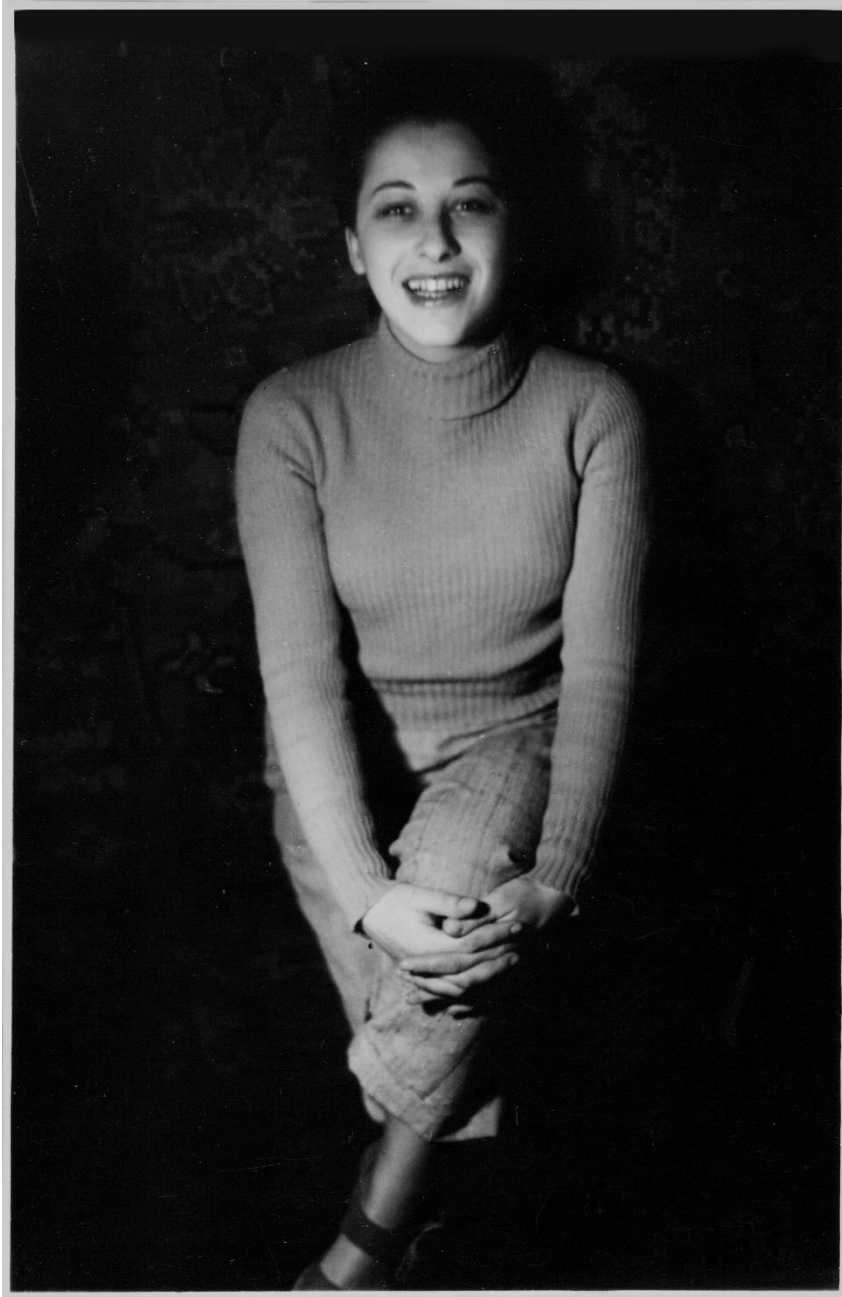


Biographical Details



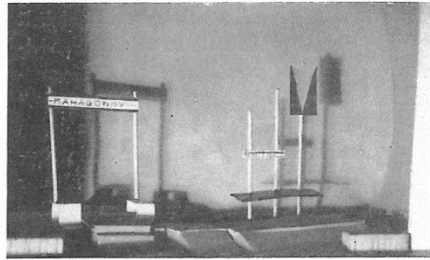
Litz Pisk in Vienna (Source: Executor. Photographer Otto Skall of Foto Skall)

