

ANNA SOKOLOW, THE LYRIC THEATRE AND ISRAEL

BY
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Ever since I first met Anna Sokolow in 1953, when she came to Israel at the instigation of Jerome Robbins and with the help of the America-Israel Culture Foundation, (then the Norman Fund), until today, innumerable voices have reached me — all uttering the name 'Anna'. Those that come to mind are the young voices of the early days of 'Inbal', of students of drama and dance who studied with her in various courses in Israel and the United States. Intermingled with these, are the voices of choreographers and dancers Jerome Robbins, Glenn Tetley, John Butler, Alvin Ailey, Norman Morrice, Jane Dudley, Martha Hill — of actors Aharon Meskin, Hanna Rovina, Fania Lubitsch and many, many others from the theatre and dance world in the United States, England, Holland and Israel. There are no limits to the profusion of feelings expressed in these voices, whether in Anna's presence or not, or when recalling her name. And the larger part of these expressions were always love, appreciation and admiration for the artist and person, the teacher and choreographer of immense influence and individuality, for a figure which symbolised an unquestionable bond between humanity and the art of movement.

It is true that here and there amidst the rich harmony of voices there were also some dissonant notes. There were those who, speaking in the name of art, of course, criticised her demanding technical approach and serious choreographic themes, which were not to their taste and for whom, it appeared, she lacked respect and underrated them. There were also those youngsters who had dropped out of her classes as they could not put up with the rough side of her tongue, or at times, her hands. But even those who were displeased or disquieted by her, discovered and all agree that Anna Sokolow and her close links with Israel, served as a challenge to live up to, that her personality, her values and artistic activities changed the landscape and opened up new avenues in the development of the art of dance in Israel.

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THE UNDERSTANDING HEART

When Anna Sokolow is creating for a dance group, her work reveals two elements that are actually one and the same, as far as she is concerned — human values and choreographic values. At the core of her compositions stands modern man — without theatrical embellishment or affectations which diminish and distort his true image. Historical or mythological figures are not generally part of her subject matter.

Truth and beauty are bound together in Sokolow's work, but it is essentially the truth which determines the quality of beauty as far as she is concerned. Ugly behaviour attracts her attention and evokes her choreographic reactions with regard to mankind today. From the individual, from dancer and spectator alike, she demands an emotional response — the prompting of one's conscience, an understanding that justifies the term 'human being'.

There is no story line in her work, apart from that for the legitimate theatre. Poetry is the rule. Her poetry suffers the pain of man and recalls his few moments of joy. Anna's song weaves, forcefully, the coming together of individuals who, in their fusion, may possibly arrive at the meaning of life.

Every creative work, including choreography, needs clearly to define the opposite poles of its material. These outline the living space in which the work moves and develops. Of these contrasts, or opposite poles, we find a number which are characteristic of Anna Sokolow's work in particular, and of modern art in general. We find the 'choreographic cluster' — a body of closely-knit dancers, as well as its opposite, a widespread dispersal of dancers all around the stage; a single straight line and a broken series of dots; 'unison' — the same movements enacted by all the dancers at the same time, and varied and independent movements

of each dancer, as in polyphonic music, in which the limits of choreographic lines lie only in the number of participants. In various choreographies, Anna gives these basic contrasts diverse forms. The attraction of opposite poles she uses in a logical and conscious fashion in order to develop movement to and from pole to pole, by establishing different intermediary forms of grouping and dispersal, lines and dots, in unison and in multi-movement. Incidentally, the choreographic cluster was to be found in Anna's work, before its musical counterpart (the 'tone cluster') became an important element in modern music. Needless to add that today the choreographic cluster can be found in the work of many choreographers of both modern dance and classical ballet.

Anna Sokolow's identity as a creative artist, and no choreographer worthy of the name lacks such an identity, is expressed not only in her overall approach to the structure of the work. One finds her signature in every single movement of each dancer, in the general selection of movement and line, in the choice of music and its integration into the choreography. The body of the dancer is the field wherein Anna creates significant contrasts of round lines versus angular and straight ones. She develops transitions between contrasts and even presents contrasts simultaneously. But these are never arbitrary contrasts or movements, but different aspects of the same concept. The overall choice of movement is actually simple and perhaps closer to a person's movements in everyday life, rather than to traditional dance. But the clear artistic and metric definition of rhythm, tempo and energy of every movement and the particular nuances created by the direction of the eyes, the position of the head and shoulders and the placing of the palms and fingers of the hands, give the movements an unmistakeable character.

