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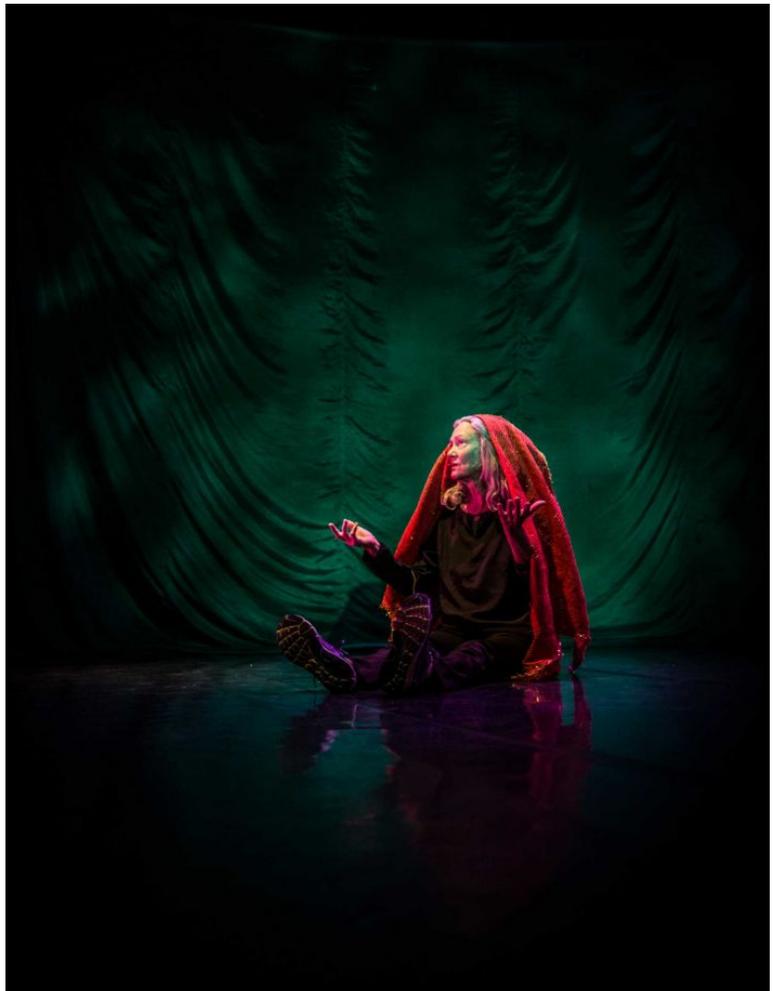
Dance: A life in dance, solo, by Sara Shelton Mann

By Mary Ellen Hunt
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If dance lives in the bodies of the artists who perform it, then volumes of fascinating history reside in the limbs of [Sara Shelton Mann](#), who took the CounterPulse stage on Friday for the premiere of an autobiographical solo “Sara (the Smuggler).”

Conceived and choreographed by Circo Zero’s [Keith Hennessy](#) with sound score by Mann’s longtime collaborator [Norman Rutherford](#)--both Contraband alums--“Sara (the Smuggler) is a review of her life via dance and theater, and what a life it is.

The title is a sly reference to the dance collective Contraband, which Mann founded in the 1980s and which disbanded in 1996. It’s not overstatement to say that Contraband, with its heady brew of art, politics, mysticism and activism, changed the landscape of modern dance theater, and Mann’s vision and energy were at the heart of it. “Sara (the Smuggler)” harnesses that same spirit.



Prompted by Hennessy’s questions and direction, Mann’s performance shifts easily from ritual to conversational. At 71, she is a compact, lean performer, her wiry frame softened by her trademark shock of white hair. As charismatic and compelling to watch as ever, Mann’s movement reads as both economical and expansive. Her rants are tempestuous, her stillness is serene.

Under a heavy gold veil, a primal energy and corkscrewing arms and fingers recall German expressionist [Mary Wigman](#)’s famous “Witch Dance.” In a Proustian step into her past as a protege of choreographer [Alwin Nikolais](#), Mann is specific, almost mathematical in her

precision, and when she leads audience members in a bit of therapeutic movement alchemy, the air crackles with exuberance.

Mann's verbal snapshots of her history are equally revelatory, often poignant. Matter-of-fact descriptions of the Klan burning a cross on the lawn of the house in which she was staying, or a coat hanger abortion in the late 1950s have no less power than wry observations on modern dance legends--Alwin Nikolais' class was terrifying and ecstatic, and "Merce [Cunningham] danced like a lion, but had secrets that he didn't teach."

"Sara" harks back to "Growing Up Public," a solo Remy Charlip created in 1984 for choreographer and dancer [Lucas Hoving](#) to perform about Hoving's own life. Hennessy offered this idea to Mann, she explains, on her 70th birthday.

Yet "Sara" is more than a simple tribute, it's an embodied history of one of the most influential figures in modern dance.

In 2003, as Mann relates in her monologue, she vowed never to perform again. "I'm still here," she says dryly.

Thank goodness for that.

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