THE ART OF DANCE BIOGRAPHY WRITING

by Giora Manor

Every artist writes his own autobiography.
(Havelock Ellis)
Biography is life without theory.
(Benjamin Disraeli)

Several new books about the lives of American modern dance artists recently landed on my desk. Among them Marcia B. Siegel's *Days on Earth* (Yale Univ. Press, 1988) about Doris Humphrey and *Solitary Song,* an autobiography by Pauline Koner (Duke Univ. Press, 1989).

The names of both authors immediately conjured up in my memory the smell of grass, of the lawn at Duke University's campus at Durham, North Carolina. At noon on a hot summer day, three figures walked leisurely towards the dining hall: a blond woman, a small dark-haired woman with huge black eyes, and a slim, tall man. As I was going in the same direction, I joined them. It suddenly dawned on me I was walking in the midst of history: three quarters of the original cast of José Limóns *Moor's Pavane,* in my opinion one of the most perfectly tailored modern dance works ever created.

Of course, José Limón himself was not there. He had died six years earlier in 1972.

Another memory floated into my mind — that of a memorial gathering held at Lincoln Center in New York a few days after Limón's demise. There for the first time, I saw Doris Humphrey's *Day on Earth,* another perfect work of art, a paradigm of the best in modern dance of the '40s which served Marcia Siegel for the title of her book about Humphrey.

Marcia herself was also there at Duke in the summer of '78. She was conducting the Dance Critics' Conference in which I too participated.

Two things struck me as we all approached the mundane campus dining hall: how much of the history of modern dance is still with us in the form of people who were there at the creation, and how closely interconnected so many of the leading modern dance artists were, like a clan or an extended family. There are genealogies, whole "extended choreographic families" as Don McDonagh so succinctly puts it the graphic design on the fly-leaf of his *Complete Guide to Modern Dance.*

Perhaps biography, "auto" or otherwise is one of the few forms in which the essence of dance, such an elusive art form, can be caught on the printed page.

But do the facts (born so and so, studied with, joined the company of, fell out with, began choreographing, John Martin wrote in the New York Times such and such, toured abroad), told with greater or lesser narrative talent reveal much more than what may be gleaned from an encyclopedia?

Most autobiographies of choreographers and dancers tend to become reports of battles and disappointments, strewn with severed relationships, struggles with insensitive, mercenary impresarios, with hardly a tranquil respite between skirmishes. For example, here is the list of chapter titles in Part II. of *An Artist First.* wrihen by Selna Jeanne Cohen to supplement Doris Humphrey's autobiography (published in 1972): Interim, Hopes and Fears, Family Life Pioneering, Threats, In the Face of Misfortune, Helping, A Good Fighter. Nearly all sound like dispatches from the war front.

Indeed perhaps the most apt description of a dancer's life is the term coined by Humphrey to describe her theory of movement: "Fall and Recovery."

The antidote for injuries of body and soul which are a constant bane of a dancer's life in most biographies are the selected quotations from newspaper critics' articles. The negative ones are often conveniently forgotten and only the "raves" get into the book...

Pauline Koner is more courageous than most authors in

this respect. She quotes a very damaging review by the most important critic of those days, John Martin of the *New York Times,* as well as a vicious piece by a gossip columnist in the *New York Post.*

The usual selective quoting creates a strange discrepancy between the despair and anger felt by the artist, who is misunderstood, misinterpreted, vilified and savaged by the critics and what is acturally quoted. But after all, artists are human, and it is easy to forgive such foibles.

Another aspect of dance writing — aesthetic, critical or biographical — which is detrimental to the correct perspective of the view offered, is the nearly total isolation of dance history from world history and the development of the other arts. This not-so-splendid isolation is rather typical in dancers, but historians and biographers should have a more objective viewpoint.

Of course, there is a certain aquarium-feeling in any dance studio. The world at large and what takes place outside recede into a distant, faint perspective, a mere shadow of political and social reality. World wars and upheavals become footnotes, mainly confined to the sphere of private life. The mirrors lining the studio walls reflect only the self.

I remember how an old lady, a former dancer of Mary Wigman, when challenged by young people at a dance history colloquium held in Berlin a few years ago, justified Wigman's tacit acceptance of Nazi rule by saying: "We were busy all day in the studio and too tired at night to notice what was happening around us, until it was too late..."

A rather lame excuse.

Knowing that Pauline Koner had spent several months in Soviet Russia in the mid-'30s, during the great purges and the show trials of Stalin and his henchmen, I expected a reappraisal of her attitudes at the time as seen in retrospect. But she merely quoates her diary and tells some spicy intimate stories about her private life in the U.S.S.R. Her diary and her story about her romance with the famous film director Pudovkin are fascinating, but fail to explain the situation of modern dance in the socialist state.

Koner and Anna Sololow, who also spent a long time in Russia, were savagely attacked when they returned home to the U.S. Very little about this found its way into Koner's book. Similary, the related phenomenon of the left-wing political active modern dance movement in the U.S. durnig the great depression and Roosevelt's New Deal is given short shrift.

