

# MODERN DANCE EDUCATION

## AT THE CLOSE OF THE 20TH CENTURY

by Ruth Eshel

The subject of teaching modern dance in Israel, in its pedagogical, technical as well as creative aspects is in disarray. This article will concentrate on the teaching of technique, the aim of which is to develop the body as a tool, able to serve the artist and his or her artistic goals.

In Israel there is no apparatus for public licensing of dance teachers or inspection of their work. Many of the instructors at the private or semi-public studios have had no formal dance education and many lack professional personal experience as dancers. In the sphere of modern dance, the situation is especially serious since there is no accepted syllabus to follow.

Though there may be much truth in the saying that what matters most is not so much what is being taught, but rather who is the teacher, there is certainly a scarcity of teachers who are both inspired pedagogues as well as creative artists. While in classical ballet the technique itself is well defined and the teacher's personality is of lesser importance, in modern dance the teacher is a very significant part of the message as there is no clearly defined framework of accepted technique.

Perhaps a clear symptom of the crisis modern dance teaching facing today is the fact that most modern dance companies in Israel and abroad, train their dancers in classical ballet only. The abandoning of modern dance instruction is, in my opinion, a mistake, as ballet and modern dance techniques are mutually complementary.

During this century modern dance took the stage by storm, fuelled by the creative talents of great artists. Apparently modern dance education could not adapt itself quickly enough to the demands created by the great innovators of this art form, and was unable to formulate its underlying principles in a coherent manner that would distinguish the merely superficial from the basic concepts of the new technique.

This phenomenon was in evidence at the turn of the century, when the great creators such as Duncan, Laban, Wigman, Jooss and Dalcroze formulated their systems. Other less talented innovators felt that they too should create their own methods. The development of modern dance education proves that these hotchpotch quasi techniques have not advanced the technical level of modern dancers.

Naomi Bahat - the head of the movement and dance teachers dept. of Seminar Hakibbutzim in Tel Aviv:

"We endeavour to free the teaching of technique from emotional considerations. We base our work on the assumption that each joint has a given range of movement articulation and from this base the student should be able to follow any technique.

At present, we are in a period of combining several styles. For example, Tirza Shpanoff, one of our senior teachers, combines basic movement with anatomy and physiology, including elements of Limon and Cunningham technique. Perhaps an eclectic approach is bound to be superficial, but I believe basic knowledge of the human body will provide the teacher and the student with a sufficiently broad basis. We try to incorporate all the

"rules" and "don'ts" of each style, while emphasizing the similarities, differences and specifics of each one.

I think that concentrating on one technique alone is detrimental. We teach, for instance, Graham, but not exclusively. I don't believe Graham is a good technique to begin one's training.

A curriculum is necessary as it provides a framework for the teacher, but he or she should be secure enough to stray from the path if that is what is called for. Each teacher should be able to develop a curriculum for himself, but often, when that is required he contributes very vague general ideas. There are only a few models to follow, as most of the great dance teachers didn't build a systematic curriculum."

Batia Cohen - pro tem. head of the dance dept. of the Jerusalem Academy of Dance and Music:

"Unfortunately, much of dance teaching is in the hands of charlatans, who have had little dance education themselves, resulting in modern classes filled with a hotchpotch of styles, a haphazard putting together of bits taken from all kinds of methods.

While in classical ballet both the aims and the didactic methods are well defined, one cannot say the same for

modern dance. Contemporary dance is developing, but it will take time until a new systematic method, such as Graham, Cunningham or Limon, is formulated.

The studies of future teachers at our academy follow the Graham syllabus (four years of Graham technique plus those of Limon and Cunningham). But we also have another section, of 'free' modern dance, based mainly on the students' own movement material."

omega of education, rather than, one among several. The pusillanimous and conservative approach of most Israeli choreographers and teachers who thought that mastery in Graham alone makes for the accomplished modern dance artist, caused a narrowing of most dancers' technical abilities and choreographers' creativity.

The atmosphere in the 1980s was one of eclecticism - a mixture of Graham principles with a sprinkling of other methods from such illustrious creators as Graham, Limon, Cunningham, Bausch, Tharp et etcera, according to the individual inclinations of each teacher. Without systematic knowledge of a method, its real values are not apparent, causing the student to follow the forms of the movements without real insight into the deeper motivations at the roots of their creation, thus turning them into superficial exercises.



Veteran Israeli dancers remember the shock they experienced when they were confronted with American modern technique in the early 1960s and how inadequate they felt by comparison.

