BENJAMIN ZEMACH – FROM DARKNESS TO LIGHT

By Naima Prevots

Benjamin Zemach, born 1901, was immersed in the world of theatre as a child growing up in his native Russia. When Benjamin was four, his father died and Nachum, his older brother, was put in charge of him. Nachum Zemach was already interested in becoming an actor and director, and that early influence eventually led to Benjamin's own dedication to theatre and dance. Benjamin's older brother was an ardent Zionist, who believed Jewish survival involved settlement of Palestine and revival of Hebrew as a spoken language. In their hometown of Bialistok, Benjamin watched as Nachum brought his interests in theatre and Zionism together when he staged his first Hebrew play, a revolutionary feat in those times.

In 1980, Benjamin recalled his brother's realization that Bialistok represented artistic isolation. Nachum left his hometown in around 1916, with the promise that he would care for Benjamin, his mother and sister, when he found another place to live and work. Nachum's goal was to work in conjunction with others who were exploring new ideas in theatre. After spending some time in Warsaw, he came to Moscow in 1917.

Moscow was the logical choice for a young Russian artist/director intent on his own development and on encounter with new ways of thinking. Although the Russian theatre had been bound by old traditions, significant changes took place between 1900 and 1917. As Oscar Brockett noted in *Century of Innovation*, "No longer backward, it was now one of the most experimental and fruitful theatres in the world. Its enormous range probably exceed that of any nation at the time."[1]

After a brief stay by himself in Moscow in the winter of 1917, Nachum Zemach returned to Bialistok and brought the whole family back to live with him. This was to be a crucial decision for the future careers of both Nachum and Benjamin who also quickly became immersed in theatre. Their training with Constantin Stanislavsky, Yevgeny Vakhtangov and Vsevolod Meyerhold from 1917 to 1924 established for them lifelong perspectives and technical foundations. For Benjamin it also meant the opportunity to explore fully his interest in dance with a variety of great teachers.

Benjamin and Nachum worked most closely with Vakhtangov, who labelled his approach to theatre "fantastic realism". He wanted the stage to reshape inner realities. One of his methods with actors was achieved through a creative adventure between director and actor. This was an approach that was characteristic of Benjamin's approach throughout his career, whether he was directing a play or creating a dance.

The experience the brothers had with Meyerhold was briefer, but also of long lasting effect. Oscar Brockett called Meyerhold "the most dedicated experimenter in the Russian theatre between 1900 and 1917..." His creative urge led him both to seek new means and to explore the limits of old ones."[2] After 1917 Meyerhold's experiments covered a wide range of ideas in the theatre, reaching into new methods of presentation and suggesting a variety of approaches into meaning, of staging techniques and training methods.

The year 1917 was the time of the Russian revolution and the Zemach family made the trip to the capital city at a time fraught with the dangers of the civil war. Benjamin Zemach was fifteen, and in later years still remembered the trip vividly. It colored his work as an artist, as it reinforced the negative aspects of war and the importance of peace. This was particularly true in his choreography for *The Victory Ball*, (1935), created in Los Angeles.

In 1980 Benjamin talked about that journey.

> The journey from Bialistok to Moscow took two weeks. We changed from one freight train to another and there were thousands of other refugees. Some were cooking over a fire they made, and others were moaning over a member of the

> family who had died. When we finally got to Moscow there were many refugees everywhere and fighting went on all over. Bullets shattered our windows. Everyone became a proletarian, and the rich hid their diamonds.

The family settled in Moscow and Nachum Zemach soon was able to realize his dream of a Hebrew theatre with young Benjamin. Nachum Zemach rented a building and gathered a group of Jewish actors and actresses with whom he could work and share in the creative process. Over the door of the building, in blue letters on white, they placed a sign that read "Habima"— from the Hebrew word for stage. Benjamin was considered too young and inexperienced to be in any productions that were being planned, but he was party to much of the planning, the intellectual discussions, the vibrant hopes of the young group.

During the period of 1917 through about 1924 the Russians allowed the Jews to worship and did not close the synagogues. In the excitement and dream of the revolution, there was an atmosphere of freedom and brotherhood for everyone, and divergent beliefs within the Communist framework were given leeway. The young artists who were struggling to give expression to new forms in painting, theatre, dance, music, were seen as part of the total ferment in the creation of a new society.

