

IS THERE ISRAELI DANCE ?

By Joan Cass

Leafing through this annual, you can see that dance thrives in this country. The question concerns not the existence of the art form, but to what extent its character is Israeli. In the area of folk dance, you can certainly find a rich harvest of our people's cultural heritage. But when it comes to the professional dancers who cultivate the field of our performing art, there is reason to doubt the nature of the crop.

In June 1977, Jerome Robbins said that of all our companies, he saw only the dance of Inbal as a truly Israeli product. If Robbins is right, should we simply accept this as a logical fact, since Inbal's origin and stated purpose were to express Yemenite culture, and classify Inbal with our folk dance creations, as did Judith Brin Ingber in "Roots" ("Dance Perspectives" # 59) ? Or should Batsheva, The Kibbutz Dance Company, Bat-Dor, the Israel Ballet, (and other companies that sprout from time to time) try to become "more Israeli" ?

Our four major companies are all "repertory companies" and they all toured abroad last season as Israeli companies. If we ask: who are their directors? dancers? choreographers ? What is the content of the pieces they choose ? Then their Israeli identification turns out to be rather slight. This is not just a theoretical quibble, but a policy matter with practical implications. Before Batsheva went on its tour, one of the managers asked, "What should we show in America ? Does it make sense to do Graham's works there? Limon's ? Sanasardo's?" They finally chose to feature Cranko's "My People" with its accompaniment of Hebrew poetry and its content of Jewish experience. Batsheva's guest stars were the Panovs, who represent Israel because he is Jewish and the couple fought for two years to leave Russia. Artistically, however, their technique is Russian ballet and Valery's choreographic style in "The Hooligan" is clearly Soviet realism.

On its spring tour, the Kibbutz Company must have confused some members of its European audiences, who surely believe that most Israelis live in kibbutzim, where they dance around camp fires, when they are not planting orange

trees. And here were these kibbutzniks appearing in a program of modern, often "abstract" works, with no hint of the Hora. Similar expectations are raised abroad by Bat-Dor and the Israel Ballet. Did not many people buy tickets to their concerts to express support for Israel, and therefore want to see something of the nation in its art ?

True, the Kibbutz Company dancers are Israelis, but their strongest choreographic influence in recent years has been Flora Cushman, an American who comes here by way of the Place, an avant-garde center in England.

Bat-Dor went to South Africa last autumn with works by Alvin Ailey, Antony Tudor, Charles Czarny, Domy Reiter-Soffer, Lar Lubovitch, Mirali Sharon, Doris Humphrey, John Butler, Jaap Flier. In content, only Butler's Bible-based "According to Eve" could be considered directly relevant to our national culture. Of the two Israeli choreographers, Sharon and Reiter-Soffer, the latter has been active in Ireland for about a decade and "Journey" has threads of Oriental fantasies. Sharon trained with the American avant-garde of the '60's, and her farcical "He and She" calls forth associations which don't stem from here.

As for the Israeli (classical) Ballet, except for a work here and there by Director Yampolsky, the repertory is strictly European.

Well, this problem is not confined to Israeli or Jewish identity. When Alvin Ailey came to set a new choreography for Bat-Dor in August, 1978, he spoke about his own output and his own company, in the same ambivalent way: "I'm interested in expressing the black man's experience," he affirmed, and referred to dances about Southern Baptists, or blues feelings or Duke Ellington's music. But he added: "My company is integrated, with black, white, yellow (and green!) dancers," and he gives them much "non-Black" material to perform. A Garcia Lorca play or a score by Samuel Barber may provide the source.

In fact, if we look at the history of ballet and modern dance in western culture, we find hundreds of examples of cross-cultural fertilization, beginning with the interaction of Italian and French influences in the royal courts.