**Sokolow, Anna (b. 9 February 1910, Hartford, Connecticut; d. 29 March 2000, New York City)**

In her seventy-year career, Anna Sokolow contributed to dance fields in the United States, Mexico, and Israel. A child of Russian Jewish immigrants, Sokolow rose to prominence in the 1930s as a principal dancer with the Martha Graham Dance Company and as an independent choreographer of her own leftist dance group. She infused her formalist compositions with substantive accusations against authoritarian power structures, highlighted Jewish themes, gave voice to underserved populations and marginalized countercultures, and composed lyrical love ballads and tributes to artists and social figures she esteemed. Sokolow’s early choreography exposed societal ills and indicted fascist governments. During the Second World War, she choreographed dances with overtly Jewish themes to stand in solidarity with the Jewish community during the Holocaust. Through her seminal mid-century dances, including *Rooms* (1954), the *Opus* series (1958-1965), and *Dreams* (1961), Sokolow became known as a high modernist choreographer of dark themes whose work expressed postwar alienation and isolation in the U.S., portrayed the disaffection of countercultural youth, and fought for humanity in inhumane circumstances. Sokolow developed a performance form she termed lyric theatre, which was a blend of dance, drama, prose, music, and visual art. Sokolow’s lyric theatre influenced subsequent developments in concert dance and dance theatre in the U.S., Mexico, Israel, Western Europe, and East Asia.

**Training and Leftist Modernism**

Sokolow began dancing at the Emanuel Sisterhood of Personal Service on East 82nd Street in New York City at age ten. As a teenager she studied technique and choreography with Blanche Talmud, Louis Horst, and Martha Graham at the Henry Street Settlement House on the Lower East Side. Sokolow joined Graham’s company in 1930, and performed as a principal dancer with Graham until 1939.

Concurrently, Sokolow led the 1930s revolutionary (workers’) dance movement with her Dance Unit. In 1932 she was a founding member of the Workers Dance League (later called the New Dance League), an organization for workers’ dance groups whose slogan was ‘Dance Is a Weapon in the Revolutionary Class Struggle’. Sokolow’s early choreographic ventures demonstrated a marriage of form and content that endeared her to both revolutionary and modern dance critics and audiences. In the 1930s Sokolow studied Stanislavsky’s method of physical action at the Theatre Union, which became prominent in her choreographic process in the 1950s.

Sokolow’s psychologically-penetrating dances present allegories and character-based non-linear narratives. In the 1930s and 1940s she utilized dance composition elements from Graham technique to her own choreographic ends, aligning her work with the fight for economic and racial equality in the U.S. Sokolow collaborated with musicians who similarly employed established forms for social ends and compositional experimentation with jazz forms. Her collaborators during this time included Alex North and Elie Seigmeister (U.S.) and Rodolfo Halffter and Silvestre Revueltas (Mexico).

Her leftist dances include *Strange American Funeral* (1935) based on Michael Gold’s poem ‘Strange Funeral in Braddock’, which called for workers’ rights through a swarming mass of women’s bodies that portrayed the story of a steel worker who fell into a vat of liquid metal when a guardrail failed; and *Case History No.—* (1937), a solo in which Sokolow’s portrayal of a vagrant teenager blamed society for neglected youth. Sokolow satirized bourgeois mores in the chiffon-clad solo *Four Little Salon Pieces* (1936). She equally faulted Congress’ filibuster of the Wagner Van-Nuys Anti-Lynching Bill by portraying U.S. senators as spoiled children in ‘Filibuster’ from the National Negro Congress’ revue *The Bourbons Got the Blues* (1938).

Sokolow’s choreographic work during the 1930s also indicted European fascist governments. *Excerpts from a War Poem (F. T. Marinetti)* (1937) and *Façade—Expozisione Italiana* (1937) used allegorical epics to show Benito Mussolini’s destruction of Italy. In *Slaughter of the Innocents* (1937) Sokolow portrayed a Spanish victim of Francisco Franco whose child died in bombings. *The Exile* (1939), a solo based on a Sol Funeroff poem, depicted the Nazis as a beast in the garden of Jewish life.

