THE CRISIS OF MODERN DANCE IN ISRAEL IN THE FIFTIES

From the Personal Viewpoint of a Dancer

by Ruth Eshel

For about 30 years (1920-1951) modern dance flourished in Israel. In the '50s a crisis developed, which ended only in 1964, with the foundation of the Batsheva Dance Company. One may perceive this period as a time of transition, in which the German School (Wigman) vacated its leading role and was replaced by the American School (Graham). The crisis was dramatic. No synthesis, no fusion of the two was attempted, and the achievements of the pioneers of modern dance in the country were simply shoved aside. The crisis ended, symbolically and actually, when Batsheva de Rothschild founded her company in 1964 and a new epoch began.

What were the reasons for this crisis? Why didn't exponents of the German School in this country succeed in forging an independent dance-theatre style, as happened in Germany in the '60s and '70s? Why were the two schools incompatible in spite of their common sources, both being based on the principles of modernism and expressionism? What were the attempts at extricating dance in Israel from this conundrum? What lesson may be gleaned from this situation?

These are the questions I shall endeavour to explore from the personal viewpoint and experience of a dancer and choreographer of the '80s, who was a student and beginner during the years of that crisis.

The First Thirty Years

The honour of being the pioneer of modern dance in this country undoubtedly belongs to Baruch Agadati, who gave his first public concert in Yaffa in 1920.[1] He was a dancer, painter and later a cinematographer who performed his own dances here, as well as in Europe. He was the first to try to create an authentic Israeli modern style in dance. His portraits of Chassidic, Yemenite or Arab charactes were not -- as many critics at that time erroneously thought -- "copies" of folk dance types. He used the material as building-blocks for his very personal creations. He possessed a keen sense of abstraction and a talent for creating stage-forms. He was one of the first choreographes who came to the conclusion that dance could exist without the underpinning of musical accompaniment. His experiments in dance without music were rejected by his audience (and the critics). The latter also misinterpreted his minimalism as neglecting the movement of the legs and overemphasising of the hand-gestures and the torso.

What he was after was original movement-material which would answer his artistic standards. In fact his very progressive attitude, anticipating the trends of American post-modernism by nearly 40 years, isolated him from his comtemporaries.

Two years after Agadati's first solo concert in 1920, Margalit Ohrentein arrived from Vienna and founded the first studio for modern dance in Tel-Aviv. These were the years of the development of the new dance in Central Europe where Dalcroze von Laban, Wigman and Jooss were active. From their schools came the first modern dance artists who immigrated to Eretz Israel. Ohrenstein would prepare a new dance program with her students each year. Her twin daughters, Yehudit and Shoshana, became famous for their performances.

In 1925 Rina Nikova (a Russian ballerina) founded her "Biblical Ballet" company in Jerusalem. She was the first to realise that the basic material for an independent Israeli dance should be gleaned not from Arab folk dance sources but rather from the rich movement, rhythm and music tradition of the Yemenite Jews, and she actually learned steps and gestures from her own students, incorporating these Yemenite elements into her ballets.

In the mid-'30s Dania Levine, who had studied for three years in Berlin, began performing in Jerusalem and at the same time Yardena Cohen, a dancer born in this country, started to create her own dances in Haifa.

Yardena went abroad to study in Vienna and Dresden, the two main centers of modern dance at that time, but she rejected the stylistic influence of her teachers, returned home and began her own work, using only those elements she found compatible with her own goals.

This was a courageous decision for a young dancer. Several critics accused her of imitating Arabic dance. But one has to take into account, that she was not a new immigrant, but born in the land, whose rhythms, landscapes, inhabitants and colours were an integral part of her being.

In 1928 the "Habima" theatre arrived in Tel Aviv and with it Debora Bertonoff (the daughter of one of their leading actors). She grew up knowing well the great innovators of theatre in Russia, Stanislavsky and Vachtangov. In Israel she gave many mimetic dance performances, founded a school and wrote many articles and books.

Also in the mid-'30s, under the pressure of Nazi persecution, several dance artists from Germany, Austria, etc. arrived. Among these were Tehilla Roessler, from the school and company of Palucca in Dresden, Else Dublon and Katia Michaeli, who were with Wigman, Hilde Kesten and somewhat later Irene Getry.