As soon as he could, Nachum Zemach began to utilize the resources available to him in Moscow. He turned to Constantin Stanislavsky for help and Benjamin remarked about this in later years:

> Stanislavsky was not afraid and did not think it would lower his prestige to work with the Habima. He was obsessed with continuity. He also felt that the people in the arts owed something to the Jewish people since they had contributed so much to culture in the past.[4]

Although Benjamin was not allowed to participate in any plays, he was present at rehearsals, discussions and any other acitivities. As he put it, he remembered "just hanging around" all the time. Stanislavsky himself could not take the time to work with the Habima group on a regular basis, but he sent his top pupil — Yevgeny Vakhtangov. The twelve men and women of the Habima started studying with Vakhtangov for a year without producing any plays. In 1918 they had a public showing of one-act plays, and gradually began to rehearse and produce evening long productions.

Soon Benjamin was allowed to participate and when Vakhtangov started working on Habima's production *The Dybbuk,* Benjamin was a full fledged member of the group. He had close contact not only with Vakhtangov, but also with Stanislavsky, who came to give classes and lecture. During the rehearsals for *The Dybbbuk* Vakhtangov became seriously ill with stomach cancer. He saw a general rehearsal of the production, but according to Zemach never saw a performance and died in 1922 just before the premiere. Vsevolod Meyerhold volunteered to help out and worked with the Habima after Vankhtangov died.

In 1983, looking back at his youth in the theatre, Zemach summarized the influence of Stanislavsky, Vakhtangov and Meyerhold:

> From Stanislavsky I learned about concentration, imagination, physical activity, purposefulness, relaxation, rhythm and the music of speech, as well as the divisions of parts into larger and smaller sections, and the role of conflict and development. From Vakhtangov I learned inner continuity of gesture, composition, combination of content and form, as well as a sense of contemporaneity and the abstraction of flights of imagination. Meyerhold taught me to approach each work with freshness of mind and an attempt to look at the process at hand as opposed to past ventures.[5]

The influence of participating in *The Dybbuk* was pervasive throughout Benjamin Zemach's career. This was one of the most important productions created by Vakhtangov. It also was the hallmark of the Habima Theatre on tour and when it became established in Israel in 1927. The first major presentation of a play in the Hebrew language, it proved a guideline in the use of Judaic material to develop a statement that had universal implications. As innovative theatre, utilizing symbolic characterization and stage sets, it was a formative experience for the young Benjamin.

At the same time that he began working with Habima, Benjamin Zemach started his dance studies in Russia. He had three major teachers, all of whom were responsible for developing different facets of his imagination and dance vocabulary. Inna Tchernezkaia, a pupil of Alexander Sacharov, was his first teacher. She had her own modern dance studio in Moscow and from her he learned "a dramatic approach to movement." Vera Mosolova, formerly a ballerina of the Bolshoi Theatre, was responsible for his solid background in ballet. Alexandrova, the director of the Dalcroze Eurythmics Institute, gave him "a firm appreciation of music and dance, and a sense of freedom and exploration in movement."

In 1925 the artistic freedom that had characterized the early years of the Russian revolution began to disappear. The tolerance of various religious and nationalist affiliations

and beliefs also vanished. The Jewish communists began to take the position that Hebrew was a counter-revolutionary language, and they succeeded in cutting off financial help and other support for the Habima. The group left Russia, ostensibly to tour, but clearly seeking a way to establish itself in a more tolerant and hospitable environment.

In 1927 the Habima members came to New York, where they went through a period of internal dissension about a permanent place of residence and artistic philosophy. Half the group left for Israel, where they established what was to become the Israeli National Theatre. The other half stayed in the United States, including Nachum and Benjamin Zemach. Benjamin found in New York an active dance community, and it was there that he began to develop his choreographic interests.