Litz Pisk was born in Vienna in 1909. Her father was Sigmund Pisk (1867 to 1933); and her mother was Anna Pisk who lived circa 1876 to 1928. She was the youngest of four children. Her brother Hans was born in 1899 and deported in 1939. Brother Fritz (born 1901), his wife Ann and son Kurt (born late 1937 in Austria) left Vienna in 1939 for Australia where Fritz then changed his name to Fred. The third brother, Karl, went to Australia in 1938. In Vienna, Pisk's father ran a business in milk distribution, and they were considered a middle class, progressive, family.



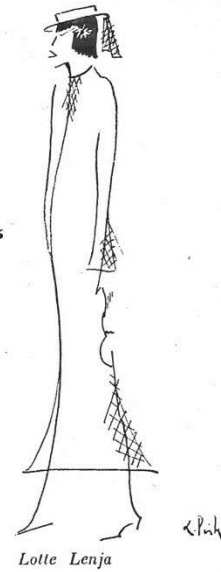
Litz Pisk in Vienna (Source: Executor. Photographer Otto Skall of Foto Skall, Vienna)

Litz Pisk's formative practice combined movement teaching, stage design, caricatures and costume design. Ahead of her departure from Vienna she was to design the first production of Brecht's *Rise and Fall of Mahagonny*



Bühnenbild aus „Mahagonny“ — Entwurf: L. Pisk

**Zur
Aufführung
von
„Mahagonny“
im
Raimund-
Theater**



Lotte Lenja

RCSSD Archive. Stage Design for the Rise and Fall of Mahagonny at the Raimund Theater, Vienna, 1932 from
Moderne Welt (Page 24)

After the death of her father in 1933, Litz Pisk resettled in Britain after what was only meant to be a short visit. During this time, she continued to design costumes, draw caricatures for journals, and teach drawing and movement; it was teaching that helped Pisk to establish herself professionally in pre-war Britain.



Litz Pisk Costume Design (Source: RCSSD Archive)

From 1938 Pisk lodged at Lillie Oberwarth's house in Swiss Cottage. Lillie Oberwarth was a part German/part English Jewish woman who opened her home on Buckhurst Crescent in London to European émigrés. In an unpublished biographical story, American dancer and choreographer Agnes George de Mille describes her visits to the house run by 'Mrs Obie', and her ensuing friendship with Pisk. Obie was later to perform as part of the Greek chorus of women referenced so evocatively in Elliot's foreword to *The Actor and his Body*. She was also to figure in a series of Pisk's unflinching drawings from the time. As wartime bombings in London increased, she moved with Mrs Obie to Watford. This cottage is remembered fondly by the nephew of Barbara Coombe, (Pisk's friend and companion) who recollects a room that had been converted into a pottery whilst de Mille recalled the lush vegetable garden. Both de Mille and Mrs Obie were to become lifelong friends and supporters of Litz's work with actors.

After periods of teaching movement at RADA, The Old Vic Theatre School, and teaching drawing and movement at Corsham, Pisk also undertook a course in pottery at Camberwell School of Art. She began teaching there shortly after. This was followed by a short period of freelance work (1955 to 1957) before undertaking a teaching post at South West Herts College of Further Education teaching pottery from 1957 to 1966). She trained in and then taught from the tradition of craftsmanship developed by the potter Bernard Leach CBE. The work of artists inspired by Leach highlight two significant legacies of the pottery: the first is

the analogy between the pots to the human body; the second is the importance of “vitality”, a quality that transcends conventional analysis in capturing a sense of energy and life.

A photo of Pisk shows her working with the renowned Viennese potter Lucie Rie in her famous home studio in London. This connection may have influenced Pisk’s personal style of pottery; her passion for the body, for the human form in motion and her observational skill played themselves out through her movement teaching, pottery and drawing.

