

FROM A DANCE CRITIC'S DESK

BY GIORA MANOR

CAGED IMAGES

In a relatively short time Ido Tadmor, a brilliant dancer by international standards, has become an excellent choreographer. His second work, performed by his own company "Cell", is a dance loaded with symbols and images, perhaps a bit overloaded.

White doves, perambulators that turn into cots and big cages into which the dancers descend in an impressive opening sequence are used to create forceful movement. The dancers are influenced by Tadmor's own virtuosity; he is still the star performer of his company.

Inventive lighting (for once not of the fashionable gloomy pitchdark variety), costumes akin to the current Batsheva-style aggressive "shmattes" and percussion dominated music by Ori Vidislavski all serve the rich texture of the dance.

The new ambitious company and the quickly maturing choreographer have been lucky in finding in Ayelet Bahat an efficient manager and in the Suzanne Dellal Centre a base for their productions.

WIM'S ROPES

Wim Vandekeybus, one of the most intriguing contemporary choreographers arrived in Israel to stage with the Batsheva dancers a new version of one of his works, here entitled "Exhaustion of Dreamed Love". The titles he favours are cryptic but one is not obliged to decipher them in order to savour his fascinating choreography.

The present work is connected in many ways to ropes and string. Indeed the whole set is made

of blond sisal - cordage, as "flats" and curtains that quiver in the bright light. Across the whole proscenium a thin rope is stretched, on which a dancer leans in an "impossible" position. Near the end the rope is put on fire by many cigarette lighters. In another scene, dancers dangle from hammocks made of rope.

Perhaps all these hemp ties are symbols of human attachments, perhaps it is all just a very beautiful abstract design. Anyhow, the breathtaking quick movement is fascinating, though somewhat detached from human emotions.

It is ironic that a Belgian choreographer had to come to Israel to let the Israeli audience hear dancers speak a Hebrew text. Our own choreographers often give dancers a text but for some mysterious reason (or simply for trendiness) it is always in English, or rather American with an Israeli accent.

The second half of the programme was a new rendering of Ohad Naharin's "Tabula Rasa" (1986), a famous well danced piece from a period when Naharin was perceptibly influenced by Jiri Kylian. It has an unusual structure - a vigorous, lively beginning which slows down to a quiet ending in what musicians call *morendo*.

OCTOBER IN MAY

Anat Danieli is another young choreographer who decided to go her own way and to establish a company of her own instead of endlessly waiting for one of the "big" companies to ask her to create for them. For her new hour-long piece "October" she chose six dancers."

"October" begins in a somewhat melancholic mood, autumnal in the first part, notwithstanding that in Israel, meteorologically speaking, the fall is not the end of the annual vegetation cycle but rather the beginning of the rainy season, when all the plants start growing and blooming.

Weather aside, Danieli's work has many beautiful choreographic elements. There is a lot of inner calm in the harmonious movement of couples, which brings to mind contact-improvization, a technique conducive to cooperation and mutual tenderness. This method does not produce climaxes and tends to create movement pleasant to execute and to watch and one which does not involve the dancers or the spectators in any high tension emotions or dramatic climaxes.

The costumes (especially the transparent crinolines in the beginning) are very good and the lighting is nice but best of all is the high level of movement. As opposed to many young choreographers, Anat Danieli isn't just immersed in the moves and steps she creates but uses entrances and exits, which are often neglected by inexperienced dance creators.

THE DANCE THEATRE GROUP OF THE KOMISCHE OPER BERLIN

During the annual arts festival held in the beautiful ancient Roman open air theatre in Beit Shean, the dancers of the Komische Oper of Berlin performed two works. The group is directed by Marc Jonkers (until recently the director of the Holland Dance Festival) and the Dutch choreographer Jan Linkens.

"Oedipus Rex", an oratorio by Jean Cocteau and Igor Stravinski, offered many fine opportunities, but only once were the marble boulders and steps that form the ancient stage used in any meaningful way - on Queen Jokasta's entrance. The rest of the time the dancers stood there waiting for the recorded voice of the singer in order to move. This static approach made any attempt at dramatic tension futile.

For some odd reason Jan Linkens - usually a versatile choreographer - made the dancers of "Oedipus Rex" move in straight lines or stand at attention, like a sergeant major in charge of a platoon of soldiers.

