



ENTERTAINMENT & ARTS

Flipping to a new chapter

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AT 71, Simone Forti can still turn a mean backward somersault. She knows just the right way to crawl around the floor while discoursing on slavery. Better than most people, she can simultaneously wave her legs in the air and launch into a riff about the Milky Way.

The time has come, she says, for a greater artistic challenge.

Forti first made a name for herself in New York in the 1960s with her Minimalist dance constructions and associations with Trisha Brown, Steve Paxton, Yvonne Rainer, Deborah Hay and other members of the revolutionary Judson Dance Theater. More recently, she has spent 20-odd years -- the last eight in Los Angeles -- mining the connections between movement and language.

But now this pioneer of postmodern and improvisational dance says she is heading “more and more toward writing. I’ve reached a plateau, moving- and speaking-wise. There is something about literature that demands something of me in a way that moving and speaking does not.”

Though Forti has previously published two books, her new effort, “Unbuttoned Sleeves,” points to the more central role writing has assumed in her artistic life.

“I’ve always been ambitious, but I guess now you could say I’ve really gone linguistic,”

she says. “Knock on wood, I have a good 15, maybe 17 years to make a whole new body of work, and at this point in my life, I’m just really interested in what literature is about.”

Published by Venice-based Beyond Baroque Books, “Unbuttoned Sleeves” is a collection of poetry, improvised writing, journal-like reflections and transcriptions of rehearsals for Forti’s last two performance projects. Both the first of those, also called “Unbuttoned Sleeves” and performed last year at REDCAT, and “101,” which played last month at Highways Performance Space in Santa Monica, involved improvised movement, spoken word and the collaboration of choreographer Sarah Swenson, theater artist Terrence Luke Johnson and composer and trombonist Douglas Wadle. Directed by Forti, the foursome worked with ideas from a provocative mix of texts, including observations by Thoreau, “The Federalist Papers” and Sun Tzu’s “The Art of War.”

The book, which Forti edited but which lists those collaborators as co-authors, is “a major step forward in terms of experimental writing,” says Fred Dewey, executive director of Beyond Baroque.

“I’m not just publishing some legendary choreographer who wrote a book,” he says. “Simone has come up with a new model that’s not just about self-expression or the vision of one person. In book form, she has found a way to bring together different people with different visions in a democratic, pluralistic way.”

“The idea was that we are four flawed people like anybody else, exploring our beliefs and speculations,” Forti said recently at her apartment near UCLA, where she’s part of the adjunct faculty in the world arts and cultures department. “I feel that I don’t have a great understanding of the world at the moment, that our civilization is full of confusion and it’s hard to know what to think. But if you put four people together and weave their interests and beliefs, that says something.”

Working with Forti has been “endlessly fascinating” for Swenson, who also runs her own local company, Vox Dance Theatre. “Simone is still evolving as an artist,” she says. “Working with her, there is always so much discovery involved about yourself and how you relate to others.”

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Exploring dance

BORN in 1935 to Italian Jewish parents, Forti fled Fascist Italy at the age of 4, a circumstance that figures prominently in her recent writing and performances. The family settled in Los Angeles, and she took her first modern dance class while a student at Fairfax High. Briefly, she attended Reed College in Portland, Ore., where she met her first husband, artist Robert Morris. The couple moved to San Francisco, and Forti initially pursued painting. Just for fun, though, she started studying dance improvisation with Anna Halprin. An early postmodernist, Halprin taught in an outdoor studio and purposely distanced herself from the New York dance establishment.

“It was the first time a teacher had really captured my imagination and the first time I knew I would always do a lot of dancing,” Forti wrote in “Handbook in Motion.”

Over ginger ale and blueberries at her kitchen table, Forti comes across as essentially the same graceful and centered person who rolled around the Highways stage for the “101” performances. Small and compact with flowing gray hair, she has a strikingly unpretentious manner and frequently breaks into impish grins. Her voice has an airy, ethereal quality, even when discussing weighty life-and-death matters. Something about her suggests an enlightened fairy or some other sprightly being whom Harry Potter or Frodo might happen upon in an enchanted forest.

Forti prefers the term “the king’s fool.”

“The fool can tell the king things that no one else can because he’s dancing while he does it,” she says. “When you’re a turning a cartwheel, you can get away with saying just about anything.”

