

DANCING WITH THE DREAM

Synopsis

By the beginning of the 20th century, Eretz Israel had been a neglected province of the Turkish empire for four hundred years. The defeat of the Ottoman regime in the First World War caused the disintegration of that empire. In 1920 the British Mandate was established in Palestine. Within ten years, the country became a place where books and periodicals were published, exhibitions were held, and dance began to flourish. There was no one guiding this cultural development. Every artist proceeded at his own pace and in his chosen direction in relative isolation.

The majority of the immigrant population arrived from Eastern Europe, bringing with it the idea of creating a distinct, new Israeli art form. Modern dance quickly became accepted by the pioneers because its concepts suited their ideology of simplicity, freedom from the fetters of tradition, social justice and individual expression. Classical ballet was rejected, as it carried the stigma of "bourgeois art".

The honour of being the pioneer of modern dance in this country undoubtedly belongs to Baruch Agadati, who gave his first public concert in Jaffa in 1920. He was a dancer, painter, and later a cinematographer who performed his own dances in Eretz Israel and Europe. He was the first to try to create an authentic Israeli modern style in dance. His portraits of Hassidic, Yemenite or Arab characters were not copies of folk dance types. He used authentic ethnic material as building-blocks for his very personal creations. He possessed a keen sense of abstraction and minimalism. He was the first choreographer in this country to accompany his dances with the music of Schoenberg and Bartok. Later, he experimented with dances without musical accompaniment, which were rejected by his audience as too innovative. In fact, his very progressiveness which anticipated similar trends in American post-modernism by nearly 40 years, isolated him from his contemporaries. He did not establish any school and therefore had no students or followers.

Two years after Agadati's first solo concert in 1920, Margalit Ornstein arrived from Vienna and founded the first dance studio in the country. She aspired to create in Eretz Israel a universal dance based on the

Central European school. She believed that a new dance form must develop naturally and cannot be forced. Later, this approach would be adopted by most artists who immigrated from Central Europe in the 1930s.

Margalit Ornstein taught "Plastic Gymnastics and Rhythmic Exercises" – a combination of the instruction methods of Mensendieck, Emile Jacques-Dalcroze, Isadora Duncan and Rudolph von Laban. The classes were accompanied by improvisations on piano and drum. Her students wore white tunics in class, and tied their hair in bows, as was customary in Europe under the influence of Isadora Duncan. At first she held her classes in a studio with a paved stone floor, without a barre and a mirror. Occasionally the lessons took place on the roof of the house or on the beach.

In 1924, Rina Nikova arrived from Russia. A classically trained ballerina, she danced in the operas produced in the **Eretz Israeli Opera** founded by the conductor Golinkin (1923-1927). In the beginning of the 1930s, Rina Nikova dramatically changed her artistic work by creating her **Yemenite Ballet**, composed of young Yemenite women. She realised that the basic material for an independent Israeli dance could be gleaned from the rich movement, rhythms and musical traditions of the Yemenite Jews. She actually learned steps and songs from Rachel Nadav, the soloist of her company. In 1937, Rina Nikova and her Yemenite group embarked on a highly successful two year long tour of Europe. The group had contracted for a tour of the United States, but when the Second World War broke out in 1939, was forced to return home and dispersed. In later years Rina Nikova established the **Jerusalem Biblical Ballet** but it never re-gained the glory the **Yemenite Ballet** had achieved during the 1930s.

In the thirties the second generation of dance in Eretz Israel began to emerge. During that period, there were close contacts with Europe. Many distinguished foreign dancers visited the country, among them Uday Shankar, Ruth Sorell, Pauline Koner and Gertrud Kraus. Most of the local young dancers travelled to Europe for further studies.

The second generation of dancers included Judith

and Shoshana Ornstein, the twin daughters of Margalit. Although young in age, they were polished professional dancers, and their concerts and group works with pupils were popular. In 1929 Shoshana opened a branch of the Ornstein Studio in Jerusalem and two years later Judith opened another in Haifa. In the 1950s Judith became an important dance critic.

In 1928 the **Habima** theatre arrived in Tel Aviv and with it Deborah Bertonoff, daughter of the leading actor, Joshua Bertonoff. Later she studied under the supervision of Vera Skoronel in Berlin and Kurt Jooss in England. Deborah Bertonoff specialised in mime-dance performances and wrote articles and books.

Also in the mid 1930s, Dania Levin, a pupil of Margalit Ornstein and Jutta Klampft in Berlin, began performing in Tel Aviv. She later moved to Jerusalem and established the youth-theatre group **Urim**, which functioned constantly until 1968.

Yardena Cohen, daughter of Jews who had lived in Eretz Israel for six generations, went abroad to study in Vienna and Dresden, the two main centers of modern dance at that time. Returning home, she rejected the stylistic influence of her European teachers and used only those elements she found compatible with her own goals. Yardena didn't have to search for the Orient – she simply let it burst from within. The rhythms, landscapes and colors were an integral part of her being. She won the first prize in the 1937 National Dance Contest which took place in Tel Aviv.

