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Anna Sokolow in rehearsal with dancers from American Dance Festival at Connecticut College. Photo © Radford Bascome

In Celebration of Anna Sokolow's Centennial 1910-2010

by Hannah Kosstrin

2010 marks the centennial of choreographer Anna Sokolow's birth. Sokolow, who lived from 1910-2000 and was known for her fierce dedication to concert dance as an art form, her insatiable search for truth in performance, and her career-long fight for dance for social change, believed strongly in the importance of Labanotation for the preservation and dissemination of her choreography. Her association with the Dance Notation Bureau began in the 1960s, and continues through the licensing and recording of her work. Universities and professional dance companies direct her work from score for performance internationally.

Sokolow is most widely recognized for her mid-century works of alienation and isolation, specifically for *Rooms* (1955) and *Lyric Suite* (1953), when these sentiments ran through the undercurrent of American society. She is also known for her Holocaust indictments and anti-war statements in dances such as *Dreams* (1961) and *Steps of Silence* (1968), her countercultural rebellion in the many jazz suites that culminated in *Opus '65* (1965), as well as for her work as the original choreographer of the musical *Hair* (1967), and her tongue-in-cheek wit in lighter works such as *A Short Lecture and Demonstration on the Evolution of Ragtime as Demonstrated by Jelly-Roll Morton* (1952) and *Magritte, Magritte* (1970). Sokolow also composed non-narrative lyrical work, including *Ballade* (1965) and *Odes* (1965). She worked with both dancers and actors throughout her career; she developed a performance form she termed lyric theater, a seamless blend of dancing and acting. The intensity and psychological depth of works like *Rooms* and *Steps of Silence* earned Sokolow various nicknames from dance critics in the late 1960s, including "prophet of doom" from Clive Barnes and "apostle of darkness" from Deborah Jowitt.¹ As Tobi Tobias has recently noted, however, the reverence of and historical focus on Sokolow's *Rooms* as a masterwork has eclipsed much of the rest of her career.²

In the 1930s, Sokolow was on the cutting edge in both the revolutionary and modern dance movements, garnering high praise from critics on both sides of the aisle, as she pushed concert dance performance to new heights in both technical advancements and scathing political commentary. Her early and mid-1930s solos, such as *Histrionics* (1931) and *Speaker* (1935), satirized the establishment and bourgeoisie, while group works like *Strange American Funeral* (1936), based on Michael Gold's poem "Strange Funeral in Braddock," that narrated the death of a steel worker who fell into a trough of hot metal, encapsulated the issues of workers rights and safety, and followed the sentiments of many leftist papers of the time.³ In addition to her late-1930s solos *Case History No. —* (1937), a portrait of street youth and a statement about the crime they encounter through their societal neglect, and *Slaughter of the Innocents* (1937), a cry for mothers and children who were Franco's victims in the Spanish Civil War, Sokolow also staged large-scale group works indicting Italian fascism. Her pair of dances in this vein, *Excerpts from a War Poem* (F. T. Marinetti) (1937) and *Façade—Exposizione Italiana* (1937) were allegorical epics that John Martin compared to Leonide Massine's symphonic ballets.⁴ American politics did not escape Sokolow's satiric tongue; her ballet "Filibuster," part of the Negro Cultural Committee's (National Negro Congress) revue *The Bourbons Got the Blues* (1938), featured U.S. senators running around the stage, acting like spoiled children, in the wake of the Senate's 1938 filibuster of the Wagner Van-Nuys Anti-Lynching Bill.⁵

Between 1939 and the late 1940s, Sokolow divided her time between New York and Mexico City. The Mexican Secretary of Education contracted her during a time when the government engaged artists, like Sokolow, Diego Rivera, and David Alfaro Siqueiros,⁶ who reflected the values of postrevolutionary Mexico. During the 1940s, Sokolow choreographed dances with Jewish themes, such as *Songs of a Semite* (1943) and *Kaddish* (1945), to stand in solidarity with Jews worldwide during the Holocaust. In 1953 she traveled to Israel via suggestion of choreographer Jerome Robbins, and under the auspices of the America-Israel Cultural Foundation, to work with dancers there, and she split the following ten years between Israel and New York. Sokolow retained longstanding associations with the dance communities in these countries through the duration of her career. The layers of irony and blazing satire that Sokolow cultivated in her work in the 1930s came through in her mid-century works like *Rooms*, *Dreams*, and *Steps of Silence*.