Great and expressive music, taken mostly from the best repertoire of modern music and of jazz (she was one of the first to use jazz for serious dance compositions) is a characteristic of most of Anna's works. But because she possesses an independent and conscious concept of choreographic form, she does not depend on the obvious formal aspects of music, as do many other choreographers. Her profound musical sense enables her to blend the choreographic lines with those of the musical composition into a single pattern, whose branches are so entwined that one cannot distinguish whether the movement directs the music or the contrary. But what distinguishes Anna Sokolow beyond everything else is the fact, that although everything we have mentioned so far refers to the realm of purely structural choreographic values, she does not relate to them as such and they are not the source of her inspiration.

Every formal detail of her work has an expressive motivation and the source of each and every movement derives from an inner spiritual emotion. In other words, the movement does not only represent its outward aspect but also the feelings that prompted it. For this reason, it does not suffice to use one's eyes to grasp the entire meaning of her choreography, one must also have an understanding heart. The cluster, the line and the unisono, therefore, symbolise for me personally, not only the striving for fraternity, equality and social harmony, but also the growing threat to man's individuality — while the contrasts stand for the dual nature of the individual who is fighting for the right to express his own identity while at the same time strives toward his integration into society as a whole.

LIGHTING THE SPARK.

Jerome Robbins evidently knew exactly what he was doing when he approached Anna in the winter of 1953 with the question: "What are you doing during the Christmas holidays, Anna? Nothing? Then come to Israel with me. There you will find an original group of people, fascinating and unusual — the members of 'Inbal' and Sarah Levi-Tanai. With your training disciplines, they can soon become the exponents of Israel."

It was clear to Robbins that this fighting artist, who at the time had already twenty years of work to her credit — as a solo dancer and choreographer to dance groups, the theatre and musical comedies — could contribute considerably to Inbal and to the dance in Israel in general. He knew, too, of her experience in education, in establishing dance groups, her knowledge of the techniques of both modern dance and the classical ballet. He was also aware of the appreciation afforded her by Mexican artists such as Diego Rivera, Carlos Chavez and others, who had assisted her in setting up the first group of modern dance of Mexico in 1939. He realised that the same social conscience which prompted her to appear in workers' clubs in the thirties and to create choreographies on such subjects as juvenile delinquency, 'A Strange American Funeral' (about a worker killed by a stream of molten copper), 'The Murder of the Innocent' (about the Civil War in Spain), 'War is Beautiful' (the rise of Fascism in Italy — 1937) would also make her react sympathetically and energetically to the new society in Israel. Rightly he also imagined that this American artist, who stemmed from an non-religious Jewish home and who had created works on Jewish themes, such as 'Exile' (1939), 'The Dog' 'Kaddish' 'Three Biblical Characters' (1946) and others, would inevitably strike a bond with Israel that could not be untied.

And so the spark that was set alight during that first meeting with the Inbal group has never gone out and the American artist who returned to Israel every year and sometimes twice a year since (with the help of the America-Israel Culture Foundation) became an integral part of the dance world of Israel.

"They were wonderful" says Anna of the Inbal dancers, "there was something very special and genuine about them. I did not know there were Jews like them, who live in such a manner, or that they can create art in such a way."

Anna took on the role of midwife to the young dance theatre. She introduced them to an awareness of body and dance disciplines, she taught them professional values of public performance and instilled in them a pride in artistic accomplishment. She was their stern artistic governess; loving and beloved, who went to great lengths for them and filled with hope, accompanied them on their first highly successful tour to Europe and the United States.

