

Ms. ON THE ARTS

When a professional dancer becomes pregnant, it obviously presents a problem. Do choreographers refuse to include her in their dances, or try to disguise her bulging shape onstage—does she “retire” for nine months and succumb to the physical limits placed on her movement?

Ze’eva Cohen, Israeli-born dancer and choreographer, viewed *her* pregnancy as an important part of her expression as an artist. The physical limitations existed, but, in Ze’eva’s words, “Dance is not just about athletics, it is a combination of movement with intellectual and emotional expression.” Pregnancy, in that context, presented new material for dance. “I could feel my body begin to grow and change. My center of gravity was different; the way I walked and sat down was different.

DANCE

THE PREGNANT DANCE

DONNA HANDLY

My feelings about myself, my concerns as a person, also began to change. I decided to choreograph a piece specifically for a pregnant dancer because it was very important for me to reflect and perform what I was going through as a woman.”

Ze’eva originally set out to choreograph a solo for a pregnant dancer. As she began thinking about the dance and researching movement ideas, however, she found it wouldn’t

work as a solo. “I felt I needed to work with other women. Because my feelings about myself and about my body were changing every day, I needed support. I needed to share my experience with other women.” The dance evolved into a trio called “Seed” in which the pregnant dancer is the central figure. In May, 1974, it was performed in New York by dancers Myrna Packer, Lorn MacDougal, and Valerie Pullman (who danced the part Ze’eva had planned to take herself until her new daughter, Keren, changed those plans by arriving 10 days before the performance).

On this and the following pages, Ze’eva Cohen talks about choreography and about the process of creating a piece for a pregnant dancer.

Donna Handly is an editor of “Ms.”



“I conceived the role of each dancer to be an individual but inseparable part of one woman. To establish a bond among these elements, there is a short ritualistic introduction where the dancers feed each other seeds [*above*]. They cross the stage in a slow procession, stopping to give each other support and comfort. At one point, the pregnant dancer makes a gesture of freeing a bird—a certain part of her life is gone. And then the dance starts. I decided to use the pregnant woman as the central figure in the piece—not as an active dancer but more as a reference point. The other dancers attend her one at a time. They make a bed for her; she lies down. They sit by her, they check her pulse, they feel the movement of the baby through her belly. One dancer lies by her side, and together they do the breathing. Together they experience what’s happening in the pregnant dancer’s body.”



(Top) "Lorn [right] inspired me to add new images to the dance. Her movements were strong and mature, as in the end of the process of pregnancy when the body actually takes over. Her material ended up being quite close to the real experience of birth. Stylized—the spasms, the jumps, the breaths that mirror contractions—but very real. She practically gives birth onstage. I choreographed these images in the dance before I had given birth myself, but not long after I was out of the delivery room I knew that, even though the real experience was unlike anything I had anticipated, there was nothing in the dance I wanted to change."

(Above) "It is just as important to utilize a dancer's natural qualities as it is to get the dancer to project the choreographer's ideas convincingly. Our materials are live, they're not dead. I had to challenge Lorn [left] to impose a very strict form on her spontaneity. At the same time, I had to work with Myrna [right] on stretching her out of her abstractness and aloofness. They both had to give more of themselves as performers, not just as instruments or tools but as artists."

(Right) Ze'eva at a rehearsal just 24 hours before the birth of her daughter. "A woman's body is beautiful and should be presented in all its stages. It is important to get away from the old idea that a pregnant woman should stay at home. Not only should I be seen, but I should be seen onstage. That's my profession. A major trend in modern dance has been toward abstraction; a body is just a body. But for me, that never works—I am always a person. Not that all the dances I perform are about specific things. I can also be abstract. But behind it there is a person. It's me and the way I feel about myself and my surroundings. It's very important to me that that comes out."