Today, after the rhetorical wars between ballet and modern dance have abated, the time has come for modern dance to learn a lesson from its predecessor, classical ballet. True, modern dance is basically personal and rebellious, but classic ballet also has its individualistic manifestations. There are pronounced stylistic differences between Russian, English, Danish and American ballet styles. Nevertheless, they are all based on a common structure, expressed in the accepted forms of a ballet class. The difference between what is basic principle and what is personal embellishment remains clear cut.

While the great modern dance artists endeavoured to formulate a new movement language of their own, what distinguished them from the rest was not only their creative genius, but their ability to analyze their own work and to glean from it principles and technical rules. It did not matter, if, as in the case of Graham, creation preceded method or as in the case with Cunningham theory preceded choreography.

Israel is an example of a country that accepted the Graham technique in the 1960s, discarding the Central European methods of the 1930s and 1940s, which suddenly seemed "amateurish and old-fashioned". The historic reason for this radical change was, of course, the founding of the Batsheva Dance Company in 1964 by Batsheva de Rothschild, who invited the best

teachers (mostly former dancers of the Graham company) to teach in Israel. The well defined Graham method became the basis for modern dance technique instruction, dominant until the early 1980s.

There is a danger however, in regarding one single system as the alpha and

The current styles of dance use a continuous shifting of the gravitational center of the dancer's body, as well as movement full of abandonment, which creates a feeling of unrestrained freedom. This may cause the illusion that anything goes, and that there is basically no need for a systematic technique. In reality, this seemingly

Sikki Kol - choreographer and modern dance teacher, the principal of the Bikkurei Ha'etim Center in Tel Aviv and its dance company Bikkurei Machol, who also teaches at the Telma Yellin High School for the Performing Arts in Tel Aviv:

"Recent developments in contemporary choreography demand a different emphasis on technique instruction. There is a demand for much wider technical and physical ability from what was acceptable in the past. The contemporary dancer has to be able to do everything. This requires each teacher to develop his own movement parameters. But not all teachers possess a wide enough knowledge of the basics of their art, to formulate their own syl-

labus. Many come and ask me for material, admitting they don't know what to teach next. More than in previous times there is a demand for several teachers to teach simultaneously, their separate branch of modern dance and this may create confusion. Our generation studied with many teachers, but they all had a common basis.

Each teacher needs some systematic logic, in order that his exercises do not become a random series of unconnected moves. The movement material itself isn't as important as what you instill into it - the goal of the exercise must be clearly defined, lucidly explained verbally and strictly followed."

Yehudit Arnon - the artistic director of the Kibbutz Contemporary Dance Company and the Mate Asher Regional Dance School:

"In my opinion, the education of each dancer has to include classical ballet training as well as the Graham method. Graham technique is well designed, teaches a clear movement language and develops the dancer's body. Its intensity and energetic qualities create in the dancer emotional involvement in the movement. I do not know any other method that en-

phasizes ground-work, the pelvis and contraction and release as does the Graham technique. On top of that, one should also study Limon and Cunningham technique. Cunningham's technique is closer to ballet, and enhances coordination, rhythm, form and abstract, not necessarily harmonic development of the movement, while the Limon method emphasizes the flow of movement. It is important for the dancer to widen his scope by studying non-dance methods such as that of Feldenkraiz, Alexander and the Eshkol-Wachman notation."



unrestrained, "abandoned" movement demands a very high technical discipline and control from the dancer's body.

superficiality.

Perhaps, if the Eshkol-Wachman notation method is going to constitute an integral part of every dance teacher's



Good systems are open to further development and modification, provided the teacher has a fundamental grasp of the principles they are based on. If he is aware of the systems' weaknesses, he is able to ameliorate them according to his needs, with insight, always aware of his reasons for making changes in order to suit the method to the needs of his students. However, unless one is an expert in one system, it is dangerous to mix several.

