

MODERN DANCE, BALLET AND FOLKDANCE

Giora Manor interviews Jiri Kylian.

Jiri Kylian, artistic director of the Nederlands Dans Theatre, was asked in the course of his company's third visit to Israel, in the spring of 1980, to lecture on the relationship between modern dance, ballet and folk dance. It seemed that this topic, fundamental to the understanding of modern stage dance, was especially well suited to Kylian's choreographic style, as he often uses elements which derive from folk traditions. Instead of a lecture he chose to show some video-films of his work and asked me to discuss the topic with him in public.

The Bat-Dor Dance Company, who were the hosts of the Nederlands Dans Theatre during their tour, made their hall available, and about three hundred dancers, folk dance instructors, critics and dance lovers congregated to listen and watch. The following is an edited version of the transcript of that interview.

Giora Manor: I know that your training is in ballet. You started as a ballet dancer in Prague, Czechoslovakia. The connection between ballet and folk dance is, on the one hand, strange. There is nothing more artificial and removed from everyday life than ballet. Then, on the other hand, in the history of ballet there are many folk roots and a lot of demi-character or quasi-folk dancing. How did you react to that, was that your way of incorporating sources of folk dance in your ballets? What did you study? Did you really study folk dance or only demi-character national dances? What is the difference between the demi-character folk dance in ballet and real folk dance?

Jiri Kylian: I studied at the Prague Conservatory in Czechoslovakia, and it was a very good school indeed. If you want to become a dancer in Czechoslovakia, you don't only study one kind of dancing and no theory, just to be able to use your body, but you have to study many subjects. The curriculum was very broad, including ethnic dances, Martha Graham technique, jazz dancing, fencing, psychology and languages. We had to study an instrument (most of us chose piano), history of theater, history of art, composition and counterpoint. If you only want to become a dancer, it is perhaps too much. But if you want to go on if you want to be a choreographer, a teacher or a ballet

master, you should know more about these things. First of all, of course, one has to study classical dancing and folk dancing but real folk dance, no character dance. Character dance is something that's been taken from ethnic dances, perverted in a way and made into a brilliant kind of insert for classical ballets. No, we didn't study that, we studied real folk dances. We wouldn't study, for instance, the *czardas* in general but would learn a specific Szekely *Czardas*, which is a *Czardas* from a certain part of Hungary. We wouldn't study just the polka but a very specific Polka that comes from a certain part of Czechoslovakia, Poland or Russia. This is what I really think is important and I would advise schools to follow this example because character dances are only a perversion of real folk dancing. Character dancing is a predigested form which is more acceptable to the general public. But it doesn't have the smell of the country, the particularity of real folk dance, which I regard as interesting and essential.

Classical ballet derives from ethnic dance. It was in Southern France, in the Basque region, in Provence, that the Classical technique originated. From the dances of Southern France were derived the so-called Courtly Dances in the Eighteenth Century, and from these in turn, the Classical technique was developed.

G.M.: Also from the Moresca dance of Burgundy which came from North Africa through Spain. Thus there is even an oriental influence to be found in the beginning of ballet. The English Morris dance probably developed from the Moresca. It was a sword dance. In fact Ashton adapted some of the Morris dance ensemble forms for his *Fille mal gardée*.

Yesterday, when we were talking about it, I thought, oh God, modern dance and folk dance, that's even stranger than ballet and folk dance. Because, after all, everybody knows that there is a *Czardas* in *Coppelia* or the Harvest Dance in *La Fille mal gardée*. Not to mention *Les Noces*. But I found that in modern dance too, there are choreographers who do use folk dancing. For instance, perhaps the most perfect modern dance I know of, José Limon's *The Moor's Pavane*, is based on the *pavane*, which is a Spanish

Court dance of the 16th and 17th Centuries, and not really a stage dance at all.

J.K.: Yes.

G.M.: And in Martha Graham's *Appalachian Spring* one may observe some very folksy influences, not to speak of the authentic square dance with a "caller" in Agnes de Mille's *Rodeo*. Not to mention the many works of our own Sarah Levi-Tanai, who uses Yemenite ethnic forms. But I don't know any contemporary choreographer other than you who so poignantly uses elements of folk dance. I don't mean steps but, for instance, formations like two lines clashing, going one through the other and parting again. Or circles that form and disintegrate, and other formal elements, which, I feel, are derived from folk dance, without using specific folk dance steps.

