

GURDJIEFF'S MOVEMENT DEMONSTRATIONS:

Drawing on pre-Christian Assyrian, Phrygian, Armenian, Zoroastrian, Sufi, Tibetan, and Persian elements at the time of the Russian Revolution, George Ivanovich Gurdjieff attempted to create a school of thought that would coordinate and expand Western man's anatomic and intellectual centers of energy into newly dynamic forms. Certain physical and mental activities, Gurdjieff believed, could bring about a total alteration of consciousness. For over sixty years his philosophy has found adherents among the intelligentsia of the Russian, French, and English-speaking world. Directors, choreographers, musicians, designers, painters, writers, and psychologists like Nikolai Evreinov, Sergei Diaghillev, Thomas de Hartmann, Alexander and Jeanne Salzmann, Louis Jouvet, Felix Labisse, J.B.Priestley, Aldoux Huxley, Katherine Mansfield, Frank Lloyd Wright, Moshe Feldenkrais, and Peter Brook have all sought artistic inspiration in the esoteric teachings of the Russian- born mystic.

Since his death in 1949, small and sometimes volatile groups have sprung up on nearly every major American campus to study and interpret Gurdjieff's work and system. Today at least two dozen independent associations devoted to Gurdjieff, or one of his disciples, can be found across North America, Western Europe, Japan, and Australia. Yet, while books by and about Gurdjieff's life and philosophy fill stalls in occult bookstores everywhere and are printed into editions of the tens of thousands, it is sometimes forgotten that before a near-fatal car accident in 1924, Gurdjieff himself eschewed all forms of writing in favor of a series of exercises and performances that were designed to change individual personality and the evolution of mankind.

Exactly where or how Gurdjieff spent his first forty years is subject to a certain amount of controversy that he did little to dispel. Born in the Caucasus, near Mount Ararat, of Greek-Armenian parentage, in 1873 or 1877, Gurdjieff grew up in an environment of overlapping and sometimes "miraculous" cultures. Alexandropol, his hometown, was a conglomeration of indigenous villages and settlements. Greeks, Armenians, Circassians, Russians, Georgians, Tartars, Jews, Assyrians, Persians, Azerbaijanians, and primitive hillpeople intermingled commercially and culturally. Alexandropol's central marketplace housed merchants and mendicants of all varieties. While quite young, Gurdjieff witnessed strange performances that involved communication with the dead, telepathy, trance-curing, hypnosis, and fortune-telling. One such soothsayer stared at his outstretched thumbnail until he fell into a deep trance. On the surface of the nail, the young shaman saw Gurdjieff in severe pain, grasping his right side; this was followed by the image of a rifle. Curiously, Gurdjieff soon developed a large carbuncle on his right side and was later injured in a hunting accident. On another occasion, Gurdjieff discovered the psychic power of the invisible magic circle that the devil-worshipping Yezidis would inscribe around an outcast; when pulled from the circle without the proper incantations, the unfortunate victim would immediately lapse into a state of unconsciousness.

Throughout his adolescence, Gurdjieff developed a joint interest in religion and science. At Kars, he prepared both for the priesthood and for a vocation in medicine. But after a prolonged study of the most up-to-date texts in psychology and neurophysiology, Gurdjieff concluded that none of the current theories could adequately explain the supernatural phenomena that he had observed since his childhood. Of course, much of

what he saw was simple tricks or the result of hypnotic suggestion, but some of it, Gurdjieff felt, was not.

It was at this time that Gurdjieff read the translations of the recently rediscovered tables of the Gilgamesh epic. The long-lost poems just published in an archeological journal closely resembled the chants about Gilgamesh that his father sang to him as a child. The fact that this complicated myth was handed down orally with such great precision for over 5.000 years electrified Gurdjieff. Perhaps, as was frequently suggested to him, certain kinds of occult wisdom and practice were preserved as well in faraway or inaccessible places.

