

THE KITCHEN

CENTER FOR
VIDEO, MUSIC,
DANCE AND
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'Discovery in Dance Is Inexhaustible'

By JACK ANDERSON

In some ways, Mary Overlie is a very up-to-date choreographer, for she seeks to carry on and develop some of the kinetic explorations begun by the pioneering Judson Dance Theater two decades ago. She has also been associated with two innovative theater companies, the San Francisco Mime Troupe and the Mabou Mines. She is currently on the faculty of New York University's Experimental Theater Wing and is one of the founders of the School for Movement Research, an organization devoted to the investigation of new dance forms.

From Thursday through next Sunday, at the Kitchen, Miss Overlie will present a small anthology of her recent choreography, with two programs scheduled nightly. At the 8 P.M. performances she is offering "Hero" and "Wallpaper," while "Painter's Dream" and a group improvisation are on the 11 P.M. bills. All performances also include a new solo, "History."

But though the solo is new, it is intended as a tribute to much that is old in dance. The up-to-date Miss Overlie has become much concerned with dance history, which she views as an unbroken continuum from past to present. In a recent conversation she maintained that whereas individual dance works can be all too easily forgotten, whenever someone makes a stylistic, technical or formal discovery in dance, "that discovery goes on and on and on. It's always there for others to use; its potentialities seem inexhaustible." And she pointed out that in the physical art of dance all such material must be passed on by personal contact: one cannot learn it by reading a book. She said, "Look at

the long line of mutual support that's taken place from dancer to dancer over the centuries. I find it very poignant that in dance transmission of information can only occur from one body to another."

Miss Overlie said she was led to view the past with fresh eyes after several years of study with the late Jean Hamilton, a former member of Anna Pavlova's company. Until her death last July, Miss Hamilton was unusual among ballet instructors because, instead of teaching classes for groups of students, she gave private lessons to one pupil at a time. "I got a new technical understanding of the body from Miss Hamilton," Miss Overlie said. "She reorganized many of my concepts of dance and I think 'History' may show this. Before I studied with her, I never understood how the hip joint worked or how the knee worked. But Miss Hamilton made me aware of kinesthetics and anatomy. She turned me into a real professional in my field."

Miss Overlie found herself particularly attracted to the Diaghilev era, admiring what she called the "fine theatrical intelligence" of such a ballerina as Tamara Karsavina and the accomplishments of such choreographers for Serge Diaghilev's Ballets Russes as Léonide Massine, Vaslav Nijinsky, Bronislava Nijinska and George Balanchine.

She had long marveled at Mr. Balanchine's mastery of space, but historical investigation made her equally impressed by the "visuality" of the ballets of Massine and Nijinska. She commented, "I like the way they created a sense of bodily geometry in their handling of large groups of people. I also like the way that, with all their own classical backgrounds, they

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nevertheless regarded each new dance as a fresh problem and refused to be tied to a ready-made movement system. I'm very sympathetic to that attitude.

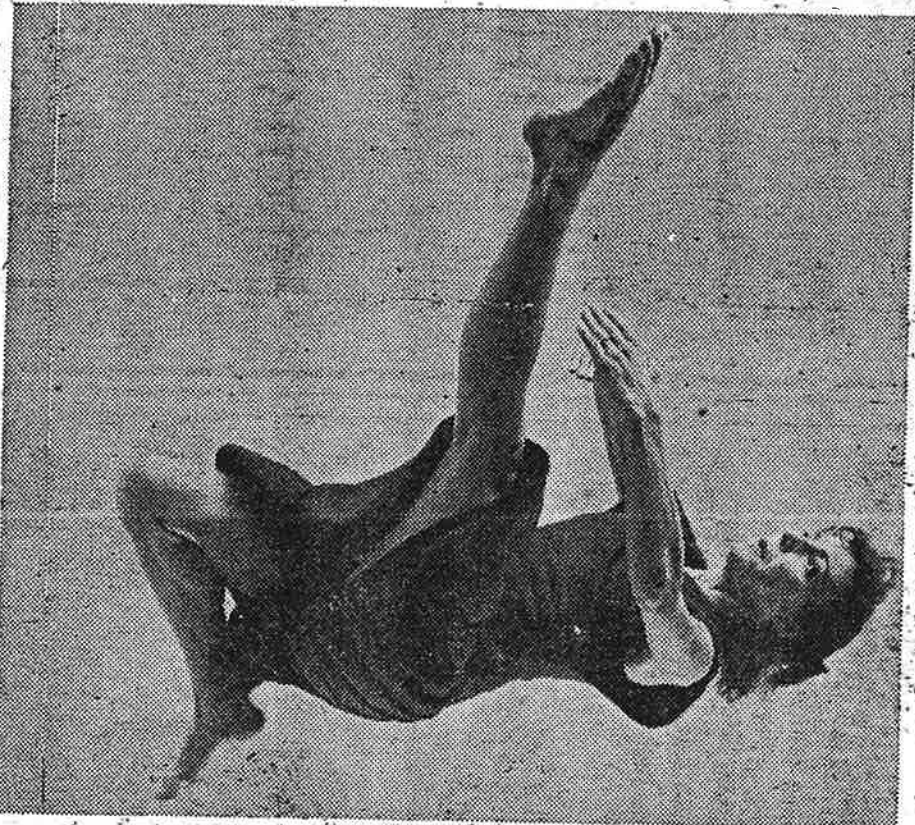
"How strange," Miss Overlie added, "that the great figures in this rich period of movement exploration continued to call what they were doing ballet. Sometimes I think we all should have gone on calling our dances ballets. Terms like 'modern' and, now, 'postmodern' dance have set up too many artificial barriers between styles."

