



הודו לאה מאת ברק מרשל, צילום: אסקף
Aunt Lea by Barak Marshal, Inbal
Dance Theater, photo: Askef

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Connection and Detachment Junctions between Concert Dance and the Ethnic Dance in Israel

The relationship between Concert Dance (Artistic dance) and Ethnic Dance in Israel has undergone many changes. During the Period of the early Yishuv¹ there was cross fertilization between these two dance genres, however, after the State was established, concert dance and the ethnic dance started to move apart. This article aims at following the key-points of connection, detachment and the option of rapprochement between the two aforementioned genres from the view point of a person who was raised on concert dance.

Several clarification sentences are required regarding the central characterizations of the terms the article will refer to. The term "ethnic dance" serves as an umbrella assembling all dance expressions responding to the needs of a society, whose members have common genetic, linguistic and cultural relations, with a special emphasis on cultural tradition (Keallinohomoku, 1983). According to Bahat (2004, pp.28-32), this relates to the widest dance basis from which several dancing types split up: ritual dance, folklore dance, social dance and concert dance. Concert dance is located at the upper edge of the pyramid, artistically speaking.

Linking up during the Yishuv Period

The source of the close ties between concert dance and ethnic dance in the Yishuv period lies in the artistic concept the creators brought with them from Europe upon immigrating to Israel. Artists of *ausdruckstanz* (dance of expression) rejected classical ballet in all its components, arguing that this type of dance represented conventions of the old world. On the other hand, they treated with appreciation performances of ethnic soloists who performed in Europe between the two World Wars. These represented in their eyes the genuine tradition of a nation reinforced in the 19th century following the national struggles for independence in Europe, known as the "Spring of Nations".

The technical level of the *ausdruckstanz*

dancers was not high and relied considerably on talent, musicality and natural ability. Therefore, the ethnic dancers' ability and the rich movement language of this genre were appreciated, being conspicuous on the poor movement language of the *ausdruckstanz* at the beginning of its route. Although *ausdruckstanz* was considered *avant-garde*, the artists integrated ethnic dances in their repertoire.

The dancer and choreographer Ruth Saint-Denis created her repertoire with the inspiration of exotic ethnical cultures. Rudolf Von Laban claimed that part of the *ausdruckstanz* artists' role was to create "movement choirs" instead of traditional folk dances. He created amateur mass performances on topics related to trade unions, and all in the "spirit of the period" (Manor, 1978, p. 33). The classical ballet also integrated ethnic dances into ballets created by Marius Petipa at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century.

Dance artists who immigrated to Israel during the period of the Yishuv brought along the approach of encouraging ties between concert and ethnic dance. The practical expression of this approach was in the aspiration to create a Hebrew dance with its various components – concert dance and folk dances. The choreographers searched for inspiration sources and turned to the small Yemenite community and the local Arabs. Their way of life, which seemed to have remained still and unchanged with time, ignited their imagination. The Jews of Yemenite origin were identified as continuing the Jewish history, interrupted by Exile 2000 years earlier, whereas the admiration for the "noble" Orientals was affected by the European Orientalism.

The repertoire of the concert and classical ballet artists included ethnic dances. A well-known dance, for instance, was *Vodka* (estimated date, the beginning of the 30's) by Gertrud Kraus. The ballet dancer Mia Arbatova performed Russian, Spanish and Oriental dances. A prominent example

of integration between concert dance and folk dance was Rina Nikova's biblical ballet group where young dances of Yemenite origin performed. Despite the dominant Yemenite ethnic component, the group was considered part of the modern dance activity in the Yishuv, and participated in the dance contest in 1937². At the same time, the dance artists in the Yishuv, Leah Bergstein and Yardena Cohen, being the most prominent among them, contributed to creating new holiday pageants related to the land. Part of the pageant dances were adopted by the people and turned into folk dances.

