

GREEN LIGHT

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BACHELOR'S IN MOVEMENT

Ze'eva Cohen's Reinvention and the Power of "Dance Art"

by Max Maduka '09

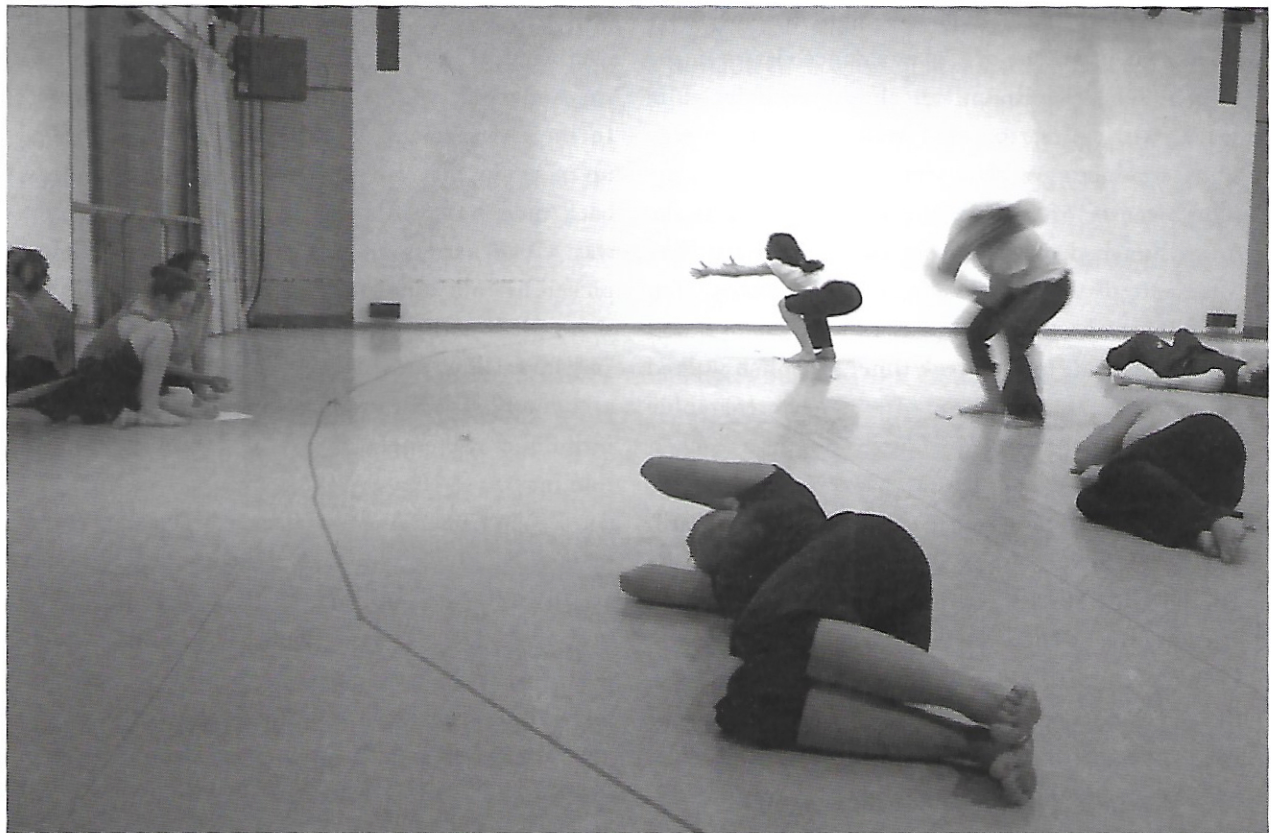
When I sat down with Ze'eva Cohen for the first time, I asked her about a peculiar decoration that hangs on a wall in her office at 185 Nassau. The ornament is constructed of assorted candy wrappers and is designed as some sort of multi-colored sunburst. "It's garbage!" Cohen told me – her brown eyes lit up. "These gypsies made it. Each of these things they found on the ground and they made them into this Christmas decoration." The ornament is indeed an apt metaphor for Ze'eva Cohen's modern dance, which transforms the banalities of everyday life and movement into something much more unique and beautiful. As an artist, Ze'eva Cohen is all about reinvention. "I fell in love with it immediately," Cohen raved about the decoration. "It's just *wonderful*, don't you think?"

