

JERUSALEM'S DANCE COMPANIES

by Pamela Kidron

Jerusalem has always been a very special city, and its dance companies are no exception. Like Jerusalem's three-religion population, and its network of self-contained neighborhoods each with its own character, the capital's five dance companies form a crazy-quilt of separate artistic concepts.

This is much in keeping with a mosaic patterning typical of the Middle East as described by anthropologists. In this mosaic patterning a multitude of groups may live in close physical proximity yet remain culturally or ideologically distinct. Jerusalem's dance companies operate within a small city, yet remain artistically distinct.

Jerusalem is 3,000 years old, but the five professional modern dance companies in today's capital are part of a very recent development.

Renowned as a holy city, with 30% of its Jewish population religious, and buffeted by social problems arising from the 69% concentration of immigrants, Jerusalem hardly had time or funds for the arts in the 1950s and 1960s. Until 1967 Jerusalem was a provincial area in Israel. Nearly all arts and culture were centered in Tel Aviv.

After the re-unification of Jerusalem, the municipality seized the opportunity to develop Jerusalem not only as a holy city, but as a centre for the arts. With much of the city's budget going for social problems, a private funding foundation was created. The Jerusalem Foundation was formed to bring in much needed funds for culture. The chairman of the board of the Foundation in Jerusalem Mayor Teddy Kollek, and the Foundation works hand in hand with city arts groups. Today The Jerusalem Foundation is the financial backbone of all five dance companies.

These companies are diverse in their artistic concerns, but strikingly similar vis a vis features of their practical profile such as budget, facilities and development. The unifying features will be discussed at the end of the

article, while the bulk of the description will center on defining their artistic concepts, the one feature which most strikingly distinguishes each from the other. Each artistic concept will be described as much as possible from the perspective of the company itself.

The Tnuot Ensemble

"All the dancers in the Tnuot Ensemble know the Noa Eskhol dance notation," says the company's founder and director Amos Hetz. The 7-member Tnuot Ensemble pre-dates all the other companies. Hetz began the group in 1971 with students from the Rubin Academy of Music and Dance.

Unlike the other Jerusalem dance companies, the Tnuot Ensemble does not run a dance school. Hetz teaches full time at the Rubin Academy of Music and Dance and works with his company four mornings a week.

"I prepare a work from beginning to end and write it out in notation," explains Hetz. "I bring the scores to the studio and distribute them to the dancers. They learn the dance like musicians learn music from a score."

"But the composition does not end by learning the score. After learning the basic score Hetz's group works on the piece for a number of years (sometimes as many as eight) collectively as a group, using the score as a basis for exploring nuances of movement. "Merely reading the score mechanically doesn't create new challenges to the dancer," says Hetz. "By this I mean challenges to both his body and his mind."

"In every work I compose, I'm trying to deal with a different body problem or compositional problem, challenging these technical abilities and mental capacities. That challenge is why I'm doing it. I'm interested in expanding my body repertoire. I never work from purely aesthetic choices."

Hetz illustrated his approach with a dance exploring

turns. The company has been working on this piece for the last four years. The dance, he says, arises from terms or conditions which he places on himself.

"In this composition I tried to explore how many turns could be done, meaning how many times I could go around on one foot. I was trying to turn myself using the thigh as the closest limb to the pelvis."

"And so I started doing one turn with three steps. Two steps with one turn, one step with two turns, and so on. This came to a phrase where we were doing 12 turns, each one with three preceding steps."

"This same dance explored the attitude of the trunk while turning. There are subtle, minute changes -- sometimes so subtle that they are not visible. I put certain restrictions on the trunk to see how they influence the turns, like slight curves in the spine, changing the position of the head, and regulating breathing."

"I try to see how far I can go in these compositions as a base for finding what is common to all things kinesthetic. I'm not interested in personally expressing myself."

"We're kind of like a *yeshiva*," says Hetz. "We're studying. The group is committed to exploring the infinite possibilities of moving, and to finding the principles which are common to all things kinesthetic and thus discovering universal principles of movement. We believe that dance notation is instrumental in opening up these infinite possibilities of moving."

As indicated by the name of the group (*tnuot* in Hebrew means 'movements'), the main focus of the group is the exploration of movement, and not presentational dancing, although the group performs about four times a year and gives lecture demonstrations. The company works and performs without music or scenery in order to minimize distractions.

