

1992 - A YEAR OF



"Batsheva" dancer Sonia D'orleans-Juste

by Ruth Eshel

Tremendous changes have taken place in Israeli dance during the past year - Ruth Eshel talked with some of the leading personalities to find out how they see the situation and the future.

The development of stage dance in Israel falls into two main periods: that of the pioneers beginning in 1920 and that starting with the founding of Batsheva dance company in 1964. The 1990s may yet prove to be the beginning of another stage of development which will take the art of dance in our country in a new direction.

The initial period of stage dance in Israel was that of the pioneers of the modern European dance school; creator-performer dance artists persevered in their creative efforts in extremely harsh conditions. The establishment of the Batsheva dance company in 1964 heralded the next period. It began by copying the Martha Graham style and continued largely by imitating dance developments in the U.S.A., and later also in Europe.

The emphasis during those years was on training performing artists, suitable for professional companies, which were then producing works by some of the most renowned choreographers in the world. There were very few original Israeli choreographers. Professional dance in Israel was almost solely in the hands of established institutions. Only in the late 1970s, did the first works of non-establishment dance, characteristically experimental, actually appear. This activity would pick up toward the mid-1980s. At first performances were mostly solo evenings by creator-artists. Later groups of dancers formed around particular choreographers. Unknowingly, they returned to patterns prevalent during the pioneering era of artistic dance in Israel, the so-called 'desert generation'.

The dance scene in Israel continued to change. The beginning of the 1990s marked several important developments: the establishment of the Suzanne Dellal Center for Dance and Theater; the turmoil in Inbal, the style change of Batsheva, the uncertain future of Bat-Dor and the establishment of dance programs in dozens of schools across the country.

The Suzanne Dellal Center for Dance and Theater was founded in 1989. For the first time, the Batsheva dance company and the Inbal Dance Theater acquired a permanent home. More important, the Suzanne Dellal Center is the home for non-establishment dance. The center encourages original creation, by providing space and facilities for choreographers, and by allowing the production of single pieces. Previously, this was possible only in the framework of "Gevanim Bemachol" ("Hues of Dance") the annual showcase series of

TRANSITION?

performances. Since 1984 this activity indicated the change in attitude towards local creation. Formerly only a handful of non-establishment choreographers were able to raise enough money for a professional production. Most creators were forced to appear on makeshift stages, with no media exposure. It took Yair Vardi, the director of the Dellal Center, only a short time to make this beautiful complex into a vibrant, bustling institution. The performances there reflect not only the achievements, but also many of the problems of Israeli dance. Nevertheless, the existence of this institution, with the ongoing contact it allows among dance artists, the many events taking place, and the atmosphere of support - all these furnish local choreographers with unprecedented conditions.

But the Suzanne Dellal center itself has faced grave problems in recent months.

Lately the more interesting and lively Israeli modern dance companies are not just the repertory companies of the 1960s and 1970s any more, but those with a choreographer in residence who impresses his artistic signature on the company. This is typical of the Kibbutz Dance Company as well as of Batsheva. The success of the Kibbutz Dance Company is due primarily to the cooperation and rapport of its artistic director, Yehudit Arnon, with its chief choreographer, Rami Be'er whose excellent work is almost always connected to the reality of life in Israel.

Ohad Naharin, artistic director of Batsheva, is, for me, more than just another one in the long procession of artistic directors of the company, which may be vying for the world record in artistic director turnover. Batsheva was founded through the vision and the funding of Betsabee (Batsheva) de Rothschild. The company started on a high artistic level, and quickly reached popular acclaim, becoming a source of national pride.

BAT SHEVA

It started out as a Graham style company, the only company in the world (except for Graham's own) whose repertoire included masterpieces by the great choreographer. In the early 1970s, the company stopped following any distinct artistic line. Since then, the dancers themselves uphold a part of the reputation the company had acquired.

