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Tribute for my Teachers

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A Posthumous Letter to Gertrud Kraus - My childhood teacher 1945 – 1955

Dear Gertrud

It is only now, in my late 70's, that I am talking to you in a way I wish I could have, when I was your student as a child and teenager, age 5 to 16 or later on, after I left Israel at age 23 to pursue my dance career in New York.

I want to thank you, Gertrud, for giving me the creative base, confidence and courage to become the artist I became, and pursue a life of passion and love for dance and music. Though no two dance classes with you were alike and the technical aspect of mastering physical prowess was weak, you were wonderful in facilitating the deep experience of how body and spirit come together in the act of dance.

Did you know that since you spoke to us in broken Hebrew mixed with German and English about concepts that were way over our heads, we -- as children, never understood a thing you said? But somehow, your intentions were always clear.

I remember how terrified I was when, as teenager, I happened to be on the same bus with you. What would I do if you asked me a question and I would have to admit that I did not understand what you were saying? What could we talk about? It was the most silent ride I ever shared with a person I knew.

I also remember how we loved hearing you play your grand piano at the living room of your Tel Aviv basement apartment—the same as your studio -- as we were improvising in movement to what we heard. Worlds of fantasy were created as we heard Grieg, Borodin, Beethoven, Mozart., Debussy, Albeniz, Paul Ben-Haim tumbling from your fingers. We took turns improvising to your music and then observing the others as they danced. Sometimes we were guided by your drawings of spatial designs or by the figures you drew. Sometimes you created dances for us based on various themes and stories, like the biblical story of Boaz and Ruth the Moabite. In your studio -- constant exploration of new ideas and new sources were the norm.

How thankful I was for your generosity of letting me, at age 14, borrow an exquisite long, flowing red satin dress from your costumes' trunk, with which to perform an improvisation to a recording of Manuel de Falla's *Fire Dance*. In class - we danced to your playing it on your piano, and that was the only dance that came to mind when I was invited to participate in a Jewish Yemenite young talent show performed in a huge amphitheater in Israel.

How hard it was to leave you at age 16 when the dance scene in Israel switched from the dominant German expressionist style to that of Martha Graham. It must have been deeply painful for you, after seeing in 1956 the Graham Company performing several programs of her master works in Israel and watching your students quickly gravitate towards that new American modern dance aesthetic. Nevertheless, you kept coming to see us perform with other choreographers and in new ways, and you were always generous with your time giving us honest and thoughtful comments.

While you no longer could hold on to your dance company, which, regretfully, I was never old enough to join, we watched you sitting at the Ditzza coffee house, chain smoking and playing chess with your European male friends for hours at a time. We were happy to see you continue teaching dance and mentoring young aspiring Israeli choreographers. Yet, you surprised us once again, as you expanded your creative horizons to become a significant painter and sculptor and a member of Ein Hod, the artist village of Israel.

How happy we were when in 1968 you received the Israel Prize, recognizing you as a most distinguished artist who contributed so greatly to the advancement of dance in Israel. The prize made it possible for you to come to New York and explore the performing arts in the city as well as visit a few of your former Israeli dance students working in dance. I so fondly remember your response to my question of what was the theater or dance performance you saw that impressed you most. And your swift answer was: "Washington Square Park."

I will never forget the last time I saw you in summer 1977, during one of my visits to Israel. You were lying in a hospital bed, alone in an otherwise empty room. It was clear at that time that there was no chance to reverse the throat cancer that afflicted you for several years. You did not seem surprised to see me and I told you about my developing dance career in New York and showed you photographs of my dancing as well as a photo of my three-year-old daughter. I then said goodbye and left the room. When I was half way down the corridor I retraced my steps in order to retrieve the photo of my smiling daughter as she was playing with so much glee and mischief with the colorful ribbons in her hair.

Gertrud, you then said -- "leave this photo with me."

It was the last time I saw you.