Detachment

The cross fertilization between concert and ethnic dance ended after the establishment of the State. The detachment between the two genres was related to demographic changes occurring in the first years of the State and the turnabout the concert dance has undergone. During the Yishuv period most of the Jewish population came from Central and Eastern Europe. However, following the War of Independence and the establishment of the State a massive immigration of Mizrahi (Eastern) Jews, driven away from the Arab countries arrived, changing the demographic balance between Ashkenazi and Mizrahi Jews. This massive immigration was compounded by the immigration of remnant refugees from Europe and the immigration from the United States and other English speaking countries. Thus, the assembly of Jews from all over the world in Israel aggravated the problem of Jewish cultural mixture in the country. Attempting to tackle this problem the policy of the "melting pot" was consolidated, holding the view that the heritage of each community was not to be fostered in order to enable the forming of a common core for all the communities. Out of this core, so it was hoped, the Israeli culture would be formed³. With the background of this policy, seeking to weaken the uniqueness of each community and strengthen the common core, the

enthusiasm for ethnic and oriental dance faded away as representing in appearance and culture the Jews of ancient Israel. The phenomenon of pushing tradition away, up to feeling ashamed of it, characterized a considerable part of the immigrant population, desiring to expedite the process of their becoming Israelis. On the other hand, there were immigrants who wanted to preserve the tradition they were raised on and felt at home with.

The second significant change which occurred in Israel is the style transformation of concert dance. *Ausdruckstanz* was rejected and instead, the American dance in the Martha Graham style was gradually adopted, granting the dancers a stylized movement lexicon and a training methodology. The ambition to professionalize on a universal level was top priority of the "new" concert dance, whereas the aspiration to create *Makhol Ivri* (Hebrew Dance) was postponed. Furthermore, associating with the ethnic was perceived as a disadvantage, which might color the dance work with localism and provinciality, while the dance artists were striving for the peak of international artistic level.

Inbal Dance Theatre

With the background of the demographic and artistic revolution and the "Melting Pot" policy during Israel's first years, Inbal Dance Theatre was established by Sara Levi Tanai. This was an example of creating a modern dance theatre nourished on ethnic materials. The timing of establishing the company created opportunity for new avenues for it yet closed others. The young country's relations with the United States, for instance, led to the establishment of the American Fund for Institutions in Israel (later called the America-Israel Cultural Foundation), which initiated the choreographer Jerome Robbins' visit to the country (1951)⁴. With his recommendation, the Fund began supporting Inbal, the first group that was able to work as a professional group in the years when there was no government support

for concert dance. On the one hand, establishing a group on an ethnic basis was contrary to the concept of the "melting pot". Therefore, it is possible to understand why during the Yishuv period the Biblical ballet of Nikova, and dances produced by her colleagues with ethnic inspiration were welcomed by all society strata and the national institutions. On the other hand, after the State was established, a group identified with an ethnic community, even a dance group engaging in concert dance (there were many arguments regarding the question whether Inbal was a folklore group or not, and what were its objectives)⁵, was a deviation from the declared policy of the "melting pot". Moreover, it was precisely Inbal's great success during its tours abroad, as the first representative of the dance in Israel, which intensified the ambivalent attitude towards it. The pride its success evoked was accompanied by discontent that an ethnic group, identified with a small specific community was representing Israel's dance abroad, precisely during the years the young state desired to project unity and not split and multi-cultures.

The detachment between Inbal Dance Theatre and the modern dance community in Israel was a two-way estrangement. The troupe was composed of dancers and a choreographer of Yemenite origin. Tanai was nourished on the creativity of her Yemenite dancers, their body language, the movement materials and its quality, and succeeded in expressing their special ethnic aspect. The choreographic simplicity of the works Inbal put on stemmed not only from artistic considerations of essence and clarity, which Levy-Tanai was blessed with, but it also matched the dancers' technical qualifications. On the one hand, Inbal withdrew into itself and even maintained that there was ethnic discrimination (Toledano, 2005, pp. 21-32). On the other hand, many of the dancers who were not members of the community could not find a supported professional framework (until the establishment of Bat-Sheva Company in 1964, and this too with

private and not governmental support), regarded Inbal as the only troupe with a support enabling it to act in a professional format. Inbal benefited from conditions that were not available to other modern dance companies, which were in deep financial crisis. Many articles were published in the newspapers under titles such as, "Artistic dance in Israel – No-man's-land" (Eshel, 2001, p.103).