"Many people say it has a steady, slow movement quality," comments Hetz. "Some people identify it with a quality like Tai Chi, or see it in comparison with strange mechanical devices. Certainly the result in all the dances I'm creating is that we're very much aware of moving and not just hitting positions. But I feel in doing my dances that they do have different qualities with the body being more fluid, more elastic, and so on."

Need the audience be aware of the underlying

conceptual process when viewing the choreographies?

"If one is watching dance not as a visual phenomenon," answers Hetz, "but as something to identify with, where the movement comes through the eyes and goes to the marrow, then he might feel these things without himself going through a prepared analysis of what really happened."

"If someone is watching it, he'll see there's no drama, there is no story. He'll have to give up and look for something else, or instinctively experience kinesthetic feelings. My first goal remains, however, to educate myself and my dancers. My interest and aim is to do this exploring work. The performance is an outcome, a result of the work. We perform only if we are ready."

The Ensemble, Jerusalem

The Ensemble, Jerusalem is primed for performing, but also strays from the ordinary by working away from the "dancer look."

"It's hard for me now to see a performance that is in traditional leotards, with blank-faced dancers forming lines in spaces," says the company's longest-standing member Aya Rimon.

"Our works are very personal, more than mere ballet positions, be it a personal movement style or a heartfelt theme of the routine of the housewife. We are all women, so the choreographies all tend to have female characteristics and tell stories about women through dance."

The company, which has five members, is based in the East Talpiot Community Center where it also runs a dance school servicing the immediate neighborhood. Founded in 1977 as the Jerusalem Dance Workshop, the company underwent several changes of personnel, and shifts in artistic direction. In its first years of activity Flora Cushman was the central artistic personality. Today the company is run like a collective. There is no artistic director. Everyone has the same say, and everyone choreographs. Company members also do the non-dance work such as lighting, public relations and sets. Company members rotate in giving the company classes, and all the company members teach in the dance school.

"In my work 'La La La'," says Aya further to illustrate the company's approach, "I purposely work away from

the ballet look by using everyday, colorful sports clothes and tennis shoes. We dump water on ourselves during the work. It's my conception of life. I believe that by doing these things we are communicating more with the audience."

"For a lot of people dance is what they see on the proscenium stage. Dancers love it. Choreographers love it. But it's not for your neighbor. My dance is done with a lot of literal gestures, laughing, walking, coughing. In our performances we like to feel some closeness with the audience."

Aya admits that there is a fringe quality to The Ensemble, Jerusalem, a quality she feels also characterizes other dance companies in Jerusalem.

"We were the first company in Jerusalem. Many of the people who founded or danced with other Jerusalem companies were at one time with us. We were a jumping-off point for these people. They started here and then left to form their own companies or dance elsewhere."

Although several of The Ensemble's members have danced abroad or with bigger companies such as Batsheva, they are all adamant about staying in Jerusalem. "We have husbands and children to consider. The women that dance in our group are full human beings. They create and teach and have families."

The Jerusalem Dance Theatre

"I felt I was not expressing myself enough," says The Jerusalem Dance Theatre's artistic director and founder, Tamara Mielnik. Mielnik, the daughter of Holocaust survivors, immigrated from Belgium in 1971 and graduated from the Rubin Academy. She was one of the founding members of the Jerusalem Dance Workshop (later The Ensemble, Jerusalem) and danced with them for three years before branching out on her own.

"I realized I wanted to choreograph, and to choreograph around themes dealing with being Jewish and coming back home to Israel."

Mielnik first did two solo evenings on Yiddish themes before forming a company in 1984 with students from her dance school.

Mielnik clearly set the artistic direction of the company.

"The purpose of the company is to illustrate the life and spirit of Israel through modern dance. Our aim is to build a repertoire of works accompanied by Israeli music that explores various themes relevant to contemporary Israel, as well as Jewish roots and culture. The company concentrates on illuminating different aspects of contemporary life in Israel arising from a return to our roots rather than from folklore."

The company's repertoire clearly reflects its artistic aims. In 1984 the company performed "Three Thoughts from Rabbi Nachman of Breslav" (choreography by Mielnik) in the Israel Festival. In their April 1986 concert programme Richard Orbach set an impressionistic dance about the Tel Aviv beach; Dina Biton choreographed a dance on the prayer of an oriental woman, and Tarin Chaplin choreographed a dance around the ritual bath of Jewish women.

