



Iro Valaskakis Tembeck. Photo from the Collection Bibliothèque de la danse de l'École nationale de ballet contemporain, Montréal.

In Memoriam~*Iro Valaskakis Tembeck*

NOVEMBER 3, 1946–SEPTEMBER 18, 2004

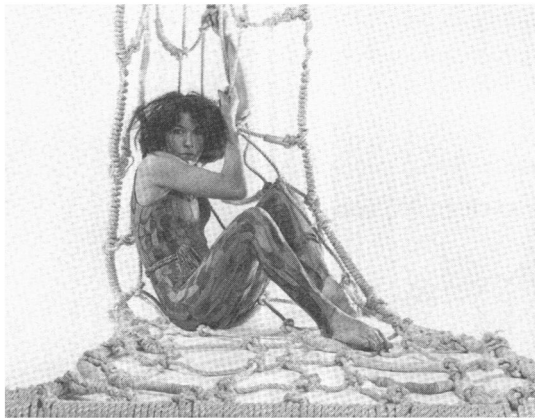
The recent death of Iro Valaskakis Tembeck leaves a great void in the Montréal dance world. Her presence here was a positive force over a long period of time. She was a dancer, a choreographer, and teacher of dance technique before making an even more important contribution to the community as an historian who not only researched and published the first books on local history, but also reached out to the larger international academic world, making our history available beyond the insular confines of Québec and Canada.

Her first book, *Danser à Montréal: germination d'une histoire chorégraphique*, (1991, Presses de l'Université du Québec, Sillery) remains an essential text for students and was translated into English and published as volume V, number 2 in the Studies in Dance History series by the Society of Dance History Scholars in 1994. This edition won the Outstanding Publication Award from the Congress on Research in Dance. Hailed in a CORD press release as “a work that charts new territory, develops substantial and high quality ethnographic research . . .,” it made the roots of Québec dance (which had emerged as a distinct force, especially on the contemporary dance scene in the 1990s) understandable to English-speaking readers worldwide.

Iro Valaskakis was born on November 3, 1946 to Greek parents in Cairo, Egypt where she studied classical ballet as well as interpretive dance with Sonia Ivanova. At the age of thirteen she danced with the Cairo Opera Ballet. Completely fluent in four languages, she spoke perfect and unaccented French and English as well as Greek and Arabic. When she emigrated to Montréal in 1967, she taught at the Academie of Les Grands Ballets Canadiens and studied dance history, beginning the passionate quest which was the running thread throughout the rest of her life. She discovered jazz dance with teacher Eva Von Gencsy and modern dance with Martine Epoque, two important and influential teachers in their respective fields. Having earned her B.A. in English and History at Cairo's American University, she acquired her master's degree from McGill University in 1969. At the same time she qualified as a teacher of jazz, character, and modern dance with the Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing.

She joined Epoque's Groupe de Nouvelle Aire in 1972, performing and choreographing as well as teaching for the company's school which she directed from 1976 to 1977. She formed her own company, Axis Danse, in 1977, choreographing solos and group works with a wide spectrum of performers; musicians as well as classical and modern dancers.

The word “statuesque” is correctly used in describing the physical beauty and pres-



Iro Valaskakis Tembeck. Photo from the Collection Bibliothèque de la danse de l'École nationale de ballet contemporain, Montréal.

ence of Iro, who was a dynamic performer and possessed a charismatic stage persona, her aura of female strength radiating outwards in solo choreographies such as *Amazonie* (1982), duos like *Terracotta* (1980), and in group works such as *Kyklos* (1983). Her works often treated the subjects of myths and rituals, and her commanding gaze, dark hair, and earth-mother image facilitated effective visualisations of primitive goddesses.

After joining the newly formed dance department at L'Université de Québec à Montréal in 1980 as historian, she co-founded a new creative research group, Artscene, where she continued to perform and choreograph. A prolific creator, she made more than forty choreographic works over the years. Invited by Les Ballets Jazz, she created *Germinal* to an original score by Vincent Dionne in 1984 and later she made a pas de deux, *Cool Heure Blues*, for les Ballets Eddy Toussaint.

Parallel with her extensive involvement in performing, she did intensive research into Montréal's dance history, publishing numerous articles in French and English for scholarly journals and the *Montreal Gazette* newspaper, *Dance in Canada* magazine, etc. As preparation for her writings she collected many photographs, programs, and other documents. She arranged several important exhibitions about the subject at the Place des Arts, Montréal's theatre complex, and elsewhere. Her latest book, *La Danse comme Paysage: sources, traditions, innovations* (2001, Editions de l'IQRC, Québec), updates and simplifies her history of Québec dance, providing an easily accessible approach to the subject. Her long-term interest in Ruth Abramowitz Sorel, a Polish ex-Wigman dancer, self-exiled to Montréal because of Nazi oppression, will soon emerge in a posthumous publication by the Society for Canadian Dance Studies. Her courses in Dance History at UQAM encouraged deeper research from her students, emphasizing primary sources. Over the years she built a large and important archive, including photo slides as well as press clippings and posters. This archive remains, with her published works, as a permanent legacy to future researchers.

Awarded a doctorate by L'Université de Montréal in 1994, she participated in many international scholarly conferences (SDHS, CORD, etc.). She served on the board of CORD. She collaborated on the organisation and edited the proceedings of a conference held at UQAM: *Estivale 2000: Canadian Dancing Bodies Then and Now*. Unfortunately, she will not be here to celebrate the first CORD conference held in Montréal at her beloved UQAM in the fall of 2005.

Her personal history was marked by tragedy. Three days after the birth of her daughter Tamar in 1976, her husband, Robert Tembeck, a theatre director, with whom she had collaborated in many theatre pieces, was killed in an automobile accident. She

retained his name for the rest of her life, only bringing her maiden name Valaskakis to her publications when she married Jean Trudel, a corporate lawyer, many years later.

Her long battle with bone marrow cancer, involving several chemotherapy treatments, was marked by a profound and holistic philosophy. She gave us all an example of how to face the inevitable with serenity and grace, speaking of the phoenix rising from the ashes and the next step in her voyage. The moving service held in her honor at Eglise St. Jean Baptiste in Montréal was full of loving people from the many worlds she had marked by her presence. The Greek and Egyptian communities as well as the Montréal dance community including choreographers, dancers, writers, researchers, and many students, were present for a touching tribute which was crowned by dancer Manon Levac performing one of Iro's solos before the altar, something that could not have happened without the respect dance has gained as a serious art in this province thanks to Iro's academic approach to its history.

Vincent Warren, C.M., Curator

La Bibliothèque de la Danse de L'École nationale de ballet contemporain
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