

# The Flourishing of Contemporary Dance in Israel Today

Ruth Eshel

The flourishing of dance in Israel for the last two decades is not self-evident, and is a sequel of a long and convoluted path for a nation with a rather short history of concert dance. For over forty years (1920 – 1964) Ausdruckstanz was created in pioneer conditions in the Yishuv,<sup>1</sup> when creativity was not supported by technical skill; after thirteen years (1964-1977) of modern American dance influence when professional companies were established, raising technical levels but privileging choreographers from abroad that brought an end to local creativity; after almost a decade of fringe development, bringing about an abundance of local creators—finally, in the 1990s, dance in Israel has reached maturity. A balance has been gained between dance in the leading

large companies and in the rich fringe, and between creativity and technique.

## Independent Choreographers

The development of modern dance at the beginning of the 90's flourished thanks to the successful timing of establishing a number of frameworks, that absorbed, channeled and encouraged the increasing waves of achievement of independent fringe choreographers. The most important, was the establishment of the Suzanne Dellal Center in 1990, under the artistic direction of Yair Vardi. For the first time, dance had a home that provided a forum for achievement, which also encouraged and initiated frameworks for projects, under professional conditions, with exposure

to national and international media. The "Curtain Up" ("Haramat Masach") project, an important framework, supporting productions of independent experienced choreographers, was established in 1989.

The permanent frameworks for Israeli independent creators and the support of the Ministry of Science, Culture and Sports yielded fruit. Following "Curtain Up" (1994) the critic Giora Manor wrote: "Something good is happening in the young Israeli choreography field. There are always some works which are over affected by known examples, there is no escape from that. However, in fact, that same spirit of self-creation, of personal expression characterizing the Israeli dance in the 1930's and 1940's has returned, when each dancer is



ארוחת ערב מאת מיה שטרן  
 ותומר שרעבי, צילום: אייל לנדסטון  
*Supper* by Maya Stern and  
 Tomer Sharabi, photo: Eyal Landsman

required to create on his/her own, and not only be a skilled performer and a brilliant technician" (*Israel Dance*, no. 3 1994, p. 32).

The distinguished, though partial list of independent choreographers, who started creating and performing in the 1990's includes Noa Dar, Anat Daniely, Inbal Pinto & Avshalom Polak, Tamar Borer, Inbal Ya'akobi, Ido Tadmor, Shlomit Fundaminsky, Yossi Yungman, Amit Goldberg & Anat Dolev (Da Da Dance), Yasmeen Godder, Yoram Carmi (Fresco Group), Michal Hermann & Emmanuel Gat. This list is joined by senior choreographers/dancers among them Rina Schenfeld, Nimrod Freed, Mimi Ratz, Amir Kolban (Kolban Dance), Yossi Tamim, Tamir Gintz (Kame'a Dance Company) Anat

Shamgar with improvisation programs and Sally Ann Friedland (Dance Drama Sally Friedland). The soloist dancer Talia Paz put on programs choreographed especially for her thus opening a new path for dance performances centered by the performing artist. If in the late 1990's there was a question whether this was a temporary blossom related to one creator or another, this concern has vanished. In the 2000's a new generation of creators emerged, thickening and enriching the activity, including creators/dancers such as Shlomi Bitton, Renana Raz, Niv Sheinfeld, Odelya Kuperberg, Ronit Ziv, Anat Grigorio, Michal Mualem, Arkadi Zaides, Sahar Azimi, Maya Stern, Tomer Sharabi, Idan Cohen, Sa'ar Magal, Yossi Berg and Hillel Kogan, and that is only a partial list.

### The Leading Dance Companies

In the 1990's the Batsheva Dance Company and the Kibbutz Contemporary Dance Company turned from repertoire dance companies into dance companies headed by a choreographer with a voice of his own. In 1991, the choreographer Ohad Naharin became the director of the Batsheva Dance Company. He reestablished the company's presence as an internationally important dance group, his style being a source of inspiration for many Israeli choreographers.

Choreographer Rami Be'er has led the Kibbutz Contemporary Dance Company to the center of the dance map in Israel. Be'er lifted a social and political flag in the 1980's. In the last

decade, his interest in the architectural aspect of dance has increased.