The most important dance artist to immigrate was Gertrud Kraus from Vienna. She had worked with von Laban and Reinhardt and had performed alone and with her company all over Europe. She, her school and her company were to be the most important factors in artistic dance in the country during the next 15 years.[2]

During the '40s and the beginning of the '50s, the students of this first generation began to emerge as artists in their own right. They were Rachel Nadav, a disciple of Rina Nikova; Naomi Alekovsky and Hilde Kesten, who studied with Kraus; Noa Eshkol, a pupil of Roessler, and Hassia Levi, who worked with Dublon. The schools teemed with dance students and all over the country dance performances were held.

One should remember that Israel was the only country in the world apart from central Europe, where the modern, expressionistic "German" dance was dominant, as opposed to the minor role played by classical ballet. In America anti-Nazi feelings were not propitious for a style called "German". In Frane and England ballet reigned supreme, and modern dance was hardly in evidence. Graham was still nearly unknown outside a narrow audience in New York.

So, quite paradoxically, during World War II, the only place where European modern dance flourished was in Israel, (Palestine in those days of the British mandate), where the refugees from the Nazis found their new homeland.

Suddenly in the '50s, modern dance, which had developed here since the '20s, came to a halt, with screeching brakes. What had happened?

The Roots of the Crisis

First the isolation of the years of W.W.II., later the dire economic situation of the new state, precluded the import of foreign dance companies in significant numbers. For nearly 13 years (1935-1948) in regard to the arts the country had been practically isolated from the rest of the world. The dancers and choreographers had nearly no opportunity to compare their own work with that of others.

Then several foreign companies arrived on tour; the French company of Jean Babilee, the American Talley Beatty and finally Martha Graham. Suddenly everybody realised that modern dance in Israel was trailing behind the times. What had appeared to be avantgarde and modern in the '30s and '40s seemed anachronistic and passé in the '50s. The dancers of the older generation were confused, the younger ones became more and more critical. The time for reckoning and stock taking had come. The bustling dance activity slowed own.

What had happened to modern dance in Israel, what had caused its stagnation? Perhaps the reason is to be seen in the attitude prevalent in the '40s, that there was no urgency in the search for a specific, autonomous "Israeli Style", for a "Hebrew Dance", which would, it was hoped, emerge in the end, of its own volition.

At first there were two schools of thought: one was to create a special "Hebrew" style, the exponents of which were Agadati, Nikova and Yardena Cohen; on the other side was, for example, Marglit Ohrenstein, who stated: "As yet we haven't become 'Hebrews'."[3] She believed, that in the fullness of time the question would solve itself. This second school of thought was encouraged by the

arrival of the exponents of modern "German" dance in the '30s.

These artists each possessed a very personal style and a technique which emerged from his or her individual artistic needs. Self expression was emphasised, although not enough attention was paid to the systematic development of technique, which could be transfered from teacher to student. The years of isolation had not been used for this purpose, since there was a markedly hostile attitude among the ballet teachers —— who had a systematic technique at their disposal -- towards the modern dance creators. The latter regarded themselves as the apostles of "the future, of new values, forms and content"[4], and many of them completely dismissed classical ballet. They feared, that a technically orientated training would hamper the spontaneous, free artistic expression they valued so much.

There was no cooperation between the "moderns" and the "classicals", that could have led to the translating of modern movement-material into a technical system. This, for example, Martha Graham did with her own material. Moreover, most of the ballet teachers expressly forbade their students to attend modern dance classes.

As a girl I studied with Valentina Archipova Grossmann (in Haifa), one of the few really professional ballet teachers in the country. A few streets from her studio, there existed Yardena Cohen's studio. What a marvelous combination of technique and creativity it could have been to combine both! But that was quite impossible, because of the aboslute demand for 'monogamy'.

Perhaps this demand that students become disciples, perhaps the whole atmosphere of veneration towards the teacher stemmed from ideas brought from Germany. I found a revealing passage in Mary Wigman's autobiographical book.[5] There is a description of her stuents coming to her dressing-room after a performance, and while her German dancers hardly dare to approach her, the American girls thank her openly and talk to her freely, as if they were colleagues and old friends. The Germans saw this familiarity as a form of bad manners and impertinence. (Perhaps this is somewhat exaggerated, as Anna Sokolow once told me, she was the first of Graham's dancers to dare to take classial ballet classes. She was apprehensive of Martha's reaction, should this "treachery" become known to her. But later she discovered, that Martha knew all along and did not mind. Editor's remark.)

Archipova, who was rather critical and contemptuous towards most modern dance creators, nevertheless was enthusiastic, when Graham's company performed in Haifa and urged us to go see the performance. Later she even invited Rena Gluck to teach at her studio, since she had discovered a common ground with Graham -- namely technique.