In the 1987/88 repertoire Mielnik did a work on the biblical figure of Sarah; Dina Biton a work on the theme of peace and work and Hedda Oren a work about Israeli children.

As opposed to the in-house choreography policy of The Ensemble, Jerusalem and the Tnuot Ensemble, The Jerusalem Dance Theatre commissions many of its works from guest choreographers.

At present the company has ten members. According to Mielnik, more and more of the dancers come not out of her dance school, but are attracted to the company for its artistic aims.

The Yaron Margolin Dance Company

"If you are eclectic, it doesn't give you anything," says Yaron Margolin in discussing his company. "You need a strong artistic direction."

The 4 member Yaron Margolin Dance Company is based on a dance school (run by Margolin) in a converted bomb shelter in the neighborhood of Malcha. The company was founded in 1980. Margolin had previously run his own studio first at the Gonenim Community Center and later at the Beit Hanoar Haivri.

He danced with the Jerusalem Dance Workshop for three years. But his personal concept of movement technique and choreography set him naturally on his own course.

"A story shouldn't push the choreography," he explains. "Associations and thoughts can't push it either. Dance has its own independent structure. The structure is built of movements which are basic to it and form the nucleus of the movement and then accompanying movements, which arise out of opposition to the movement nucleus, and subsidiary moves or extensions, supplementaries, echoes of the movement-nucleus."

"Using all three the choreography unwinds like a mosaic, with movements developing out of movements, emerging against movements, developing as subsidiaries to movements, and so on. My early dances came out with an on-going sense of oriental time, seemingly without direction."

Margolin's movement technique is based on several principles he sees as basic, namely that one has to use only the right, necessary amount of energy to accomplish a move, no more; that movement is connected to correct breathing, ("There are movements which breath-in and others which breathe-out."); that one should concentrate on the music and the character or role, rather than on 'private thoughts' and be aware of focusing points in the space one is dancing in, in order to stay within the concrete space; and that one should let the pulse of the movement carry one on.

"You don't stop the movement," comments Margolin, "so there aren't any 'positions' to hold. The movement is necessarily continuous because of the impulse and the breathing. The continuous movement quality and the small movements in the choreography are a result of the technique. Because of that, my choreography couldn't be any other way."

With this elaborate conceptual basis, the dancers have to undergo an intensive period of training in the technique before performing.

Margolin's company is, indeed, a devoted coterie of dancers who are committed to Margolin's aesthetic vision. He does all the choreography for his company, and he delights in that it has been called innovative. "Revolution," he says, is a good thing in dance."

Tamar Jerusalem Dance Group

"I don't want to be an artistic director, and I don't want to work under one," says Zvi Gotheiner of the recently

formed (September 1987) Jerusalem Tamar Dance Group. This sentiment is strongly echoed by all members of the company.

Tamar describes itself as a corporation of choreographers. All the works are set by company members, and most of its members choreograph for the company. Artistic decisions are taken together by consent or vote. "The company," stresses Tamar's General Director Meira Eliash-Chain, "is the sum of its members."

Setting Tamar apart from the other four Jerusalem dance companies is its approximately \$300,000 yearly budget (30 times larger than the budgets of the other companies) and the fact that its dancers are salaried. None of the dancers in the previously discussed four companies get paid monthly wages. Substantial support has been promised the company for a period of six years.

The backbone of its budget comes, as for the other companies, from the Jerusalem Foundation. In keeping with the city's general goals of educating audiences for the arts, Tamar was established together with a dance school. The well appointed studios and offices are located in the Gruss Community Centre in the neighborhood of Rommema.

According to Gotheiner, who is a strong force in the company, dancers have traditionally been frustrated because they have been treated in a child-like manner. "Do these steps and shut up!"

"For us it is a matter of vision to oppose the attitude that dancers are blank vessels or puppets and the choreographer comes along and plants his choreography on them. Our company is not working that way. All the dancers in the company are given a chance to choreograph, and we want to see the personal differences between the members through their choreographies on stage. This gives the company a human look".

"Each choreographer has a different vision, a different fantasy," adds Meira Eliash-Chain, and indeed she dwells on the lack of homogeneity in the repertoire. At the January 1988 premiere at the Jerusalem Theatre, one could watch two minimalistic theatre pieces, an impressionistic duet on a beach to the natural sounds of the sea, and a balletic number, entitled "To and Fro."

