

“THE SEED AND THE HUSK” -- THE KIBBUTZ DANCE COMPANY

By Giora Manor

Throughout its existence the kibbutz-movement, though never constituting more than 3% of the Jewish population of Eretz Israel, fulfilled a much greater role in many areas than its proportionate share would suggest. Ever since the period prior to the establishment of the State of Israel, when the kibbutzim (and moshavim) served as bases for activities which in normal circumstances would belong in the governmental sphere, such as those of economy, security, immigration and education, they have played a special role in life in Israel. The kibbutz movement's attitude towards the arts in general and that of dance in particular has always been rather ambivalent.

On one hand the kibbutzim, never just remote villages, always regarded culture and artistic creativity as an important sector of their communal life; on the other the basic, unrelenting endeavour to make the Jewish community in Eretz Israel one of “productive farmers and workers” pushed the arts and the artist into amateur status, even when the artists themselves arrived mature, and professionally trained. Some of the immigrant dancers and choreographers joined their respective kibbutzim after a professional career abroad.

Such artists as Lea Bergstein or Rivka Sturman, who came from Germany in the late '20s and early '30s brought with them the achievement of the modern expressionistic dance of Laban, Wigman and their colleagues, joined kibbutzim and turned their creative powers mainly towards the staging of agricultural festivities and the “artificial” creation of new folk-dances. These dances have become true folk-dances throughout the years.

The kibbutz-movement also served as a basis and laboratory for choreographers who did not become kibbutz-members. Gertrud Kraus and Yarden Cohen appeared in kibbutzim and staged pageants there. Sara Levi-Tanai began her work as a choreographer in Ramat Hakovesh and Mishmar Hasharon.

But only in the '60s, when the third generation of kibbutz-born dancers achieved maturity, both the subjective demand for artistic expression as well as the objective circumstances made the foundation of a kibbutz dance-company feasible.

Even before the first group of dancers gathered together in 1969, there were sporadic experiments in performing artistic dance ensembles inside the kibbutz-movement. The first choreographer who brought American modern dance to the kibbutz was Rachel Immanuel, then a member of the kibbutz which later became Hatzor. Yehudit Arnon organized a regional dance-company in the Galil Hama'aravi area, which later became the home-base for the activities of the Kibbutz Dance Company.

The group of dance-teachers and choreographers which constituted the nucleus of the Kibbutz Dance Company (until 1975 called the “Interkibbutz D.C.”) comprised, among others Hedda Oren, Noah Shapira, Hermona Lin, Yehudit Arnon, Tirza Shoham, Gabriella Oren and Oshra Elkayam (Ronen). The artistic advisers were Gertrud Kraus and the scenic designer Roda Reilinger. The producer of the first performances was Micha Lin.

The first premiere took place at Yagur on the 27 of February 1970 and the program included the following works: “People” by Noah Shapira; “Dream” by Hedda Oren; “On the Road” by Hermona Lin; and four works by Oshra Elkayam, namely “Bird”, “After Drawings by Paul Klee”, “The Mediterranean” and “Witches' Sabbath”.

The company was indeed 'inter-kibbutzim', lacking a home and a base, or even such simple requirements as a studio of its own, an office or magazine for storing costumes, etc., without which the fledgling company could hardly function. Gabriella Oren became the person in charge of organizing the preparations for the company's second program and during that period the

regional studio, which Yehudit Arnon ran at Ga'aton became the home-base for the Kibbutz Company and she the Artistic Director of the group.

The Kibbutz Dance Company is not a "one-man-company". Nevertheless, the personality of Yehudit Arnon became the most important factor in developing the at first semi-professional group into an artistic ensemble of international renown and one of the most exciting dance companies in Israel. In recent years the company has attracted such illustrious choreographers as Jiri Kylian, Matz Ek, Christopher Bruce, Kei Takei, Anna Sokolow, Ohad Naharin, Ze'eva Cohen, who came to visit and became enamoured of the very special atmosphere and freshness of the kibbutz dancers.

Yehudit belongs to the category of personalities, not necessarily choreographers themselves, like Diaghilev, de Valois, Sonia Gaskell or Marie Rambert, who nevertheless became the moving spirits of their companies. They may be regarded as "creators through others", as catalysts causing artists to flourish and performers to exert themselves and to develop their own creative talents.

Arnon was born in Czechoslovakia, was interned in concentration camps during the Holocaust, returned to Budapest, and finally came to Israel to join Kibbutz Ga'aton. She was hardly 20 when, after World War II she staged huge pageants in Hungary, according to the vogue of those times, without having had any prior systematic dance-education or theatrical experience. She was very successful, but decided to emigrate to Israel and become a kibbutznik. Only later she obtained a systematic, theoretical and practical basis, along with her work in her kibbutz, and became not only a disciple of Gertrud Kraus, but also her close friend and admirer.