Her attitude towards Deborah Bertonoff was an exception. I remember that they were friendly and Bertonoff even once brought her pupil, Nurit Stern, to take a class with Archipova. We all went to watch Bertonoff's performance and the dance that most appealed to Archipova was "One, Two, Three". This was a sort of satire, poking fun at the dilettantish dance teachers, who had opened studios all over the country without having had any real education themselves.

When I was about six, I used to dance in the classes Miraim Bat-Artzi gave in her living-room. I was clad in a tiny tutu and pointe-shoes. Parents and children alike were very pleased with these classes. My parents asked Ora Rattner, a well known dancer and choreographer, to come watch their prodigy. I assume Ora was rather appalled at what she saw, since soon afterwards I was enrolled in Archipova's studio. One has to perceive Archipova's strict adherence to rules of proper attire and precise execution of the exercises, as well as her painfully slow progress in teaching us new material, in contrast to the success of the amateur teachers, to whom students flocked in droves.

Tel Aviv the circumstances were similar. Recently I came across a standard contract, which all of Margalit Ohrenstein's students had to sign, in which there is the following clause: "As long as the student is enrolled in the studio, she is prohibited from studying at any other school or taking part in any concert or dance performance -- without express consent from the management of the studio".[6]

Each modern choreographer fought against all others and defended his own domain. There was no possibility of concentrating the existing talent or cooperating in any endeavour, as each one claimed the right to be the sole arbitrator and director. There was no central established body able to offer the budding creative and performing talents an outlet. The choreographers had to cope with the organizing of productions without any sort of subsidy and suffered all the ills of unfunded companies -- the constant coming and going of dancers, rehearsals held in the evenings only, rudimentary costumes and the lack of proper lighting or decor.

In spite of the fact that choreographers who had come from Europe had had experience with proper stage-lighting, they lacked the means of implementing the achievements of modern stagecraft. The halls in which they had to perform being ill equipped and the technical apparatus rudimentary, surely restricted their work.

(The sole exception was Sara Levi-Tanai's "Inbal Dance Theatre", which slowly gained professional status and became known world-wide in the late '50s. But it was not regarded as modern dance by other dance artists in Israel. It was dismissed as "folk" or "ethnic" dance, although in fact Levi-Tanai was undoubtedly the most important choreographic talent active in those times, and her work is certainly to be regarded as modern dance, although based on ethnic materials. Editor's Note.)

Two years after the founding of the State of Israel the atmosphere for creating all kinds of central, established, "state institutions" was propitious. A committee for the establishment of a professional dance company was created, but endless discussion ensued since each member of the committee pulled in a different direction. The committee was unable to decide who should be the artistic director. At last, in 1951 on a rather narrow basis the "Israel Ballet Theatre" was founded with Gertrud Kraus at its helm. Gertrud Kraus was already past her prime. The first program was composed of her works. These were met with a rather cool and critical response by the audience as well as the critics. During its first year of activity the company produced another program, in which there appeared a new work by a visiting American choreographer, Talley Beatty, "Fire in the Hills". It was the first real meeting between the "old" and the "new" modern dance.

So, thre was no professional dance company (except "Inbal") in the country, hardly any well-trained dancers, and the leading choreographers were getting older. The crisis was acute.

Years of Crisis

In 1962 Yehudit Ohrenstein describes the situation thus: "We became used to the fact that only visiting artists from abroad appeared on our stages. For years no indigenous dance performance on a high standard was seen. (She too completely disregarded "Inbal", a typical, rather conceited attitude of many critics in Israel. Editor's Note.) Many of the young and talented leave the country, to study abroad, as they are aware, that if and when they return no artistic organization is going to offer them an opportunity as dancers, most of them remain abroad... The local dance artists lack any suitable framework or sponsoring body for their activity... As a result, dance in Israel is for all practical purposes paralyzed."[7]

After 30 years of intensive activity, the dream of an independent Israeli dancer on a high artistic level was becoming more and more unreal. The younger generation began -- without checking the facts -- to denigrate the achievements of the preceding generation, who were unprofessional in their eyes. And when the pioneers of dance spoke about their former triumphs, the young ones expressed their desire to go abroad. When Y. Ohrenstein wrote the above quotation, I was a soldier and took part in a contest for young dance artists. I received a prize of 300 Israeli Pounds, a not inconsiderable sum in those days, the equivalent of the cost of tuition for one year.

