

WHAT IS AMERICAN ABOUT AMERICAN MODERN DANCE?

by Judith Brin Ingber

My thoughts on American modern dance are grounded in the same dances, books and articles we have all seen and read over the years, but my perspective owes a great deal to the five years I worked in dance in Israel. In order to make a few points about what is American about American modern dance, I want to begin by telling you about a dance program I saw in a small theatre in Tel Aviv, Israel. It was a very plain theatre. The seats were wooden, there was minimal lighting equipment, bad sight lines, but the performance illuminated the single most provocative clue to the differences in what makes American modern dance American.

As I watched, it occurred to me that American modern dance did not allow dancers on stage to communicate intimately. I was seeing something other than personae or abstractions; here I saw individuals with the capacity for intimacy, trust, interest and belief in each other. The only similar American example I could think of was the defunct radical dance company "The Grand Union" which prided itself on its intimate, personal dances physically bound together through daring lifts, holds and unusual physical contact.

Our abstract thinking leads us to an internal, almost selfish, direction in America. In contrast with other cultures, Americans, to use an athletic metaphor, jog rather than run. We are free to jog wherever we want. We are free to jog through the inspiration of exotic cultures or of our own past, which we can accept or reject. We are free to jog at our own pace in an artistic way. Creativity is our only limit. We do not have to run away from bombs or wars. We hold our own turf and can make it and shape it at will.

I am reminded of yet another concert in Israel. This one was held in the old stone Roman amphitheatre at Caesarea, where the Mediterranean sea provides a visual and audio back drop. There was a full moon. Merce Cunningham staged an entrance from the sea. His dancers made a slow yet startling approach to the stage, as if coming out of the water. They stopped by the fallen stone pillars and rocks. Suddenly, there was a noise that made the audience freeze. It was the sound of an air-raid siren, that steady piercing whine that rises to a deafening pitch to warn people to run

for shelter. We were all ready to dash from our seats. Then, oddly, the sound suddenly dropped off. It had only been a technical trick. The composer had unwittingly plugged into our sensitive sound system with his electronic music.

No, we Americans are different, because we are free to work in our own context and to create dances at home or abroad. Isadora went to Europe, so did Loie Fuller, Maud Allan, Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn, Helen Tamiris, and numerous other dancers. The dancers who came to America with their culture and dance often were escaping and looking for safety or new roots. Way back in the late 18th century, America's first ballet dancers were refugees from the French Revolution; others followed in the 1920's after the Russian Revolution; in the 1930's and 1940's many modern dancers came to escape from fascism. Political realities cannot be neglected; they certainly influence the dance. But America's politics are summed up in the idea of self-help and the belief that the individual is foremost. If you work hard enough you, too, can become president. Perhaps the over-riding sense of self and self-expression has affected modern American dancers as much as the struggle for independence and life in other countries.

I am led to think of Martha Graham's dance, "Appalachian Spring," which depicts the wedding of pioneers. It is Graham's commentary on the pioneering spirit of our ancestors. The dance was premiered in 1944. Two independent people, the Bride and Groom, are caught in their own thoughts, imaging their own futures. The Bride's solo shows her dreams, tentative yet hopeful, about her children to come. It shows her consciousness of herself as the link in generations when she turns to the older woman for comfort in her awesome step ahead in marriage. The husband to be, that strong frontiersman, stands at his own hewn fence, looking out at his fields. The fence denotes his territory and delineates his strength; it is by the fence that he can be endearing and protective of his bride. At the end, he takes her to sit in the rocker on the porch. They are stalwartly posed together, looking out on their land. It seems to me that Graham is dealing with the bride's situation, with her reveries, but not with the intimacy of her marriage to her own groom.

How very different are the feelings in Sara Levi-Tanai's dance "Jacob in Haran" at the moment when Jacob and Rachel declare their love for each other. The dance was premiered in Tel Aviv in 1975, in that very simple theatre I described. The darkened stage revealed the two robed dancers on a huge stone, at night, close in lovers' intimacy. They took little space. Their hands were shaped oddly into fists gently touching each other on the forehead and chin in a kind of silent ardently unaggressive secret language known only to them. It was so provocative, drawing the audience tightly to them. This moment was part of the larger story about the Biblical Jacob, but Levi-Tanai, as choreographer, nonetheless, shows two people absorbed in their love for each other, tender, already interconnected, solid and grounded in their footing. They are ready to bear all that we know from the Biblical story that will befall them, but their attention is only to themselves.

