

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training
Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

ADRIENNE SICHEL

Interviewed by: Daniel F. Whitman

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[Note: This interview was not edited by Ms. Sichel.]

Q: This is Dan Whitman on February 17th, interviewing Adrienne Sichel. Adrienne, can you explain to me where we are right now? We're across the way from the Africa Museum and the Market Theater.

SICHEL: I'm in the Newtown Precinct, and we're sitting between three dance institutions: "The Dance Factory," "Moving Into Dance," and "The Dance Space."

Q: Can you tell us your role in these three institutions, or one or more of those?

SICHEL: I have no direct role, but I have been involved in covering and following the development of these institutions and the artists who have been trained in them.

Q: Since when, may I ask?

SICHEL: I came to Johannesburg in 1983; I was in Pretoria before that. So as an arts journalist -

Q: I've heard of the small village up the way, a short distance from here.

SICHEL: I started as an arts journalist, 40 years ago exactly this year. I was trained in drama, I have a drama degree. I did what they call real journalism for eight years; I realized the huge, huge responsibility of becoming a critic and working in the arts. So in 1978, I started back at the Pretoria News where I trained, and I started in entertainment. At that stage, there was really a lot of classical ballet and a lot of European state funded art, but contemporary dance had started. I had missed the beginnings of that being in Pretoria. When I moved to Johannesburg, it became part of my beat.

Q: So you covered Johannesburg for the Pretoria news?

SICHEL: No, I transferred from Pretoria. I was the arts editor at that stage, and I transferred as a sort of back up theater writer and a general entertainment writer, because I had done television in Johannesburg. And I made the editor promise me that I wouldn't do ballet, because I knew that was very vicious, at that stage, standards were really high, it was very Euro-centric and really something I didn't want to get involved in. It was

something I had done a little bit in Pretoria. And of course within a week of me being here, the man who was writing about ballet, also a freelance writer, disgraced himself in some way, I never found out what it was, and I ended up having to do ballet.

Q: Exactly what you didn't want to do.

SICHEL: But at the same time there was this parallel development of contemporary dance. But my other job was as theater critic and theater writer, and the work that really interested me most was developmental work, which kind of dovetailed with the contemporary dance and community dance development. So that's my involvement with contemporary dance in South Africa.

Q: As a critic, but also as a practitioner at any point?

SICHEL: No.

Q: As a critic, as an observer.

SICHEL: No, I was trained at drama school, I did Laban, there was no contemporary dance training in South Africa at that stage. So I did do the Laban method which was the first contemporary dance in South Africa because it was taught at the Universities. It's from the Laban center. So I had that training. And I had ballet as a child, I grew up in the countryside, I did not grow up in a city. I grew up in Rustenburg. So I had ballet from the age of 4 to 14, and that's the only training I had.

Q: Well, that's 10 years, that's something.

SICHEL: Right, but I never danced professionally.

Q: So you were an observer, an analyst and a critic. You made your way to Pretoria at some point and from there to Johannesburg.

SICHEL: Yes, after graduating from the University of Natal.

Q: Natal, in Durban. So you've lived in almost every part of the country. Well, except you didn't mention the Cape.

SICHEL: No, well, I've been working essentially, nationally; I still do.

Q: So, you cover the country. Now you moved to Johannesburg when?

SICHEL: In 1983.

Q: 1983. And you became, what was it freelance?

SICHEL: No, it was full time. I was working on Star Tonight, national supplement.

Q: The Star Tonight.

SICHEL: Editing the Pretoria version, in Pretoria

Q: Right, now who owned that?

SICHEL: It was the Argus group, now owned by Independent newspapers.

Q: I see. The Argus is, I'm going to show my stupidity here, I know it's read a lot in the Cape.

SICHEL: The Argus Group was South Africa owned. The Star newspaper was part of their group and they were the Irish owned Independent newspapers after 1994.

Q: After things changed.

SICHEL: I spent virtually my entire career, with a small break, with them. I retired from them officially in June 2009.

Q: Ah, I retired in October of 2009.