One of the first performances Benjamin gave in New York was an evening shared with Jacob Ben-Ami and Michio Ito on September 25, 1928 at the Yiddish Folks Theatre. During this time Benjamin also became active in the group that worked and performed at the Neighborhood Playhouse. It was there that he performed with Martha Graham, Charles Weidman, Doris Humphrey, and Michio Ito and created several solo concert pieces. One of the dances Zemach still remembers is the one choreographed by Michio Ito to music by Claude Debussy, *Fête et Nuages*. As he wrote about it in 1983, he recalled, "I was a dark cloud who stole Martha Graham from Michio Ito." Other concert pieces created during this time included *The Beggars Dance, Roumanian Rhapsody* (music by Enesco), and *Tocatta and Fugue* (music by Bach).

New York was Benjamin's home base from 1928 to early 1932. During those years he conducted teaching and performing tours of Palestine, the West Coast and several eastern American cities. His performances in New York marked him as a figure to be watched and heralded. Elizabeth Selden, the critic, wrote of his impact in the *The Dancers Quest* (1935).

> Benjamin Zemach goes even further back than does Doris Humphrey toward that ancient oneness in which the dance embraced all media of expression, serving as a repository for the epic memories of the race and as its confession of faith. He represents in America a unique type of ritual dancing, not only because it has the unmistakble ring of true adaption of some cult foreign to the dancer, but also because it represents a synthesis of all the "isms" that we have carefully been taught to separate into the desirable and the undesirable. Benjamin Zemach seems blissfully unaware of this distinction and emerges in the end with a composition fascinating for its exoticism, yet essentially right in every way. The transplanting from his native Moscow seems not to have impaired his creative talent: Somehow America is a curcible in which all metals mingle and melt, undergo chemicalizations that leave the right ones none the worse for their purging as well for use in new combinations.[6]

Two works were created by Benjamin Zemach during the period 1928 through 1932 that became signature pieces, *Ruth* and *Farewell to Queen Sabbath*. Characterized by lyric flow, sequential movement, dramatic conflict and resolution, Zemach's choreography in these two pieces and later as well, was a personal synthesis of his work in Eurythmics, ballet and modern dance. He emphasized inner characterization, emotional gesture and dramatic rhythm all of which were part of his theatrical training in Russia.

The program note for *Ruth* had this quotation from the Bible: "And they went back from the land of the Moabites to Judea; and Naomi said to them, 'Do not come with me, my daughters, for God has embittered my life'; and Orpah kissed her and went away while Ruth remained bound to her." Although the dance was based on Judaic heritage, Zemach was concerned with making a universal statement. The dance was not a realistic telling of the story. It was an abstraction, with the emotional relationships and motivation the three women as the predominant characteristic. The dance had something to say about women that would speak to everyone.

Zemach abstracted the essential inner quality of the three relationships and the strength that carries women through their various roles and accompanying hardships. Selden remarked that in *Ruth*:

> There are no poses; one is conscious only of beauty lifted into space and vanishing again as new movement emerges." It is what Paul Valery calls 'l'acte pur des metamorphoses' — the essence of the dance... The extraordinary inner and outer dynamics of this unaggressive composition depends in the last analysis on its remarkable tempo. The entire... process is conducted at a pace which lifts it out of the realm of ordinary experience into that of pure vision.[7]

Farewell to Queen Sabbath, also created during Zemach's early years in New York, was based on the Jewish ritual of welcoming the Sabbath as a queen. On Friday night she comes, bringing peace, harmony and rest, and after sunset on Saturday there is a ceremony (*havdalah*) in which Queen Sabbath is bid farewell. Zemach took this age old ritual and transformed it into an ecstatic experience wherein the individual and the group are in touch with each other and with the universal forces of change and recurrence. The dance was accompanied by a mixture of traditional chants and Chassidic songs. It was not necessary for the audience to comprehend the words of to know the specific religious

source. The choreography succeeded in creating a mood that moved the audience from a physical to a spiritual plane. Each person could identify with their own particular ritual at special times, in which emotions transform daily lives.

The choreography for *Farewell to Queen Sabbath* consisted of a soloist and a group functioning as a chorus. Zemach, as the soloist, faced the chorus who were meant to represent the congregation. Dressed in the traditional long black kaftans of the orthodox Jews, the group began a slow rhythmic motion from side to side. This swaying gradually increased in tempo and intesity and then began to slow down, until the stage was as quiet at the end as it was when the curtain opened. In this rhythmic rendering of joy and sorrow Zemach captured the growing anticipation and joy at the coming of the Sabbath: the promised release from the mundane activities of the week and the joining with higher forces of the Sabbath, followed by the sadness but inevitability and acceptance of Queen's Sabbath's departure. Selden felt this dance was characterized by "immediacy of abandon and strength of inner concentration."