Classical ballet in Israel moves along a different path, detached from modern dance. In the period of the Yishuv, it even encountered ideological objection. Nevertheless, with vision and adherence Berta Yampolski and Hillel Markman succeeded in establishing The Israeli Ballet raising dozens of good dancers. Yampolski has been the company's sole Israeli choreographer for decades and in fact, the company does not meet the need of raising a generation of creators in this genre.

to prove their connection to the land, its history, and the fact that they were Israelis, nowadays the choreographers and the dancers are people who have been born in Israel and live in it.

The Israelis are part of a people with an ancient and outstanding history, which has known within one generation the holocaust and the miracle of the fulfillment of the dream of establishing its own State. Yet, reality bites into the dream, criticizes it and tries to strip it and present it as an innocent and empty tool. Therefore, in Israel, maybe more than elsewhere, there is

and then dancers. Frankness and straightforwardness characterize their dance which is not polished to the end, does not shine as extra fine European porcelain.

The intensiveness of life, the need to put on defense masks in view of the new existential social and political news repeatedly flooding us, to go on livings "as if normally" require and generate super-energy. They grant the Israeli dance inner vitality, which stores within it energies on the verge of explosion, blocked with ties of restraint, and eventually explode. Therefore, in



דואטים מאת ניב שיינפלד ואורן לאור, צילום: גדי דגון  
*Duets by Niv Sheinfeld and Oren Laor, photo: Gadi Dagon*



עבודה עברית מאת רננה רז, צילום: אייל לנדסמן  
*Hebrew Work by Renana Raz, photo: Eyal Landsman*

### Research

In 1984, director Gila Toledano of the Israeli Dance Library, initiated the documentation enterprise of the dance in Israel, and two years later the Dance Library was transferred to a specious and respectable hall in Beit Ariela. In addition, some of the universities in the country opened courses for higher education studies in dancing, and recently the number of Israelis studying for their Ph.D in this field has increased.

### Reflections on locality

The pioneers who came to the land of Israel dreamed about creating Israeli dance or "Mahol Ivri" (Hebrew dance). Contrary to the past, when the people engaging in dancing came to Israel from all over the world and desired

tension between reality and the dream. Choreographers and dancers are influenced and affected by their surroundings, which finds expression in the text written with the body.

What does characterize the Israeli dancers? In comparison to dancers in the world, the Israeli dancers are generally older. Most of them have completed their military service and are exposed to the daily political pressures shared by all Israelis, to the competition of a country blessed with creative talented and ambitious people gathered in a small piece of land. The relative maturity of the Israeli dancers equips them with a "Life history" – a reservoir of experiences, thoughts and memories. Their body text is rich, blunt and impertinent. When they dance, it seems that there are no partitions between them and the viewers. The viewers see first people,

contrast to the long and round lines of the classical Ballet projecting the security and calmness of the genre, the Israeli dance prefers energies which model the body outline from within and create sentences in different lengths, without a fixed rhythm. These seem like little pieces of thoughts in a feverish mind, springing up and declining and alternatively being cut short in a sudden fall.

Dance in Israel is mostly expressive and content permeates through it, undergoes abstraction and is presented with restraint. In its lyrical and poetic moments, the dance here is in a state of some glumness of sadness and restraint. In the body there is no room for dolling up or embellishment. It is neither a dance which expresses joy nor a dance which spreads its wings to open spaces. It shuts itself in rooms, halls or clubs, maybe as self



defense from suicide bombs or maybe in order to keep its strength, knowing that it shall be needed, and it cannot be dispersed in vain.

Fashionable topics in the global dance, engaging a lot in apocalypse, fear and aggressiveness, find their way into the Israeli dance as well. However, while engaging in them overseas appears to be an expression of general concern about the world's condition, in Israel these issues receive a close and genuine significance. The Israeli is sated with and tired of violence. He/she is targeted ruthlessly and does not get excited by direct and naturalistic violence on stage. In the last decade there are more dances dealing with local political topics, for example, *Yoman Miluim* (Reserve logbook) (1989) by Rami Be'er or *Virus* (2001) by Ohad Naharin.

Some works turn to fantasy, aspiring to reach a different place, exotic, which

has also led to a natural acceptance of the Orient. The integration of Israeli dance into the Orient is not an artificial attempt to deal with eastern figures as was the situation during the beginning of the Yishuv period, but a slow and permeating flow of a cultural encounter between the Oriental music, European and American modern and postmodern dance.

