

# PALESTINIAN, JEWISH, ISRAELI DANCE IN AMERICA

By Fred Berk

Looking at the American Jewish dance of approximately the ten years prior to the establishment of the State of Israel, one discovers a surprising fact: folk dances from Eretz Israel were referred to as "Palestinian Folk Dance", but concerts presented by professional dancers based on Jewish topics were called "Jewish Dance" or "Dances on Jewish Themes".

What has this so-called Palestinian Folk Dance? Actually these were folk dances brought to Palestine by the chalu-zim from the countries they came from, namely Russia, Poland, Rumania etc., dances such as the Hora, Krakowiak, Polka, danced as a passtime and social activity by the settlers. Later these dances reached America and became the dance repertory of the Zionist youth movements. By dancing them, the American youths identified themselves with the Zionist dream of a new homeland. The demand for such dances exceeded the supply coming from Palestine. Dance leaders in the Zionist youth movements began to create their own dances, which were based on Jewish folk tunes with simple Hebrew words. Usually the dancers accompanied themselves by singing, as live music was rarely available and records of these tunes did not exist yet. Two collections of some of these European and locally created dances were published:

Dances of Palestine, by Corinne Chochem (Behrman House, N.Y. 1941), and Dances of Palestine by Delakova-Berk (Hillel Organization, N.Y., 1947).

Around 1942 the Hebrew Arts Committee was founded by members of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America with the purpose of stressing the importance of Jewish art in America. One of the committee's departments was devoted to folk dance and modern dance. Performers were sponsored by this organization to stimulate American dancers to concern themselves with Jewish dance.

The following facsimile of a concert program is typical of the "Palestinian Dance" of the period.

The Bible, Chassidic tradition, life in the new country, the history, lore and poetry of the Jewish people fascinated many choreographers and dancers in the '40s in America. For Jewish and Gentile dancers alike the Bible provided inspiration. Since ballet became a popular art form one can find many Biblical themes recurring, such as Genesis, Joseph in Egypt, Queen Esther, Salome, the Song of Songs or the Book of Psalms. (A book exploring the phenomenon of

dance in Biblical times, William O.E. Osterley's *Sacred Dance* was published in 1923, and apparently fuelled the imagination of dance creators.)

In more recent times the Chassidic legend of the Dybbuk (probably brought to the attention of modern dancers through Ansky's play) attracted such noted choreographers as Anna Sokolow (1951), Sophie Maslow (1964), Pearl Lang (1975), Jerome Robbins (1974) and Eliot Feld (1974).

Benjamin Zemach and his Jewish dances, solos and group works, forcefully performed possessed a certain authentic Jewish flavor, whatever that may be, and left a strong impression on American dance. There were even dancers who performed dances on Jewish themes exclusively. Modern choreographers who created works on Jewish themes were, to name but two Pauline Koner (*Chassidic Songs & Dances*, 1932; *Palestine Pictures*, 1933) and Anna Sokolow (*Song of a Semite*, 1944).

From time to time an organization would approach artists who had works on Jewish themes and sponsor a concert devoted to Jewish Dance. One such concert, sponsored by the School of Jewish Studies, featured the team of Delakova-Berk in Palestinian folk songs entitled "The Nights Are Young"; Hadassa (born in Palestine, and eventually to become an exquisite Hindu dancer in the U.S.) danced her famous "Shuvi Nafshi", based on the 116th Psalm; Anna Sokolow danced "Exiles" and Lilian Shapiro (a former Graham dancer who became a very active choreographer at the Jewish Theatre on Second Avenue, danced "Credo", based on a poem by Yuri Suhl. To quote from the review in the *Dance Observer* (January, 1948):

"One rarely has the opportunity to see a dance program so full of feeling and fine artistry as was this Jewish Dance Festival."

The Nights Are Young projected a tender folk quality. The first section, a love dance, was especially appealing in its delicate simplicity.

Anna Sokolow is an accomplished choreographer and a dancer of unrepressed energy. She has much of significance to say and performs with great power. The Exile stands out by virtue of its starkness and intensity.

Lilian Shapiro's Credo was a particularly distinguished performance. Dedicated to the "Resurgence of the

Because what we are talking about when we use word-like “Black”, “Israeli”, “Oriental”, “Soviet realism”, “classical”, “modern abstract” — is style. And style expresses the attitude and personality of a group of people in a specific time and place.

These terms refer to more than the subject matter of a dance, or whether there is a story or a mood or a composition of changing shapes. They refer to the movements themselves and their school of technique. For example, classical ballet behaviour can be traced to Renaissance court life and the reign of Louis XIV. The turn-out and the exaggerated bow (or “reverence”); the formal positions; the stiff posture; the elegant courtesy between male and female; the symmetry of design; are all marks of the ballet’s noble birth. Later, modern dance had its stormy youth in America and Germany between the two world wars. We can see the tensions of the period reflected in torso contractions and uneven rhythms; the city-scapes in angular body lines; the striving for mass freedom, in the large, swinging movements, and free-form groupings of ensembles. Jazz dance was spawned in Africa, reared in the American South, and matured in Northern urban centers. The pelvic swings and body rolls are taken directly out of African native rituals, tap dance and rhythmic shuffles were developed by the slave population and isolated shrugs of head or of one shoulder were ironic gestures of the alienated city Black. These movement techniques paralleled the musical sounds heard from African drums, Dixie-land brass bands and Northern “be-bop”.

The most common dance technique of the ‘60’s and ‘70’s is a sophisticated cosmopolite that borrows gestures, rhythms and movement sequences from all the above styles, which in turn had adopted other mannerisms from Spanish, Hindu, American Indian dance and lots more, along the way. This international character is fitting for the telstar, jet age we live in, where national boundaries are insignificant in cultural borrowings, even if more important than ever in politics. The global character of communication is reflected in contemporary choreographic style.

Yet at the same time, the ideas of “one world”; of the

“democratic melting pot”; of the “universal brotherhood of man” have all been found wanting in the last decades. On the contrary, a dominant trend of ethnic nationalism is discernible, with peoples like the Moluccans, the Basques, the French Canadians, as well as American Blacks and Israeli Jews, striving for definition. The arts cannot help but respond to strong human aspirations like these. Hence the ambivalence expressed by Alvin Ailey as a contemporary dance who is also Black. Like most of us today, his position ranges from proud standard bearer of a national or ethnic heritage, to the loving presentation of works that have proved their appeal “somewhere” in the past, to the fostering of new creations that are some artist’s personal reaction to life in the world today. Thus he plunges into the mainstream of the contemporary dance world, with its pluralistic cultural make-up.

So it is here. Although company managers debate the issue from time to time, all our repertory companies also swim in this mainstream; even if occasionally one of them dips into the pool of Israeli culture (whatever that may be!) and comes forth with movements inspired by Middle Eastern sights and sounds, or by the rhythms of our cities. For while we constantly make generalizations about national cultures, at the same time we can see the contradictions. After all, where is there today an isolated national culture?

Therefore, I conclude that if we can refer to an American dance art-shaped by the American Martha Graham, but also the Russian Balanchine, the Jewish Jerome Robbins, the English Antony Tudor, the Black Alvin Ailey — then the concept of an Israeli dance art is also valid. It can be argued that for a healthy national expression, we should encourage more local choreographers and employ more native Israeli performers. This means we must offer good dance training to youngsters. Fortunately, there are signs that this is happening more and more.

But as for the style of the companies and their repertories, we can call them Israeli if they are produced in this country. Whether they then appear at home or abroad, they will finally express who and what we are. ■