



Thoughts on Curtain Up 2004

Ruth Eshel

Two or three years ago I was asked by a well-known critic from abroad, who was very knowledgeable about Israeli dance, whether the blossoming of dance in Israel was not temporary – was there a new generation following Liat Dror and Nir Ben-Gal, Adi Sha-al and Noa Wertheim, Noa Dar, Ido Tadmor and Inbal Pinto. I did not know how to respond. It was a time of new economic decrees, and the fear was that a new generation would not be able to grow even if new talent were to become apparent. The last Curtain Up (*Haramat Masach*) festival indicated that indeed a new, fresh, bold generation has evolved. However, this must not be taken for granted.

All agree that modern dance in Israel has been flourishing for over a decade. The abundance of new dances presented in Curtain Up 2004, celebrating its fifteenth year, and the rich, varied program of the International Exposure event, presented to guests from abroad following Curtain Up, are uplifting indications of the thriving of dance in Israel – despite the *Intifada*, suicide bombings and economic decrees.

Again, this flourishing must not be taken for granted, especially in view of the difficult history of artistic dance in Israel. This dance

was created "from scratch", as part of the creation of a Hebrew culture, and its explorations took it along convoluted roads, often hitting dead ends. Throughout Israel's modern history, dance was a neglected stepchild in terms of budgetary allocations, and this has not changed to this day. At the same time, Israeli dance has become a leading performance art in Israel: original, fresh, backed by quality performers, it is Israel's best ambassador abroad. No other performance art in Israel attracts such large young audiences. Every day a new premiere is performed at the Susan Dellal Center in Tel Aviv; a metropolis indeed.

This was not the case in the past. The establishment of professional dance companies has started quite late, after music, theater and the plastic arts, with the establishment of the Batsheva Dance Company in 1964.¹ For over two decades, especially from the mid-50s to the late 70s, the gaze of Israeli dance turned outwards. Most creations were imported ones, and the large companies distinguished themselves with repertoires signed by well-known choreographers from around the world. This raised the professional level of performance and production, and educated dancers and audiences artistically, but there was no confidence in the abilities

of Israelis as either choreographers or artistic directors. The great breakthrough of fringe dance only took place in the late 70s, with creators and dancers such as Ruth Ziv-Ayal, Rina Schenfeld, Oshra Elkayam, Nava Zuckerman, Alice Dor-Cohen, Sally Anne-Friedland, Dorit Shimron, Ronit Land, Hedda Oren, Rachel Kafri and myself. For the first time, a generation of independent creators was growing in Israel, working under difficult conditions, pioneers in their own way. Since there were no established dance venues, some performed at the Acco festival for Different Theater (*Teatron Acher*) (1981) or in other such performance venues. Shades of Dance (*Gvanim Bemachol*) (1984) and later Curtain Up, established by the Dance Department of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport, provided venues for independent creators and encouraged the flourishing of fringe dance. The Susan Dellal Center (established 1989), directed by Yair Vardi, provided a home for dancers and venues for companies of different sizes. The artistic directors of Curtain Up were Israeli: David Dvir, Daniella Michaeli, Eran Baniel, and Nava Zuckerman, the present artistic director. The last three are associated to a large degree with the theater, reflecting the open view of dance as an art that combines many art forms.

Nir Ben-Gal and Liat Dror, Inbal Pinto, Noa Wertheim, Adi Sha-al, Yasmeen Godder, Shlomi Biton, Renana Raz and many others were discovered when they presented works in Curtain Up events. In many of the dances performed in Curtain Up 2004 Ohad Naharin's style is evident, and lately Yasmeen Godder's fast, sharp, frantic style is also recognizable. But some individuals develop their own movement style. Shlomi Biton's movement in *One* is characterized by gestures that are like disrupted movement thoughts that seem to emerge without control but are actually designed in strong, clear lines, meticulously delineating the movement. The couple Mia Stern and Tomer Sharabi, in *Walking to This Day*, have created an interesting movement language: two bodies stuck to each other by the torso form a four-legged creature, it is unclear which limb belongs to whom, and the movement combinations are startling. In her work *Ishama*, Shelly Alalouf tries to depart from traditional oriental belly dancing in order to create a free-style dance, in a personal expression of contemporary dance. Emanuel Gat turned to the Salsa dance for enrichment and inspiration in his work *The Rite of Spring*, where five dancers expect a draw of luck to determine which of them is to be sacrificed – all the while exchanging partners in flowing, round movements,

Inner Pocket by
Shlomit Fundaminsky,
photo: Eyal Landsman

Now I Want to Forget
by Sahar Azimi, dancers: Sahar Azimi
photo: Eyal Landsman



unconcerned, as if this were a common party event.² Inbal Pinto and Avshalom Polak, in their work *What Good Would the Moon Be*, have created a fantastic world that brings to mind works by Walt Disney. Pinto and Polak have created a kaleidoscope of loveable, strange figures that shyly, mischievously sneak in through concealed openings and doors in the stage walls. As in their past works, the set, props, costumes, wigs and lighting have an important role; unlike their past works, this dance is performed

by an entire company - a dozen accomplished dancers-performers. The movement is mostly broken, pantomime-like, with exaggerated gestures and acrobatics, at times bringing to mind silent movies. The dance and choreography aspects are richer than in the past, in a nice attempt to balance movement and props. Renana Raz, the youngest of the lot, presented an entire program in the movement-theater style, titled *Phantoms*. It is a psychological work dealing with a seemingly ordinary family,

whose members are gradually stripped of their external shells.

Yasmeen Godder's talent erupts once more. Her work *Strawberry Cream and Gun Powder* addresses local reality. Pain is translated to hyperactive movements, in what seems to be an attempt to cover and hold back the pain, abundant details and compressed movement in impulses that bring about quivering and hysterical laughter. Godder alienates emotion and significance, and

seems to move between Pina Bausch and Trisha Brown. Drama is cleared of any human vitality and the dancers sound like cartoon figures, while interwoven moments of human, emotional pain draw us back to reality.

In Curtain Up 2004 the development of artists who stood out in former Curtain Up events is evident. The names of new, independent creators appear alongside those of veteran choreographers, despite the absence of any outstanding talent. The present Curtain Up event also enabled the wonderful dancer Talia Paz to be seen in full bloom in *Bliss*, a work created for her by Rami Levi.

So dance is flourishing and we may be pleased, and yet I claim that there is room for concern. The artists' economic conditions are constantly deteriorating. After Curtain Up - what next? How do we continue to stimulate creation? Most veteran creators do not have their own home and rent studios

for enormous amounts of money. Most dancers work without pay and must gain money in other lines of work. For young, undiscovered artists, this is par for the course, but over time this is exhausting and threatens creativity. There is a real danger that independent veteran creators, such as Pinto, Dar, Godder and others, who are the greatest assets of original Israeli dance, will be worn down and the present thriving will come to an end. Thus I reiterate: we must not take this flourishing for granted. The time has come for dance to receive its deserved share of Israel's cultural budget. How long can it remain the gifted stepchild?

¹ From the 1920s until the establishment of the Batsheva Dance Company, the European Ausdruckstanz style was prevalent in Israel, and although the artists were professionals, the performance conditions were usually not.

² Although the premiere of Gat's *The Rite of Spring* was not in this year's Curtain Up but in International Exposure, he was discovered as a creator in the previous Curtain Up festival.

Strawberry Cream and Gun Powder
by Yasmeen Godder and the Bloody Bench Players,
dancer: Inbal Yaacobi, photo: Tamar Lamm

