

Ze'eva Cohen: Dance Artist



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Ze'eva Cohen was born and raised in Tel Aviv, where she began to dance at age 5, studying with Gertrud Kraus and later working with Rena Gluck. In 1963, after dancing with Anna Sokolow's Israeli-based Lyric Theatre, Cohen made her way to New York City, where she studied at Juilliard and performed with Sokolow's U.S. company—and became a founding member of Dance Theater Workshop. In the early seventies, Cohen set up her own dance company as a solo artist. Over twelve years, she built a repertoire of twenty-eight solo dances, performing works by such artists as James Waring, Viola Farber, and Margalit Oved. Cohen has also choreographed works for such companies as Boston Ballet and Alvin Ailey Repertory Ensemble, as well as Ze'eva Cohen and Dancers, a troupe she formed in the 1980s. A dance educator throughout her career, she began working at Princeton University in the late sixties. She spearheaded the university's dance program, which blossomed during her forty years there. For her farewell tribute concert at Princeton in 2010, Cohen produced a film about her career, which she has since expanded. Titled Ze'eva Cohen: Creating a Life in Dance, the film was featured in February 2015 at Lincoln Center's Dance on Camera festival and was a finalist at the Dance Camera West festival at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles in spring 2015.

Terry Stoller spoke with Ze'eva Cohen in January 2015 about her early work with Anna Sokolow, her philosophy about dance, her solo repertory company, her choreography, the opportunities that living at Westbeth afforded her, her years at Princeton, and her legacy film project.

Terry Stoller: In the early sixties, you joined Anna Sokolow's Lyric Theatre in Israel. Sokolow soon encouraged you to go to America. Why did you want to take that opportunity to leave your home country?

Ze'eva Cohen: I left at age 23. I had studied with all the best teachers in Israel, and other than classical ballet, I had pretty much explored all the possible modern dance there. After performing with Anna's Lyric Theatre, I thought I needed to explore further. I was very drawn to Anna Sokolow, who I felt was the artist I could learn most from at that time. A few of my friends came back from New York having studied at Juilliard, and they raved about the training there. The best of the best were teaching at Juilliard, people like José Limón and Louis Horst. So when I went to New York, I was studying with the pioneers of modern dance and performing with Sokolow, whose aesthetic I preferred because it combined dance with theatre in a beautiful way. It was part dancing, part acting, and very related to the way human beings really feel and act—not an idealized or much too stylized kind of dancing.

This was a dream come true. I was completing my education, which at Juilliard included classical ballet training, modern dance training, choreography, music, dance notation, and dance history and criticism. And at the same time, I was performing with the Sokolow company.

So you wanted to work with Sokolow because she combined theatre with dance.

No, because she was a great artist who happened to work in the kind of way that made sense to me. I felt that when dance was too stylized, you went very far away from the emotional impulse of it. And when it was more lifelike, the way Anna approached it—simplified, but more profound—it felt more true and real to me.

I've read that as a performer you have a broad range, from the tragic all the way through to the comic. Is this something that got developed with Anna?

I would say that delivering a performance that reflected empathy with people was something that was facilitated through Anna's work. But she didn't work with us so much on character. She didn't give us specific instructions. I had a lead in the opening scene of Anna's *Dreams*, her dance that was inspired by André Schwarz-Bart's book, *The Last of the Just*, which deals partly with the Holocaust. I remember reading a lot on my own about Stanislavski and the Method. But what actually worked for me was setting myself up in the kinetic, sensual ambiance that facilitated the character to emerge.

Being in Sokolow's company gave you an opportunity to become a member of a community of artists.

Yes, it did not take long to bond with the company. In fact there was a smooth transition from Anna's company to Dance Theater Workshop, whose founder was Jeff Duncan. We rehearsed at his loft on 20th Street. Jeff was Anna's rehearsal director and one of her lead dancers. When Anna wound down her company, Jeff and some of the Sokolow company, including me, as well as newcomers, joined forces and developed an enclave of creative artists. All of us started to choreograph, and we were dancing in each other's pieces and producing combined concerts.