Litz Pisks’ Influences and collaborators

Trish Arnold (1918 to 2017) was an influential movement teacher who taught at LAMDA and whose legacy underpins Jane Gibson’s work. Arnold knew Pisk and attended some of her open, Monday night classes. It is Arnold who remembered that Pisk attended Sigurd Leeder’s classes in London. Leeder’s teaching featured many types of swings. It is therefore extremely likely that Pisk drew inspiration from him given that swings were such a large and vibrant part of her work.

Sir Kenneth Barnes (1878 to 1957) was principal of the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art from 1909 to 1955, and he was to be instrumental in helping Pisk to obtain citizenship in Britain.

John Blatchley (1922 to 1994) was an Australian-born theatre director who knew Pisk at RADA as a student and then at the Old Vic as a colleague.

Gertrude Bodenwieser (1890 to 1959) was an influential early modern dance teacher and choreographer who ran her own dance school in Vienna from 1923 to 1938. Her dance troupe/s undertook very intense European touring performance schedules. Pisk designed costumes for several of her dance works and did, at times, travel with the troupe. See *Dance as Image Empire of Ecstasy: Nudity and Movement in German Body Culture, 1910-1935* by Karl Eric Toepfer, University of California Press (1997) for a full account of this prodigious choreographer and teacher.

Franz Čížek (1865 to 1946) was born in the Czech Republic and taught at the Kunstgewerbeschule in Vienna. He is particularly remembered for his teaching of art to young children and it was these teaching methods that led to his fame outside of Austria. Čížek also invented 'Kineticism', a term that 'fused expressionist, cubist, futurist and constructivist aesthetics to represent the movement of objects and the dynamic properties of forms and spaces'. Viennese Kineticism appears to have been an art movement that developed within the school from 1920-1924. Pisk was a student of Čížek's in her first and second year of study (circa 1924 to 1926) and 'Kineticism' was a term that she referenced frequently in her teachings. Čížek's precise influence is hard to extrapolate as Pisk did not specify whether it was his teaching of art to children or the principles of 'Kineticism' that she found so influential.

Elizabeth Duncan (1871 to 1948) was a dance teacher and director of the Duncan schools. The first Duncan School was located in Berlin-Grunewald; then they relocated to Darmstadt in 1909, then to Potsdam from 1921-24, and significantly to Austria to the Klessheim Castle in Salzburg from 1925 to 1933. It is thought that Litz may have attended in 1927 to participate in the training. The school relocated to Munich in 1935.

Michael Elliot OBE (1931 to 1984) was a British theatre director who studied at Oxford University. He is remembered for establishing 59 Theatre, the 69 Theatre Companies and a regional theatre centre in Manchester, a forerunner of the Manchester Royal Exchange. Pisk and Elliot developed a long-lasting collaboration, working across theatre and television. Selected productions include: *The Women of Troy* (co directed with Casper Wrede) (1958); *Brand* by Henrik Ibsen for the 59 Theatre Company at The Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith (1959); *Brand* by Henrik Ibsen for the BBC (1959); *As You Like It* for the Royal Shakespeare Company (1961); *Peer Gynt* by Henrik Ibsen at the Old Vic (1962); *The Merchant of Venice* at the Old Vic (1962); *Measure for Measure* at the Old Vic (1963); *As You Like It* for the BBC (1963); *Miss Julie* by August Strindberg for the National Theatre at the Chichester Festival Theatre (1965); *Black Comedy* by Peter Shaffer at the National Theatre at the Chichester Festival Theatre (1965); *Daniel Deronda* adapted by James Maxwell for 69 Theatre, (1969); *The Tempest* for 69 Theatre, Manchester Royal Exchange (1969); *Moby Dick*, world premiere adapted and directed by Elliot, Manchester Royal Exchange (1983/84).

Clifford Ellis (1907 – 1985) was a British artist and illustrator. From 1946 to 1972 he was the Principal of Corsham Court, Bath Academy of Art, a school for the education of art teachers. He wrote about Pisk's teaching qualities noting, 'she has a quick intelligence, wide sympathies, and is indefatigable in seeing a job through'. It was at Corsham Court that Pisk met Barbara Coombe, who was to become a life-long friend and companion.

