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## “Dada Gert” captures the essence of World War I artist Valeska Gert

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So, you've never heard the name Valeska Gert. Neither had I until I caught "Dada Gert," the Striding Lion Performance Group's intriguing, richly atmospheric multimedia dance-theater piece performed this weekend and next at the Hamlin Park Fieldhouse in the Roscoe Village neighborhood.

Conceived, choreographed and performed by the highly imaginative Annie Arnoult Beserra — who is backed by an ensemble of six bold dancer-actors, as well as Jeff Hancock's eye-popping black-and-white "installation" and costumes, and some stunning archival film footage of Gert — "Dada Gert" captures the essence of this audacious, expressionistic, German-Jewish dancer and cabaret artist. And it embodies the spirit of the avant-garde Dada aesthetic that, in the wake of World War I, thrived on notions of irrationality and primal intuition.

Gert was what we might now label "a transgressive artist." Think Patti Smith or Tilda Swinton or Russia's Pussy Riot, and you might have some sense of her equivalents. With her remarkably malleable, chalk-white face and black hair, her alternately sleek, voluptuous and spasmodic movements and her satirical attitude, Gert was the embodiment of pure expression, and daring improv. For Hitler she was one of the "decadents."

Beserra's work is not a biography. It is an evocation of Gert's vision in which she captures the way Gert would teasingly question whether she was a witch, a whore, a wet nurse, a procuress, a clown or an angel.

Gert staged her little satires as highly stylized human puppet shows. She captured the more monstrous aspects of her contemporary Berlin society much as the artist George Grosz did, with all the fat cats, "tough guys" and prostitutes at play. She engaged in a crazed version of the Charleston, her limbs all distorted and moving at Cubist angles. She sent up the manners of the would-be posh. She "danced" out the generally Darwinian struggles of artistic existence. And very movingly, she paid bitter homage to the soldiers who were used as canon fodder and then treated to fancy funerals. When Gert herself is forced into exile by the Nazis, Beserra has her unroll her own "paper" railway tracks.

Aiding and abetting Beserra all along the way are gifted dancer-actors Hancock, Britt Banaszynski, Michaela Federspiel, Calyn Guberman, Ericka Vaughn Lashley and Dana Dardai (the latter, "Big Blonde," plays accordion and sings). And throughout there is some astonishing film that gives a wonderful sense of the real Valeska Gert, as well as the Berlin of her time.

Hancock's stunning set and wonderfully sculptural costumes have a life all their own, and are enhanced by Christopher Ash's projection design, sound by Nick Keenan and lighting by Jacob Snodgrass. The aura of the Hamlin Park Fieldhouse, a red brick structure with uncanny echoes of Berlin architecture, does the rest.

Although Gert forged her career during the Weimar years, she went on to lead a chaotic existence in London, the U.S., and then back in Europe until her death in 1978 at the age of 86. Along the way she crossed paths with Tennessee Williams, Federico Fellini, Jackson Pollock and Werner Herzog, among many others. But SHE was the pioneer.

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