Unlike most previous artistic directors, Naharin is no stranger forced on the company. He is an Israeli, ex-Batsheva dancer himself, and a fastidious choreographer. Naharin breathed new life into the soon-to-be 30 year old company, which already had the look of a veteran in its forties. He brought with him a contemporary spirit, artistic standards, movement materials and qualities hitherto unknown to its dancers. Naharin's world wide fame bestowed esteem on the company and enhanced its eminence everywhere. Batsheva has been rejuvenated.

In spite of the general acclaim of his recent works, such as "Kyr" or "Arbos", there is a feeling of unrest or resentment in the company. Several good dancers have left and there are others who object to Ohad's policy of inviting minor choreographers from abroad to work with the company. Some fear he is turning Batsheva into a "Naharin company".

This situation recalls the first years of Jiri Kylian in Holland. When he became the artistic director of the Nederlands Dans Theatre similar strictures were voiced. But undoubtedly without Kylian and his many works the Dutch company would not have reached its present undisputedly high level.

I spoke to Ohad Naharin about the problems Batsheva is facing.

Ohad, How would you like to see Batsheva dance company?

Ohad Naharin: I would like to create a place for me and the company; a place where I could work to my best ability. In the past, I worked here as a guest choreographer. I had to work within a setting I didn't form, and there were limitations. Now I am in charge, and this gives me a totally different freedom to work. I have brought with me my experience and knowledge, and I'm working in standards acceptable to me.

Why, in your opinion, is there such a great turnover of dancers in the company?

O.N.: The company works in a certain way now, which isn't acceptable to everyone. We work more today. I demand a different sort of discipline; greater seriousness and devotion to work. The company is today composed of people who very much like to do the work I do. I try to create a warm home for this kind of work, and a body without opposition from within.

There are rumours classes are not run in

an orderly fashion.

O.N.: I stress self-discipline. I do not force anyone, but expect the dancers to recognize their responsibility to the company as a whole. I made an experiment: I announced that there was no obligation to take the daily morning class, but that dancers are expected to do them. It didn't go off well. Back in New York, there were no regular classes for my company, since the dancers were taking classes with many fine teachers that perhaps only New York City can offer. Here it's different. There were two or three dancers who abused the freedom, and took less classes. We finally reached a decision that it is mandatory to take five out of the six regular company classes each week.

You are in demand throughout the world, and are obliged to travel abroad several times a year. How does this affect the company?

O.N.: I have been "married" to Batsheva for two years now, but I've been in contact for several years with the Nederlands Dans Theater and the Geneva Ballet. I am attached to dancers there, I like working there, and I don't wish to sever my connections there. It also helps my work with Batsheva. My contract specifies that for three months each year I may work abroad. I must realize my complicity as a creator. This is expressed mainly, but not exclusively, by my work here, but also abroad. I have now transferred some 25 minutes from "Kyr" to these two companies, but not the whole dance, because I understand the possessiveness the Batsheva dancers feel toward this piece.

Do you enjoy the support of the management board of Batsheva?

O.N.: I have a very clear vision of what Batsheva can be, and where it can go. The artistic board and the Ministry of Education deal with statistics, and things that are more tangible. My role was to convince them. Now it's easier, since they see I am right in my approach.

INBAL

It is no secret that Sarah Levi-Tanai is reaching ripe old age and will soon have to retire. It is also no secret that throughout the years, Levi-Tanai did not cultivate a successor and that only a handful of veteran dancers has remained with the company, all of them nearing the age of 50 or that the technical level of the younger dancers is amateurish.

Sarah Levi-Tanai clung with all her might to the company and has refused to be replaced, since for her, Inbal is the source of her creativity and life - her home. It was plain for all to see, that Inbal was in sore need of a thorough self-examination and the sooner the better.

And yet, when rumours began to spread in the newspapers of her coming resignation as artistic director, even before the final decision had been made, it was cause for dismay. It seemed as though the second generation was ousting the venerable mother from home, while there were still many things she could accomplish. It was agreed that she would be able to make two new pieces for the company every year, a decision that the board of directors has not honoured so far.

This may not be feasible, given the precarious relations between the current board and Levi-Tanai. Perhaps this is also due to the real need to enable Rena Sharett, the newly appointed artistic director, to steer Inbal in her own direction.