SICHEL: I'm an independent writer now, and I've been given a teaching fellowship at a university this year, in the School of Arts, for drama and for dance.

Q: Now, in the span of your career, through coincidence I guess, there were great historical events in your country. Can you remember your first contact or reactions as these changes were undergone? Many people in Pretoria hid from them, but I'm guessing you did not.

SICHEL: Well, I considered everything part of my beat; of course in Johannesburg it became quite wider. It became quite dangerous, mainly for the artists in those areas. There was like an unwritten agreement. If things were really bad, they would call and say don't come.

Q: The concern being a concentration of people in a given place, where the other people have told me that the authorities were nervous whenever there were many people gathered in one place. Was that the case?

SICHEL: No, but it sort of depended on the violence in the area, it's a very strange, painful history because I started writing, and a colleague of mine, at the Citizen Newspaper, Marilyn Poole. We started going to performances, especially at the Funde Arts Center, which was quite accessible. We started writing about, and I started writing about performances there, and choreographers and dancers would approach me. I started getting complaints from the black media, saying, "How dare you speak to that black

woman, because it's the white press, and it was like, well, where were you?" So that was part of the difficulties.

Q: Put you in an odd situation.

SICHEL: Put them in an odd situation, as well. Some of them were Pan-Africanists, but the politics, you know, ultimately what they were doing was surviving and trying to survive through making art, and to develop children, particularly, because there were no arts education in the schools, and that's what they were doing, arts education.

Q: Your own self, Adrienne Sichel, in this scene, the scene of ferment, you were there as an observer, as a critic, how did you see yourself fitting into this environment which was, where others said, that you were not part of it?

SICHEL: Well, you know, as journalists, especially as arts journalists, in a white environment, it was mainly white men, we broke the rules, and we could do that in contemporary dance. I mean, the Market Theater was a marvelous place. It broke them all in terms, of the laws, the segregation laws that were created, so there was major access through to theater, but with contemporary dance it was slightly different, so that whole business about critical distance, there's this whole thing. We had to become culture activists.

Q: When did that happen?

SICHEL: Well after the establishment of the dance umbrella, which is a very big festival now, but it came into being because Marilyn Poole and I realized we were the only link between dancers in Swaziland and Johannesburg, so we knew exactly what was going on, but these people never connected and there was no platform for them.

Q: So you were the only link really.

SICHEL: We were the only link, through the newspaper.

Q: Now, about the community, you mentioned Soweto and other townships.

SICHEL: Alexandra, Katlehong, because these were art forms, pansulo is very popular in Katlehong, contemporary dance because of Jackie Simela, Nosee Menacka. And also being trained by people like Sylvia Glasser, who created moving to dance.

Q: In Johannesburg, right.

SICHEL: So there were teachers, there were white teachers who went out on a limb to create the bridges, to train people, and often these artists would come to town.

Q: Was there a hybrid between the forms known by the white population, which I guess must have been European influenced, and the local innovations, there must have been a hybrid of forms.

SICHEL: Right, and Sylvia Glasser created something called Afrofusion. She has trained generations and enabled generations of choreographers who are now internationally renowned, but because she also studied anthropology after studying dance, and she started giving papers internationally about appropriating with respect, so yes, that did go on. There was a huge resistance from audiences, particularly white audiences, and that's how dance umbrella also helped bring this entire explosion together.

Q: Why would the whites in the audience have objected to, this appropriation with respect, is this a paradox?

SICHEL: No, appropriation of traditional African dances, create rich and traditional African rhythms, and what Sylvia used was technique, she was also influenced by Nikolais and she had been Graham trained as well. But she developed her own technique and own method, which is now being taught in that institution.

Q: What was it that grated against some of the audience? Did they find it unorthodox?

SICHEL: Yes, they found it, I mean, looking back, to see black bodies, trained black bodies, doing contemporary dance technique. But also, there was a much, much deeper resistance. All the funding went to the ballet companies to the white arts, and people like Sylvia Glasser and Adele Blanc and Suzette Le Sueur who started "The Dance Factory;" these were South Africans who wanted to change that. So it was about funding, and something called the Dance Alliance was formed, towards the end of the 1980s. And that was a grouping of choreographers, dancers, teachers, so they were lobbyists, they helped change.

