**Maslow, Sophie (b. 22 March 1911, New York City; d. 25 June 2006, New York City)**

**Summary**

Sophie Maslow, a prolific choreographer and significant contributor to American modern dance, was often characterized as a populist, or people’s choreographer, because she was inspired by the struggles and experiences of ordinary people. Combining modernism with humanism, Maslow’s work depicted emotional and universal experiences (a hallmark of mid-century modern dance) while also envisioning a more just and equitable society. Throughout her more than fifty-year career she drew from a variety of sources, including folk traditions, rural and urban American life, and literature. During the 1930s, while a soloist with the Martha Graham dance company, she began choreographing her own work and joined the New Dance League, the precursor to The New Dance Group, a collective of choreographers who viewed dance as a form of social activism. In 1941, she formed the Dudley-Maslow-Bales Trio with Jane Dudley and William Bales, and shortly thereafter, established the Sophie Maslow Dance Company. Her Trio and Company toured throughout the United States and provided Maslow with a platform to create some of her most significant works, including *Dust Bowl Ballads* (1941) and *Folksay* (1942) about America’s heartland, and *The Village I Knew* (1950), which depicted Eastern-European Jewish life. After 1954, Maslow continued to choreograph for the Sophie Maslow Dance Company.

**Early Life**

Maslow was born in New York City to working-class, Jewish parents who emigrated from Russia. As a child, she was immersed in a secular, Jewish culture that encouraged intellectual and artistic expression. She began her training at the Neighborhood Playhouse, studying dance with Blanche Talmud and Martha Graham, and composition with Louis Horst. Maslow was a soloist with the Graham Company between 1931 and 1940.

**Contributions to the Field and to Modernism**

During the 1930s, Maslow was affiliated with the New Dance League and the New Dance Group, alongside other (mostly Jewish) dancers, including Miriam Blecher, Nadia Chilkovsky, Jane Dudley, Edith Segal, Anna Sokolow, and Helen Tamiris. Although their styles varied considerably, these women fused modern dance with leftist politics to create a radical form of dance that protested bigotry, capitalism, and fascism. Like her peers, Maslow was interested in the social and political culture in Soviet Russia and performed her first solos about and for working-class, socialist audiences. However, Maslow’s dances emphasized human experiences over politics and offered a refreshing contrast to the strident, somber work most frequently offered on leftist stages. Thus, critics commented that her two main solos from this period—*Themes from a Slavic People* (1934) and *Two Songs about Lenin (1935)*—were poetic and lyrical dances that effectively captured the spirit of ordinary folk.

Inspired by the unity generated by Second World War, Maslow focused primarily on American life, people, and folkways during the 1940s. Departing from the elitism and abstraction that characterized much modern dance of this era, she aimed to reduce distinctions between audiences and performers and envisioned a more egalitarian America. Indeed, her ensemble (including such notable dancers as Ronne Aul, Donald McKayle, and Pearl Primus) was consistently racially integrated. Her Americana dances effectively operated on two levels: their folksy tenor supported wartime patriotism while simultaneously depicting an American collective that included ethnic and racial minorities. Her two most enduring dances of this period, *Dust Bowl Ballads* (1941) and *Folksay* (1942), epitomized the choreographer’s ability to transform American folklore into modern dance. Two solos, set to songs by Woody Gutherie, *Dust Bowl Ballads* responded to the plight of migrant workers.  *Folksay* was more upbeat. Performed to live music by Guthrie and Earl Robinson, as well as Carl Sandberg’s poem ‘The People, Yes’, the ensemble piece offered a lively fusion of modern dance and American vernacular forms like clogging and square dance. Maslow continued to work in this American mode throughout the 1950s but became more interested in urban figures and styles such as boxing (*Champion*, 1948), jazz (*Manhattan Suite*, 1953), and beat poetry (*Poem*, 1963). During these years Maslow rejected the field’s emphasis on abstraction by freely utilizing speech and poetry in her dances, a choice that in certain ways presaged postmodern dance’s return to text and narrative.

Maslow’s dances always reflected a pluralist and liberal-humanist set of values shared by many American Jews. In response to the Holocaust, however, she began to focus more frequently and openly on Jewish history and culture. For example, she staged numerous works for the annual Chanukah Festivals at Madison Square Garden, an event sponsored by Israel Bonds. Her most famous dance of this period was *The Village I Knew* (1950), a seven-part suite that enlivened Sholom Aleichem’s stories about Eastern-European *shtetl* life. In contrast to sections like ‘Sabbath’ and ‘Why is it Thus?’, which translated ritual into clear and poignant gestural patterns, or the dynamic and celebratory ‘Festival’, the dance’s finale, ‘Exodus’, portrayed the despair wrought by persecution and pogroms. Works like *The Village I Knew* offered a nostalgic depiction of European Jewish life and religious ritual mediated by modernist aesthetics, effectively bridging past and present, old world and new, traditional and modern.

**Selected Works**

*Themes From A Slavic People* (1935)

*Two Songs About Lenin.* (1935)

*Dust Bowl Ballads* (1941)

*Folksay* (1942).

*Champion* (1948)

*Prologue (1950)*

*Four Sonnets* (1951)

*The Village I Knew* (1950)

*Manhattan Suite* (1953)

*Anniversary* (*Warsaw Ghetto*) (1956)

*Poem* (1963)

*From the Book of Ruth* (1964)

*Raincheck (1966)*

*Ladino Suite* (1968)

*Neither Rest Nor Harbor* (1969)

*Country Music* (1971)

*Decathlon Etudes* (1976)

*Black Elk Speaks* (1978)

*Woody Sez* (1980)

*Voices*  (1980)

*From Louis’ Book* (1985)

Select Chorography for Theater and Opera

*The Dybbuk* (1951)

*The Shoemaker and the Peddler* (1960)

*The Golem* (1962)

*The Big Winner* (1974)

**References and Further Reading**

Graff, Ellen. (1997) *Stepping Left: Dance and Politics in New York City, 1928–1942*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Graff argues that leftist choreographers, including Maslow, infused their work with modernist aesthetics, thus conveying radical ideology while inventing revolutionary choreographic forms. She also provides a history of the New Dance Group and discusses a number of Maslow’s dances from the 1930s and early 1940s.

Jackson, Naomi M. (2000) *Converging Movements: Modern Dance and Jewish Culture at the 92nd Street Y*. Hanover, N. H., and London: Wesleyan University Press.

Jackson’s *Converging Movements* examines how a key Jewish organization in New York City became a home for modern dance. In one of her chapters, she discusses the intersectionality of Jewishness and modern dance in Maslow’s *The Village I Knew*.

Jackson, Naomi M. (1999). "Jewishness and Modern Dance in Sophie Maslow's *The Village I Knew*." In *Dancing Texts Intertextuality in Interpretation*, edited by Janet Adshead-Lansdale, 83–103. London: Dance Books.

This article offers a more concise, stand-alone version of Jackson’s analysis of *The Village I Knew*.

Rossen, Rebecca. *Dancing Jewish: Jewish Identity in American Modern and Postmodern Dance* (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 2014).

This book examines the connections between American modern dance and American Jewish identities over a seventy-five year period, and discusses the work of numerous modern and postmodern choreographers, including Maslow.

**Websites**

<http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/maslow-sophie>

**Moving Image Material**

<http://vimeo.com/8649694>

An excerpt from CityDance Ensemble’s reconstruction of *Folksay*.

Credit: Dr. Rebecca Rossen. Special thanks to Abigail Blatt.