

AN EVENING WITH THE SECOND GRAHAM GENERATION

by *Martin Kace*

One dance generation ago, the mountain came to Mohammed. When Martha Graham appeared on the Israeli scene in the early 60's, she brought with her two major gifts - a legacy and a pioneering artistic spirit. A young, strong, talented and raw contingent of people were instrumental in bringing these gifts to fruition.

In September 1976, a group of six of the second Israeli Graham generation met in a Greenwich Village apartment to discuss their lives as dancers. (The first generation of Israeli dancers educated in America being those who became the founding members of "Bat-Sheva" and the other Israeli companies.) The six were Aya Rimon, Yael Barash, Oded Kafri, Zvi Gottheiner, Ohad Naharin, and Ofer Sachs. All of them plan or hope to return to Israel to dance. All of them are ambivalent toward the prevailing Israeli dance scene, accepting fully the value of the latter of Graham's gifts to Israel, but skeptical about the necessity, at home, of the former. All of them were very tired at the time of our evening meeting, after a full day of classes.

There can be little doubt that New York City is, today, the Mecca of the dance world. It is no longer possible for the mountain to come to Mohammed - the best one can do in the way of strict import is to try to chisel off a few rocks and bring them home. But one may well question the desirability of this one-way flow, as this group did.

All six dancers came to New York to study. They felt that they could learn more and develop themselves more fully if exposed to the center of their professional universe. All eyes were cast westward for inspiration. As Zvi put it: "In, Israel, most aspects of professional life, dance included, are undeveloped. Israelis are excellent raw material, but one must have a variety of instruction from which to taste and chose, in order to develop best. Israel has a number of excellent teachers, but one can't pick and chose as can be done here."

"One style or one company cannot afford to breed within itself," Ohad added, "otherwise you come to a standstill artistically; there is danger of stagnation."

One surprise is that all six put technique, or rather technique per se, rather low on their lists of learning priorities. "I came here to be exposed to a world of dance," said Ofer, "not just to pick up the mechanics of a profession. In New York, I can live dance, I can breathe dance, while in Israel today I'm afraid that this just isn't possible as yet." The relative "unimportance" of the technical aspect, however, should be taken with a grain of salt: the minimum number of classes taken by anyone present that day was three.

Unlike most Israeli professionals seeking additional training abroad, these dancers feel that they are not out simply to add to an already-existing institution, but rather to expand its' base, widen its' scope. Said Zvi: "When I came to New York, I didn't know exactly what I was coming to. I had heard that it was big and wonderful, but the reality was a real shock - a very pleasant one. I found that I had developed a mistaken sense of proportion in Israel - a rather small world there looked quite large to me." But like other Israelis in similar situations, they are eager to bring back and implement their new-found ideas and widened abilities.

In relation to the U.S., Israel functions on very limited resources. This is a fact that is very well-recognized by the six. But it is not a real hindrance, though it does seem to make the pull toward New York that much stronger. But none of the dancers are rolling in clover here. None of them seem to expect to, either. Their expectations are as modest as those of their American Colleagues. Financially, at any rate. But the exposure to the rich companies, such as the American Ballet Theater, New York City Ballet, Graham Company, and Ailey Company, with their relatively lavish conditions, has shown them that there can be respect for good talent with strong, creative ideas. "Ame-

ricans have a technical advantage in dance. They start very young with the best of training. But we Israelis dance with our willpower, our motivation," Aya stated, "and that is our strength. In many ways it is hard for us to identify with our American counterparts. We arrive from different directions, and differ in many of our goals. We are weaker technically, but are more openly creative. Maybe we rely on innovation to compensate for our technical disadvantage. We can't afford to overlook innovations, they are our backbone at this point."

Innovation and new ideas seem to be a basic staple of these dancers. It is not uncommon for them to take a 2-hour train ride to New Haven to see a new company that may be in danger of not making it to Mecca. Yael put it this way: "We are a sort of upper class among our colleagues. We have more energy and will to get up and go out and look for new aspects in dance."

But in this vitality, there lies a certain fear - a fear of what is perceived as a rather conservative Israeli dance community, reluctant to lend a fully listening ear. Ohad hit the nail on the head when he said: "Back in Israel, we will need our mouths, not just our legs." There has been a rush in Israel to institutionalize. In many cases, prematurely. The bureaucracy is one example of this. The dance world is another, probably. And it is this looming conservatism that puts a damper on the plans of many aspiring pioneers. Their goals, however, do not stop at bringing back newly-acquired techniques and exposures to Israel. At Julliard, Aya finds herself consistently seeking Mid-Eastern themes as inspiration for her choreography. Yael finds energy in associations with and of the Israeli countryside. Says Oded: "I feel closer to Judaism, and my roots than ever before. It took my coming here to New York to discover

that one can express almost any facet of life through dance, and I find that given this freedom, my heritage has become very important to me." This appears to be another major point of differentiation between these Israeli students and their local counterparts - as the second Israeli dance generation, they are aware of their cultural points of origin, and hence have a sharpened idea of their respective destinations. And this took a voyage of 10,000 kilometers to accomplish.

They really are an idealistic bunch, and it is almost absurd that it took this den of corruption to bring it out in them. They happen to be one of the most sincere bunch of people I have come across in a long time. The really surprising part of it is the Jewish-Hebrew-Israeli "thing". They all want to see good Israeli stuff, and have lost their compunctions about folklore, it seems. Not that they are that hot on a strict folk discipline, but they recognize that that is the potentially strong point of inspiration of Israeli dance. Many of them are discussing taking some of these aspects into a balletic or modern discipline. I really do hope that they retain this verve when they get back, and not just fall into what's comfortable.

The second generation of Israeli dancers is paying its dues in New York City. It is a mature generation of dancers, concerned not only with the "what's" of dance, but very much with the "how's" as well. They have come to Mecca not only to express their beliefs, but to expand them, sharpen them, and to try to help to generate new ones at home. They have a respect for the dancer's legendary figures, but are not dominated by them. It took this sojourn to acquire respect and wholeness vis-a-vis their art, and a creative sense from within that will surely prove to be a boon for the dance in Israel. ■