Oedipus is, as far as I know, the story of the downfall of a great figure, but Uwe Kuessner in the main role could not build such a tragic fall for lack of suitable choreography and charisma.

The second part of the programme was a new version of "Petrushka" also by Jan Linkens. Even today Fokine's 1911 original is far more interesting and vibrant than this feeble attempt at contemporary adaptation. Just as in Oedipus, here too the use of identical, uniform-like costumes, straight lines and symmetrical movement bring to nought the characters and the story.

Let's hope that this botched tour of the Komische Oper isn't going to prevent another visit to Israel, because they are able to perform much better works and dance convincingly.

"ROMEO AND JULIET" FROM BELGIUM

The Ballet de l'Opera Royal de Wallonie performed at the Mishkan Leomanuyot Habama in Tel Aviv Jacques Dombrowski's version of Prokofiev's ballet based on the tragedy of youth by William Shakespeare.

The choreographer gave his gifted young dancers a lot of movement of the energetic-aggressive type so typical of rock-and-roll, with emphasis on the "roll". As long as it dealt with brawling in the streets of Verona and romping at masked balls all was excellent - the dancers were a joy to behold, both the fast moving men and the well trained ladies.

The chief protagonist was a versatile stage set (by Patricia Meus and Michele Swerts), a three-dimensional raised semi-circular platform which, as the rift between the two families widens, gradually splits in two before our very eyes. Later it became a glass window to indicate Father Lorenzo's cell. The set was well utilized by the choreographer, except in the crucial scene, the only time Romeo and his beloved are in bed together. This intimate moment was set on a brightly lit open scene with the couple sleeping on the naked podium... To add insult to injury, the otherwise resourceful and inventive choreographer did what most of those who had ever staged the tragedy of the star crossed lovers have done, i.e., let the boy get out of the nuptial bed fully dressed and in boots. As far as I can remember only Heinz Spoerli had the guts and integrity to let his Romeo get up naked, look at the rising sun and get dressed before fleeing from Verona.

The first half of the ballet was full of good inventions and fun but towards the end the choreographer ran out of ideas. The end was weak - it isn't at all easy to dance a convincing duet with a dead lady.

In spite of all the deficiencies it was an interesting work, danced by a good company in a well designed production.

THE TEL AVIV DANCE THEATRE

Perhaps it is a bit over ambitious to call a modest company of students and graduates of the "Bikkurei Ha'itim" dance centre the Dance Theatre of Tel Aviv.

Nine dancers performed works by five choreographers (Semadar Imor, Noa Dar, Iris Livneh, Bonni Feyn and Tomer Sharabi). Mostly it was nondescript choreography of the xerox type (a solo multiplied symmetrically by the number of available dancers). Only Tomer Sharabi's work, a rather strange group piece, had atmosphere and character. Sharabi himself in an Indian dhoti-like garment moved among his dancers like a guru. He is undoubtedly the most talented young choreographer in Israel today. It is high time he gets an opportunity to work with a proper dance company.

BRILLIANT BUT NOT MOVING

Wim Vandekeybus' company "Ultima Vez" performed two of his works at the Israel Festival in Jerusalem in May - "What the Body Does Not Remember" and "Bereft of a Blissful Union". He is a fascinating choreographer, his dancers are fabulous performers, the staging is full of brilliant ideas and the movement is breathtaking but not moving - in the emotional as opposed to the kinetic meaning of the term.

It is an explosion (again in both senses of the word) of human bodies in space and real pyrotechnics of sound and fury, signifying I don't know exactly what. However, in spite of the brilliance of it all, I found it rather cool and detached, lacking in human warmth. It is a fantastic spectacle, one that keeps you on the edge of your seat most of the time, but leaves you in the end still hungry for a cerebral or visceral artistic experience.

AN ETHIOPIAN SURPRISE

One is seldom privileged to be present at the birth of something wonderful. Such a feeling of elation, of aesthetic pleasure, of witnessing a small miracle happening before my eyes I experienced while attending the dress rehearsal of a new group of the University of Haifa students. All eleven of them (5 women and 6 men) are of Ethiopian extraction and came to Israel as children. After completing their military duty, they are now studying at different faculties. The nucleus of the young company come from the Theatre Department. They took movement and composition classes from the choreographer and critic Ruth Eshel. The dance company that emerged from this activity wasn't the result of some prior design or planning on the part of the teacher or of her students.

