

# BALLET FINALLY MOVES FRONT

*Judith Brin Ingber*

Ballet in Israel seems to have received widespread publicity only with the recent arrival of the Russian stars, Galina and Valery Panov. In fact, the story of ballet here is even older than the 25 years of Israel itself--and reflects something of the determination and unique elements of this little middle-eastern country. Mia Arbatova, today one of the most venerated of Israel's ballet teachers, told her view of this "history" in a series of recent interviews.

"The history of dance in Israel seems to me to have been against ballet. The first to work with movement here was Margalit Ornstein who had studied with Wigman and her "wonder children" performers, the twins Yehudith and Shoshana who did a kind of gymnastic-free style dance. There were movement classes at the "Ohel Theatre" and some private studios. When Golinkin, a singer from Russia arrived, there was a change in the style of dance and performance for he started the first Palestine Opera (This was during the British mandate before Israel was independent).

"Rina Nikova, a ballet dancer from Moscow, joined his opera, performing and choreographing. When this first opera closed, Nikova started working with Yemenite girls. I know she fell in love with the whole atmosphere of the Orient that she found here: the sands, colors and diverse communities of peoples. She began creating a kind of imaginative folklore dance with her Yemenite pupils. She did train her troupe in ballet, however, they never performed in this style.

"In 1934," Arbatova continues, "I came from Riga with my husband on a dance tour. Ballet was certainly not loved here -- it was very, very low down on the list of dance entertainment. The dancer everyone spoke about and wanted to see was Gertrud Kraus, the famous Viennese performer. After I settled in Israel this lack of understanding or love of ballet was the situation I had to face for years. Even fellow dance teachers seemed to have little regard for the long process of training a ballet dancer."

Arbatova's involvement in ballet started comparatively late for a dancer. After the Russian Revolution, she and her family moved to Riga and she started to dance in the opera at the age of 15. "This was hardly considered proper activity for a Jewish girl from a religious family and my aunts and uncles refused to talk to me. In the opera I discovered an anti-semitic atmosphere; there was only one other Jew, Simon Simenov, who later worked with Sol Hurok in the U.S. But my teachers and performing experience were so important to me that I tried not to pay attention to my relatives or the anti-semites. I studied with the famous Olga Preobrajenska, Alexandra Fedorova Fokine and danced in ballets staged by Michel Fokine himself."

Arbatova's first look at Palestine occurred during her dance tour in 1934, but despite her Zionist feelings, she returned to Riga. She had an invitation to dance in Monte Carlo with Massine's Ballet Russe along with her husband. "I went as far as London, but circumstances intervened. Chamberlain flew to Germany with his umbrella and everyone talked of war. Somehow a tourist visa was arranged for me and I stayed a while in London, thinking however about going to Israel. By then I knew that Gertrud was living there and also Sonja Gaskell (known today for her important work in Holland founding the National Netherland Ballet) who I understand had a studio in Tel-Aviv."

Instead, she reached New York where she worked with Michael Mordkin, one of Pavlova's partners. "For a livelihood I worked as a dancer on Broadway. Then I decided I would go to Israel. I managed to get a tourist visa in 1938, simply arrived and stayed."

Mia introduced herself to the dancers then in Tel-Aviv. "I went to Gertrud Kraus and was overjoyed when she agreed to rent me her Frug St. studio in the afternoon hours (even though this was the hot siesta time) so I could work out every day. She was sensitive to my needs and I have always valued her as an artist, although we basically

had very different, radically opposed ideas about dance. She seemed to base everything on improvisation. As a performer, Gertrud had a fantastic physical ability to do all that she wanted, but her lessons were without the basis of technique as I knew it from ballet. Occasionally I did teach for her or watch her teach, as well as do work for the Ornsteins, but it seemed to me that I was like a little fly trying to push against the enormous elephant of modern dance. It was so established in Israel and there just was no understanding of ballet."