Inbal Dance Theater is a unique phenomenon in the Israeli dance scene. It is not just another modern dance company, wherein ethnic materials are adapted to the stage. At Inbal, an ingenious dancemaker has taken the traditional materials of her ethnic culture, transformed them and created an artistic dance theater whose total method is very contemporary. If one has dreamt of Israeli dance that is not merely a reflection of what is done abroad, but is drawn from the depths of our own traditions, Sarah Levi-Tanai was certainly the one who has accomplished exactly that.

Just a few years after the company's inception in 1949, the press was already asking: "Where is Inbal headed?" In my opinion, Inbal has a mission: to bring out the rich movement materials found in ethnic groups. I see the future of Inbal not as a modern dance company, performing general contemporary movement with an added oriental flavor, nor as a folk dance company with artistic aspirations, but rather as a research group that studies the legends, songs, and especially the indigenous dances of each ethnic group, analyzes the movement materials and creates a movement vocabulary which enriches the entire Israeli dance.

And before asking "What is to follow Sarah Levi-Tanai?", it would be wise to form a select group of professionals, who could take down in movement notation the movement materials discovered and developed by Levi-Tanai, and produce a systematic set of lessons where the Yemenite based movement-language is taught. Furthermore, they should reconstruct the masterpieces and videotape them while Levi-Tanai is still with us.

I spoke with Rena Sharett a few months after she took office as the new artistic director.

How is the transition from the old to the new Inbal progressing:

Rina Sharett: Harder than I expected. It

isn't simply replacing one director by another. I am not slipping into the shoes of Sara Levi-Tanai. I am starting something completely new. My world is that of ethnic dance. There certainly is a place for such a dance theater, apart from the works of Sara, whose qualities are well known and unchallenged.

The technical level of the dancers was often discussed in the past. Now technical instruction for the dancers has been intensified, and they are progressing. I decided to take what there is and to proceed from there. Before one makes changes, the assets one has have to be preserved.

We are in a process of transition, and artists wishing to participate are welcome.

A year later, when Inbal premiered its new program at the 1992 Karmiel Festival, not even a single work by Sara Levi-Tanai was included. When the dancers had to deal with movement based on Yemenite tradition (in the works of Ilana Cohen, Sikki Kol and Sara Zarev), they looked like people wearing cloths not their own, in spite of their improved technical level.

Three of the new works were by Rina Sharett. As choreographic invention is not her strong point, even the beautiful costumes were unable to hide the relative poverty of the movement-material and her rather old-fashioned realistic approach.

BAT-DOR

Batsheva de Rothschild's announcement of July 31, 1991, about the forthcoming extensive layoffs at Bat-Dor, and of closing the company and school attached to it, unless public funding is forthcoming, came as a shock to the dance community in Israel. "I don't know how long I have left to live, and I won't tell my heirs what they should do with their money. Funding sources must be found that would guarantee the continued activity of Bat-Dor", she stated.

She founded the Batsheva company, to provide Israeli dancers with a professional setting in which to work - a privilege not enjoyed by their predecessors. As may be recalled, in the first years of its existence, only dancers trained in Graham dance technique could join Batsheva. According to Rothschild, one of the reasons for her decision to create Bat-Dor only four years after the establishment of Batsheva, was the wish to provide a workplace for young dancers whose style was neoclassical and would not fit Batsheva, such as Shelly Sheer, Yehudah Maor, Miri Zamir and Jeannette Ordman. There was a possibility at that time that, lacking a proper place, these dancers would leave the country.

However dubious her past decisions may have been, all this is irrelevant to the question of the future of Bat-Dor.

In September '91, despite everything, classes recommenced at the Bat-Dor school. The monthly appropriation by the

Baroness is barely sufficient for maintaining school activities and for keeping on the majority of the dancers in the company. There is no money for new pieces, so now only classes are given and rehearsals go over the existing repertory. The office floor is empty. There is no public relations budget. The target is not to reach too high a deficit. The dancers are having a hard time, and there is no solution in sight. Meanwhile, de Rothschild's health continues to deteriorate and everyone is on standby.

