

# Dance Costume Design in Israel

BY RUTH ESHEL



LYGRA COSTUMES BY DAVID SHARIF  
FOR "JOURNEY", BAT-DOR DANCE COMPANY  
CHOR.: DOMY REITER-SOFFEH  
PHOTO: MUJA & HARAMATY

▶ The pioneers of modern dance in Israel in the 1920's and 1930's used to design their own costumes and often - because of lack of funds - to also dye and sew them themselves. Their models were the costumes worn by the exponents of Middle European "Ausdruckstanz" - their mentors - such as Mary Wigman.

The solo being the main dance form, their concerts would consist of up to ten short pieces. For each number they would change costumes. The costume was important not only as such, but as the one stage attribute the choreographers/dancers were able to enhance. The special dress for each dance was their means to extend the theatrical element of the performance, since lighting was primitive and a set impractical, and they had to travel all over the land to perform, without special transport, using public buses or a taxi.

The most popular dress was a long one, made of rather heavy, often dark material, which lent the body a long line and emphasised the expressionist components of the dance. The cut underlined a modern attitude to the female figure, that of an independent person, who does not wish to emphasise her femininity and does not seek to please the roving male gaze. Such long dresses fitted the modern movement vocabulary, which consisted of swings and turns as well as jumps. In Israel, skirts or long pants proliferated, worn together with a blouse that revealed the waist-line, an outfit which was comfortable to move in in the hot climate.

The exception to the rule was Baruch Agadati, the pioneer of modern dance in Israel, who arrived in Jaffa in 1919 and soon afterwards began giving recitals of his works. Before becoming a dancer, Agadati was a painter (returning to the easel in his last years via cinematography). Naturally, he designed his own costumes, influenced by Russian avantgarde artists, Constructivism and Cubism. His costumes were made of stiff materials and had angular lines, with a surrealistic streak. For example, in his several dance portraits of Chassidic characters, he would wear one black and one red boot.

The choreographers' endeavour to include some local, Israeli flavour in the design found expression in oriental embellishments and ornaments. When dealing with biblical themes, they turned to Arab dress for inspiration. Hence the "kumbaz", very wide-cut pantaloons, the white kaftan worn by Yemenite Jews, or the "gallabia" used in many dances.

Rina Nikova, for instance, a Russian ballerina who came to live in the country in 1925, used colourful Arab garb when creating biblical dances for her Yemenite ballet group: long

dresses, flowing embroidered gowns, bejewelled head dresses. The simple movement she employed stressed the importance of the gorgeous costumes.

Yardena Cohen, born in Israel and scion of a family who had been resident in the land for seven generations, was familiar with oriental style and music. But she had also studied in Germany with Palucca. During the 1930's and 1940's, she created dances with costumes which showed a mixture of modern dance and oriental style. The cut was simple, to facilitate movement, the costume embellished with authentic ancient jewelry including tinkling ankle bells. The costumes for her early dances were designed by Margareta Berger-Hammerschlag, and since the late 1930's - by Haya Alperowitsch.

Alperowitsch saw Yardena Cohen as a "Canaanite" artist. Due to the biblical prohibition against graven images - no ancient pictures or sculptures - she had no models to work with. But in the Bible there are many descriptions of clothing and accessories, and she used these for inspiration. Another source were archaeological finds uncovered during those years in the Middle East. The sight of blooming wild flowers in the hills of Galilee inspired her to use a striking combination of hues: green, yellow and red.

During the mid-1930's, names of costume designers began to be listed in dance programs. As was then the custom in Europe, these were well-known artists who were mainly influenced by the Paris School. They regarded the collaboration of such great painters as Picasso or Matisse with ballet companies as their model.

The dark dramatic dresses disappeared and more feminine, revealing, colourful costumes with applications took their place. Gradually, more costumes showing bare legs, ballet-style, were used. The new costumes reflected the longing for light and colour in the sombre atmosphere of

World War II. The public was looking for entertainment and fun as an antidote to the tragic events taking place in Europe and the Middle East. The leading designers were Anatole Gurewitsch and Genia Berger, who had to improvise and prepare their own materials, since there was no supply of fabric and dyes from abroad because of the war. The sketches of the designs from that period are beautifully drawn, rich in detail and colour.

In 1956 Martha Graham's company visited Israel. It was a revelation, and the audience embraced the new American dance with enthusiasm. That was the end of European modern dance influence and the start of a new Graham-dominated era. In 1964 the Batsheva Dance company was founded. Its early repertory consisted mainly of Graham works. Her costume style became dominant, and she instructed the dancers and seemstresses in her ways of designing costumes by having the dancer don a leotard and them draping material around her body with pins.

