

A Brief Biography of Sir Robert Cohan CBE

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Sir Robert Cohan CBE (27 March 1925 -13 January 2021) was one of the true pioneers of modern and contemporary dance. His work as a dancer, choreographer, teacher, advocate and mentor helped shape the art of dance around the globe.

Cohan's career in dance began in 1947 when a friend suggested he take classes at the Martha Graham studio in New York City. Like many returning GIs in the post WWII environment, he was searching for both direction and meaning in his life. He found it in the Graham studio. Martha Graham herself recognized his potential. After a few months of what Cohan described as "back-breaking work", Graham selected him for the Company. He became a principal dancer, often partnering Graham on stage. In 1952, encouraged by Graham, he choreographed his first work, *Perchance to Dream*, which was included in a mixed programme and received positive reviews.

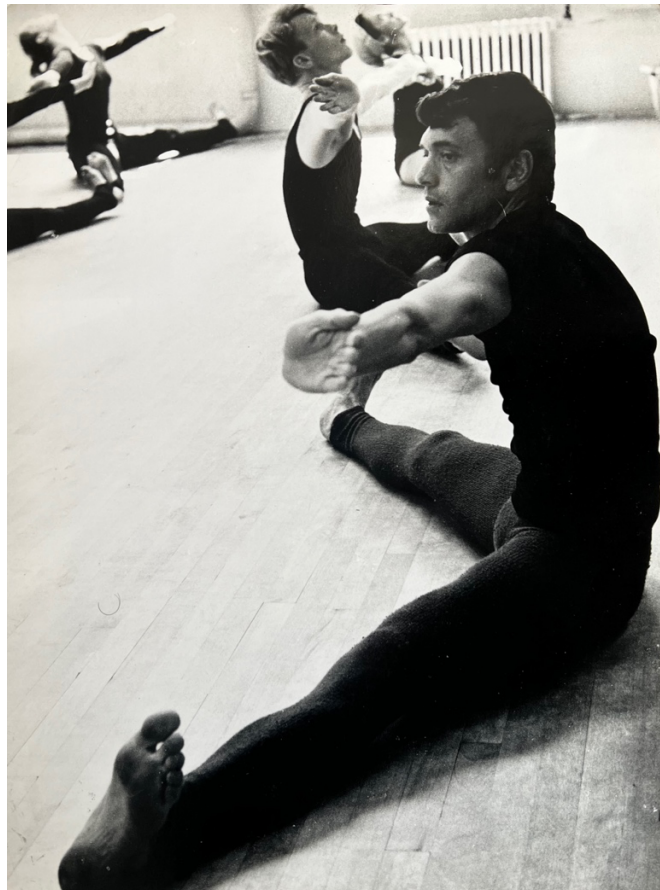


Cohan and Noemi Lapzeson in Graham's *El Penitente* Photo: Anthony Crickmay

Cohan left the Graham Company for a period in the late 1950s to form his own school. He also taught at several universities and colleges in Upstate New York and New England. The commuting was grueling, but teaching provided a necessary part of his income. His skills and abilities as a

teacher and mentor were finely honed during these years. He also used this time to study and perform different genres of dance. Working with Jack Cole in a more commercially lucrative jazz style, Cohan danced in a casino revue in pre-revolution Cuba. The troupe included Gwen Verdon and starred one of Cohan's childhood idols singer and dancer Ginger Rogers. Cohan continued to choreograph and dance in modern works throughout this time, performing several works with Matt Turney at university theatres and festivals including *Eclipse* (1961) at the prestigious American Dance Festival held at Connecticut College. Between 1952 and 1967 he choreographed about twenty pieces including works for Graham and the Batsheva Dance Company of Tel Aviv. Cohan rejoined Graham in 1962 and became co-director of the company. Soon afterward, he toured widely with Graham including in Europe and the UK. During the tour, he became acquainted with some of the people who would soon change his life and go on to become important colleagues and friends.

Philanthropist Robin Howard had for some years been enthralled with the Graham Company's performances and deeply involved in the work of the company. In 1966 Howard, who had been looking to form a school of modern dance in Britain, asked Graham to recommend the right person to lead such an effort; Cohan immediately came to mind. Given his talent, intelligence, diplomatic temperament and work ethic, Cohan was a natural choice.



