

ONE HAS TO HAVE STIMULATION...

MOSHE EFRATI'S "KOL-DEMAMA" DANCE COMPANY

by Arie Yass

Many a good and original achievement was born of pure chance. About twenty two years ago Moshe Efrati, then a successful young dancer of the Batsheva Dance Company, was asked to work with a group of young deaf people at the Helen Keller House in Tel Aviv. The idea was for dance to provide a social framework, with a bit of therapy thrown in for good measure. Moshe himself, who at that time was working with choreographer Glen Tetley on his role in "Mythical Hunters", had no idea at all, what deaf dance would turn out to be.

After about three months he went to see Mr. Reich, the director of the House, to ask him to release him from his obligation. The world of the deaf which he had encountered seemed to Moshe to be an unimpregnable fortress. "One can't reach them, or speak to them," he said.

Reich pleaded with him to try for another three months. As he put it, "I see something happening between you and the group, which has had several previous unsuccessful experiences with councillors. Give them one more chance."

Moshe, who is generous to a fault, agreed, and now, more than twenty years later, he is still to be found on the bridge connecting the world of the deaf with that of the hearing; between the silent world behind the glass barrier of deafness and that of dance, full of sounds, everchanging rhythms, bustling with colour and teeming with moving forms.

At those early sessions with his deaf students Moshe would wield a stick, like the baton of a conductor, to hold their attention. His intense temperament would

often prompt him to hit the stage-boards or the studio floor with the stick. One day one of the boys was facing away from Moshe, but when Moshe pounded the floor with his stick, the boy turned around, as though he had heard a noise. Moshe realized that the boy had reacted to something. He asked him (in sign language) what he had felt. "Something in my sole," came the answer. The boy was barefoot, as is the habit of modern dancers.

"This accident stuck in my mind", says Moshe in his book "Kol, Demama U'machol", (Sound, Silence and Dance"), which was published in 1981 as an illustrated album, documenting Efrati's work as a choreographer and the development of the "Kol Demama Company", the sole dance company in the world, which integrates hearing and deaf dancers. "I began to experiment with the stick pounding the floor-boards method. I asked my dancers to turn their backs to me. I discovered, that some of them were sensitive and felt the vibrations of the floor-boards, while others didn't respond as easily. There were arguments. One deaf girl said, that she heard the stick hitting the floor through her hearing-aid. So I arranged it in a way her feet didn't touch the floor, asking one of the boys to lift her. I pounded the floor -- with no reaction from her. That was the start."

The vibration-method which transmits rhythms through the floor-boards to the dancers' soles, was born, enabling the deaf to become part of a group.

"The primary impulse was not audio-musical, but rather rhythmical. There was no need for me to strike the floor -- one of them (the dancers) could just hit the floor with his foot, and the movement would change its flow, without my interference. I was able to change visual formations on stage, as the cue would come from the

participants themselves, from within the group and choreography would ensue."

At that time a company was formed, "Demama" by name, composed of deaf dancers. It first performed publicly in 1971, in a program of four works by Efrati. Prior to that event Efrati had choreographed several works for Batsheva. A leg injury made him turn more and more to choreography and in the wake of his success as a choreographer he was invited to work for several European dance companies, such as the Ballet of the Deutsche Oper in (West) Berlin, the Flemish Royal Ballet in Belgium and the Ballet Theatre Contemporain in France.

Clive Barnes, the dance critic of the New York Times, wrote (in 1975), that he saw great promise in Efrati's art, as he was the first Israeli dancer to offer a personal version of the Graham technique. Barnes felt that Efrati had something unique to say in his choreography and that being Israeli, the special something must indeed be specifically Israeli.

I think Barnes was right in his suggestion, as Efrati's work to this day is based on his personal, very Israeli experiences, be it memories of his childhood in Jerusalem, the religious processions and the funeral rites which he saw as a child, or the works of Martin Buber, or poems by contemporary Israeli poets.

In 1982 I interviewed him about his "Psalms of Jerusalem", which he created for the opening performance of the Israel Festival of that year. The music was by Noam Sherif.

He told me. "How does one sing psalms to Jerusalem? By prayer. Since my childhood I see the city as a place to which flow prayers of a multitude of believers of many denominations. I see the Jerusalem of nuns in processions, holding their hands together, clad in their dark habits, of moslem workers kneeling in prayer, lowering their foreheads to touch the ground, of Jews swaying dressed in long black overcoats before the Wailing Wall; Jerusalem with **mezuzoth** at each door, with crosses in windows and crescents on minarets; city of priests; of **kadies** (moslem learned men of religion), of the sound of the **muazzin** calling the followers of Islam to the mosque; of the sound of the **shofar** in the synagogue; of the peal of church bells. All these accumulate into one song of Jerusalem, to become a psalm." These elements become a torrent of expressive, enchanting and variegated movement in his choreography.