A Personal Tribute to Rena Gluck - My teacher, 1956 -1960

Rena Gluck's contributions to the development of dance in Israel since her arrival from the USA in 1955, were highly significant.

I started studying the Graham technique with Rena on a regular basis soon after she opened a dance school in her Tel Aviv studio, and a year later, in 1957, I joined her newly formed dance company. Our student-teacher relationship has evolved over the years, becoming a close friendship.

Rena, a graduate of the Juilliard School and a student of Martha Graham for many years, introduced a thorough understanding of the Graham technique and aesthetic to Israel. This

new discipline was substantially different from the dominant German expressionistic aesthetic we were previously exposed to.

Following the Graham tradition, Rena's classes were based on a series of exercises that demanded body tension and force that were not part of our kinesthetic sensibilities. We were introduced to new floor exercises and moving-across the floor sequences only after mastering the Graham basics. Progress seemed very slow, difficult and monotonous to our eager, young group of students. Having been since childhood a student of Gertrud Kraus, where no two classes were alike and where improvisation and creativity were the norm, this transition for me was particularly difficult.

Since Rena brought with her a pedagogic approach, which encouraged students to discuss any subject that needed clarification, I mustered the courage, after one of her classes, to ask a question: "If I continue to only exercise this technique, will I lose the essence of my creativity?" Rena's answer: "If your creative urge is truly innate, you will never lose it, BUT – with no technical mastery and physical understanding of your body, you will have a very hard time becoming a professional dancer."

What kept me studying with Rena was watching her charismatic solo recitals, in which she performed several of her works. Her performance, from both a technical and emotional aspect, was inspiring. I also appreciated being exposed to new themes, new ideas, and musical possibilities for my own imagination and future creative work. In addition, Rena invited me to join her company, along with other advanced students, and the opportunity to perform onstage after many years of study was exciting. And even if the group only performed one dance per season, augmenting her solo dances, it was thrilling to share the stage with Rena and watch her perform close up.

Performing in the Rena Gluck Dance Company was my first professional stage exposure.

Another profound new aspect that Rena introduced in her solo recitals was her deep engagement in issues with social justice, universal peace, and racial equality, subjects that were prevalent in the American Jewish left leanings and activism. While we in Israel were primarily concerned with finding national unity for Jews who came from the global diaspora with no common language and culture, Rena brought American Jewish views that were primarily concerned with justice for all.

In 1959, another bold undertaking, took place with the creation of "Bimat Machol" ("Stage for Dance"), a collaborative project where three choreographers, Naomi Eliskowski, Rena Gluck, and Rena Shaham, decided to form a joint company. That these choreographers, even if financial necessity was the main force that brought them together, could share dancers, rehearsal space, the stage, and resources, was a bold idea that signaled a new era.

Prior to Bimat Machol, loyalty to only one teacher and their methodology was demanded and followed. Studying with another teacher was considered betrayal. The new possibility of performing in works by choreographers, with whom we did not train, and being exposed to new ideas and influences, was most significant.

This openness for new ideas and possibilities was further enhanced when the three leading artists invited the influential American modern dance choreographer, Anna Sokolow, to join them as guest choreographer and restage one of her works.

In summer 1963, when I was ready to study at the Juilliard School in the New York and perform with the Anna Sokolow Dance Company, Rena invited me for a parting conversation. What I remember from that talk, was Rena very sensitively addressing the possibility of my encountering racial prejudice in the US. Not because of my being Jewish, but because of my Yemenite Jewish heritage where I could be viewed as being black or of mixed race. To my delight, I have not yet encountered these prejudices in New York or around the United States.

It is interesting to note that while Rena's career as leading dancer, choreographer, artistic director and educator thrived in Israel; mine thrived in similar ways in the United States.

Rena's role in my artistic education was essential. I am lucky to have gained a lifetime friend.

