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DANCING TO ROBERT WALSER

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“Herz Schmerz,” or “heart pain,” a rhyme both silly and sad—and not a Robert Walser quote—will première at the Baryshnikov Arts Center, in New York, this week. Photograph by Whitney Browne

If you’ve never heard of the Swiss turn-of-the-twentieth-century novelist and short-story writer Robert Walser, you’re not alone. But he has a veritable army of

admirers, and they include no less distinguished figures than Robert Musil, Walter Benjamin, Susan Sontag, and W. G. Sebald, who, in an essay published posthumously in *The New Yorker*, described Walser, appositely, as “a clairvoyant of the small.” Walser, who was born in 1878 into a moderately prosperous family based in Biel, Switzerland, experienced penury early in life, when his father went bankrupt. From that point onward, despite a brief period of success and popularity in Berlin that lasted about five years (from 1905 to 1910), during which he published three novels and countless short stories, he never found his financial footing.

In his novel “Jakob von Gunten,” Walser tells the story of a young man who enrolls himself in an academy for butlers in order to qualify for a well-paying job at one of the grand homes that dot the German countryside. Years earlier, Walser had himself attended such an august institution, and had gone on to serve table for a few months in a Silesian castle. (Apparently, butlering didn’t suit him as well as he had hoped.) At various times, he also worked as a bank clerk, an inventor’s assistant, and in a factory. (I’ve pieced this biography together from various essays and from Susan Bernofsky’s introduction to Walser’s short fiction, “Microscripts,” which she translated into English for *New Directions*. Soon, though, there will be a much better source: Bernofsky’s upcoming Walser biography for Yale University Press.)

After leaving Berlin, Walser, depressed by poor book sales and his relative isolation, ended up living, alone, in a series of furnished rooms back home in Switzerland and, finally, after suffering hallucinations—insanity ran in the family—in a sanatorium in Bern, and then another, in Herisau. He spent the last twenty-three years of his life, from 1933 to 1956, in the latter institution. He continued to write at first, and took lots of long walks. (He had the time!) The Second World War doesn’t seem to have affected him much (unlike the First, where he was conscripted to build war fortifications and contracted Spanish influenza). Walser died in 1956, at the age of seventy-eight, of a heart attack during one of those walks, on Christmas Day, in a snowy field near the sanatorium. He was more or less forgotten, except by a small group of devotees. The first translations of Walser’s work, by Christopher Middleton—who heard about him from one of his students when he was teaching English in Zurich—began to appear

in the nineteen-fifties, but real interest didn't start to grow until around the time of his centenary, in 1978.

How do you translate all of this into a dance, or even a work of dance theatre? The material feels both so deeply literary and, at the same time, so utterly deflating. The subject is a solitary man whose writings tended to track the minutiae of his solitary life, and who died alone in the snow—this hardly sounds like something to dance about. But that is precisely what the choreographer John Heginbotham and the illustrator Maira Kalman have set out to do. The piece, entitled “Herz Schmerz,” or “heart pain,” a rhyme both silly and sad—and not a Walser quote—will première at the Baryshnikov Arts Center, in New York, on October 10th.

Kalman is a longtime admirer of Walser. Her short, beautifully illustrated meditation on the writer appears at the end of “Microscripts,” a volume of obsessive, taut little texts that Walser wrote in neat code on small slips of paper. She and Heginbotham have attempted something like this before: in their work “The Principles of Uncertainty,” from 2017, also inspired by one of Kalman's illustrated books. That work, too, was a collection of personal impressions, a collage of images, words, and steps set to music and performed by a group of friends, some but not all dancers. Both Heginbotham and Kalman are dedicated walkers and free associators, often at the same time. That may not make for the most organized collaborative process, but, given enough time, their free associations allow a certain simplicity and inner logic to emerge, after many, many ideas have come and gone.