On May 23, 1932 at the Pasadena Community Playhouse, Benjamin Zemach gave his first concert in the Los Angeles area. He was to stay in Los Angeles until invited in 1936 back to New York by the director Max Reinhardt, where he was to stage a Broadway play. These four years in Los Angeles were filled with activity and growth for Benjamin. He was able to develop a concert group and taught extensively. During this time he directed *The Golem* and other plays for the Pasadena Playhouse, created a short movie as well as the dances for *She* (1935) and *Days of Pompei* (1935). Along with his own work, he was influential in the development of several young artists. Many dancers studied and performed with Zemach in Los Angeles, among them: Arnold Tamon, Robert Bell, Waldeen Falkenstein, Ella Serruier, Teru Izumida, Karoun Toutikian, Ruth Sharp, Lisa and Miriam Levitsky, Margaret Mayo, Charles Ewing, Thelma Babitz, Adela Cutler and Frieda Ginsburg Maddow.

Babitz, Cutler and Maddow went with Zemach to New York in 1936 and in 1937 became members of the Graham Company. Maddow, (in 1986), spoke of the lifelong impact Zemach had on her, as an artist and dancer:

> Benjamin made you participate in the creative process, he made you feel you had something in you, that you had ideas. It was fascinating. He opened up a whole workd of expression and possibilities to me. He gave meaning to dance. It was not just technique. Each class was based on a theme, and you learned to improvise and look into yourself. Performance was also a shared creative experience. Benjamin made sure that dance for us was not superficial, but a deeper, inner process.[8]

Zemach's first Los Angeles program in May 1932 was long and varied, with fourteen pieces listed: *Jacob's Dream, The Worker on the Soil, Tocatta in D Minor, The Menorah, Three Palestinian Folk Songs, Beggar, The Cheder, The Study of the Talmud, Excentric, Destiny, Ruth, A Chapter from Psalms, Farewell to Queen Sabbath.* Fourteen dancers and Benjamin performed, accompanied by pianist Verna Arvey and singer Arcady Kaufman.

The next involvement for Zemach was the week long Olympic Dance Festival. Zemach began to attract notice, and soon he and his group were touring and performing in Los Angeles, Carmel, San Francisco and in Seattle.

Recognition by community leaders took the form of an invitation to create a ballet for the prestigious Hollywood Bowl. On August 5, 1933 Zemach's *Fragments of Israel* was presented at the bowl with forty-nine performers and a chorus of 23 men. The orchestra was conducted by Bakaleinkoff and costumes were designed by Willis Knighton. This commission signified major opportunity to use a live orchesstra, a substantial vocal chorus and a large group of dancers.

Fragments of Israel was in two sections; section I was a re-shaping of *Farewell to Queen Sabbath;* Section II was a new work — *Ora*. In this ballet, Zemach was developing all his ideas on a larger scale. The two sections allowed him to make a broader statement about the need for recognition of the Jewish people – – the rich heritage and the right and necessity to survive. The dance was intended to convey a universal plea for all people to maintain their identity and right against oppression. Zemach was continuing in the vein of ecstatic, symbolic dance, and was also making a social statement about the right for all to live and fight against oppression. By creating the second section, Zemach celebrated not only the contribution of the Jews to the religious and cultural heritage of Western civilization, but also the rebirth of the Jewish people as a nation. He created a dance about the right of the Jews to worship in their own way, and also the right to rebuild a nation in Palestine. He celebrated the beauty of worship and of work, and used authentic folk material for inspiration in creating a contemporary statement in expressive movement.

Isabel Morse Jones, the music critic, was impressed with the work. She noted that Zemach was "as worthy a representative of the Jewish race as Ernest Bloch and his music."

> His "Fragments of Israel" at the Bowl, was a profound and

ballet, original, deeply impressive" and said that it had "the touch of genius." She felt that Zemach had produced "a history making ballet."

