



The Prickly Rose: A Biography of Viola Farber

Jeff Slayton

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It is tempting to assume that life is easy for a person of reputation and acclaim that fame comes without effort and that their accomplishments have somehow exonerated them from all future struggle. In this inspiring biography of modern dance pioneer Viola Farber author Jeff Slayton exposes the sacrifices she made as well as the passion that carried her through the dark and impenetrable patches of her career. Farber was Slayton's teacher mentor friend and dance partner for 20 years. The two were also married for nine years. He wrote the book to describe her life and art and to capture a unique period in dance history when it was birthing into an artistic profession in its own right.

Farber who was born in 1931 entered the modern dance scene at a time when it was undergoing a radical revolution through the influence of Expressionist Movement. She brought a unique vision and aesthetic not only to her performing but also to her choreography. Dance is by nature an ephemeral expression—once performed never to be repeated. Farber says Slayton was attracted by that quality and “loved that dance left no debris behind and was not all that interested in having her work survive after she had stopped choreographing.” When she died not a single videotape of her company's repertoire was found in her apartment.

As a teacher Farber helped dancers discover “their dancing involved not only their physical technique but also their spirit soul emotions and musicality.” This approach forced them to grow and often led to profound psychological openings in her dancers. As a choreographer Farber liked to work directly with the strengths and weaknesses of each individual dancer showcasing their uniqueness as opposed to trying to squeeze everybody into a standardized mold. As a result says Slayton dancers loved working with her.

Slayton captures the complexities of Farber's personality—her passion her commitment to dance and the insecurities that plagued her. He notes a cruel side to her that sometimes caused friction within the company but makes clear that she never asked anything of anyone else that she didn't also ask of herself doubly. It is this aspect—that she often “scratched” anyone who came too close to her—that sparked the title of the book.

The book's only weakness is that Slayton's focus is sometimes a bit shotgun in nature. Details that have no context are peppered around paragraphs that don't seem to have any real center to them. But Farber's story is so engaging and Slayton's admiration for his ex-wife and mentor is so thoroughly infectious that one quickly forgives any superficial organizational flaws.

From insights into the realities of the creative life to the details of Farber's fascinating career and contribution *The Prickly Rose* is a good read for anyone interested in either life or art.

ROBIN IRELAND (January 5, 2007)

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