Cohan (circa 1967)

Photo: LCDT Archives

In 1967 Cohan remained in London after a Graham tour. With Howard's support and encouragement, he put together a programme for the newly formed Contemporary Dance Group in a matter of a few short months. Performed at the Adeline Genée Theatre in East Grinstead, the programme received critical praise and Cohan's presence as a catalyst of change for the British dance scene was immediately recognized. Cohan noted that he coined the term *contemporary* dance to distinguish it from the term *modern* dance which referred to a style of ballroom dancing in Britain. In interviews at the time Cohan noted that he was not trying to mould UK students into an American modern dance style or export Graham technique as he taught it in the States. He recognized that he would need to alter his teaching style and expectations to help develop what might in time become a form of "English contemporary dance."



Cohan (1971)

Photo: Anthony Crickmay

Cohan moved to London in 1968 and took on the role of founding Artistic Director of the London Contemporary Dance Theatre and The Place school. Along with Howard, Janet (Mop) Eager, the LCDT dancers, technicians and designers, including Norberto Chiesa and John B. Read, he worked tirelessly to build the company and, importantly, to develop an audience for contemporary dance in the UK and Europe. Unlike many Graham Company alumni, Cohan did not elect to form a company named after himself, but rather to build a repertory company that would not only showcase his own pieces but also serve as a fertile field from which the next generation of dancers and choreographers would spring forth. Both LCDT and The Place school succeeded in doing this at a level of commitment and excellence that could not be ignored.

The technique is Graham's, the stars are from her company, and there is, munificent concession, one of her works in the repertory, but the company, as with every dance group, depends on its director.

Everything in fact depends on Robert Cohan, and naturally London's dance world has been scrutinising rather carefully. He has a proud history as an outstanding dancer himself, and clearly has the confidence of the Graham stars working with him. He is also a choreographer, and almost all modern dance choreographers, when they start a company, stick exclusively to their own creations, where their audience often longs for a change.

Cohan is an exception; exactly half the 12 works presented this season are by other hands, and he seems anxious to discover and encourage new talent.

His own works are brilliant. Of his six pieces, at least four are major works and two of these, "Eclipse" and "Cell," are nothing short of masterpieces. In themselves they make this London season an important event, justify the company, and push the Arts Council into a tight corner. Where I think

Excerpt from review by Nicholas Dromgoole
14 September 1969 *Sunday Telegraph*

LCDT's reputation grew both in the UK and abroad. The company had many successful seasons at the Sadler's Wells Theatre. It toured throughout Great Britain, often sponsoring educational workshops and classes in communities that had little prior exposure to the kind of artistic expression LCDT offered. These opportunities allowed Cohan and LCDT to reach out to and engage a new generation of audiences and future artists.

Under Cohan's direction LCDT toured widely abroad, performing at prestigious festivals and venues in the United States, Canada, Latin America, France, Spain and a host of other European nations. The company was selected to serve as the ambassadors for British dance to the Olympic Games in Los Angeles in 1984 and was invited soon afterward to the 1988 Olympic Games in Seoul.



LCDT at Wembley Arena (circa 1984): Linda Gibbs, Patrick Harding-Irmer, Christopher Bannerman, Lauren Potter and Darshan Singh Bhuller.

Many of Cohan's works, such as *Tzaikerk* (1967), *Stabat Mater* (1975), *Nymphaeas* (1976) and *Forest* (1977) exude an almost classical lyricism, and some have achieved that rare space of enduring classic works that help define the genre and period. Others such as *Cell* (1969), *Stages* (1971), *Ice* (1978) and *Eos* (1978) have a far more abstracted edge and presence. Still others such as *Class* (1975) explore movement for movement's sake with energy and joyful abandonment. Cohan moved almost seamlessly between classical, psychological, and spiritual themes; he was equally adept at narrative structure and pure abstraction. For 21st century audiences some of Cohan's LCDT works may read like echoes from another era, but many of his works along with those of other LCDT company choreographers were not just ground-breaking, but ground-shaking in their impact on the dance scene.

Due to shortages in Arts Council funding, LCDT was disbanded and held its final performance in June 1994. As biographer Paul R. W. Jackson points out in his well-researched book about Cohan, *The Last Guru*, the dance world and even those dance critics who had been critical of Cohan's work were shocked at the thought of losing a company that Clement Crisp referred to as a "national treasure". In what must certainly have struck both Cohan and the LCDT family as an almost cruel irony, the company received its third Laurence Olivier Award that same year.

Although building the performing company and the school had been Cohan's primary *raison d'être* for almost three decades, he made significant connections with, and contributions to, other dance schools and performing companies in the UK and elsewhere. He was a Patron of The Rambert School of Ballet and Contemporary Dance from 1989 until his passing in 2021, and there is a

studio named in his honour at the school. Cohan's and LCDT's influence can also be felt in institutions outside of London including the Northern School of Contemporary Dance and Phoenix Dance Theatre in Leeds.

