**Sybil Shearer (b. 23 February 1912, Toronto; d. 17 November 2005, Northbrook, Illinois)**

**Summary**

In the modern dance world, Sybil Shearer was by most accounts an idiosyncratic, singular, and somewhat esoteric figure whose career spanned the second half of the twentieth century. As a dancer Shearer came of age in the 1930s, when she studied at the Bennington School of the Dance, joined the Humphrey-Weidman company, and performed with Agnes DeMille. In 1941 she presented her debut concert as a soloist in New York City and became recognized as an innovator, an original voice within the generation that followed Bennington. The following year she moved to Chicago, a decision that enhanced her reputation for curiosity, elusiveness, and mystique. She founded her own ensemble of Chicago-based dancers, the Sybil Shearer Company, created scores of short solos for herself, and was a pioneer in the photographic and film documentation of her dances in collaboration with photographer Helen Balfour Morrison. Deeply philosophical and at the same time profoundly spiritual, Shearer devoted her career as well as her inner life—it is impossible to separate her artistry from her spirituality—to a constant search for cosmic meaning, aesthetic purity, and spiritual authenticity. Strongly influenced by Rudolf Steiner, she was a true modernist in the sense that she believed deeply in universal concepts and was in constant search of the evidence and experience of those realities through choreography and dancing.

**Training and Early Career**

Born in Toronto, Shearer grew up near Nyack, New York. She began ballroom dancing at the age of four. Her passion for dance was sealed a few years later, when she was ‘carried away’ by a performance of Anna Pavlova and, in her own words, fell in love ‘with her, with the dance, with the theater.’[[1]](#endnote-1) Shearer went to Skidmore College (1930-1934) where she majored in English. The first volume of her posthumous autobiography, *Without Wings the Way is Steep*, indicate her early interests in analyzing dance as well as practicing it. A prolific writer, a vast percentage her autobiography is in the form of her correspondence—letters she wrote first into a notebook and then copied on stationary to send.

The year she graduated from college, she attended the inaugural summer session at Bennington, and returned for several more summers, where she studied dance with Doris Humphrey, Martha Graham, Louis Horst, Bessie Schonberg, and Hanya Holm. Settling in New York City, she focused her studies in dance with Charles Weidman and Doris Humphrey and eventually became a member of their company. Her primary impulse, however, was in making and dancing her own choreography. By the late 1930s, while continuing her association with the Humphrey-Weidman company, she was also doing independent lecture-demonstrations in various colleges and universities, studying with modernist composer and astrologer Dane Rudhyar, performing with Agnes DeMille, and preparing to show her work to the public.

**Contribution to Field and to Modernism**

In late 1941, Shearer debuted her solo choreography in New York City, receiving highly enthusiastic reviews from Walter Terry and John Martin. ‘Exciting,’ ‘unconventional,’ ‘creative madness,’ and the use of lyricism and humour were noted in these early reviews, along with a caution from Martin about ‘sentimentality.’[[2]](#endnote-2) After presenting work in two concerts barely six months apart to glowing reviews, Shearer made the decision in late 1942 to accept a job teaching dance at Roosevelt University in Chicago. This relocation to the American Midwest proved a defining step in the evolution of Shearer’s working process and aesthetic, though she continued to return to New York City annually for over a decade to show her solos there. After a 1945 appearance, Edwin Denby wrote, ‘Her recital in general showed a visual as well as a gymnastic and rhythmic originality and discipline which should be highly stimulating to other young modern dancers and open new possibilities to them.’[[3]](#endnote-3) Praising her ‘exactness in the basic carriage of each number and the lightness with which the gestures and steps seemed to arise from the stance and be lifted or carried by the rhythm of the breathing,’ Denby also noted her ‘brilliantly acid wit’ and observed that the audience was ‘a keenly professional one.’[[4]](#endnote-4) In other words, Shearer was a dancer’s dancer, and those who saw her dance always made a point of returning whenever she was performing.

The remainder of Shearer’s long career was anchored in and around Chicago, ‘with its open prairies and oak woodlands providing a great, expansive stage-setting for her art.’[[5]](#endnote-5) Shearer herself said, ‘I came here because the rhythm of the Midwest has a sweep to it, rather than the broken rhythm I felt in New York.’[[6]](#endnote-6) Uninterested in the relentless grind of trying to teach, make choreography, maintain a company, and tour regularly, she opted to show her work only when she felt it was ready and perform given works only as often as she saw fit. This sometimes meant that having created and performed a given dance, she felt fulfilled and never returned to that work again.