**International Engagement as Modernist Transition**

Sokolow’s engagement with Mexican and Israeli dance institutions at mid-century initiated a transition in the reception of her work from leftist dances to high modernism. After working under the auspices of the Mexican Ministry of Education in 1939, Sokolow choreographed dances there based on folkloric themes that Mexican audiences read as revolutionary, since folklore was part of the *mexicanidad* (Mexican-ness) of post-revolutionary national identity wherein modernism relied upon a continuum that contained indigenous and formalist elements. Sokolow’s dances, which included *El renacuajo paseador (The Fable of the Wandering Frog,* 1940) based on a popular Colombian children’s fable, reflected Mexican nationalism via *mestizaje* (the creolized racial and cultural blending of European and indigenous forms) through traditional thematic material presented through formalist choreography. When Sokolow toured these dances to New York, U.S. critics treated them as less sophisticated choreographies rather than abstracted modernist dances. Sokolow’s 1940s dances with overtly Jewish themes also engaged the critical tension between the ethnic and the universal. As Mexican modernism included folkloric and formalist elements, these Jewish-themed dances similarly expanded U.S. modernism to include expressions of cultural identity through abstracted form. They include *Kaddish* (1945), a memorial for Holocaust victims premiered in Mexico in which Sokolow lay *tefillin* (the act of winding men’s phylacteries around the arms and head during prayer). Supported by the America-Israel Cultural Foundation in the 1950s-1960s as an American dancer of the modern tradition, Sokolow taught dancers in Israel’s Inbal Yemenite Dance Group (Inbal Dance Theater) and presented work including *Forms* (1964) with her Lyric Theatre in Israel from 1962 to1964. Through the rest of her career, Sokolow remained engaged with modern dance in Mexico and Israel.

**Mid-Century Modernism**

When a back injury forced Sokolow to stop performing in the 1950s, her choreographic method shifted as she relied on the dancers’ contributions for a majority of her movement generation. Through this way of working, the form continued to dictate the content, as it did in her work since the 1930s. From the 1950s, she built her dances on character studies generated by mining dancers’ individual experiences and memories. Sokolow based the dancers’ directives for movement inspiration on principles she learned studying Stanislavsky method acting in the 1930s. She paired movement phrases based on dancers’ improvisations with arched torsos, erratic runs, desperate reaches, violent body slams, syncopated rhythmic patterns, movements borrowed from social dances, and codified positions from dancers’ technical training. Sokolow’s musical collaborators in the U.S. during this time included Kenyon Hopkins and Teo Macero. She additionally choreographed to the musical scores of Alban Berg, Anton Webern, Charles Ives, Dmitri Shostakovich, and Johann Sebastian Bach, among others.

Sokolow’s mid-century choreographies expressed urban alienation and isolation, the plight of countercultural youth, and anti-war sentiments. These include *Lyric Suite* (1953), a plotless series of vignettes that portray comfort contrasted with discontent, and *Rooms* (1954), a postwar anthem of unfulfilled desire and loneliness portrayed through people painfully isolated in tenement apartments. The *Opus* series (1958-1965) featured fractured jazz scores, scraps of movement borrowed from social dances including the Twist, and dancers as disgruntled youth screaming obscenities at the audience. Sokolow’s anti-war statements continued in her Holocaust indictments in *Dreams* (1961) and *Steps of Silence* (1967), wherein concentration camp prisoners in the first stoically face death and in the second are reduced to a pile of rubbish, and in her *Time+* series (late 1960s) containing Vietnam protests.

In her 1965 *Dance Magazine* essay known as ‘The Rebel and the Bourgeois’, Sokolow argued for challenging established forms by allowing flux in modern dance instead of fossilizing it within an academy. Her insistence that artists should forge their own paths instead of making derivative work reinforced her own challenges to the *status quo* in dance and politics.