Thus began a strenuous eighteen-year search that brought Gurdjieff across much of western and central Asia, down through Eastern Africa, and east to Tibet and Siberia. Journeying to the holy cities and sacred sites of the great and lesser religions, in addition to those of tiny or obscure sects, Gurdjieff was seeking audiences with "remarkable men", people who possessed hidden knowledge of forgotten sciences, or secret members of spiritual brotherhoods. In the monasteries and cliff communities of Abyssinia, among the wisemen of the Hindu Kush, and elsewhere, Gurdjieff began to find what he sought. He learned not only the language but each religion's customs and rituals. In Bokhara and Afghanistan, Gurdjieff was taught dervish-whirling and other Sufi ceremonial magic. After the turn of the century, Gurdjieff found himself at the court of the Dali Lama in Lhasa. Besides immersing himself in Tibetan ritual practices, Gurdjieff acted, according to British intelligence, as an undercover agent for the Czar. It is now widely accepted that during his period of intense spiritual-seeking, Gurdjieff engaged in political espionage and dubious business activities to fund his travels and those of his friends.

By late 1914, Gurdjieff had returned to Moscow. The world war and a smoldering social unrest created a special atmosphere of uncertainty and excitement among Russia's aristocracy and upper classes. While Rasputin held court in Petrograd, advising the Czarina and her family on their daily regimen, a new interest in the occult, séances, and sexual magic overcame Moscow's high society. Demonstrations of yogi spiritualism and astrology were attended by frenzied crowds, often reaching more than a thousand at a single lecture.

In the middle of November, a brief announcement appeared in the newspaper, Voice of Moscow, describing the scenario of an Indian mystery-play called The Struggle of the Magicians by "G.I.Gurdjieff, a Hindu". Set in an unnamed Eastern city, the play or ballet revolved around the struggle of the students of two mystical cults, one devoted to the White Magician, the other to the black, interspersed between the competing temple and dervish dances (both White and Black students were played by the same performers) was an allegorical love story that gave the intended performance the format of a revue.

The short notice's impact was stronger than might have been expected. Several young persons, including P.D.Ouspensky, soon to be Gurdjieff's leading disciple, sought out the mysterious Hindu, frequently with great difficulty. The many memoirs that record these early meetings reveal that Gurdjieff's materialist/spiritual philosophy was already well-formulated by 1915. Discounting the otherworldly and singled-minded techniques of fakirs, monks, and yogis, Gurdjieff was experimenting with a "fourth-way". The

function of all art - that is, sacred or objective art, a key to the fourth way - Gurdjieff maintained, was not the invocation of esthetic beauty or the imitation of surface reality, but rather the initiation of the recipient into a completely different plane of understanding, to awaken him into experiencing the sense of cosmic place and time, to permanently shatter and enlarge his socially-delimited notion of personality. To this end, Gurdjieff developed a score of intricately-designed charts and tables that related the human body and consciousness to the latest formal breakthroughs in the fields of mechanics, atomic physics, chemistry, astronomy, color and sound perception, and psychology, as well as his own research in occult science and movement.

Gurdjieff spoke of the "inner" octaves in the musical scale that correspond to organs in the body and planets in the solar system; of breathing techniques, whose rhythms mathematically correlate to certain patterns on carpets or the lives of saints. Like other mystics of the ancient and medieval world, Gurdjieff believed that strange structural similarities could be found in all forms of matter and behavior. "As above, so below". Therefore, with the breakdown of Newtonian physics and astronomy, Gurdjieff called for a reinvestigation of Aristotelian logic and neo-Aristotelian art. Rejecting "philosophic India" and "theoretic Egypt's sources for his new art and Thought, Gurdjieff only found appropriate models in "practical Persia, Mesopotamia, and Turkestan".

The rapidly changing political-military situation cut short Gurdjieff's Moscow experiments. Only months before the Bolshevik takeover in October 1917, he fled to the Caucasus region, first to Essentuki, then to Tiflis. Because of the dislocations brought about by the revolution in Russia proper, Tiflis in Georgia was undergoing a cultural renaissance. Manned by émigré Russians, theaters, opera houses, conservatories, and orchestras magically appeared. The with some assistance from the Provisional Government in Tiflis, Gurdjieff opened his school, the "Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man".