Like the directors of dance companies mentioned above, Yehudit is a complex personality with contrasting character-traits. She is very sensitive to social needs and the personal problems of those working with her, but at the same time able to pursue her aims relentlessly; dictatorial and tender at one and the same time. Perhaps only such a unique mixture of determination and creative genius – what one may call "charisma" – enabled her to found, and what is even harder, to continue to develop and preserve, a flourishing dance company. This may be true everywhere, but is especially so in the framework of the kibbutz-movement, which is the "owner" of the Kibbutz Company, since those at its helm have not even today grasped the importance of this very special artistic institution.

The company began its work in a rather sporadic way, each dancer being allotted only two work-days weekly for his/her art. The first program consisted only of "home-made" works, by choreographers who were members of kibbutzim. There was a certain advantage in this, as it proved the necessity of a stage for the kibbutz-choreographers as well as for the dancers. But most of these were beginners, lacking professional experience and know-how. The technical level of the dancers left much to be desired and the works themselves gave the impression of exercises and experiments.

The first two programs were well received by the audiences and after the company settled down at Ga'aton and Yehudit became the group's Artistic Adviser, the dancers were granted another working-day per week. Now they could spend three days at the studio and the rest at their respective kibbutzim. This led to a pattern which shaped the work of the company, was perhaps detrimental to the individual's artistic development, but in my opinion beneficial in shaping the special quality of the company's work, of which more later.

Undoubtedly the most decisive factor in the development of the company was the arrival of two well-known artists and teachers, namely Flora Cushman, an American who had worked with Robert Cohan in London (at the Contemporary Dance Theatre and its school) and at Bejart's "Mudra School" in Brussels, of which she today is co-director, and another American, Gene Hill-Sagan, a black choreographer who, like Cushman lived many years in Israel. Both – each in his own way and style – brought to Ga'aton the demand for a high professional standard and the determination to carry the company beyond the 'sound-barrier' of professionalism. Their works for the company also introduced an element of excitement, which the early programs of the company had lacked.

One of the potent images, engraved in the mind, which are elements forming the composite mosaic of a dance-company's persona, derives in the case of the Kibbutz company from Arnon's duet "The Seed and the Husk", a simple, direct rendition of the male figure – the husk – giving birth to the female one, the seedling, which is to grow into a mature plant. Perhaps the reversal of traditional biological roles, together with supple, strong but gentle movement made this such a moving and memorable dance. I believe it was symbolic of the company's future.

Parallel to the teaching activities of Cushman, Hill-

Sagan and others, was formed a nuclear group of dancers, devoted to their art and determined to overcome all obstacles. It included such artists as Martha Reifeld, Mike Levin, Zichri Dagan, Margalit Rubin and several others.

If one examines the individual development of these members of the first generation of dancers, one may perceive a very 'normal', organic line of growth. Fifteen years later Martha Reifeld works with the dance-theatre group of Ruth Ziv-Eyal; Zichri Dagan serves as rehearsal-director of the Kibbutz Company; Margalit goes to New York to dance with several companies, such as that of Matthew Diamond. Among the choreographers who contributed to the early programs, Oshra Elkayam runs a dance-theatre group of her own and Hedda Oren continues to work for the Kibbutz Company.

A dance company is an organic entity, which grows and matures, one generation replacing its predecessor. From among the "second generation" several dancers became excellent performers: Shelomo Zaga, Efrat Livni and others.

The maturing of a company also brings with it the phenomenon of dancers leaving to join other companies. (The first to transfer was Miriam Hertz, who joined Bat-Dor for several seasons.)

Again and again dance-critics have endeavoured to determine the Kibbutz Company's special atmosphere and to find a definition for its company-character. Many critics abroad, after watching the company on its first tours, pointed out the distinctive special qualities of the kibbutz dancers.

During the company's first tour in Europe, when it appeared at the "Nouveau Carré" in Paris in 1978, the critic of "Le Monde" wrote (April 29, 1978): "...No doubt, the dancers' double life (as kibbutzniks and dancers) bestows on them a sense of health and an unusual muscle-power. They apply their pioneering spirit in their dance. By these means they achieved a highly professional level ... The Kibbutz Company performs an eclectic repertoire with great corporeal mastery and inner feeling."