Indeed, Cohen's real specialty is creating art from apparent nothingness. If you ask her what she does for a living, she's likely not to tell you that she's an acclaimed modern dancer-choreographer, but that she's a "dance artist."

The founder of Princeton University's Program in Dance, Cohen is in fact widely regarded as a visionary in her field. In 1971, she embarked on a groundbreaking twelve-year solo repertory tour. The performances were an unorthodox experiment in dance, and they were widely met with critical acclaim. In a range of selections, Cohen explored different emotions and artistic roles through her dance; her penchant for musical responsiveness and a unique physical expressionism established her as one of the great "dancer-actors" of her time. The tour performances were hailed by the *New York Times* as powerful and dynamic, and though

she spawned myriad imitators, few other dancer-choreographers could compare. In one review, the *San Francisco Chronicle* summed-up her distinctive style: "Cohen's art is original as well as personal. She does not follow a school or fit any known category. A fine actress as well as a flawless dance technician, she has blended modern dance with a rather severely classical ethnic style...eloquence and gravity are her aim, and achievement." In 1966, PBS captured her performances in the nakedly probing Anna Sokolow masterpiece *Rooms*, run as a part of the series *Dance in America*. Post-tour, Cohen has not slowed down, founding a company in 1983 - Ze'eva Cohen and Dancers - and serving as a founding member of the prestigious Dance Theater Workshop, which has been home to such notables as Whoopi Goldberg and Mark Morris. As a choreographer she continues to create works of honesty and beauty. She is getting older and may no longer be quite as fluid as she was as a young dancer, but her work is no less in demand. "The one great problem of [tonight's show]," one *New York Times* critic lamented in 2000, "was that Ms. Cohen was not in every dance."

So it should come as no surprise that Ze'eva Cohen was exhausted the first time I met her. "I just need to chill," she remarked, her lilting Israeli accent wrapping awkwardly around the slang. "It's been a long day and I'm tired." We were standing outside of her office. A barefooted dancer ambled out of the rehearsal room holding a plate of cookies. He offered one to Cohen and she no doubt marked my ill-hid jealousy. She broke off half and handed it to me, "You want?" It was an entirely rhetorical question; she'd practically placed it in my hand



Photograph by Kelsey Johnson '08

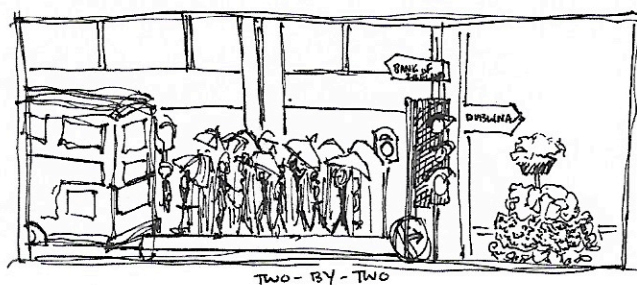
by the time she'd brought the word "want" to its inflexion. Her perceptiveness is disarming, though her undergraduates may well be used to it. "She dedicates herself one hundred percent to her students," said Natasha Kalimada, a senior who has trained closely with Cohen. "This summer in New York... I spent my weekends working with her in a studio on the top floor of the apartment in which she lives [in New York]. She did this out of her own time, no payment involved. It truly speaks to her giving nature; she deeply cares about each of her students." For her pupils, Cohen is at times seen as a sort of second mother. Watching her, one realizes she could be anyone's mother. "I see worry on your face," she reassures her students at the end of a tough rehearsal. "It is the song and dance which bring us out of the dumps. It is going to be splendid. Have a great time and feel good."