Hilde Holger (1905 to 2001) trained with Bodenwieser and danced in the Tanzgruppe Bodenwieser from 1926 to 1929 and started her own dance troupe and school in Vienna. Pisk started as a student at Holger's school and then became a partner of the *Neue Schule für Bewegungskunst*, The New School for Movement Arts. Holger describes the curriculum as teaching the 'history of dance and music, art appreciation, costume and stage design, anatomy....Costume design was taught by Liz Pisk a very talented designer and also a talented teacher of movement, which made her a great name later, in England with the Royal Shakespeare Company. I am proud to have had her too as one of my pupils'.

Holger relocated to Britain after World War II after having spent some time in India. Her inclusive dance practice in Britain had a significant impact on shaping community dance and the growth of creative choreography with disabled performers. After their joint venture in Vienna, there is evidence in letters from Hilde to Pisk of the two women reconnecting many years later in the UK.

Rosalind Knight (born 1933) is a British actress who recalled Pisk's influence on her as an acting student at the Old Vic Theatre School: [the combination of] 'Michel Saint-Denis and George Devine, and Litz Pisk, and Suria Magito...was most awesome... And luckily for me there was quite a lot of movement and dance, and not ballet but movement and limbering. So I liked that, so I was fairly good at all of that. And period dance, which was just divine, with this woman Litz Pisk, who was the most inspirational movement teacher of all time, and choreographer person from Vienna. And that was wonderful'.

Dame Lucie Rie (1902 to 1995) was a renowned Viennese potter. A photo of Pisk shows her working with Rie in her famous London studio. This connection may have influenced Litz's personal style of pottery. Rie ran her own pottery studio at 18 Albion Mews (which has been reconstructed at the Victoria and Albert Museum), and she also taught at Camberwell School of Arts from 1960 to 1972.

Oskar Strnad (1879 to 1935) was a Viennese architect of Jewish descent. He had an extensive career as teacher of theatre and film design and as a designer of buildings, furniture and glass wear. He was Litz's teacher at art school through her final year of study. His influence remained central to her understanding of theatre space. She said of him: 'He was trained as an architect, he saw his work in the theatre not primarily as building, but as utilising space and light to let the play live. The aim was always to find a path from the heart of the play to its physical realisation... At this time I had no clear idea about the working process of theatrical production, and it was very lucky that I was too young for Strnad's course right away. The two years that elapsed before I was able to apply to join him were put to good use....exploring both the space and the human activity of the actor moving through it'.

Michael Saint-Denis (1897 to 1971) was a French theatre director and teacher and the nephew of Jacques Copeau. He came to London with his own company the *Compagnie de Quinze* in 1935. He established the London Theatre Studio and then Old Vic Theatre Centre (school and companies) from 1947 to 1952. He then established and advised on actor trainings in Strasburg, New York and Montreal. Returning to England in the 1960s he became a general artistic adviser at the Royal Shakespeare Company with artistic director Peter Hall from 1962 to 1966, with responsibility for artist training.

Yat Malmgren (1916 to 2002) was a Swedish teacher and dancer who knew both Kurt Jooss and Laban. He would create his own movement and acting system heavily inspired by Laban. Along with John Blatchley he was one of the founder members of the Drama Centre – a British Conservatoire established in 1963. As he and Litz were movement staff at Central at the same time they would have been very much aware of each other's movement practices.

Belinda Quirey MBE (1912 to 1996) was a historical dance teacher, historian and choreographer. She taught dance history at the Royal Academy of Dancing, LAMDA, the London College of Dance and Drama, London Contemporary Dance School, London Theatre School and the British and European Studies Group. She also created a BBC television series *May I have the Pleasure?*

Past students and colleagues of Litz Pisk interviewed for the Introduction to the
Theatre Makers edition of *The Actor and His Body*



Litz Pisk teaching at Central (Source: RCSST Archive, Photographer Unknown, student actors Linda Bellingham and Saylor Creswell)

Wendy Allnut (born in 1946) trained at Central from 1963 to 1966. She started her career as an actress, before becoming a movement specialist engaged in training the next generation of movement teachers at the Guildhall School of Drama. Allnut had trained initially as a ballet dancer at Elmhurst School of Dance, a long-established school known for professional classical ballet training. She instinctively knew that she would have to undo aspects of her former training to undertake a new form of movement. Allnut acknowledges that the

discipline of ballet has served her well, but as a trainee actor the limited connection to the ground, the disguising of effort, the absence of visible, effort-related breath, and the release of limbs with their natural weight, were all to change after working with Litz.