Sokolow's legacy includes her long history of teaching in the U.S. Her relentless demands in the studio brought her students to a high level of performative achievement that was a deep marriage of form and content. Sokolow's long association with The Juilliard School began with a guest residency in 1955; Martha Hill hired Sokolow as a faculty member there in 1958.⁷ She taught at Juilliard until very late in her life. Through the 1980s, she was considered a choreographer in residence at Juilliard, and she had a strong presence there.⁸ At Juilliard, Sokolow not only interacted with other prominent choreographers as her colleagues, such as Antony Tudor, but she also taught in an environment in which Martha Hill introduced Labanotation as an important part of the curriculum.⁹

Sokolow worked with the Joffrey Ballet and the Oakland Ballet, and taught for many years at Mary Anthony's studio in New York. Among her many residencies at universities across the U.S., one of her first was at The Ohio State University in 1966. The materials that captured the experience, the OSU Department of Photography and Cinema's film *Anna Sokolow Directs Odes*, and Senta Driver's *DanceScope* article "Passion Is Also Important," show the intensity and the reward of working with Sokolow in the studio.¹⁰ Sokolow's teaching influence remains in the bodies and teaching styles of many dancers who, in turn, share it with their students. Sokolow is also part of the Labanotation syllabus: students studying Labanotation at the elementary level encounter Sokolow's work in their reading studies through an excerpt of *Session for Six*, and are able to embody it early in their notation studies.¹¹ Sokolow also passed her love and reverence of music, visual art, film, and literature on to her students. Dancers who worked with her from the 1960s through the rest of her career cite Sokolow as an important source of their general artistic education.¹² These include Alvin Ailey, Dorothy Bird, Martha Clarke, Ze'eva Cohen, Raul Flores, John Giffin, Hannah Kahn, Jim May, Lorry May, Trina Parks, Kathy Posin, Moshe Romano, and Bea Seckler, among countless others.

Notator Ray Cook, who came to the U.S. in 1962 to continue his Labanotation studies that he began in Australia, first worked with Sokolow when he was a Juilliard student. A couple of years later he was dancing in her company and soon began to write the first of many scores of her work (that's his hand scooting up the page in Lucille Rhodes and Margaret Murphy's 1980 documentary *Anna Sokolow: Choreographer*). Cook voluntarily did the work because he felt the dances were important and needed to be documented. He averred that Sokolow's sister Rose Bank, who made Sokolow's costumes for many years, told Sokolow she should have her works notated.¹³ That encouragement, and her exposure to notation at Juilliard, may have influenced Sokolow's decision to work with notation.

In addition to giving permission for the notation of nearly twenty of her dances in Labanotation, between 1976 and 1988 Sokolow wrote letters of support for the Dance Notation Bureau (DNB) which demonstrate her backing of the DNB's mission and of the field of Labanotation. In these letters, she expounded upon the importance and professionalism of the institution, and how having her work notated enabled many companies to perform her choreography at once; Labanotation kept her established

repertory alive while freeing her to continue to make new work.¹⁴ In a 1979 letter of support for the DNB to the National Endowment for the Arts, Sokolow wrote, “I have come to depend on the Dance Notation Bureau as an invaluable tool to my art.”¹⁵

The depth of imagery and motivation upon which Sokolow built her mid-century movement aesthetic posed a challenge for notators. Sokolow’s solo movement and choreography in the 1930s-1940s, as evidenced in photographs and reviews from this time, reflect her Graham training (she was a principal dancer with Martha Graham’s company from 1930-1939): her movement, at its core, featured abdominal contractions and powerful spirals through the torso. Sokolow stopped performing in the early 1950s due to a back injury. It was also during this time that her choreography changed to reflect a new method of working. After a trip to Russia in 1934 and through her work with the Theatre Union during the 1930s, Sokolow began using the Stanislavsky Method. In the 1950s, she brought it to the forefront of her process through her work with Elia Kazan and the Actors Studio.¹⁶ It most likely also enabled her to obtain power from the dancers’ movement, as she could not demonstrate as much herself anymore. She instructed the dancers to draw from their own experiences in order to build their characters, from which she constructed her works’ narratives.