Although the institute floundered financially for a time, it eventually attracted a sorely-needed clientele; young dancers from the local Dalcroze studio and fifty pupils from the Circassian State Theater enrolled in order to study Gurdjieff's sacred dances and sacred gymnastics. Having already gathered a small number of Moscow's elite-people like Thomas de Hartmann, a composer for Diaghilev and the Moscow Art Theater; Jeanne von Salzmänn, a Dalcroze choreographer; and Alexander von Salzmänn, considered by many, including Appia and Craig, as the foremost lighting designer in Europe - Gurdjieff was able to offer courses in harmonic and plastic rhythm, ancient oriental dance, medical gymnastics, and mime. Preceding these classes, Gurdjieff delivered lectures about his travels, the soul, free will, telepathy, numerology, and demonstrated - as he explained - traditional feats of magic and sleight-of-hand tricks. The movement work soon became a focal point of the Institute, as Gurdjieff further elaborated on one of his theses - that man is controlled by three interconnected vital centers: those of cognition, feeling, and movement. Each thought or sentiment expresses itself in a gesture or pose. Correspondingly, every movement creates a change in the mind or nervous system. According to Gurdjieff, particular physical or psycho-physical activities, such as those he learned in Central Asia or Tibet, could after one's means of perception or intellection in very radical ways.

The purpose of the sacred dances was to communicate viscerally an occult knowledge that could only manifest itself in physical terms. Gurdjieff referred to an ancient dance mannequin machine he was shown in a Sufi monastery south of Tashkent during his travels. Composed of ebony and gold plates, the apparatus consisted of a vertical column fitted with seven movable arms, each attached by seven universal joints. Like a written alphabet, the machine was capable of transmitting an infinite number of sign combinations. For the Sufi masters, the dance and its accompanying music carried with it the force to signal certain human and cosmic mysteries. Even before the Mongol conquests of Turkestan, not only did the most famous shamans, choreographers, musicians, and storytellers perfect their art in dance, but the greatest interpreters, scholars, and scientists were encouraged to express their discoveries in movement. Thus, Gurdjieff and other explorers claimed, much of the lost Zoroastrian and Lamaist wisdom could be uncovered in specific Sufi performances.

The sacred gymnastics employed a different kind of logi, being more for the dancers than the spectators, although they were frequently performed before large audiences. Unlike Dalcroze's eurhythmics and Laban's eukinetics, which were also created to affect the performer's psychological state, Gurdjieff's gymnastics often lacked any sort of graceful or beautiful dance rhythms. Instead, participants were given complicated angular or difficult movements to reproduce.

The introductory movement work, called the "obligatory exercises", was based on the separate and simultaneous locomotion of the arms, legs, and head: The right torso and head might be turned in a leftward direction as the eyes and left arm twisted upward in a pulsating motion. A first, pupils were taught special gestures that represented letters of the alphabet and were told to use them in place of speech. Later, intricate disjointed steps and mental exercises were added. In contrast to the classically-trained dancer, who is usually free to impart new emotions or ideas to set movements, the Gurdjieff performer had to execute exact muscular patterns while experiencing prescribed chains of thoughts or feelings. In this way, Gurdjieff hoped to bring a disciple harmoniously into a higher state of consciousness.

During this period, Gurdjieff developed his "Stop Exercise", a training device that would eventually be a trademark of his Institute and system. Again, believing that internal and physical actions were intrinsically linked, Gurdjieff stated that one major reason mankind's spiritual evolution had been stymied was the individual's reliance on habitual mental, emotional, and motor activities. By altering one aspect in one of the vital centers, other changes would follow. According to Gurdjieff, the average person possesses about thirty automatic attitudes or poses. All of man's physical movements are concerned with passing from one habitual position to another. These limited postures are generally socially conditioned. Each epoch, each nationality, each occupation has its own particular repertory of movement that prevents the individual from perceiving new sensations or thoughts. An English scholar cannot understand the thought-processes and feelings of a Manchu prince or medieval French laborer without studying and imitating the way each express fear or carries his body or sits. Before one can comprehend new sources of knowledge, a motor change must be affected.

Any break in a person's prearranged movement patterns, Gurdjieff believed, would result in a change of consciousness. While eating or socializing on the stage, when they were least expecting it, Gurdjieff would command his students to stop. Between

positions, as if they were caught in a photograph, the students were instructed to hold these new poses, completely arresting their musculature. Without changing the tension of their facial muscles, their gaze, and so forth, each student was required to concentrate on each new grouping of muscles, to block out any old flow of feeling or thinking, to absorb just what he experienced at the instant of the command. Occasionally, since they could not unfreeze their awkward postures at the moment of the command, disciples feel right offstage when performing. Over a period of time, Gurdjieff's pupils developed a totally new, unnatural and non-habitual sense of balance. That and the sharp and unpredictable tableaux impressed many spectators.