THE HISTORICAL TREND

The trend away from modern European dance (inherited from the pioneers of dance in Israel: the Ornstein sisters, Gertrud Kraus, Katia Michaeli, Tehilla Roessler, Dvora Bertoni and others) towards American dance techniques which took place in the fifties with the appearance and work of Rina Shaham and Rena Gluck, became more acute and established by the end of the decade through dance classes which Anna held with the aid of the America-Israel Culture Fund. These were given to dancers, others were held for young actors – and her work which appeared on the stage in 1958, 'A Soldier's Tale' (narrated by Arik Lavie; The Soldier: David Abraham; The Princess: Bruria Eviezer; The Devil: Juky Arkin), 'Poem', performed by the Dance Stage (Bamat Machol) and the choreography for an opera by Avidom: 'Alexander the Hashmonai' (Israel Opera, 1959), not only established American techniques as the new dominant force in Israeli dance, but also clarified to the younger generation of dancers and instilled in them the need for more exacting discipline in the daily ninety-minute class, in rehearsals and in public performances, as well as the profound difference between improvisation and dance composition.

It was Anna who advised the America-Israel Culture Foundation (according to Judith Gottlieb – director of the Foundation at the time) to set up a single dance theatre for various choreographers. The importance of this was not only to emphasise that it was the public's duty to support

young choreographers (Rina Shaham, Rena Gluck, Naomi Aleskovsky). It was an important step toward changing the Israeli tradition of one-choreographer-companies lead by a single creator, and the beginning of the dancer's release from dependence on the work of a single artist. This was the first indication that there was a possibility of establishing a repertory dance theatre in Israel.

These developments, in which Anna played a crucial role, changed the climate of dance in Israel and led naturally to the idea of establishing a permanent dance group. Eliezer Peri, the Chairman of the Board of the America-Israel Culture Foundation at the time, approached Anna with the remark: "Why shouldn't you create a dance group here?" Anna liked the idea and agreed with enthusiasm, prepared a plan for action and presented it to the board for their consideration. Among the members of the board was Batsheva de Rothschild, who later established the 'Batsheva' and 'Bat-Dor' dance groups.

"It was a revolution", according to Judith Gottlieb, "no one thought about dancers, at the time, but only about creators. The major support went to choreographers. Although 'Inbal' was already in existence, no one understood that dancers would have to be paid if a permanent group were to be set up. Anna's proposal was accepted. For the first time, working dancers were given independent professional standing and on May 24, 1962, the Lyric Theatre was formed.

THE LYRIC THEATRE

The Lyric Theatre presented four programmes.

First Program – 1962

Members of the Group:

Galia Gat, Liora Chachmi, Dalia Harlap, Ze'eva Cohen, Dalia Kimchi, Judith Ron, Rina Shacham, Rina Schenfeld, Ehud Ben-David, Itzhak Ben-Nissim, Shimon Siani, Yigal Paz, Abraham Zuri, Joseph Kipnis.

The program consisted of: 'A Soldier's Tale'; 'The Treasure' – from a story by J.L. Peretz; Music: Nathan Mishori; and 'Dreams' all choreographed by Anna Sokolow.

Second Program – 1962

Members of the group:

Galia Gat, Liora Chachmi, Dalia Harlap, Ze'eva Cohen, Miriam Ferber, Ehud Ben David, Itzhak Ben Nissim, Shlomo Dever, Yigal Paz, Abraham Zuri, Joseph Kipnis.

'Dreams' and 'Four Jazz Suites'; 'Opus '62'

Third Program – 1963

Members of the Group:

Galia Gat, Dalia Harlap, Miriam Ferber, Liora Chachmi, Moshe Romano, Abraham Zuri, Yanon Neeman, Leah Levin.

'Rooms', 'Suite No. 5' and 'Lyric Suite'

Fourth Program – 1964

Choreographic Director: Anna Sokolow

Asst. Director: Abraham Zuri

Guest Artist: Rina Shacham

Members of the Group:

Ofra Ben Zvi, Gideon Abrahami, Joanna Pelled, Yanon Neeman, Liora Chachmi-Zirlin, Abraham Manzour.

'Forms', 'The Question' and 'Ode'.



In the summer of 1978, a few of the former members of the 'Lyric Theatre' met with the author. Here are a few of the remarks made by Anna Sokolow, Abraham Zuri, Galia Gat, Dalia Harlap and Ruth Lerman made at that meeting.

Nathan: What was it like working with Anna?

Galia: Work was sacred! I was afraid to move.

Zuri: Like an electric shock! We were terribly enthusiastic. We worked like horses.

Galia: That was the life!

Nathan: Were the dancers of the 'Lyric Theatre' different from dancers you have worked with in the United State?