What are the backgrounds that lead to these two different approaches to weddings, the joining of two lives, in modern dance? I hardly feel it necessary to say that Graham came out of Denishawn. Ruth St. Denis was a fantastic character dancer, who loved to draw from the legends of other cultures. Graham, and also another Denishawn dancer, Doris Humphrey, on the other hand, wanted to be structural in their work, to be free to create movements that rigorously reflected the drama or themes that they chose to deal with. Graham was always "In one guise or another, desirable, beautiful, and beset in the female mode," as Jill Johnston said in her "Ms" Magazine article from 1978. Both Humphrey and Graham cast themselves as the priestness or queen, muse, goddess or soloist, each brilliant as a dancer in her own right. Rather than the exotic dreams of St. Denis or Shawn, both Graham and Humphrey used their Puritan/Protestant background in their choreography.

Sara Levi-Tanai is the other culture; that exotic, far away legendary place. She is clad in tradition — she does not need to create symbols and similes. Her energies go into the depth of her traditions and history. Her background is Yemenite, from the country on the southern tip of Saudi Arabia. Jews lived there in an isolated society probably from the fall of Solomon's Temple, six centuries before the common era until 1948, when the Yemenite Jews were air-lifted en masse to Israel, to the new nation. Levi-Tanai lives in the land of the Bible and as a choreographer she is visual with a kind of outside eye which shapes her thoughts and feelings. Her preference for certain movements is not the result of movements she enjoyed doing, for unlike Humphrey or Graham, she was never a star dancer herself.

Her movement material is parallel, percussive, angular and yet lyrical. Like the American choreographers she is free of any classical style. In this case the movement is unrelated

to classical style because it is drawn wholly from authentic ritual and Yemenite-Jewish dance itself. She has been influenced by the rhythm and movement of the landscape, the sand and sea, the grazing sheep, the slow movement of the gaze of eyes looking into endless expanse and also by the wrath and the love of the prophets, by the ecstasy of the "Song of Songs" and by the tradition of ancient and religious literature as well as the folklore of Yemen.

Like Mary Wigman, Levi-Tanai is free with the movement material for its own sake. She is also a renowned composer and writes her own accompaniments, even including the rhythms of ancient Hebrew texts. Sara Levi-Tanai is dealing with a philosophical expanse, as put forth in her tradition, rather than a territorial expanse, as in Graham's dance.

"American" as a term includes many ideas and outlooks. Modern dance, too, is inclusive, covering a multitude of minor "isms", as John Martin pointed out more than fifty years ago. He said that modern dance expressed the inner compulsion of the choreographer. The choreographer externalizes a personal, authentic experience in his or her dances. Further, according to an unpublished paper that Gertrude Lippincott wrote in 1951 when Mary Wigman was expected at Bennington, the American method of modern composition — if one can call it that — can cause the dancer to stray from the emotional sources of his material so that his work occasionally loses its warmth and personal quality.

Far from dry are our bride and groom in Israel. Levi-Tanai handles her background emotionally, and her characters speak of the strong passion and "soaring ecstasy" that is felt in all her dances. The moment of meeting between Jacob and Rachel shows poignancy and love. They speak intensely to each other and thereby to the audience. Her success is also in part due to a clarity resulting from choreographic solutions and ideas about couples in other dances.

Her first wedding dance, "Yemenite Wedding" was done in 1956, a decade after Graham's "Appalachian Spring." The dance itself was almost a documentary; in four sections it detailed the traditional ceremonies; the groom leaving his house; the bride beautified with henna; the ceremony taking place under the wedding canopy; and finally, the groom seeing his bride for the first time. She is decked out in the traditional garlands of jewelery. She sits on a throne-like chair, hardly a figure in the dancing. At times, she is veiled. Levi-Tanai has said that she shows women asking for partonage and protection in her dances. "I see this is the role of the Eastern woman and I have absorbed it into my work. It is also a symbol of my people showing one of the many ways Israel relates to God."

She used ritual in her 1969 dance, "My Sister, My Bride," in which definite spatial forms take over, emphasizing her attitude to women. By the time she created "Jacob in Haran," the bride became a figure with her own feelings, her own movements, and a unique relationship to a specific person. Caught in the pending deceit her father would perpetrate on Jacob when he substituted her sister, Leah, at the ceremony, Rachael becomes a strong figure despite her constricted situation.

"Appalachian Spring" also evolved through different dances. "Frontier" is known now as a kind of preliminary sketch from 1935. A pioneer woman is shown at her fence, looking out or going away from, but always returning to the fence. In his opening-night review in 1944 for the later dance, "Appalachian Spring," Edwin Denby commented that the striking reality in Graham's choreographic style is that each character dominates the stage equally, each is an individual dramatic antagonist to the others.