Accompanied by de Hartmann on the piano, several public demonstrations were given in Tiflis. These were considered to be generally successful. Gurdjieff then returned to his script *The Struggle of the Magicians*. Announcing that his ballet would be staged at the State Theater, he instructed his pupils to begin building sets, costumes, and stage props. One such property that Gurdjieff constructed was a papier-mâché mannequin whose electric eyes mysteriously brightened and dimmed. When de Hartmann's wife found Gurdjieff smashing the doll with an axe, he explained, "We have made it, so we do not need it anymore". With that the performance was dropped.

In 1920, Gurdjieff led his Institute into exile in Turkey. Studying the techniques of the Rufai (howling) and Mevlevi (whirling) dervishes, Gurdjieff combined some their therapeutic music and gestures into the intermittent performances the Institute was still staging in the ancient Jewish quarter of Constantinople. From October 1921 until July 1922, Gurdjieff and his troupe traveled across central Europe. At Hellerau, he was given the opportunity to purchase the bankrupt Dalcroze Institute, but wealthy English followers pleaded with him to come to London first.

After stopping in Berlin to deliver some lectures, Gurdjieff was sorely disappointed with the financial and legal problems that beset his group in London. Finally in July, 1922, the Institute purchased an estate at Prieure in Fontainebleau, near Paris. It was here that Gurdjieff perfected his sacred dances and sacred gymnastics, now collectively called the movements.

Before his small theater at Prieure was built, Gurdjieff rehearsed his students at the Dalcroze studio in Paris. Every day from ten in the morning until one in the afternoon, Gurdjieff's pupils, now numbering more than sixty, practiced the same contorted gestures, with different parts of the body flying in opposite directions. Now new mental exercises were added. Many were rote mathematical ones, finding relationships between numbers or coating in sequence. Others resembled Eastern koans : "While placing all of your weight on your fore fingers and kicking violently with your feet, remember $5 \times 3 = 25$. How is that ?" Still others combined the use of various mental facilities: as a student swiftly swung from an upright to a certain reclining position, he was to count, "2. 4. 6. 8. 10. 10. 8. 6. 4. 2. ", while recalling the last twenty-four hours, event in a kind of film clip fashion. All in all, Gurdjieff created seven categories of exercises for the harmonious development of the individual.

Reports of Gurdjieff's activities, referred to as "the Work", attracted a large number of English intellectuals, doctors, psychologists, and society women. Journalist from major English and American newspaper and magazines began to appear more and more often. The French were generally skeptical of the school, also known as the Gurdjieff Institute.

Certainly some of the goings-on at Prieure were baffling. A curious mixture of asceticism and hedonism governed the prescribed existence of Gurdjieff's disciples.

Arising at five or six in the morning, each member was assigned an arduous physical task- sawing timber, cleaning, caring for the animals, cooking. This was followed by a light lunch, dance training, more work, periodic lectures by Gurdjieff, dinner, and four to five hours devoted to the movements. Like a wiseman in a Sufi community, Gurdjieff made personal demands on each of his students. A woman who enjoyed eating sweets or smoking would be forbidden to do so. Special exercises in attention and "self-remembering" would be tailored to the needs of each student. On Saturday nights, a huge gourmet meal would be served to several hundred pupils and guests. After being led into a performance house laden with Persian carpets and goatskins, and separated by sex, visitors would be treated to a five- or six-hour presentation of the movements and ritual dances. Usually placed in six rows of eight, nine feet apart, the white-clad dancers slowly enacted the obligatory exercises. The "Stop Exercise" would sometimes be demonstrated during these performances.

The mystical Central Asian music; the flowing scented-water fountain in the center of the room; the perfumes; the colored lights; the richly-designed, canvas-covered space; and the three-foot thick cushions helped fashion an environment that left even the most antagonistic reporter impressed. In fact, through 1922 and 1923, the majority of the articles documenting in the Institute's Work were uncharacteristically detailed and glowing. Unreported in the newspaper accounts, however, were the rumors of vigorous sexual activity that did little to tarnish Gurdjieff's personal reputation. Prieure's popularity seemed to grow almost by the week.