Did your association with Dance Theater Workshop impel you to go off and develop your solo repertory?

I would say yes. Working with an ensemble of highly creative people who dared to break boundaries inspired me to think out of the box. Jeff, in particular, encouraged me to strike out on an independent path. I decided to work as a solo artist performing dances by the many choreographers who fascinated me at the time. Out of the twenty-eight solos that I performed in twelve years, twenty-three were either commissioned by me or were dances I saw other choreographers perform that I felt passionate about embodying. And these artists were very generous about giving me their work either for free or for not too much money—which I had to raise grants for.

How much input do you have when you commission a piece?

Really not much at all. It was pretty much them making a work for me. I just did what they said. They trusted me because of my reputation as an artist. They left me alone once they created the piece for me. And I kept internalizing it and evolving it, not by changing the steps, but by enlarging the interpretation of it.

When you were building a repertoire, were you looking for a type of dance or for the choreographer's sensibility?

Just the choreographer's sensibility. But, for example, one of the pieces was *Song and Dance* by Lynn Dally. I met her at a summer intensive dance program where we were both on the faculty, and I loved her funky work. I thought, Wow, I need a funky piece. I asked her if she could arrange the work—which was a trio—as a solo for me. With Margalit Oved, who created *Mothers of Israel* for me, it was a different quest. Here was a great artist from Yemen who could connect me with the heritage of my grandparents.

A critic pointed out about your solo repertory work, that it was unusual for a solo artist to perform other people's choreography.

It still is. At the time, it was really a breakthrough. The dictate in modern dance at that time, as influenced by Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, José Limón—these were the giants—was that choreographers produced solo programs in order to investigate and solidify their unique movement language. It was not like in ballet where you already had a set vocabulary. In modern dance, you had to invent a movement language that suited your temperament and your way of seeing the world. My quest was to learn from others, to embody certain choreographers' sensibilities by emulating them, by performing their language and their style.

I was a charismatic performer. I could always hold the stage as a one-woman show. I was eager to explore the ways I could extend myself and not just do what was comfortable. At that time there were certain influential schools of modern dance—Graham, Limón, and later, Cunningham. So dancers trained for years with one particular style of a great artist. And when they performed, people could always say where they had trained. But I was looking for what I call the zero point or the white canvas point, for how the body moves in relation to gravity, levity, time, space, and energy. I was interested in moving in and out of a style without being locked to a style. Anna Sokolow had paved the way for that kind of neutrality, because she based her choreography on simple gesture as well as on walking, running, and falling.

After working as a solo artist for twelve years, you formed Ze'eva Cohen and Dancers. Did you do only your own choreography with that company?

Yes.

Can you talk about the impulse for that phase of your work?

When I graduated from Juilliard, it was clear I had a gift as a choreographer. I knew I had a gift as a dancer; that's why Anna chose me for her company. But I wasn't sure about choreography. Early in my career, I had to make a choice because I couldn't do both. When I was younger, my passion for performing was greater than my passion for choreography. And though I knew I needed to develop that craft, I thought it could wait.

I began to develop my choreographic voice sporadically, alongside my solo career. Almost every summer I was engaged in an intensive six-week dance program. Part of our assignment as faculty was to create dances for the students. So each summer I would create an original work. One of these works was my dance *Rainwood*. It was eventually performed by several major companies, including Boston Ballet and the Batsheva Dance Company of Israel. The last production of *Rainwood* by Utah's Repertory Dance Theatre had beautiful projections and costumes designed by my husband, Avri Ohana, which further enhanced the piece.

After the twelve years of my one-woman shows, I became bored with solo performing, and I felt I had taken it as far as I could. That's when I went to NYU and did my MFA in dance. Earlier I had gone to Fordham for my BA. One of my professors, who taught a course in freedom as realized through the arts, agreed to a choreographed piece in lieu of a paper. So I created a dance called *Cloud Song*, a mixed media piece reflecting the search for identity of a young person in the 1960s. It asked questions like: Am I a flower child? Am I a bummed-out kid? Or do I lace up and get a straight job? That dance was one of the bridging pieces toward my becoming a choreographer.