Cohan's contributions as a choreographer and fierce advocate for the art are well documented. But he was also known as an extraordinary teacher who inspired his students to expand their technical skills and movement vocabularies along with their emotional and intellectual connections to movement. He believed in training and technique, but also in the ability of dance to convey and communicate in profoundly emotional and spiritual ways. Cohan's successful 1986 book, *The Dance Workshop*, was a practical manual for dance training and technique underscored by his deeply philosophical approach to the art. The basic tenets and methods outlined in the text have remained relevant across generations, and there is evidence that the book or elements taken from it are still used and highly valued by dance teachers and students.

Though Cohan's teaching interest was centered in the training of dancers, in 1977 he assumed a lead role in an intensive two-week course housed at Surrey University in Guildford billed as the *International Dance Course for Professional Choreographers and Composers*. The program was funded by the Gulbenkian Foundation and comprised a select group of eight choreographers, eight composers, three musicians and twenty-five dancers. The course focused more on the process of creation rather than a final show or public performance. Many of Cohan's LCDT colleagues, including dancers and designers, also attended and gave workshops or demonstrations during the course. Cohan found the sessions challenging at times; he looked for ways to guide and inspire the professionals without imposing his own aesthetic biases or working methods in an interfering manner. As anyone teaching at a high level in the creative arts understands, that is a tricky balance to achieve. He participated in this program a total of eight times.

After the closure of LCDT, Cohan 'retired' to the rambling stone *Mas* he had purchased twenty years earlier with friend and collaborator Norberto Chiesa in the South of France. He relished the pastoral Cévennes mountain setting, his gardens, and the fields of lavender surrounding the country property. He focused much of his creative energy on his work as a visual artist producing a substantial body of drawings and pastels. He continued to serve as a board member of the Contemporary Dance Trust and worked on choreographic projects for the Batsheva Dance Company, Scottish Ballet, and other companies in the UK and Europe.

In 2013 Cohan returned to London after the sale of the house in France. Never one to truly retire, he continued engaging in new creative and intellectual pursuits. In 2014, at the age of 89, Cohan, who had received honorary doctorates from several universities including Middlesex, Kent, Exeter and Winchester, was appointed as a Visiting Professor at Middlesex University.

In 2013 Cohan also began a productive collaboration with Yolande Yorke-Edgell and the Yorke Dance Project (YDP). He choreographed numerous pieces for the company over the next eight years, including *Communion* and *Lingua Franca*. First piloted at Middlesex University, Cohan, Yorke-Edgell and composer Eleanor Alberga created a development residency for professional choreographers, composers and filmmakers known as *The Cohan Collective*. Cohan participated actively as Artistic Director in all the residencies offering valuable insights to the participants. During the Covid-19 lockdown period, he continued to create his final work, a series of solos, on-

line with YDP. As lockdown lingered on, the solos, *Afternoon Conversations with Dancers*, were filmed on location in distinct settings. These filmed solos have subsequently been screened as *Lockdown Portraits* at the Barbican, the Victoria and Albert Museum and at venues throughout the regions. The solos have been performed on stage by YDP at venues in the UK including the Linbury Stage of the Royal Opera House in November 2021. In Spring 2022 one of the solos, *Wind*, that Cohan had choreographed for YDP guest artist and Graham Company member Laurel Daley, was performed by the Martha Graham Dance Company at New York City Center.

Cohan continued working on new projects up until a few hours before he passed in his sleep on 13 January 2021.

Cohan received many awards and accolades during his lifetime including the London Evening Standard Award, Society of West End Theatres Award (now the Olivier Award), Critics' Circle National Dance Award and the Bonnie Bird Lifetime Achievement Award. He received an honorary CBE in 1988 and became a British citizen in 1989. In 2019 at age 94, Cohan was knighted in recognition of his outstanding service to choreography and dance.



Sir Robert Cohan CBE Investiture (2019)

Photo: Palace

Many LCDT alumni went on to highly influential and productive careers as choreographers, conservatory and university teachers, producers, composers, and designers. It is fair to say that most would acknowledge that the impact of Cohan on their lives and careers was akin to Graham's influence on Cohan's own life and work. Their works are part of the continuing evolution of the art form and a testament to Cohan's immeasurable contributions and influence during a remarkable seven decades-long career.

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