In London Mia had seen ads for the Nikova Biblical Ballet Company, so she also was curious to meet Nikova. However, "I saw that ballet was a kind of side issue within Nikova's own folkloric original approach to dance. So, I began on my own." Sometimes she choreographed at the Opera, where she became first dancer and teacher. "When boys were needed I commandeered young sportsmen from the Maccabi club and gave them a cursory training course. All the while, I tried to propagandize for ballet for I knew people looked on ballet as a kind of horrible four-legged creature. To try to change this attitude I decided to open my own studio. I rented a room in a laundry and my first students came -- mostly my own relatives and girls from the Opera. Not one book on ballet was to be found in Israel, no films, no guest dancers. There was nothing to help me support my work to develop the art of ballet."

Mia gave free demonstrations and little concerts throughout the country and by the 1940's she had two performing groups, one for children and one for adults. But this activity was still misunderstood. For example, "I remember a critique in one of the newspapers: 'It would have been better if the directoress had been taught to cook soup.' Even more incomprehensible to me was the disdainful attitude I heard so often, 'I can't stand ballet and I would never go see it!' because as a dancer I had always gone to see all kinds of dance styles.

"Gradually the feelings, at least against me as a person, changed. I know my hats, colorful skirts and nail polish were considered somehow indecent compared to the usual khaki shorts, blouses and long braids of the day."

A succession of Mia's studios included one in a wedding hall, a little more satisfactory than the laundry. Then there was a particularly nice studio in a basement. "When the first rainy season came I realized the studio was probably flooding and frantically rushed over just in time to watch a valiant rescue operation. The kindly Yemenite grocer next door had organized a few neighborhood boys to help him haul the old rickety piano from the rising waters. Eventually, I was able to build two studios (with the remarkable feature of wooden floors) on the ground floor of a newly constructed mid-Tel Aviv apartment house.

"Still before the founding of the state in 1948 the Hagana found out about my studio and some of the boys approached me about my willingness to store their illegal arms for them. I was concerned that the little girls would innocently reveal the cache of the underground defense group, but I wanted to help. Finally I agreed that the Hagana could come if each young man would literally sit on the guns until after I finished teaching and all the students had left. Afterwards I would hear the men say, 'OK Hevra (group), let's begin with plies and relevés.' Of all people, our own soldiers had learned all kinds of ballet steps and even enjoyed watching."

Mia became involved in the Hagana herself and the "directoress" in fact did take up cooking -- in the Hagana kitchen for soldiers. She also participated in a political cabaret with her second husband, singer Yosef Golan, Michael Gur and his wife Miriam Bernstein-Cohen. "I had grown up with the idea that ballet was theatre." Indeed, she realized this outlook by occasional choreography for Tel-Aviv theatre productions at Habimah and the Cameri.

Because Mia had been without a proper studio for so long, she decided hers would be open to everyone. Mia Pick, a dancer from Germany, joined her as a teacher and whoever came from abroad used her studio for rehearsals and whenever possible, taught Arbatova's students. Anton Dolin and the Festival Ballet were frequent visitors. "He was wonderful to us -- Dolin decided to initiate scholarships for an Israeli dancer to study and work in England with his company. Reuven Voremborg, now in Holland, was a recipient, and also chosen were Yona Levy and Rena

Perry. Other guests to Arbatova's studio included Les Ballets Jean Babilée, Spanish groups and Jerome Robbins. On his first visit he came to investigate dance in Israel on behalf of the Norman Fund (later the America Israel Cultural Foundation) in 1951.

"We performed for Robbins in my studio and he agreed to teach my dancers. He came several times to Israel and I remember one meeting in particular where he addressed a large audience of dancers at Habimah. He said that everyone should learn ballet; it was the base for dancers of today. His feeling was that the choreographer makes changes in style and intent of the movement, not the dancer, whose training should be firmly based in ballet to enable him to meet the stylistic decisions of the choreographer. Robbins became extremely impressed by Inbal Dance Theatre and softened his original statement about ballet. He agreed that all kinds of styles could be taught to students. Once again I felt the development of ballet in Israel didn't get strengthened as it should."

