

13

Much of the Bartók *Fourth Quartet* was complete by the end of 1957, composed in the studio in Northbrook. But then I saw how this ballet had to continue, and I picked the Bartók *Sixth Quartet* to compose the other half. If I was going to seriously have a theatre and a company, I had to have, for the most part, better dancers from whom I could get a more precise performance. So I disbanded the amateur group. Then I had an interesting time auditioning dancers I picked from classes in other studios in the city. Some of my amateurs were as good or better than the professionals I auditioned, and were needed for their special characteristics. So the final production was a mixture of new and old dancers, and it was interesting, because I could use some dancers barefoot, some with slippers, and some on point. The two sections of this long work were quite different, and they called for a variety of different qualities of movement.

A number of the new dancers found it difficult to follow my instructions as I was choreographing, because I gave instructions based on movement quality and design rather than steps. Today, there would not be the same problem, but then most dancers were trained in ballet, character, or tap based primarily on footwork, but of course I used that too.

Joan Ehemann was one of my new dancers. She had been trained at the Stone-Camryn School in Chicago, but after that had been a soloist with American Ballet Theatre, and had also worked with Agnes de Mille. Many years later, in 1989, she wrote her remembrances of this time when I was choreographing the second half of *Within This Thicket* and later *Fables and Proverbs* in the studio.

Within Her Thicket
by Joan Ehemann Stone

Some notes about rehearsal with one of the greatest choreographers of this century: Sybil Shearer.

It is always three o'clock, the summer sun hot in the clear August sky, when I remember the early sixties at Sybil Shearer's studio-home in Northbrook, Illinois, a studio on the plains. As we trudge along the back of what some dancer had dubbed the "milk carton house," Sybil greets us at the door, a large straw hat shades her freckled face. The inevitable barking of a large, German shepherd, Toura, could be heard for half a mile if anyone cared to listen. Sybil caged the playful animal during rehearsal. Through the bars Toura watched every movement and groaned disapproval.

White outside, the spotless interior was soft beige or honey color. I remember some lovely pieces, a candle stick, a Bible, a silver teapot, some century old Victorian chairs. All else was sparse and spacious. Parallel walls of seventy feet, two shorter walls on each end, a shed roof. Voila! The milk carton house! Two walls, closets on rollers, compartmentalized the house, bedroom and bath, sewing and costume room on one end, dining room and kitchen on the other. The center was a vast space; a good wood floor, and floor-to-ceiling windows on the south side that reflected like mirrors when the sun went down.

Music emanated from one moveable wall. Always wonderful music, but I hear Bartok whenever I think of Sybil. Most dancers arrive by car and are already dressed for rehearsal. Not at all like New York, where dressing room gossip was long and legend. As we changed our shoes, we heard the click click of a new piece of choreography. As she worked, Sybil made a clicky sound in her mouth. Not at all like New York where all dancers count music, "One-two-three." "un, deux, trois! "Ras! Vah! Chetery!"

Dinah arrived late from the University of Chicago, twenty-five miles away. I always see her driving her 1952 Studebaker. She sold it to me for \$75.00 in 1960. Great car! She taught dance to autistic children. (Until *Rain Man*, I didn't know the meaning of the word.) Dinah had short legs, and a long . . . ponytail. She couldn't point her toes. Amazingly she was perfect in Sybil's company, because Sybil choreographed using Dinah's particular attributes of intensity and movements close to the ground.

In New York a dancer unable to split or point toes is out. Don't even think of being late. Don't even think of being the wrong size or shape.

Masao, a jolly Japanese, could jump to the moon, and he understood line. He often danced with Sybil. They were an odd contrast, she so white and he Oriental. Of course, that's what Sybil intended in their counterpoint pas de deux.

Occasionally, Helen Morrison stopped by to plan the lighting. She was chubby, tweedy, and articulate. She had the eye of a horse trader which she applied as a photographer and as this company's lighting director. She was discerning, clever, and full of funny stories about Sybil.

The two of them had forged Sybil's career in the Midwest, teaching, presenting solo concerts and company performances. John Martin, the longtime New York Times dance critic, journeyed to Chicago each time Sybil presented a concert. He adored her work and rated her alongside Antony Tudor.

