

REVIEWS OF SYBIL SHEARER (excerpted from *Without Wings the Way Is Steep, The Autobiography of Sybil Shearer, volume II, The Midwest Inheritance*, and *other sources)

1942 [*On her first return to New York after moving to Chicago*]

She is unmistakably an original; there is no other dancer whom she even suggests . . . Technically she is miraculous; her body does things that are incredible, not only in conception but in execution.

[**John Martin**, *New York Times*, 12-13]

1946

. . . she is one of the most authoritative figures in the contemporary dance . . . she is an exciting dancer, say what you will. That her colleagues agreed with this estimate was evidenced by yesterday's audience. If lightning had struck the theatre, at least half the American dance would have been wiped out.

[**John Martin**, *New York Times*, 5-4]

1949 [*Re: Carnegie Hall concerts*]

. . . she is an unquestioned leader in the younger generation of modern dancers, is completely unafraid to stick her neck out, and whatever she does, good, bad or indifferent, has considerable importance. Better watch her. [**Lincoln Kirstein**, *New York Times*, 4-24]

Sybil Shearer, gentle rebel, gave a solo recital yesterday afternoon at Carnegie Hall for one of the most distinguished dance audiences within memory. . . She did not identify her dances except by number . . . she dispensed with stage properties, the varied lighting effects of a few seasons ago were replaced by an unchanging illumination, and she used no makeup. . . forsaking these usually helpful aids . . . she was, nevertheless, an enchantress. . . As a priestess might, she led her followers past the realities of temple walls and pillars and into the mysteries of her faith, in this case, into the mysteries of nature-dance.

[**Walter Terry**, *New York Herald Tribune*, 4-25]

1950 [*Re: "Once Upon a Time"*]

The ability to lead contemporary dance into these rich and fertile fields, directly through its own movement intelligence, marks Sybil Shearer as the one great woman dancer of our immediate moment.

[**Richard Lippold**, *Dance Observer*, February]

1952 [*de Mille's "Portraits of Her Contemporaries"*]

. . . Ray Bolger excepted, she was the greatest comedian I have ever seen dancing. . .

. . . It is no ordinary experience to discover one evening that an intimate, a known, well-loved, daily companion has something close to genius and stands outside the standards we set for ourselves. The person speaks with the usual voice, laughs with the ordinary expression and then, without transition or warning, becomes a figure of magic. I have known this experience three times, with Carmelita, Antony Tudor, and Sybil Shearer. [**Agnes de Mille**, *Dance Magazine*, May 1952]

1955 [*Re: opening the Brooklyn Academy of Music Dance Series*]

. . . Sybil Shearer could never be consciously derivative nor eclectic. Like any true artist she does not do what she wants, but what she must, at any given instant. One time it may be intellectual avante garde-ism; another time, psychological symbolism; another, stark theatrical realism; or largely lyricism. Her fixed aesthetic attitude is one of change. . . It matters not whether one enjoys one dance more, or less, than another; there is always the exciting kinesthetic stimulation derived from viewing a performer who has complete mastery of her instrument and an intuitive sense of the beauty of movement.

[**Louis Horst**, *Dance Observer*, January]

Ours is an urban era. . . And that is perhaps why Sybil Shearer always seems so different from other modern dancers. . . why her concerts are on an entirely different dynamic key. She is not an urban dancer. Her style is essentially pastoral. [**Doris Hering**, *Dance Magazine*, January]

1956 [*In: program of British Film Institute's National Theatre Film Festival of Dance*]

She is at once the most isolated and the most advanced of all the dancers; yet I believe that eventually she will prove to be one of the most influential in the development of a new kind of modern dancing . . . She is unique, and each of her dances is unique. . . [Her dances] are usually difficult, both in the sense that they require consummate technical skill for their performance and that they make no concessions to the spectator. . . Above all, Shearer is a visionary. She is like some kind of seer, a Sybil indeed, who looks deep into the reality that lies beyond appearances and transmits to us a message that is at once cryptic and disturbing. . .

[**David Vaughan**, "Sight and Sound and Dance and Dancer." Shearer as sole representative of modern dance]

1959 (*Re: "Within This Thicket," the first performance of the Sybil Shearer Company*)

. . . Miss Shearer is one of the most controversial of artists, not because she goes in for avant-garde eccentricities and "epatement," but because she doesn't. Her concentration is always upon the fundamental character of human expression, its roots in nature and its evocation of conceptions and awarenesses that are outside the accepted dimensions of the commonplace. . . That she is a mystic, a nature mystic, goes without saying, and this is the core of her power.