> The crowd was enormous, one of the largest, if not actually the largest of the season, and the onlookers could not be restrained from breaking into the performance with spontaneous clapping and cheers. Feeling ran high and the tension was ominous. Impersonalizing war and nationalistic folly, as Zemach did, was a master stroke. The banners were just brilliantly colored symbols, not any country's flag. Even the hordes of doughboys marching by in colossal shadows finally merged into gray motion pictures thrown on the great proscenium.... No one would fail to "pray for worlds to mend" after this spectacle. The dancers were as clever as a lot of Kreutzberg or Wigman dancers would have been. This was modern ballet with the German technique and an American bride-of-war idea dominating it. The effect was overpowering. It cast a spell over the Bowl. The ghosts of dead soldiers will haunt it for a long time.

Zemach's statement in *The Victory Ball* had originally castigated not only the destruction of war, but those who wanted war to continue because of the profits they could earn from the activities of war. In the version Zemach rehearsed on the Hollywood Bowl stage he had a scene in which he correlated the enrichment of the stockbrokers with the destruction of war. With each act of destruction there was a corresponding act of profit, exemplified on the stage by the addition of higher numbers to the riches of the stockbrokers. While the management of the Bowl was agreeable to Zemach's anti-war ballet, they were not pleased with the portrayal of the rich getting richer on the spoils of war. Zemach was told to eliminate this scene in his ballet and he had to comply. According to Zemach, "There was quite a hullabaloo about the stockbroker scene... a stormy session with Mrs. Irish."[11]

In spite of the fact that he had to eliminate the section showing profiteering from destruction, the ballet was strong enough to get its message across. Viola Swisher's review in the *Hollywood Citizen News* of August 2 carried the headline, "Zemach's Tragic 'Victory Ball!' Ballet Thrills Vast Bowl Throng: Horror of War Told in Dance."

The ballet moved continuously from one scene to the next. According to Amielle Zemach,

> his work always had a sense of connection, of one thing moving to the next. He never created independent vignettes. There was always a wholeness in his work, with one thing leading organically to the next.[12]

In *The Victory Ball* the main action began on the battlefield and then moved to the ballroom, where the soldiers watched from the side. As the ballroom scene faded, with isolated couples repeating the strains of the dances, the battle took center stage again, while a group of mothers stage left grieved. During this section, the stock market scene was to have taken place stage right.

Amielle Zemach noted that her father's work always went "from darkness to light," with a focus on the plight of the "common man." Although Zemach was making a bitter anti-war statement, he also wanted to say there could be a transition from despair to hope, and that there was always the existence of light alongside the actions that constituted the dark side of humanity. Alma Cowdy, in her August 2 review of the ballet in the *Los Angeles Herald Express,* brought out this aspect of the dance.

> The Bowl was thrown into darkness as the Alfred Noyes poem was begun by the speech chorus trained by Bertha Fisk. This eerie chant, with solo spoken by Irving Pichel, was beautifully done. Conductor Schelling's idea of the slow awakening of the city on the day of the armistice was effected by a small spot of blue green light enlarged gradually to bring the relief of the brilliantly costumed generals, diplomats, dowagers and debutantes who with mawkish gestures moved down upon the stage and swung into polonaise, foxtrot and exaggerated tango. The most effective of Zemach's drama in movement came in the middle part of the work when the scenario called for sheer terror before the oncoming hordes... A final section to a distorted waltz rhythm was dances hesitantly by a couple here and there and grew to proportions of a bacchanale before they were confronted by the return of the mocking dead and the march of the troops. Simultaneously with the rising and accusing figures of sorrow, the black cross of death disappeared and in its place rose the three white crosses of hope, back center, accompanied in the music by the introduction of the courage raising bagpipes.

The descriptions and pictures of *The Victory Ball* call to mind Kurt Jooss' *Green Table.* Both Zemach and Jooss were creating in a period when artists in dance, music, painting and literature were concerned with the plight of the individual in face of war, hunger, suffereing and inequality. For Zemach as well as for others, to find an artistic vocabulaary that would make a statement about man and his political, social and economic environment was a necessity.