The main difference between “Herz Schmerz” and “The Principles of Uncertainty” is that this time the cast is mostly made up of non-dancers. John Heginbotham, who was a member of the Mark Morris Dance Group for most of the early two-thousands, has removed himself from the action. In any case, he considers himself only half a dancer at this point: “I was a dancer,” he said, “but I'm also *really not* a dancer.” Kalman, who is sixty-nine, *is* dancing in the show, as well as speaking from memory, two things she is not at all used to doing and which, she admits, make her feel very vulnerable. There are two actors in the cast, David Barlow and Daniel Pettrow, both of whom have a lanky grace but no real dance

training. “When I watch choreography done on people who aren’t classically trained,” Heginbotham said, “I like that you can really see how they naturally move, in unconscious ways. I’m more aware of their humanity.” And then, like a limpid stream in a field of brush, there is Maile Okamura, a fellow Mark Morris veteran. Before that, she was a ballet dancer. Her extremely pure, pristine way of moving provides the work’s quiet center. All five performers are friends.

Another central figure sits at a small table onstage, just to the right of the main action. Susan Bernofsky, Walser’s biographer and the translator of seven of his books, folds and unfolds a white cloth napkin, serenely, for the duration of the show, which lasts a little under an hour. Over and over, Bernofsky folds the napkin into the shape of a foot, one of many patterns included in a butlering manual that was published during the period when Walser was a servant in training. Bernofsky was brought in as a consultant at first, but, after she gave the cast a tutorial in napkin folding, Heginbotham decided to put her onstage with the others. Like an hourglass, Bernofsky marks the time. “Mostly,” she told me, “I think about Robert Walser. I imagine his late years in the hospital and the very routine things he did with his hands, while his head could be anywhere. Meanwhile, the dancers are all around me, living out things that are like stations in a life.”

Because of the mixed cast, Heginbotham had to find a common movement language that everyone could master. Many of the piece involves walking and running, touching or almost touching, lying down, getting up, shaking, speaking. Some of it feels a little bit like a pantomime, though not in the literal sense—more like a conversation in which you can’t quite make out the words. Kalman waves her arms around like a wizard; the cast members lead one another around, fingers curled, as if putting one another under a spell, only to be put under a spell in turn. In fact, nothing in “Herz Schmerz” is literal or directly quoted from any of Walser’s books. Besides the recitation of a few passages from “The Walk,” a 1917 novella, and a short story from the previous year, entitled “Nervous,” the references to Walser are indirect, atmospheric, and subjective. “I think of these things as metaphorical threads,” Bernofsky said. If a man, lying against a white background, should lead you to think of a dead man lying in the snow, so be it.

But, lest the audience be disappointed, there is also dancing in “Herz Schmerz,” much of it contained in two delicious little sections that stay with you when you think about the piece afterward. One is a catchy gavotte—the music is by the Swiss composer Hans Huber, a contemporary of Walser’s—with a motif of four rising notes, followed by a playfully cascading descending scale, during which the dancers execute a sequence of light, staccato, weaving steps, travelling sideways. (The musicians, Caitlin Sullivan, on the cello, and Pedja Muzijevic, on the piano, are onstage with the dancers. They, too, are friends of Heginbotham’s.) “It took me some time to learn that sideways weaving sequence,” Kalman confessed with a laugh. “I keep telling John he can fire me at any time.” During the longer legato notes, they wipe at the air with their arms, a very Mark Morris move. Near the end, they do a hand dance in canon, one after the other. It’s so simple, and so perfectly attuned to the music, you almost want to join in.

The other dance is a melancholy solo for Maile Okamura. She seems to dance for herself, executing basic balletic steps to a lilting waltz-like melody. It may sound like nothing, but you could watch her do small arabesques and tendus for hours.

The effect of the show, which I saw as a work in progress during a recent rehearsal, is modest, and at the same time not so modest. As the title suggests, it leaves a pain in your heart, a slight sense of desolation. At the end of “The Walk,” the protagonist reflects, “There is one dark path into the other world, the path down into the pit, into the earth.” We’re all vulnerable, mortal, and alone. This is a sentiment with which Kalman can relate. “As you get older, it’s very present, that very quiet despair and sense of your aloneness,” Kalman said. “It doesn’t mean you’re sitting there miserably crying all day, though, you know, at some point in the day, tears may be shed.”