Perhaps one shouldn't expect too much impersonal insight in an autobiography, which by its very mature is supposed to supply the individual closeup which is grist for the mill of the historian.

Indeed, Marcia Siegel is the right person to disect and marshall the facts to create a comprehensive picture. She does this very well indeed.

Only occasionally is her book prone to the approach so often found in dance hisotry works — namely, that of supplying the reader with too many facts, such as exact dates of premieres, addresses and who danced which part when and where.

Days on Earth certainly doesn't belong in the category of books which are but long lists of facts hung on a clothes line to dry in the sun. The reluctance of writers to offer opinions and to stick to often irrelevant verifiable pieces of information is certainly the result of many dance history works being rehashes of doctoral theses and the detrimental influence of academic writing requirements.

The academic method also causes the page to be festooned with footnotes. Extensive footnoting is a most important tool for anyone engaged in further research. It is most frustrating to find fascinating quotes in older books, such as those by Kurt Sachs, without any cited source.

At first I was astonished to find no footnote numerals on the pages of Siegel's book. Then I discovered Marcia had used a method which I hadn't previously encountered. She listed all quotes by page and line number, at the end of the book, with the first words of the cited material to facillitate their location. This method lets the general reader ride along unimpeded, yet offers the researcher all the information he may need.

Days on Earth is also a contribution to redressing the injustice inflicted by hisotry on Doris Humphrey who, to judge by her choreographic work, was no less on artist than Marta Graham who became in the common mind synonymous with American modern dance. Everyone knows about Graham's "Contraction and Release", while Humphrey's "Fall and Recovery" is an esoteric term known only to specialists. Perhaps if Doris had reached a ripe old age and kept her own company till today, this injustice would not have ocurred. ■

AN EARLY EXPERIMENT IN DANCE THEATRE IN ISRAEL

by Nava She'an

The connection between Anna Sokolow, one of the leading creators of modern dance in America and Israel began nearly 40 years ago when she was invited to work with "Inbal." She has returned to this country nearly every year since, to choreograph and to teach. Indeed her "Lyrical Theatre" was the forerunner of "Batsheva" dance company. (See Nathan Mishori's article in Israel Dance '80.)

In February 1990 Anna will celebrate her 80th birthday. The following exerpt from memories the actress Nava She'an is now writing, depics her collaboration with Anna Sokolow in the early '60s on a dance theatre piece, many years before that term began to be used, is our birthday present for her.

G.M.

For more than three years I had been travelling all over Israel performing my one-woman show. What now? Should I start preparing another program? I wasn't sure what to do. I had heard that Anna Sokolow, the American choreographer, was teaching the "Inbal" dancers. I was accepted and enrolled as one of the students in the course she was giving. Of course, not being a dancer but a professional actress, I wasn't as agile as the youngsters participating in the summer course. But this didn't deter me; on the contrary, it egged me on. What Anna was teaching is exactly what I love best: it isn't just dance, but rather movement, which requires the qualities of acting. I followed Anna's work avidly, until one day an idea occured to me. Not long ago I had read a play by the Danish playwright Finn Mathling, "The Journey into the Green Shadows". I liked it very much, acquired the performing rights and had it translated into Hebrew. I approached Anna, proposing to stage it with me as a movement theatre piece. In other words, that parts of the woman's monologue, which constitutes the whole play, would be danced instead of just acted (spoken.)

Until than I had always acted as my own director, but I felt I was unable to be my own choreographer as well. Anna was delighted by the offer and consented to work with me on the staging of the play. We worked for about a month, several hours daily. We inderstood each other so well that I felt as one person with her. The movement Anna created became the starting point for my acting.

She didn't interfere with the audio part of the play or the intonations of the spoken text. She relied on me, knowing that the final shape of the performance would be based on our common idea of it.

She decided to use Alban Berg's "Violin Concerto." This month of work with Anna Sokolow was one of the happiest and I most fertile periods of my life. Though sometimes I was a bit taken aback by her enthusiasm. She would shower me with compliments and superlatives, which frustrated me instead of encouraging me. Of course I enjoyed her praise, but it embarrassed me to hear her say: "I am enchanted by you!" She was, as she often stated, "in love with me in my moments of creation."

"I am enchanted by your full femineity, as expressed in your movement, which is simple, or rather untrained, professionally." She found in me some elements of the art of Isadora Duncan, and that was the style in which she chose to direct "Journey."

Yes, it was she who staged and directed. It soon became plain to me that she was the dominant partner, not myself.

The program therefore listed her as the director of the play. In contrast to my previous one-woman shows, which were monodramas, "Journey" was a monologue. It had no "invisible partner", the dramatic devise used in monodrama to provide the actor with an invisible second protagonist, who exists only in his imagination and is perceived by the audience through him.

Perhaps this lack of a partner made me turn to dance in my new production, since I don't see a monologue as a