The choreographer is faced with many problems in dealing with social content, as is any artist. It is easy for political and social art to be less art and more polemic. In dance, the social content must be abstrated in to movement that is universally meaningful without being lateral and pedantic.

beautiful ritual, with choral chants of ancient Hebrew origin, and orchestral interludes conducted by Bakaleinkoff from manuscript. Jacob Weinstock directed the folk song. The scenes were of Bible times, the very sources of culture -- humanly fundamental and powerful. It was great dance drama for the Bowl, and the young dancers felt privileged to work under Zemach in two numbers, "Farewell to Queen Sabbath" with its Chassidic rites from meditation to ecstacy, and "Ora" a vigorous Palestinian theme in which the old pioneers sing, "God will rebuild Palestine!" and the young ones shout, "The peasants will rebuild Palestine."[9]

The Hollywood Bowl had never until then presented ballets based on Jewish content or Jewish folk material, and the press did not ignore the opportunity to highlight this unusual offering. There were pictures and articles in several newspapers, and both the message and the form of the dance occasioned considerable comment. The *Hollywood Citizen News* on August 4 featured a large picture of the ballet with the heading "Zemach Ballet Distinctive... Unusual Bowl Offering... Hebrew Folk Dance Basis."

The picture shows the performers grouped not as a single unit, but arranged in a dramatic scuptural interplay of mass and shape. Except for a unison group of women stage right, every dancer is arranged in a different shape: sitting, lying, standing and leaning. Each individual dancer contributes a particular shape to the total vision of three major sculptural groupings. Six dancers closest to the back of the stage hold large columns -- symbols of the tablets of the ten commandements. The three tablets on stage right and the three tablets on stage left are held so that they lean towards the center of the stage. This gives the feeling that the tablets meet in the center and form a triangle whose apex reaches towards God and the heavens. The three multi-shaped groupings of dancers also create a sense of focus towards the apex of a triangle.

The *Los Angeles Times* published a picture in its July 30 edition with the comment: "This production is based on Jewish folk dances, and in the words of the producer, is 'serious but not heavy.' " This picture shows a trio, in which once again the sense of sculptural shape and mass are emphasized. Each of the three dancers is in a different position. It creates a sense of a three-leveled unit, all leaning and yearning towards a central focus. There is a strong feeling of the weight of the bodies, as well as a fluidity created by the leaning torsos and the interconnected, molded use of shaped arms.

Benjamins Zemach's comments on *Fragments of Israel* were quoted in the program notes for the performance.

The Jewish race has been crowded out of its natural surroundings. The Jews are naturally a people of the soil, of the vineyards. They have been crowded together in large cities. Today their movements are nervous and unbalanced; sharp jerks in syncopated rhythms. Looking for a typical Jewish style not only in the past, but going back to the very source of our life and culture -- to the Bible and Biblical times... we find there not only scenes which are humanly fundamental and powerful, but a style richer and older than those we know already. This style is, and always will be, ancient and modern at the same time. Just as the modern dance goes back to the primitive for its fundamentals -- so does this movement, "back to the soil" started so strongly with the Jewish race all over the world, go back to the Bible.

Zemach's dancers represented common people -- all of humanity. In particular, these people are Jews, with their own traditions and their own songs and movements. In universal terms, these Jews represent all of us who celebrate some relationship with a higher being to give meaning to our lives and whose week is composed not only of the need to work but also the need to seek spiritual reinforcement, solace and exaltation. The traditions of religion come not only from the rules and rituals of formal worship, but also from within the moods and traditions of all the people.

In the second sequence of *Fragments of Israel,* "Ora" (a Hebrew word for light), a strong statement was made about the dreams of the Jewish people for the rebirth of their heritage in Palestine. Zemach was not unaware of the conflict in the rebuilding of Palestine -- the conflict between those who would wait for a Messiah and those who would take tractor and plow to reclaim the land in an active attempt to shape their own destinies. Without negating the necessity for spiritual guidance portrayed in the first sequence, the second proclaimed the need for a life of action to make dreams come true.

In 1935 Benjamin Zemach had his second major commission for the Hollywood Bowl, creating *The Victory Ball* (music Ernest Schelling). This ballet, presented August 1, marked a major development in his choreography, for it was a work that made a solid statement on a broad scale. It was an impressive, compelling, mature work with complex movements for soloist and group. The critics were unanimous in their praise, and because of this dance Max Reinhardt invited Zemach as choreographer for the New York premiere of *The Eternal Road.*

The Alfred Noyes poem, "The Victory Ball," was the inspiration for Zemach's ballet. It was printed in its entirety in the program as follows:

The cymbals crash,
And the dancers walk,
With long silk stockings
And arms of chalk,
Butterfly skirts,
And white breasts bare,
And shadows of dead men
Watching them there.