Of course, there is also the possibility of abandoning any system and basing one's own method on organic natural movement. Behind this approach is the belief in the universal origin of body movement as a source of material from which one may draw whatever is necessary for any desired goal. This approach requires a fundamental understanding of the body, an ability to choose what is appropriate for each exercise, as well as a talent for composition. One has to keep in mind, that we are not discussing a single class, but a syllabus covering several school years. Experience teaches us, that often the freedom thus granted is much too wide, even for an experienced teacher. Even the talented creators of new methods have confined themselves to a small number of principles on which to base their work, as they understood that spreading too thin is bound to result in

Naomi Perlow - choreographer, head of the Batsheva Ensemble, also teacher at the Bat-Dor studio:

"Everyone is after newfangled fashions all the time. While this may be justified in choreography, one has to halt this trend in the sphere of dance education. It is imperative to organise, gather together and classify the existing material. Only after this has been accomplished should the search for new ground continue. I am not afraid of conservatism in dance education. A teacher has to have cultural roots. We have to know from where we came and be proficient in all kinds of techniques, such as the Graham, Cunningham or Lester Horton (Alvin Ailey) methods. A dancer who embarks on a teacher's career at the age of 21, can't be expected to master all that in four years.

Once a week I sequester myself in the studio for 10 hours, to search for movement material to use in my classes for the coming week. In each class I

concentrate on a series of basic themes, which form the 'atoms' of that class. For myself, the preparation of the classes is an adventure. I don't teach too many classes, in order not to become stale. I find it important to preserve my appetite for and emotional involvement in teaching. The basic structure of my classes is that of the classic ballet lesson, but with modern movement material. I like comparing the structure of a class to that of a cathedral: on a broad basis each layer moves upward, in a steady crescendo, a structure that includes repeats, development and exactitude.

It would be most helpful if a syllabus existed consisting of principles expressed in examples taken from the creations of great artists, with instruction pointing out possible development of the material."

Roni Segal - a dancer, choreographer and principal of a her own school for dancers, teachers and choreographers in Switzerland, who recently returned to Israel after many years abroad:

"I think it is important that a dance pedagogue should be an artist himself, not just an instructor, as it is impossible to teach something one hasn't experienced. Unfortunately, nowadays, no one has the necessary patience to study in depth.

The human body is a map of life and the artist-teacher has to decide which part of that life-map he is able to use as his language and his technique. During his searchings he works on the movement material at his disposal, makes it his own and explores it from within. After completing this process, he is able to teach others.

For each class I prepare certain cen-

tral points, but do not cling to them religiously. By now I feel secure enough to change the structure of the lesson according to some specific problem that may arise during the work. My classes are based on the architecture of the body and on the quality of movement. From time to time there is an improvisation period.

As for my students, I wish to provide them with a sufficiently wide, variegated and precise base, to enable them to create for themselves, not to confine them to the boundaries of any given style. It took me many years to form a precise method. Without formulating his ideas, a teacher is unable to teach. If one isn't a creative artist, it is best to follow exactly what ones's teachers have taught you. What is really important is not a method, but the personality of the teacher."



curriculum, it may become a tool, as a basic definition of movement, thus becoming a possible foundation on which a syllabus could be structured and commonly accepted by all.

Modern dance education in this country is currently at a crossroad. As the art of contemporary dance has progressed, the existing methods have become inadequate, and there is, as yet, no new system that can replace them.

The preparation of a syllabus comprising both technical training and the creative aspects of contemporary dance, including a basic "grammar" of movement components, as well as examples gleaned from works of well known choreographies in different styles, comprehensive but at the same time not hermetically sealed, could provide dance teachers both with the "what" and the "how" of a contemporary modern dance education.



Amos Hetz is the head of the Movement Dept. of the Rubin Academy in Jerusalem and the artistic director of his "Chamber Dance" company:

"The goal of my pedagogic work is to develop the senses and thought processes of my students, to teach them how to mould movement material and to enhance their creative talent. We offer our students movement, movement-notation and composition classes. The movement classes are designed to gradually build their physical powers, until they are able to use the widest range of movement. The study of movement-notation develops the analytical ability while composition enhances their proficiency in creating new compositions from the material learned in the other two courses, commensurate with the student's own aesthetic views, and according to his imagination.

I object to calling movement classes

'technique', as this term already points to its pitfalls. The movement class is a series of experiences, learning the diverse possibilities of each body part, each joint and the relation to gravity.

In order to achieve versatility and insight, I have to teach the future dancer or dance teacher how to analyze movement, as I believe one is unable to execute complicated movements without being able to define what is being done and what the potential of a given move is. To achieve this, we use the Eshkol-Wachman notation.

The use of movement notation makes the formulation of scales [as in music] possible. It facilitates the formation of exercises and whole compositions, defined according to the definitions of the Eshkol-Wachman notation method. I strongly believe that making the study of movement notation an integral part of the education of dancers would radically change dance pedagogy."