Shortly after she relocated, she met the photographer Helen Balfour Morrison, another defining event in Shearer’s life and artistic evolution. Morrison became Shearer’s manager, publicist, patron, lighting designer, and photographer. With Morrison’s help, Shearer established a secluded dance studio in Northbrook, Illinois, that became her creative home, a base for her solo creations, and a working space for her dance ensemble. Morrison’s photographs and films served as documentation but also as a creative tool in the studio and in this way anticipated later developments in dance and media.

In addition to maintaining the private studio aimed at supporting her own artistic work, Shearer established the Sybil Shearer School of Dance in Winnetka, Illinois, leading to the creation of a network of branch schools on Michigan Avenue in Chicago, in Hyde Park, in Milwaukee, and in several other Chicago suburbs. The school flourished for decades, led by Shearer’s students and members of her company.

Shearer never developed a signature technique informed by her own idiosyncratic movement vocabulary. As she noted, ‘I relied on being guided through art as a doorway to fulfillment. I was therefore always preparing myself to be ready when the time came. I was interested in pursuing the *technique of expression*, because I thought of myself as an instrument for the spirit….It is probably the reason I was essentially a soloist.’[[7]](#endnote-7) Yet Shearer did train generations of students in Chicago, helping them learn ‘to be ready when the time came,’ giving them the fullest possible physical and performative capacity. Perhaps her best-known student is John Neumeier, who studied with her in the mid-1960s before he left to continue his career in Europe.

Shearer’s comprehensive choreographic project celebrated individualism, skewered pretention, demanded acute self-honesty, and proposed that the practices of dancing and choreography were serious endeavours that expressed the wonders of nature and the human soul, and provided a platform for examining the world. A survey of her titles indicates where her values, wit, and inquiry lay: *Fables and Proverbs, Let the Heavens Open that the Earth May Shine, In the Cool of the Garden, Shades Before Mars, Tony the Great, In a Vacuum, Now is Always Then.* Shearer was interested in explicating universal truth and purity by way of dancing, sometimes through the use of humour, at other times with biting exactitude, and at still other times with an outpouring of lyricism performed with such conviction that other dancers, general viewers, and critics alike repeatedly declared her one of a kind. Life, nature, and art were fluid in her world. As such she demonstrated no use for conventional categorizations and thinking. Central to her overall aesthetic was a sincere belief in pursuit of the ideal. ‘In good ballet everyone represents the ideal,’ she wrote in the second volume of her autobiography. ‘In good drama and theater everyone represents the deviation from the ideal,’ she continued. ‘It is the unusual drama that may depart from this norm—in the case of the hero or heroine perhaps. I was always interested in drama and theater. But I was also interested in the ideal. In other words, there had to be a goal toward which one was working in life, and in art, which was or could become the ideal. And this ideal should not be only a custom or a tradition, such as good technique is a tradition for the dancer. It must also be an inner reality.’[[8]](#endnote-8)

Late in life, Shearer formalized her interests in the spiritual philosophy of Rudolf Steiner, becoming an anthroposophist. In the 1980s she turned to writing as her creative outlet, becoming the Chicago critic for *Ballet Review* and assembling her earlier correspondence in her massive autobiography. But she also continued to perform on occasion, appearing in a danced lecture at the Art Institute of Chicago a few months before she died at age ninety-three.

**Legacy**

John Neumeier is one of many former students who has described the ineffable influence that Shearer exerted on him, most especially through ‘her technique of complete emotional immersion and physical involvement.’[[9]](#endnote-9) As difficult as it is to describe, it was what Shearer called the ‘technique of expression’ that she transmitted through her teaching and choreography. After the death of Helen Morrison, Shearer established the Morrison-Shearer Foundation to preserve her own and her colleague’s work. After Shearer’s death, the Foundation has continued to document the legacy of both women, preserving the valuable trove of Morrison’s films by placing them at the Chicago Film Archives as well as the architecturally significant studio custom-built for Shearer. Over the last few years, Chicago choreographers have reconstructed several of her dances as part of the foundation’s efforts to ponder what Shearer’s career meant for the local dance community and for modern dance beyond Chicago.