Shadows of dead men
Stand by the wall,
Watching the fun
Of the Victory Ball.
They do not reproach,
Because they know,
If they're forgotten,
It's better so.

Fat wet bodies
Go waddling by
Girdled with satin,
Though God knows why;
Gripped by satyrs
In white and black,
With a fat white hand
On a fat wet back.

"What did you think
We should find?" said a shade
"When the last shot echoed
And peace was made?"

"Christ," laughed the fleshness
Jaws of his friend,
"I thought they'd be praying
For worlds to mend.

"Making earth better,
Or something silly
Like white-washing Hell
or Pecca-dam-dilly.
They've a sense of humor,
Those women of ours,
These exquisite lilies,
These fresh young flowers!"

"Pish," said a statesman
Standing near,
"I'm glad they can busy
Their thoughts elsewhere!
We mustn't reproach 'em,
They're young, you see."
"Ah," said the dead men,
"So were we!"

"Victory! Victory!
On with the dance!
Back to the jungle,
The new beast's prance!
God how the dead men
Grin by the wall,
Watching the fun
Of the Victory Ball.

The *Hollywood Citizen News,* August 1, carried the headline: "Victory Ball Symphony Due at Bowl Written as Protest on Indifference to War Cost."

> Ernest Schelling's symphonic work "A Victory Ball"... with Benjamin Zemach presenting his ballet to this great work, was composed as a "tonal protest to those who seemed so indifferent and forgetful of the sacrifice of the war, and who were celebrating with victory balls all over the world" the composer said today... It was composed as a "symphonic tableaux" by Mr. Schelling after his return from the World War as "a tribute to those who gave their all" so that "we might live in peace and happiness" he declared.

The cast of characters for *The Victory Ball* was listed on the program as follows: Generals, Diplomats, Profiteers, Dowagers, Debutantes, Soldiers, Mothers, Crosses, and Death. The ballet opened with Irving Pichel reading the poem by Albert Noyes. Blandings Sloan created a projection painted on glass that filled the arch of the Hollywood Bowl with crosses. Viola Swisher described the ballet in her August 2 review for the *Hollywood Citizen News*:

> While the dancers whirled about in a gayly colored ballroom scene silent shadows of war played an obligato across the Bowl shell. Fields fertile with dead men and marked by crosses, soldiers going over the top to infinity –– these were silhouetted in the background while sub-debs and statesmen, smartly tailed officers and sleakly gowned women danced and flirted at the Victory Ball. Then came a war scene, leaving some of the dead and bereaved to make a chilling lacy pattern along the front of the stage when the lights flashed again upon the ballroom scene. Thus the Zemach ballet went its way to a crashing climax that left spectators thrilled and silent for a moment before breaking into rounds of applause.

Two rehearsal pictures of *The Victory Ball* taken at the Hollywood Bowl are helpfull in understanding the way Zemach used movement to develop his anti-war theme. One picture shows a group of six women. Each of the women is expressing an intense sense of anguish and despair, but each in her own way. The bodies are twisted at the torso and knees, and feet press deep into the ground. There is a great deal of tension in their bodies and faces. One standing woman has her arms in front of her, crossed at the wrists with the fists clenched. Her shoulders are pressed forward and raised and her chest has the feeling of being almost concave with despair. Another woman is standing but with knees more deeply bent. Her torso is twisted stage left and slightly rotated to the back. Her palms are facing each other and cradling her head, as if to protect it from injury. Her elbows are angular and she is in a deep plié, with weight unevenly distributed, leaning more into her right knee. All six bodies are angular, and the overall impression is of six women in pain.