It was an unusually warm night in November when I sat in on one of Cohen's dance classes in the Hagan Rehearsal Room, an almost entirely white space, with mirror-paneled walls. Cohen's energy when conducting a class serves more or less as the room's center of gravity. She sat on a stool at the front, hunched over with her chin on her fist, like some sort of stylized version of *The Thinker*. Ten disciples, eight women and two men, sat or stood as they pleased. It was break time, so Cohen walked around the studio floor offering choreographic critiques, usually with a hug or a smile. As a teacher, Cohen is usually blunt and her criticism can be cutting. One senior in her class, Amanda Howard, put it delicately: "A few people have said that she can be harsh in her criticisms." When the music started up and her pupils began to move again, Cohen confirmed as much. "You can't do 1-2-3-4?" she queried dangerously. "What's wrong with you? You're the smartest girls in the nation!" And when her sharp tongue was taking a break, her mind was working overtime. Cohen is an innovator first and

foremost, and in the wide, open spaces of the dance floor, her keen eye is Queen. As mistakes persisted in one particularly troubled segment, Cohen decided to re-imagine the dance entirely. "I don't mind giving it up, maybe we can find something better." And right there she did it: arms akimbo, she cocked her head to the side and considered. A student interrupted the silence with a technical point. Cohen furrowed her brow: "I'm having a moment of inspiration, you interrupt me?"

You might well list raw inspiration as the *primum mobile* of Cohen's class. Her instruction style is notoriously abstract, technical rigidity is eschewed in favor of metaphors and telling rolls of the head.

"Think vertical," she instructed one male student, "Think skyscrapers, think antennae." Cohen has been known to tell students to move "like seaweed." Most of her advanced



critiques, in fact, center on a willful ignorance of technicality. "Forget about the counts! It's visual!" she remarked, adding later, "Give it style please!" In the last segment of one piece, the dancers line up in a row; they are supposed to recline and throw back their heads in a display of exhaustion. There was a bad actress among the troupe, and Cohen picked her out immediately. "You're faking," Cohen snapped. But the dancers understand her language and invariably learn from it. "In my dance classes as a young girl, the emphasis was never on refining technique, the emphasis was on creativity," Cohen told me.

Ze'eva Cohen's cultural background and personal history have everything to do with her creativity as a dancer. She was born in Tel Aviv in 1940 and began her dance training at the age of five. Cohen describes her first eight years in Israel as enormously formative. "I was born and raised in Israel, but I was born really under British mandate... countries were formed and Israel was declared a nation when I was eight years old."

In those early years, Cohen's father was absent. A participant in the Zionist resistance against Britain, he was imprisoned and eventually exiled to North Africa. Cohen's mother was left behind to raise her alone. "I had a very strong mother," Cohen reflects. "I was very used to very strong women in Israel at the time because they were making a country; they had to fill in for the men who were not around."

Throughout Cohen's childhood years in Tel Aviv, many Israelis experienced a collective sense of political, social and geographic disorientation. "It was a time of discovery, a time of change, a time of new ideas: how to create a new society," Cohen told me. In the Middle East of the 1940s and '50s, Jews suddenly found themselves immersed in a new - and for many - alien society. The recently-founded State

critique of traditional choreography. Unlike ballet, for example, which stresses rigid technical training and adherence to a formulaic way of moving, modern dance (originally known as *free dance*) looks to completely restructure the rules of choreography. Modern dancers play with motion in much the same way that free-verse poets play with language; it sees the open form as capable of conveying raw emotion and commenting on more abstract philosophical ideas.

For Ze'eva Cohen, a young Israeli thrown into an unprecedented social circumstance, modern - as opposed to classical - dance was a natural fit. "Israel was... this harsh, desert country: ballet didn't fit *in*. Ballet was refinement, was courtly, was European."

Prior to the outbreak of World War II, it was

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of Israel was, from the first, home to a unique brand of multiculturalism. "Everybody was thrown into one country," she said. "The mix of East and West has been with me since childhood." The apartment building of Cohen's youth housed eight different families and eight different languages. For Cohen, the combination of a rich exposure to the arts and an atmosphere rife with fresh ideas created a social context in which new forms of artistic expression were encouraged. "There was a freedom to take risks, to improvise, to constantly invent; there was never a right way of doing things." Ironically, it was in a community comprised almost entirely of refugees, that Cohen was able to find a home. "Because you're creating something from nothing, you have a chance to re-create who you are," Cohen joyfully explained. These conditions also happened to provide rich nourishment for the flowering of more experimental cultural movements in Israel - among them modern dance.