After leaving Batsheva company, Efrati, along with other dancers of that company, namely Ester Nadler and Gabi Barr (as well as Jacov Sharir, Roger Briant and Israel Heshkovitz, who did not stay with him for a long time but left to pursue their own careers) founded the Moshe Efrati Dance Company, in which for the first time the deaf dancers of "Demama Company" joined hearing ones in a work whose symbolic title was "A Man Begins His Day".

This exciting integration of the world of sound and that of silence brought about the creation of a new venture, the "Kol Demama" company. The premiere of "Kol Demama" took place in 1978. The program of four new works included a dance based on ideas of Buber, mainly his "Thou and I" attitude of human dialogue, in this instance the dialogue between the world of sound and silence.

Only two years later, in 1980 (and for a second time in 1982) the new company was invited to perform at the prestigious dance festival at the Theatre de la Ville in Paris.

It became evident that in the sphere of dance Israel held an important position. In a long article which appeared in "Figaro", entitled "The Great Crisis of Dance in France" the author states among other things that from the performances of Efrati's Kol Demama, which combines a classical basis with Jewish moral philosophy, one may glean the extent of the crisis in which French modern dance finds itself. In Kol Demama the writer found first of all excellent dancers, but also a whole background of cultural heritage, which in his opinion is lacking in French companies, who are mainly to be regarded as epigones of Balanchine, Graham, et al.

If anyone harboured doubts about Efrati's choreographic work, the Parisian dance critics were quite sure about their verdict. They regarded him and his company as the discovery of the season, and saw in him a choreographer of great originality. The enthusiastic audiences which filled the theatre every evening made it clear, the "Kol Demama" was one of the best and most beautiful voices emanating from Israel, reaching the ears of the world. "Le Monde" printed a long article praising the company, stating that it is quite impossible to distinguish between the hearing and the deaf members of the company, since they all form one dynamic, highly professional, powerful whole. The author went on to describe the dances, stating that no surprisingly many of them dealt with human

loneliness and the endeavours of reaching out towards other human beings. The critic found the movement in "Chapters — Sounds" rather violent until, with the emergence of the first sounds and fragments of speech it stops for a brief moment, to flow on more gently, much more humanely.

The dance critic of the "Quotidien de Paris" wrote that she was much surprised after the performance — since she never read program-notes before the show — to realise that several of the well-trained, vigorous dancers of the young company were indeed deaf. The enjoyment she felt during the dancing turned to true admiration when she learned about the dancers special predicament, and she found "Kol Demama" to be outstanding — both on an artistic as well as a human level.

During the ten years of "Kol Demama's" activity from its regular performances in Israel, the company performed in the U.S.A., Canada, Mexico, France, West Germany, Belgium, Sweden, Finland, Spain and Italy. Efrati's work for the company became richer, more personal as a result of the meeting between the movement of his deaf and his hearing dancers.

This integration became one of the main tools of his choreography, sometimes taking on the form of recorded sounds made by the deaf members of the company, to which the hearing dancers performed. On other occasions Efrati used sign-language as a movement-element or motif. For instance in his "Tiotot" ("Sketches") created in 1986, a very theatrical, variegated composition of many segments, the voice of the actor Yosi Banai reads the poem by Lea Goldberg about the flow of time, which Efrati "translated" into

the sign language of the deaf, thus creating a most moving and beautiful movement.

Since its beginning the company has had to struggle with dire financial problems. Indeed after the premiere of "Tiotot" Moshe considered seriously whether to disband the company altogether. The company is subsidised by the Ministry of Education and Culture, but the subsidy being insufficient, it survives due to the generosity of several funds and individuals.

In 1987, after ten years of working in temporary quarters, the company finally moved to a permanent studio in Hayarkon Street in Tel Aviv.

"You say to yourself, that perhaps the difficulties ignite your imagination," — Moshe muses. "Perhaps that is so. It makes you concentrate and give your best. You have to rely on what you have — your dancers — and leave sets and other stage-devices out of consideration. What you can use is your own inner truth, and that of your dancers. I have said many times that I was an artist and not a social worker. I try to create and transfer the inner truth of myself and my dancers to the stage as best I am able. It is immaterial how many of them are deaf and how many hearing. The integration is important. The truth I am persueing is a simple human one. 'One can surmount all difficultires with the help of perseverance, a lot of imagination and a strong will.' That is what I am trying to say in my works. A human being needs constant stimulation. Life, memories, sounds, silences, and the difficulties we encounter suply this stimulus all the time..." ■

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