From a Woman's Recollections as an Israeli Outsider

By MINDY ALOFF

The dances of the Israeli-born choreographer Ze'eva Cohen focus on women, contemporary, ancient and mythological. Some of the dances are feisty, some are noble. All, ultimately, are tragic: they dance as an act of resistance against straitened circumstances and passing time, as if they were singing private songs in a desert.

Five of the four works Ms. Cohen has choreographed since 1968, collected under the title "Female Mythologies," will be performed at Danspace Project in St. Mark's Church from Thursday through Sunday in a program dedicated to Ms. Cohen's mentor, Anna Sokolow, who died on March 29. None of the dancers are old enough to have seen Ms. Cohen's own impassioned performances, the true models for their roles, with Sokolow's company during the 1960's.

"Dancing for Anna was a total emotional and intellectual commitment," Ms. Cohen said. "She helped liberate me from being an academic dancer to being a full-blooded, expressive dancer."

As a coach, however, Ms. Cohen is soft-spoken and precise. Sometimes her corrections to the dancers are framed by metaphors: a maneuver for both hands should have the character of falling sand; arms should "be like seaweed." More often, though, the frame of reference is direct and practical.

The most ambitious work of the Danspace evening is "Women and Veils II," a new and intricate ensemble piece for 10 women to an insinuating score commissioned from Michael Keck. Its images of female life in a tribal society — where individual expression, much less individual freedom of action, is suppressed — bloom from austere patterns, and the rhythms. During a recent interview at the Lower East Side studio where it was being rehearsed, Ms. Cohen said that the dance had been inspired by the life of women in the Middle East.

Ms. Cohen's memories of her native country still evoke mixed feelings. She explained that although she felt privileged and encouraged in some contexts, as an Israeli of Yemenite descent she also grew up considering herself an outsider within the larger population of European emigres, who, despite their common Jewish heritage, looked down on the Yemenite Jews.

"I was the only Yemenite Jew in the European neighborhood," she said. "At home, I was treated with kid gloves, given music and dance lessons. In the street, a stranger once actually stopped me to ask if I would clean her house. At one time, I would never touch klezmer music, for example. I'm not European, and klezmer music was part of Middle Eastern culture, the culture of my people."

In 1966, Ms. Cohen finally brought herself to reconsider this self-imposed censorship when she incorporated klezmer into a lighthearted duet for herself and the dancer-chorographer Jiil Sigman, "If I Ever Had a Daughter (Mother's Tongue/I Love You)," which will be on the Danspace program.

Growing up in Tel Aviv in the 1950's Ms. Cohen studied with the Austrian-born modern dancer Gertrude Kraus, who emphasized improvisation and music response, and with Rena Gluck, who taught the Martha Graham technique. As a teenager she also made occasional visits to classes in jazz and ballet, which, at that time, were considered kosher for a confirmed modern dancer. Two obligatory years in the Israeli Army were followed by performing experience in Gluck's dance group and then with Sokolow, who had first traveled to Israel in 1953 to work with Inbal Dance Theater, a Yemenite company. After nearly a decade, Sokolow founded her own Lyric Theater, where 10 original actors and dancers included Ms. Cohen.

Sokolow soon arranged for, and subsidized, Ms. Cohen's travel to New York, where she completed the dance program at Juilliard in 1975 with Sokolow's New York-based company for eight years. (Her own "Rooms" is preserved in Julliard's "Sokolow's Rooms.") In 1975, a newly-coeducational - hired Ms. Cohen. She was immediately founded and running it while she also performed a time, directed her own group, and wrote two new solo shows: "The Hاجer's life, breathing, and having.

At Danspace, Ms. Cohen will be performing dancers who are sympathetic with her aims and style of direction. These are "Women and Veils II," which consists of dances, and by asking colleagues to join the company, Ms. Cohen was able to fill slots in the other roles: "Room," the dance by Ms. Cohen is "Negotiations," which interprets the biblical Sarah and Hagar's story, which will dance in the "Women and Veils II," while Ms. Cohen's role is the Greek heroine, by Alexis Ostrick.

Caryn Heitman will perform the role of Ariadne, which in 1985, several years before Paul Taylor Dance Company retired after a 20-year association, choreography, Ms. Cohen's "Negotiations," which was the person Ze'eva Cohen made up in the studio, just before a run-through, and in which she had rehearsed it, Ms. Cohen will be making.

T HIS dance, to moving to This is moving to Theseus, who has never married herself," Ms. Cohen said, "is the one time I start dance from positions," Ms. Cohen's solo work together gestures from Hellenistic this is mourning. This gesture is an archer. I put them together, scale. The idea is that a whole is a sculpture, and in comes back to life, trying to mend a man, this happened to her, why she was so moved.

"An audience may not always see her, but she's abandoned and in the dark. It's up to you to give. They understand that I'm involved in the school that she's teaching, the audience to interpret. If you're from which people can take best.

Aleta Hayes, left, and Ze'eva Cohen of the Ze'eva Cohen Dance Company rehearsing "Negotiations," which will be in a retrospective of Ms. Cohen's work next week at Danspace Project.
Ze'eva Cohen, in a tribute to her mentor, Anna Sokolow, presents five of her tragic dances about women in a state of rebellion.

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Sokolow soon arranged for, and subsidized, Ms. Cohen's travel to New York, where she completed the dance program at Juilliard in three years and danced with Sokolow's New York-based company over a period of eight years. (Her astonishing performance in "Rooms" is preserved in Jac Vanek's 1966 film, "Anna Sokolow's Rooms.") In 1969, Princeton University - newly coeducational hired Ms. Cohen to teach dance; she immediately founded an entire dance program, running it while also performing as a soloist and, for a time, directed her own group. She maintained a family life, too, marrying and having a daughter, Kerryn.

At Danspace, Ms. Cohen will be working with experienced dancers who are sympathetic to her aesthetic aims and style of direction. The ensemble of "Women and Veils II" consists of dancers whom she discovered by asking colleagues and friends for recommendations. Most of the soloists in the other pieces originated their roles. Ms. Sokolow, the dancer-choreographer, has been appointed to different projects. She has been appointed to different projects.

Aerial Hayes, left, and Ze'eva Cohen of the Ze'eva Cohen Dance Company rehearsing "Negotiations," which will be in a retrospective of Ms. Cohen's work next week at Danspace Project.