In this context I would like to mention a small personal story. In the middle of the 50's, when I was a 14 year old ballet student I saw a performance of Inbal Dance Theatre at the amphitheatre located in the beautiful big garden of Rothschild Center at central Carmel. The theatre was full. As introduction to the performance Levi-Tanai gave some explanations regarding the costumes and the movement materials of her company. There was festive excitement in the air. The dancers, looking wonderful, and the very special choreography received thunderous applause. Yet to me, who dreamed of becoming a dancer, it was clear that this wonderful group is designed for the physical and mental qualities of the Yemenite community. As a young girl who was not a member of that community, and who grew up on classical ballet and later on modern dance, I knew I could not become part of it. I dare assume that this is how generations of dancers felt, that despite the great appreciation of Levi-Tania's work, they understood that her choreography was not designated for them.

With the years, the reservoir of dancers of Yemenite origin was depleted; the better ones left in order to find their own voice and expand their horizons. Only a small number of the old dancers remained in the group, and the lines were filled with non Yemenite dancers. The new dancers had enhanced technical qualifications compared with the old ones, however, the choreography and the movement language, which a priori were based on the body and the spirituality of the dancer of a Yemenite origin, and not

on the ability of a professional dancer regardless of any specific ethnic origin, have lost their magic and seemed foreign and artificial.

As years went by a unique Inbal language was formed, and would be tested by its ability to be accepted as a net movement lexicon capable of enriching the artistic dance and preserve its vitality and the movement interest also when it is performed by professional dancers without any communal belonging.

As the professional modern dance in Israel was losing interest in ethnic dance it was also getting further away from the Israeli folk dances. In the 50's there was acceleration in creating folk dances, out of which Jonathan Carmon created what is called in the slang of the creators of folk dances "Israeli dance for the stage". Carmon developed a folk dance style designated for the stage in which he integrated basic elements of the Israeli folk dances typical of that period (step, bouncing, skipping, running etc.) and movement elements from ethnic dances of Israel's communities. In addition, he combined in his works jumps like grand jeté, turns like chainé, grand battement, attitude and balancé. Carmon had also a great influence in the perception of using direction and space. Along the years, generations of choreographers emerged, most of whom were his students, developing this dance direction in their own way, however not all of them were blessed with Carmon's talent.

The question may be asked why movements, identified with classical ballet were interwoven into the "Israeli dance for the stage". Apparently, Ausdruckstanz was a more natural partner for cooperation and enrichment. I believe that the reason lies in the fact that Ausdruckstanz was the source from which the said basic materials were retrieved. Ausdruckstanz was unable to provide the new and significant movement lexicon, beyond what it had already provided. The additional potential partner for enrichment was Graham's modern dance, which in fact was rich



Torus by Sahar Azimi, Inbal Dance Theater, photo: Askef

טורוס תאטר סהר עזימי, צילום: אסקף

in movement materials but its style bore the creator's personal imprint. Thus, elements of the classical ballet movement lexicon found their way into the "Israeli dance for the stage". Furthermore, it should be noted that Carmon studied dancing with Gertrud Kraus and Mia Arbatova and his artistic career began in concert dance, turned to folk dances and from there reached the "Israeli dance for the stage". An additional aspect of the combination between folk dance and ballet was the habit, already popular in the 50's, of sending young girls to ballet lessons as part of their cultural enrichment. Most of them had no aspirations of becoming professional dancers, but many were attracted to the stage. Folk dance groups provided a framework

for these ambitions, and gained public appreciation. Representative Folk Dance groups were established in the framework of a municipal or a regional authority granting the dancers the joy of dancing and the pleasure of being exposed to stage lights. It was also a way of seeing the world, by participating in the many tours taken by the groups, representing Israel. Frequently, the professional kernel of these groups was built around those dancers who had acquired basic knowledge of classical ballet and dancers who had studied Jazz. In the 70's Jazz became very popular in Israel, following the success of the Shimon Brown "JazzPlus" dance group (1969-1972), and the international prestige of Alvin Ailey Dance Theatre.

The young dancers, who acquired elementary technique in artistic dance, became teachers giving lessons to their dance groups and created their own teaching methods. Out of these youngsters emerged a considerable number of choreographers who created "folk dances" for the masses and also "Israeli dance for the stage" for the representative groups. In both cases they specialized in working with amateurs. Some of the members of these groups reached the professional modern dance companies which were always in need for male dancers. On the other hand, choreographers of the folk dance representative groups, who desired to work with professional dancers and companies, encountered difficulties, stemming from lack of appreciation to their artistic qualifications.

