

THE ISRAEL BALLET

FACT AND FICTION

By Ruth Eshel

When Berta Yampolsky and Hillel Markman named their company "The Israel Classical Ballet Company", they were making a statement of intent. They wanted an Israeli company - based in Israel with Israeli dancers and choreographers, and one that will be devoted to the classical form of ballet. Many artists name their companies after themselves, but with Markman and Yampolsky it was different - they wanted to establish a national company of the first order that would show ballet to its best,

established in Israel as early as the 1920s, but classical ballet was danced in the 1950s only at the opera and was then still widely regarded as a misfit. In 1967 they decided to leave the Israel Opera Ballet and establish their own company.

Barring Inbal Dance Theater, which was already in existence in the early 1950s, all other established Israeli dance groups came into being in the 1960s - Bat Dor the same

year as the Israel Ballet, three years after its senior company Batsheva was established. Two years later, in 1969, a third modern dance group was born, The Kibbutz Contemporary Dance Company.

The Israel Classical Ballet Company started out as The Holon Classical Ballet Company. From Holon Markman and Yampolsky drove daily to collect their two dancers, who had left the Opera Ballet with them, to rehearse on a small wooden stage in a community centre near Tel Aviv.

The Holon Ballet held its first premiere in January 1967. Yampolsky and Markman danced duets from "Romeo and Juliet" and Serge Lifar's "Don Quixote" and the rest of the show consisted of Dolin's "Pas de Quatre" and Markman's "Interplay" to music by Anton Gold.

Yampolsky gave afternoon classes - four afternoons a week, six hours each time - in gym rooms at local primary schools to make a living. She prepared with the pupils the school's end of term performance ("you cannot

imagine how miserable it was to coach kids who couldn't care less for dancing").

The Holon Ballet Company was not easy to sell. Armed with reviews, Markman used to go to various cultural functionaries hoping to interest them in performances, and over the weekends both would go about looking for stages on which to put up a show. However, when they did finally get to perform they got good press coverage and the public liked them.

The Tel Aviv premiere took place on the eve of the 1967 war, before a house full of women the men had all been mobilized. Among the audience was Gertrud Kraus, the high priestess of modern European dance in Israel in the 1930s and 40s. She encouraged Yampolsky and Markman, and unlike many of their colleagues did not enquire why a successful duo decided to return to Israel. By her own request she became the budding company's confidential advisor.

When it became clear that they would not be sponsored in any way by the Holon municipality, the company moved

