Destined for the dance

he dance world's reach has always been tiny. Robert Cohan, the driving force in the understanding of contemporary dance in Britain in the twentieth century, grew up, like most people, in blissful ignorance of either classical dance or the burgeoning contemporary schools. Cohan was born in 1925 and raised in Brooklyn. His dance-life was, surprisingly, entirely a product of the US army. He went to his first dance performance at the suggestion of army friends; he was wounded in Europe, and his months in hospital enabled an education through a well-stocked library. The girlfriend of an army buddy led him to Martha Graham's classes; and his tiny war pension enabled him to give up a well-paid job to attend fulltime. No General Patton, no London Contemporary Dance Theatre.

Cohan – a lover of the mystical – would have said he was destined. And in many ways it was an astonishing ascent. Within a year of his first class, he was dancing with Graham's company; four months later, he was teaching her technique to others and studying choreography with Louis Horst, Graham's companion and musical director. This three-stranded enterprise - teaching, choreographing and performing – was to be his raison d'être.

Cohan's charm and leadership, now legendary in the dance world, must have been present from the beginning, as he survived two decades in the orbit of Graham, a notoriously difficult character. A break of five years, in which he cemented his teaching reputation, choreographed and ran his own small dance

JUDITH FLANDERS

Paul R. W. Jackson

THE LAST GURU

Robert Cohan's life in dance, from Martha Graham to London contemporary dance theatre With commentary by Robert Cohan 380pp. Dance Books. £20 (US \$33.95). 978 1 85273 162 5

company intervened, before he returned once more to the fold, in time for a tour to the UK, and a meeting with Robin Howard. Howard was a Graham fanatic, and was determined to bring contemporary dance teaching and performing to the UK. The man suggested by Graham was Cohan.

Difficult and by now alcoholic though Graham might have been, she was also right. The first performance by Cohan's London Contemporary Dance Theatre (LCDT) took place less than a year after his arrival, and the important British dancers and choreographers – including Siobhan Davies and Richard Alston – who studied with him are legion.

Despite this astonishing success, however, much of his life was a tangle of wrangles with the Arts Council, which acted as censorious paymaster, unable ever quite to decide what it wanted. First, it wanted a company that produced artistically challenging works; then it quavered that the work was too "difficult" for "the provinces", and what it really wanted was bigger audiences; then it withdrew support

from those who produced the unchallenging work that drew in these audiences. It makes for dispiriting reading, as does the backstory of Robin Howard, who cheerfully pauperized years [with Graham]... were the happiest and himself to make up for the government's lack of support, before being ousted in a boardroom coup encouraged and admired by the Council. Cohan's later years, therefore, were spent only partly in Britain; he also worked as artistic adviser to the Batsheva Dance Company in Tel Aviv (founded by one of Graham's very earliest supporters), and in teaching and choreographic endeavours.

Paul R. W. Jackson's decision to tell Cohan's story entirely chronologically provides a number of challenges. Cohan's choreographic output was large - nearly seventy works - and at times the chapters have century of life; and in Class, Cohan did for an "and then" feel to them. A the- contemporary dance what the défilés of the matic approach would have allowed the author to show the development of the choreographer, from his more formal, austere earlier pieces, to his later, more lyrical period. There would also, crucially, have been space to discuss Cohan's ideas. We are told he was attracted to the mystical, and was a reader of George Gurdjieff and Jiddu Krishnamurti among others, but we gain little understanding of how that reading translated into his work.

In fact, there is almost no attempt to get inside Cohan's head and discover what he was thinking. His decision to work in Apartheidera South Africa, despite the cultural boycott of the country, is given exactly the same survive. That is what art is, in the end – what amount of space – two lines – as his "truly ex-survives. The rest is howling into the wind.

traordinary" experience on a wildlife safari on his way home. His private life, too, barely rates a mention – we gather that he had a penchant for troubled, addicted men, but there is no attempt to look at what that might mean. Each chapter ends with a page or so of comment from Cohan, who read the manuscript after it was finished. At one point he says, "those ten most fulfilling of my life", which comes as a surprise after Jackson's chapter of trauma, slog and poor working conditions. But there is no way, in the structure Jackson has chosen, to address these competing stories.

