

FROM BEING CINDERELLA TO “CINDERELLA” — 20 YEAR OF CLASSICAL BALLET IN ISRAEL

by Yossi Tavor

Classical ballet used to be the Cinderella of dance in Israel. Explanations for such a situation abound. Perhaps the reason is to be found in our perennial endeavour to be revolutionaries at the helm of avantgardism, among the pioneers and discoverers. Such used to be the situation among political movements; Jews always joined those who demanded change. The same applies to the arts. We welcome any newfangled idea, and in order not to be accused of too much conservatism, we are carried away by enthusiasm and leave the classics behind.

Jews always abounded in choreographic talent. One of the symbols of classical ballet today, Mia Plisetzka, also is of Jewish extraction. And those who arrived at the shores of the Holy Land? From Baruch Agadati, through Rina Nikova, Mia Arbatova, Valentina Archipova to Alexander Lifshitz and Galina and Valery Panov, each arrived with a list of international successes on the ballet stage behind them.

One notices an interesting phenomenon: some of these, as soon as they set foot in their new homeland, looked for ways to become integrated in the mediterranean landscape. Some, just like their colleagues the painters, musicians and other artists, were so to say blinded by the Israeli sun and began seeking refuge in the ethnic, Yemenite or Israeli folklore, forsaking classical ballet. Those who did not, left the country. Those who stayed, stopped dancing.

One can understand them. While for a fledgling modern dance company a modest room, a linoleum floor and lots of enthusiasm are sufficient, a ballet company, right from the start, requires many technical facilities: a large stage, sprung wooden floors, costumes, a trained stage crew. Therefore it is not surprising, that even those ballet artists whose Zionist ardour urged them to settle in the country, were soon frustrated by the circumstances. After all, can soloists, even not of prima ballerina status, perform without a company, dancing only solos or pas de deux?

But exactly thus it all began. Two Israelis, about 20 years

ago, stood together at the cradle of the “Classical Ballet Company” (which later changed its name to “The Israel Ballet”), the sole ballet company in Israel today.

Hillel Markman began his training with Archipova in Haifa, later studied with Mia Arbatova in Tel Aviv and from there went on to the “Ballet Rambert” in London.

In London he met Berta Yampolsky, who was born in Russia and came as an infant to Israel with her parents. She too was a former student of Archipova and later went on to study at the “Royal Ballet School” in London. They both became dancers in the “Ballet de Monte Carlo.” After spending a few years in the company, they both decided to return to Israel and start a ballet school of their own. That happened in 1965, and two years later they founded the “Classical Ballet Company”, the forerunner of the “Israel Ballet” of today.

At first the company consisted of 4 of their most gifted students, all women, and of course themselves, as soloists. The obvious choice of repertoire was: a pas de deux from “Don Quichote”; another from “Romeo and Juliet” by Serge Lifar and the famous “Pas de Quatre” from the year 1845, as well as several works which Janine Charrat created for the Israeli company.

The “Batsheva” and “Bat-Dor” companies were right from the start financed by the ‘Israeli Diaghilev’, Batsheva de Rothschild; the “Kibbutz Dance Company” was backed by the kibbutz movement and “Inbal”, after many years of struggling, had already some backing. The America-Israel Culture Foundation provided the ballet company with some financial help, but it was just one of the many projects it helped to finance.

With its modest repertoire the company performed for schools and kibbutzim. In spite of the many existing ballet-studios, the awareness of classical dancing was minimal. The new company tried to offer their alumni an outlet.

In the early '70s, several ballet artists immigrated to Israel and Berta and Hillel took some of them under their wings. The number of dancers grew to 12 and more ambitious works could be attempted. Berta also began choreographing her own works. Hillel on the other hand turned his attention more towards the administration of the company. In 1973 the Panovs arrived in the country and the company had an opportunity to dance with international stars, an opportunity which did not materialise. But it was to return later.

The real turning point came with the visit of Patricia Neary. In 1975 the assistant of George Balanchine came to observe the Israeli ballet company. The result was, that the 8 years old company was granted permission to learn Balanchine's "Serenade" and a pas de deux from "Agon", two of Balanchine's masterpieces.

Says Berta: "We had a great company. I can hardly believe we are to have such marvellous dancers again. I have a video-recording, in which Balanchine states, that from all the foreign companies doing his 'Serenade' ours is the best rendition."

And a London ballet critic wrote, he wished "the 'Royal Ballet' would dance it as well as the Israeli company."

That year the company danced with great success in the Israel Festival.

Next year Joseph Lazzini arrived to mount his version of "The Miraculous Mandarin" on the company, Berta prepared the grand pas de deux from "Paquita" and Heinz Spörli from Switzerland came to stage his "Opus 35" by Shostakovich.

In 1977 the company toured the U.S.A., to mark its 10th birthday. The company was again invited to America in 1981. It was then they met Balanchine, who usually never went to watch his works danced by foreign companies, but came to see the Israelis. "He was impressed, and at a reception after the show he said, we could have any of his works without paying royalties."

Since then the company danced his 'Concerto Barocco' and some smaller works. "I do not like his New York City Ballet" — says Berta, — "their style is vulgar, but I think Balanchine is non plus ultra. Perhaps one shouldn't have more than one or two of his works in one program, that is enough."

After performing in the U.S.A. in 1981 the company also

toured South America, dancing in Puerto Rico, Venezuela and Chile, where Berta received the annual dance-critics' award for her "Dvorák Variations".

The critics abroad admired the "Israel Ballet", and found it young and brimming with creativity. At home they were criticised severely — as Berta again and again complains during the interview. She thinks the Israeli critics do not wish them well, and are not prepared to take their difficulties into consideration. I can appreciate her sentiments. In the early '70s I came to the company's small and meagerly equipped studio in Tel Aviv in order to tell the listeners of the Israeli Radio in the Russian language about the company. I spoke to Berta behind a sort of plywood partition — her "office" at the studio. And I remembered the many spacious, well equipped facilities of even amateur companies in Russia... In such dire circumstances the "Israel Ballet" has to work!