Anna: Yes. They were Israelis. Like 'Inbal' dancers, they had insufficient technical training. They had some ballet and came from the Israeli-German school and from folk dancing. But because of this, they were open to new ideas, without a set of cliches. They were very talented, worked hard, and they came to dance and not to earn money.

Nathan: Actually, how did you come to Anna?

Ruth: Straight from Archipova. (Valentina Archipova, a Russian dancer, who taught at Haifa.)

Zuri: From the studio of Archipova, Katia Delakova, Rina Shacham, Rena Gluck, Naomi Aleskovsky.

Dalia & Galia: We studied with everyone we could. With Judith Ornstein, Mia Arbatova, Gertrud Kraus, Rena Gluck, and others.

Nathan: What was required of you at the auditions for the 'Lyric Theatre'.

Anna: They had to dance and to read something.

Galia: I had to count from one to ten and when I came to ten I had to shout the number 'ten'. And I remember that I shouted with all my might. I really put my heart into it – together with all my desire to get on stage and dance.

Zuri: I failed. Only later on I was asked to come again.

Nathan: What did you do every day?

Ruth: We studied elsewhere for two days. Only for rehearsals did we get together.

Galia: The rehearsals took place at different times and at different places. We worked in the studio of Katia Michaeli, Hassia Levy, 'Inbal', in the gymnasium of the Levinsky Teachers Seminar.

Nathan: Who looked after all the staging problems?

Dalia: Adam, and Arik (Galia's husband) saw to the lighting

Galia: Everyone did something.

Ruth: I ironed.

Nathan: Where did you perform?

Zuri: We danced everywhere. We danced in places where no group would appear today. We danced on tables tied together with rope, on concrete, on the floor, on stacks of hay. Of course we danced in Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, Haifa, Nathanya, but also in the settlements of Kidron, Ein Hod, Tivon, Lahav, Afikim, Beth Zera, Kfar Witkin, Kiriat Gat, Maayan Zvi, Hulda, Maabareth, Shuval, Daphna, Ayelet Hashachar, Reshafim, Mesilloth, Sarid.

Nathan: How were you received outside the big cities?

Everyone: Wonderfully – there was enthusiasm and joy.

Nathan: What special experiences remain with you?

Ruth and everyone: The work at rehearsals. The dances, particularly 'Rooms' and 'Dreams'.

Dalia: The full and shared life. We were like a family.

Anna: They really worked together. There was no feeling of competition — there were no stars. In my work, I avoid differentiating between the status of soloists and the group.

Nathan: And the sad moments?

Zuri: When they announced that auditions were going to be held for the 'Batsheva' company, the Lyric Theatre was still at work. We were all tense and kept quiet. We didn't talk to one another about it and did not know who would go to the auditions.

Galia: (Apologetically) We didn't work enough. Until Anna came on her annual visit, we were like a herd without a shepherd. And along came a promise of work with known international choreographers. It was difficult for me — it was a sort of betrayal. I wrote a long letter to Anna and she understood!

Nathan: Was the Batsheva group the only reason for discontinuing the work of the 'Lyric Theatre'?

Zuri: The general situation was difficult. We only received a salary during half of the year. We had to earn our living and danced when possible, in the theatre in Godik's musicals, with other groups. We could not bring other choreographers from abroad and in the light of our experience with Anna, we did not want to work with Israeli choreographers. Getting engagements was another problem. Dancing four or five times a year in Tel Aviv was the limit. There was no one dealing with organisation or public relations. Support from the American-Israel Culture Foundation stopped as soon as 'Batsheva' was formed. The dancers in the fourth program received no pay at all. Rehearsals had to be held in the foyer of the 'Chamber Theatre' on a stone floor. The premiere itself was held on a Friday at five in the afternoon.

Nathan: What did working in the 'Lyric Theatre' give you?

Ruth: Criteria for everything that happened afterwards.

Galia & Dalia: Values! Depth!

Zuri: (Quietly, painfully) When I see that the movements do not come from within, when the glance is wayward and there is no justification for the movements of the hands — I know that it is not dancing. Today, most of the dancers merely want to be beautiful — the dancing is cold.

Ruth: It gave us a degree of depth which stayed with us when we were working with other groups as well.

