

THE STATE OF THE ART OF DANCE – 1980

by
Giora Manor

The dance revolution taking place in the whole western world has reached Israel. In Europe, where ten years ago modern dance companies hardly existed, one can find small and also fairly large ones, not only in the capitals but also in provincial towns. Ballet companies traditionally humble auxiliaries to opera companies, have become the central feature of their houses, and spread the fame of Stuttgart, Brussels or Hamburg over five continents.

In America, where there are literally hundreds of active professional dance companies, dance has ceased to be an esoteric speciality for aficionados. Dance in all its forms has become an integral part of the popular art scene. It is hard to define the precise reasons for this change in attitude, but undoubtedly the general disappointment in theatre, along with the growing interest of the theatre itself in body language and its progressive turning away from dialogue, have contributed substantially to the rediscovery of movement as a mode of theatrical expression. Also, the immediacy and swift pace of dance are well suited to the hectic rhythm of life in the second half of the twentieth century. After all, "instant" seems to be the adjective most typical of our times. And dance is a form of instant theatre.

In Israel, dance no longer has to struggle for the right to exist as a legitimate art form. Its development has been phenomenal, but many basic problems are still unsolved. There are many fine artists and several excellent creators of dance. But still, the problems of creativity, the inevitable dependence on a few central creative personalities, the lack of will to experiment and to take artistic risks (among choreographers and dancers alike) are problems which demand attention.

For the first time in its twenty-year history, the Batsheva Dance Company has an Israeli artistic director, Moshe Romano, one of its founding members, who has spent the past seven years as rehearsal director and associate artistic director of the Contemporary Dance Theatre in London. Since its founding in 1963, Batsheva has suffered from an overly quick turnover of artistic directors, who, though several among them were competent artists, came as guests and regarded their stay in Israel primarily as another step

(This article was first published in Hebrew in the quarterly Bama Theatre Review.)

in their career. With all their goodwill, they remained visitors, none staying at the post for more than two or three years. After Batsheva's artistic connection with Martha Graham was severed, and after the company became a publicly-owned and supported one, the problem of artistic policy became even more acute. Artistic directors came and went, keeping the company together without gaining new ground or heading in any specific direction.

When Batsheva lost the financial support of its founder, Batsheva de Rothschild, Kaj Lothman took over and for two years steered the company with a kind but firm hand. After Lothman's contract ran out, negotiations were concluded with Norman Morrice, who had just resigned from his post with the Ballet Rambert. However, before he could take over as the next artistic director of Batsheva, he received an irresistible offer and became head of the Royal Ballet in London instead. So at very short notice another director had to be found. Paul Sanasardo, who had worked in Israel several times, creating works for the Bat-Dor Company was invited to take over. During his tenure most of the new works in the repertory were hand-me-downs, except, perhaps, his penultimate choreography for the company, "Jewish Folk Songs", to music by Shostakovich, which is a minor masterpiece. He managed to attract several good dancers to the company while, alas, losing a few of the promising young male dancers.

It still remains to be seen in what direction the new management of Cohan-Romano will steer the company. In the changeover the two remaining founding members, Rena Gluck and Rahamim Ron left the company which was, perhaps, regrettable but inevitable.

There seems to be a change of atmosphere in the studio, but the real challenge will be to create a new repertory of original, daring works by Israeli choreographers, and to find a sense of purpose and direction in Batsheva's work.

Can there be a 'poor ballet'? Most classical ballets are huge works demanding a large corps de ballet, a full stage machinery, soloists with star quality. For more than 12 years Hillel Markman and Berta Yampolsky have struggled to

keep the Israel Ballet alive on a meager budget, under difficult technical conditions. Their company is of chamber ballet size, with about 20 dancers. They are true pioneers, but the ballets they produce seem to be put together haphazardly, without the benefit of a cohesive artistic policy.