Ohrenstein, a member of the jury which awarded the prize, invited me for a talk. She wanted to know what my plans were. I told her I wished to study at one of the great ballet schools abroad, perhaps to join a company there and finally to dance the role of Odette/Odile in "Swan Lake".

She listened and let me say all I felt. Then she told me how many years ago she and her sister had performed in Paris in their own material, of Israeli origin, and how the critics and the best European artists had reacted favourably to their dancing. She said that I should understand that in order to go abroad I had better first be an established artist with my own material, in order to be able to offer something unique, otherwise I would become just one of thousands of girls taking daily ballet clases and dreaming of getting into a company, a dream not likely to become reality.

I listened politely since I was afraid she would perhaps anull the prize I had son, if I told her that I was sick and tired of hearing this sort of argument. In fact I hardly understood what she was talking about. I was sure, she exaggerated the difficulties I was to encounter abroad. So I just waited for her to finish. I wished to leave and dance far away. Israeli dance for one with artistic aspirations like me was folk dance. It was unprofessional. I didn't know the history of modern dance in Israel and had no wish to know.

Experiments in Extricating Dance from the Crisis

The foundation of the State of Israel brought with it the

arrival of dancers from the U.S.A. The first one to immigrate was Rina Shaham, who arrived in 1951 and participated in Talley Beatty's work for the "Israel Ballet Theatre" which Gertrud founded. She also performed her own solos in a program she shared with Tehilla Roessler.[8] These were the two occassions, when the "German" and the "American' schools of modern dance met on one stage.

In 1955 Rena Gluck arrived. She was a graduate of the Julliard School in New York. She too started to appear in evenings of solo dances, since no established company or framework existed. Both new immigrants opened schools, and that became the first opportunity for Israeli dancers to come to know American Graham technique.

The relations between the dancers of this generation were cordial. Everybody realized that some sort of central performing body was necessary. An attempt was made by organizing the "Dance Stage" ("Bimat Machol"), where works by Rena Gluck, Rina Shaham, Naomi Eleskovsky and their groups were shown. Original music by Israeli composers was written for them, by Paul Ben-Haim, Yechezkel Baron, Jehoshua Lakner and others. For the first time since Anatol Gurevitch had collaborated with Gertrud Kraus in designing decor, noted young artists such as Dani Karavan were working with the choreographers. Among the dancers of "Bimat Machol" there were artists such as Rina Schenfeld, Ze'eva Cohen, Ruth Lerman, Galia Gat, Ofra Ben Zvi, Ehud Ben David, Chanina Zuckerman, Arie Calev, Avraham Zuri and several others, who would later become well known. Usually when an artist arrived from abroad there were expectations of mutual enrichment. Just like the choreographers active in previous decades, those coming in the '50s from Ameria chose to deal with Israeli topics, in order to express their feelings towards their new homeland. But they also continued to create in the style to which they were accustomed. As early as 1957 the dance critic of "Al Hamishar" daily, Oliah Silberman writes:

"Modern expressionist dance was created in orer to liberate dance from the fetters of the classical style... But should one become confined to the technique which was established by Martha Graham and Jose Limon... it would be equally undesirable, since it would be as detrimental as to be subservient to the monotony of ballet." She stated, writing about a recital of Rena Gluck, also in 1957: "If Rena will not confine herself to the boundaries of American expressionism and classical ballet, but will also learn something from European expressionism and the realism of Russian ballet, as well as from the oriental movement and landscape she now works in, she may well enrich her 'vocabulary' of movement and her artistic sensibility, and in due course also enrich us, through her paedagogic work with her company."[9]

In the meantime, the young generation quickly absorbed the Graham style, since modern dance had never been alien to the spirit of the country.

In the early '50s, the American choreographer Jerome Robbins came on a visit. He was sent by the "America-Israel Cultural Foundation" (then still the "Norman Fund") to make a survey of dance in the new state. He felt very attracted to what he saw and fell in love with "Inbal", realising the tremendous potential of Sara Levi-Tanai's work. After completing his mission, he wrote a most interesting report. In this long letter one senses the concern felt by many of those in charge of the arts in Israel because of the crisis dance was going through; and because of the eagerness of young dancers to embrace the American modern dance style and to distance themselves from their own cultural creativity and background.