J.K.: I think this use of folk elements, natural movement and natural relationships in the newer choreography has its reasons. I don't think it just comes from nowhere. If you follow the history of humanity, you are frightened by the speed in which we are being pushed to live. It took man thousands of years to progress from holding a stone in his hand to making the first tool. The ancient cultures took thousands of years to develop. Then you come to the Middle Ages, which only lasted hundreds of years. As you come closer to the Nineteenth Century you realise that cultures such as the Classicist period and the Romantic era which lasted only about fifty years. Suddenly, with the beginning of the Twentieth Century, there are several streams appearing at the same time. Now every artist is an individualist. There is no common style under which you can put all the artists creating today.

And if you look at the development of technology, all the things that we are surrounded by, you feel like an idiot, because everyone is constantly operating things without knowing how they function. So, although the human mind has developed in such a terrific way, it has also specialized so much that one person is not able to understand all scientific development, only a small part of it. So we are creatures surrounded by machines, by telephones and cars and televisions, and all these things that one doesn't know how they work. And one feels that human achievement is expanding, but the individual within the whole thing is contracting. I think it's an enormous problem.

When I was a child, twenty years ago, there were things created in ballet that were strange and monstrous, the stranger the better, and one couldn't relate to it as a human being. For me, I don't want to be an avant-garde choreographer. Because I think it is time to look back, to re-

discover the elements, the very elementary movements and the elementary human relationships. I try to take things that help me to express this from classical technique, from modern American dance, from folk dance, and also from natural movement, normal movement how people actually move. I choose from all these things and try to form a language that enables me to get closer to the ground, closer to the people, closer to the heart. That is what I am interested in, and that is what I am trying to do.

I never actually take folk elements and incorporate them into my ballets. I always take the character or the smell of whatever it is, change it all around, and it come out different. But somehow it has to do with folk dancing.

My ballet *Symphonietta* is an example of this. The music, by Janacek, is also derived from folk music, from folklore, but it is not folklore, it just has some elements in it that made me choreograph what I have choreographed.

G.M.: You said you wanted to use natural movement. What exactly do you mean by natural movement? It is opposed to artificial movement or stylised movement? I notice in your movement the excellent use of impetus, of momentum. For instance you love your dancers to slide along on the floor after they have stopped moving of their own accord. The lifts in your ballets are always in movement, there is never a lift which is static, a pose. But where do you feel the naturalness comes in? I mean what is natural, as opposed to stylised movement? How would you define it?

J.K.: Natural movement is very simple. There are maybe some of you here who have never danced and if I asked you to do something like getting up, or crossing the room you would move in an untrained way and I think there is a great deal of beauty and honesty in this kind of movement. There is another ballet of mine, called *Children's Games*, where there are such everyday, natural moves. Untrained people sometimes have a wonderful ability to move. I am sure you have had the experience of seeing someone who has never danced, who has never done a step on the stage, but you think, my God, this person is just walking, and it's such a beautiful thing. By the way, walking on stage is one of the most difficult things to do. That's what I understand by natural movement.

G.M.: Nevertheless, even in *Children's Games*, these are trained dancers. I don't think an ordinary person could really do what they have to do.

J.K.: I think actually they could, with an enormous lot of work.

G.M.: You mean with training. But then they would cease to be just average people and become dancers. I would say, and I don't know whether you agree, that normally what we call natural movement is movement for a purpose and not for the purpose of moving.

J.K.: Yes, yes. Movement that everybody does, natural movement, can be taken and used for stage purposes. Of course, it's changed then, its meaning is different from the original purpose the movement was made for. I find it a very important element in choreography.

For instance, when I was working on *Children's Games*, I started by going to the market, in Holland, and buying hundreds of dirty old military underwear, whole bundles of it, and then we spread them – well, we washed them first – we spread them all over the studio and started putting them on in strange ways, like children do, when they take their mother's skirt and father's shoes and put them on. These costumes, really old underwear, got worn the wrong way round; a pair of long-johns is put on upside down, imprisoning the feet of the dancer at the ankles. There is one girl with children's knickers on her head and her hair coming out where the legs were supposed to be. In a way, in the whole ballet, things are being used the wrong way.

G.M.: So the movement, derived from naturalistic circumstances, from natural movement and the rehearsal situation became the guiding artistic principle of the ballet. How about the accompaniment, which is in parts concrete music, interspersed with pieces of Gustav Mahler's *Kindertotenlieder*, edited by Gary Carpenter, your resident musician?

J.K.: That, too, was musical rough material created by the dancers themselves. For the first scenes we rub the rims of drinking-glasses to produce delicate singing sounds. For the battle scenes we got all the dancers together, and blew on ordinary iron pipes, which you can blow on like on trumpets. We recorded the banging drums and breaking of glasses and everything else, took all these elements to the E.M.I. studios and spliced them together and made them into rhythms.