"GURRELIEDER"
CHOR.: BERTA YAMPOLSKY
DANCERS: ORNA KUGEL
AND BRUNO VERZINO

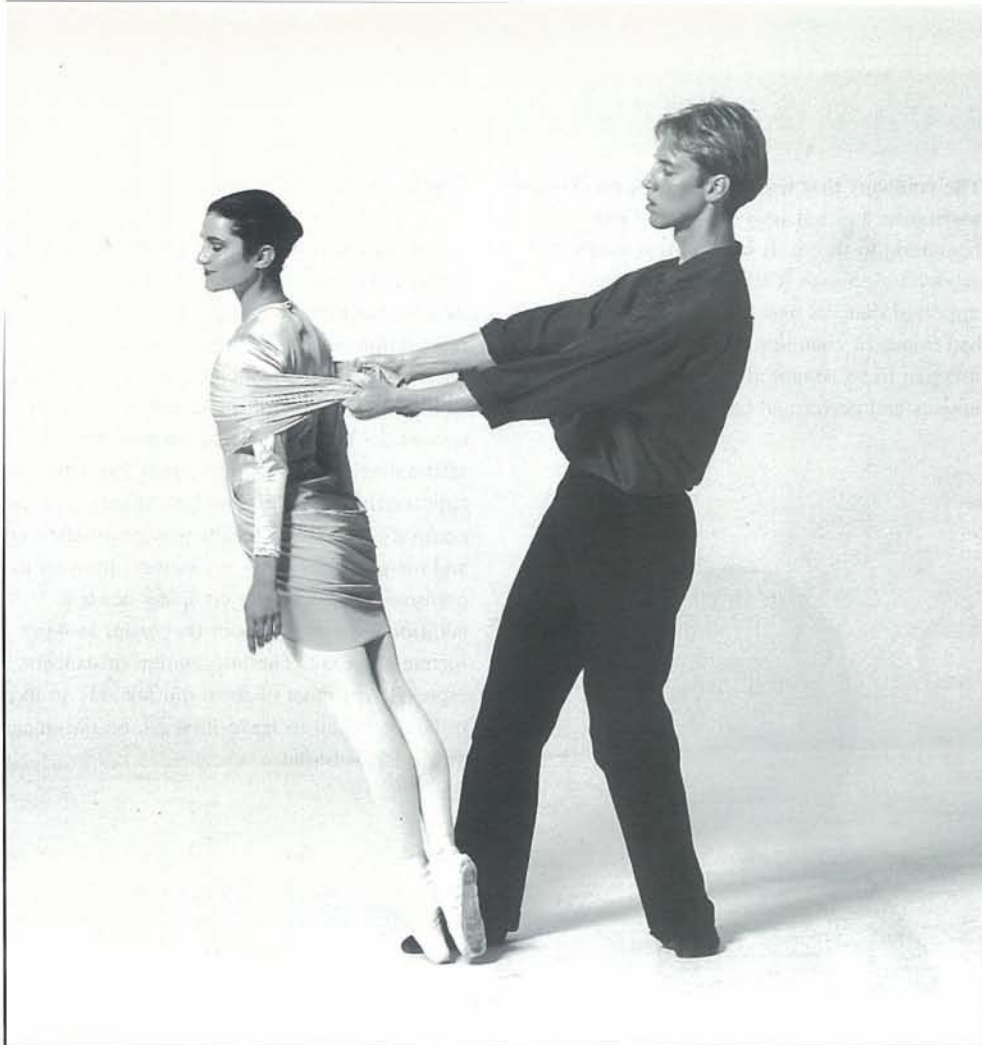
meet and nurture local demand for classical ballet and be nurtured by it in return.

The article outlines the twenty eight year long history of the company in the context of the Israeli dance scene and analyzes the extent to which it has realized its aims.

The First Years - 1967-1975

The duo Yampolsky and Markman spent the 1950s outside Israel, dancing in such famous companies as the Ballets Russes and the Fokine Ballet, but always dreaming of establishing a classical ballet company in Israel. When they decided to return they naturally approached the Israel Opera Ballet, where they subsequently danced as soloists for two years. Modern dance was well





recognition encouraged us". It was time to widen the repertoire and Yampolsky and Markman, like the leading modern dance groups of the day, had to resort to hiring foreign choreographers.

As a reaction to the dominance of European ballet in Israel in the years 1920-1964, that focused on the content and very little on technique, the Israeli dance world in the 1960s and 70s worked very hard on the dancer's body but did little in the way of artistic creativity. Few choreographers were producing modern dance and none classical ballet, and there was a general feeling of inferiority among Israeli performing and creative artists in the field, when they compared themselves to colleagues abroad.

Markman and Yampolsky approached Janine Charrat, whose work "Les Liens" had impressed them in Brussels. Within three weeks she produced a duet for them and created "Chaconne" for the company.

When Markman and Yampolsky discovered they needed more dancers they went looking for them in the USA and Canada. In 1967 Bat Dor opened a studio, but most of its graduates preferred to dance with Bat Dor itself or with Batsheva, both of which enjoyed lavish De Rothschild support and could hire the best teachers and choreographers in the field, rather than join The Israel Ballet.

The Jewish Agency paid the fare and board of the Jewish dancers they "imported" and their salaries for the first few months of employment here. During their tour to recruit new dancers Markman and Yampolsky went to

to Tel Aviv, to become finally The Israel Classical Ballet Company. They hired a floor in an apartment building, had a parquet installed and started rehearsing. But the jumps disturbed the neighbours and they had to move again.

In 1970 Yampolsky's father helped them purchase a place of their own in a part of town

"BORN AGAIN", CHOR.: BERTA YAMPOLSKY
DANCERS: NA'AMA YADLIN AND KEVIN CUNNINGHAM

that today is the height of fashion but then was in the middle of nowhere, Kikar ha'Medina. Again they built a parquet, opened a school and started working. "Hundreds of pupils came from all over the country", says Yampolsky. "The company numbered five dancers. We received token assistance to the sum of two thousand pounds, which was barely enough for one production, but the

"GISELLE", ACT II, CHOR.: FERROT
DANCERS: EREZ DROR AND MARCIA ZUSSMAN



the New York City Ballet performance of George Balanchine's "Midsummer Night's Dream", with Edward Villela and Suzanne Farrell. They presented themselves as managers of the Israel Ballet, which at the time numbered five dancers including themselves. They got excellent tickets but after the show they could not muster enough courage to address Balanchine and only wrote him a letter. This letter was to stand the company in good stead in years to come. It touched the great choreographer's heart and he later gave the Israel Ballet performance rights of some of his ballets free of charge, among them "Serenade", "Pas de Trois", "Concerto Barocco", "Agon Pas de Deux", "Four Temperaments" and "Symphony in C".

