

THE SPECIFIC IN THE UNIVERSAL

BY RUTH ESHEL

The style and themes of choreographer Moshe Efrati's creations are rooted in Israel, but his message, though stemming from the place where he lives, has universal significance. He claims an interest in man "from the cradle to the grave" ("you have to penetrate the person, see what makes him tick") and in the cultural and historical assets of the Jewish nation ("he who disdains his past will have no future and his present will be as transient as fashion"). "I live in a place and its atmosphere is part of me, it caresses me. I feel I have to come to grips with my origins. You can but look to yourself. I am not looking for an America in Israel. To hark after every chance superstar means you feel inferior. 'To be' is to be yourself", says Efrati.

Born in Jerusalem and creating in Israel for over thirty years, Efrati portrays a society in flux and comments on the changes it is undergoing. He is an artist who cares, who pines, and he is no longer content to give his audience just an aesthetic experience; he has things to say. Moreover, as the years go by his message comes through clearer and blunter, as if the is clearing away the complexity of meaning in a choreographical composition and getting to the core, the one lucid message. He wants to say things outright and more than ever he feels pressed for time.

Soloist of Bat-Sheva in its early days, Efrati belongs to a generation spiritually coached by the high priestess of modern dance - Martha Graham, and by other famous choreographers of the day, who had given the company the best of American modern dance - Talley Beatty, Jerome Robins and Jose Limon, among others. However, he was one of the few who tried to escape their influence. He looked for a "black hole", a niche of his own, where he could face the challenges and light the

darkness in his own way. In the 1970s the young choreographer believed that only so could he make his mark as creative artist. His work with deaf dancers was to become Efrati's "black hole".

In order to work with non-hearing dancers Efrati devised a system of vibrating the stage boards. The vibrations serve the deaf dancers as sound waves do the hearing. "I worked with them through the eyes", says Efrati in answer to a question, "I showed them the steps and they followed. I illustrated why I choose one movement rather than another. But visual contact allows only for frontal communication and unless I found a way of enabling them to move in space in all directions I could never have created a dance which deserves to be judged by artistic standards".

In the course of experimenting with combinations of deaf and hearing dancers new communication codes evolved - bodily contact, eye contact and sharp gestures to mark the beginning and end of a phrase. When only the deaf danced the sole accompaniment were beats on the stage boards but when Efrati introduced hearing dancers he added music to his work and then the deaf followed the body signs of the hearing dancers. The combination of deaf and hearing dancers generated a new quality of movement, not only due to the special concentration such work involves but also due to a new energy cycle that was created. "The deaf dancer", says Efrati, "is always linked to the energy of the ground, because he senses the vibrations, whereas the hearing dancer always aspires to soar. When a deaf and hearing dancer dance together a dynamic cycle of energy is created - the deaf's from below and that of the hearing from above".

Notwithstanding that his first deaf dancers were amateurs, and despite their handicap, Efrati made no concessions when it came to perfecting the tool of their trade - the body. He demands long, clean bodily contours in the dancer's costume. A lesson in classical ballet became the daily fare of hearing and non-hearing dancers alike. "Every profession has its own ethics and standards and physical excellence is a professional must for a dancer. I will not make concessions where virtuosity is concerned. Dancers clad in heavy boots are a passing phase".

Work with the deaf dancers has enriched Efrati, and the sign language has added to his choreographical vocabulary: "Because of their handicap, rather than despite it, I found in them qualities that I missed in the hearing dancers, who seemed flat by comparison. The deaf have a world different from our own which has no use for the abstract. I can't even tell if their dreams contain sound. They have a range of sensibility, sight and receptivity, as well as integrity and an ability to concentrate that we lack". As early as 1980 he used the sign language as an integral component of a dance

he put up in the Theatre de la Ville in Paris, "Mirkamin" (lit. textures). Three years later Pina Bausch did the same on the very same stage.

"HE THAT WALKETH UPRIGHTLY"

DANCERS: GABI BARR, MOSHE EFRATI, ESTHER NADLER

In "Mirkamin", (1978, "Textures") his first full length work, Efrati summed up his studio experimentations of combining hearing and non-hearing dancers. Like three other dances of his - "Kmihot" (1984, "Aspirations"), "Hitkashruyot" (1982, "Attachments") and "Tyotot" (1986, "Drafts"), "Mirkamim" is about inter-personal ties. Grouping together of dancers and dissolution of the groups into duets, trios and solos make up the basic graphic design of this dance, which is then shattered by the introduction of sentimental duets. Thus Efrati creates a tension between

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"The Jewish enigma" is how Efrati describes his work that takes Jewish tradition for its theme, another central subject in his creation. "Enigma" because he believes that with the Jews nothing is ever self-evident. Of himself in this respect he says that though he is a non-observing Jew his life teems with the Halacha (the codified Jewish law) and that he envies those who go even deeper than he without being religious. In 1978 he created a quartet based on "The Dybbuk" (in Jewish folklore, a disembodied human spirit who can come to possess a living person, and in the specific story a young bride is thus possessed) - "Holech be-Tom" (1978, "He that Walketh uprightly"). Esther Nadler and David Rapoport danced the newly-weds and Moshe Efrati himself and Gabi Barr danced the evil spirit. The work begins very formally and very lyrically, the disintegration of the girl's sanity being expressed with disorganized movement cutting into the original pattern. The image is one of a worm eating up the girl from within.