Anna: (Continuing Zuri's remarks) There are better conditions for the dancer than in the past, but the atmosphere is not what it should be. There is an aura of competitiveness and not of giving all that it is possible to give. They think of careers, salaries, more than of the dance and its significance. There isn't sufficient respect for the actual work. The various dance groups have no clear concept of their purpose or their aims. A dancer must know why he dances with a particular group. The choreographers do not look around them — they do not relate to the landscape or to life around them. Remember! You are dancing about people, about humanity. Who or what is humanity? You!

Not all of Anna Sokolow's expectations, or those of the dancers or the Israeli dance world, were fulfilled in the 'Lyric Theatre'. The reasons for this are evident from the remarks of past members of the group. The result was not a fully professional establishment with an efficient administration, but a pioneering enterprise which was effective due to the will power, the artistic beliefs, the persistence and enormous personal efforts of Anna Sokolow and some of the dancers.

But the important achievements of the 'Lyric Theatre' are unquestioned. It educated and developed dancers with high standards of technical ability and artistic integrity. It staged eleven choreographies, some of which are considered as outstanding works in the repertoire of international modern dance. Thirty performances of each of the programmes, newspaper coverage and many critical articles about the performances, brought about an awareness of the dance and enlarged the audiences for dance performances. New values and criteria were applied to choreographic works. And in 1963, not only the 'Lyric Theatre' and 'Inbal' were at work, but also dance groups such as that of Rina Shacham, Rena Gluck, Naomi Aleskovsky and Rina Scheinfeld, and dancers of the 'Lyric Theatre' worked with all of them. Anna Sokolow's 'Lyric Theatre' not only provided the impulse to establish other dance groups, but also handed down to them some of its best dancers.

ANNA AND ISRAEL

Anna Sokolow, whose contribution to modern dance has been recognised, appreciated and esteemed in her own country (Dance Magazine Award, 1961), was sent on an official cultural mission to Eastern Europe and China and endowed with honorary doctorates from Brandeis University and the University of Ohio in 1978, awarded grants and scholarships from important foundations, had her works performed by innumerable companies. For her, Israel was something of a revelation. Her Jewish consciousness, based only on an inner sense for the distant past and not on any knowledge of the religion, tradition or culture, provided a foothold for her constant seeking of the roots of her personality and identity among the intellectuals and artists of Israel. In her own words, "I discovered the roots of Jewish spiritual nobility, the positive element in the stubborn Jewish character". The people, the landscape and the quality of Israel became an indistinguishable part of her make up and some of her works (such as "Deserts", "Dreams", "Song of Songs" "Question without Answer", "Two Poems" based on the work of Leah Goldberg), could not have been created save under the influence of this country. There is no doubt that Israel not only provided Anna with rewarding cultural material but also served to explain her ability to suffer, her unending battle with the 'Philistines' of the dance world and her unswerving adherence to her artistic aims.

Today, after twenty-five years of permanent contact with

Israel, it would appear that her creative activities have reached a summit. In addition to the three choreographies for 'Batsheva' in 1973; "In Memory of No. 52346", "Deserts" and "Poem" in 1977, she re-created "Rooms" and in 1978 "Scenes from the Music of Charles Ives" and "Dreams". With these serious compositions, 'Batsheva' have become the spiritual heir of the 'Lyric Theatre'.

The other dance companies performed works by Anna this year. Flora Cushman's Jerusalem Dance Workshop performed "The Lyric Suite" and the Kibbutz Dance Group, premiered "Two Poems". Students from the Dance Department of the Jerusalem Academy prepared "Question and Answer" last year and this year, a similar group performed "Homage to Gertrud Kraus" (within the frame-work of an appearance by 'Batsheva' group). In 1979 Anna created "By the Water of Babylon" and "From the Song of Songs" for a special performance during the International Seminar on "The Bible in Dance".

The culmination of her activities in Israel will occur in the summer of 1979, when an idea she has been thinking and dreaming of, for a long time will materialise. The 'Haifa Municipal Theatre', the Batsheva dancers, the poet and playwright Israel Eliraz and the Jerusalem composer Mark Kopitman will collaborate with Anna in recreating the image of Hanna Szenes on stage — "Wings"

Anna Sokolow, Israel, and the vision of her 'Lyric Theatre', will be joined together in one focal point. □