A new Israeli opera opened under the direction of Edith de Philippe. Mia became the "director of ballet" and trained and choreographed some 50 dancers including Yona Levy, Aliza Sadeh, Dalia Koshit and Meir Avraham. Occasional ballet evenings of Mia's works were presented, including her "Little Match Girl." "I think my end came when the ballet parts of the opera became too successful. Ironically the critics' praise caused difficulties with the administration. One day I came to work as usual and the doorman simply would not allow me in. I had been locked out of my position."

International competitions in Europe "saved my morale," said Mia. "I was asked to judge in Vienna when Nureyev won a gold medal and Vasiliev performed." There she also entered her student Yona Levy, who won a silver medalion. "I remember afterwards at a press conference one of the important Bolshoi teachers said that he had seen something wonderful, the young ballet dancer from Israel and he had no idea that there was any ballet there at all. Alas, back in Israel there was, in fact, no real framework for a talented ballet dancer. I also visited my old teacher, Preobrajenska, in Paris and was reminded of the position ballet enjoyed outside Israel."

Mia continued teaching and by the 1960's her students included Rina Schenfeld (one of Batsheva's leading stars today), Nira Paaz (rehearsal director of the Israel Classical Ballet today), Ophra Ben-Zvi, Leah Levine (Mrs. Donald MacKayle), Igal Berdichevsky (of Bat Dor Dance Company) and his wife Miriam Paskalski.

Indeed the opportunities for Israeli dancers to perform began to change. The initiative of Naomi Aleskovski, Rena Gluck and Rina Shaham resulted in their group "Stage for Dancers". Anna Sokolow founded "The Lyric Theatre" and then the Baroness Batsheva de Rothschild began the Batsheva Dance Company. However, none of these groups were based in ballet technique.

The work of starting an actual Israeli ballet company remained to be done. "Hillel Markman came from Archipova's studio in Haifa, studied with me and then asked for suggestions about study abroad. I sent him to Rambert where many of my students had gone," said Arbatova. He and his wife Berta Yampolski (also trained by Archipova) were abroad for several years and danced in the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo. After they returned they opened a studio and in 1967 started a company.

Directed by the Markmans, the Israel Classical Ballet Company was founded with some help from the Council for the Arts, the America Israel Cultural Foundation and other institutions. The company of some 20 dancers, with a repertoire including Balanchine, Blaska, Dolin and Charrat, tours extensively in Israel. When the Panovs perform in Israel, they appear with the Israel Classical Ballet Co.

Not only has the opportunity to see ballet in Israel increased, but there has been a development in ballet education. International standards are insisted upon in the large dance studios (Especially the Bat Dor Dance School in Tel Aviv and Lia Schubert's Dance Center in Haifa) as well as the Rubin Academy of Music's Dance Department in Jerusalem (which offers the only Israeli degree in dance education). The change in ballet education is verified by Rena Perry of the non-profit Royal Academy of Dance Organization of London.

Perry explained that when she studied ballet in the early '50's, the teachers were Mia Arbatova in Tel Aviv and

Valentina Archipova-Grossman in Haifa. "However, today there exists an organization of 30 teachers involved with teaching to meet the high international standards set by the Royal Academy of Dance (R.A.D.) system developed in England. As an Israeli, I feel I can say that the R.A.D. system is a very fitting framework for Israeli children who at first seem to have no patience for learning. The R.A.D. system builds their physical strength, their discipline and confidence and they can feel that they are progressing each year through the specific graded dance material. Last year some 750 students participated in the exams adjudicated by an examiner sent from England."

