

“BATSHEVA” -- ROTHSCHILD’S DAUGHTER

by Giora Manor

The close connection between the Rothschild family and the renewal of Jewish life in Israel did not of course start as the airplane carrying Martha Graham’s troupe on her first world tour touched down at Lod airport. Officially listed as “Wardrobe Mistress” Betsabee de Rothschild, Martha’s former student and later benefactor, came down the steps with her and stood on Israeli soil. After all, Baron Rothschild’s sobriquet had been “the well-known benefactor”. It was he who had financed the first agricultural settlements of the Biluim in the 19th century, as well as many other important institutions connected to Zionism.

Robert Cohan, a dancer in that Graham company, tells the story: “All over Asia, at every airport the press was waiting for us with cameras. And always Martha would begin her remarks by pointing to Betsabee and introducing her. The reporters would give her a glance and concentrate on Martha. But at Lod airport, the moment she uttered the magic name Rothschild, all the cameras started clicking, taking pictures of Betsabee...”.

In the very young State of Israel her family name was one to conjure with. Whether Batsheva (to give the future Diahilev of modern dance in Israel her proper Hebrew name) noticed that difference or not, her relations with the arts in Israel began to take on a steady and decisive character. Her Foundation, which took upon itself the financing of science and art, at first concentrated on furnishing talented, young, aspiring dancers like Rina Schoenfeld with bursaries, enabling them to go abroad -- to America -- for study.

The early 60’s were a period of twilight in dance in Israel. Gertrud Kraus had practically stopped choreographing, Anna Sokolow would come over only for rather short periods to work with her “Lyric Theatre” and a new generation of dancers was growing up without a leading choreographer to shape their present and future. (Ruth Eshel so tellingly describes this in her article elsewhere in the present Annual.)

In 1962-3, as the idea of a new modern dance company became a viable project in Batsheva’s mind, she decided to begin by providing the prospective dancers with a

technical groundwork. She asked her great friend, Martha Graham for advice and assistance in sending over instructors and in receiving talented Israelis at her school in New York.

Among those who came to the auditions were several slated to become the stars of the future company. There were Ehud Ben David, Rachamim Ron, who until then had hardly any experience of modern dance, and there were those who had already studied with Graham in New York, like Rena Gluck, Rina Schoenfeld or Rina Shaham (the last inexplicably never accepted into the new company.)

Ruth Harris, a dancer of Viennese extraction, became the ballet-mistress of the company “Batsheva”, soon to become the flag-ship of modern dance in Israel and known around the world.

After a year of intensive work by emissaries of Graham, such as Linda Hodes, Robert Cohan, Ethel Winter and the choreographer Donald McKayle, in December 1964 the first premiere took place at the “Habima” theatre in Tel Aviv. In the program-notes Batsheva de Rothschild wrote that she founded the company bearing her first name, “because there was a need for it. As per chance this need met with a constellation of circumstances making possible the establishment of a professional company [...] There were in Israel choreographers searching for dancers, dancers waiting for choreographers, there was a growing public demand [...] for professionalism, there was my long acquaintance with Martha Graham...”

And it was Martha Graham, who became the young company’s godmother.

The repertoire of the first two seasons included such staples of the Graham canon as “Errand into the Maze”, “Herodiade”, “Diversion of Angels” and “Embattled Garden”. Indeed at that time “Batsheva” was the only company outside her own to which Martha gave permission to perform her works.

There were also works by Robert Cohan, Donald

McKayle and Glen Tetley, who in 1965 created on "Batsheva" one of his best-known works, "The Mythical Hunters", to music by the Israeli composer Oden Partos. Like Mordecai Seter, Partos became a composer for other dance companies in Europe and the United States, as guest choreographers of "Batsheva" went on to create for companies all over the world.

The dancers were encouraged to experiment in choreographic creations of their own. Rina Schoenfeld, Oshra Elkayam and Rena Gluck and somewhat later Moshe Efrati all choreographed for the company.

The Graham style was not so much a revelation but rather a continuation for the Israeli dance-public. Modern European dance had been the accepted mode of expression in the country since the '30s, when several choreographers arrived and began their creative and pedagogical work. What really constituted a revolution of sorts was the leading part taken by the male dancers of the new company.

In Gertrud Kraus' company there were hardly any men and even in "Inbal" the women took precedence, in spite of the preponderantly male domain of Yemenite dance.

The rather unruly, exuberant performances by dancers like Ehud Ben David, Rachamin Ron or Moshe Efrati were also an expression of the "Sabra" (Israeli born) spirit of extrovert energetic improvisation, rather than of technique and discipline.

But there was no lack of excellent female dancers in the original Batsheva troupe. Rina Schoenfeld, Galia Gat and later Nurit Stern, Esti Nadler and Lea Avraham, to mention but a few, were all remarkable artists.

The company quickly gained an enthusiastic, faithful audience. The strong connection to Graham, who came on frequent visits, continued under the first Artistic Director of the company, Jane Dudley.

The first serious crisis occurred in 1967, when Rothschild decided to appoint a classically trained dancer from South Africa, Jeanette Ordman, as soloist and later Artistic Director of the company. This move brought about a "revolt" by the dancers, who were not prepared to accept the appointee.