What made her start thinking about preparing a performance with them and finally forming a company was the very special quality of their movement and their ability to improvise - as dancers, singers and musicians. She encouraged them to bring authentic Ethiopian-Jewish motifs, the traditional ancient melodies and rhythms, dance movements and games they played as children. From these, with the help of her students, Ruth Eshel has extracted and constructed an hour long performance of rare beauty, full of poetry in movement, song and music.

They call themselves "Eskesta", which is the Ethiopian word for the typical dance in which the shoulders are the main active body part. The group is sponsored by the University of Haifa.

The performance consists of three parts: it begins with an evocation of ancient prayer chants in the nearly obsolete Gez language, which they were taught by an old Kess (a priest and rabbi). The venerable old man was moved to tears when he listened to these youngsters sing the ancient prayers at a rehearsal. The Jewish religious establishment in Israel does not recognize the Kesses' authority and encourages the disappearance of this ancient lore.

The second part of the show consists of a cleansing ritual gleaned from the Ethiopian Jewish daily ablution at the local stream. The last part is a suite of children's games. The authentic materials created through improvisation were structured by Ruth Eshel but without degrading the material to the level of a show "for tourists".

As the programme began to crystalize into a stage performance, the problems of music and costumes required attention. Several leading composers were invited to attend rehearsals and the advice they gave led to appointing a member of the group called Zena, who is an accomplished singer and dancer, as the musical leader of the company. All the music is authentic, with no electronic tricks and synthesizers.

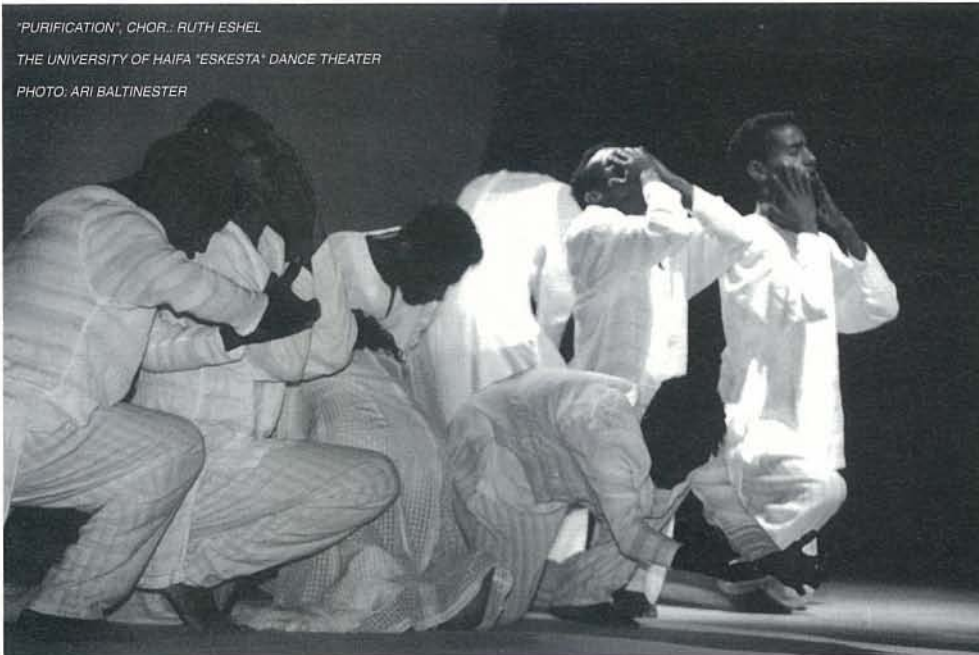
The problem of costumes was tackled with the help of designer Talli Itzchaki. The solution was simple - light off-white pyjamas-like trousers and shirts for the boys and unadorned white dresses for the girls.

"BEREFT OF A BLISSFUL UNION", CHOR.: WIM VANDEKEYBUS

ULTIMA VEZ, PHOTO: OCTAVIO URIBE



"PURIFICATION", CHOR.: RUTH ESHEL
 THE UNIVERSITY OF HAIFA "ESKESTA" DANCE THEATER
 PHOTO: ARI BALTINESTER



The authenticity and freshness of the movement together with the unmistakable dedication of the dancers reminds one of the early days of another Israeli dance theatre - "Inbal", founded in 1950 by Sara Levi-Tanai with a group of new immigrants from Yemen.