In the latter half of her career, Sokolow continued her anti-war and proletarian statements while choreographing tributes to activists and artists. These include *Tribute* [to Martin Luther King, Jr.] (1968), *Magritte, Magritte* (1970), *Scenes from the Music of Charles Ives* (1971), *Homage to Federico García Lorca* (1973), *Poe* (1977), *For Langston* [Hughes] (1980), *From the Diaries of Franz Kafka* (1980), *Kurt Weill* (1988), and *Frida* [Kahlo] (1997).

**Legacy**

Sokolow’s legacy lives in her teaching career, in the performance of her choreography through Labanotation, in her dances that empower the underserved, and in her continuing influence through prominent choreographers. She taught at The Juilliard School from the 1950s through the 1990s, and also at the Actors Studio, HB Studio, and Mary Anthony’s studio in New York, at countless universities in the U.S., and in capacities abroad including Mexico, Israel, Japan, and the Netherlands. Sokolow’s students and company dancers include, among countless others, Alvin Ailey, Pina Bausch, Martha Clarke, Ze’eva Cohen, Raul Flores, Jim May, Lorry May, Trina Parks, and Moshe Romano.

**Hannah Kosstrin**

**Selected Works**

*Histrionics* (1931)

*Anti-War Cycle* (1933)

*Speaker* (1935)

*Strange American Funeral* (1935)

*Ballad in a Popular Style* (1936)

*Four Little Salon Pieces* (1936)

*Case History No—* (1937)

*Excerpts from a War Poem (F. T. Marinetti)* (1937)

*Façade—Expozisione Italiana* (1937)

*Slaughter of the Innocents* (1937)

*The Exile* (1939)

*El renacuajo paseador (The Fable of the Wandering Frog)* (1940)

*Lament for the Death of a Bullfighter* (1941)

*Mama Beautiful* (1941)

*Songs of a Semite* (1943)

*The Bride* (1945)

*Kaddish* (1945)

*Mexican Retablo* (1946)

*The Dybbuk* (1951)

*A Short Lecture and Demonstration on the Evolution of Ragtime as Demonstrated by Jelly-Roll Morton* (1952)

*Lyric Suite* (1953)

*Rooms* (1954)

*Poem* (1956)

*Session for Six* (1958) [First dance in the *Opus* series]

*Dreams* (1961)

*The Question* (1964)

*Opus ’65* (1965)

*Ballade* (1965)

*Odes* (1965)

*Steps of Silence* (1967)

*And the Disciples Departed* (1967)

*Time +7* (1967)

*Tribute* [to Martin Luther King, Jr.] (1968)

*Magritte, Magritte* (1970)

*Scenes from the Music of Charles Ives* (1971)

*Homage to Federico García Lorca* (1973)

*Poe* (1977)

*Homage to Alexander Scriabin* (1977)

*For Langston* [Hughes] (1980)

*From the Diaries of Franz Kafka* (1980)

*Kurt Weill* (1988)

*Frida* [Kahlo] (1997)

**Artist’s Writing**

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Venza, J. (1966) *Rooms*, New York: WNET.

Williams, V. and R. Boggia (2007) *Reflection: Reconstructing Anna Sokolow’s Steps of Silence*, New York: Insight Media.

**Paratexts**

All images courtesy of the Sokolow Dance Foundation:

Sokolow in *Slaughter of the Innocents* (1937) photographer: Barbara Morgan

<http://jwa.org/media/anna-sokolow-in-her-slaughter-of-innocents>

Sokolow in *Kaddish* (1945)

<http://jwa.org/media/anna-sokolow-in-her-kaddish>

Lorry May in Sokolow’s *Magritte, Magritte* (1970)

<http://jwa.org/media/lorry-may-in-sokolows-magritte-magritte>