G.M.: Speaking of real "natural movement", when your company did *Kinderspelen* in Jerusalem yesterday, one of the crystal glasses broke. Suddenly two dancers came on stage on their knees, mopping the floor in perfect rhythm with the music. It fitted in very well. Only later did I realise that this scene was not a part of your choreography at all. The dancers were simply afraid someone would hurt

their feet by treading on the broken glass.

J.K.: It also has to do with the way one choreographs. For me, no matter how intricate the movement used, it must be natural, it must move according to natural and physical laws. No matter how fast and how intricate, it has to be comfortable. That does not mean it has to be predictable. Yesterday a lady told me she was surprised every time something happened on the stage, startled by what was going on. I told her that I once met Mr. Nicholas Beriozoff, a dancer and choreographer who used to dance with the Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo, and sets classical ballets for many companies. We met in Turino and we had a dinner together. He is an older man and he said to me: Jiri, I don't know what it is, but whenever I think your dancers are going to go this way, they go the other way. So, he found he was always looking at the wrong side of the stage. But however unpredictable and surprising the moves my dancers are dancing, it has to be comfortable.

G.M.: What you have just said is merely the definition of brilliant art, which is that it seems natural but surprising at the same time, like Mozart's music, for example. It seems as though nothing simpler could be devised but nevertheless one is astonished.

To come back to our subject: of course there is natural movement, in folk dance, though some folk dances are very acrobatic or demand all kinds of feats or special skills which untrained people or people from another region or another culture are unable to do at all.

J.K.: The marvellous thing about folk dance is that it's absolutely in human proportion, in honest relation to the human body and in complete harmony with the natural surroundings in the particular part of the world where it originates.

You can see that a dance from the plains and a dance from the mountains are of completely different character. People are used to walking in a particular way, to working in a certain fashion and all these things influence their dances.

Another wonderful thing about folk dances is that they are always based on the advantages and disadvantages of the human body. You can do a folk dance in a perfect way, you really can but you can never dance classical ballet perfectly, because classical technique is "constructive", it's a technique that doesn't take into account the faults of the human body, it does not reckon with human imperfection. One can never do a perfect arabesque, or a perfect *escarté*. I have never yet seen a dancer with a leg above 90°

with hips absolutely straight, level, as it says in the book. Have you? I've tried, but it never works. Yet in the very intricate Indian dances or the dances from Indonesia, which are terribly complicated and have some really strenuous physical movements, can be executed in an absolutely perfect way.

G.M.: Are you sure that a choreographer from India or Indonesia would say the same?

J.K.: I hope so.

G.M.: Perhaps he would think that ballet is perfect and that his dancers are imperfect.

J.K.: Maybe his dancers are imperfect. Then they should study a little more. But classical ballet just cannot be done in a perfect way.

G.M.: Because it's an idea; it's built on an ideal person, who doesn't exist.

J.K.: Yes, exactly.

G.M.: Maybe there is another thing. Navaho Indian women, when they weave their famous blankets, which have most intricate patterns, always purposely leave a mistake in, as they say, "to let the soul out". So, if you are too much after perfection, you need a sort of mistake, a window for the soul of imperfection to escape through.

J.K.: I left so many souls out.

G.M.: But as we are progressing to Asia, it occurs to me that you are going to Australia. Why? Is it all connected with what we are talking about?

J.K.: Yes, it is very much so. I don't know if any of you are acquainted with the aboriginal people of the northern part of Australia. Several years ago I saw a film on television about their dancing and I was never so excited about dancing in all my life. Decided I had to do some research, to study with them, to see what they really are like, because those few dances I saw were incredible. The dances of the Australian aborigines are not like the commercialised African dances. The aborigines have an enormous technique, they have ways of expressing which are quite unique. I saw a dance about a hunter and an animal. The dance was circular and both dancers moved always on the perimeter of the circle as far from each other as possible. So the distance between them never changed. But they constantly changed roles. The hunter would become the animal, and you were

never sure who was hunting whom. It was magnificent. So I decided to go there and study with them. We are now planning a full evening's production based on aborigine culture, for which three major composers will write the score. Part of the score will be by Arne Nordheim, another part by Luciano Berio, and still another by Toru Takemitsu. This production should take place in 1982, in Holland, and for this purpose we are going this summer to live for one month in the Northern Territory of Australia, where the Australian Government has arranged the largest gathering ever of all the aboriginal tribes of Arnhem Land, the Northern Territory and Groote Island. All these tribes have never met, because the distances are so enormous, and they are going to gather together in one place and for six days and six nights present their slightly different cultures.

For in the life of the aboriginal people of Australia dancing is "number one". Everything else takes second place. If you dance a dance, you own the dance, as your property. You can trade dances . . .

G.M.: So they have copyright of choreography, which is a subject nowadays much discussed in America and Europe.