Above and beyond artistic arguments for and against Bat-Dor, there exists a moral obligation by the State of Israel and the local dance scene to Batsheva de Rothschild, who had chosen to invest her fortune in Israeli dance.

Before that, for over 40 years, artists had been trying to create professional companies here, and have had to give up, due to lack of financial support. Theaters, orchestras, folk dancing - all were budgeted. Stage dance was an upstart, and but for de Rothschild, who founded Batsheva, Bat-Dor and its school, and who brought to this country the best teachers and choreographers, who knows when the establishment would allocate enough money to build a stage dance company, and what would have become of the teachers and dancemakers who now lead Israeli dance?

Throughout the years, de Rothschild has repeatedly asked for public assistance in covering the growing expenditures of Bat-Dor, demands that were never seriously considered, perhaps because of Rothschild's reputation as a constant benefactor. There were also those who doubted the necessity of this aid, and tried to show it as merely a public relations stunt. Anyone acquainted with de Rothschild knows that she is frank and straightforward. She says what she feels, and acts accordingly.

Some of the reactions to her dramatic announcement showed a certain satisfaction, stemming from the closing of an historical account. After all, de Rothschild's activities have given rise to frequent misgivings. Her unflinching support of Jeannette Ordman, her preference for the younger company over the publicly and critically acclaimed Batsheva company; her attempt to fuse both companies, under Ordman; her open hand toward Bat-Dor was a source of envy for all those who had to make do with meagre public funds. To all these was added a great deal of rumour, gossip and defamation.

As great as this contribution was, given the legitimate controversies over whether de Rothschild's money could be used differently and perhaps more wisely, so would the ingratitude be, if her final request is ignored.

About a year ago I spoke about all this with Jeannette Ordman.

What is the situation now at Bat-Dor?

Jeannette Ordman: The situation is very hard, since we are trying to manage on the Baroness' monthly grant, but that is not enough. For three years now, we've been cutting expenditures but we barely

managed to finish last year. De Rothschild will continue to give us the same grant this year. The only source of light lately has been the 90 thousand shekels grant we've received from the Council for Culture and the Arts, earmarked for salaries of new immigrant dancers.

Today, nine of the 20 company members of Bat-Dor are from Russia.

Is there any solution in sight?

J.O.: There is a tendency now to help the school, but not the company. De Rothschild told me: "They're putting me back right where I started. There will be a school that will educate good dancers, but they won't have anywhere to dance, and they'll have to leave the country. I created Batsheva so that dancers wouldn't leave the country. I created Bat-Dor for dancers with different qualities, so that they too wouldn't have to leave. And now the school will be left, and what will become of all the fine dancers graduating from it?

Suppose Bat-Dor does get establishment support. A public board of directors will be set up and it would have its say in the running of the company. Would you accept that?

J.O.: Of course. Anyone who gives money wants to have some influence. Nobody just gives away money. But it's a matter of proportion. If a tenth of what the Baroness allots us is given by them, their influence will be proportional. If they give more, so will their influence increase.

In the meantime, Bat-Dor resumed its performances. At the Karmiel Festival the company looked well trained and cohesive, in spite of it having recently absorbed several new immigrants from the former Soviet Union.

THE ISRAEL BALLET

Among the many new immigrants from Russia there arrived dancers on various levels of artistic proficiency, all of them trained in classical ballet. Their natural place is among the dancers of the Israel Ballet. Indeed, several Russian sounding names appear on the program list. Obviously, ballet trained dancers who join the Kibbutz Company or Batsheva, would have to make an effort to bridge the gap between their accustomed style and the modern, contemporary movement of these groups. That is also the reason these new immigrants have not yet found their way into the non-establishment experimental groups.

The Israel Ballet, which was founded and is directed by Hillel Markman and Berta Yampolsky, has recently celebrated its 25th anniversary in a gala performance. The company looked mature and proficient.

As a recent (April '92) official statistical

report showed, the Israel Ballet had more spectators attending its performances in the past years than any other Israeli dance company. The company has no stage of its own and only one studio to rehearse in. Lately, the company is trying to establish an affiliated ballet school.