The University of Haifa "Eskesta Dance Theatre" has already appeared, besides at functions for the benefactors of the university, at several events in Israel, such as the Karmiel Dance Festival and has been invited by the Joint Organization to perform in Paris.

Perhaps this is an auspicious beginning of something truly great.

BETONTANC

I am used to people abroad wondering how come our little war ridden country produces so much art, especially dance. The programme of the Israel Festival '96 was far from exciting as far as dance is concerned, apart from Ultima Vez, but there also performed a company from Yugoslavia (another small and long suffering country) by the name of Betontanc. They hail from Ljubliana, Slovenia, the only part of the former federation which succeeded in avoiding civil war.

Betontanc's six dancers performed Matjaz Pograjc's "Every Word a Gold Coin's Worth" before, on and over a metal wall, which became not only the central metaphor of their piece but also served the young dancers as a percussion instrument. The movement may not have been very original - fighting turning into embraces and vice versa - and it offered no surprises, but it all had the ring of truth, of young people identifying with their movement material.

One of the tasks of the Jerusalem Festival is, in my opinion, to bring such out of the common companies to Israel.

A ROYAL VISIT

Strange as it may seem, the British Royal Ballet performed in Israel for the first time ever in June this year. Anthony Dowell's dancers brought "Swan Lake" to the shores of the Mediterranean, the ancient Roman amphitheatre at Caesarea, and a mixed bill consisting of two works by Ashton and one by Ashley Page to the Performing Arts Centre in Tel Aviv (having been abroad I missed the "Lake").

Sir Fred, as Frederic Ashton used to be called, was represented by two works. One is "The Dream", his version of the Shakespearian presentation of love as folly and madness. In a way it is the opposite companion piece of "Romeo and Juliet". Indeed, the hilarious "Pyramus and Thisby" pantomime is the exact copy - or negative - of the last act of the tragedy of the star crossed lovers' tale; each thinking his/her beloved to be dead, and consequently killing themselves. Why is this plot so funny in one play and so sad in the other? The German writer Gustav Landauer explained it thus: "The Dream" is about lovers as they are seen by others while "Romeo and Juliet" is about love as felt by the lovers themselves.

Ashton's "Dream" is funny. He assumes that the spectator knows the story so he doesn't bother with explanations of the complicated stratagems of Oberon and Puck, but enjoys and lets us enjoy the situations and the dancing. As usual, Puck (Anthony Bourne) steals the show. The only complaint I have about the choreography is that the fairies move in a formation too military, geometrical and symmetrical for the free spirit they are supposed to be.

The company was lightfooted and agile, in good shape after a long period of problems and mediocre dancing.

The second Ashton piece, "Rhapsody", to music by Rachmaninov, is a remarkable work, seldom

seen. Its beautiful geometrical decor brings to mind the 1930s, but as it turns out the ballet was created in 1980. With its clean lines and costumes, the work looks like an extension of the choreographies of Bronislava Nijinska or Massin's symphonic (abstract, plotless) works. "Rhapsody" is well danced and the soloists, the brilliant performer Tetsuya Kumakawa and his partner Tracy Brown were a joy to watch.

Ashley Page is one of the Royal's house choreographers. His "Fearful Symmetries" to music by John Adams is sharp and the atmosphere sombre. In my opinion he could have used the asymmetrical set (by Antony MacDonald) much more than he actually did. It is a well wrought piece of moody choreography.

The disappointment of the performance was the Russian born star of the company, Irek Mukhamedov. He not just looks like a heavy lorry driver, he moves like one.

After several years in the doldrums, the Royal Ballet is again one of the leading ballet companies in Europe. Dowell's policy of re-staging works from past decades is now paying dividends.

LOVE WITH EVERYTHING

Liat Dror and Nir Ben-Gal's new piece "Lashevet Lakum Ahuvi" (in English "Land of Rape and Honey") seems to be another rich theatrical dance piece devoted to all possible variations, mutations and perversions of love. For reasons I fail to grasp, this resolute and very sensual work got terrible reviews. I suspect some of my colleagues were so negative about it because they don't like or are unable to understand irony and sarcasm, which are important ingredients of this new piece.

