 29-year-old German dancer suffered from an advanced state of pulmonary tuberculosis; no therapy or medical treatment was advised. The patient rallied slightly the next day but was informed that she had little time left.

Four months later, Anita Berber was buried in a pauper's grave outside Berlin. Only thrill-seeking transvestite couples from the Eldorado nightclub, some somber journalists and intellectuals in top hats, a couple of film directors, the German sexologist Dr. Magnus Hirschfeld, and immediate relatives from the Berber clan attended. Henri Châtin-Hoffmann, Anita's third husband, an American, and his latest dance partner watched from afar. The intimate and bohemian ceremony that was planned had to be curtailed due to a nonstop rainfall.

It was the end of an era.



ANITA BERBER en HENRI

In het Centraal Theater te Amsterdam worden weder intieme kunstsvonden gegeven onder leiding van Max van Gelder. Het hoogtepunt van den avond is het optreden van Anita Berber en Henri, de beroemde filmsterren en dansers. Veel liever hadden wij Anita Berber op een speciale dansavond met haar partner gezien, haar dansen pasten niet in het kader van dit programma. Het beste nummer was Morphiom door Anita Berber op muziek van Spollansky gedanst. Haar standen en mimiek waren vaak van een tragische schoonheid. Dit zal nooit iemand deze danseres kunnen verbeteren.

Arabesque, door Henri op muziek van Debussy gedanst, toont dat de danser over smaak en techniek beschikt.

De wals van Brahms, door beiden gedanst, lijkt ons voor Anita Berber minder geschikt.

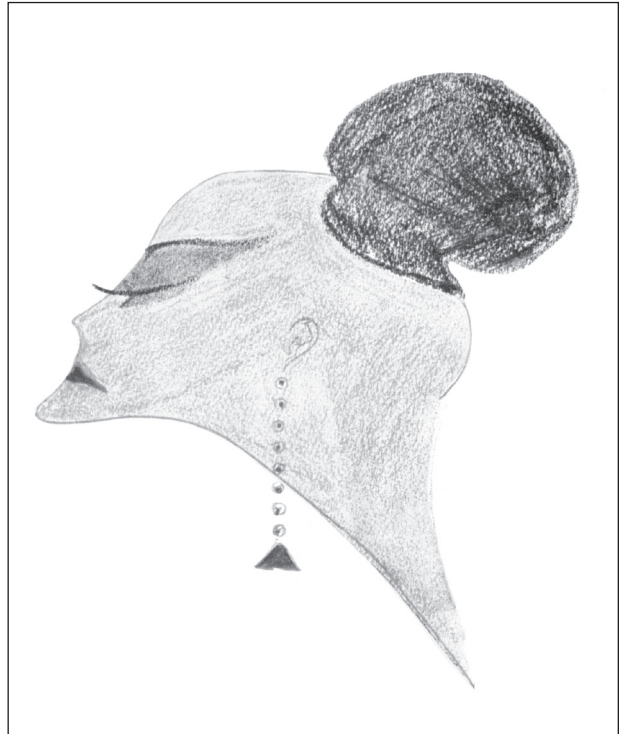
Dutch review of one of Anita Berber's last dance recitals in Europe, *Cinema en Theater*, Autumn 1926

Weimar Berlin's notorious starlet, a "phallic woman," the reincarnation of the cult-goddess Astarte, the avatar of female desire and perversity, had finally succumbed to the stimulants and addictions that made her the single most decadent personality in a world without moral boundaries or legal restriction.

Introduction

But beyond her reigning status as the signifier of German bad-girl behavior—a “priestess of depravity”—who was this Anita Berber?

To be sure, she was an accomplished Expressionist poet, iconic fashion model, naked dancer, and silent film actress. No description of Berlin during its wildest Inflation years in 1922 and 1923 was complete without a startling Berber anecdote or scandalous reference. Marlene Dietrich rode to fame on Anita Berber’s stock-in-trade: the silk-stockinged legs and gentleman-like demeanor. Lotte Lenya



Self-Portrait by Anita Berber, 1922

articulated Anita’s distinctive sexual ambiguity in song and stage character. Lya da Putti portrayed pouty Amazons and fickle debutantes in evident homage to Berber’s stage and film performances. Among Central Europe’s countless femme fatales, only Anita Berber was noted for her unvarnished belief in artistic authenticity and her rootless, nearly unquenchable, lust for ineffable sensations.

Whether decked out in male attire or stripped naked, Anita revealed yet another side of her fugitive persona and her dedication to genuine grief and exaltation, to body madness, to unadulterated eroticism. Her dances were the dark manifestations of a shape-shifting desperado.

The men and women within the lost girl’s orbit were compelled to borrow shamelessly from her bag of outlaw tricks. Anita’s innovations—her scenic coldness, her pansexual revelations, her opaque concoctions of autobiography and artifice—were too appealing to ignore. But none of Anita’s gang or her many imitators could tap into the Madonna’s

The Seven Addictions and Five Professions of Anita Berber

unsettled soul or faithfully reproduce her mysterious visions. Even Greta Garbo, who starred in the Oscar-winning film *Grand Hotel* as a Berber stand-in, failed to capture the disquieting essence of the winsome rebel.

When Anita Berber was interred in Berlin's St. Thomas cemetery, contemporary writers and historians sensed something wondrous had just ceased to exist. It signaled a tectonic, if barely newsworthy, shift in popular European culture, like the disappearance of a minor folk form or the shunting of a once-flourishing religious sect. The doe-eyed German performer was dutifully mourned, evaluated anew in the years following her death, then elevated into the realm of erotic legend.

The Czech dance critic, Joe Jencik, recognized the fable-like significance of the dissipated starlet best in his miniature biography, *Anita Berberová: Studie* (Prague: Terpsichora, 1930): "Anita Berber's long, bony hand ripped the silken dress off the tarted-up old woman—a ghostly figure the dancer called Public Morality. Now they stood in front of one another, each naked with horrible scars. Berber's whip lashed out at the ancient hag; but Anita always punished herself at the very moment when she tore open the doddering whore's repulsive flesh. The two played out an ecstatic dance of human desire and destitution. They fought each other savagely but both of them knew implicitly that the ruination of one was the ultimate death of the other."