In November, 1923, Gurdjieff arranged for a performance to be given in Paris. For over a month, the entire Institute prepared for the first public demonstration of the Gurdjieff system in Western Europe. Dances and musical scores that pupils had begun in Tiflis were suddenly completed. The entire contents of Gurdjieff's movement house - the rugs, mats, cushions, scented fountain, bulbs, and lighting boards - were brought to the Theater des Champs Elyseés the night before the first dress rehearsal. The theater's foyer was transformed into a Persian courtyard. Students who were not performing on the stage were dressed in Struggle of the Magicians costumes and distributed Middle-Eastern delicacies; the public fountains sprayed champagne instead of water.

The performance opened on 13 December, 1923, with an enthusiastic send-off from the magazine, *Comoedia*; "Professor Gurdjieff may be unknown in Paris, but he is famous throughout the world". For two hours the thirty performs and thirty-five musicians enacted Gurdjieff's movements, which were particularly well-received, caused a small amount of commotion when spectators, responding to the female performers work with raised arms, began shouting. "Enough, enough". No one could understand how it was possible to keep arms outstretched for so long.

The performance ended with the "Stop Exercise", which slightly started the *Le Temps* reviewer, who otherwise thought that many of the dances bore an uncanny resemblance to the Dalcroze Institute's Oriental dances. Critical of the strongly hypnotic rhythms used in the movement section, the reviewer felt Gurdjieff's blank faced performers moved more like mechanical puppets than "liberated beings". And, fearful of Gurdjieff's Eastern influence on European society, he compared the students to a gang of convicts:

"they cross the lower part of the leg 'outside' and then force a kick; they flutter their hands; they raise and drop their outstretched arms all in one piece, with wrists and fingers rigid. "Other critics were more sympathetic, especially of the movement work, which was brilliantly set off by Salzmann's lighting system.

Convinced that he now had an artistic vehicle to promote his school of teaching, Gurdjieff quickly made preparations to travel to America. Selecting forty of his pupils, he chartered space on a French liner leaving for New York at the beginning of January, 1924. Even on board, Gurdjieff continued to rehearse his students. Acquiescing to a passenger's request, the performers recreated the entire Théâtre des Champs-Élysées show. At its conclusion, Gurdjieff again shouted, "Stop!" Despite the ship's rolling, which caused the piano to slide slowly from one end of the room to the other, the students all held their precise positions.

In New York, foreign companies like Max Reinhardt's, the Moscow Art Theater, and many Russian imitators - the Russian Theater Company, etc - were enjoying an unimaginable crescendo of success. This and A.R. Orage's proselytizing for the Institute during the previous month assured Gurdjieff of an enthusiastic audience. By the end of January, arrangements to use Lesley Hall on Manhattan's West Side were completed.

The first performance was advertised mainly through word-of-mouth and was open without charge. Along with people interested in the occult and the arts was an audience of well-known music and theater personalities. Having promised the police department that no erotic dancing would be included in the program, Orage mounted the stage at nine o'clock. He spoke about Gurdjieff, his travels, the Institute, and finally about the evening's presentation. Besides the movements, which would be broken down into group and more-difficult solo performances, a demonstration of "supernatural phenomena" would be seen.

De Hartmann entered the stage with an orchestra of five. After a long pause, the first Gurdjieff performers appeared, the men dressed in long tunics, the women in shorter ones with gold braids in their hair. The music began and the performers stretched out their arms, beating out rhythms with their feet. This continued for over fifteen minutes. Another group came in and enacted what seemed to be a kind of machine dance. Two sets of the obligatory exercises (originally from Tibet and Kafiristan) were seen next. The music changed, which led into a ceremonial piece called "The initiation of a Priestess", that was probably from Gurdjieff's *Struggle of the Magician*. Afterwards came a short series of athletic dervish dances from various parts of Central Asia. This was followed by an enactment of an Islamic pilgrimage that was meant to demonstrate Gurdjieff's concept of voluntary suffering : two performers pulled themselves around the stage floor as if they were crippled. A fragment of a shamanistic rite and a series of graceful women's dances were presented next. Finally, a short staging of a Christian Assyrian ritual, whose movements were based on Gurdjieff's favorite geometrical form, the eight-sided Enneagram, completed the first section.