The action takes place in a room with quilted walls - part pink boudoire of some demi-mond whore, part padded cell for the agitated insane. As is the choreographers' wont, in this room people are forcefully fed and gently bathed; one of the women even pulls down the pants of a large man, puts him over her knee and spansks his bare bottom. People climb the padded wall or are catapulted against it. All the usual components of these choreographers' theatrical language are present and irony is present all the time (about one hour).

Ben-Gal himself indulges in what he likes doing most: he dons a black dress and sings in over-sweet falsetto tones about love. He may be a woman or a clergyman, I am not quite sure. But why does he sing in English? Perhaps because, as they say, in Yiddish it sounds better... Some critics thought it was sentimental, while really it was sarcastic and even bitter.

The company was well rehearsed, compact, dedicated and each move expressed its content,

but as often happens to these two gifted dance creators, they tend to serve too much food for dance and thought. I am afraid they are never going to learn the secret of economy and that less is often more.

OHAD NAHARIN LAUGHS ALL THE WAY TO THE STAGE

How does he dare, this snotty upstart, to confuse us so? After we got used to Ohad Naharin's works being long and elaborate, accompanied by noisy music, violence lurking beneath the virtuosic movement, with dancers clad in fashionable tatters, all of a sudden he has made a dance which is chamber-size (just six dancers) and with pleasant, quiet music. In his new work there are quite a few amusing nonsense texts and a lot of irony. This is the opposite of what we came to regard as typical Naharin choreography. Only in the title is he true to his own tradition - "Yag" is as enigmatic and cute a title as all his others. But we all know better by now than to analyze the meaning of "Anaphasa", "Mabul" and the rest.

The piece begins before it begins, with a trick Jiri Kylian used recently, inviting the spectators to climb on-stage through the artists' entrance and the dressing rooms, to cross the stage, where some of the dancers are warming up, and gain their seats by climbing down from the stage to the hall proper. Being used to seeing the auditorium from the viewpoint of the performer this didn't give me any frisson, but I am sure many people must be surprised to see the theatre from the stage and meet the dancers behind the scenes. To be really effective Naharin has to organize this unusual introduction in a more structured form.

The quality of the movement in the actual piece is intimate and non-violent. Naharin has an uncanny sense of how to juxtapose moves one against the other and of mixing sameness with diversity. There is poetry in his way of blending the individual moves with the unison of the group.

Dancers always have a hard time when required to open their mouths and speak. Being, as the English say, unaccustomed to public speaking. This was overcome by using play-back. Some sentences sound ironic, others simply funny. I found the monologue of a little girl speaking again and again about her love for pickles amusing.

Towards the end of this compact (lasting only about one hour) and beautiful piece the fun element becomes more and more pronounced. Even a mundane object such as a dancer's spectacles becomes a telling prop, when the man ends up lying naked under a piece of plywood with his glasses on top of this improvised "tombstone".

Most of my colleagues, the critics, were angry with Naharin for not observing the conventions he himself has established. For my part, I was happy and exhilarated by his innovations and his ability to surprise me. "Yag" is a brilliant, amusing dance and a very welcome addition to the Batsheva menu, with one reservation - and again I must state my objection to the murky lighting. I would like to see the dancers clearly and the fashionable gloom robs the spectator of this basic right for long stretches of "Yag".

THE INTERNATIONAL PARTS OF THE KARMIEL FESTIVAL

Each July the artistic director of the Karmiel Festival, Yonatan Karmon, brings several professional dance companies from abroad to widen the scope of the performances and to offer the folk dance aficionados who arrive in droves for three days and nights of dancing, exposure to ballet as well as modern dance.

This year, the best performance was that of the Municipal Ballet of Braunschweig, Germany. Its artistic director Pierre Wyss assembled a group of remarkable dancers. Their repertory comprised several styles of modern dance, from the badly constructed and pointless work "Glasstuck" by Pieter de Ruiter to the excellently built and brilliantly danced "Heartbreakers" by the British choreographer Richard Wherlock.