[**John Martin**, "The Dance: Forward! Maverick in Midwest," *New York Times*, 11-1-59]

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1961 [Re: "Fables and Proverbs," the second program of the Sybil Shearer Company]

. . . The world has been beating a path to Sybil Shearer's door for years because she is the thinking man's modern dancer. Miss Shearer is a woman with a passion for privacy. When she takes it into her red head to emerge from hiding and give a program . . . one must be on the alert to catch it, for she has something on her mind. [Donal Henahan, *Chicago Daily News*, 4-12-61]

1963

. . . There is something intriguing about Miss Shearer's working schedule, as well as deep interest in her work. Whoever heard of an artist having the sensibility and integrity to work all the time, and show the work only when she felt it was ready? [Ann Barzel, *Chicago's American*, 4-30-63]

1970 [Re: *Sybil Shearer Company at Ravinia*]

Those of us who have seen her through the years hardly take her for granted, but one realizes more how unique she is when a newcomer, particularly such a one as I encountered last night, a dancer who knows the dancers of three continents, marvels: "There is no one like her anywhere. Her dancing and choreography are wonderful and completely her own." Ann Barzel, *Chicago Today*, 7-28-70]

1971 [Feature prior to the *Arie Crown Theatre* performance]

. . . Possibly no two who watch follow her to precisely the same place - it depends on where they have been before. . . I have seen her, unaccountably, pinpointed at the edge of civilization's abyss, cruelly held captive; in rapier satire of timorous indecision; ludicrously, terrifyingly lunatic; a plunging, starry figure veiled in a mystical cloud; seized by vertigo, with a grounded mermaid's terror of earth; blown by the winds of romanticism. I have seen her move so exquisitely - barefoot, windswept, bronze hair flying - that I knew she was in her element, yet I did not know for certain whether she moved on the ocean's floor or the roof of the sky. [Claudia Cassidy, *Chicago Tribune*, 11-14-71]

1972 [Re: *Arie Crown Theatre; last performance of Sybil Shearer Company*]

Sybil Shearer has been a dance star for well over three decades. Recognized as a dancer of tremendous gifts, there are those who wonder how long she can stay at the peak of her art. Yesterday afternoon in the Arie Crown Theater it was clear she is still there, her quicksilver movements, her airy-nymph grace unimpaired. [Ann Barzel, *Chicago Today*, 1-17-72]

1975 ["Glorious Maverick," Re: Helen Morrison's film, "A Sheaf of Dreams"]

One of the truly great dancers, choreographers, and dance innovators of our day is rarely seen, at this period in her career, by the public. It is not that she is unapproachable - to the contrary, she loves to have people approach - but she won't stray far from her home and studio in Northbrook, Ill. Sybil Shearer has always been a maverick.

. . . Years ago, when she performed in New York, she would telephone her good friend and publicity representative Isadora Bennett and say that she'd like to play such-and-such a Broadway theater for a Sunday matinee in about 10 days' time. The impossibility of advance advertising and promotion never bothered her. Miss Bennett would make the arrangements and Miss Shearer would arrive - accompanied by her longtime associate, Helen Morrison, the great photographer who lit and directed the Shearer enterprises - and give a solo recital for an audience packed with so many dance celebrities that if the roof had caved in, there would have been no American dance the next day.

. . . Most innovators become with time more rigid than their conservative rivals, perhaps because they believe that one massive artistic rebellion does it all. Not so with Sybil Shearer. Every year, for those who travel to see her dance, there is a new avenue to be explored . . . as of now, a movie. . . and since Miss Shearer won't tour herself, the dance world is fortunate that *A Sheaf of Dreams* will bring Shearer to us.

[Walter Terry, *Saturday Review*, 11-1-75]

1979 [An afterword]

First and last, Sybil Shearer is an ardent free spirit who has persistently gone her own way. She has run all risks, challenged sacrosanct assumptions, leaped over obstacles regarded as unsurmountable. Everything about her serves to remind us that dance, if it is to exist at all, must be a passionately pursued *adventure*. She was a leading member of the Doris Humphrey/Charles Weidman company in its best days (mid-1930s), and in 1942 she received John Martin's prestigious Dance Award for "the most promising debut performance of a solo choreographer." Then, suddenly, the following year, she fled New York and its maddening maze of jealous coteries, and has worked ever since in relative isolation in the northern suburbs of Chicago.

This deliberate self-occultation, revealing her utter indifference to an ordinary "successful career" ---- and her scorn for the hardly disinterested pretensions of critics ---- doubtless helps explain the reticence with which dance historians have approached her appreciable contributions. Thus, whereas many lesser dancers have been made the subject of full-length biographies and numerous monographs, *Sybil Shearer --- indisputably one of the greatest dancers of all time --- has been awarded primarily silence and more silence, especially in recent years.* . . . * [Franklin Rosemont, *Cultural Correspondence*, Fall 1979]