

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 excerpt from memories the actress Nava She'an is now writing, depicts 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 occurred 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 then 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 understood 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 femininity, 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 device 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

compete theatrical form. The whole play takes place on the level of a soliloquy, and the woman has no fixed age. She constantly veers between childhood and old age. She also doesn't belong to a certain place. Because she isn't fixed to a certain space and time, she depicts the whole lifespan of a woman, everywhere and anytime. As there is no "second", imaginary character, everything is open to exploration concerning the passage of time and the transitions between the different ages in the life of that particular woman. I turned to movement to solve these problems, and thus became involved with the work of Anna Sokolow. Here are some remarks I jotted at the time in my notebook:

The woman was born in death, into a world of death and water. After all, even before it is born, the fetus is surrounded by water in the womb. The sperm and the cadaver are one: between them is only the threshold of transition. I have to create in the mind of the spectator a double feeling: that of the present and the non-present, of presence and absence, of reality and non-reality.

As a child, one discovers everything, all is new, astounding. In old age one experiences how everything returns, how the limbs degenerate; you are unable to withstand this challenge, so you take leave. The main problem is how to depict the personal in such a way that it becomes impersonal. The reoccurrence of events (in the character's life on-stage) is, to my mind, the special feature of this play.

The staging has to provide a framework for a "moving voice", a voice that moves about, conveying what the soul feels. Rehearsals progressed towards the first performance without either of us having decided what to call our work: dance theatre or rather movement theatre.

In 1960 no one paid any serious attention to such a form of staging. It took many more years for the now well known genre of dance theatre to emerge. Perhaps that is the reason, Dr. Elyakim Yaron in his article on this phenomenon (Israel Dance '87-'88), does not mention Anna Sokolow's and my pioneering work. He concentrates on contemporary creators of dance theatre in Israel, such as Na'ava Zuckerman, Ruth Ziv-Eyal and other choreographers. I bear no grudge against Elyakim Yaron. He himself wasn't yet a theatre and dance critic in those days. At any rate, the critics then were not "officially" invited to the performance and came of their own volition as it suited them.

I took "Journey into the Green Shadows" on the road, mostly performing in the same kibbutzim where I had



Anna Sokolow

appeared in my previous one-woman shows.

The critic Yoram Kaniuk wrote in his review, "She travels from place to place. For such a venture one needs courage, belief and talent. She has all three and spends them all lavishly on stage."

Dr. Yaron, in his article about dance theatre analyzes performances in which the actor-dancer "did not have at his disposal the (spoken) word as one of the tools of his trade." "Journey" was an exact example of such a rare fusion of oral and corporeal expression, of text and movement. Yaron continues, "The point of departure isn't stylized movement (ballet) but rather natural movement, utilizing all the potential of the human body, in repose (relaxation) or movement (tension). Regarding natural movement as a starting point postulates also a new approach to the personality of the actor."

After I had performed "Journey" for about a year, Anna again arrived in Israel and, of course, came to see me do it. After the show she didn't say so, but I felt she wanted to tell me, "You must do your daily class. Without constant training it isn't possible..."

January 1963. Another year had passed. I had

invitations to perform, but suddenly became apprehensive. Some time ago I had read somewhere, "The public doesn't want to see the fat Isadora, clad in a white sheet hopping on stage anymore." I was afraid, I was beginning to look ridiculous, as certainly there is some justification for the audience not to wish to watch an aging actress perform. Was I an "aging actress", at the age of 43, or do I look like one?

I didn't know the answer, but I was afraid. I was sorry to part with "Journey," but I decided to give up. My body had lost its self assurance. I may dance in the privacy of my home, but not in front of an audience, on-stage, since discontinuing my daily training routine. I demand regular movement training from my students, and for

long years I trained conscientiously myself. But not any more. So I had to take the consequences.

I thought that between Anna and myself a firm relationship had formed. But life doesn't comply with our plans and wishes. In 1977 Anna was asked to stage a play about Hanna Szenes, the parachutist captured and killed by the Nazis, for the Haifa Municipal Theatre, which I had joined in 1961. She offered me the role of Hanna's mother. I was delighted by the prospect to work with Anna Sokolow again! We met twice in Tel Aviv to discuss the part. But internal theatre intrigues being what they are, nothing came of it. Another actress played the role. Anna and myself didn't meet again since. ■

TAMAR BEN-AMI תמר בן-עמי

Choreographer

כוריאוגרפית



מפגשים - סדנאות

המלך גיורגי 66, תל-אביב, טלפון: 03-288621
66, King Georeg St. Tel - Aviv, Tel: 03-288621



אלכס קוטאי יחסי צבור
ALEX KUTAI Public Relations

רח' בול 6 תל-אביב 62285 62285 Tel-Aviv 62285

טל. 03-5461613, 5463612

- מבין הפרויקטים שמשרדנו טיפל:**
- ★ להקת המחול מויסייב - מבריה"מ
 - ★ פסטיבל המחול כרמיאל
 - ★ להקת אומסק - מבריה"מ
 - ★ להקת קול וזממה - משה אפרתי
 - ★ התיאטרון הקאמרי
 - ★ המחזמר "אחים בדם"