In addition to using the turns, torso arches, and full-body falls from the dancers’ technical training, Sokolow also incorporated into her choreography movement drawn from daily life taken to extremes, from running heavily, to frantically climbing over bodies, to vulnerably reaching with arms, to slamming violently into walls. Cook notes in his introduction to *Ballade* in the Language of Dance Series, “She knew that if we planned our paths and knew in advance where we were going, the spontaneity would be lost. In reproducing her works, it is this look of spontaneity that is most difficult to achieve because dancers want to know exactly where they are expected to be on stage.”¹⁷ Cook, who grew to know Sokolow’s work well, quickly learned not to record a dance too soon, because Sokolow often altered the movement during the rehearsal process before solidifying it for performance.¹⁸

In recording Sokolow’s work, Cook has emphasized focusing on the crux of the movement. Since so much of what he experienced of her work was the importance of the imagery she gave and the dancers’ motivation, the full dance went beyond the movement symbols on the page.¹⁹ Often, the meaning or imagery behind the movement could only be described in words, and posed a challenge for notating it. Additionally, Sokolow preferred to present dancers as individuals onstage, and not to create absolute unison. While she gave her group of dancers the same instructions, each dancer performed them differently. In order to reflect this in his scores, Cook said that he could notate more than one option for a dance moment, but it was not possible to capture exactly what each dancer did with Sokolow’s instructions.²⁰ Notator Lynne Weber found a similar movement focus when she notated Hadassah Kruger’s version of Sokolow’s *Kaddish* in 1974. She found that the effort of the dancer’s internal struggle was more important than her resultant positions in space; as such, Weber included Laban Movement Analysis (LMA) symbols in the Labanotation score for that dance.²¹ While Cook found Sokolow’s movement easy to notate in the 1960s,²² its intricacies continue to challenge dancers and directors in staging it today, as they create the fresh, personalized performances that it requires.

Sokolow’s career spanned the twentieth century. The themes, statements, and movement in her work reflect decades of developments in social politics, Jewish identity, dance training, and choreographic choices. Labanotation and the Dance Notation Bureau were important to Sokolow’s work during her lifetime, and they remain integral elements in her legacy.

The following scores of Sokolow’s work are available through the Dance Notation Bureau. The first date is the year Sokolow choreographed the work. This is followed by the name of the notator and the year he or she wrote the score.²³

Kaddish (1945; performed by Hadassah Badock Kruger, 1974; Lynne Weber, 1974)
A Short Lecture and Demonstration on the Evolution of Ragtime as Demonstrated by Jelly-Roll Morton (1952; Muriel Topaz, 1972)
Lyric Suite (1953; Ray Cook, 1972)
L’Histoire du Soldat (1954; Judith Bissell)
Rooms (1955; Ray Cook, 1967, 1972-75, revised 1983)
Dreams (1961; Ray Cook, 1974)
Opus ’63: Third and Fourth Movements (1963; Martha Clarke and Ray Cook, 1963)
Session for Six (1964; Muriel Topaz, 1965)
Ballade (1965; Ray Cook, 1974)
Odes, Duet (1965; Muriel Topaz, 1971)
Steps of Silence (1968; Ray Cook, 1975)

Magritte, Magritte (1970; Ilene Fox, 1982)
Scenes from the Music of Charles Ives (1971; Ilene Fox, 1983-84)
Quarternotes (1974; Lynne Weber, 1974)
Moods (1975; Ray Cook assisted by Charlotte Wile, 1975)
Homage to Alexandre Scriabin (1977; Ray Cook, 1977)
Poe (1977; Jane Marriett, 1977)

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¹ Clive Barnes, "Dance: Anna Sokolow, Prophet of Doom," *New York Times*, n.d., n.p., Anna Sokolow Clippings, The Jerome Robbins Dance Division of The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. The same article ran in the *Washington Post* as "Anna Sokolow, Poet of Chaos." Clive Barnes, "Dance: Anna Sokolow, Poet of Chaos," *Washington Post*, November 15, 1968, 40. Alan M. and Sali Ann Kriegsman Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. See also Deborah Jowitt, "Dance: Calligraphy," *The Village Voice*, November 21, 1968, 30. Alan M. and Sali Ann Kriegsman Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

² Tobi Tobias, "The Afterlife," *Seeing Things: An ArtsJournal Weblog*, March 8, 2010.
http://www.artsjournal.com/tobias/2010/03/the_afterlife.html (accessed March 13, 2010).

