**Nagrin, Daniel (b. 22 May 1917, Bronx, New York; d. 29 December 2008, Tempe, Arizona)**

**Summary**

Over his long career, Daniel Nagrin played many roles, on and off stage. A dancer, choreographer, writer, and teacher, he achieved his greatest prominence as a solo performer, choreographing twenty-eight solos for himself between 1942 and 1982. The characters he created were usually contemporary men, often city-dwellers, and he set a number of his pieces to jazz music at a time when that was unusual in modern dance. In 1997, he wrote that ‘whatever I do—as a dancer —I do not try to look like something, I am someone *doing* something. I never do abstract dance’ (*The Six Questions*, xv).

Nagrin also assisted his first wife, Helen Tamiris, in several of the Broadway musicals that she choreographed and had prominent roles in *Up in Central Park* (1945), *Annie Get Your Gun* (1946), *Touch and Go* (1949), and *Plain and Fancy* (1955). In 1971, he founded the Workgroup, an ensemble of dancers who, for nearly three years, developed and performed structured improvisations. His periodic teaching culminated in a professorship at Arizona State University, where he taught full-time from 1982 to 1992; he continued to teach and develop projects, as well as writing four influential books about dance.

**Contributions to the Field and to Modernism**

While studying at City College in New York, Nagrin took his first dance class at the New Dance Group in 1936. Ray Moses, who had danced with Martha Graham’s company as Lillian Ray, was his first influential teacher; he made his debut in an anti-war piece she choreographed. He also studied modern dance at the Martha Graham School (1938-1939) and ballet with Elizaveta Anderson-Ivantzova, among others.

In the summer of 1940, he gleaned theatrical skills performing in weekly revues at Unity House, a resort in the Poconos, where he was introduced to jazz music by fellow dancer Sue Remos. In 1942, Helen Tamiris, acting as Unity House’s resident choreographer, gave him ideas that were to shape his creative life. From Tamiris, then a socially conscious modern-dance choreographer and performer, Nagrin learned that, in his own work, he needed ‘to discover the inner life to fire up the motions’ (*Choreography and the Specific Image*, 11).

Leading modern dancers—notably Martha Graham and Doris Humphrey—had, in the 1930s, built their techniques and ideologies on opposing movement impulses that could express emotional states. Adapting and varying these choreographers’ approach to suit his solo dramas, Nagrin created characters who faced obstacles that they sought to surmount. Sometimes his male personas grappled with their inner voices; at other times, they struggled with invisible adversaries, objects, or spatial constraints. In one of the most famous of his ‘Dance Portraits,’ *Strange Hero* (1948), Nagrin swaggered like a movie gangster, quick on the trigger, with enemies lurking; shot over and over, he was still rising and falling as the curtain descended, refusing to die. In *Man of Action* (1948), he was a city-dweller, late for an appointment, thwarted by crowds and traffic. Some of his solos involved deft pantomime; others did not. In *Spanish Dance* (his own favorite), he projected the brooding intensity, the whiplash clarity, and the rhythms of flamenco, but his feet made no sound. In all his tautly constructed dramas, he dealt with what could be seen as masculine stereotypes, but provided nuances that softened their edges and revealed their vulnerabilities.

In the 1960s, when young choreographers—primarily those associated with New York’s Judson Dance Theater—began to question the conventions of dance, Nagrin expanded his own ideas. In 1968, as the conflict in Viet Nam escalated, he premiered (and subsequently toured extensively) an evening-long solo, a ‘Dance/Theatre Collage’ titled *The Peloponnesian War* (1968). Actor Frank Langella’s recorded voice was heard reading from Thucydides’ account of the war between Athens and Sparta. The piece contained scraps of Nagrin’s own early solos, his ballet classes, his Broadway routines. There were also rifle drills, marches, and an anthology of drastic falls. He appeared as Hitler, as a mysterious masked woman. He changed costumes in view of the audience.

Forming The Workgroup gave Nagrin the opportunity to experiment with what composer John Cage called indeterminacy. Although his ensemble of creative improvisers worked within predetermined structures, risk and unpredictability marked every performance. And in the solos that he made, beginning in the 1960s, he performed as himself, sometimes addressing the audience, or commenting on his actions. At one point in *Ruminations* (1976), he let the spectators watch him struggling to choreograph a solo to music by Beethoven. In his 1978 *Getting Well*, he performed his recovery from knee surgery—his own recalcitrant leg the obstacle to be overcome.

