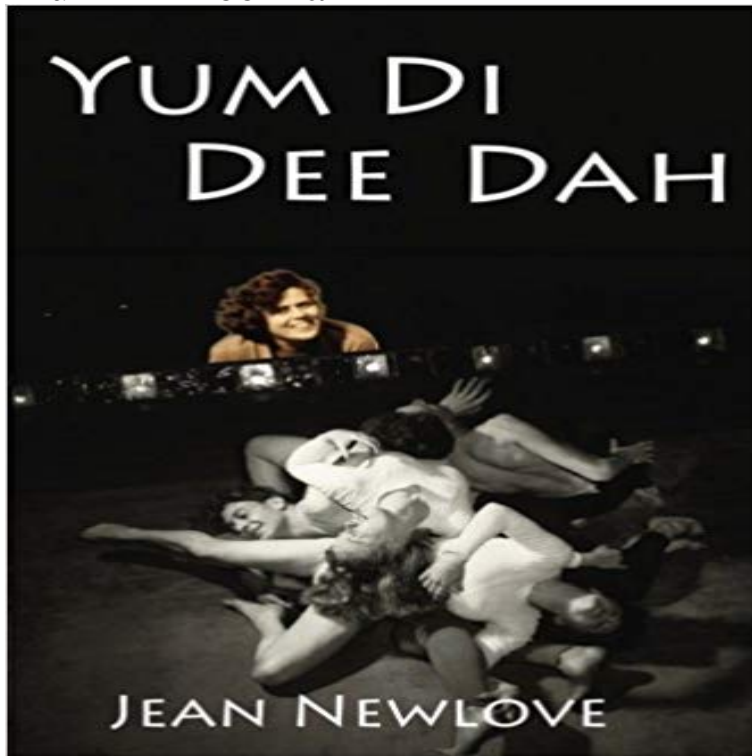


Yum Di Dee Dah



Over the years I have regularly entertained friends, colleagues, and family with anecdotes of my early days while working as Rudolf Labans assistant during the Second World War and my subsequent career in Theatre Workshop as choreographer, dancer, movement-teacher, and part-time actress. It was a truly extraordinary time in my life as it was for so many of us, whether back-stage or front-of-house, audiences and cast alike. I am still proud to have played an integral part in one of the most influential and innovative companies to have performed on the stage. Conceived by Joan Littlewood and Ewan MacColl as a theatre of action before the War, the agit-prop of Ewans Theatre Union developed into the professionally based Theatre Workshop in 1945. By an accident of history, Joans visionary direction and Ewans extraordinary gifts as a dramatist and singer required a third element, that of choreography, to realise their genius: and that is when I joined the company, in my early twenties having already spent what seemed a lifetime of work and study with another giant of the twentieth-century stage: the movement theorist Rudolf Laban. In those early days Laban was virtually unknown in this country; all I knew of him as a schoolgirl was his unusual name, and his striking photograph in a library book. His reputation as a scientist, philosopher, mathematician, and theoretician has since risen dramatically; he was also an architect, an artist, a dancer, and a choreographer; a man of colossal vision, and one of the greatest theatrical innovators of our time. The actors in Theatre Workshop were the first professional company to use his understanding of movement, through their regular classes with me. I am delighted to say that, sixty years on, they have passed their training on to new generations, many of whom are directors. I was fortunate to

study with Laban himself during the war, as part of a training programme designed to help women factory workers avoid strain while increasing production as part of the wider war effort. By the time the war ended, I had served out an apprenticeship with Laban when he received a letter from Joan Littlewood asking for help in training the young Theatre Workshop company in movement, Laban invited me along on a temporary basis. Instead I embarked on a lifelong career under his inspiration. Laban was also to become a fan of the company after seeing some of our productions, expressing the wish that had he been allowed to continue his theatre work in Germany, this was the way he would have worked. Theatre Workshop believe that by combining all that is best in the great theatres of the past with the most recent scientific and technical developments we can create a theatrical form sufficiently flexible to reflect the rapidly changing twentieth century scene - ambitious aims, but in the company's first production of Ewan's Johnny Noble in the 1940s I think we almost achieved it. A man and a woman, each dressed in oilskins and standing on either side of the proscenium arch, sing in front of a darkened stage that gradually increases in light as they explain in song what the audience will see. Three older women are sitting on a diagonal under a huge orange spotlight. Their voices and movement languidly show their reaction to the overpowering heatwave. Enter a young girl, dancing, followed by a group of others, who in dialogue and song inform the audience that Johnny, a wartime merchant seaman, is on his way home. Blackout to a spotlit flashback to Johnny, sitting on a box on an empty stage playing a harmonica while the effects of the light, sound, and carefully rehearsed movement of the cast give the audience the full and uncanny effect of a man aboard ship surrounded by the sea . . . Magical. Yum Di Dee Dah Lady was the nickname given to me by Joan Littlewood. In the early days we had no recorded music for classes and I would beat out rhythm with a drum or

accompany the movement vocally.

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