In another work, "Tehilim shel Yerushalayim" (1982, "Psalms of Jerusalem"), dealing with the three religions that hold the city sacred, Efrati uses motives he remembers from the synagogue of his childhood - beatings of the chest to signify contrition, bows, hands held up in a priestly blessing (with two digits to one side and three to the other) and walking back and forth. The latter signifies pilgrimage. The strides are performed with the back strained forward and the toes stretched as if to grip the ground ("Jerusalem sits upon mountains and this is a climbing kind of walk") the head bent forward and slightly turned back ("as if to take leave of the past").

In a dance created to commemorate the expulsion of the Jews from Spain 500 years ago - "Camina y-Torna" (1990) - the walking motif signifies something else - the wanderings of the Jews. In this dance Efrati criticizes the Israelis for their wanderlust. He says that the two thousand years of exile lie like a curse even on the generation born here. Its roots are shallow and weak and having a homeland has not cured it of the lust to wander, nor does the prayer "next year in Jerusalem" stop the Israelis from giving Jerusalem up for the "new Jerusalem" - America.

"Some motifs in "Camina y-Torna", such as pain and punishment, are inspired by medieval literature - the dancers bite their hands and pull at their mouths as if to tear it. Others are childhood memories of Efrati's, who grew up in the Sephardic Jewish community in Jerusalem. There is, for example, a scene of tending the sick with elements from exorcism rituals in the Sephardic Jewish tradition, and one in which women guests to a wedding make the sign of warding off the evil eye from the young couple.



"HE THAT WALKETH UPRIGHTLY"

DANCERS: DAVID RAPOPORT, ESTHER NADLER

PHOTO: YORAM RUBIN

contrasts - the formal choreography and the expressive aspect of the dance. This type of juxtaposition - of a mass of dancers moving staccato in groups, painting the stage in strong colours and radiating force, with lyrical and poetic-like duets - plays an important role in all his work. "The group is charged with the energy of a bullet in the stomach sending out sparks. In the lyrical duets the external energy is collected and brought inside", describes it Esther Nadler (the choreographer's wife and former soloist in his company "Kol Demama").

In the studio Efrati's dances come together fast. "He has a direct way with him, no obstacles, from the thought to the step", says Nadler, "sometimes it is difficult to follow the movements that rapidly flow from him, because he can't wait to get his draft out into the open". Efrati explains: "I never approach a work without good reason, and I don't start working with the dancers unless I have a spatial pattern in my mind. Everything floats in my imagination. I see the pictures, build the basis, the pattern of the dance, so I have

the general flow of the groups and the smaller groupings. I build and break, build and break. In the studio, because the pattern is already there I have no problem with details. They simply fall into place according to characterization and general atmosphere".

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The sign of the cross appears as a motif in both "Camina y-Torna" and "Tehilim shel Yerushalayim". In the former Efrati combines it with a Jewish gesture - a finger brought to the mouth and then touched thrice to the throat while intoning "In the name of Abraham, of Isaac and of Jacob", to show how the marranos came to combine Christian and Jewish gesticulations.

The choreographical elements taken from ancient traditions and from his childhood in Jerusalem ("I am a Jerusalemite; all the mysticism, the religiosity, the eccentricity, the dimness, the clouds that fall on your head") are used by Efrati as embellishment. "I don't develop these elements, because I want the movement to remain clear, but sometimes I stretch and flatten them into the dynamics of an altogether different movement and turn them into a faint memory of the original".

In recent years Israeli current affairs have become more central to Efrati's work, and have been dealt with more brutally and bluntly, reminiscent of paintings by Francis Bacon. "La-Follia" (1989) example, is interwoven with texts by Nissim Alloni, an Israeli playwright very critical of Israeli society read by Yossi Banai. The main criticism through this dance is that it is erratic, it harks after every flitting fashion, and it is so neurotic it needs psychiatric help, but there are other points he raises too. In one scene a dancer comes on stage with a chair tied to his back ("the chair no Israeli politician will part with"), a tall sharp hat to this head ("like the beak of a bird of prey") and all covered in a net ("the net we will all be caught in the end"). In another a folk dance serves to criticize the fundraising projects israel mounts among world Jewry.



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In the choreography of "La-Follia" the top part of the body is painted with rough wide brush strokes, mercilessly, with movements taken from off the streets - brandished fists, obscene phallic gestures with the fingers, "until only the pain remains". But from the pelvis downwards the discipline of the

"MIXED MEDIA ON STAGE"

DANCERS: TAL BET-HALACHMI, MALI RESHEF

classical ballet regime is maintained. Between the two parts of the body jazz-like oscillating pelvic movements mediate.

In "La-Follia" as in many of his other works Efrati plays around with contrasts. For example, the water-flower dance in the second part of the work takes the form of a classical ballet performed by four women dancers, but its moments of harmonious beauty are shattered by the loud screamings of the dancers. While they scream they also sniff their own scent. Harmony and disharmony alternate without rhyme or reason in a mad world.

In 1995 Efrati came out with a dance called "Mythos" (lit. myth) in which he argues against debunking the pioneering myth which is central to the ethos of the state of Israel. He is well aware of the changing world about him and is willing to accommodate the new "myths", Madonna, Michael Jackson, money, T.V. ratings, but is unwilling to have his own demolished: "if you break my myths you break me", he says and asks whether Madonna and Jackson are material enough for educating the next generation.

Presently he is working on a new dance based on the writings of the Jewish Czech writer Franz Kafka - the epitome of particularism in universalism?



"LA FOLLIA"

DANCER: MERAV ELCHADEF

PHOTO: YORAM RUBIN