No one seemed to mind working for an hour or even four. We'd stop at no special command. Perhaps someone had to pick up a spouse at the station. Someone else might change the sprinkler, the scent of sulphur [in the well water] very strong. We might have Sybil's picnic supper on the table outside, or tea from the beautiful silver pot. Something a bit stuffy English, perhaps Scottish, prevailed in Sybil's character. Her mother was Scottish Canadian.

In New York I cannot remember eating a meal with any choreographer or sharing cookies (EVEN) all the years I danced in New York, with a score of choreographers. New York is all hustle, bustle and business.

Sybil sometimes wore practice clothes, but in this scenario I see a long-sleeve, well-fitting white blouse buttoned to the top, a beige A-line skirt, flat shoes or ballet slippers. Sybil's hair was wispy and unruly like the bushes in her driveway.

We were all ready. A short warm up bending knees, the heat of the day loosens our muscles. A golfer waves as he searches for a ball, and walks on. Sybil perches on a three-legged stool, sets the tape machine. Toura groans with envy from her large cage.

"Click, click." Sybil demonstrates the movement to be learned. No counting. "Now you, Joan, come from that corner on a diagonal.

And John, you start when Tom gets to the middle! But do yours facing back. "Click, click."

John, perplexed with the new choreography, scratches his head. "Sybil, could you dance it once again?" Sybil obliges. Everyone marvels at her ability to move through the complicated pattern with ease. John is now a successful artistic director-choreographer of a major ballet company in Europe, and attributes working with Sybil, the most important springboard of his career.

In New York, rehearsals and performances are determined by money and unions. There is no time to be polite. Learning fast is very important: it saves time and therefore money. Dancers with experience are in demand.

The costume room was cluttered with new shoes of every color, and costumes that Sybil made—wonderfully imaginative costumes. Velcro had just come on the market and she was delighted with the quick change possibilities it presented. Sybil once choreographed a whole ballet, with costumes for twenty, changed her mind and never spoke of it again. Once she kept the choreography and changed the music. Both incidents almost unthinkable in New York.

As a modern dancer, Sybil was unique, she approved of ballet; one day she astounded me by wearing point shoes and attempting successfully movements I had practiced years to execute. She choreographed several dances with point work.

She knew Agnes de Mille well and had danced and choreographed with her. These two brilliant, articulate women communicate their art so intelligently and comically it is a joy to be a witness. I worked with each extensively, but only once did I see them together. The event was a lecture I had arranged under the auspices of the venerable Chicago Newberry Library. Agnes was in her eighties and Sybil introduced her. Agnes's speech was riveting. Agnes, reminiscing in her book, "Dance to the Piper," in a hilarious chapter, discovers that Sybil had become a better choreographer than she.

Like a dowager at a cocktail party, a slow moving bee flies from geranium to marigold, as I immerse my sore toes in the damp green grass and drink in the beauty of the gentle Illinois landscape before me.

Sybil loved her outdoors. In the sixties she choreographed "Within This Thicket," an autobiographical ballet. We were all within her thicket, at one with nature, art, beauty and dance.

Some of us gathered last June for a little class Sybil arranged. Nothing had changed. The feel of intellectual excellence was like a breeze through the screen door: the Real thing. Fresh air, scents of lilacs and faint smell of sulphur.

"How wonderful," I said to Sybil, "to have been one of the great choreographers of the twentieth century." Selfless as she is, Sybil blushed and smiled as she did in the sixties, "Oh, not really." And her wonderful honest smile would light up all who knew and loved her and respected her artistry.

Actually, I was choreographing the second half of *Within This Thicket* beginning in the fall of 1958. We performed both parts in the fall of 1959, and started working on *Fables and Proverbs* in 1960.

John Martin had said in January 1958 that he hoped he could see the Bartok, and I probably showed him some of the movements when he visited in the summer. So he must have received advance notice, but it came as a huge surprise when his article on *Within This Thicket* appeared in the *New York Times* in advance of the performance. After seeing my situation here, he had changed his whole attitude about my being in Chicago. Once more he wanted to help.

New York Times
Sunday, November 1, 1959

THE DANCE: FORWARD!
Maverick in Midwest

by John Martin

Sybil Shearer, who turned her back on the New York rat race some years ago in order to find herself in her own terms as an artist, takes a big step forward on Tuesday when she makes a new group production of major proportions in her own theatre, the Winnetka Community Theatre, just north of Chicago.

The theatre is an intimate one, and its stage is of only moderate size, but it has been equipped with a new lighting system (under the direction of Miss Shearer's longtime artistic associate, Helen