**Bonnie Brooks**

**Selected Works**

*In the Cool of a Garden* (1941)

*In a Vacuum* (1941)

*O Lost* (1943)

*No Peace on Earth* (1947)

*Let the Heavens Open That the Earth May Shine* (1947)

*Salute to Old Friends: Doris Humphrey, Walter Terry, Agnes de Mille, John Martin* (1948)

*Every Nook and Cranny* (1948)

*Once Upon a Time* (1951)

*Shades Before Mars* (1953)

*Now Is Always Then* (1957)

*Within This Thicket* (1959)

*Fables and Proverbs* (1961)

*The Reflection in the Puddle is Mine* (1963)

*Wherever the Web and the Tendril* (1964)

*In Place of Opinions* (1965)

*Spells and Rituals* (1971)

**Artist’s Writings**

Shearer, S. (1984) ‘Looking Back,’ *Ballet Review* 12(3): 22-25.

Shearer, S. (1984) ‘Neumeier in Chicago,’ *Ballet Review* 12(3): 39-40.

Shearer, S. (1988) ‘John Martin: A Tribute,’ *Ballet Review* 16(1): 49-52.

Shearer, S. (1993) ‘My Hanya Holm,’ *Ballet Review* 21(4): 4-7.

Shearer, S. (1994) ‘A Salute to Agnes de Mille,’ *Ballet Review* 22(4): 10-12.

Shearer, S. (2006) *Without Wings the Way Is Steep*, vol. 1, *Within This Thicket*, Northbrook IL: Morrison-Shearer Foundation. Includes dvd of selected solos filmed by Helen Balfour Morrison.

Shearer, S. (2012) *Without Wings the Way Is Steep*, vol. 2. *The Midwest Inheritance*, Northbrook IL: Morrison-Shearer Foundation.

**References and further reading**

Cohen, S.J. (1961) ‘Avant-Garde Choreography,’ *Criticism* 3(1): 16-35.

Hodes, S. (1984) ‘Sybil Shearer Dances,’ *Ballet Review* 12(3): 35-39.

Horwitz, D.L. (1984) ‘A Conversation with Sybil Shearer,’ *Ballet Review* 12(3): 26-35.

Lloyd, M. (1949) *The Borzoi Book of Modern Dance*, New York: Alfred Knopf.

Martin, J. (1965) *Sybil Shearer*, Palatine IL: M. Yoshimasu.

Smith, C. (1946) ‘Dance Letter,’ *Kenyon Review* 8(4): 689-93.

**Film Documentation**

All films by Helen Balfour Morrison of Sybil Shearer are held at the Chicago Film Archives, and a selection can be viewed online.

**Suggested Paratexts**

Sybil Shearer in her Northbrook studio in the 1950s, photo by Helen Morrison, courtesy of Morrison-Shearer Foundation

<http://www.morrisonshearer.org/httpdocs/abo.html>

Sybil Shearer dancing outdoors, 1943, photo by Helen Morrison, courtesy of Morrison-Shearer Foundation

<http://www.morrisonshearer.org/httpdocs/eve.html>

Sybil Shearer in solo from Fables and Proverbs (1961), photo by Helen Morrison, courtesy of Morrison-Shearer Foundation

<http://www.morrisonshearer.org/httpdocs/pub.html>

Notes

1. S. Shearer (2006) *Without Wings the Way Is Steep*, vol. 1, *Within This Thicket*, Northbrook IL: Morrison-Shearer Foundation, xx. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid., 334-37. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. E. Denby (1968) *Looking at the Dance*, New York: Horizon Press, 347. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid., 346. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. C. Doty (2012) ‘Introduction,’ to S. Shearer, *Without Wings the Way Is Steep*, vol. 2. *The Midwest Inheritance*, Northbrook IL: Morrison-Shearer Foundation, xvii. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. S. Shearer (2006) *Without Wings the Way Is Steep*, vol. 1, *Within This Thicket*, Northbrook IL: Morrison-Shearer Foundation, 257. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. S. Shearer (2012) *Without Wings the Way Is Steep*, vol. 2. *The Midwest Inheritance*, Northbrook IL: Morrison-Shearer Foundation, 285. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. J. Neumeier (2012) ‘Foreword’ to S. Shearer, *Without Wings the Way Is Steep*, vol. 2. *The Midwest Inheritance*, Northbrook IL: Morrison-Shearer Foundation, xiv. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)