Following the intermission, Orage explained the philosophy of Gurdjieff's "Stop Exercise". Smoking an Egyptian cigarette and dressed in a tuxedo, Gurdjieff approached one end of the stage. On the opposite side were his students. Suddenly Gurdjieff tossed something into the air. Racing to catch it, the performers were stopped with Gurdjieff's command. Frozen into a kind of racetrack photo, the pupils were transformed into

statues or "petrified rabbits", as one critic wrote. Letting a minute pass, Gurdjieff gave another command for them to relax. Returning to the side of the stage, the performers repeated the exercise several times. (To demonstrate a student's complete immobility, on one occasion, Gurdjieff walked up to him and pushed him over. On still another night, as the performers were rushing downstage toward the audience, Gurdjieff turned his back and lighted a cigarette, just at the moment when everyone expected him to stop them; only after the students flew off the platform into the chairs of the front-row spectators did Gurdjieff give the command).

This was followed by a number of folk and country dances from Turkey and Transcaspia. Olga de Hartmann briefly explained each one of these, appearing on the stage after every one. She also introduced the manual Labor exercises that showed the uses of music rhythms in increasing work productivity. Groups of students enacted such daily nomadic tasks as wool-combing, carpet-weaving, and the sewing of shoes and stockings.

Another intermission preceded the last part of the performance. Stepping up to the stage, Orage spoke about a different facet of the institute, the exploration of supernatural phenomena. Diving such phenomena into three categories- tricks, semi-tricks, and real supernatural activities - Orage expounded on their dissimilarities. Essentially, a trick involved any artificially-performed event that falsely ascribed its efficacy to some supernatural force. A semi-trick worked according to the superior physical or mental skills of the performer. An example of this would be a blindfolded entertainer who, by holding the hand of a spectator, can locate a hidden object by following the involuntary movements of the spectator's pulse and muscles. A real supernatural phenomenon was any activity that official science could not explain. "Tonight", Orage announced, "all three categories will be seen; each spectator will have to determine which event belongs to which category."

The audience then experienced a number of demonstration of thought- transmission. Numbers, shapes, objects, opera scores, animals were whispered to pupils in the audience and these were conveyed to pupils on the stage. (On other nights slightly different activities occurred). The evening ended after four hours with an enactment of "The Fall of the Priestess" that continued until every spectator left.

Gurdjieff's performance was widely covered in the Sunday entertainment supplements of most of New York's newspapers, although it was not always taken too seriously. Gurdjieff conducted formal question-and-answer sessions after the performances moved to the Neighborhood Playhouse on Grand Street. Finally, the production was mounted at Carnegie Hall on March 3rd. But this time it was given almost no newspaper coverage. Hoping for a breakthrough elsewhere, Gurdjieff arranged to bring his troupe to Philadelphia, Boston, and Chicago.

In Philadelphia and Boston, the demonstrations failed on many accounts. But, assisted by the French Consul in Chicago, the performances there were extremely well-received. Buoyed by a fresh crop of American disciples ready to follow him back to Prieure, Gurdjieff attempted one more performance at Carnegie Hall on April 3rd. Immediately afterward, he returned to France, where the work on the movements intensified.

Then on 6 July, 1924, under mysterious circumstances, Gurdjieff drove his cart at almost sixty miles an hour into a tree. During his long and painful recuperation, members of the Institute tried to recreate the movement work, discovering that they were almost incapable of doing so. From 1924 until his death twenty-five years later, Gurdjieff spent most of his creative energy in writing, rarely, if ever, referring to the movements. A great personality change seemed to have come over Gurdjieff. Bitter arguments and expulsions of most of his loyal disciples followed. But before Gurdjieff's accident, as many as six hundred persons underwent at least some training in the physical work.

In 1961, a handful of Gurdjieff's dances and movements were staged in New York, not far from the original Lesley Hall. Today, thanks to the written scores and memories of the Institute's instructors, much of Gurdjieff's physical work has been preserved. However, with the notable exception of the work of Kathleen Riordan Speeth, who has painstakingly reconstructed each of the major movements, step-by-step, in California, Gurdjieff's exercises are enacted only in private by small groups of individuals. Still, the sixty-year-old experiment continues.

Book: The Theater of the Miraculous
Author: Mel Gordon