Jackson's belief in Cohan's achievement is admirable, and, for those who have seen his work, entirely justified. To name but a few examples: Eclipse is an extraordinary theatrical, dramatic piece that turns white-hot emotion into pure icy geometry; Cell's universality, its theme being the mind imprisoned by the man, has been demonstrated over its nearly half-Paris Opéra do for ballet, laying bare the spatial arrangements, musical organization and formal composition that underlie Graham's

It is dispiriting, therefore, that Jackson constantly reduces this genuine admiration to an aggrieved arguing back at critics long gone. Yes, it's a shame that John Percival of The Times did not find Cohan to his taste. No, we do not need a quarter-century-old derogatory review from the Kilburn Times resuscitated so that we can be told why it is wrong. Cohan's achievement was to enable an entire art form to flourish. That will survive. His best works will

Tendy Perron's introduction to her compendium of reviews and feature articles reads not unlike an ancient apologia with its curious mix of hubris and diffidence. She seems at pains, as a practitioner of dance, to legitimize or excuse her assumption of the writer's, and especially the critic's, mantle. Her opening sentence is nothing if not preemptive: "I was not the writer in the family". It is also unnecessary; there is no question but that she can write, that she is, by intuition and by formal as well as impromptu training, a writer. Indeed, her style is refreshingly different from the lifeless, obfuscating prose that characterizes so much dance writing and that makes modern dance in particular seem to the reader an arcane and alienating experience. Her sense of rhythm, musicality and logic inform and illuminate her criticism, as does her performer's instinct for intimate, immediate communication with an audience.

It is notoriously difficult to describe adequately or meaningfully in words what a dance looks like. It is not only a physical medium of expression, but also of experience. Perron is particularly adept at distilling the essence of a moment. Even when her prose is most precise and evocative, I found it difficult to formulate a vision of the beautiful movements, the eloquent stillnesses Perron documents. What I did learn, however, was what it felt like to be there, in that moment, breathing the same air as the dancers on stage and the audience in their darkened seats. We can appreciate the visceral charge, the elemental excitement generated by a single potent gesture or a perfect piece of

Bone-deep pleasure

KATHLEEN RILEY

Wendy Perron

THROUGH THE EYES OF A DANCER

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somatic phrasing, even if we can't picture it, or our picture remains impressionistic at best. In trying to analyse the mystery of Sara Rudner's astounding dancing, Perron says:

Every ounce of her body commits to the movement; all systems are go; she is doing what she was meant to do. Even the most pedestrian of moves are charged... Although her presence is rock solid, her movements are mercurial. Like a great actress, she transforms with every feeling, every phrase. But the spell she casts is not theatripleasure of motion and a lusty willingness to follow her own impulses.

She is a fine portraitist. Some of her most engaging pieces are not about movement as such but simply about people she has worked with or befriended. The most interesting, perceptive piece of writing in Through the Eyes of a Dancer is perhaps about a writer, albeit one who had a special place in his heart for dancers, "a place of innocence": J. D. Salinger.

Perron is a principled critic and editor, acutely aware of her responsibility to an art form that is eternally precarious in economic terms, and of the social issues alongside which, and out of which, dance is created. The volume includes two pieces - "Beware the Egos of Critics" (1991) and "A Debate on Snark" (2012) – admonishing critics who abuse the power they wield or who indulge in excessive negativity under the protective veil of honesty. Her own reviews could perhaps use more critical bite, but, while her sympathies are clearly with the makers of dance, her point of view is more balanced, her points of reference wider than the average practitioner's or critic's.

The book is divided into seven chronological sections spanning the 1960s to 2012. It is not intended to be a comprehensive record of Perron's writings for the SoHo Weekly News, Village Voice and Dance Magazine (of which she is currently Editor at large), or of the New York cal. It is a pure dance spell, rooted in bone-deep dance scene in the past half century. Instead, the When Perron interviews Sontag, she notes her selection is partly defined by Perron's parallel careers as dancer, choreographer and teacher: busy periods practising her craft entailed fallow periods of writing about it, and vice versa.

> The selection is idiosyncratic in other ways, too. Things that excite Perron as a dancer, or that underpin her philosophy as an artist, inevitably emerge as leitmotifs in her writing; for instance, her emphasis on dance (or acting) as a serious, vital and revelatory form of play, as a

sophisticated extension of the game of Let's Pretend. Her critical responses are both raw and elegant, betraying the influence of her heroine Susan Sontag, who believed in lingering over ___ the "sensuous surface" of art.

Each piece is like the twist of a kaleidoscope, colourful fragments of downtown experimental performances, ballet at the Metropolitan and butoh in Brooklyn, testifying to the richness of New York's dance culture. Beyond the descriptive and documentary lie discussions of a more ethical nature: ongoing debates about feminism and racial diversity in dance; sober reminders of how the AIDS epidemic decimated the dance world in the 1980s and 90s; and cautionary tales of how the new technology and the sheer availability of readymades from the dance past complicate (and arguably enrich) the question of appropriation. And there are two controversial blogs about the uncredited use of a body double in the film Black Swan

Through the Eyes of a Dancer is an apt title. Even the pieces not specifically concerned with dance are written from a dancer's perspective. "gently moving hands" and how her "lifeaffirming energy radiates throughout her body and the space around her". Some of her more striking images have a danceability and a soaring quality, as in "when sparks of possibility flew across the skyscape of the American mind". "Dancers see a netherworld of thought, motion and energy invisible to non-dancers", Perron explains. This is dance as modus vivendi as much as modus videndi.