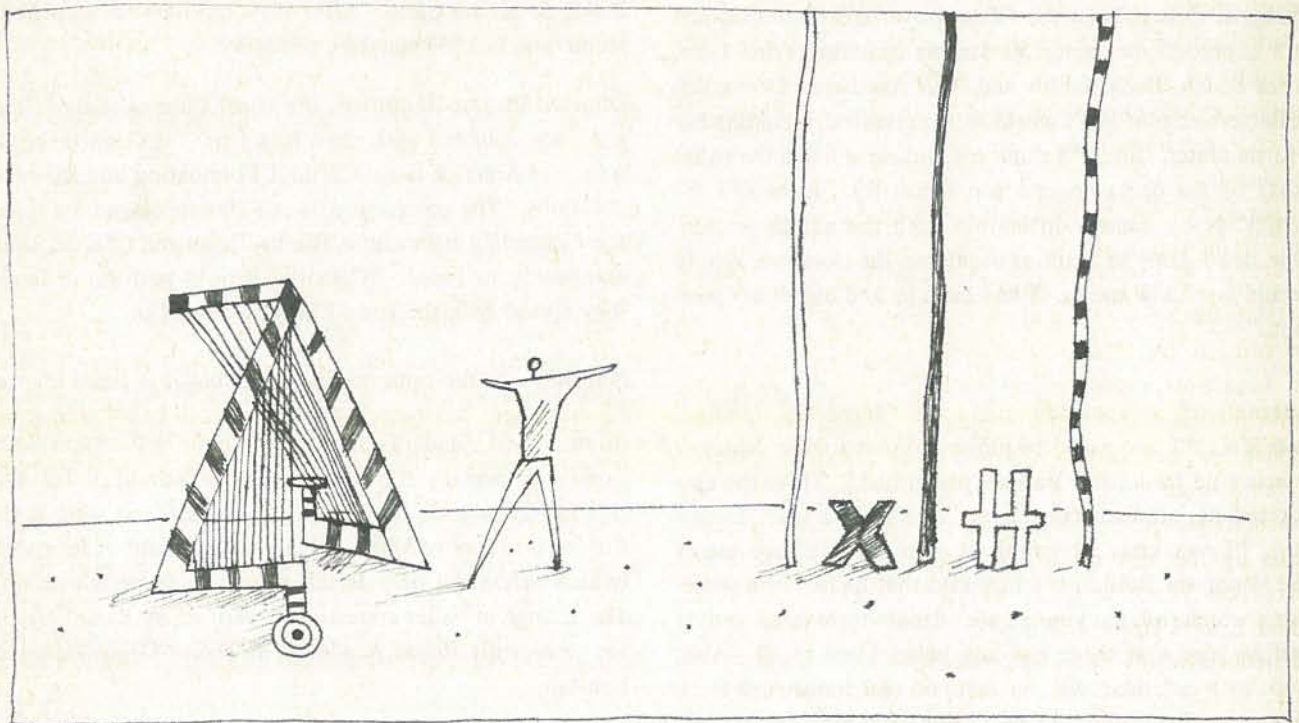
This approach to ballet education began when Jeannette Ordman, today director of the Bat-Dor Dance Company and school, together with Yvonne Nurunsky, gave the first course in the R.A.D. system to 16 teachers in 1965. Valentina Archipova-Grossman studied the material and taught it to others including Rena Perry. By 1967 an examiner was invited from England to evaluate students and the following year the Israeli teachers' group was granted

the credentials to open a branch of the Academy in Israel.

"Developing teachers is terribly important in the overall development of ballet," said Perry. "We hope to expand our scope to include more and more teachers, especially outside the Tel-Aviv and Haifa areas. In June, 1976 we expect to run a week-long course offered by the English examiner for interested dance teachers.

"Our good fortune," concludes Rena Perry, "is that now there are places where dancers may study properly, as well as perform without having to travel abroad and thus we can be sure of building on the vast Israeli talent that exists."

Certainly the Israeli dance scene today is supported, well loved and not relegated to any one style. It is many faceted, ballet taking an honored place in dancers' education and performance. Indeed, the hopes and the tenacity of Mia Arbatova and all the other pioneers have realized this broad change in the dance of Israel.



Danni Karavan 1969

Danni Karavan - Sketch for "Bat-Sheva" Dance Company.

דני קרוון - רישום ללהקה "בת-שבע"