Forti first conceived of what has probably been her most influential choreographic method -- moving and speaking in tandem, a practice for which she coined the word Logomotion -- in the early ‘80s, after her marital breakup with artist-musician Peter Van Riper and the death of her father. Feeling the need “to reinvent my sense of direction,” she started a workshop for people going through work and life transitions.

“This one woman wanted to develop a more personal relationship to the newspaper, and when my father died, I had said, ‘Someone in this family has to read the paper,’” she recalls. “I always struggled with newspapers, while my father read two or three of them a day.

“In the workshop, I began to connect with the paper, and I started to dance the news.”

Forti has conducted Logomotion workshops for dancers and nondancers all over the world. The practice is rooted “in how we behave, how your thoughts affect your body. Like the way you tilt your head when you’re thinking or the way you use your hands when you speak a certain way.”

It was three years ago that Forti began trying to transmute these ideas into a new medium, when Beyond Baroque’s Dewey published “Oh Tongue,” her second book (the first was 1974’s “Handbook in Motion”). Mingling essays, poems, stream-of-consciousness musings and a poignant imagined dialogue between Forti and her deceased father, “Oh Tongue” also seemed an experiment in how its author’s improvisational techniques might transfer from the stage to the page. With a style often reminiscent of Kerouac and other Beat authors but without the macho swagger, she sought connections between early childhood memories, current political

situations, how the survival mechanisms of herbs and animals are not so different from humans' and why she felt compelled to write it all down.

“Usually, I want to write when I’m at the end of a cycle in my dancing. When some search that’s been feeding me starts to disappoint me,” she wrote. “Dancing is so direct. I mean, you just put your hand on the ground and, wow! I wish writing could be like that. Yes, now I remember. I want something with a longer arc. Something that coheres for a longer time.”

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Making her move

ALTHOUGH she “suffered for weeks from dancing too hard” at a recent festival in Berlin, Forti maintains that growing older physically has little to do with why her “lust for movement is different.” A devoted practitioner of tai chi and a big fan of contact improvisation jams, which she started attending in her early 60s, she feels “more supple now than I’ve ever been. I was never virtuosic, so it’s not like I’ve lost a lot, movement-wise. It just got to the point where I could pull out a solo at the drop of a hat, and I was getting frustrated. There’s that trap of repeating yourself.”

However, she dismisses the idea that literature leaves behind more of a legacy than choreography.

“Well, I guess they are like kids,” she concedes of books. “They will last, but so will what I’ve been teaching. A lot of dancers today are moving and speaking.”

Carmela Hermann, a local choreographer who combines movement and language, considers Forti a major influence.

“Simone teaches you not just to follow her but how to find your own inspired

relationship to movement and language,” she says. “I also learned from her how working with subject matter as opposed to just pure movement really opens up channels.”

When Swenson started working with Forti, “I couldn’t speak at all, I could only move,” she says. “But this unlocking starts to happen, where the movement of the body opens up the possibility of language. Things start to come out of your mouth that wouldn’t have if you weren’t moving and vice versa.”

Forti says she herself remains deeply influenced by the Judson Dance Theater era, which completely upended conventional definitions of dance. While living in New York and later in Vermont, she went on to develop a body of work based on visits she made to zoos as well as other observations of animals. She moved back to L.A. in 1998 but says that, even here, she is still affected by the work of Konrad Lorenz, the pioneering student of animal behavior and, in particular, the birds known as jackdaws.

“I’ll call out to any crow that flies by my window. They don’t like it, but I like that they don’t like it,” she says, breaking into another impish grin.

Something seems to be keeping Forti eternally young at heart. Call it, perhaps, a continuous quest to expand her perspective and deepen her consciousness. That and “always having a sense of development within, of being able to change with the times,” she says. “At this moment, it’s the ensemble work and the writing that’s coming together for me.

“I mean, I’m no Virginia Woolf, but I do feel I have something to offer.”

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Choreographed thoughts and images

“When the twin towers fell I changed focus. I’m not the only one. Not just the news, some history. And then, the sense that there is history. The Declaration of Independence and the writings around that. The body politic and oh! Yes. Slavery. The Constitution and the writings around that. The separation of church and state, the separation of powers and why. A tensile structure. When meditating, clouds of thought energy ready to snap into thought, some thoughts are hard to think. The king’s fool turns cartwheels like our planet, like a hawk in space, like painful knowing. Like rocks strewn across my desk.”

-- from Simone Forti’s “Unbuttoned Sleeves”