Indeed, most of the company's dancers come from abroad, join the Israeli company for a season or two and leave again. Only the Israeli Ballet and Bat-Dor are still "international companies" in this sense. Batsheva, the Kibbutz Dance Company, Efrati's Kol Demama, and of course Inbal have a large majority of Israeli-born and trained dancers. In itself there is no harm in importing talent from abroad. After all, there are only a few German dancers in the Stuttgart company and only a third of the artists of the Nederlands Dans Theatre are Dutch. But the real question is not one of the nationality but of identification, a feeling of belonging to the company. This seems to be lacking. Performing recently with guests like Evdokimova, Godunov or the Kozlovs, the Israel Ballet proved that it can hold its own in the sphere of classical repertory, provided it gets the necessary managerial support. There is undoubtedly an audience for ballet in Israel, so hopefully, we will be able to watch full-scale productions in the future. Just as nobody questions the performance of established works by symphonic orchestras, the great works of Petipa, Ivanov or Balanchine will have to become an integral part of the Israel Ballet's repertory.

The Israel Ballet is doing very important work in school performances, thus creating an audience for the future. Inbal and, recently, Batsheva have also been active in this sphere, as is a company run by Hassia Levi in the Rubin Academy in Jerusalem.

No doubt Sara Levi-Tanai is the most original creative talent in Israeli choreography. However, her Inbal Dance Theatre has been through a most difficult period. Its problems were financial but also artistic. Finally, the company acquired a studio of sorts and several young dancers joined its ranks, but its future is far from assured.

Inbal is now celebrating its 30th birthday. One of its main tasks now should be the preservation of the body of Sara Levi-Tanai's choreography. Unfortunately some of these important creations have been amended and 'modernized' by the choreographer, to the detriment of their artistic value.

The Bat-Dor Dance Company has all the technical facilities a company could want. It possesses a theatre of its own;

a well-run management, and a large body of subscribers numbering several thousand. Being a company without a resident choreographer, it depends entirely on the quality of its current guest choreographer. Its artistic director, Jeannette Ordman, stresses the importance of discipline and high standards of performance. Surely these are important elements, but the strict adherence to rules does not create a climate of creativity. Spontaneity and the joy of dancing are often absent from Bat-Dor's polished performances. Its dancers look anonymous on stage. A dancer trained in Bat-Dor will often show a marked development in the quality of his movement when he joins another company. The artist's personality is suddenly revealed, he feels free to express himself in the framework created by the choreographer to interpret his role, rather than go through the motions in the most precise but impersonal manner.

There are many important works in Bat-Dor's repertory, such as those by Paul Taylor or Jiri Kylian. Domy Reiter-Soffer has worked so often for the company that he could be regarded as the house choreographer. Unfortunately the existence of a large body of subscribers leads the company to discard many excellent ballets soon after their premiere as dance audiences have an appetite for new creations and have not yet learned to savor repeats of well-known works as concert-goers do.

The company which has progressed most in recent years is the Kibbutz Dance Company. From a nucleus of gifted amateurs it has become a brilliant ensemble of international repute. Its artistic director Jehudit Arnon, together with other choreographers and teachers, such as Flora Cushman, has imbued the company with an enterprising spirit. Its repertory consisting mostly of Israeli choreography, is one of its main assets. Another is the spirit of mutual trust among its dancers, a feeling of the joy of dancing which is evident in their performances. Perhaps this is the reflection of the kibbutz way of life. Unfortunately, the people in charge of culture in the kibbutz movement are not sufficiently aware of the company's needs and its importance, hence its financial difficulties.

Moshe Efrati's Kol Demama group, which began as an experiment in integrating deaf and hearing dancers, has also gained international renown. The group's strength, but also its weakness, is its total dependence on the creative work of its director, Efrati, which has the effect of limiting its scope despite Efrati's great talent. It is impossible for the uninitiated viewer to guess which of the dancers are deaf - which, to my mind, is proof of the success of the experiment.