Markman and Yampolsky returned from the USA with seven new dancers (among them Pamela Osserman) and including themselves their company then numbered nine dancers. The Israel Ballet changed overnight - technically it improved enormously, but the classes and rehearsals were conducted in English and all the works performed were ordered from abroad.

It was time to widen the repertoire again and so, for the company of nine dancers, Tod Bolender produced "Still Point" (1974), Gene Hill Sagan (who spent several years in Israel) created "Sweet Agony" and "Pale Lotus" (1974) and Janine Charrat also continued to contribute, this time a work by the name of "Repetition de Phaedre" (1974). Yampolsky's first choreography - "Symphonic Variations" (1974), to music by Cezar Franck, was also produced at this time. The process was traumatic for Yampolsky - "I was a beginner and one of the dominant dancers had no faith in my ability and rallied the company against me" - and she preferred to see herself still as a dancer and artistic manager first and foremost.

Despite the setbacks, by the mid 1970s optimism seemed to be in order.

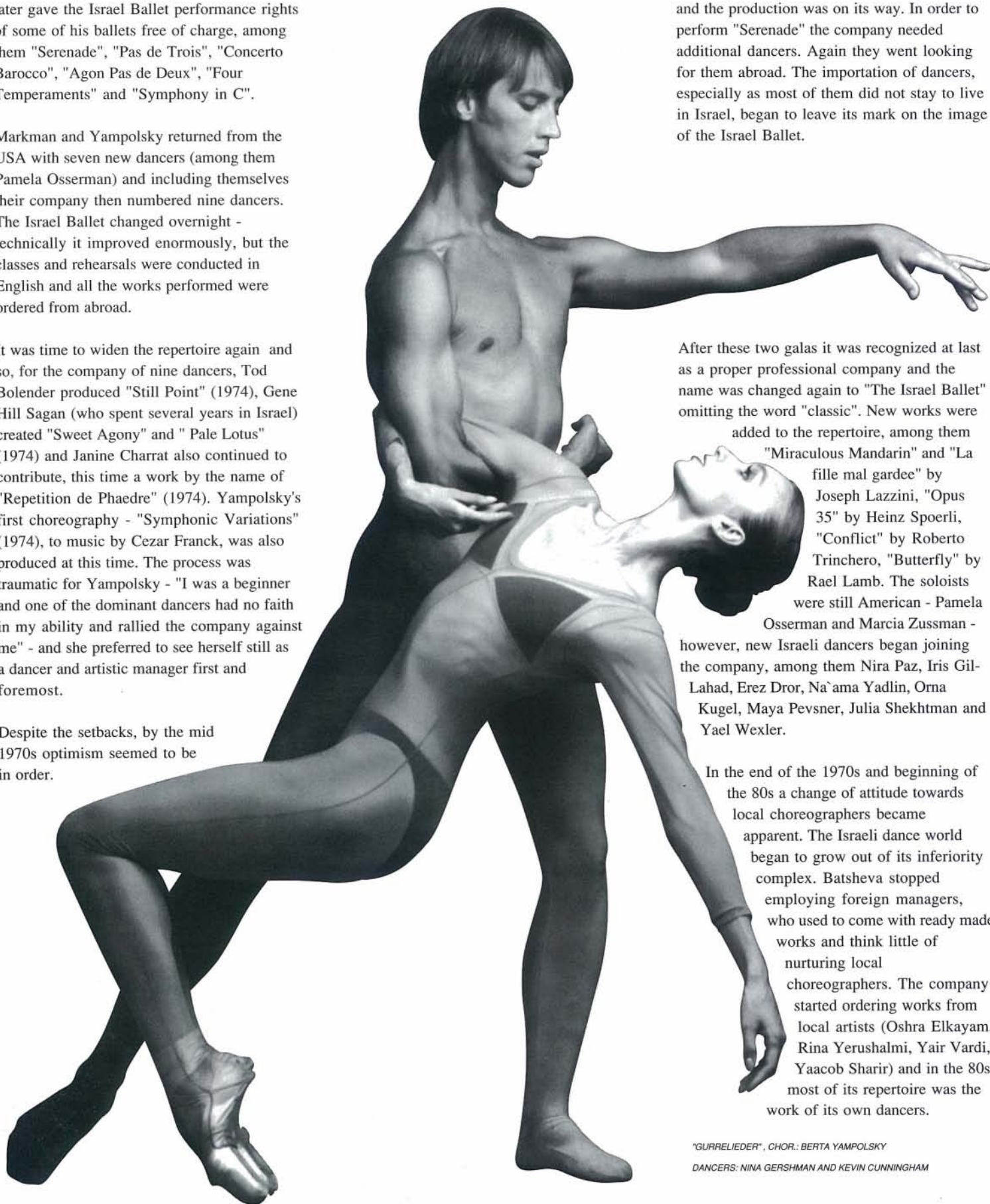
The company that was created with no external assistance was not only subsisting but beginning to thrive. It had its own studio and school and though it still depended on imported dancers and foreign choreography, it had hopes of changing that. In the meantime it began to be sought after, received good notices and performed before full houses.

