

ARTS | DANCE

DANCE; From a Woman's Recollections as an Israeli Outsider

By MINDY ALOFF APRIL 9, 2000

THE dances of the Israeli-born choreographer Ze'eva Cohen focus on women, contemporary, ancient and mythical. Some of the women are feisty, some are noble. All, ultimately, are tragic: they dance as an act of resistance against straitened circumstance or passing time, as if they were singing private songs in a desert.

Five of the 40 works Ms. Cohen has choreographed since 1968, collected under the title "Female Mythologies," will be performed at Danspace Project in St. Mark's Church from Thursday through Sunday in a program dedicated to Ms. Cohen's mentor, Anna Sokolow, who died on March 29. None of the dancers are old enough to have seen Ms. Cohen's own impassioned performances, the true models for their roles, with Sokolow's company during the 1960's.

"Dancing for Anna was a total emotional and intellectual commitment," Ms. Cohen said. "She helped liberate me from being an academic dancer to being a full-blooded, expressive dancer."

As a coach, however, Ms. Cohen is soft-spoken and precise. Sometimes her corrections to the dancers are framed by metaphors: a maneuver for both hands should have the character of falling sand; arms should "be like seaweed." More often, though, the frame of reference is direct and practical.

The most ambitious work of the Danspace evening is "Women and Veils II," a new and intricate ensemble piece for 10 women to an insinuating score commissioned from Michael Keck. Its images of female life in a tribal society -- where individual expression, much less individual freedom of action, is suppressed -- bloom from austere patterns and binding rhythms. During a recent interview at the Lower East Side studio where it was being rehearsed, Ms. Cohen said that the dance had been inspired by the life of women in the Middle East.

Ms. Cohen's memories of her native country still evoke mixed feelings. She explained that although she felt privileged and encouraged in some contexts, as an Israeli of Yemenite descent she also grew up considering herself an outsider within the larger population of European emigres, who, despite their common Jewish heritage, looked down on the Yemenite Jews.

"I was the only Yemenite Jew in a European neighborhood," she said. "At home, I was treated with kid gloves, given music and dance lessons. In the street, a stranger once actually stopped me to ask if I would clean her house. At one time, I would never touch klezmer music, for example. I'm not European, and klezmer music was part of Yiddish culture, the culture of victims," she said, referring to the Holocaust.

In 1996, Ms. Cohen finally brought herself to reconsider this self-imposed censorship when she incorporated instrumental klezmer music and traditional Yiddish songs into a lighthearted duet for herself and the dancer-choreographer Jill Sigman, "If Eve Had a Daughter (Mother's Tongue/ I Love You)," which will be on the Danspace program.

Growing up in Tel Aviv in the 1950's, Ms. Cohen studied with the Austrian-born modern dancer Gertrude Kraus, who emphasized improvisation and musical response, and with Rena Gluck, who taught the Martha Graham technique. As a teenager she also made occasional visits to classes in jazz and ballet, which, at that time, were not considered kosher for a confirmed modern dancer. Two obligatory years in the Israeli Army were followed by performing experience in Gluck's dance group and then with Sokolow, who had first traveled to Israel in 1953 to work with Inbal Dance Theater, a Yemenite company. After nearly a decade, Sokolow founded her own Lyric Theater, whose 10 original actor-dancers included Ms. Cohen.

Sokolow soon arranged for, and subsidized, Ms. Cohen's travel to New York, where she completed the dance program at Juilliard in three years and danced with Sokolow's New York-based company over a period of eight years. (Her astonishing performance in "Rooms" is preserved in Jac Venza's 1966 film, "Anna Sokolow's 'Rooms.' ") In 1969, Princeton University -- newly coeducational -- hired Ms. Cohen to teach dance; she immediately founded an entire dance program, running it while she also performed as a soloist and, for a time, directed her own group. She maintained a family life, too, marrying and having a daughter, Keren.

At Danspace, Ms. Cohen will be working with experienced dancers who are sympathetic to her aesthetic aims and style of direction. The ensemble of "Women and Veils II" consists of dancers whom she discovered by asking colleagues and friends for recommendations. Most of the soloists in the other pieces originated their roles: Ms. Sigman, the dancer-choreographer Aleta Hayes (who performs with Ms. Cohen in the 1996 duet "Negotiations," which interprets the relationship between the biblical Sarah and Hagar) and Regina Nejman, who will dance in the 1998 tragic duet, "Jeptha's Daughter," while Ms. Cohen recites the poem of the same name, by Alicia Ostricker, that inspired it.

Caryn Heilman will perform the sobering and statuesque solo "Ariadne," which Ms. Cohen developed for her in 1985, several years before Ms. Heilman joined the Paul Taylor Dance Company, from which she recently retired after a 10-year association to pursue her own choreography.

"We made 'Ariadne' together, in the sense that I was the person Ze'eva made it on," Ms. Heilman said in the studio, just before a run-through of the dance. After she had rehearsed it, Ms. Cohen picked up the story of its making.

T HIS dance, to me, is Ariadne's peace offering to Theseus, who abandoned her at Naxos and never came back for her, and to herself," Ms. Cohen said. "Caryn and I took time -- two weeks -- to find just the right movement.

"It's the one time I started all the choreography of a dance from positions," Ms. Cohen continued. "I strung together gestures from Hellenic vases and from books: this is mourning. This gesture is going to the bath. This is an archer. I put them together like notes in a musical scale. The idea is that a woman has been found on an island as a sculpture, and, in the course of the dance, she comes back

to life, trying to make sense of what happened to her, why she was abandoned.

"An audience may not see the particular meaning I had for every gesture, but they will see in the first that she's abandoned and in the last that she has something to give. If they understand those, they'll have something. I'm still of the school that likes to leave room for an audience to interpret. If you can get to a fertile symbol from which people can take their own stories, that's the best."