

Denishawn: The Enduring Influence. Jane Sherman. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1983, 168 pages, \$15.95 hard.

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Ted Shawn, co-founder with Ruth St. Denis of the Denishawn dance school and concert company, believed dance to be "the oldest, noblest, and most cogent of the arts." He declared that dance conveyed "man's deepest, highest, and most truly spiritual thoughts far better than words, written or spoken." Shawn's views are easily supported. Dance, ritual, and religion are consanguine, as studies of primitive religions indicate. A survey of Joseph Campbell's classic study of myth, *The Masks of God*, indicates dance's centrality to the collective unconscious, as does Havelock Ellis's contention that dance was the most important of the arts. William Butler Yeats understood this when he made dance a powerful symbol of an ideal unity often sought but rarely achieved, an inextricable merging of the physical and intellectual, the performer and the performance. The steadily expanding field of dance therapy indicates that dance is an effective bridge between the cognitive and affective realms; dance is basic and it embodies a wholeness rare in human endeavors.

A great deal has been written about Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn—with good reason, for it is generally conceded that Denishawn inaugurated modern dance. Jane Sherman, author of *Denishawn: The Enduring Influence*, has herself written two excellent books and a number of fine articles on Denishawn. This book, however, is special, for it offers and embodies the wholeness that is intrinsic in its subject: dance in general and Denishawn in particular. On its most basic level, it is a history, considering Denishawn's antecedents, origins, and descendants while exploring its special contributions to dance and culture. Certainly anyone interested in Denishawn must read this book, and so too should those interested in modern dance. But it also has appeal for anyone interested in the relationship of life to art, and to anyone interested in the impulse to create: both St. Denis and Shawn revered the creative impulse. The book is a superb cultural history, offering considerable insight into the relationship between high and low culture in the United States, as well as into the obstacles creators must face.

Jane Sherman writes *con amore* and with expertise, for she was herself a member of Denishawn; she participated in the Denishawn Dancers' historic tour of the Orient in 1925-26, a tour which was one of many major cultural contributions made by Denishawn. Sherman quotes Baron Ishimoto of Japan:

Whenever a historian tries to write a book on the relations between the U.S. and Japan, he cannot ignore the coming of the Denishawn Dancers in 1925 to Japan because by their appearance on the stage of Tokyo, the Japanese attitude towards America in respect to art has been completely changed. In other words, historians must pay more attention to Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn than to any other American visitors since Admiral Perry.

Shawn and St. Denis took Western Dance to the East, they brought Eastern dance to the West, and perhaps most surprising, they took Eastern dance to the East: their tour of India has often been cited as the catalyst for a renaissance of traditional Indian dances.

Shawn and St. Denis could accomplish this because they sincerely believed in the universality of dance. The foundation of this belief was a strong religious impulse that they channeled into dance: both believed that dance expressed the divine self. Indeed, Ted Shawn quoted Nietzsche: "I should only believe in a God that would know how to dance." "The religious strain that persisted throughout the creative lives of Shawn and St. Denis" was doubtless most apparent in those dances of St. Denis in which "she expressed, as its goddesses, the essence of a country: *Radha* (Indian), *Isis* (Egypt), *Ishtar* (Abyssinia), *Kuan Yin* (China), and *Kwannon* (Japan)" or in those dances of Shawn's which expressed Christian themes, such as his *The Three Dances of David*. But spirituality, religion, was ever rooted in the earth; it never dissipated into ethereality or hardened into dogma—it was a wholeness that united humanity.

Sherman begins her book with a character study that explores the personalities of Denishawn's founders, and in it she explains how religion and dance came to be connected in their lives. Sherman's marvelous eye for the telling detail illuminates the marriage between the mystical and the human, which was the source of Denishawn's power, more effectively than could pages of explanation. She briefly recounts Ted Shawn's tremendous faith and will in overcoming paralysis—which struck him as he was studying for the Methodist ministry. And she juxtaposes St. Denis's fascination—through her mother—with Mary Baker Eddy's *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures* and her chance sighting of a poster advertising Egyptian Deities Cigarettes with a painting of Isis. Both the book and the poster contributed to St. Denis's "goddess syndrome." Sherman's juxtaposition of poster and book very effectively conveys the wholeness, the inclusiveness, the humanity of Denishawn's "religion."

Sherman also displays the tremendous effort that Shawn and St. Denis channeled into preparation. Not only did they work at choreography, but "in preparing every new ethnic work, the two immersed themselves in studies of the books, paintings, sculpture and music of that area, even to discovering in a museum a tiny, ancient coin that showed the correct headdress for St. Denis to wear in her Abyssinian ballet, *Ishtar of the Seven Gates*." Dance was ever more than a mere physical activity for Denishawn; both Shawn and St. Denis were "omnivorous readers" who shared their reading on "dance, world cultures, metaphysics, and philosophy" in discussions with their pupils. Indeed, as part of their preparation, Shawn would often read to members of the troupe from appropriate books. Again, the sense of integration, of wholeness is paramount: the physical and the intellectual were joined.

Ted Shawn and Ruth St. Denis were groundbreakers, pioneers in a number of areas. They virtually established American dance—or perhaps it would be more accurate to say they brought it home. Forerunners Isadora Duncan and Loie Fuller, for example, had made the pilgrimage to the world of high art, which meant Europe. Shawn and St. Denis toured abroad, of course, but they also took the gospel to the hinterlands of America; they took "serious" dance to places it had never been before. The Denishawn concerts were so popular that they were offered vaudeville engagements; they accepted in part to finance "the school, the company, and new productions." But, in refusing to compromise their standards for an audience who had come primarily to see "popular" acts, they educated thousands of Americans who had never before seen serious dancing. Indeed, in 1916 they became the only act other than Sarah Bernhardt to be held over at New York's Palace Theater, demonstrating (as has been repeatedly demonstrated in the cultural history of the United States) that American entrepreneurs too often underestimate the taste of American audiences.

Denishawn was a pioneer, too, in Ethnic dances. Indeed, the influence can be seen in the history of Broadway: from *Annie Get Your Gun* through *The King and I* to *Oklahoma!* The influence is often difficult to measure, but there is no denying it has been substantial—extending even to the cinema, as Gene Kelly has testified. Another key influence is apparent in every musical with a contingent of male dancers, for Denishawn was “the first American company to raise the male dancer to the equal of the female in duets and ensembles.”

These “firsts” are certainly the most obvious and spectacular of their contributions, but they are merely one aspect of the company’s cultural contributions. Naturally, Denishawn had the obligatory battle with the American Mrs. Grundys, contributing to artistic freedom in the U.S. Sherman’s account of one such battle is at once entertaining and cautionary. It is a reminder of the ever-present opposition to innovation and creativity. In retrospect, such opposition is difficult to comprehend—as when Sherman writes of the proponents of ballet and modern dance coming to blows in theater lobbies—and therefore important to record.

This is a book with a great deal to offer. It embodies a number of the virtues of Denishawn, perhaps none more appealing than its deceptively powerful simplicity. It is a book which mirrors the integrity of its subject. It is a book whose importance is assured because it explores artistic forces which altered the nation’s cultural history, and whose quality is assured by its sympathy with the ideals Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn held. Sherman quotes Ruth St. Denis on the aim of the Denishawn School: “The eternal quest for truth, the ecstasy of an instant’s communication with a divine being, the harmony of rituals, beautifully performed.” Doubtless it is only in dance that this quest can be embodied, but surely Jane Sherman comes as close with mere words as is possible.

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