Wyss' own quartet "Carmen Raw", based on the Carmen story, was a clever and precise distillation of the well known plot, offering the talented dancers an opportunity to excel. This Carmen in a nutshell reminded me of Jose Limon's famous Othello-quartet, "The Moor's Pavane", perhaps the best dramatic quartet in modern dance history.

The huge open air stage of Karmiel has devoured many a dance company and made even great dancers disappear in the vast space. The Ballet Theatre Espanol led by Rafael Aguilar tried in vain to get to the many thousands of spectators sitting on the grass. The guests from Spain also brought Aguilar's version of "Carmen" (I prefer the compact Braunschweig version), another inevitable "Bolero" but not the powerful Bejart version, and a "Flamenco Suite". I am sure that in other circumstances all this would have been much stronger and better.

From far away Caracas, Venezuela, came the Caracas Contemporary Ballet company, directed by Maria Eugenia Barrios and her Israeli husband Ofer Zaks. The group is well trained, young and agile, but the work they performed, John Butler's version of Orff's "Carmina Burana" from 1959, looked like yesterday's salad - stale and old fashioned. No amount of good dancing could disguise its age.

RAMI BE'ER'S TWILIGHT

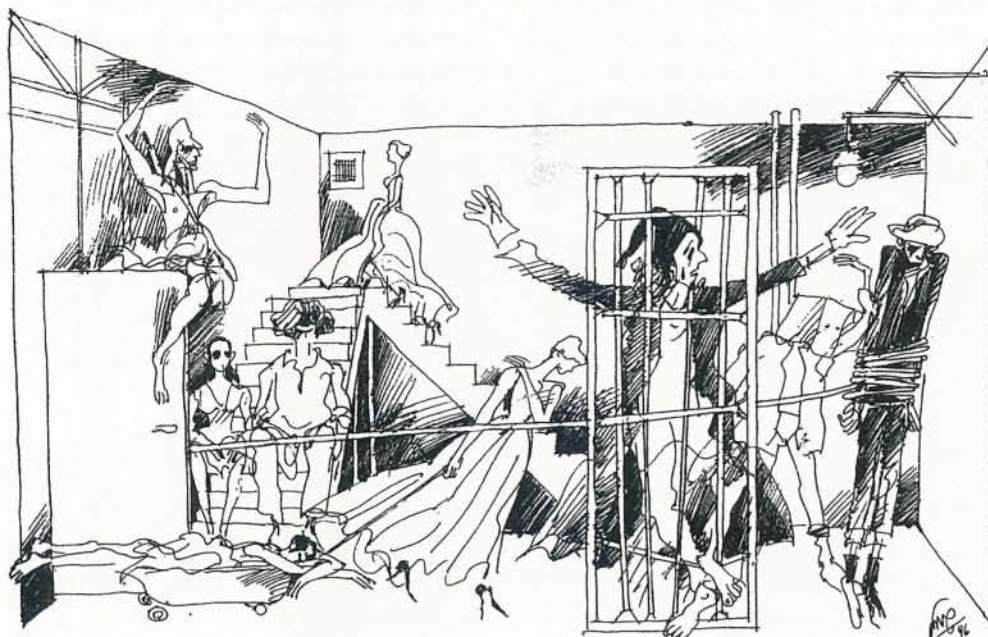
The Kibbutz Dance Company is celebrating 25 years of existence this year (see the special supplement in this issue of IDQ) at Karmiel. Beside the premiere of Rami Be'er's new work, the veteran dancers of the company (some of them now dancing with other companies, mainly foreign) rehearsed and presented parts from works by Matz Ek, Jiri Kylian and Yehudit Arnon. What a pity these "old" dances are no longer danced by the company! Boaz Cohen, Ziv Frenkel, Nitza Gambo, Ari Fastman and Eynav Cohen-Levi made this brief seance of dances a memorable show.

The twilight hours before daybreak are very special. I am told that most births and deaths occur in this peculiar time slot. In the Talmud



LIAT DROR AND NIR BEN-GAL, "LAND OF RAPE AND HONEY"

ILL: SHMUEL KATZ



RAMI BE'ER, "WHEN MOST I WINK", ILL.: SHMUEL KATZ

there are several directions of how to distinguish between day and night, e.g., day is when one is able to tell a dog from a wolf and see the difference between green and light blue. Rami Be'er called his surrealistic (sometimes nightmarish) new dance "One of the Hours of Day or Night" (translated in the programme as "When Most I Wink". Perhaps they meant wank?).

