

ANN HALDRIN

by Ellen W. Jacobs

She has a reputation for pulling off the most brazen things, including her clothes, which she did in 1967, several years before it became theatrically fashionable. Her name is Ann Halprin, high priestess of dance's avant garde.

When the nudity news broke, the New York City police sent out a summons for her arrest, and she never ventured east again till this past summer when her San Francisco Dancers' Workshop performed at the Connecticut College American Dance Festival.

A long time proponent of communal living, Mrs. Halprin's over-publicized reputation for pioneering theatrical nudity, plus the reputation of her dancers as a bunch of "free spirited freaks," generated epic rumors on the comparatively traditional Connecticut College campus. Sex orgies. Screwing on stage. Dropping acid in the wings. Interestingly enough, what people expected of her revealed more about their personal fantasies than what Mrs. Halprin and company turned out to be.

An artist whose artistic vision is an extension of a total life philosophy and style of life, Mrs. Halprin's choreographic process reflects a reverence for the individual creative impulse. Each member of her company has a voice in what is going to happen on stage. Both in choreographic process and performance she seeks to close the gap between life and art.

From the beginning, critics have questioned whether what she does can be considered dance. Denounced for performing therapy in the name of art, she has been the subject of great dispute. Her experiments with the arts as communal creation go back to 1955, when she appeared as part of the ANTA

"It represents a biological truth," she said. "We have a tradition, then it decays, or it is destroyed. From it emerges a new growth. A new way is discovered and a new form created."

Her present involvement with "intra-communal art" began in 1969 when she and members of the San Francisco Dancers' Workshop worked with members of Studio Watts for a performance of "Ceremony of Us", presented at the opening of the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles. Since that time her work has concentrated on developing artistic communities among artists from different ethnic backgrounds, people representing a diversity of values and interests. But instead of trying to create a melting pot, these differences are prized and used to enrich each other.

Mrs. Halprin's philosophy of dance training preceded many of the ideas recently recognized in psychology and dance therapy. An awareness of the inextricable relationship of the body, the intellect, the emotions and the spirit are not recent discoveries for her. The ways in which different ethnic groups move reflect the differences in their cultural backgrounds and social attitudes. Since these differences are cherished by Mrs. Halprin, her training does not reduce their movement qualities to a common stylistic denominator. No one is asked to relinquish his identity. Instead, classwork and performances enhance individuality and uniqueness.

Because a performance is supposed to be a communal effort by each of the performers, there is great potential for ego and artistic conflict. "Life at the San Francisco Dancers' Workshop is like sitting atop a volcano," Mrs. Halprin admitted with a grim smile. Company conflicts are resolved through marathon encounter group confrontations where pent up emotions and ideas spill out until a resolution is reached.

As long ago as the Fall of 1968, Mrs. Halprin called for a redefinition of the role of the artist. In an article in the "Tulane Drama Review" she said: "I am



Modern Dance Festival in New York City. "Something happened to me there," she said in her husky voice. "I became aware of a new need. There seemed something seriously wrong with the autocratic relationship I saw between the choreographer and the dancers in the company. I decided to leave the dance world. I wanted to make things in which all the artists were equally dependent—musicians, artists, dancers, light designers. Things that would not just focus on dance."

So trailed by a following of devoted students, Mrs. Halprin decided on an outlaw existence and set off for the west in search of other alternatives. The artists that joined her, composer LaMonte Young, light designer Patrick Hickey, constituted the beginnings of the present San Francisco Dancers' Workshop.

In virtual isolation from the rest of the dance world, she was free from the restrictions and influences of conventional dance ideas. She was one of the first choreographers to reject the proscenium arch and seek out new spatial environments for dance. "We searched for new possibilities in manipulating sound, space, task-oriented movement. We moved out of the theater and worked outdoors, in the woods, on the fields, in the streets. For two years we explored new performing environments. Being out of the theater stimulated the development of a new concept of time. We realized that a performance did not have to happen at 8:30 p.m. Why not at other times? We scheduled events at dawn, at 3 p.m."

She was also one of the first choreographers to involve the audience in her performances. This she did way back in the 1950's. In 1967, when she began doing her now famous Myths, she saw develop among her audience-participants what she calls "a collective energy" that grew to a "collective consciousness." The awareness stimulated further explorations.

"Again and again I saw the pattern repeat itself. I would offer the audience a structure. For instance, a maze of paper carefully constructed for the audience to walk around. I saw the participants destroy the structure, not because they consciously set out to do it. It just happened. And then they would recreate it in their own way. As they went through the paper maze they tore it apart and then built their own maze to suit their own purposes.

coming to see the artist in another light. He is no longer a solitary figure, but rather a guide who works to evoke art within us all. This is the pure meaning of seminal theater."

She does not regard the stage as a platform for her personal expression of feelings and believes that today's avant garde in dance have reached a definite impasse. Instead of responding to society's needs, they respond only to their personal need for expression. "Many artists are running away rather than confronting the social problems that overwhelm us. They are heading for other worlds—India, the East—instead of going into the problems, examining them and trying to solve them," she said.

Her most recent explorations, which she presented in New London and which she is now presenting at New York's City Center, are the result of years of experimentation with communal relationships, as well as a recent experience with psychologist James Fadiman.

The three sections of the piece, "Initiation," "Confrontation" and "Submission" are analogous to the three levels of consciousness through which Fadiman guided Mrs. Halprin. The first level, which she calls "the mask" presents the social image that we present to the world. Reaching the second level demands a recognition of the conflict between personal fantasy and social regulation. It is a state where what we want to have and be, and what we can have and be, oppose each other. It is a period of great violence. The third level, the spiritual experience, is a state of submission, reached when the conflict is resolved. The reconciliation permits the inner peace necessary to achieve oneness with other people and ourselves. "We must go through each of these three states if we are ever to reach harmony with ourselves and others. It is basic to all real human relationships."

From the audience she seeks to evoke sufficient empathy during the first two sections so that it will be moved to join the performers in the "trance dance" in the end. "If we have been doing our job, members of the audience will join us on stage." Hundreds of New Londoners jammed the stage of Palmer Auditorium in New London.

The company is appearing in the basement of New York's City Center November 12-16.