And Elisabeth Cadot felt, that "their kibbutz experience lends a special warmth to the group. For once the spectator may perceive how the dancers dance with each other, not just alongside one another in haphazard encounters." (May 7, 1978)

The long fight for more and more work-days each week allotted to dance, and the division between membership duties in their respective kibbutzim and their artistic work at Ga'aton seemed to some to be detrimental to their development as artists. I believe that in fact it was just this special mode of work, this "dual" life, which contributed to the creation of the company's esprit de corps. The breaking of the daily routine of class and rehearsal into a weekly meeting for 3 — 4 days of intensive work from dawn to dusk (and night), followed by 3 days at home, a weekly reunion, kept their dance fresh and that this rhythm lends the kibbutz dancers a joy of movement seldom encountered in other ensembles.

Kibbutz life also gives them the habit of cooperation and friendship so evident in their performances, as opposed to the spirit of competition and one-upmanship usually much in evidence on the dance-stage.

Perhaps this may be illustrated by a rather amusing example. Yair Vardi (a former Batsheva dancer, who later danced with Ballet Rambert and became the director of the English Dance Theatre) was invited to work for the kibbutz company. He decided to choreograph a piece with the (rather shopworn...) central idea of a group versus an outsider; the individual's plight in society. Maybe because he himself was born in a kibbutz, or because of the kibbutz-company's atmosphere, the scenes which he devised, in which a girl breaks free from the group, always ended with the others extending a helping hand to the soloist, never letting her down. He was rather surprised when I pointed out (in a review of the piece), that while he set out to depict isolation and loneliness, he in fact had unwittingly portrayed a collective.

"The Kibbutz Company... proved unusual in several respects. Directed by Yehudit Arnon, the dancers have developed a hearty style impressive for its fervor. No one preens, no one indulges in egotistical displays. Instead everyone always looks secure, confident and totally devoted on stage" — wrote Jack Anderson in "The New York Times". (October 1986)

Eva-Elisabeth Fischer said (in "Ballett International", nr. 7/8, 1986): "One-and-a-half years ago, the company still made an amateurish impression. But now one could enjoy perfectly professional dancers, a fact made especially remarkable by the fact that it is more difficult in Israel than in other countries to rise to an international level. For while young dancers elsewhere are busy refining their techniques and expanding their

stage experience the young Israelis are completing their military service.”

Perhaps because familiarity breeds contempt, or simply makes it more difficult to perceive changes, the Israeli dance-critics took a somewhat longer time to accept the idea that the Kibbutz Company had crossed the border of professionalism, perhaps due to the work of teachers and choreographers such as Cushman and Gene Hill-Sagan. Likewise, the kibbutz-ambience itself was for them rather obvious, even banal. This often made them oblivious to the special value of the company, so obvious to foreign writers.

Alas, even the leadership of the kibbutz-movement, the “owners” of the company, often took excellence for granted and often failed to provide the required financial and organisational help necessary for the company’s survival.

An important stage in the development of the company was, I believe, the collaboration with choreographers of renown, such as Jiri Kylián, who visited the company and was so impressed, that he gave it his duet “La Cathédrale Engloutie” free of charge and later taught them his masterpiece “Stoolgame”; or the continuing collaboration with Mats Ek, the Swedish choreographer. Another important creator who repeatedly worked with the company is Kei Takei, one of the most original choreographers today.

True choreographers are a very rare breed. The Kibbutz company is fortunate to have nurtured a young choreographer of its own, namely Rami Be’er, a product

of the school based at Ga’aton. He belongs to the young generation of dancers who have replaced the founders, among them such artists as Anat Asulin, Sivan Cohen or the remarkable Boaz Cohen.

Lately a certain trend may be discerned in the company’s programming, perhaps due to social demand (a much maligned term), for performances for young audiences. Rami Be’er – apart from his work for adults – has created three excellent group works, namely his “Peter and the Wolf” (Prokofiev), the witty “Carnaval des Animaux” (to the music of Saint-Saens) and his “Young Person’s Guide to the Orchestra” (to music by B. Britten). This last is influenced by the cartoons of Hoffnung, with fabulous masks by Yehudit Grünspahn and it, like all good works of art intended for children, enjoyable to all ages.

The kibbutz-movement’s role in the art of dance in Israel is not confined to the performances of the Kibbutz Dance Company. All over the country regional dance-studios educate young people, some of whom join the central company or become members of other professional companies. Indeed the kibbutz school-system is the only one which emphasises artistic education and encourages the study of dance as part of the school curriculum. The Kibbutz Teachers Seminary (in Tel Aviv) maintains a school for dance teachers. So perhaps it is not surprising that a substantial number of dancers and choreographers in Israel are kibbutz-born or educated. ■

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