Where did this lack of appreciation, stem from? It appears that the more the choreographers of the "Israeli dance for the stage" integrated movement elements identified with modern and classical dance, as well as trendy folk dances of various nations, the more the tendency of a stage "show" increased, the more disrespect for the works was felt. While the borrowed movement materials from modern dance and classical ballet seemed exciting to the dancers and the choreographers operating in the field of "Israeli dance for the stage", who regarded it as "professionalism", the professional concert dance artists saw things in a different light. The borrowed movement elements, performed by amateurs, left no impression on them. Furthermore, professional choreographers, particularly in the postmodern dance genre, wanted to keep away from familiar movement materials, each trying to express a personal voice and imprint a specific movement mark.

Recently, the choreography of the "Israeli dance for the stage" has become more complex and the standard of dancers has risen, however the movement language, which is the core of the matter, seems like an "odd customer" of modern dance, eclectic movement materials. Sometimes it is

expressive or entertaining, and it has some bearing, generally superficial, on folklore. Many of the creators in the field also lack good taste. Choosing a topic or a title for a dance, related to Israel, or relying on a melody written by an Israeli composer to a song in Hebrew cannot replace an original movement lexicon.

Nevertheless, the achievement of these choreographers or the activity of these groups should not be underestimated. A phenomenon, which might be unique to Israel, was created of thousands of amateur youngsters dancing in folk dance events and in the representative folk dance groups with passion and love of dance, to the sounds of Israeli songs, and that in an era when the Internet and other temptations are at our threshold. This is a wonderful phenomenon that must be preserved and fostered while encouraging good taste. Nevertheless, this is, most probably, not the artistic product the pioneers of folk dance and the "Israeli dance for the stage" dreamt of. One should distinguish between the educational phenomenon of thousands of youngsters dancing and being ostentatious about creating

"Israeli dance for the stage". Where have we lost our way?

The first folk dances were created out of the desire to create a unique Israeli style, aiming to get as far as possible from the characteristics of the other genres. Thus, these dances are built on basic universal movement materials such as bouncing, skipping, running and so on. These materials are not unique to the Israeli folk dances and most ethnic dance uses the same elements. The difference between one ethnic style and another lies in the different choreographic use of those basic movement elements. The more emphasized the dosage of characteristics, such as focus on various parts of the body, the rhythm or the use of space, the more specifically the ethnic identity becomes. According to Bahat (2008), when the ethnic identity loses its importance, other channels are sought to express the

need in movement and dance.

I maintain that the "ethnic uniqueness" of the first Israeli folk dances lies precisely in "neutralizing the ethnic", by leaving the basic movement materials in their most natural way; in one word, in their simplicity. Any emphasis of one dosage or another in dimensions of time, space, form and strength, might draw it closer to the known combination identified with the ethnic dance of a certain people or a specific community. Nevertheless, to that "natural simplicity" of the first Israeli folk dances was added the element of the dancers' bursting energy. The combination between natural simplicity and energy created freshness, which came off well with the message of national renewal. In other words, and with the appropriate caution, the uniqueness of the first Israeli folk dances is not in the formal movement characteristics (for instance, a uniquely stylized foot lifting, or a variety of stamping with knee lifting in variations), but precisely in the lack of prominent traits. This is how the simplicity and the modesty of the movement were preserved in its natural origin. The characterization "the young energy" of the dancers could have been translated into the rich use of rapid hopping, running, jumping and deployment within the general space.

That is the core of the problem, because if simplicity is the main characterization of the dance, any complexity and enrichment might destroy it. Since simplicity and energy are the basis of the Israeli folk dances, the development for the stage must be entrusted in the hands of a wise choreographer, who will act with sensitivity, respect, knowledge and creativity. Borrowing materials of other nations is an easy solution but a destructive one.

The more popular the folk dance events became and turned into a livelihood source, the greater became the pressure on the dance instructors to create more and more new folk dances, as if it were about a combination of movements, as customary in Jazz lessons, ending

with a small dance combination. The most popular instructors have also turned into the choreographers of the representative folk dance groups.