Maturity, 1975-1985

An invitation to participate in the 1975 Israel Festival marked a new stage in the development of the Israel Ballet. It meant recognition and gave them courage to ask for "Serenade" from Balanchine and "Electrobach" from Felix Blaska for the grand occasion. In two weeks Balanchine sent word to the affirmative, only stipulating that Pat Neary approve the production and the standard of the company. Neary's account was complimentary and the production was on its way. In order to perform "Serenade" the company needed additional dancers. Again they went looking for them abroad. The importation of dancers, especially as most of them did not stay to live in Israel, began to leave its mark on the image of the Israel Ballet.

After these two galas it was recognized at last as a proper professional company and the name was changed again to "The Israel Ballet" omitting the word "classic". New works were added to the repertoire, among them "Miraculous Mandarin" and "La fille mal gardee" by Joseph Lazzini, "Opus 35" by Heinz Spoerli, "Conflict" by Roberto Trinchero, "Butterfly" by Rael Lamb. The soloists were still American - Pamela Osserman and Marcia Zussman - however, new Israeli dancers began joining the company, among them Nira Paz, Iris Gil-Lahad, Erez Dror, Na'ama Yadlin, Orna Kugel, Maya Pevsner, Julia Shekhtman and Yael Wexler.

In the end of the 1970s and beginning of the 80s a change of attitude towards local choreographers became apparent. The Israeli dance world began to grow out of its inferiority complex. Batsheva stopped employing foreign managers, who used to come with ready made works and think little of nurturing local choreographers. The company started ordering works from local artists (Oshra Elkayam, Rina Yerushalmi, Yair Vardi, Yaacob Sharir) and in the 80s most of its repertoire was the work of its own dancers.



"GURRELIEDER", CHOR.: BERTA YAMPOLSKY

DANCERS: NINA GERSHMAN AND KEVIN CUNNINGHAM



"STILL POINT"

CHOR.: TODD BOLENDER

DANCERS: PAMELA OSSERMAN
AND HELEN GLAMBY

the company, on its attention to detail, the ensemble and the style. The weak point, according to the critics, was lack of stars and sense of virtuosity. From the USA they went on to Chile to participate in an international competition and Yampolsky carried home the trophy for Best Foreign Choreography for her "Dvorak Variations" (1981). All in all the

The Kibbutz Contemporary Dance Company underwent a similar change of heart and even in the Israel Ballet programmes some local names began to appear such as Sharir ("Homage to Jerome Robbins" 1976); Vardi ("From Four Winds", 1981 and "Four Seasons", 1983); Naomi Aleskovsky ("New Sounds of Debussy", 1978; "Contrasts", 1979 and "The Daughter of Yiptach", 1981); Domi Soffer Reiter ("Romances", 1976); Amir Kolben ("Sand Reminiscences", 1986) and several dances were being produced by its own dancers (Deena Laska, "Peter and the Wolf"; Erez Dror, "The Dreaming Box"; ballet mistress Roseline Subel, "Lizzie Borden").