The set, a large room with windows near the ceiling and steps leading nowhere, is altogether like a painting by Dali or Magritte, very real and at the same time pure, "impossible" fantasy. Again, the decor, designed by the choreographer, is very much part of his creation. The music is yet again by the ubiquitous Mr. collage, assisted by Alex Claude, whom I have still to meet.

Be'er's forte is staging. Just as Bejart's masterpieces stripped of stage apparatus are rather neutral, Be'er's works rest firmly on the staging of movement rather than on a dance language of his own. But he is also a past master of the duet, which he offers to his dancers like presents, to make them shine. In his new work there are several solo-scenes, mainly those danced by Uri Ivgi and a fabulous, dangerous looking one, danced by Gunther Gurlitsch who gets entangled in an old metal framed bed.

I found the quasi nostalgic Sabbath candle scene trite and sentimental. If it was meant as satire it was not sharp enough. But altogether "When Most I Wink" is an important addition to Be'er's opus.

THE CULLBERGERS

For more than four centuries dancers and choreographers have spent much of their professional careers abroad, far from their countries of origin. The French Bournonville

and Petipa were the founders of Danish and Russian ballet styles. The Russians Balanchine, Fokin and Massine made modern ballet in the West into what it is. The same is true of South American dancers such as Marcia Haydee or Jorge Donn.

Numerous Australians and South Africans became leading dancers in Europe. In recent years a growing number of excellent Israeli dancers are engaged abroad and no less than five Israeli dancers, about a quarter of the company, dance in the Swedish Cullberg Balletten.

Naturally they spend their summer vacations at home, where their families and childhood friends live. This past summer they got together well ahead of time and organized a performance for themselves, to be produced by Nira Paz, the former ballerina and mother of Tallia Paz, in Israel, under the auspices of "Omanut la'Am".

They called their programme "Pitipana", which I assume makes sense in Swedish. Boaz Cohen, the veteran Israeli Cullberger, Yamit Callif, Raffi Sa'adi, Eitan Sivak and Talia Paz are very good dancers indeed and the programme they performed showed them off to their best advantage.

Two beautiful duets, by Matz Ek and by Philippe Blanchard, and a solo by Blanchard, danced by Talia Paz, were the highlights of the evening. Orjan Andersson's "Arrival of the Queen of Sheba" danced by all five was impressive. Jens Ostberg's dance for the quintet was ambitious but disappointing and pointless.

The present writer's patriotic heart enjoyed the show but was rather sad to see all this Israeli talent squandered on far away audiences in the cold North. But to be honest, what could one offer these excellent, mature artists at home? I doubt if the leading Israeli dance companies would welcome these prodigal sons and daughters back.

NOT GISELLE'S FAULT

Amir Kolben has produced a new dance piece complete with TV projections and computer induced dancers, as is his wont lately. It is whimsically entitled "G is L - 2", perhaps the "Second Giselle"? Indeed he took elements of the second act of the most romantic of ballets and re-worked it with the help of a computer-programme for choreographers.

Kolben is very inventive and while the use of projected videotape images in his previous work "Casablanca" was rather weak and washed out by the lighting, in his new work he solved the problem by hanging the screen at a 45 degrees angle above the stage.

The Wilis - his students at the Rubin Academy - acquitted themselves of their task very well indeed. Some strangely shaped "barres" make the stage look like a studio, which is correct, as the real subject matter of Kolben's new dance is dance itself. Well roared, lion!

BAT-DOR PASTA

The recent Bat-Dor premiere had two pleasant works by the Italian choreographer Luciano Cannito, which offered the dancers an opportunity to shine. The company looked well drilled and light in these works. "Black on Black" is a typical opening-piece, energetic and vibrant and the final dance, "Five Seasons", also by Cannito, is enhanced by the work of the lighting designer, Carlo Cerri and the costume designer Shmuel Wilder. The lively choreography shows the dancers, Na'ama Kristal, Arik Elfassi, Suzanne Holden and the others, at their best.

Anja Brud's new piece "Contretemps" is less structured and not very interesting. Its best part is Judy Kupfermann's inventive and colourful lighting. The movement itself does not quite jell into meaningful structure.

