

# EDUCATING MOVEMENT AND DANCE TEACHERS

**Giora Manor** talks to **Naomi Bahat-Ratzon**, head of the Dance Department of the Kibbutz Teachers Training College in Tel-Aviv.

**Giora Manor:** Readers of the Israel Dance Annual surely remember your name from reading your articles about ethnic dance in Israel. This time I would like to talk to you about your work in the Kibbutz Teachers College, especially about the course for Movement and Dance Teachers, which you are in charge of.

For me the college — the Kibbutz Seminar, as it was then known — which I remember since its modest beginnings in the early 40's, was always connected with pioneering work in movement-education and dance in Israel. I mean the innovative ideas implemented in the work of the Movement Department's founders, Judith Binetter and Lotte Kristeller, names which may not mean much to today's students. I think it is rather important to recapitulate the main ideas on which their work was based, which were revolutionary and radical then and are still rather unconventional and anti-establishmental today.

**Naomi Bahat-Ratzon:** Yes, you are quite right and I am not sure whether I should feel "sorry" or "glad" about the situation. The methods of the Kibbutz Seminar were, and still are, based on a constant search for new answers to the old questions, but the basic attitudes haven't changed, I believe. Right from the beginning the people in charge — who were educators as well as being movement and dance orientated — had in mind the improvement of the personal movement-proficiency of each individual, according to his needs and abilities, as a person and as a member of society. The methods developed were based on scientific research in anatomy, physiology, practical psychology, biomechanics and educational theories.

**G.M.:** Such an approach was concomitant with the general ideas of kibbutz — education. But could you be more specific? What exactly is the difference between your methods and those practised by other institutions training dance-teachers? I know your students are learning classical ballet, basic movement. . .

**N. B-R.:** True, the technique we are teaching is based on a wide spectrum of methods. The basis is that of fundamental movement, a discipline incorporating much of the ideas of Moshe Feldenkrais, developed to serve spacial movement, the flow of energy and the use of movement as a means of interpersonal communication. The personal ability of each moving individual is emphasised in 'his own time', his awareness of the self is being developed and attention is paid to the improvement of everyday movement-habits. This is a constant and dynamic process

This "basic-movement", which is taught by several teachers, such as Yehuda Livne, Hagar Arad and younger instructors, who are themselves alumni of the Kibbutz Seminar, is for us a fundamental platform which comprises several techniques. The discipline we call "from movement to dance" is taught by Tirza Spanhoff, who is a graduate of the Seminar and studied with several well-known dance teachers while continuing her work in "basic-movement". In collaboration with other instructors she developed a method which enables the student to use the techniques of modern dance or ballet, according to his choice and needs.

Our method is open to all possibilities, provided one possesses the awareness of one's movement potential.

**G.M.:** I know you devote much time — compared to other dance-schools — to creativity, composition and choreography. How does this work in a crowded time-table?

**N. B-R.:** We regard creativity or rather a creative attitude as a fundamental tenet of every movement-class; we try to avoid working on a technical problem by mechanical means but rather to solve the problem at hand from different points of view, looking for diverse methods to overcome it. This spells "creative attitude" in movement-thought, didactic methods and the structuring of each class.

One should bear in mind that dance is after all a means of

individual expression, but also a means of communication. Which brings us to the other facet of the creative attitude, namely composition. Composition is a subject taught in all three years of the course, by Zoffia Naharin and myself, mainly through the examination and discussion of work prepared by the students in their own time in class.

**G.M.:** How does the instruction in classical ballet or Graham-based modern dance, (which has by now also become 'classical'. . .) co-exist within this framework?

**N. B-R:** A very good question. . . The 'founding fathers' (or rather 'mothers') believed that with the improvement of the individual's movement potential technical proficiency will follow without further effort. But since the establishment of a course for dance-teachers, we felt it was necessary to strengthen these technical aspects. Therefore, we engaged teachers who are experts in ballet or modern dance, but only such as are inclined to regard creativity and the principles of basic movement as important. For example, Dina Shmueli (who teaches ballet) or Rhoda Manes (who teaches modern) would themselves take part in basic-movement classes taught by other teachers or participate in Feldenkrais-classes, to acquaint themselves with the methods we use.

**G.M.:** Don't you find it a bit difficult, when a teacher takes part in one of his colleague's classes as a student, as it were?

**N. B-R.:** There were, of course some problems in the beginning, problems we readily embraced. Our work is very much team-work and we attach a lot of importance to mutual consultation and periodical meetings of all the staff in which anyone may raise problems and voice their opinions.

**G.M.:** I have read in some publication that you accept only one in six or seven candidates who apply each year for the movement-and-dance teachers course.

**N. B-R:** Surely there are many reasons for the popularity of the course, in spite of the rather spartan premises we work in, compared to similar institutions. In recent years more and more applicants are aware of the goals they are seeking and why they wish to become movement-and-dance teachers. Most of those who come to us are looking for an opportunity to be creative and try their hand at choreography – which we try to provide.

Public relations are one of our weaker sides. All we do is to publish an ad., but most of the future students apply even before the notice has appeared in the papers. One student

brings another and our problem is to choose and select, as the amount of places is restricted.

Our facilities allow but for a certain number of students to be accepted each year and recently the Ministry of Education has – for lack of sufficient funds – frozen the number of new candidates we may take in. But to be quite honest, I'll have to mention, that six years ago when the Movement and Dance Teachers Course was inaugurated, we were approached and asked to open the new venture in conjunction with another well-known institute, on condition that we would take many students, hundreds of them. We believed that educating fewer but better-trained teachers was preferable to having a lot of mediocre ones around. Our ideas were accepted and two "streams" established, one for movement-and-dance teachers and a separate one for physical education teachers.