Q: In the constellation of the arts, literature, music, where did dance fit as a medium for social change?

SICHEL: It was huge. I suppose because we were in Africa as well. Also, because what I've been talking about, the various starter of activism, Georgina Thompson, was a major activist from Cape Town, they were on the original acting group, and they helped create the original white paper on the cultural policy for this country. At that level after 1994, there were many, many dancers, and I'm being very simplistic here, but it's huge.

Q: Uh, you're not being simplistic, you're being brief because of the limits of time, and it's not your fault, and I'll take the blame for that. No, we'll give the blame to a person not present (laughter). So, you were chosen as, was it an international visitors program? In what year?

SICHEL: 1990.

Q: So, some of your black colleagues had been to the U.S. before you were? Did I understand that?

SICHEL: Yes, they weren't my colleagues, they were dancers, and they'd been to the dance festival before me, maybe late 1980s, 1990s, but I was amazed that I was synced on an individual one. I didn't go with a group, which was great, because the rationale was that the country was changing and I needed to be empowered as a journalist and a critic and obviously someone who had worked extensively in the community. Developments, to see how things are done somewhere else, and also because of the culture boycott, we were hugely, hugely isolated. I personally had been to the United States in 1979, because I was a TV writer, and I wanted to see what the hell television was.

Q: That's when we got television here in 1976.

SICHEL: So, I went to Burbank and I did all those things and I went to New Orleans and I went to New York, which I totally fell in love with, it was a personal visit, it was a trip, I went with a friend, but it was an orientation. So, my next trip was in 1990, and of course, it was quite strategic, but my expectations were completely the wrong way around. I thought I would have problems as a white South African having access to theater, but you could only say, what it, the Oakland, the various...

Q: The alternate life people, not mainstream Americans.

SICHEL: And community centers say, in where did I go in St. Louis, I was in Minneapolis and St. Paul.

Q: The community theaters?

SICHEL: African American. And obviously African Americans in some theater companies. I thought it would not be a problem having access to market theater instead of Harlem, boy was I wrong. Because of the market theater and because I knew John Kani and Barney Simon.

Q: The founder, one of the founders. 1976 I think.

SICHEL: These were people I knew, and so it was open sesame, I met the most wonderful actors. There was kind of a litmus test, if within five minutes there was kind of an invisible test, that people knew you were on the level, there would be very subtle, and it would be obvious.

Q: So, you had to present your credentials.

SICHEL: The hierarchies in the dance world were very different, and the shocking thing was I had no access to Alvin Ailey and I understood it was because I was white, I couldn't meet Arthur Mitchell, but I could access school, because Augustus Van Houten was the director of the school, and Nadine Nadoun, who is now running it, was a student

in the school. So I had access to that. Of course there was a huge irony, because there were two or three years I was getting these letters from people, especially Americans, Brooks was trying to get in the U.S. I was writing letters of recommendation and the most extraordinary thing was the first day after Mitchell went to get a sweater in his car, I was sitting next to him, and I followed that entire workshop program, which was really incredible. I can't say the same about Alvin, but I don't know what it was.

Q: Well, it was political, I guess.

SICHEL: Yes! Marilyn, the woman I co-founded the concept of dance umbrella with, she had been to New York, and seen, what's her name, that incredible woman.

Q: Martha Graham?

SICHEL: No, Judith Jameson. She had access! Maybe it was the kind of person I was.

Q: But, if you didn't have access it couldn't be the kind of person you were, because they'd never met you.

SICHEL: Well, now I had this really wonderful letter of introduction and everything, so how Marilyn got in and I didn't, I have no idea.

Q: Well, how could it be that when they had never met you?

SICHEL: Well, then I met her and it didn't help (laughter). You know, I followed both companies and it was very interesting. Because it's part of our history and so many people have gone and they gave scholarships. So I'm very grateful for that, for this program, because I had amazing access to all sorts of things, they flew me across to get from one place to another and it was really an extraordinary gift and of course we were living in a war zone. And it actually got worse. And by that time I don't think they realized in 1990 when I got there, I was kind of shell-shocked, and it was difficult, but it worked out fine.