In fact, American modern dance was democratic early on. Other modern dances are not free from traditions to present characters in that way. The ancient Israeli bride is not a democratic woman; she is something else in Levi-Tanai's dance, a woman tied by family bonds, who still can be sensual and intimate in a way that the democratic bride cannot be.

In the American and generally Protestant world view, we are constantly forging ahead. This viewpoint incorporates the new. The progressive view is that something better lies in the future so that traditions can be left behind. The assembly line means we can almost forget craft and that products can be dispensable. Communications need no face to face rapport. We have the phone. No hospitality is necessary and no personal carriers. Technology surely will bring us the better world. America's penchant for including everything means technology is included in the general definition of modernism and therefore of modern dance.

Without technology, in fact, there seems to be no dance. How can you separate the technology from Alwin Nikolais'

work or Merce Cunningham's? In "Winterbranch" the blinding light thrown on the audience is indispensable, so are the electronic scores or Cunningham's recent cinematic/video outlook influencing his choreography.

In contrast, even an American choreographing for an Israeli company, produces something different. The dance becomes more sparse and elemental, depending on the performers as

the vehicle of power. These performers are dancers in a culture that emphasizes emotions, strong personalities who can

put forth bluntly, clearly, unequivocally. As dancers, they influence any choreographer from abroad who comes to work with them. I am reminded of Glen Tetley's "Mythical Hunters" for the Batsheva Company. Israeli choreographers like Mirali Sharon, Moshe Efrati or Domi Reiter-Soffer are also dealing with movement which derives from the dancers themselves as well as with their own.

Maybe that is one of the reasons that European Expressionism took such hold in early modern dance in Israel. The ability to grasp the essence of an emotion and convey it spatially and in imagery, spoke to the dancers there and the audiences as well. To a great extent, modern dance in Israel was made by European Expressionists. Historically, Gertrud Kraus came from Vienna in the 30's and influenced dancers for four decades, including the recent Kibbutz Dance Company. So did other dancers and theatre directors who trained directly with Wigman and Laban, for example, Elsa Dublon, Katya Micheli; Palucca trained dancers or Vera Skorenel dancers like Leah Bergstein, who worked mostly in the Kibbutz folk mode or the Ohrenstein sisters.

Certainly the power of Laban's approach, as well as Wigman's and her disciples, reached America. Holm's work is outstanding. But unlike in Israel, it seems to me, their impact was absorbed into the general atmosphere of modern dance but did not change its course.

An interesting exception and link to Europe is the work of Meredith Monk. She is an exception to all that I've been describing. Her work speaks of intimacy and emotionalism relayed in a moving manner because of the interactions of the performers and the material. At age 18, after ballet and Graham, Monk started studying with Fred Berk at the 92nd St. "Y" in New York City. Berk came originally from Vienna, had performed in the company of Gertrud Kraus and was very active in modern dance there. As a matter of fact, he won a bronze medal in the International dance contest in Vienna in 1934 for three expressive, original solos. Twenty-five years later and a continent away he had Meredith Monk as a student. She has told me that in contrast to her studies in dance studios, the folk dancing and creative work she was learning from Berk was of a real expressiveness and a keystone in her work. "In folk dance I was in an expressive medium that was much closer to my temperament than the abstract modernism I could study any place else. Berk made me feel integrated. There's an acting aspect in folk dance, because you're a real person. That expressiveness is something I still maintain and something that still interests me."

Monk is highly regarded and supported in Germany. What she earns there provides for her work here, in the U.S. she told me recently. She visited Israel and has become very close friends with Sara Levi-Tanai. I do not think it is a coincidence. They are both musicians, and their choreography and definitions of dance go far beyond abstractions. They both like working with epic sizes in emotional ways.

In Israel, the Europeans became a force, while in America they generally became simply other dancers doing other

kinds of modern work. The individual here always reigned free; dancers are free to try their hand in any way that moves them. They are free to include what they will to be innovative, to try a number of techniques and methods for portraying their thoughts. American modern dance is part of our progressive belief. Just as it is hard to imagine life without a telephone, a car and electricity, the innovations and inventions of Messrs. Bell, Ford and Edison have also certainly affected and shaped our sense of American modern dance.

(Conference of Dance History Scholars,
the Congress on Research in Dance and
the National Dance Guild at the
University of California at Los Angeles;
June, 1981).