J.K.: Yes, an absolute copyright. Should a man come from one tribe to another and see a dance he likes, he has to ask for the rights and they may say, alright, you can have this dance, but we want another dance from your tribe in exchange.

I am also concerned about a much wider issue. Folk art is so ephemeral that it is important to go and study and preserve it as well as possible. One can keep a painting, if one is lucky, one can keep a statue or a piece of architecture, a house. A song, a story can be written down in a way. But with dance, especially folk dance, there is no way to notate it efficiently. Because there are so many things that go along with it, the atmosphere, the way everything is done, how it's felt, how it's connected with the mythology, with ancient culture. All this you cannot record, it has to be passed on from person to person and it has to be kept alive by working with it.

I am very much concerned with nations, preserving their heritage. One has to know where one comes from and what one belongs to. Especially so in the arts that pass by and are gone.

So we are going to research, to gather material, and a camera team will come with us and film the whole event. The aborigines themselves are really concerned about preserving their culture. We asked, what can we give them,

what do they want from us in order to put on this festival? They said: all we want is a professional colour film of the event.

G.M.: One of your works is based on music actually titled **Folk Songs** by its composer. Of course I am referring to **Dream Dances**, which really are dream-dances, I mean they are a dancer's dream.

J.K.: Thank you. The music is by Luciano Berio. He named it **Folk Songs** and it was written and dedicated to Kathy Barberian. But I feel he wasn't quite right to call them folk songs, because they are not real folk songs, they are arranged and changed and one of them even . . . but why not? He wrote it himself and it still is a folk song. I have tried to make equivalent choreography to all eleven pieces. Almost every one comes from a different country. There are songs from Italy, America, France, Sardinia, and Azerbaijan among them, each lasting from one to three minutes. Obviously it posed an enormous problem to choreograph pieces that short, and keep each distinctly different in character from the rest. One of the dances is only three quarters of a minute long, and in those 45 seconds I had to make a statement of some kind. Also I was determined to make this statement while using no actual folk steps.

Originally we called it **Folksongs** and then we changed it to **Dream-Dances**, because it was dreamed up, more than actually choreographed, by using folk elements.

G.M.: Another feature of folk dance that you incorporate in your work is that there is no front and back. Folk dances are very often in the round and there is no proscenium, no front and no back. You very often use dancers standing for a long period of time with their backs to the audience, which is very unusual. Although in German they say "Ein schoener Ruecken kann auch entzuecken" ("A beautiful back can be enjoyed"). There seems to be some connection between this feature of your choreography and folk dancing, which is central, pivotal, and not frontal stage-audience-oriented.

J.K.: Yes, I definitely think there is a connection. It also has to do with another thing. I think theaters don't present a really perfect situation for watching dance. There is a discrepancy between the dancing on the stage and what the audience sees. I always request that my dancers dance for themselves and for each other, and not for the audience. The result is a different kind of dance. For me the public may be there, but not necessarily. Maybe that's why I don't care whether they stand with their back to the audience or

face sideways. I think a good dancer should be able to express himself with his back not necessarily with his backside. The back is the dancer's most vital, most important part and can really be very expressive. It's true folk dancing always whirls around in all directions, but with me it has to do with the fact that we pretend that there is no audience.

G.M.: But that's again a feature of folk dancing, where you don't dance for an audience but for yourself, and those who may watch are only allowed to peep.

So actually you use a sort of fourth, imaginary wall on your stage like in naturalistic drama, through which the audience can see.

J.K.: I believe in relationships, in dialogue. Connections between people are really very important to me. Even if you are all by yourself and you think something or state something, and it means nothing, unless you transmit it and relate it to your surroundings or to someone else. And I believe that the strongest ties are between one person and another. That's why I always make duets, there are always two people dancing together.

G.M.: When you did have a solo in your **Dream Dances**, in order to avoid at all costs its becoming a solo, there was a girl lying on the front of the stage while the man was dancing.

J.K.: Yes, he was dancing for her.

G.M.: Of course, that was obvious. She was left there from the previous dance and that was a nice touch.

J.K.: My constant use of the duet form has been pointed out to me. As a criticism I accept it, because there is a danger of falling back into the same pattern, into using one principle all the time.

G.M.: Thank you for telling us today the stimulating things you told us. Through discussing general, fundamental problems of choreography we have gained a deeper understanding of your own art of making dances. Sometimes by going far away one discovers truths about oneself, so I hope your trip to the aborigines will provide you, and through your work us, the audience, with insight into our own lives and problems.

Thanks to **Bat-Dor Dance Company** for making this meeting possible. And thank you, Jiri!

J.K.: Thank you, Giora. □