³ See, for example, Emery Balint, "Miner's Funeral: A Short Story," *New Masses*, January 16, 1934, 16-19, The Ohio State University Billy Ireland Cartoon Library & Museum, and Herb Krackman, "Seeing American First: IV—Miner's Homecoming," *New Masses*, February 2, 1937, 7, The Ohio State University Billy Ireland Cartoon Library & Museum.

⁴ John Martin, "The Dance: New Blood: Esther Junger, Jose Limon and Anna Sokolow in Bennington," *New York Times*, August 29, 1937, 8X, Anna Sokolow Clippings, The Jerome Robbins Dance Division of The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

⁵ See Owen Burke, "Filibuster and the National Negro Congress," *New Masses*, May 24, 1938, 31, The Ohio State University Billy Ireland Cartoon Library & Museum; Unknown author in *Time Magazine*, May 16, 1938, quoted in Larry Warren, *Anna Sokolow: The Rebellious Spirit* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Book Company Publishers, 1991), 76; and No author, "Negro Artists to Present Social Revue Sunday Night," *Daily Worker*, May 6, 1938, 7, The Ohio State University Libraries.

⁶ Magnolia Flores (dancer and artistic director of Ballet Independiente) in conversation with the author and Alejandra Jara de Marco, March 26, 2010, Mexico City.

⁷ Warren, 174.

⁸ Valarie Williams (dancer, notator, teacher), in discussion with the author, April 20, 2010, Columbus, Ohio.

⁹ Lucy Venable (dancer, notator, teacher) in phone conversation with the author, August 12, 2010.

¹⁰ *Anna Sokolow Directs Odes: Artist in Residence, Winter, 1966*, directed by David L. Parker (The Ohio State University Department of Photography and Cinema, 1972). Collection of Department of Dance, The Ohio State University; and Senta Driver, "Passion Is Also Important: Anna Sokolow at Ohio State," *Dance Scope* 3, no. 1 (1966), 25-29. See also the forthcoming article about Sokolow's relationship with The Ohio State University Department of Dance, Hannah Kosstrin, "The Passion is Still Present: Anna Sokolow Centennial and OSUDance," *InForm* 2009-2010.

¹¹ "Lesson IX" in Peggy Hackney, Sarah Manno, and Muriel Topaz, eds., *Elementary Reading Studies* (New York: The Dance Notation Bureau, Inc., 1970), 8-13.

¹² John Giffin (dancer, choreographer, teacher), in discussion with the author, April 20, 2010, Columbus, Ohio.

¹³ Ray Cook (dancer, notator, teacher), in discussion with the author, October 18, 2009, New York City.

¹⁴ General letter from Anna Sokolow, 6 February 1976, Collection of Dance Notation Bureau (DNB); Anna Sokolow to Rhoda Grauer (National Endowment for the Arts), 14 May 1979, DNB; Anna Sokolow to Dance Notation Bureau, 24 September 1988, DNB; and Anna Sokolow to Kathleen Berman, 4 October 1988, DNB.

¹⁵ Anna Sokolow to Rhoda Grauer (National Endowment for the Arts), 14 May 1979, DNB.

¹⁶ Ellen Graff, *Stepping Left: Dance and Politics in New York City, 1928-1942* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997), 70-74; and Warren, 51-60, 116.

¹⁷ Ray Cook, "Personal Reminiscences of Anna Sokolow," introduction to *Ballade*, text and Labanotation by Ray Cook, ed. Ann Hutchinson Guest, Language of Dance Series No. 5 (Switzerland and USA: Gordon and Breach, 1993), 3-4.

¹⁸ Cook, discussion.

¹⁹ Cook, discussion.

²⁰ Cook, discussion.

²¹ Lynne Weber (notator), in phone conversation with the author, January 25, 2010.

²² Cook, discussion.

²³ See *Notated Theatrical Dances: A Listing of Theatrical Dance Scores Housed at the Dance Notation Bureau*, ninth edition, revised by Mei-Chen Lu, 2009. See also <http://cdsweb01.fhcr.org/DNB/> for the Dance Notation Bureau's online catalog of this list.