For the coming year they are simultaneously working on an outdoor work ("Requiem") to be done in an airplane hangar, and a concert programme of small chamber

works. “We’re purposely working on these at the same time,” says Eliash-Chain.

Gotheiner teaches the company classes, in a self-styled ballet technique which derives from his work with Maggie Black. Although Gotheiner denies any direct link between the technique and what goes on on-stage, he does agree that the technique has an indirect effect on the general appearance of the company. He describes this as “quickly centered confidence, less pretending of nobility, more real.”

“We try to develop the dancer with the whole weight on the feet. I try to teach people to stay connected to this feeling of weight. Ballet says the opposite – to be above the weight.” Indeed, in observing a company class the plié’s literally dropped to the floor. Grand battements fell heavily into fifth position.

“The hip line is straight and the shoulders above the hip, but there is a little curve in the lower back which we don’t try to avoid.”

“Many dancers I have to guide daily to this placement ‘straight of center’. This is because the body responds to emotional states, such as tenseness stemming from anger, or twisting, because of physical tensions. This kind of work is daily reconnecting with the body to get in ‘the straight of center’. You want to center yourself mentally and physically. For me this work is mainly physical, although many people said they felt the class was very much like meditation.”

“You don’t have to force this kind of position because it is natural balance. One of the main principles of the technique is not to force things, not to make movement unpleasant to do. Forcing disturbs the quality of the movement.”

“The technique should help one to dance with his/her body, instead of changing the body to reach a ‘perfect position’. This holds true for the turn-out, (dancers are instructed to turn out from the hip joint to their own limit), and lifting the leg to the side. “The angle at which you lift your leg,” says Gotheiner, “can also be personal.”

“People say we dance relaxed, but this is not true. There is a fine line between action and tension. When you resist a movement, you just create tension. We try to find the simplest way of doing a movement.”

“In class we do the simplest movement, unforced,

unaffected, not acted. In choreography, on the other hand, you can use everything, tension, attack, storytelling. If anything, the technique makes versatility of styles and ways of moving possible.”

Although the company premiered to rather mixed reviews, members appear to be unruffled and unwavering in their artistic commitments.

“You don’t create masterpieces all at once,” says Gotheiner. “We have only been working for 4 months and we are still in a period of molding together. Our company is just beginning.”

Jerusalem’s dance companies are a rainbow of artistic visions. Yet the companies are strikingly similar in their structure and development. This results primarily from the municipal womb in which they have been nurtured.

The municipality has two basic views about arts in the capital that affect all of Jerusalem’s dance companies.

The first is concerned with the character of the city. According to past spokesman for the municipality, Rafi Davara, Jerusalem is known as a holy city, as a city of Torah, and boasts a large religious population. Artists, he claims, are not as free to develop their art as they would be, say, in the sprawling town of Tel Aviv.

Secondly, says Davara, out of a Jewish population of 330,000 approximately 220,000 “don’t know what art is.” These consist of a 30% religious population who do not attend concerts for religious reason, 69% of the Jewish population do not attend dance concerts for cultural reasons, and 60,000 are children under the age of five, and not counted as part of today’s audience.

“The main thrust over the last 12 years,” says Davara, “And the main aim for the next 15 years is to educate this public to be an active audience for the arts. Therefore, most funds will go to arts education programs rather than for large production budgets for big companies.”

In keeping with this aim to educate an arts audience, most of Jerusalem’s dance companies are established together with dance schools. They are based in neighborhood community centers where they service the children of the immediate neighborhood.

The dance school, in turn, provides backing for the company through providing rehearsal space and studios for company classes, salaries for dance teachers, (usually company members) and administration costs. For

production costs the companies then turn to different national and municipal or governmental agencies. All of the companies are applying to the same agencies and are competing for limited funds.

The yearly running budget for each of four of the companies (with the exception of Tamar) is only about \$10,000 which, the companies point out, is hampering their development. A much heard complaint is that if they were salaried, the companies would be able to attract dancers and thereby raise their professional level. Keeping these performance companies on a low flame is partially explainable by the city's concentrating on education for the arts and putting an emphasis over the last several years of building arts facilities.

Diversity of artistic concerns and unity of practical profile characterize Jerusalem's dance companies. "If you consider the cultural desert that was Jerusalem twenty-one years ago," says Davara, "then you would realize that having five dance companies now is a revolution."

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