"History," then, will be both an offering to the past and an affirmation that the past's achievements can live on in the present. Other works at the Kitchen arise out of the concerns of Miss Overlie's own creative past.

"Painter's Dream," of 1978, is one of the pieces that Miss Overlie used to call "abstract narratives" until she said she found "too many people crossing their eyes in bewilderment" when they heard that phrase. But she still considers it apt because dance is an art that must unfold in time and therefore it is possible for an unfolding of movement to possess dramatic tension and momentum, even though it may not tell a literal story. The title of "Painter's Dream" derives from Miss Overlie's attempt to use space as a constantly changing canvas on which to "paint" with movement. "Space is the kind of canvas a painter might dream about," she said.

"Wallpaper," choreographed in 1979, is a piece that could be called either theater or dance. However, Miss Overlie believed it is essentially dance because, even though it has brief passages of dialogue, its structure and content were determined by movement concerns, rather than by literary ideas or plot devices. Another abstract narrative, it requires its performers to react on an interpersonal level. Nevertheless, Miss Overlie claimed, "It's a study in pattern. That's why I called it 'Wallpaper.' Wallpaper is something you see in

Mary Overlie



John Elders

Mary Overlie will perform her new solo work, "History," as part of her program at the Kitchen beginning Thursday.

rooms where all sorts of unusual social phenomena may occur. Yet wallpaper itself is very formal and designed."

"Hero" was planned in 1980 to be Miss Overlie's first dance to music, and Laurie Anderson was commissioned to write a score. But Miss Anderson found time to write only 11

minutes of music — "very beautiful music," according to Miss Overlie — for the 40-minute work and the premiere took place in silence. Now, Miss Overlie has shortened "Hero" to 20 minutes and, with Miss Anderson's approval, Don Christensen has rearranged the original musical material. Previously, Miss Overlie had never

been drawn to music. She said, "I like silence. Silence can seem immense, it can be eloquent. And when dancers move to music, they often have a tendency to do no more than just hit the beat with their gestures and ignore all other expressive possibilities." Yet if silence can be eloquent and an imaginative use of music can look theatrical, Miss Overlie also thought that "music adds power to dance" and she hoped that music could reinforce the monumental scale she sought in "Hero."

Miss Overlie decided to include group improvisations on her 11 P.M. programs because she habitually uses improvisation as a compositional aid. She explained, "For me, improvisation keeps my perceptions of time and space alive." But she cautioned against regarding improvisations as undisciplined free-for-alls. "I structure all my improvisations," she said. "I provide a formal frame that makes possible a bodily dialogue between dancers." Moreover, although she occasionally allows for moments of improvisation in her dances, her choreography is more often totally fixed by the time it reaches the stage.

The Montana-born choreographer reflected, "I come from a family of Scandinavian carpenters. I love carpentry myself and I think it shows in my dances. I take great pleasure in setting every gesture. Structuring is exciting; it gives you a sense of being in control of things — provided you don't let your sense of control strangle your imagination."

Once the performances at the Kitchen are over, Miss Overlie wants to start work immediately on new dances. She said, "I'm interested in movement that's fun to do. At the same time, I dislike superficiality and I think too many virtuosos have a tendency to do too much all at once. That goes against my carpenter's instincts. Still, I can see that my sense of fun and my dislike of superficiality may rub heading against each other when I start my new dances. But I'm eager for a creative wrestling match, and curious to see what will happen."