Zemach was interested in using the body to express the deep inner anguish of the soul in this ballet. He was never interested in pretty movement, nor in virtuosity, and each dance required its own expressive vocabulary. He was interested in movement that had meaning, the torso, pelvis and arms taking the brunt of the expressive message. Amielle Zemach once asked her father about being trained so that she could lift her legs in handsome and elegant arabesques and extensions. Zemach replied, "Why would you want to lift your leg. It is only pretty.[10]

Form and content came together in *The Victory Ball.* Zemach was not interested in interpreting the words of the Noyes poem literally. He used them as a jumping-off point and developed visual and sculptural sequences of movement that would abstract and probe the qualities of brutality, despair and disaster that come with war. The critics were unanimous in their praise of Zemach. Isabel Morse Jones, in the *Los Angeles Times* (August 2.) called the work "real

Kurt Jooss' *Green Table* remains a masterful anti-war statement to this day. From all the available accounts and documentation, Benjamin Zemach was a choreographer who also created a powerful anti-war ballet, and whose other work was equally successful in its ability to make artistically meaningful and socially relevant statements.

Zemach brought to Los Angeles new directions in both form and content. The use of words — of spoken and vocal accompaniment — derived from his theatre background and provided new elements for many dance audiences. The movements for each dance grew organically from the content. His dances were characterized by expressive use of torso, head and arms, with a sense of weight in the whole body and flexion in the knees and ankles. Within this he could create a lyric, sequential flow of movement, or an angular sculptured pattern.

The concern with the darker side of human experience and the conflict between light and dark may well have been encouraged by the work with Vakhtangov, Stanislavsky and Meyerhold. In 1980 he spoke of dance as always having been for him an art that would reach "to a consciousness of the world and the human connection and come close to the core of life." It was not a dim view of the world, but one where contrasts existed, and spiritual regeneration could be achieved through understanding. Art was a way of attaining resolution of the human spirit, of resolving the dichotomy of darkness and light.

Zemach was beginning to achieve a strong identity as an independent artist when he came to Los Angeles. In this city, he grew and developed and left a strong mark on audiences and students. In 1936, as he was beginning to solidify his reputation and his work in Los Angeles, he accepted Max Reinhardt's invitation to stage dances for *The Eternal Road.* During the next decade in New York, where he stayed until 1947, he continued to teach and choreograph, but did not develop a permanent company.* Los Angeles beckoned again in 1947, and Zemach was active in theatre and dance in the city until 1971 when he finally settled in Israel.

Zemach's career needs to be fully documented and then his influence and artistry can be more completely assessed. In later years he trained Allan Arkin, Adeline Gibbs, Hershel Bernardi, Lee J. Cobb, Sam Jaffe, and Corey Allan among others. He continued to choreograph and direct plays and attracted large crowds to his productions.

Was Zemach one of the crucial figures in shaping American modern dance in the late 1920s and 1930s? Has he been neglected because his work was stronger during the 1930s than it was later? Has he been neglected because he left New York at a crucial time twice? Has he been neglected because we are just beginning to evaluate some of the individuals who were not recognized as super-stars? How important was the sense of social concern, of the conflict of light and dark, in the totality of modern dance in the 1930s? Did this concern help shape the search for new structure and vocalbulary that was so important in the maturing of American dance, and was Zemach influential in this growth? The answers to these questions are yes.

The value of analyzing Zemach's work in Los Angeles is that it provides an intensive look at what he did, and provides an evaluative base. Zemach was noticed as an important artist from 1928 through 1932 in New York. He grew in maturity and developed while in Los Angeles from 1932 through 1936. During this period he was an artist who had something to say and had found an original way to say it. He was a teacher who understood movement and theatre, and knew how to initiate and share the creative process with students. He was important in shaping dance in Los Angeles in the 1930's, and he shaped the careers and artistic development of many who later went elsewhere and continued on their own. This is a first step in the assessment of Benjamin Zemach's place in the development of American dance, and will provide the groundwork for a fuller evaluation. ■

The article is a chapter from a book soon to be published in the U.S.A.

*During this period Zemach paricipated in many socially and politically concerned dance events in New York. (Editor's note).

1. Oscar G. Brockett and Robert R. Findlay, *Century of Inovation, A History of European and American Theatre Since 1870* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1973), p. 263.
2. Ibid., pp. 258, 259.
3. Interview with Benjamin Zemach, August 1980, Berkeley, California at the home of his daughter Margo Zemach.
4. Ibid.
5. Correspondence with Benjamin Zemach, 1983.