Beginning of Rapprochement between the professional dance and the ethnic dance

While the disinterest of professional dance in the folk dances and the "Israeli dance for the stage" has not changed in the course of time, one may occasionally locate exceptional cases of interest in ethnic dance. It seems this trend is increasing, though very slowly. Moshe Efrati adapted, in an extraordinary manner, movement elements out of the Sepharadi Jewry culture in some of the dances he has created. A prominent example is *Camina A-Tourna* (1990), a dance engaging in the Expulsion from Spain and the endless wandering of Jews along the generations. Liat Dror and Nir Ben Gal were pioneers when they started combining belly dances in their programs, for instance in *Donkeys* (1989), *Inta Omri* (1994) and *Dance of Nothing* (1999). They did not do it as part of an international trend of relating to belly dances, which accelerated in the world, but as part of a genuine integration effort into the East. Dror and Ben Gal regarded belly dancing a movement material belonging to the place we live in, and this approach was reinforced by the couple's relocating to the desert and dissociating themselves from the entire show accompanying belly dancing, such as the female dancer's garments. Dror and Ben Gal's international prestige contributed to the concert dance artists' attitude change towards ethnic dance. Barak Marshal combined in his works motifs of Hassidic Dance, Yemenite dance and Pop and Ilana Cohen of Inbal continued creating dances in the company's movement lexicon. Renanna Raz has recently created *Kazuarot* inspired by the Druz Debka and the author of this article is working with members of the Ethiopian community with Eskesta and Beta dance troupes. Inbal Dance Theatre, with a new management headed by

Razi Amitai, has entered a new path: talented choreographers, identified with concert dance will be invited to create dances inspired by ethnic dance. There were great hopes that the Karmiel Festival, which brings together various communities, will also succeed in creating an encounter between the genres. The various genres share the same location in Karmiel Festival, whilst each one maintains its independence. The festival does not initiate nor provide a place for dialogue between concert dance, currently flourishing in Israel and revealing much greater curiosity and awareness than in the past to the treasure of ethnic materials of the communities, and the enterprise of folk dance and the Israeli dance for the stage, which despite its success in drawing thousands of people to the dancing circles has reached a dead end from the artistic point of view. Apparently there is no escape from a clear definition of objectives: a creation of a folk dance, designated for the masses, or development of concert dance for selected professional dancers, inspired by Ethnic dance. There is no contradiction in being open to influences, no matter how diversified they may be, provided the objectives are clear, the professional knowledge exists and primarily good taste is preserved.

Ninety years after Baruch Agadati, the pioneer of concert dance in Israel, turned to the Jewish ethnic traditions, Ashkenazi and Mizrahi, as a source for a new movement lexicon. As known, Agadati's name is associated also with the first Israeli folk dance⁶. Since then, concert dance, ethnic dance of the various communities and the folk dance have gone a long way, and awareness of the strengths and weaknesses of each genre has increased. Now, with new tools of an updated world, with technical and budgetary ability not existing in the past, the time has come for a renewed connection

Endnotes

¹ The Yishov period - the early Jewish settlements in Israel before the establishment of the state of Israel

² Establishing the dance group its being run by Nikova, who immigrated from Russia and was not a member of the Yemenite community, must have facilitated its integration in the 30's and the 40's as part of the dance for the stage making. On the other hand, in the 50's and henceforth, the fact that a Yemenite group was headed by a non-member of that community strengthened its image as an Oriental group.

³ The perception of the "melting pot" did, in fact, threaten the conservation, the revival and the spreading of the Eastern communities' ethnic dances. Already at the end of the 40's Gurit Kadman, the musician Ester Gerzon-Kivi and the literature researcher Yehuda Ratzabi acted for their preservation and documentation. Thereby Kadman preceded her generation and contributed to the growth of a multi-cultural society. According to Ronen (2008), affected by Kadman's activity the community dances contributed to the Israeli folk dances, so that each one of them could feel they were "his own".

⁴ In 1951 the American choreographer Jerome Robbins came to Israel. With regard to the aspiration to create Makhol Yisraeli (Israeli dance), he wrote in the report to an American Fund and to institution in Israel (later on the Israel-America Culture Fund) that the Israeli dancer must assimilate the techniques of classical ballet and modern dance, master these techniques and other, "Till they no longer seem strange and hostile. Only then will you reach the stage where you may make your own experiments, grow and develop".

⁵ Regarding the many arguments about Inbal's mission, see a discussion on the group's way, held in 1975. Toledano, pp. 161-162.

⁶ The folk dance called Horah Agadati was created by Gurit Kadman based on Baruch Agadati's solo dance. Kadman asked the composer Uria Boskovitch to set the song to music.

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