With Hitler's rise to power, more Jewish dancers of European origin joined the meager world of Israeli dance. A combination of historical events brought many competent and original artists to our small country. Among the artists fleeing Nazi persecution were Tille Rössler (from the school and company of Palucca), Else Dublon, Katia Michaeli and Paula Padani, who had danced with Wigman. The most important 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. Her popularity in Europe was so great, that her photograph appeared on cigarette-box prizes, and her name found its way into texts of satiric literary cabarets. In 1935, when Gertrud was at the peak of her artistic success in Europe, she decided to immigrate to Eretz Israel.

In 1939, with the outbreak of the Second World War, immigration came to a halt. During the war, Eretz Israel became an isolated island where culture flourished.

Isolation increased the need for cultural self-reliance. Each dancer was often a choreographer in her own right, so it was natural to stage solo recitals and to establish groups and perform with students. Gertrud Kraus was the dominant figure, the guru of dance in Eretz Israel. Her group became the **Folk Opera's** official dance company during the years 1941–47. At

that time it was probably the only modern (as opposed to classical) dance group in the world to be attached to an opera house.

The third generation of dancers emerged in the 1940s. They received their education from local teachers and produced their own dance concerts. Among these were Naomi Aleskovsky and Hilde Kesten, who had studied with Gertrud Kraus and became soloists of her companies, and Rachel Nadav and Hassia Levi (Agron).

Swings, turns, jumps and angular movements were characteristic of the expressive dances of that time. Every dance had a clear subject matter, with a message to be transmitted. The repertoire of the period included universal, social, Jewish, Israeli and Biblical themes. Contemporary Jewish themes were seen in an unfavorable light by the third generation, who preferred the folk dance *Horas*, which received artistic treatment. These dynamic and joyful folk dances symbolized for them the revival of the nation. The use of heroic Biblical figures established their link with ancient Israel.

Because of the war, mounting tension and the horrifying news from Europe, escapist operettas began replacing the budding experimental works of the twenties and thirties. In spite of the intensive creative dance activity, the revolutionary ideas of modern dance brought from Europe did not always attain maturity.

The technique of the artists was based more on natural ability and acrobatics, less on systematically developed technique. The artists did not overlook physical ability, but they saw technique mainly as a means for enhancing creativity. Each teacher had her own system and defended it fiercely. Each teacher had her own disciples. Absolute loyalty to the studio was imperative. Their zeal furnished them with stamina to overcome the difficulties presented by the strenuous, hazardous conditions in a pioneering country.

In spite of the fact that choreographers who had come from Europe were familiar with professional stagecraft, they lacked the means to implement the achievements of modern scenic devices. The halls in which they had to perform were ill equipped and the technical apparatus rudimentary. Hence, costumes had to fill in for the lack of scenery. Often the dress was theatrical, stylish and supported the realistic themes. Important designers collaborating with choreographers were the painters Anatole Gurevitch, Genia Berger and Haya Alperovitch.

During the 1930s and 1940s the Israeli folk dance movement was emerging. Eretz Israel became a living laboratory, where the revolutionary ideas of Rudolph von Laban of creating new popular dance were tested. In the kibbutzim flourished the "Masachtot" as a form of agricultural celebrations revived from Biblical texts and rites which took on the modern form of "total theatre."

Professional dancers were deeply involved in creating the new Israeli folk dances. Lea Bergstein, (a dancer of Vera Skoronel's company who joined kibbutz Beit-Alfa and later moved to Ramat-Yohanan), Yardena Cohen and Sara Levi-Tanai created choreographed agricultural festivals that were used as models by many other choreographers.

One must remember that Eretz Israel was the only country in the world – apart from Central Europe – where the modern, expressionistic, German dance influence became dominant. Classical ballet played a relatively minor role. During the second World War, nearly all dance activities were destroyed in continental Europe. In the United States, anti-Nazi feelings created an unpropitious climate for a “German” style. In France and England ballet reigned supreme, and modern dance was hardly in evidence. Graham was still almost unknown except for a narrow audience of followers in New York. So, quite paradoxically, during the World War, the only place where European modern dance flourished was Eretz Israel, where refugees from the Nazis found their new homeland.

Nevertheless, the immigration wave of the late '30s brought several classical ballet dancers to Eretz Israel. Ada Trainin, Mia Pick, Elisheva Mona and Valentina Archipova-Grossman, all graduates of famous ballet-schools, began teaching in an adverse, even hostile atmosphere. The dominant figure in this sphere was Mia Arbatova, a former soloist of the **Riga Opera Ballet**. In 1943 she established her own studio in Tel Aviv, which became the center of classical ballet in the country for more than thirty years. In 1949, Arbatova, together with Mia Pick, Elisheva Mona and Irene Getry (who arrived from Europe after the war), established the **Folk Ballet**. This was the first cooperative project of professional dancers, with all four of them performing. It lasted only a year. In 1947 Edis de Phillipe established the **Israeli Opera**, the only place where the young generation of classical ballet dancers could work on a permanent basis.