As a discipline, modern dance emerged at around the turn of the last century as a pointed

Europe - Germany in particular - that had served as a veritable Mecca for modern dance. Choreographers like Martha Graham, an American modern dance superstar, were heavily influenced by the German school. But with the rise of the Third Reich, avant-garde movements hit a temporary brick wall across the continent. There was an exodus of talent from European centers - many flocked to the growing Jewish community in the British-run Palestinian mandate. Some of the modern dance pioneers who immigrated to Israel in the interwar years in particular hoped to inform their craft with cultural elements from the Middle East. Cohen was a beneficiary of the trend. These refugees were great artists and many were women. "It was very interesting," Cohen noted. "Out of refugees, I got the best."

Cohen decided to dance professionally at the age of sixteen. Studying first at the Inbal Dance Theater, a Yemenite conservatory in Israel, she was discovered by Anna Sokolow, the great American dancer-choreographer. Sokolow was impressed by Cohen's talent first and foremost. At age twenty,

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Cohen traveled to New York to enroll at the Juilliard School. She graduated Juilliard in just three years and studied under Sokolow for eight.

Cohen's education, though centered on dance, was infused with a wide range of extra-musical interests that informed her work as a choreographer. After Juilliard she enrolled in the Excel Program at Fordham University to complete the credits necessary for a Bachelor's degree. Fordham proved that Cohen could find fertile ground for musical inspiration even among the liberal arts. "I was in a class in literature and the theme was freedom. For the final project we could create a piece if we were artists. So I created this piece called *Cloudsong*. The whole class came to the theatre to see me perform it and well - I got a great review in the *New York Times*! And I mean I got my grade too, but I thought, 'Gee!' It was so ridiculous, you know?"

the perfect forum for Cohen; she is able to innovate artistically as well as connect with her Middle Eastern roots – blending seemingly disparate traditions.

In 1971, Cohen began a solo repertory tour that, in many ways, would come to define her career; a tour that would be hailed as an unconventional and daring achievement in modern dance performance. In twelve years Cohen performed a staggering twenty-eight solo pieces by twenty-three different choreographers. The critical response was overwhelming. In 1978, the *San Francisco Chronicle* described one of her tour performances as "masterful...and utterly brilliant", a "flawless balance" between high art and entertainment. Likened by the *Chronicle* to Isadora Duncan, the romantic mother of modern dance, Cohen gave a performance that was a sensational achievement of "dramatic fire". One critic put it simply, "Cohen is a genius."

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By all accounts, Cohen's eclectic personal history – a life in Israel, in America, and in academia, uniquely informs her work as a choreographer. "My focus is not primarily on virtuosity and technique, but understanding how to put dance in a historical and cultural context," Cohen told me. Cohen is perhaps most famous for an approach to dance that is distinctly non-western in musical and choreographic influence. It was her cultural background that paved the way for a totally new way of looking at dance. "My innate movement style has definitely come from the Middle East, my unique form as a movement-maker has a certain earthiness...and certain ways that the body moves which are non-Western."

Jill Sigman '89, a modern dancer-choreographer who studied under Cohen at Princeton in the late '80's, can attest to this. "[Cohen] has found a way to bring the Yemenite dance sensibility and movement style into a completely contemporary dance idiom." The relative freedom of modern dance (as opposed to the rigidity of classical choreography) has proved

Cohen is also famous for the rich expressionism of her performance; she uses the face as well as every part of her body, and describes her aesthetic as something close to "dance theater." "I always dance like I was also an actress." This is evident in pieces like *If Eve Had a Daughter: A Mother's Tongue/I Love You*. This was also evident in her tour performances. Jennifer Dunning of the *New York Times* wrote that "Her commitment to the moment and her gutsy approach to physical acting reflect Sokolow's inspiration...her radiant face is a marvel, a map of tumultuous yet readable emotions."

So when Cohen likens herself to Meryl Streep, it is not all that surprising. "I'm similar to her in my quest to become many people who are different from myself." In pursuit of this goal, Cohen specifically performed solos that allowed her to actually explore different characters through dance. "The quest was to become as many different people as I could think of through different dance styles and sensibilities. The idea was to create a literature for dance..."

Like any actress, she had her favorite roles. Cohen was particularly celebrated for her performance in a piece entitled *Mothers of Israel*, choreographed by Margalit Oved, where she portrayed the four biblical matriarchs, Sarah, Rebekah, Leah and Rachel. "It is a modern dance, but the inflexion is a Middle Eastern, Arabic-Jewish flavor," Cohen said. Another of Cohen's favorites is *Cloudsong*, which was her take on the American youth movement of the 1960's.