However, whereas in the Kibbutz Dance Company and in Batsheva it became a matter

"FOUR SEASONS", CHOR.: YAIR VARDI
DANCERS: JANE SANING AND AMI DASKAL

of principle to encourage dancers to develop into creators and to employ local choreographers as far as possible, the Israel Ballet lagged behind. Markman: "We wanted to encourage Israeli choreographers and they produced nice work, but they were modern choreographers. We exhausted this vein and went on". The company started to produce the great classics (such as the second act of "Swan Lake" and of "Giselle", "Raymonda" and "Paquita"), continued to order works abroad and built up Yampolsky as resident choreographer.

The Israel Ballet went on its first tour to America in 1977 with works by Sagan, Spoerli and Lazzini. In the second tour, in 1981, they danced "Serenade" and some of Yampolsky's new creations. The notices were complimentary, remarking on the freshness of

25 dancers had a very good nine week tour and repeated the experience in 1984 in Canada and the USA, ending in the prestigious Reggio Emilia Festival in Italy.

And yet in Israel they were again without studio and school, having had to give up their Kikar ha'Medina abode due to neighbours' complaints. From 1979 they again moved from one gym hall to another and from one hired apartment to the next, leaving behind them a string of costly parquets.

Fulfilment and Frustration 1985-1995

By dint of their devotion and their struggle to survive against all odds Markman and Yampolsky seem to have realized quite a few of the aims they set their company. Two years



before its 30th birthday the company boasts 35 dancers; today, mostly immigrants from the former Soviet Union, rather than from the USA. In the late 1980s the soloists were Wendy Lucking-Shapira and Na`ama Yadlin. Recently they were replaced by Nina Gershman and Orna Kugel. Today's male soloists are Kevin Cunningham, Peter Sabli and Bruno Vazinu. Currently the Israel Ballet performs in the celebrated new Arts Centre in Tel Aviv. All its performances sell well and the company is very much sought after for morning performances before school audiences. They had had very good notices after their foreign tours with special regard to Yampolsky's aesthetic and romantic productions, the company's ability to carry well Balanchine's works and the standard of its soloists.

However, they have also met with setbacks, frustrations and disappointments. The Israel Ballet still has no studio of its own, and without a proper place to practice in, a school of their own is of course out of the question.

From the mid 1980s Yampolsky has dominated the company's repertoire with ballets such as "The Nutcracker" (1985), "Cinderella" (1986), "The Sleeping Beauty" (1987), "Harmonium" (1988), "Two by Two and Everyone" (1989), "Romeo and Juliet"

(1991) and "Gurrelieder" (1994). The question always remains - why not order more works from local choreographers? Markman and Yampolsky feel that to compare them with the modern dance groups in this respect is not fair because "it is easier to be a modern choreographer" and because "only some one who has done pointework himself can produce classical ballet". Be that as it may, it is more than a decade since the company performed anything by a local choreographer. Markman: "We are struggling to survive, how can we think of taking on guests?". But there is more to it than that. Programmes of the company reflect their attitude to the local choreographers whose works the company has performed. Their names are not on the list of the choreographers who have produced works for the company. The same is true for its dancers - beautiful pictures of Yampolsky's productions decorate the programmes but the performers are

not mentioned by name (Due to this interview in the new programme for the performance of "The Nutcracker" credit has been given to all the performing dancers).

