

Tribute to Pearl Lang

By Ze'eva Cohen

92nd Street Y, New York, NY

November 5, 2009

I came to New York in September 1963 from Israel with an invitation from Anna Sokolow to study at the Juilliard School and to dance with Anna, in whose Israeli company, the Lyric Theater I performed before coming to the States.

My first memory of performing on this stage is dancing the role of the young, haunted woman in the opening scene of Sokolow's powerful Dreams - a dance meditation on the Holocaust. This was performed in April 1964, my first year in the States. I was green, foreign, poor and homesick and the Y felt like home. I also performed another leading role in Anna's masterpiece, Rooms, which in 1968 was revived for channel 13 - the first Dance in America production. Rooms was premiered on this stage in 1955.

It was at this auditorium that I remember seeing Pearl Lang perform her solo Shira to music by Alan Hovhaness. Here was a beautiful, strong woman; a charismatic solo dancer whose dancing was so passionate and poetic. I still remember the vibrations created in Shira by her plucking the elastic chord crossing the stage diagonally from top to bottom. It felt like the inner soul has just been struck like a harp string. Soon after graduating from Juilliard, Pearl invited me to perform the role of the biblical Yael opposite her Deborah in her NY City Center season and on tour.

I am certain that watching Pearl as performer had a great influence on my own solo dance programs for which I commissioned and reconstructed works by 23 choreographers over a period of 12 years. I am also certain that it was the courage, beauty and depth with which Anna and Pearl found in integrating themes and ideas inspired by their Jewish heritage which inspired me to do the same.

In 1975 I commissioned Margalit Oved to choreograph for me Mothers of Israel, a solo, portraying the four biblical matriarchs: Sarah, Rebecca, Lea and Rachel; it was done in Yemenite/Jewish style, a heritage Margalit and I share. In this millennium I choreographed Negotiations and Female Mythologies - full evening concerts with contemporary interpretations of biblical and Jewish themes and characters, focusing mostly on duets for women.

I am proud to be part of the Y's history, which continues to find new and creative venues to nurture dancers and choreographers and develop new audiences for dance.

I am also glad to be standing here tonight to honor Pearl Lang, a "Jewish voice" of an earlier generation, and to introduce her dance - Tehilim. Pearl Lang began her career on this stage, dancing in the works of Martha Graham. She passed away this year, after a long career in which she mated her Jewish heritage with American modern dance and let their respective values ignite each other.

Tehilim is the biblical name for Psalms, songs of praise - affirming faith, life and living.