Q: So there was skepticism in some of the established African American groups in New York. Outside of that you found that you had very free access for whatever reason, is that what you're saying?

SICHEL: Right, to the people I wanted to meet, yes.

Q: And you went where, outside of New York? Do you remember which?

SICHEL: I went to DC, and I went to that incredible, mixed ability company outside DC.

Q: Really?

SICHEL: Most incredible. I actually then caught up with them at the American dance festival. I'm trying to think of it, she was a woman, she was almost like Sylvia Glasser, but she created this company in DC. So, I did working DC, I went to San Francisco, I went to Minneapolis, which was wonderful.

Q: So you've got the East and West and something in between.

SICHEL: The middle, yeah. So, it was a very specifically targeted at theater, regional theater, and I went to Atlanta and I met James Garthaven, who I subsequently met in 1990. And that was amazing, no problem for me, that was just incredible. So, you know, I can't figure it out, but it was a great gift and it helped me kind of realign where I was critically.

Q: Can you explain in what way you realigned? I don't know if that's a fair question.

SICHEL: No, it's fine. Because I had been to Broadway, but I had never actually been there to see work from a critical point of view. And it was different from work in South Africa.

Q: The U.S. provided many models that people followed or emulated or something, certainly in the townships, we don't know how. Through radio, through music...

SICHEL: Through strategic programs of sending people to be educated.

Q: So this was a model, an established thing, where America was known to provide models that were followed in some countries and South Africa was one of them.

SICHEL: When I talk about realigning us as a critic, I saw the San Francisco ballet and more and more and it really bored me. The more interesting, edgier work, and of course the greatest experience was meeting Bill T. Jones, who had a breakfast meeting with me and I kept missing him. He made such an effort to meet me! I saw him in "Uncle Tom's Cabin," I was flown there for the night, and he wasn't there. I saw "Uncle Tom's Cabin" and it was so important! And I met him in the village, because I was in New York twice, and we had a breakfast meeting, and I wrote about it and when I came back it was like, "Oh my God." So, it was hugely meaningful to me.

Q: It was meaningful to you, and you wrote about it for the public. Again, maybe an unfair question, what did it mean to the public? Did you get any feedback from your readers?

SICHEL: Yes, huge feedback, especially from actors and dancers.

Q: How did this affect them? The news that you brought to them?

SICHEL: Well, you know not everybody reads dance magazine, and we had very little on television and also to have kind of first hand interaction with these artists

Q: So, did you feel that you were a vector of information, and not everybody can travel, this is the longest commercial flight in the world, from Johannesburg to New York, not everybody has the stamina or the means to do it.

SICHEL: Right, but it was more crossing the kind of cultural divide. Obviously some dancers and teachers had gone, and John Conner had won a Tony award, but this was different. This was asking the question in that context.

Q: When Brook Spector decided to take the risk of bringing the dance theater of Harlem here, you must have given him advice in one way or another?

SICHEL: Well, I wrote him a letter of recommendation to the funders.

Q: So, you were in favor of this -

SICHEL: Even though Arthur Mitchell had snubbed me, I'm not that sort of person, and it was incredibly important because apart from having him there on opening night, there was a lot of acrimony and that whole divide between the white purists and the rest. They were saying, "Oh, that's not really ballet." The dance theater in Harlem. But it created a whole new audience on another.

Q: Right, because on that famous opening night with Nelson Mandela at the Pacific Theater, was it? Was a mixed audience, now there was a bit of dumb luck here, because at the time when Eustace and Brooks and yourself decided to take this political risk, with the hindsight of history, luckily it came at exactly the right time, but it was impossible to know that as you're planning it?

SICHEL: But also it put me as a critic, well that was another incredible moment, I was sitting in North Carolina, which is one of the most racist places I've been in my life, and I am from South Africa. I looked at this report, I think it was dance magazine, and I wanted to die a thousand deaths because I looked at what I had written about the dancers of Harlem and our terminology, I talked about them in terms of the food, but I can't believe it was them or the work, the whole thing being like caviar, and I didn't mean it in a racist way.