Integrating oriental belly dance as a legitimate component in the modern world of dance in Israel, in the mid nineties, was introduced by the couple Liat Dror and Nir Ben-Gal. The two, who are not of oriental (mizrachi) origin,<sup>2</sup> started engaging in this domain, which till that time had been in a Procrustean bed of entertainment, weddings and dubious clubs. In Dror's belly dance there is no shred of Orientalism, as was the case in the dance of the early Yishuv settlement.

Within the flourishing of dance on it

the pop, the Gipsy and the Yemenite. Lately choreographer Renanna Raz created, *Kazuarot* (2007), which draws inspiration from movement materials of the Druze minority in Israel. The author of these lines has been trying for years to create a movement lexicon for artistic expression, inspired by the dance tradition of the Ethiopian community.

The flourishing in Israel embraces various aspects of dance, granting it depth, yet it could be said that a large part of the processes described above exist also in other dance domains in the world. The art theoretician Gideon Ofrat (1984) wrote: "The other locality does not presume to rely on a definition of artistic locality. This definition will always be artificial, forced and its products unsuccessful. In other words, it is not important to us if something of our other locality will resemble something of any other



אינטר פייס Face מאת אמיר קולבן, צילום: מאשה ויזל  
Inter Face by Amir Kolben, Kolben Dance Company, photo: Masha Weizel



דואטים מאת נוב שיינפלד ואורן לאור, צילום: גדי דגון  
Duets by Niv Sheinfeld and Oren Laor, photo: Gadi Dagon

reflects the Israeli well-know tendency of "clearing one's head", to gather forces and tackle with reality. Such pieces of works are, for example, *Let's Escape* by Anat Daniely (2002), *Clouds and Soup* (2007) by Noa Dar and *When she Reached the Sun* (2005) by Rami Be'er. And such are also the works of Inbal Pinto and Avshalom Polak.

Life in the Middle-East and the constant friction with it has not only changed the body contour of the Israeli, who is tall, strong and more sun tanned than its ancestors, but

various shades, it is surprising how little is reflected of the multi-cultures of the different communities of Israelis and minorities with their ethnic traditions. This is particularly prominent in light of the fact that the immigration to Israel from around the world has never ceased. In this context the works of Sarah Levi Tanai's in Inbal Dance Theatre with Israelis of Yemenite origin should be noted, the dances created by Moshe Efrati inspired by the Ladino,<sup>3</sup> as well as works, surprising in their freshness by Barak Marshal, who connected between the Hassidic,

locality [...] to meet the place means – to meet the nature of the place, its history and/or the art of a place [...] other locality of physical qualities, of life symbols and real myths of the present society" ("Other locality" in *Can* (here), p. 53).

The art of dance plays on an instrument whose architectonic anatomic structure exists in all continents and expresses the emotional, the mental and the creative range which is shared by all human beings. Nevertheless, each person is a whole world of nuances, and each



ציר מעגל הלב מאת שרונה פלורסהיים,  
צילום: איגור קרוטרו  
*The Heart Axis Circle* by Sharona  
Floresheim, photo: Igor Krotero



בוא תרגיש מאת סהר עזימי,  
צילום: גדי דגון  
*Come, Feel* by Sahar Azimi,  
photo: Gadi Dagon

society is not a duplication of the next society. Within the narrow framework of nuances, of subtleties which cannot be measured scientifically, and belong to the subjective world of art, there exists that unique voice.

Life is a journey of a creative process, dynamic and changing which is reflected in the dance. History shows that in a people's life there are ups and downs, and we do not know whether we are in the middle of climbing toward additional peaks, or that descending the slope is already in the doorway. Therefore, all that was written here is within the limits of examining the present, which is the edge of the past.

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<sup>1</sup> Yishuv refers to the pioneer period before the statehood of Israel.

<sup>2</sup> Mizrahi Jews literally means "Eastern" and refers to Jews living in North Africa and the Middle East.

<sup>3</sup> Refers to the culture of Sephardic Jews who were expelled from Spain in 1492. Many of whom settled in Middle Eastern countries as well as North Africa, the Levant, and various European centers.