Robbins came to the conclusion that the level of dance technique in the country was as yet insufficient to support real self-expression, hence the necessity of encouraging further study of modern and classical techniques, until these could be well assimilated by the Israeli dancers. He viewed this as a transitional period leading to true self-expression.

His analysis was correct, but I doubt whether he realised in 1952 that it would take more than twenty years, until 1977, for his prognosis to become reality. In the late '70s the first swallow of post-modernism arrived on the Israeli scene, starting a new period of creativity in dance, generating a return to the trend of solo dancing and the activity of independent dance groups, working outside of the establishment-companies.

The most important practical outcome of Robbins' recommendations was an invitation to Anna Sokolow to come to prepare "Inbal" for their first tour abroad, which materialized only in 1957. She was to provide a technical polish to the rich choreographic and musical texture of Sara Levi-Tanai's works. In fact "Inbal" was the only Israeli dance company that flourished in the '50s. For the average Israeli dancer "Inbal" was a quite remote phenomenon, far from his ambitions. The Yemenite dancers were regarded as lacking technique, and to make them seem even stranger, they sang and talked on-stage -- twenty years before such behaviour

became one of the innovations of post-modern dance and dance theatre. Their movement language did not belong to what most modern dancers were familiar with; they were at once too "folkloristic" and really also too avantgard to be understood.

Anna Sokolow came nearly every year for stays of several weeks or months. In 1963 she founded the "Lyrical Theatre". While Rena Gluck, Rina Shaham (and Naomi Eleskovsky) were gifted dancers but relatively unexperienced choreographers, Sokolow was a well known artist of world renown. The "Lyric Theatre" was supported by the A.I.C.F. and Anna prepared four programs with its dancers. Perhaps the most famous work performed by it was Sokolow's "Rooms". This was the first dance company in Israel to gather together the best available professional dancers, although all the choreography was by Sokolow herself. It may sound strange that I, living in Haifa (just a hundred kilometers away) had no inkling of all this activity taking place in Tel Aviv. Perhaps my ignorance was a result of the education I received in the studios, which equated faithfulness to one's teacher with a complete disregard of anything happening elsewhere. It was also unacceptable for a girl in her teens, prior to her army service, to move to another town in order to dance there.

As I have already said, Anna used to come each year, but she did not settle in Israel. After preparing a program she would return to the U.S. Until she returned, her dancers were practically unemployed. Natan Mishori in his article [10] tells how the company members would not agree to work with local choreographers, in spite of their dire need for more works.

Dance teachers from all over the country used to come to Tel Aviv to take classes, but in my eyes they were a bunch of rather old, dilletantish women, who would take rear positions in the studio during the class. They tended to be serious, heavy and obese. Some of them were prone to boast about "the wonderful dances" they had choreographed in their kibbutzim, perhaps in order to enhance their image in my eyes or to convince me to allow them to create works "on me". I was amazed at the audacity of these amateurs, who were unable to do a decent piruette, but who endeavoured to create dances for professionals like me.

As it turned out, it was in the kibbutz movement, which was despised by those living in the towns, where the creative spirit of the German school survived. May be this was the result of the "dancer" or teacher of the kibbutz having to stage several shows on festive occassions in the kibbutz and by so doing earn the right to a free day for going weekly to town to take classes.

The young ones among them and the talented, if they wished to become professional dancers had no choice, but to leave the kibbutz and move to Tel Aviv. Others became excellent instructors in creative movement, working with the children in their kibbutzim. In this aspect too we had to wait until the '70s, when all over the world books about creative dance education began to proliferate, to realise that all this had been practised in the kibutzim since the '30s.

After the "Lyric Theatre" discontinued its activities, Rena Gluck continued performing sporadically with her own group and for the first time in her program-notes we encounter the name of the "Batsheva Foundation for the Arts" supporting dance.

Batsheva de Rothschild is a most surprising and wonderful person. She is so quiet and unassuming, that one hardly believes that she played such an important role in supporting modern dance mainly Martha Graham in America, during the period when no governmental support for dance was to be obtained. In the '50s she became interested in Israel and was instrumental in bringing many performances of Graham's company to this country. She began to offer scholarships to Israeli dancers to go abroad and study. She achieved the nearly impossible task of persuading Graham to let her works be performed by unknown dancers in a small, remote country. In 1964 de Rothschild's own company, "Batsheva" was founded. A new era of dance in Israel had begun. The crisis was over. ■

The bibliography for this article is to be found at the end of the same contribution in Hebrew, on p. 9.

This article is partially based on the M.A. thesis of the author.