Q: You considered it a rich nutriment, is that what you meant?

SICHEL: Yes, a caviar of performance basically, and I don't know if anybody else noticed it, but I thought it was dreadful when I read it, in another context, in America. But you know, the isolation was severe, and something that didn't just happen on the stage, happened in the workshops. I remember coming back from Etheridge Hall, with that incredible ballerina from dance theater of Harlem. The prima ballerina, she'd been teaching and of course I was used to working in that environment, children undernourished, wearing threadbare clothes, and she cried all the way back to Johannesburg and there was razor wire, chickens in the backyard, and that whole

interaction, it was, how do you explain that? I totally understood it, so it didn't just happen on the stage, what happened on the stage was really important, but what happened offstage was also terribly important. Arthur B. Mitchell was articulate, and the professionalism of the ballet was breathtaking. I knock Alvin A. for having very strict rules about not taking their shoes off on the concrete floor, there was nothing these Harlem people wouldn't do, and they did it all.

Q: It took about a year to negotiate that trip, how involved were you? I know it was mainly -

SICHEL: All I know is that I was let in the loop, and I helped hopefully with the funding. But there was a sequel to this story because Arthur Mitchell then took one of Sylvia Glasser's dancers, because you know, this is a very ugly history, when Sylvia was training with Idiago, a person of color, she couldn't send her ballet teacher Bernice Lloyd, who was also teaching Charlize Theron, they couldn't get her, they couldn't train them in the ballet in the white halls of schools, but Felicity was so into contemporary dance and she landed up in Arthur Mitchell's company. But he also spotted this young choreographer called Vincent Mantsoe and so within two or three years, I was back in DC seeing Vincent's premiere of a ballet he did for Dance Theater of Harlem. So there was a lot of stuff.

Q: So did you ever doubt that it was worth the risk?

SICHEL: No, no, no.

Q: Even the UN had doubts about whether they would allow this.

SICHEL: Well, I gave a ticket to, I won't mention his name but he's very well known now, (laughs) dancer turned choreographer, and if I had two tickets, I gave one to somebody else, and he sat next to me and he said, I didn't know black people could do that. And within two years, he was also working for a classical company in the U.S.

Q: Tremendous change between the 1980's and mid 1990's.

SICHEL: So, that was, how do you measure that personal impact?

Q: No, you can't. That's why we're taking the oral history. I know you've got a schedule.

SICHEL: We have a few more minutes.

Q: So, what incredible timing. You were given a tour of the U.S., to see the counterpart organizations in 1991; I think the Dance Theater came the following year.

SICHEL: No, I went in 1990, I think they came in 1992.

Q: Since that dramatic moment, and two years later the elections, comment about your country.

SICHEL: Well, we were totally- the time I went in 1993, to the International Critic's Conference, which was incredibly traumatic.

Q: Where?

SICHEL: At Durham, NC.

Q: Yes, yes.

SICHEL: That was traumatic for many, many reasons. It also helped me to develop critical criteria.

Q: Traumatic politically, culturally, artistically?

SICHEL: All, all of them, but and of course, we didn't know what was going to happen, especially in 1994. My entire family left the country.

Q: People were very afraid, I remember many people assuming there would be a bloodbath in 1994. Many people.

SICHEL: People were stocking up tuna, it really was, between 1990 and 1994, we were really on the edge, and there was all this death, I mean, actually Americans can be very insensitive.

Q: Really? (Sarcastic laughter)

SICHEL: I remember the day before I left to go to New York, first, to the Cold Conference and the New York Critics Conference in New York, it was really wonderful and before I went to the ADF. And I remember standing in the lift, and there was one of the cleaners at the store, and she was completely distraught, it was a woman in her 40's; she had just come off the train, where about 20 people around her had been killed. As a journalist we know, daily what was happening, there was still huge censorship, but we knew what was going on, but that really rattled me. And then to go into a kind of environment especially this critics conference, where there was huge complacency, and there was a little war. There was a woman Pascaline Desegee, from France, she was from Leon, and Daniel Badeway had just died of AIDs. Their big contemporary dance there, and there were certain Americans, and Chinese, and other journalists and people, who were denying that there was a pandemic.