In 1983, I auditioned people and chose about eight dancers. I rented a studio several days a week in Chinatown, where we rehearsed. I would give the dancers a warm-up, or they would do their own, and then we would work on creating a new piece. I was hoping that working with my own group on a consistent basis, rather than being jobbed in as a guest choreographer for a few weeks, would help me solidify my method of working. I learned that I'm not the kind of choreographer who comes in to rehearsal with prepared material—maybe a phrase or two—and not even with finished music. I found that in rehearsal, I needed to create an atmosphere of trust and relaxation, a safe place in which things would happen. I invented movement on the dancers. I would often be inspired by their personalities or idiosyncratic ways of moving. This group became Ze'eva Cohen and Dancers.

Caryn Heilman, a member of that company, also used the term *on*. She was quoted as saying that you created *Ariadne* [1985] *on* her.

It was her personality that inspired me to come up with certain material. That solo, *Ariadne*, evolved out of a group piece called *Ode*, which had been commissioned by the Chicago Repertory Dance Ensemble with support from the National Choreography Project. The whole piece, *Ode*, did not survive the test of time, but *Ariadne* did. The solo was based on the story of the mythological character, and I selected fifteen gestures borrowed from Hellenic vases. But in my retelling of Ariadne's story, I used those gestures to empower her on a journey refiguring her turbulent past. The dance concludes when she succeeds in linking these gestures—which represent her history—in an order that brings her peace.

As you're approaching your choreography, what kicks off the piece—the music or the movement?

Either. With *Rainwood*, for instance, I was at Santa Cruz on a summer dance program. I had no idea what I would choreograph. I started working with the dancers, creating several movement phrases in silence. Later on, I brought music sources to try. But what took hold was an environmental soundscape recorded at Georgia's Okefenokee Swamp. (The producer of that recording was Irv Teibel, who happened to live in Westbeth.) *Rainwood* is about the constant transformation of nature, how nature re-creates itself with no beginning, middle, or end. It's set to sounds of birds, frogs, and insects, and brings

alive the creatures of the wilderness in a symphony of steps, crawls, and twists. The dancers portray the environment and the various creatures moving in it as they wake up, fly, migrate, nest, mate.

You've choreographed for the Batsheva Dance Company. What was it like to go back to Israel to choreograph for them?

The artistic director in the late seventies was Paul Sanasardo, and he was the first to bring me in. I never choreographed one new work for Batsheva. I only restaged, rearranged, combined different pieces together, because, frankly, they were difficult to work with. They were known to make jokes during rehearsals. If you were one of their own, they didn't have to behave so well.

Were you pleased with the results?

Of all the pieces I staged for them, *Rainwood* was the only dance that stayed in Batsheva's repertory for a long time. The magic of *Rainwood* really took root. (The Israeli production was titled *Wilderness, Swamps and Forest*.) For me, it was a mystery and a huge surprise that the Israeli audience loved this work. In Israel, audiences seem to need constant innovation and high stimulus. This dance is a hypnotic, quiet piece that evolves very slowly. One has to let go of tension and allow oneself to look and be mesmerized by kinetic and visual metamorphoses of nature.

As you've said, Margalit Oved choreographed a solo for you that was drawn from your heritage. Did going back to your ancestral roots become a through line in your own choreography?

Probably, subconsciously, the way I always moved was influenced by Yemenite and Israeli folk dance traditions. And that's partly what made me a unique dancer. There was something different in my style of performance, but it was inherited, natural, not something I learned as a dancer. For most of my career as a choreographer, my cultural heritage wasn't interesting to me because it was too familiar. The urge was to explore things I didn't know. It was not until very late in my career that I began to mine my ethnic roots and refer to themes and characters from the Old Testament.

