

BAT-DOR — TECHNICAL STANDARDS

By Dora Sowden

When the State of Israel celebrates its 40th anniversary, the Bat-Dor Dance Company will mark its 20th -- not an unusual milestone among the professional Israeli companies but with a history very much its own. Uniqueness is also not unusual among dance companies in Israel. So Bat-Dor also has its distinctive individuality.

In 1958, Baroness Bethsabée (Batsheva) de Rothschild had settled in Israel, and by 1964 she had founded the Batsheva Dance Company. In New York she had formed a strong friendship with Martha Graham and her interest was decidedly in modern dance. She began thinking of the need for a school as well, and looked about for a suitable director. Her choice fell on Jeannette Ordman.

Born in South Africa, Ordman had been following a dance career in London. She had come to Israel as principal dancer and ballet mistress of a company assembled in London and had been performing with conspicuous success in Israel when the impresario left the dancers stranded. In order to cover her expenses and debts, Ordman opened a studio. Arie Kalev gave her the use of his premises and, as somebody later described it, "students flocked to her."

A friend of a friend of Ordman's, hearing that Batsheva de Rothschild was in search of a studio director, called her attention to Ordman's classes. With the approval of Graham, who was then visiting Israel, Rothschild invited Ordman to become director of the studio she had in mind. The Bat-Dor Studios opened their doors in 1967.

Besides planning the new studio, Ordman was for a time ballet mistress of the Batsheva company and also danced with the company. Impressed by Ordman's "sense of ideal, taste, dancing ability, unusual energy and organising power," as she once put it, de Rothschild decided to form a second company.

Again on good advice (such as that of Antony Tudor who was visiting Israel) the Bat-Dor Dance Company

was launched in 1968, with Ordman as principal dancer and artistic director, in addition to her directing the studios. She has held all these positions ever since.

Right from the beginning the style of the company was based on a blend of classical and modern techniques. This was an innovation at the time but is now common in many companies that have found the mixed, comprehensive training beneficial to the dancers. In fact, it is generally accepted now.

Ordman, herself classically trained, went abroad to acquaint herself with modern techniques and acquire their skills. Teachers called her a "quick study" and marvelled at it. The style of the company is contemporary, as the name Bat-Dor implies, but to this day, the women in the Bat-Dor company can appear in toe shoes when necessary -- as in Hans van Manen's **In and Out**, a recent addition to the repertoire (1985, music: Laurie Anderson and Nina Hagen).

The first performance took place in August 1968 in Herzliya and the following month the Bat-Dor company made its debut in Tel Aviv. Choreographers had been invited from abroad to provide the programmes, because it was Ordman's aim to establish a standard of performance that could measure up to international comparisons; and she wisely saw that this was possible only with more experienced choreographers than were then available in Israel.

Among those who came in the early years were Sophie Maslow (USA), Job Sanders (Holland), Peter Wright (U.K., now director of the Sadler's Wells Royal Ballet), Antony Tudor (British-American), Rudi van Dantzig (Holland), Mary Anthony (USA), Denis Carey (U.K.). At a later stage guest choreographers included Michel Descombey (France, now Mexico), Paul Sanasardo (USA), Charles Czarny (Holland), Manuel Alum (USA), Benjamin Harkarvy (USA), Walter Gore (U.K.), Don Redlich (USA) and Gene Hill Sagan (USA) who stayed on in Israel for ten years and whose **And After...** (1974, Music: Bach) became a classic in the Bat-Dor

programmes. It was dedicated to a dancer friend, Yair Shapira, who was killed in the Yom Kippur War (1973).

The policy was however, also to encourage Israeli choreographers. Members of the company, such as Yehuda Maor and Igal Perry, presented their first works on the Bat-Dor stage. Ordman herself created two or three works but did not pursue choreography further. Mirali Sharon was a guest choreographer who worked several times with the company; her most notable works being **Hymn to Jerusalem** (1978), and **Joseph the Dreamer** (1979).

In 1971, the Bat-Dor company invited Domy Reiter-Soffer, an Israeli who was dancing and choreographing abroad to create works for the company. This led to such a long and successful association that the choreographer himself, who is now internationally known from Australia to Yugoslavia, the United States to Ireland, has said it was "like a marriage". To date he has choreographed more than 20 works for Bat-Dor beginning with **I Shall Sing to Thee** (music: Zvi Avni) based on the loves of King David, to **Divertimento** (1987, music: Leonard Bernstein).

Among Reiter-Soffer's most conspicuously successful works for Bat-Dor are **Journey** (1977, music: Tangerine Dream); **Visitors of Time** (1978, music: Paul Ben Haim); **Alto Rhapsody** (1982, music: Brahms); **A Day Will Come** (1983, music: Honegger); **After Midnight** (1984, music: Pink Floyd, Kitaro, Count Basie); **Apropos Bach** (1985).

More and more distinguished choreographers came to work with Bat-Dor, sometimes to create new works, sometimes to set a work that had already been performed abroad. Among the many memorable works that have enriched the Bat-Dor repertoire are Alvin Ailey's **Night Creature** and **Streams**, Paul Taylor's **Cloven Kingdom**, **3 Epitaphs** and **Diggity**, John Butler's **According to Eve**, **Othello**, **Eve of Death**, Antony Tudor's **Dark Elegies**, Lar Lubovitch's **Whirligogs** (which he created for Bat-Dor) and **Big Shoulders**, Choo San Goh's **Spectrum** and **Moments Remembered**, Jiri Kylian's **Bue Skin**, Cliff Keuter's **Women Song**.