A number of Nagrin’s solos have been performed by others, notably by Shane O’Hara and by members of the José Limón Dance Company. His books deal with many aspects of dance, including performance practices, compositional processes, exercises in structured improvisation, and injury prevention. Their printed pages extend his knowledge, wit, and imagination beyond the many students that he taught. Watching Nagrin himself performing his solos—most of which were filmed or videotaped—is a lesson in distilling the essence of a character or action through dance.

**Deborah Jowitt**

**Selected Works**

**Solos**

*Private Johnny Jukebox* (1942),

*Landscape with Three Figures 1859* (1944)

*Spanish Dance* (1948)

*Strange Hero* (1948)

*Man of Action* (1948)

*Dance in the Sun* (1951)

*Man Dancing* (1954)

*Jazz Three Ways* (1957)

*Three Happy Men* (1957)

*With My Eye and With My Hand* (1958)

*Path* (1965)

*A Gratitude* (1965)

*Nineteen Upbeats* (1965)

*In the Dusk* (1965)

*Not Me But Him* (1965)

*Why Not?* (1965)

*The Peloponnesian War* (1968)

*Untitled* (1974)

*Changes* (1974)

*Jazz Changes* (1975)

*Fragments* (1976)

*Ruminations* (1976)

*Time Writes Notes on Us* (1978)

*Getting Well* (1978)

*Silence is Golden* (1978)

*Jacaranda* (1979)

*Poems Off the Wall* (1981)

**Workgroup Productions**

*Rondo* (1971)

*Prison* (1971*)*

*Polythemes (*1972)

*From Now* (1972)

*Recognition Ritual* (1972)

*Wind I* (1972)

*Wind II* (1972)

*Relay Solo* (1972)

*Go 1-2-3-4* (1972)

*Quiet Dance* (1972*)*

*Signs of the Times* (1972)

*Fragment Rondo* (1972)

*Sea Anemone* (1972)

*Ritual for Two* (1972)

*Ritual for All* (1972)

*Rituals of Power* (1972*)*

*Signs of the Times (*1972)

*Ham and Clove (*1972)

*The Edge is Also a Center* (1973)

*Hello Farewell Hello* (1973)

**Artist’s Writings**

Nagrin, D. (1988) *How To Dance Forever: Surviving Against the Odds,* New York: William Morrow.

Nagrin, D. (1994) *Dance and the Specific Image: Improvisation,* Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.

Nagrin, D. (1997) *The Six Questions: Acting Technique for Dance Performance,* Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.

Nagrin, D. (2001) *Choreography and the Specific Image: Nineteen Essays and a Workbook,* Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.

**References and Further Reading**

Jowitt, D. (2012) ‘Strange Heroes’, in *On Stage Alone: Soloists and the Modern Dance Canon*, ed. C. Gitelman and B. Palfy, Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 163-186.

Schlundt, C. L. (1997) *Daniel Nagrin: A Chronicle of His Professional Career,* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Wawrejko, D. (2012), ‘Daniel Nagrin's Dance Portraits: Choreographing Agency’, *Journal for the Anthropological Study of Human Movement* 19 (1): 19-34.

**Film Documentaries**

Nagrin, D. (1965) *Daniel Nagrin, Dance Soloist: spring ’65*, New York: Insight Media.

Nagrin, D. (1973) *Two Works by the Workgroup*, New York: Insight Media.

Nagrin, D. (1974) *Jazz Changes*, New York: Insight Media.

Nagrin, D. (1977) *Dance as Art, Dance as Entertainment*, New York: Insight Media.

**Paratexts**

Nagrin in *Strange Hero*, photo by Marcus Blechman

<http://www.nagrin.com/art/photosoriginals/7a.jpg>

Nagrin in *Jazz Three Ways*, photo by Marcus Blechman

<http://www.nagrin.com/art/photosoriginals/11a.jpg>

The Theatre Collection at the Museum of the City of New York also has a large holding of Blechman images, if the Nagrin Foundation at [www.nagrin.com](http://www.nagrin.com) cannot supply the images.