In May 1948, the British Mandate ended and Ben-Gurion announced the establishment of the State of Israel. This was followed by Arab armies invading the country and Israel's War of Independence. During the short period between 1949 and 1952, tens of thousands of Jews reached the country and Israel went through a demographic upheaval. There were shortages of clothing, shelter and food.

In 1951, without any significant financial support Gertrud Kraus established the **Israel Ballet Theatre**, which presented only two programs. This was an attempt at establishing a professional group which could seriously demonstrate the achievements of European modern dance in this country while integrating the new influence of American modern dance.

At the beginning of the 1950s, foreign dance

companies began touring the country. For the first time after a decade of isolation, the standards of dance in Israel could be compared with that of other countries. Suddenly everybody realised that both modern and classical ballet in Israel were trailing behind the times. The dancers' technical level appeared mediocre, and what had been avant-garde and modern in the 1920s and 1930s seemed anachronistic and passé in the 1950s. The modern dancers had not developed an original movement vocabulary, and their dance productions looked provincial and amateurish compared with the professional companies visiting the country. Likewise, audiences that had welcomed local artists during the long years of isolation now preferred foreign companies.

Dancers of the older generation were confused. The time had come for reckoning and stock-taking. Younger dancers became more and more critical, dismissing out of hand the whole European concept, as represented by their teachers, without considering what concepts were worthwhile keeping and which should be discarded. The previously bustling activity slowed down.

While Central European dance declined in the cities, it was preserved in the kibbutzim, due to the practical need for focusing on creativity, rather than on technique. Kibbutz dancers, with no access to daily training, had to choreograph dances for their kibbutz festivals and its many social events.

During the transition period between European and American dance influence, three important and original achievements took place. Yet, during the '50s, they were not regarded as part of the artistic dance activity and not appreciated by the young generation of dancers. **The Inbal Dance Theatre** was established by Sara Levi-Tanai in 1949. Jerome Robbins recommended that the America-Israel Cultural Foundation support the company and invited Anna Sokolow to improve the company's technique. **Inbal** was acclaimed world-wide in the late 1950s but was dismissed as mere folk or ethnic dance by the local dance world.

In the 1950s, Dr. Moshe Feldenkrais created his system for improving movement ability. Noa Eshkol and Abraham Wachman created their system of movement notation. Both achievements hardly attracted the attention of the young generation of dancers.

The foundation of the State of Israel brought with it the arrival of dancers from the United States. Like artists in previous decades, the newcomers had to work under difficult conditions, only slightly improved from those of their predecessors. The newly arrived artists chose to deal with Israeli topics to express their feelings towards their new homeland, but continued to create in the Graham style to which they were accustomed. The decline of European dance in the country hastened the adoption of American dance. The achievements of

dance in Eretz Israel in previous decades were disregarded and the arriving artists were hardly aware of what had gone on before them.

The first to arrive was Ruth Harris, a ballet dancer, a former dancer in Jooss' group in Europe, who had fled to the United States during the Second World War. She was the first to teach American jazz in Israel. In 1951 Rina Shacham arrived. She performed her own solo concerts, danced in the **Israel Ballet Theatre** and shared a program with Tille Rössler – a rare occasion when the German and the American schools of modern dance met on-stage.

In 1954 Rena Gluck arrived. She was a graduate of the Juilliard Dance School in New York. She appeared in evenings of solo dances and established a small group with her pupils. Her studio quickly became the center where young Israeli dancers received their first opportunity to study the updated American Graham technique. This provided them with a methodical system of technique, together with a new movement vocabulary. The young generation of the 1950s was able to absorb the Graham style quickly, as modern dance had never been alien to the spirit of the country.

In contrast to previous decades, relations between the young dancers were cordial. They realized that some sort of central performing body was necessary. The three dominant dancers, Rena Gluck, Naomi Aleskovsky and Rina Shacham, established **Bimat Mahol** (Dance Stage) where they choreographed and danced with their students. Two different programs were presented. **Bimat Mahol** received no financial support and consequently dispersed.

In 1962 Anna Sokolow established the **Lyric Theatre** with meager support by the America-Israel Cultural Foundation. In contrast to **Bimat Mahol**, Sokolow was the sole choreographer. She prepared four programs, which included some of her masterpieces, such as "Rooms" and "Dreams." But Sokolow did not settle in Israel, and after each program she returned to the U.S., leaving her dancers to their own devices while waiting for her next visit.

With no professional permanent dance group and no financial support, the crisis deepened. In 1962 Judith Ornstein described 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 of a high standard was seen. Many of the young and talented dancers 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."

In the 1950s Batsheva de Rothschild became interested in Israel. She brought Martha Graham's company and other artists and teachers to this country.

She gradually became more and more involved in the problems of dance in Israel and decided to establish a professional modern dance company to solve the problems of the young dancers. She decided to establish a repertory dance company, not a company working with one choreographer only, as was the custom in that period. She persuaded Martha Graham, whom she had helped sponsor for many years, 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.

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