Q: As late as 1993? Amazing.

SICHEL: As late as 1993. So that was also hugely instructive for me, there was also Congolese doing contemporary work, there were a lot of issues. And that was when I

realize that criticism was un-African. Because there was a choreographer, Daniel Bileiu from Mozambique, whom I've always wanted to meet him and never did, there was a prince from Nigeria, he was there. He could have been a choreographer; he could have been part of the dance critics. There was a man from Zimbabwe and we saw some terrible travesties of ritual in the name of entertainment at the festival, and they were mortified, they wouldn't say anything because it wasn't polite to criticize. And that was a wakeup call for me, and it really formed the work that I still do.

Q: Any travesties or parodies were created by Americans?

SICHEL: African-Americans. To end the whole AIDS debate, AIDS denial, and it really clicked into place later with. For me it was, every time I went to the states on one of these things, it was a crash university course.

Q: A little bit out of the sphere of what we're talking about. Thabo Mbeki, did he deny that HIV/AIDS exists, and if so why? Surely he's smarter than that.

SICHEL: Well, you know, I was standing on that corner and I met an artist, who was about to go to the Bernal in Morocco, and he looked fine, I've known him a long time, a great artist, I heard in January he died. And the person who told me about it, a choreographer said all of a sudden, his eyes had rolled back and he never took any medication. And Gibson Kente was diagnosed with HIV. He was in his 70s; he never took any medication, because it was un-African. So these are deep, deep beliefs... could be cultural, could be spiritual, does run in African culture. And maybe this is what Thabo Mbeki believes.

Q: You don't need to answer this question but I need to ask it: Was this political opportunism on the part of your country?

SICHEL: Yes, but knowing what happens, I don't think that was it.

Q: A true denial of what we scientifically recognized as a disease that kills people.

SICHEL: I've been told by many people that he wasn't alone. Many in his cabinet -

Q: His Health Minister certainly -

SICHEL: Yes, absolutely.

Q: Perhaps elected for exactly that reason.

SICHEL: There was also a bond going way back.

Q: South Africa is always in the crucible of a crisis, positive or negative, it seems always, there's a crisis in the sense, the Greek sense, of bifurcation, and the fate could go this way or that way at any given time. Is it that way now?

SICHEL: Oh, it's definitely that way now. And for me the salvation is its artists.

Q: What could be the possible scenarios? That the country could descend into crime -

SICHEL: It has.

Q: It has done?

SICHEL: It has.

Q: That's terribly sad. It's not a political plague -

SICHEL: It's partly political, because there is no political will, which is what happened with AIDS. And we're reaping the whirlwind. Lack of education, corruption.

Q: Is there the possibility of resolving in this? The stakes are very high, we've got 40 million people here in a country that in many ways is state of the art, but its advancements are unequally distributed of course.

SICHEL: Right, there is a contradiction.

Q: The arts will do what it can.

SICHEL: But it has done a lot.

Q: Your own intentions for the next, as we say, your plans? I can ask the question because I'm in the same situation (laughs).

SICHEL: I have to get you the, I'm very active, and I have this book to do, which the French government, two years ago, wanted to help me publish, and to get it done, because I was working full-time. I couldn't find publishers, now I have a fellowship at the Fritz School of Arts, and there might be a link with this university press. It's called, "Body Politic."

Q: Ooh.

SICHEL: "Fingerprinting contemporary South African dance." But its a huge history, which needs to be . . . just outlined, we have no archives.

Q: Of course.

SICHEL: Also, I'm getting older and so many people around me have died or left the country, or retired. But hopefully that's the main aim; hopefully I'll get some of it done.

Q: To preserve the history of what's happened in the last few decades and the enormous changes, partly from within, partly through pollination from outside the country? Is that correct? Tremendous changes in the art scene -

SICHEL: Oh, yes, but we've also now linked to the continent.