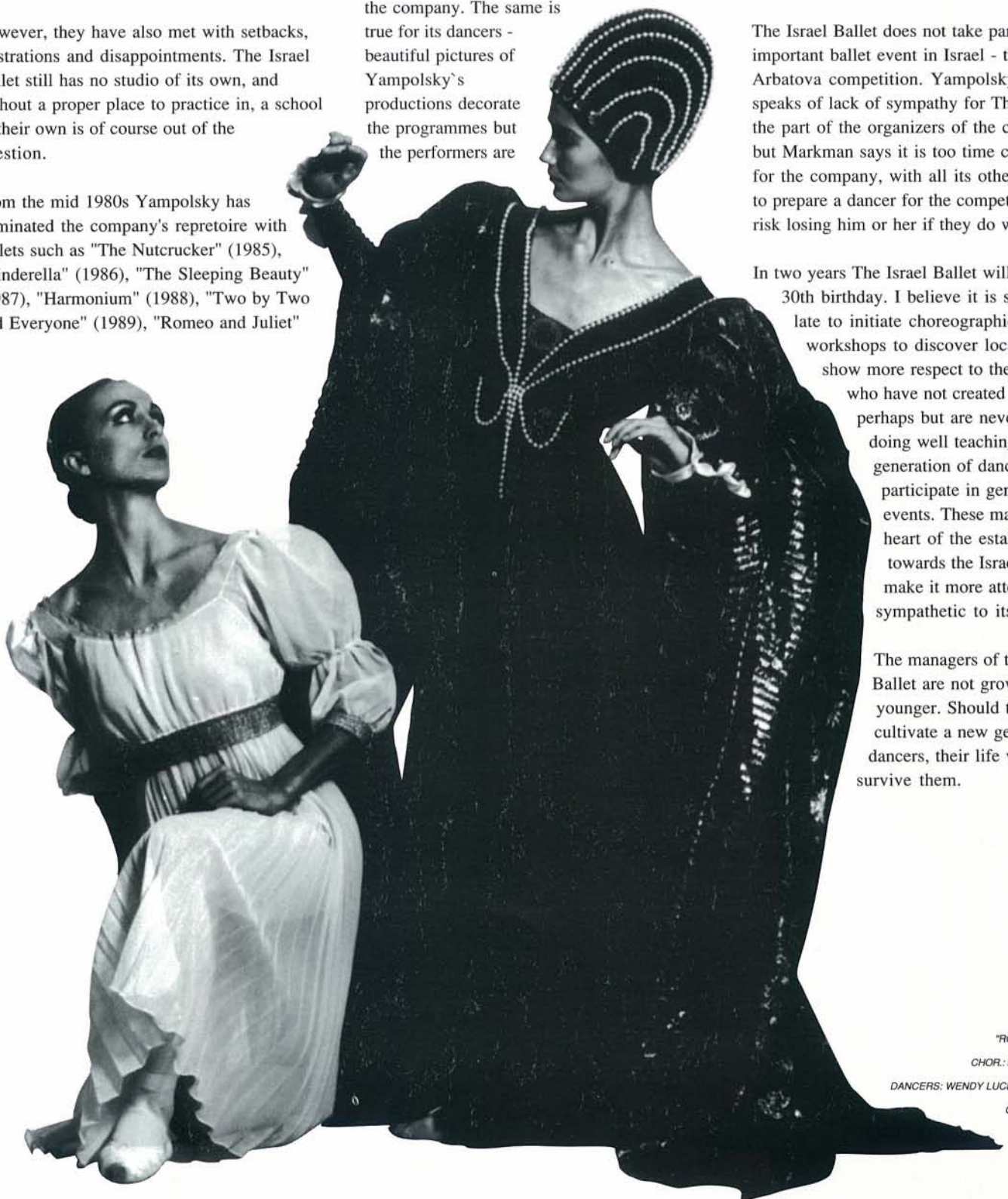
The Israel Ballet is still not the first choice of good local dancers, graduates of dance schools. Markman and Yampolsky attribute this to professional jealousy on the part of the teachers: "I managed to establish my own company. They don't forgive me for this", thinks Yampolsky.

It is also true that today it is easier for dancers to seek their place abroad than it used to be and many do so, especially since, when there is only one company of its kind in Israel, the dancer is more dependent on it and that tends to put applicants off.

The Israel Ballet does not take part in the most important ballet event in Israel - the Mia Arbatova competition. Yampolsky again speaks of lack of sympathy for The Ballet on the part of the organizers of the competition, but Markman says it is too time consuming for the company, with all its other difficulties, to prepare a dancer for the competition and risk losing him or her if they do well there.

In two years The Israel Ballet will celebrate its 30th birthday. I believe it is still not too late to initiate choreographical workshops to discover local talent, show more respect to the colleagues who have not created a company perhaps but are nevertheless doing well teaching the new generation of dancers, and participate in general dance events. These may warm the heart of the establishment towards the Israel Ballet and make it more attentive and sympathetic to its needs.

The managers of the Israel Ballet are not growing any younger. Should they fail to cultivate a new generation of dancers, their life work may not survive them.



"ROMEO AND JULIET"
 CHOR.: BERTA YAMPOLSKY
 DANCERS: WENDY LUCKING (JULIET) AND
 GEORGINA YACOBY