Reflections on my work with Anna Sokolow - My mentor 1960 - 1968

Anna was my mentor who helped shape my life as a dance artist after I finished my army service and joined, along with some of the best young dancers in Israel, her Lyric Theater, a dance company she established in 1962.

I first performed in a choreography by Anna called "Poem", at age 19. Anna was invited to be a guest artist by the three artistic directors of "Bimat Machol", Naomi Eliskovsky, Rena Gluck and Rina Shaham, to restage "Poem" for their upcoming performance that included their own choreographic works.

The performance took place in Tel Aviv's old opera house at the end of Alenbi Street across the sea in July 1959. Anna's Poem, choreographed to music by Alexander Scriabin, was an outrage to the audience and critics. Israel has never seen before such an erotic and bold, yet – poetic and lyrical dance. The dancers were practically glued to each other. I, who was a very shy dancer, never found myself before so close to a man.

"How old are you," Anna said in front of everybody.

"I am seventeen", I lied.

"And still uncomfortable?" she said.

I soon learned that the truth was naked and that no hiding was possible.

In rehearsals, Anna repeatedly pushed us for "more," "more" and yet – "more", and she used to add, "I do not believe you". No matter how intensive our execution was, it was never enough.

I thought I would break.

In the early 1960's, when I worked with Anna again as member of her Lyric Theater in Israel, I was given solo roles in dances like "Dreams," "Rooms" and "Ballade" as performed later in New York. I discovered that "more" could also mean infinite degree of lyricism and tenderness and not only force and high level of intensity for which she was so identified with.

I also loved that while Anna was very specific in her instructions, she left room for me to bring my own interpretations. With Anna's support I opened up to uncharted emotional, sensual, and

psychological territories. It was scary but also very freeing. If my interpretation felt true it was accepted.

As a senior student at Juilliard in New York, I remember how shocked we were, students who already studied two or three years of choreography, when Anna's response to viewing our solos was: "get rid of these dances". Well-made dances were not her interest, what she was seeking and advocating was authenticity.

To those of us, who did not immediately dropped the class and asked her how to proceed, she suggested the following: "Go to a quiet room and stand there for a long time until the first movement that feels true to you comes out. Your movement and not somebody else's." I did as she said, I closed myself in a quiet room, I listened to myself over a long time, and the miracle happened. The movement that was revealed was a circular chest movement originating in the sternum that repeated again and again. This was a movement I never learned in any of my classes over the many years of study. It felt true to who I was, and it became a reliable source of generating movement for my choreography from then on.

This discovery was one more important gift Anna bestowed on me and I am so deeply grateful.

I eventually identified this movement source to be that of Yemenite dance. I encountered this movement again when I worked with Margalit Oved, leading artist of the original Inbal Dance Company, when she created "Mothers of Israel," a solo I commissioned for my one-woman repertory show in New York in 1974. Though I am of Yemenite Jewish descent, I am second generation Israeli. My family lived in north Tel Aviv, and I was not raised with Yemenite tradition or culture.

In September 1963, at Anna's urging, and with her assistance, I left Israel to study at Juilliard and perform with her American dance company. It was there in the United States, that I further developed as dancer, choreographer and educator in academia and became the director of the dance program at Princeton University.

When Larry Warren, the first biographer of Anna asked me, along with other dance artists, to write a testimony for his book, *Anna Sokolow, The Rebellious Spirit*, I wrote the following:

"Anna gave me permission to open myself as an artist to the full power of my passion and fantasy with no fear. She taught me that there was no other way to dance but to invest myself totally, physically and mentally, in the work. She could not tolerate an apologetic approach to dancing. Standing tall, strong, being direct, honest and simple, were qualities she encouraged and demanded.

I remember Anna in class, easily pushing down the outstretched arms of strong men, then, challenging them to do the same to her. They almost never succeeded. This demonstrated that gesture should always be weighted and physically committed.

Anna taught me to take the time and listen to what was truly personal and unique in my way of moving and feeling" (letter to Larry, August 12, 1989)."

Thank you Anna.