

## Introduction

The word fame, to me, has always borne the connotation of a kind of immortality, that is, having accomplished something, or done something, or been something that people will remember always. I don't feel that is true with me. I don't believe that the little dance I have done or my appearances in the theater have made a sufficient contribution to the art of the world to immortalize me.

~ Sally Rand, December 1951

Sally Rand was once the most talked about woman in America. Now, nearly 40 years after her passing, the telling of her story, in all its warts and wonders, is long overdue. Remembered primarily as a "fan dancer," there was oh so much more to this extraordinary woman. She plowed her way through life with an exuberance and determination matched by few. During her later years, Sally earnestly approached the task of writing her memoirs but, in the end, she never found the time. In 1969, she expressed her views on the subject of celebrity autobiographies:

I can't help but feel that the average person who writes an autobiography or a memoir is essentially a pompous son of a bitch. For instance, I give you that Irish Catholic, Pat O'Brien, and that dull little tome of Bette Davis. Mind you, I adore Bette; I have a great admiration and respect for her ability and courage and I am positively prostrate at her talent, but, oh, God, her book is dull and Pat O'Brien's is positively vomity.

It is this type of pomposity that I will avoid if I ever write the goddamn book!

Sally never did write that "goddamn book" and so it has fallen to others to take up the task. We can only hope that the remarkable subject of this book would have found this effort to be without pomposity and worthy of her higher expectations.

Whatever else she was, Sally Rand was a talented writer. Although a manuscript of her memoirs was long rumored to exist, only a fragment was ever

actually written. Even so, a fair portion of this volume consists of Sally's own words. In a draft of her intended autobiography, she wrote:

When I was about 13 years old ... in school we had to write an essay about ourselves — really a 250 word “autobiography.” How heartbroken I was. I couldn't say I had been born in a raging storm or in a ship in the middle of the Atlantic or even that my birth occurred in the middle of the night.... As I recall, most of the 250 words were devoted to the dramatic exploits of my dog and two kittens and a frog that I happened to own at the time.

The reason I find myself recalling this long-ago incident is all too obvious to me: once again, I am in the same darn situation — I still haven't a heart-rending life story to tell.

- I can't enthrall you with the exciting details of how I licked the dope habit....
- I can't hold you glued to this book as I reveal the horrors I went through when I kicked that terrifying curse of alcohol....
- I haven't fought my way back from a mental mashup....
- I haven't been deceived by an army of men who have married me for my fame and/or fortune....
- I haven't been betrayed by managers or agents who cheated me out of five million dollars....

So once again I find myself just a little bit envious of those who have a “story” to tell. Between thirteen and sixty-two, it stands to reason that I should have improved my autobiographical possibilities. Not so.... But my charming publishers have asked me to write this book nevertheless....

Truth be told, Sally's was a far more interesting life than she modestly acknowledged. And, like each of us, she was inextricably bound to the fortunes and failures of her family, her culture, and her gender. The fascinating details of her life can be fully understood only in the context of her surroundings and the challenges of her time. So, in the course of these pages, we shall venture down a number of compelling byways and encounter an assortment of characters, both famous and obscure, whose own journeys enhanced, diminished, informed, or otherwise intersected with the odyssey of our subject. As the great naturalist John Muir once so elegantly observed: “When we try to pick out anything by itself we find that it is bound fast, by a thousand invisible cords that cannot be broken, to everything in the universe.”