Really we have quite a lot of students! There are about 300 in both courses and as many again taking part in refresher courses we are conducting for graduates, who return periodically to enhance their knowledge.

The subjects of the refresher-courses are: Dance-notation (the Eshkol-Wachman method on several levels); the Feldenkrais method; movement and dance therapy; movement for disabled children in a remedial education framework; choreography for dance teachers, etc. There is also a preliminary course for those who wish to study at the seminar, but need a better foundation in ballet and modern dance. This course is there first of all for those kibbutz-students who find it difficult to obtain proper basic instruction in the rural areas.

**G.M.:** Several aspects that are nowadays typical of what is called Post-Modern dance were, if I am right, practised at the seminar right from the time of the "founders", as you called them.

**N. B-R.:** I am glad you put things in their proper perspective. Sometimes I have to remind myself, how about 25 years ago, when we were students of Binetter or Kristeller, we used to create dance and movement around and with small objects, such as chairs, sticks, balls or plastic sheets, as now such creative activity is an important part of the new dance. When one regards the work of, for example, Rina Schenfeld, it is not at all surprising to find our students participating in her group, utilising just these methods of creativity they learned at the Seminar.

**G.M.:** Though your stated aim is to educate teachers, I know a number of dancers in the professional companies,

who were students at the Seminar or at the choreographic courses you conduct.

**N. B-R.:** Quite true, there are our past students in Batsheva and Batsheva 2, in Moshe Efrati's company and as I already said, with Rina Schenfeld.

**G.M.:** Is there any improvement in the number of men enrolled in the dance teachers course?

**N. B-R.:** There is a certain improvement, not just in the increasing number of male applicants. Each year there are about 4-6 applicants. In the last three years we have had two male students in each class and the presence of men makes a great difference. As in the physical education course there are more than 50% male students, our own students take advantage of the fact and persuade some of the future sport-teachers to participate as dancers in their choreographic exercises. Among our instructors there are several men, such as Yehuda Livne or Ya'acov Levitan and of course there are several lecturers teaching academic subjects.

**G.M.:** The creative and educational aims of the Seminar are well defined, but would you say that there is something specifically Israeli about your work? In other words, could such a way of educating dance teachers work anywhere else?

**N. B-R.:** We emphasise our "Israeliness", we are aware that our students are going to work in this country (though we had students from abroad, who came specially to enroll with us), therefore we have a subject in our curriculum called "Folk Dance Traditions in Israel". The traditional dances of the Jewish and non-Jewish communities of Israel are observed analytically, as dance and as a sociological phenomenon. We arrange workshops with experts in these fields, which makes it possible for the students to practise and learn the traditions of the Yemenite, Chassidic as well as Arab, Druse or Circassian communities. This subject, as well as the study of the history of dance, integrates academic analysis with practical creative work.

**G.M.:** Is there any way to ensure that the graduate will mould his educational work according to the principles you try to impart?

**N. B-R.:** Surely you know as well as I do that education isn't an insurance company. The highly motivated student — and most of our students are highly motivated — nevertheless often finds himself in a situation which makes him unsure, perplexed and he has to find his own way. We wish to offer him a broad basis, which will enable him to

find his own direction. Such an approach often at first leads to a certain amount of confusion, but with the help of teachers who are aware of the specifics of their subjects such an open, generalised approach is transferable in an educational situation.

**G.M.:** I wonder why it took so many years to open the course for movement and dance teachers at the seminar. Physical education teachers in the kibbutzim have been using your methods for many years, so why the delay?

**N. B-R.:** Perhaps my own development as a teacher will serve as an illustration. Before I became a movement and dance teacher — and that was quite a few years ago — I was looking for a place to study, but couldn't find it all under one roof. So I went to a regular music-academy, got my horizon widened by Binetter and Kristeller at the Kibbutz Seminar, where I enrolled; studied with the outstanding dance teachers of that time, Gertrude Kraus and Yarden Cohen, who helped me to form a personal basis of understanding dance, on which I could build my own outlook. At a rather advanced age I got to study ballet and modern dance and had to go to different places to learn such diverse subjects as, for instance, dance-notation, yoga, the Feldenkrais and Alexander methods. Nowadays at the seminar we try to offer the student a wide range of subjects so that no aspect of dance or movement would be closed to him, as each individual has his special needs. To answer your question: as usual, the demand came from below, from the needs of the students. People who were not primarily interested in becoming dancers in professional companies, such as Batsheva, Bat-Dor or the Israel Ballet but wished to gain a broad basis of movement-knowledge on which to build their career had nowhere to go to, unless they went abroad, where there are institutions of this kind. The demand came mostly from the kibbutzim. And, like myself or Tirza Spanhoff, they came to the seminar to study movement and a little dance and then had to go to look for other opportunities to study specific areas of dance. Or, as happens today, past students of the music-academies or dance-schools (in Israel or abroad) come to us after graduating.

What we had in mind was, first of all, the educational aims of movement, the tuition of basic movement rather than turning out more accomplished dancers.

**G.M.:** How would you put your credo; what would your message to dancers be?

**N. B-R.:** When we say 'dancers', we mean the whole person and his movement-potential, the ability to use movement as a means of expression and of communication. We try to