Rothschild decided to found another company in order to provide Ordman with a suitable organization for her work, the "Bat-Dor" company.

Among the many first-class choreographers who came to work with "Batsheva" were Norman Morrice, John Butler, Jerome Robbins, Jose Limon and John Cranko. Brian Mac Donald became Artistic Director, to be replaced after a few years by William Louthier.

In 1968 the company went on its first tour abroad and in 1970 danced in New York, presenting many Graham works, in a sense bringing coal to Newcastle, daring the comparison. But the critics were enthusiastic, captivated by the sparkling company-spirit which overcame technical deficiencies. In Paris Ben David and Schoenfeld received the prestigious first prize of the 1971 International Dance Festival.

When several leading dancers, such as Moshe Efrati left the company, a younger generation replaced them. Among these were Yair Vardi, Ester Nadler and several other very good dancers.

But the relations with de Rothschild went from bad to worse, until in 1974 she decided to merge her two companies.

The decision caused quite an uproar in the country since this would have meant the end of "Batsheva" as such. Telegrams protesting against the proposed move from all over the world poured in. The Israeli Ministry of Education and Culture, under pressure from Lea Porat, head of the National Council for the Arts, took "Batsheva" under its wing and provided a lean budget, which nevertheless enabled the company to continue as a publicly subsidized institution.

But the crisis was acute; Pinhas Postel, general manager of the company, agreed to stay on for a season or two and Kaj Lothman and Linda Hodes were appointed joint Artistic Directors pro tem.

During the following seasons many important foreign choreographers came to work with the company. In 1974 Martha Graham came and created her sole work not choreographed on her own company, namely "The Dream", a Biblical ballet to music by Mordecai Seter. Gene Hill-Sagan, Anna Sokolow, Christopher Bruce as well as Israeli choreographers such as Mirali Sharon and Yaakov Sharir worked with the company.

In 1978 Paul Sanasardo was appointed Artistic Director. His work dominated the repertoire and the company seemed to lose most of its special flavour and character.

Again "Batsheva" was looking for a suitable replacement. Norman Morrice, who had been responsible for transforming the "Ballet Rambert" into a modern company and had worked successfully with "Batsheva" on many an occasion, signed a contract to become the next leader of the company. But a few weeks before assuming his new post, he was offered the Artistic Directorship of the "British Royal Ballet" -- an offer he could not refuse.

"Batsheva" was left in a most difficult situation. Robert Cohan, who knew the company very well indeed, agreed to become Artistic Adviser for an interim period. On his suggestion Moshe Romano, one of the founding members of "Batsheva", who had in the meantime become Cohan's assistant in his "London Contemporary Dance Theatre", was appointed Artistic Director. Surprisingly enough it was the first time an Israeli artist was holding that post. But the choice was not a happy one and Romano resigned after a rather short reign.

In 1978/9 Bill Strumm, a new immigrant from the U.S.A. and businessman, became involved as General Manager of the company just after it had performed in London only to return home under a cloud of debt and unpaid hotel-bills.

After its auspicious first decade, when Batsheva had been the undisputed leader of modern dance in Israel, when its dancers had been hailed and praised by international critics, and its style firmly linked to the Graham school, the company found itself in the doldrums.

Even in those dark days surprisingly enough, the exuberant dancing which had made its fame was well in evidence, although few of the members of the first and second "Batsheva" generations were still in the company. Excellent dancers had joined, several of them, such as Shelley Sheer, Nira Triffon and David Dvir,

alumni of "Bat-Dor". Dvir was later appointed Assistant and finally full Artistic Director.

What turned the tide and gave the company a new sense of direction was the appearance of a series of young, talented choreographers. Ohad Naharin (who began his career in "Batsheva" but now has a company in New York) brought several of his works. So did Mark Morris and Daniel Ezralow. This new policy of inviting young talent paid off and now the company approaches its 25th birthday with an up-to-date repertoire. Recently young Israeli choreographers, such as Rami Be'er and Nir Ben-Gal have been working with the company.

After severing her ties with the company that still carries her name, Batsheva de Rothschild permitted it to use the premises she owned. Ultimately she decided to sell them, leaving the company without studios, offices or workshops. In recent years the company used an old theatre in Tel Aviv, the "Ohel Shem Hall" but now the theatre-project at Neve Zedek, the oldest Jewish quarter of Tel Aviv, is taking shape. Here "Batsheva" is to settle down provided with adequate premises at last.

During the quarter of a century of its existence, a long list of extraordinary works was created or mounted on the company. Nearly none of these works is still in the active repertoire. The Graham works were withdrawn when Linda Hodes returned to America and she and Ron Protas took over the "Graham Company"; John Cranko's work to Israeli poetry, "Ami Yam -- Ami Ya'ar", Kurt Jooss' "The Green Table", Robbins' "Moves", are unfortunately no longer performed.

For about ten years the company has been running a junior group, "Batsheva 2", in lieu of a school, to train young dancers. At the instigation of Robert Cohan a workshop for experimental choreography takes place every season, serving as a showcase for budding creative talent. ■