The ubiquitous Graham-dress was usually long, reaching down to the ankles. But in contrast to that of the "Ausdruckstanz", much more revealing, showing the body off to its advantage. The wide skirt is brought backwards between the dancers legs and sewn to the back part of the dress, thus becoming a sort of trouser-skirt. This is a more feminine dress than that of the "Ausdruckstanz", a strong, loving, jealous - even revenging - female.

Graham was also a model figure for make-up styling, emphasising the cheek-bones, with heavy eye make-up and artificial eye lashes. Imitating her, the Israeli dancers began to pull their long hair backwards, coiling it on top of the head.

The men's costume was usually stretch shorts and a bare chest. These were very theatrical costumes underlining the differences between the genders.



STRECH COSTUMES FOR "LINEAR REFLECTION",  
K.C.D.C., CHOR.: HEDDA OREN



COSTUME BY ABRAHAM OFEK FOR RUTH ESHEL'S SOLO "SELF STONING DRESS"

The main costume designers of Batsheva in the 1960's were Arnon Adar, and members of the company such as Galia Gat, Linda Hodes and Yaakov Sharir. Several works were costumed by Lydia Pincus-Gani and the company wardrobe mistress, Bertha Kwartch.

Early in the 1970's the typical Graham-dress began to wane, as a result of the increasing influence of neo-classical ballet on modern dance. The trend started with the foundation of the Bat-Dor dance company in 1967. The basic new costume was a unitard body-stocking with applications. In a little shop near the old central bus station, one could purchase whole bales of stretch-fabrics, from which the wardrobe mistresses of Batsheva (Bertha Kwartch) and that of Bat-Dor (Lea Ladman) would cut and dye body stockings. Dresses were made of soft knitted materials that fall nicely round the body, the upper part hugging the torso, with a round decolletage and a cloth skirt reaching to the knee.

These were very "human", every-day dresses. On the Bat-Dor stage one could see very beautiful dresses in a more classical-romantic style.

A further refinement was made possible by the introduction of Lycra fabrics in the mid-1970's. Moshe Ben-Shaul, who made costumes for Moshe Efrati's "Koldemama" company, 'discovered' this material at the "Diva" swimming-suit factory in Tel-Aviv. The new glittering fabric enhanced the form of the human body.

Ben-Shaul: "The costumes were designed in close collaboration with Efrati [the choreographer]. We had long talks about colours, about the subject matter [of the dance]. The emphasis was on the dancer and the content of the dance, not on the costume as fashion or stage presence" (Interview, April 1997).

The works created by Mirali Sharon for Bat-Dor and Batsheva in the 1970's were innovative, the first evidence of a new style. She lived in New York between 1958 and 1971, studied and worked with Merce Cunningham, Alwin Nikolais and Murray Louis. After returning to Israel, she approached several Israeli composers to write music for her works. She collaborated closely with the artist David Sharir, who designed the sets and costumes for her. In her choreographies, the central idea is that of "total theatre" with strong ties between movement, costumes, sets and lighting.

From 1976, other young choreographers returned from their studies abroad, during which they encountered post-modern dance. A new phenomenon of "other dance" began to appear. The large established companies did not invite the young artists to create for them. Parallel to this development, several dancers left the large companies, because they wished to create works in another style. They were influenced by the work of Cunningham with John Cage and Robert Rauschenberg. They approached sculptors to prepare costumes and props, often "found objects" taken from everyday life. These objects became the starting point of the choreography. The exaggerated make-up was abandoned, and a more realistic street make-up style was adopted.

The tour of Nikolais' company in Israel created a vogue of dancing inside large flexible "sacks", turning the dancers into animated sculptural objects.

**"Clothes are all of the refugees' possessions, taking them to wherever they go. We went to visit an asylum for destitute street-people, and got a lot of old clothes. We dressed our dancers with layer upon layer of rags, each layer representing another phase in that person's life"**

COSTUMES BY MOSHE BEN-SHAUL FOR "ALTER EGO", KOL-DEMAMA, CHOR.: M. EFRATI, PHOTO: M. RAZ



The very first movement-theatre piece created in Israel was Ruth Ziv-Eyal's "Mysteries" (1976), for which her husband, artist Avishai Eyal, designed decostumes. It is the story of a woman (Gabi Eldor) and a man who seek to contact each other, but strange figures clad in costumes made of string and kitchen utensils, such as cutlery and pots and pans, aggressively try to prevent them from meeting.

Avishai Eyal: "Designing the costumes was in fact autobiographical. We were a young couple and we used to talk a lot about arranging our house. Ruth - usually up in the lofty spheres of art - was always surprised that such a housewife world of pots and pans, knives and forks actually existed...." (Interview, 13.12.95).

At the very first rehearsal of "Mysteries", Ruth arrived with a collection of kitchenware, and the action of the dance evolved from the dancers' encounter with the costumes.

