

FANCHON SHUR

I have been around Fanchon Shur for many years and collaborated with here in television, film, stage, concert hall and communal religious rituals.

I am finding myself standing today in awe before her as I stood years ago in the presence of her multi-faceted creative wealth, boundless fantasy and intellectual depth.

Fanchon's talents cannot be measured only by an official listing of her choreographic compositions, published poems or exhibits of her drawings and paintings; her spirituality, emotionality and individuality must be confronted in a direct encounter.

I regard Fanchon as one of those rare flaming souls that appear in every generation surrounded with a radiating aura whenever and wherever they are seen.

She was six when her parents moved from their native Chicago to Los Angeles. During her High School years she became a student of Ann Barlen, founder of the Los Angeles Dance Center and foremost dance-educator of children in the country. Soon she began to choreograph her own dances. Her output was phenomenal--some 90 works. Among them: Tara the Stone-cutter, The Hunter, Robin Hood, and many others. In the five years she spent in the Dance Center she taught more than 2000 children from various ethnic groups in the area. This enormous experience with children laid the foundation for her future philosophy and dance-methodology for the young ages.

This period also marks Fanchon's entrance on the concert stage as a solo-dancer and company member under the direction of such nationally renowned choreographers like Anna Sokolow and Charles Wideman.

In 1959 she produced her first independent dance movie Lullaby as a warning to mankind about the menace of the atom bomb. The movie was shown at the 1960 International Film Festival in San Francisco and was awarded second place. In the same year she co-founded, with her dance-partner Kate Hughes, the New Dance Theatre of Los Angeles. The doors of the theatre opened for the first time to the public with the premiere of Fanchon and Kate's major work High Spring, based on birth rituals and primitive ceremonies celebrating the cosmic power of the universe and Mother Earth. When this work was in rehearsal, I met Fanchon. It was shortly after my arrival in the U.S. from Israel. She commissioned me to write the musical score for this dance. I accepted the offer and thus began my collaboration with her. High Spring was followed by a solo-dance Fallen Leaf and another impressive work. Earth. The new

compositions were performed on the concert stage of many theatres in Los Angeles, and were highly prized by critics and enthusiastically received by the public.

Her profound search for authentic sources in ethnic traditions and her intuitive ability to recapture the spirit and pulse of bygone generations helped her to stage successfully two major Greek and Indian festivals for children. She demonstrated a keen sense in understanding the uniqueness of ancient ceremonies and an ability to bring them to life through the media of dance.

In the middle of the sixties she became involved in the process of reshaping and revitalizing Jewish rituals. She instinctively picked up hidden messages of her people in the surviving customs and traditional gestures employed at weddings and celebrations. These remnant strains became transformed in artistically conceived dance-motifs, motion-ideas, and rhythmic patterns ready to be used in religious rituals and performance pieces like Chassidic Suite 1963, Sabbath's Tablecloth 1965, and a major work for young dancers Search for Identity 1966.

1966 was also the year when we moved to Seattle, Washington. It was not easy to leave Los Angeles, a circle of friends and an entire closely related dance community. She had to start all over again in the Northwest -- and she did. Her skills as a teacher brought her students, and her talents as a performer established her soon in Seattle as a major innovative and contributing force.

During her Seattle period she consolidated her approach to contemporary dance, deepened her philosophy about communal rituals and crystallized her concept of spirituality and emotionality and their places in the world of movement.

In 1969 she choreographed for an ABC television special Revolt in Mode'in. In the following year she composed her classic Crimson Prayer. This piece is choreographed for a solo-dancer in red on a scaffold with two figures moving in a black sack -- a living tribute to the six million Jews killed in the Holocaust.

This dramatic dance-meditation was presented on stage as a part of a concert and in churches and synagogues all over the country as a living, stirring outcry to the Almighty.

Then came Birth for solo-dancer with a 60 foot elastic stretched from the stage into the audience; Share the Wealth -- a very funny piece for many funny dancers....

In 1972 she co-founded Dance Theatre Seattle and became one of its directors.

This was also the first year when Fanchon and I began to teach our System of Structured Improvisation. This system was a direct outgrowth of our long collaboration in music and dance. It dealt with the interrelations between composer and dancer in artistic improvisations proceeding in a structured framework with the help of seven symbols on solid cards spread on the floor for reference and initial guidance.

We taught our approach to hundreds of students at Seattle University, at the University of Utah, and at the Rubin Academy of Music in Jerusalem.

In 1974 Fanchon composed her 27-minute dance-epic Womankind. This monumental composition deals with the place of woman in ancient and contemporary societies, and it is meant to evoke in the audience the primordial instincts of tribal allegiance in order to cope with the energies suppressed by our present patriarchic society.

Perhaps this is the first piece in which Fanchon successfully amalgamated all her talents into one solidified artistic statement. The motific wealth of this composition is overwhelming; the musical score and the choreography are one; the impact on the spectator, unforgettable.

Womankind was premiered in Seattle in November 1974. It will be performed in Cincinnati, in the beginning of May, by the leading choreographers and dancers of this city: Peggy Lyman, Jefferson James, Judy Gregg, Gail Heilbron, Carol Wann, and Fanchon Shur.

There will be another composition by Fanchon on the same program Taleet, (Prayer Shawl) for five dancers moving in a 40 feet fabric.

I regard Fanchon as one of the most innovative, imaginative and talented artists and as the leading dancer-choreographer in Jewish liturgy in the United States.

Fanchon is currently engaged to present her dances on Jewish themes in many cities all over the country. Next month she will perform her solo-dance Jewess in the Renaissance in Seattle, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. More engagements are on the way.

In her studio she teaches dance-fundamentals and a special course in "Myth, Tale and Legends" -- which became a "hot" course in the recent seasons for many students.

Fanchon is a person who searches for new paths and ideas, constantly deepening and widening her horizons, and concerns herself with the need to perpetuate individual growth.

I pray she lives till her 120th birthday and shares the fruits of her creativity and spirituality with her children, with me and all the people who love and treasure her friendship.