During its first years, the Israel Ballet was a repertory company performing works by foreign as well as Israeli choreographers, among them Berta Yampolsky. In recent years, most of the works are by Yampolsky, who has also staged a number of full-length ballets, such as "Sleeping Beauty" or "Romeo and Juliet" in a rather solidly traditional style. These were well constructed and conservative compared to the experimental treatment choreographers such as Mats Ek had accorded to "Giselle" and "Swan Lake" or Maguy Marin in staging her "Cinderella".

What are the plans for the coming season?

Berta Yampolsky: I have finished a new short work for 15 dancers, and I plan to do a new ballet for the whole company.

Isn't there place for more works by leading choreographers from abroad?

B.Y.: We are engaged in negotiations with Hans van Manen, who is due to come and work with us in 1993. I wish to have works only by the best, and in my view Balanchine is still the best. Indeed, we get the rights for his works free of charge. Most of the good choreographers in the world are busy working for their own companies and are not prepared to come and stage their works for us. Anyhow, we don't have the necessary funds nor the inclination for experiments. We have to rehearse up to five different works simultaneously in only one rehearsal room.

What about opening the company to Israeli choreographers?

B.Y.: To choreograph a classical ballet is very difficult, and I do not know any good local artists. From time to time, I ask my dancers whether one of them would like to create a new work, but young dancers tend to be busy with their dancing and just want to dance. They tend to think that they'll have time enough to choreograph when they are older. Three years ago, Itzik Tapiero, then a dancer in our company, created a good new work. He received excellent reviews, went abroad to conquer the world, and today he is earning his living refurbishing apartments in New York.

Of course, as Yampolsky says, there are many examples of one choreographer providing a company with most of its repertory. One such choreographer was John Cranko in Stuttgart. But he also provided his audience with opportunities to watch the best creators of his time and gave chances to young choreographers to try their talents. Some of these, such as Jiri Kylian, John Neumeier or Billy Forsythe, have become the leading choreographers of today.

The Israel Ballet is the only permanent, established classical ballet company in the land, as opposed to about four

modern dance companies. Such a monopoly carries with it certain obligations. In my opinion, it is Markman's and Yampolsky's duty to offer the Israeli ballet audience the best new work by foreign choreographers while encouraging Israeli dance creators by putting the company at their disposal.

What is your opinion about the idea of a new chamber ensemble for ballet with a more contemporary outlook by Israeli choreographers?

B.Y.: Who needs such a thing? I do contemporary works, such my "Untitled" to music by Gustav Mahler or "Harmonium." To found another company? There is no place in the world with so many dance companies, and most of them can hardly manage to exist at all.

THE NEXT GENERATION

A new element in dance life in Israel is the existence of dance programs in 14 junior high schools and 12 institutes of higher education, attended by about a thousand students. Most of these programs are found in the central Tel Aviv area, but are on the rise throughout the country (Pardess Hannah, Haifa, Ga'aton, Jerusalem and even Mitzpe Ramon). These programs enable students to take a morning class, usually in addition to private studio classes. But it's not just the increase in hours of practice. The youngsters are exposed to a variety of teachers and dance styles (ballet, modern dance, ethnic dance, folk dancing) within the school, an important aspect that usually does not exist in a private setting.

And maybe even more important are the theoretical classes - in dance history, music, anatomy, and composition, where these young people acquire tools to understand the choreographic medium.

It is now possible even for students who are not enrolled in a school dance program to submit a matriculation paper on any dance-related subject, or to create an original dance as part of their "Bagrut" examination. Before dance programs were inaugurated, composition studies, and general dance education for young students was neglected. I see primary importance in these two subjects, and their combination with technique classes in correct proportion.

For about 40 years stage dance in Israel before statehood grew around non-establishment figures for whom creativity and self-expression were paramount and the technical aspect secondary. After 30 more years, since the 1960s, a time of adoration of technique and imported guest choreographers, we are now at the dawn of a new era. Perhaps now a balance is to be achieved between the contribution of established companies and that of fringe dance, a balance between technique and creativity, between the confinement within studio walls and the broadening of vision.

