

## In Memoriam—Selma Jeanne Cohen (1920–2005)



What do I remember most about Selma Jeanne? Her boundless curiosity and drive—she was never still, personally or intellectually—and also her gift for friendship. It is always useful to remember that her discipline and drive came from a rigorous training with the Aristotelians at the University of Chicago, which fostered competition. But Chicago surely turned out at least as many pedants as it did seekers—and that was what Selma Jeanne was. Why else would she have undertaken to define a field that scarcely existed—dance history—or undertake in her fifties to study Russian (a notoriously difficult tongue) and to master it surprisingly well?

Her curiosity is shown in the range of articles she commissioned for *Dance Perspec-*

*tives*, which she edited for some sixty monograph issues. As might have been expected, many of them focused on Western theatrical dance, although even there she included issues on technique, music, design, and iconography that went beyond the norm of the 1960s. But there were issues on dance in Korea, India, and Ghana, and on the Chinese sleeve dance, el duende, castanets, and trance dance. Here she was hoping to extend the conversation and educate her loyal readers, even though it took some of us (including me) some time to appreciate that.

As the editor of a journal of dance history myself, I have learned much about what Selma Jeanne was doing and why. For there is also a very selfish side to editing—the desire to educate oneself coming even before the desire to bring new and unusual material to our readers. There is a thrill of discovery. And with Selma Jeanne, this was extended when, abandoning *Dance Perspectives*, she turned to the new challenge of the *International Encyclopedia of Dance*, on which I became one of her six associate editors.

For this grand project her vision, perhaps only partially realizable, was that it would be truly international, covering dance in all its variety around the world. This was her dream, for she wanted to know all of this, even as the scope of the enterprise extended beyond what any one person could encompass. Certainly, of all the articles, the ones she treasured most were the country articles, for it was these that extended knowledge most

comprehensively—as I have found as I turn to them again and again in my own work.

If you wish to see for yourself the range of Selma Jeanne's writing, there is an eye-opening bibliography of it that Barbara Palfy lovingly prepared for the festschrift issue of *Dance Chronicle* (volume 18, number 2) on the occasion of her seventy-fifth birthday. Alas, it is essentially complete; except for the encyclopedia there was little more to follow.

I do not want to idealize Selma Jeanne, for I care too much about her to do that. She was determined, or how else could she have accomplished so much? After all, when younger she had made a serious study of dance, even though she had uncertain balance and severe problems with eyesight. But she could also be just plain stubborn. In working on the encyclopedia, we had some fights that I feared endangered our friendship. Sometimes she won, with her, "I'm the editor-in-chief, after all," and sometimes I did. But then would come a call—perhaps an invitation to our annual Christmas Eve dinner—and all was well again.

One of her unrealized dreams was to found and chair a department of dance history at a leading university. She was, by all accounts, an inspiring, if demanding, teacher. But she was not an ideal administrator. She was too hands-on to be satisfied with delegating authority: her way was best! Sometimes it was, sometimes it wasn't, but that is not a good way to run things. She did, however, make a major contribution to developing the Intercampus MA in dance history at the University of California in the 1980s, for a time commuting regularly between New York and California while also writing her book *Next Week, Swan Lake*. This project, on which she worked closely with Christina Schlundt, provided the foundation for the present PhD program in dance history and theory at the University of California at Riverside, where

Selma Jeanne long served as a Distinguished Scholar.

Speaking of travel, for many years she was fearless. With the International Theatre Institute (to which she brought her focus on dance as an integral part of theater) she flew alone to meetings around the world, including Western Africa on at least one occasion. On another trip she ran into an equally intrepid traveler, Ann Hutchinson Guest, in the Moscow airport as they were both en route to a conference in North Korea! I said to her once, "I know that you can go around the world unaided, but I treat you as if you couldn't cross the street without my arm." Smiling, she replied, "Yes, that's the way I like it."

And as long as she could travel, she was a fixture at meetings of the Society of Dance History Scholars, which she had been instrumental in founding—we had our first meeting of the steering committee in her living room. It greatly pleased her that when the society established a prize to encourage young scholars, it was named for her, and she loved attending the annual dinner in their—and her—honor.

An important aspect of Selma Jeanne was the pleasure she took in introducing her friends to one another. It was through Selma Jeanne that we met many people in dance who became not only good friends but with whom I have worked closely on a number of projects—the encyclopedia, *Dance Chronicle*, and for other causes in dance. In addition, the encouragement and assistance she gave Jack Anderson and me when we were starting our journal thirty years ago, immediately after the ending of *Dance Perspectives*, was only another sign of her great capacity for friendship and her desire for the development of the study of her beloved art.

George Dorris

This tribute was prepared for the last of three sessions honoring Selma Jeanne Cohen, held at the New York Public Library in 2006.