One summer in the mid-nineties, I got a residency at Swarthmore College to create a new work. I asked the dancer Aleta Hayes to join me, and we developed *Negotiations* there. I wanted to do something about the story of Sarah and Hagar, and I wanted to draw from Aleta's movement quality, which I saw as an African-American way of moving unique to Aleta. And for me, I thought, Let me draw from my own cultural roots, including a Yemenite kinetic impulse. With this dance, as in *Ariadne*, I chose to change the outcome of an ancient story, and we arrived at a resolution for the two feuding women through negotiations rather than banishment.

That dance was included in a program called *Female Mythologies*, performed in New York in 2000. Would you like to talk about another piece in the program?

There were five works all together, and one of them was called *If Eve Had a Daughter: Mother's Tongue/I Love You*, which I had created in 1996. I was a very good friend of Mira Rafalowicz, a dramaturg who was producing the International Yiddish Festival in Amsterdam. I said, Mira, how can my work be included in your program? She said, You need to do at least one piece that uses Yiddish. So I started listening to Yiddish songs, and I fell in love with klezmer music.

I contacted my former student Jill Sigman, who's an experimental choreographer. We began improvising at the Princeton Dance Studio. She brought all her grandma's utensils, and we used those in a kitchen scene between a mother and daughter.

That piece really shows your humor.

Jill was a great partner for that piece. I took on the mature role of an immigrant mother, while Jill was the rebellious daughter rejecting the old culture.

You seem to have an entrepreneurial spirit, which was true from the beginning. How did you get the idea to form the Ze'eva Cohen Dance Foundation?

This has to do with Westbeth. At the beginning, before Merce Cunningham took over the eleventh floor, he was rehearsing up there. There were a lot of young talented people around him who were inspired by him and John Cage and the spirit of the early seventies. There were filmmakers and video makers

and young lawyers from Harvard who wanted to help the artists, pro bono. And I used to rehearse up there too.

I was creating my one-woman show, and I needed funding. I had a manager at the time, and he told me that I should try to get funds from the New York State Council on the Arts and the National Endowment for the Arts. The only way for me to get support was to become a not-for-profit organization. What did I know about business? I had been in this country only seven years, and my head was in the clouds. My ex-husband helped me with grant writing, and one of the pro bono lawyers helped me become incorporated as a not-for-profit organization.

Princeton University was also very important in your career. How did that relationship begin?

I began teaching there in the fall of 1969, the first year that Princeton opened its gates to women undergraduates. I felt it was lucky that Princeton was not ready then to really invest in a serious way in the arts. I only taught there twice a week. I was ambitious for the development of dance as a discipline at Princeton, but there was no way of pushing that because they were just not ready. Since I needed my time and energy to develop my career in New York—and I also wanted to have a child—this job proved ideal.

At Princeton, the development of the dance program was incremental. Dance courses were added one at a time over a long period of time. By the late eighties, more and more of my students were making connections between dance and academic subjects. They were incorporating their dance work into final projects and theses associated with their major areas of study, like anthropology, religion, architecture. After twenty-five years of teaching at Princeton, they gave me tenure and promoted me to a full-time professorship. So for the remainder of my time there, I devoted myself to further develop dance as an independent program.

You left on a very high note. Is that when you had the idea to begin your legacy film project?

Not right away. For the Princeton tribute concert in 2010, I made a version of the film for my students and colleagues that shows my work in the context of my life. Soon after my retirement from Princeton, I realized that if I was going to leave something behind, the *what* was not as interesting as the *how* and the *why*, which were both missing from the original film. I re-engaged Sharon Kaufman, the director and editor of the film, so that we could expand it and focus on those elements and also include some footage from my work at Princeton. We called the revised film *Ze'eva Cohen: Creating a Life in Dance*.

Finally, would you like to say something else about Westbeth?

As a self-producing artist, I've needed the security of Westbeth throughout the years. I think I would not have been able to negotiate this kind of career for all these years if I hadn't had affordable rent and the benefits of a community of artists around me.