In 1977 I asked Ruth Ziv-Eyal to create a solo for me; her husband, Avishai, designed a costume which covered all of the dancer's body. In the "Scarecrow" dance I had a large pickled cucumber tin on my head, and the audience were unable to find out where my front and where my back were. The tin served as a mask and also as a megaphone, augmenting the voice when I accompanied my dancing with a spoken text. Concealing the face focused the spectators' attention on the minimal moves of the scarecrow.

Another piece by Ruth Ziv-Eyal, "Blai" (Rags, 1983) deals with the predicament of refugees. Its central movement element is the taking-off and donning of all kinds of costumes, layer upon layer.

"Clothes are all of the refugees' possessions, taking them to wherever they go. A heap of rags is all there is left after one of them dies. We [the choreographer and the designer, Frieda Klapholtz] went to visit an asylum for destitute street-people, and got a lot of old clothes. We dressed our dancers with layer upon layer of rags, each layer representing another phase in that person's life. For example, a layer is associated with a boy-scouts uniform or with connotations of a wedding." (Interview, 11.1.96).

Accessories, such as handbags, gloves, briefcases or sun-glasses were used. The glasses were a kind of mask "in order to allow the dancers to communicate with the help of body movement, not with their eyes." The clothes became the focal point of the performance; how one buttons a jacket, how one closes a zip-fastener, and how one dons and doffs "layers of time". The piece ends with a large heap of rags and people, undressed or partly dressed, limbs and hair emerging from it.

In most of her choreographic works, Rina Schoenfeld used different props as a starting point of the movement. These elements also served as a partial costume for her. Her inspiration comes from the work of Oskar Schlemmer, an artist of the Bauhaus school, active in Germany in the 1920's. His best known dance in "The Triadic Ballet", in which he made the dancers look like geometrical structures with the help of wire, metal sheets and paper mache costumes.

In Rina Schoenfeld's "Pachim" ("Tins", 1980) a copper sheet is used as a percussion instrument, but is also used as a sort of crown which she puts on her head, lending her an "old Egyptian" profile. In another dance she used translucent plastic bags sewn together in the form of a beautiful light ballroom dress.

In 1981 the sculptor Avraham Ofek designed a gown made of stiff off-white canvas, with many pockets, which he filled with stones. The dress stood by itself like sculpture. Inspired by the biblical punishment of stoning for fornicating women, he called his gown "Self Stoning Dress". He offered me the "stony" costume and I choreographed a solo with it, in which I took out the stones one by one, and discarded them, similar to the Jewish habit of turning one's pockets out at Yom Kippur for the "Tashlich" ceremony. It became a ritual of cleansing and purging the body of disease.

The plastic artist Eli Dor-Cohen and his then wife, Alice, a dancer, created together several dance-theatre pieces in which costume played a dominant role. His designs were influenced by the British artist and dancer Lindsey Kemp, who toured Israel in 1984. For his visual-theatre work "Mitta Vruda" ("Pink Death") he received first prize at the Acco Festival in 1985. For the present writer's solo about an alien figure from outer space ("Compact Amazone", 1986) he designed a costume in which many tiny light-bulbs were integrated, that could be turned on and off according to the movement. The bulbs were fastened to a leather harness covering the whole body and the head of the dancer.

The visit of Pina Bausch and her company from Wuppertal started a fashion of female underclothes, and for the male dancers business suits as dance costumes. Nava Zuckerman's works for her "TMU-NA" group in the 1980's are evidence of this trend.

The performances of the Belgian dance group "Rosas" in Israel started another tendency in costuming: That of an everyday look, very short black skirts, bare and unshaven legs, heavy boots and hair allowed to fall freely from the dancers' heads.

Nir Ben-Gal told me how in 1987, when he and Liat Dror presented their hour-long duet "Two-room Flat" to the selection committee of the "Gevanim Bemachol" show-case performances,

they were told to discard the heavy boots they wore in this dance, as these "would damage the linoleum flooring of the stage...."

"We were dancing with really heavy boots, the type that pull you towards the floor. We wanted to see how this influenced our movement. For us the boots were a protest of sorts, a statement against the ballet slipper as well as the bare feet of Graham. After all, one doesn't go to work barefoot, neither do we." (Interview, 19.7.97).

Ben-Gal and Dror use street cloths for their dances. Simple everyday dresses, nevertheless with some stogy accent. "There should be generosity and richness in the [dancer's] body,

The photos of their company are almost always grey. They underline photographic values that shun the "dionysian" sparkle. Black indicates the traditional oriental womens' dress, made of coarse black material, as opposed to the white colonial dress of European officials.

The present decade is rich in fanciful costume design. The late Moshe Sternfeld was a frequent designer of sets and costumes for dance theatre. For Osha Elkayam's "Sulamot" ("Ladders", 1988) he made a costume for a fish-woman, who is "caught" by a fisherman. He obliterated her female torso contours with the help of a square-cut piece of knitted material that looked like fish-scales.