For many years the trait which more than any other has hindered the development of dance in Israel is that new groups and independent artists are too quick to seek established status. The budding dancer, just graduated from school or academy, is looking first for a place in one of the established companies, and a steady salary, seeking security rather than innovation or experiment. As long as the attaining of technical competence was the primary goal, this was understandable. Only recently, after nearly twenty years does one encounter small, independent groups and enterprising choreographers who prefer doing their own thing to becoming cogs in the comparatively well-oiled performing machines of the established companies.

Independent creative activity is helped by the opportunities offered by several club-theatres, such as Tsavta, which provide a showcase stage for experiment, thus freeing the dancer of the financial burden of production costs. At the initiative of the Dance Library (with the support of the Tel-Aviv Museum, which donates its stage) a "Stage for Dance" has been created, on the model of the "Stage for Dancers" run in the 50's in New York by the late Fred Berk, where many now famous choreographers first revealed their work. The very fact that so many choreographers wished to present their work, is a sure indicator of the amount of talent laying dormant, awaiting a Prince Charming's kiss.

Apart from such showcase performances there has been experimental activity by dancers and choreographers such as Ruth Eshel, Rina Shaham's group and other artists including innovative solo performances by Rina Schoenfeld which earned deserved international acclaim.

In Jerusalem, there are two enterprising modern dance groups. Flora Cushman's workshop has been performing her work there, and recently a new group, the Katamon Modern Movement Group, with a gifted young choreographer named Yaron Margolin at its helm, has shown fascinating new works.

Apparently, something is stirring. The old preoccupation with technique is gradually replaced by an interest in creativity.

There are several thousands of students learning dance in all forms in schools and studios all over the country. There, not only are Israel's future dancers and choreographers being trained, but importantly, a new audience is being formed. Unfortunately, most of the studios are still primarily concerned with the teaching of technique rather than with propagating creativity and furthering an appreciation of the art.

This is strange, as Israel has produced well-known innovators and original thinkers in the field of the movement education and theory such as Moshe Feldenkreis and Noa Eshkol. The Kibbutz Teachers' Seminary in Tel-Aviv is the centre of that dance education which is based on relaxation and natural movement, rather than on stress and force. The emphasis there is on creativity and self-expression.

Many of the ballet schools have adopted the British R.A.D. method, which has improved didactic standards without, alas, encouraging creativity. An important innovation is the recent inclusion of dance as an optional subject in the official Matriculation Exams ("Bagrut"). The Rubin Academy in Jerusalem has maintained for the past five years a secondary school where students are able to take dance as a "Bagrut" subject. But only in the kibbutz schools is dance – modern and ballet – an integral part of the curriculum in primary and secondary education. This explains the surprising fact that kibbutz-educated dancers make up nearly half of the membership of the professional companies, while the kibbutz movement itself accounts for only about three per cent of the general population.

The existence of the Dance Library in Tel Aviv, and the well-attended lecture courses in dance history it runs, indicate a marked growth in the public's interest in dance as an art.

Seven years ago, I wrote in an article about the dance situation in Israel that perhaps the time was ripe for the government to assume responsibility for a national company, the natural candidates being Batsheva and Inbal. Since then, Batsheva has, in fact, by default become a publicly owned company. The dire economic situation has led to thoughts about the creation of central, state-run facilities which would make it easier for the individual companies to meet their budgets. This seems to me the proper course to take rather than to entertain hopes of amalgamating companies in an integrated framework, run by bureaucrats. Bigger does not necessarily mean better or cheaper.

What is really needed is a change of climate, a change of attitude towards the experiment. The Israeli dance audience harbours a strange suspiciousness towards innovation. Whereas in the United States, people come to experimental performances with their minds open to anything the artist has to offer, Israelis seem to attend in order to call the artist's bluff. They sit tensely through the performance, unable to enjoy anything new or unusual, because they do not wish to be taken for a ride. A certain lack of intellectual curiosity hampers the free development of choreography in Israel. The potential is great, but there is no way to tell when the promise will be fulfilled. □