Fran Bennett (born in 1937) was a movement and voice teacher at the Guthrie Theatre, Minneapolis, Minnesota in the 1960s. She had been seeking another way of approaching the movement of actors – or as she described it, a version of movement for actors that ‘was not watered-down dance’. She was recipient of two awards – the Rockefeller Foundation Grant and a Ford Foundation Grant - which enabled her to assist Litz for the year from 1966 to 1967 and then for a return trip in 1969. As a tall woman of African Caribbean heritage, Bennett’s first vivid impression of Litz is ‘a short lady with hooded eyes who mumbled’. They met on the common ground of movement and the warmth and respect of the two women imbues all of Bennett’s reflection. Bennett too is a direct inheritor of Pisk’s teaching and philosophies.

Cicely Berry CBE (born 1926) is a renowned voice teacher, coach and author. She trained and taught as a voice teacher at Royal Central School of Speech and Drama and then went on to be the director of voice at the Royal Shakespeare Company from 1969 to 2014. Her book *The Voice and the Actor* is considered a seminal work on practical voice.

Michael Feast (born 1946) is a British actor, who trained at Central School of Speech and Drama from 1964 to 1967. In a rich career both on stage and screen, Feast connects the foundations laid through Litz’s movement teaching to his ongoing process as an actor. Through his working career movement training continues to percolate; Feast noted that his ‘body still has that training in it’ and that the groundwork of research and line learning act as precursors to the bodily rehearsal process. He also cited the direct use of daily preparation for performance in the form of warm up (shaking out, stretches and swings) with the spine and the pelvis at the centre. You can hear Pisk’s teaching in his words ‘movement comes from the centre - the spine and the abdomen- then its organic, a real centred place, its not extraneous’.

Jane Gibson is a movement director with an extensive career working across film and theatre. She was Head of Movement at the National Theatre. She trained with Pisk as an actor at Central from 1964 to 1967 and later went on to teach movement and assist Trish

Arnold at LAMDA. She is a leading movement director who articulates the joint influences of Arnold and Pisk on her movement direction work and specifically the fundamentals of movement for the actor.

Nickolas Grace (born in 1947) is a British actor who trained with Litz at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama from 1966 to 1969. He was inspired by Litz and her work and continues to maintain a live connection to the work, which he practices daily and teaches to other actors in a variety of conservatoires and rehearsal settings. He recounts a story told by Pisk in class of her mother who promised that 'today I am going to learn to fly, I am going to exist in the air, opening the door to the garden and running fully arms outstretched'.

George Hall (born 1925) is a Scottish-born actor, musical director and teacher who first met Pisk as his movement teacher when he trained at the Old Vic Theatre School, London. He recalls that under the famously critical leadership of St Denis, 'Litz was an inspiring teacher. I know I couldn't have survived the Old Vic without her' (Hall in Susi 2010:39). As a long-term friend and collaborator, Hall would go on to work with Pisk in a variety of company contexts such as with Theatre '59 and Theatre '69 and on a range of productions. Hall was later to become Head of Acting at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama for 25 years.

Sue Lefton (born in 1946) is a movement director and director with an extensive career working across theatre, opera and film. She trained with Pisk as an actor at Central School of Speech and Drama from 1963 to 1966 after having trained as a ballet dancer at The Royal Ballet School and Ballet Rambert. Lefton is a key inheritor of the movement teaching of Pisk as Lefton went on to teach out of Pisk's work in the 1970s at Central before a career as a movement teacher at Guildhall and a freelance movement director and director.

Virginia Snyders (born 1930) trained as an actress with Litz Pisk at The Old Vic Theatre School in its second year. Later she would go on to work as a director and drama teacher with Litz at Royal Central School of Speech and Drama. After which she joined the staff at Guildhall School of Music and Drama, where she was Head of Drama in the 1990's.

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