As a choreographer, Cohen has created many daring pieces of her own as well, among them *Rainwood* and *Negotiations*, the former treating major themes in nature, and the latter, part of a larger Cohen work - *Female Mythologies* - focusing on the relationship between the biblical matriarchs Sarah and Hagar. *Negotiations* was a poignant critique of the relationship between two enormously important women. In her conception of the piece, Cohen says that she felt emotionally impelled to use the story of the Jewish and Arab matriarchs as the basis for a dance. "I always felt very bad reading the Old Testament; the story always bothers me because I thought it was so unjust of Sarah to throw Hagar into the desert. I feel almost guilty...I felt that if I

had to write the story in the Bible I would write it differently and so I did, through my dance."

Now that she's at Princeton full time, however, Cohen says that she sometimes finds it difficult to strike the proper balance between teaching and choreography. When she first came to the University in 1969, Cohen divided her time fairly evenly between touring and teaching. Throughout the next two decades, she pursued her professional and academic careers simultaneously as well, continuing to perform her solo tour and founding a ten person dance company in the eighties. But by the nineties, Cohen shifted most of her focus to her dance program at the University. At this point, what professional choreography she does pursue, she pursues in a freelance capacity. "All my energy is here," she adds, with just a hint of implied possessiveness.

Cohen came to Princeton in 1969 just as the University began accepting women. Though Cohen was starting at a University known in many ways for its conservative academic tradition and atmosphere, Cohen says she was pleasantly surprised by the community's receptiveness to modern dance. When her first class appeared in the Princeton course



The Cincinnati Kid has a mid-life crisis.


catalogue, sixty students registered. Fifty were men. The administration was shocked but lent its total support to her class. "The students were just jumping of the walls," Cohen recalls with a smile. "The administration was just happy to see them blowing off steam." The dance classes proved to be a good way to engage students emotionally. "In the beginning year it was just about raw energy and trying to find some form to contain that rawness." In the present day, Cohen's classes have more structure, "but," Cohen assured me, "spontaneous movement is still there."

According to Jill Sigman, Cohen's founding of the dance program at Princeton was a "tremendous feat." "There was no program when she got there, she basically created it single-handedly." And students couldn't have been more thankful. "She has been this engine of activity," Sigman relates. "It is because of her teaching that many found a connection with dance. Her work at Princeton is a testimony to the importance and value of dance in a liberal arts education."

When Ze'eva Cohen opened the door to her office on a cool mid-December afternoon, she had a smile on her face. "I'm so tired," she said. You can hardly believe it though. Cohen is the type of person whose criticisms are interspersed with laughter, and who seems to meet exasperation with a warm grin. She is a decided optimist in spite of historical and cultural influences which were, at times, quite grim, and in spite of her participation in a modern art form which often highlights the problems of the contemporary world. For Cohen's beloved instructor Anna Sokolow, whom Cohen admits had a far darker view of the world than she, modern dance provided a mode of articulating the unanswerability of life's questions. As Sokolow put it, "You ask the world a question and there is no answer." Ze'eva Cohen, on the other hand, admits not the absence of an answer, but rather the answer's complexity. Cohen looks to the future of modern dance, which she believes will mine the depths of this complexity even further. "For me, the idea of how antiquity feeds postmodern thought is very exciting; it is probably the most important thing. We change the way we relate to history, so that

we don't dismiss the past but instead we weave it into the present, we weave it into the future."

During one of our last encounters, Cohen related a favorite quote to me. "There was a woman who said that modern dance is like *Alice in Wonderland*, when you ask her, 'What are you?' or, 'Who are you?' and she says, 'I knew who I was in the morning, but I don't know who I am now'."

For Ze'eva Cohen, modern dance is a reflection of this sort of disjointed reinvention. As a dancer and choreographer, Cohen traces themes of dislocation and rebirth. As an "actress," Cohen reveals different sides of a person very much rooted in a strong heritage. Ze'eva Cohen is at once revolutionary and traditional. Thus, the solution to the *Alice in Wonderland* riddle might well lie in Cohen's story itself; who she was in the morning had a whole lot to do with who she is now. In any case, Ze'eva Cohen knows that at least one aspect of her identity is certain. "I'm a dance artist," she says firmly. "If you ask me what I am, I'll say I'm a dance artist." 

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