Q: Yes, no longer a pariah state.

SICHEL: And in terms of what I have been able to do and say since 1995, when the French government started this contemporary dance platform. I don't know how this happened, I ended up in Angola, on the jury of this competition, South Africa has won four times, and Vincent Mantsoe entered a dance, and he won it! That is to say, he lives in France, because we don't honor our artists. Of course one of the, it's very easy to say, the artists are the salvation of the country, but contemporary dance, these dancers aren't recognized as professionals.

Q: There's a lot to be angry about right now.

SICHEL: And Mantsoe is an icon on the African continent, but he's not really widely known. So, he lives in France. But he still makes work commission from here. So there are still huge, huge challenges, but South African dancers now, are what South African theater was in the 1980s.

Q: Oh, so cutting edge -

SICHEL: Huge, cutting edge, huge international profile, very provocative, and it's now hitting the states, the last two years.

Q: And there's no longer any political distance among audiences overseas. I'm wrong, I'm wrong, tell me I'm wrong.

SICHEL: Well, yes. You see, the subject matter it's still issue based, it's very much issue based, so it's very provocative, and it breaks any stereotype of what you expect black African and white African artists to do. You know, like Johnny Clegg, he's not the only person who can. There are two, two great pioneers on the African continent; they are both women, who have championed the art form. One is Germaine Acogny from Senegal, she's partly based in France, and she has a technique and she's a great, great pioneer, she has a school outside Dakar. The other one is Sylvia Glasser, and she's a specialist in African rhythms, forms, traditions and she's a white South African, so that's the surprise. She doesn't have one white dancer in her company or her school.

Q: Can the art forms transcend culture politics and frontiers; is it their job to do so?

SICHEL: Yes, all of the time. And that's been part of the strategy, and that's why they got away with murder.

Q: Who is they?

SICHEL: The artists, the pioneers.

Q: Is there any parallel between this, do you think, and what happened in Eastern Europe in the 1980s?

SICHEL: Slightly, I noticed at the American dance festival, that contemporary dance was relatively new in the World, Eastern Europe, China, Russia, South Africa, and Korea.

Q: Because it's possible to present oneself as not conveying a political message, even when one is.

SICHEL: Oh, absolutely, look at what the market theater did. The eastern Europeans used puppetry.

Q: Ah. Is there any contact between South African and Eastern Europe.

SICHEL: Oh, yes, we have a huge Polish population here.

Q: From before?

SICHEL: Yes, from apartheid. Huge Russian population as well. The link is quite good. The other bizarre thing that happened, all of the sudden the ANC leadership had never seen a South African company but had all seen the Bolshoi.

Q: Oh my gosh!

SICHEL: When I was introduced to Madiba at the start of this, I had seen him a couple times, but never met him; he was distraught that I had never seen the Bolshoi.

Q: So many paradoxes. You've never just had the door opened and just been welcomed nearly anywhere. Was Madiba serious about that?

SICHEL: Oh sure. They used to call me the ballet lady at the start. Peter Sullivan was introducing me and he walked into the room of the department and showed me that this was where the important things on TV were being filmed and the correspondent's work. He turns to me and says, "They don't do ballet here." And Madiba stands up and goes, "Ballet? Who's that?" So it happened. I was summoned. Peter Sullivan kept on rattling on. I said to the old man, "I'm not interested in the old theater; I'm interested in the South Africans." And he had a woman next to him and he asked who I was interested in particular. I rattled off Vincent Mantsoe, Boise Sequon and he told her to make a note. Then he said, "Have you been to the Bolshoi." I said no, and he said, "Oh! You must go!" I was shattered for days. He wanted his critic to see what he had seen. They didn't have a problem with the art form, just the white South Africans doing it. They loved the ballet because of the Russian culture.

Q: I think you said, dance is now what theater was in the `80s.

SICHEL: Except in Cape Town. It's a whole other thing happening there. But internationally, yeah, that's what is happening.

Q: Adrienne Sichel, thank you so much!

SICHEL: It was a great pleasure.

End of interview