Berta tends to accuse the press of being in favour of innovations and newfangled ideas, and against the established classics.

In fact the Israeli public began taking the company in earnest after several well-known guests from abroad danced with it. In 1981 Eva Evdokimova and Alexander Godunoff were soloists and the company served as a corps de ballet, and I remember the audience applauding madly. An attempt to repeat that success with the help of Vladimir Gelvan and Leslie Brown failed to produce the same results, but that was not the company's fault. It turned out that the ballerina, Barishnikov's protegee, was pregnant and not at her best. The corps, on the other hand, performed brilliantly.

Parallel to its activity at home the company continued to tour abroad. In 1984 it danced again in the U.S.A. and Canada and took part in the prestigious festival at Reggio Emilia in Italy.

Dora Sowden, the dance critic of the "Jerusalem Post", expressed her admiration of the company's neatness of execution and the artistic accomplishment of Berta Yampolsky's choreography. (Four out of 7 ballets performed on that tour were her's.) One of the dances, to Mahler's Fifth Symphony, was dedicated to the Swedish diplomat Raoul Wallenberg, who saved the lives of thousands of Hungarian Jews during the holocaust, but using his name was deemed a gimmick by the press.

Most of the company's repertoire nowadays consists of works by Yampolsky. She says: "My work does not cost

us money, so I go on trying, sometimes succeeding and sometimes less. But we are on a constant search for other choreographers. We are going to acquire two more works by Balanchine, 'Four Temperaments' and 'Agon', for which we waited a long time. If we have to pay for the rights of a work, it better be very good indeed. We are not a workshop or an experimental stage."

In spite of the partial success with guest stars, the company avoids inviting more foreign dancers. "It is easy to ask someone to come as a guest, but it is detrimental to our dancers, as they lack challenges and all the glory goes to the visitors. When Godunoff was here, someone from Israel Television interviewed him and asked, how such a famous dancer agreed to perform with a company like the 'Israel Ballet'. That I shall never forget. They all denigrated us, not deeming us worthy of dancing with such a great star. That was very painful." — she says.

Dance critic Giora Manor wrote: "When the company is provided with a financial and administrative basis, it is able to stage very nice classical ballets. Therefore it is quite possible, that in the future we are about to see some of the great ballets in full production, and on an adequate standard. There is a large audience for classical ballet and just as one isn't astonished at the performing of established old works by orchestras, one shouldn't go on asking the same old question: what are we to nymphs and princes, and they to us in classical ballet."

Indeed his forecast materialised soon enough. The first full, evening long ballet was "The Nutcracker", with choreography by Yampolsky. It was a great success.

Then came "Cinderella", also staged by Yampolsky. It was the continuation of the same line of thought. The mime scenes were an important component of the production. There were only few solo dances, the decor was simple, but effective, and many children, students of the company's school took part. The public flocked to the performances.

"In general, the public loves us," — says Berta — "We also had a subscription series, but had to discontinue it, as we do not have the necessary administration for such a venture. But our public is faithful and comes to every show, including many children."

Berta adapted the large classical works to the size of the company and its level. Perhaps the general public did not notice this, but the experts did. The lack of first class soloists made Berta look for alternatives. "I know exactly

what my dancers are capable of and I let them do only what they do well."

Wouldn't giving them something challenging expand their scope?

"Of course, when I have a dancer of talent, I give him more difficult things to do."

But what was sufficient for "Cinderella" and "The Nutcracker" was not enough for "Sleeping Beauty", the company's latest production. That is a most ambitious, well known ballet. It was performed with live music, played by the Israel Philharmonic, for their subscribers. The music had to be given in its entirety and the choreographer (Yampolsky again) had to fill the stage with movement. The orchestra, unaccustomed to playing for ballet, did not contribute much to the performance. The result was a rather longish show, with few solo dances and somewhat boring. A few brilliant solos and duets would have enhanced it no end.

For myself, the best production up till now was "Cinderella", and Berta states it will be given again and there are plans to tour it abroad.

From being a small Cinderella of a company to a full production of "Cinderella" in twenty years! Perhaps 20 years of steady growth is something unusual in our country, where every one expects swift development and quick results. The high standards we demand of our artistic bodies are not always fair, when one considers the meager means at their disposal. We demand international standards, while governmental support is negligible, compared to what is customary in the West.

I often hear people talking about the 'rentability' of artistic ventures. Coming from the Soviet Union, I am well aware of how much the state invests in ballet companies, often without results. The comparison is rather painful.

Of course we would like to see our ballet on the same level we are accustomed to abroad. Perhaps one should point out, that foreign companies performing in Israel often are far from perfect, and surely they enjoy much more support than our companies.

It is easy to understand Berta and Hillel, who invest so much, in terms of time and enthusiasm, in their company, in their longing for recognition and encouragement. After 20 years, there still is the dream.

“What are my ideals?” — says Berta — “The best! I am a perfectionist. To work with good dancers. I am not referring to physical conditions. I am willing to compromise on that, but I want a high standard. I work hard with my dancers and want a very good company.”

In spite of all the hardship, she will go on working and creating. “The truth is, when we began 20 years ago, we were unaware of all the problems we would encounter. We didn’t think Hillel and myself are never to be able to have a vacation. That the quest for choreographers and financial support would be endless. I am a realist, and I thought we would achieve more. I believe we are a good, constant company and some nights we give excellent performances, and the public loves us. That is what gives me strength to continue. I hope, finally we shall have a home, as we were promised many times.” ■

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