Among the latest additions are works by two choreographers from South America: Oscar Araiz's **Cantares** (1986, music: Ravel) and Mauricio Wainrot's **Libertango** (1987, music: Astor Piazzolla). Robert Cohan of the London Contemporary Dance Theatre, who is now artistic adviser to the Batsheva company, also contributed exceptional pieces, among them **Tzaikerk**

(1976, music: Alan Hovhaness) and **Khamsin** (1980, music: Bob Downes). Of the younger choreographers Matthew Diamond (USA) has made a striking contribution: **Implosion** (1983, music: Stravinsky).

In due course dancers graduated from the Bat-Dor Studios to join the Bat-Dor company, but as with all companies, some came from abroad, and some were returning Israelis. It is even more interesting that many of those who danced with the Bat-Dor company for a shorter or longer time went on to become leading dancers in other companies here and abroad. Names that appeared in the early programmes of Bat-Dor can now be read in the lists of dancers of the Batsheva and other companies; but many are still with the company -- like Igal Berdichevsky and Miriam Paskalsky (who take leading roles). So are also Moshe Goldberg, Patricia Aharoni, Jonathan Avni and Alon Avidan -- two of those who get opportunities to choreograph for the end-of-term studio performances. Igal Perry, also a product of the studios, now has his own studios (Perridance) and dance company in New York, but he comes from time to time to choreograph for the company. David Rapoport freelances -- dancing with many companies, today is in charge of "Batsheva 2".

Sally-Anne Friedland who, like Ordman, was born in South Africa joined the Bat-Dor company when she came to Israel but is now a soloist on her own. David Dvir is now Artistic Director of the Batsheva company and Shelley Sheer the leading soloist.

In 1970, the Bat-Dor company made its first trip abroad: to Malta and Italy. Thereafter it made extensive tours in many parts of the world: the Far East (1972), South America (1973), South Africa (1975 and 1977), Mexico (1978), the United States (1979). Since then it had made more visits to the United States, with a special week in New York at the Joyce Theatre in 1983, opening with a gala benefit for the Dance Library of Israel. Major festivals at which the Bat-Dor company has appeared include the Holland Festival (1971), the Edinburgh Festival (1976) and the Spoleto Festival (1980).

In 1983 Bat-Dor visited Zaire and Kenya. Anti-Israel elements in Kenya tried to disrupt the visit but the performances were enthusiastically received. In 1986 the Bat-Dor company made a historic tour to Poland. The success was sensational, especially for Jeannette Ordman and Reda Sheta, the Egyptian dancer who had been partnering her regularly since 1979.

Sheta had come to Israel with the Berlin Opera Ballet and

roles, among them the title role in John Butler's **Othello** (1982) with Ordman as Desdemona.

Indeed, Ordman has appeared in many important roles in the works of both Israeli and foreign choreographers, but perhaps her greatest triumph has been in Rodney Griffin's **Piaf Vaudeville** (1984). "She's a natural -- such a quick study", said Griffin. Based on the life of the French songstress the dancing is set to nine of her songs and is choreographed for eleven men and "Piaf" who never leaves the stage.

In 1987, the Bat-Dor company toured Canada without Ordman who was undergoing an operation; but it was to the credit of her continuous direction and to her assistant, Kenneth Mason that the high level of performance was maintained -- and so also in more recent appearances in Italy, Milan and Rome.

One of the Bat-Dor enterprises has been the launching of a subscription series in 1971, for which mainly Joseph Frenkel has to be credited. Thousands of subscribers are enrolled annually, most of them in Tel Aviv, but also in Jerusalem and Haifa.

The company also performs in smaller centers where the theatres are good enough for the comfort of the dancers and the works can be adequately staged.

Another Bat-Dor enterprise has been to invite companies from abroad to come to Israel under its auspices. Among them have been the Netherlands Dance Theatre. The Dance Theatre of Harlem (USA), Pina Bausch's Wuppertal Dance Theatre (Germany), The Győr Ballet of Hungary, the Dutch National Ballet, the Zaire National Folklore Theatre, the Mazowzse (Polish Folklore) company, and the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre.

Just as it has encouraged Israeli choreographers, the Bat-

Setter's music, and Sharon set her **Hymn to Jerusalem** also to Seter music. Paul Ben Haim's music, as already mentioned, has featured in two of Reiter-Soffer's works and the music of Sergiu Natra was chosen by Michel Descombey for his work **The Wait** (1971).

Among Israeli designers who have created decors for Bat-Dor are Dani Karavan (**And After...**, 1974), David Sharir (**Journey**, 1977), Eric Smith (Butler's **According to Eve**, 1976, and Reiter-Soffer's **A Day Will Come**, 1983), Dov Ben David (Cliff Keuter's **Shadow of Wind**, 1980, and Reiter-Soffer's **After Midnight**) and Mazal Haliva (Butler's **Eve of Death** 1978). Costumiers have included Oberson and Lea Ladman.

In the first years the Bat-Dor headquarters were at 9 Hahaskala Street in Tel Aviv but in 1970 the school and company moved to new excellent studios -- including a little theatre at 30, Ibn Gabirol Street. The company also gives performances in other theatres.

At this stage, the Bat-Dor is taking a new step. A public committee has been formed to take over the administration as of January 1988. The object is to control budget and to raise whatever funds are necessary to ensure future existence and development. Batsheva de Rothschild has said that this is not so much a change as a measure to continue efficiency and artistic level. The artistic direction will not be affected and she herself will still be involved.

Explaining the need for this, she has said, "Nobody lives for ever. My heirs may not wish to continue supporting a dance company. Arrangements have to be made to see that Bat-Dor continues and maintains its standards, values and achievements." ■

Dora Sowden is the dance-critic of the "Jerusalem Post" and correspondent of "Dance Magazine" (New York).