COSTUMES BY LEA LADMAN FOR "BEYOND THE MIRROR",  
BAT-DOR DANCE COMPANY, CHOR.: IGAL PERRY.  
PHOTO: MULA & HARAMATY

not in the decor, costuming and props," says Nir. His dancers rehearse in regular street clothes, wearing normal pants (not jeans, as these are too tight fitting to be comfortable to dance in), in underpants, brassieres, shirts and so on. During the rehearsal they become saturated with sweat, so they are discarded and changed, which becomes part of the choreography. In "Assinus", Liat even washes their clothes on-stage.

The under-shirt carries associations with work in the kibbutz, and the simple clothes remind one of the 1940's, but also of communist China. The shoulder straps of Liat's brassiere are intentionally visible above her dress, as is the unshaven armpit. All these are a part of their stance against the beautifying of the dancer.

In Dror - Ben-Gal's works the dominant colours are the practical hues of work-clothes: black and dark blue, but there are no pinks or light blues.

Yuval Caspin designed the costume for Esthi Keinan's "Al Anna Ai Eile Buba" (nonsense words of baby talk, 1993), which is one of the most interesting works presented by "Inbal". The piece is built on Ladino songs, depicting women tending their babies. Caspin designed a multi-layered white costume of sheets and lace, inspired by pictures of women of Thesaloniki (Greece) from the 19th century.

The designer for Ruth Ziv-Eyal's "Gravitation" (1994) was Ronit Gruenbaum. The piece starts with the dancers entering the stage in a column covered by large gown, their heads under hoods, following the leader calling: "One, one, one!" When the outer garment is removed, the dancers appear bandaged by clinging-foil (as used for sandwiches), followed by gradual peeling-off that allows human figures to emerge.

Current openness about the relations between the genders brought about a proliferation of unisex costumes. Men in skirts, corsets and

dresses; men and women exchanging clothes on-stage as if the boys wished to find out how it feels to be a girl. Men dancing in female skirts stresses the narrowness of their pelvis, emphasising the width of their muscular torso.

Lately, the corset is in evidence in many choreographies. In our mind it is connected with Victorian prudery, as it keeps the torso rigid under a dress that conceals most of the skin. Tension, controversy and interest were generated by costumes combining corsets and heavy uncouth boots, while revealing as much bare skin as possible.

Today there is much more willingness to show naked skin than in the days of the hugging body-stocking of the American modern dance period, which suggested nudity without actually stripping the dancers naked.

In 1982 Ruth Ziv-Eyal created her "Mahzor" ("Cycle"), performed out of doors around a mound of clay with a pool of water in a crater. She had her group engage in ablutions, the women in skin-coloured body stockings, the men in underpants.

When Yaron Margolin showed his "Cursed Women" (1987) and "Dance of Death" (1988) in which there was total nudity, there were spectators who shouted "Go to Jaffa!", meaning the striptease clubs of that red-light quarter. But when the dancers in Dror and Ben-Gal's "Inta Oumri" (1994) took a very real bath on-stage,



COSTUME & CHOR. BY DORIT SHIMRON FOR "BEYOND THE RAINBOW",  
TNUATRON DANCE COMPANY

**"During the past decade, the emphasis was less on line and form, more on fitting in with the idea, the message of the dance. Once the most important aspect was whether the costume showed the dancer off to his or her best advantage. Not so nowadays...."**

the nakedness was accepted by the audience as a regular part of the choreography.

Sometimes the starting-point of the design is an article of apparel, such as an underskirt or a brassiere which is embellished or painted in a certain new way. The costume serves the choreography more than the dancer's body.

States Efrat Roded, who designed most of the costumes for Rami Be'er's works: "During the past decade, the emphasis was less on line and form, more on fitting in with the idea, the message of the dance. Once the most important aspect was whether the costume showed the dancer off to his or her best advantage. Not so nowadays.... In Be'er's 'Aide memoire' (1994) the costumes are simple, because we were looking for an atmosphere of cleanliness, a minimalistic costume revealing much skin.... Once upon a time we used a lot of Lycra, georgette, materials that fall nicely, chiffones. Today we are looking for fabrics that express the ideas of the choreography and the meaning of the work. The metallic clothes of the costumes for Be'er's 'Makomshehu' ('Someplace', 1995) denotes a futuristic atmosphere, one of aluminium and iron, of a modern alienated society."

The rich assortment of materials at the disposal of the designer, and the carte blanche to go as far as fancy may carry the idea or vision, opens up artistic possibilities never before encountered.



COSTUMES BY EFFRAT RODED & RAMI BE'ER FOR  
"NAKED TOWN", K.C.K.D., CHOR.: RAMI BE'ER,