

# The Kibbutz (Contemporary) Dance Company

# 25 Years of Creativity



"THREE MEN", CHOR.: YEHUDIT ARNON  
DANCERS: ZICHRİ DAGAN, SHELOMO ZAGA  
& MIKE LEVINE, PHOTO: JAAGOV AGOR

What is so special about Ga'aton, a little kibbutz in the hills just south of the Lebanese border near the beach resort Nahariya, that attracts illustrious creators of dance such as Jiri Kylian, Matz Ek, Suzanne Linke, Christopher Bruce, Kei Takei, Anna Sokolow, Nils Christie to work there for little or no remuneration?

Ga'aton hosts the studios of the Kibbutz Dance Company. It also has a beautiful hilly landscape, a distant view of the sea and a wonderful atmosphere of tranquillity despite its proximity to war ravaged Lebanon. There is something special in the social intercourse among the students of the regional ("Mate Asher") school of dance, the company dancers and the technical and administrative staff. Most of them, artists and non artists, are kibbutz members. Though kibbutzniks are not angels and artists are always competitive and prone to hard feelings and hurt egos, in Ga'aton there is an atmosphere of belonging and of participating in something larger than personal ambition, in addition to a very typical kibbutz feeling of being cared for, of there always being someone to respond to a dancer's emotions and problems.

In most instances this caring person is a little lady no longer young, who has been running the show for more than 25 years. She is prone to shed tears but is at the same time tough as a hazelnut, adamant and strong but also as pliant as a rattan cane. I refer of course to Yehudit Arnon, the Artistic Director of the company and principal of the school for over a quarter of a century.

I recently asked Matz Ek, the innovative Swedish choreographer who works with the most illustrious European dance companies, how he ever came to work at Ga'aton, so far from the centres of modern dance? "I was in Verona, Italy, staging a piece, when, after the performance, a tiny lady with enormous eyes approached me", he explained. "She introduced herself as the head of the Kibbutz Company and said how much she admired my work and would I be so kind as to stage a dance of mine for her dancers". He was impressed by her personality. He saw the number that had been tattooed on her forearm in a Nazi concentration camp. He also sensed her determination and simply could not refuse.

When Ek first arrived to see the dancers he was at once struck by the special quality of their work. He knew from experience the power of a creative mother figure. His own mother, Birgit Cullberg, was the founder and director of the Stockholm "Cullberg Balletten", which he directed at one point in his career and for which he still choreographs. When he later staged his "Soweto" piece with the kibbutz dancers, he

gave the role created for Birgit Cullberg to Arnon. She was rather apprehensive about performing after so many years off stage, but was extremely effective in the role of Mother Earth.

The great Czech choreographer Jiri Kylian was also immediately captivated by Arnon's determination, when they first met, and they became great friends. In 1995 he sent her a letter saying: "We have met many years ago in my office in the old studios of the Nederlands Dans Theater. I will always remember your very slight figure and your unassuming strength of conviction about that which you have set out to achieve - to make a statement as a survivor who does not only want to live on but wishes to hand something of great moment to the present generation. Yours is a message of movement, a message of dance, which represents freedom and which is the oldest form of art".

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The history of 20th century modern dance and ballet is strewn with formidable little ladies and no less intimidating men, not all of whom were dance people themselves but who were (and in some cases still are) the driving force behind many dance companies. To name but a few - Diaghilev, who never choreographed a ballet but gave the world the Ballets Russes, Lincoln Kirstein who brought Balanchine to America; Marie Rambert and Ninnette de Valois, founders of British ballet; Sonia Gaskell, founder of ballet in the Netherlands; Carel Birnie, without whom there probably would be no Nederlands Dans Theatre; Batsheva de Rothschild, founder of the Batsheva dance company which revolutionized modern dance in Israel; Arno Wustenhoffer, the "Intendant" (i.e. general director of theatre in Germany) who introduced Pina Bausch to Wuppertal and defended her work there in face of the objections of subscribers, and who with the other important Tanztheater creators he brought to Bremen, such as Reinhild Hoffmann, Gerhard Bohner and Hans Kresnik, became one of the main promoters of the new European dance theatre.

Yehudit Arnon belongs to this illustrious category of dance creators, whose greatest achievements were accomplished through others. Like catalysts they themselves are not involved in the chemical reactions creating new compounds, but without them the process would not take place. They are the hidden driving force of companies, the secret "muses" of great choreographers, the real pedagogues behind great dancers. This phenomenon, so unusual in other art forms, is evident in modern dance and ballet.

Yehudit Arnon's strength, is, I think, a combination of personal tenacity, farseeing investments in artistic potential, which she often spots long before anybody else does, and her attitude to life. She is an individualist who is nevertheless very much aware of social needs, a combination required by the mode of living within a kibbutz.

Arnon hates to talk about her experience in the Holocaust. It took me several years of close cooperation as a journalist and dance critic to persuade her to tell the story of her life. Finally she told how, when she was not quite 20 years old, during the Second World War, she had dreamed of dancing just for her friends and fellow members in the Zionist youth movement in Hungary to which she belonged when she was imprisoned in a concentration camp. Her reputation as a dancer was already such that in the camp one day she was ordered to dance for the amusement of her jailors. Arnon refused and was made to stand barefoot in the snow all night as punishment (at least she escaped the fate of another young Jewish dancer, a famous baby-ballerina by the name of Mussia Daiches. When Daiches refused to dance for her captors they broke both her ankles to make sure she would never dance again).

GENE HILL-SAGAN



During that awful freezing night Yehudit Arnon resolved if she survived to devote her life to dance, and in the heady days of rebuilding Jewish life in Hungary after the war (before the establishment of the State of Israel) the resurrected youth movement in Hungary, to which she returned, staged many pageants influenced by the "Soviet style" mass performances fashionable at the time. Before she ever properly studied dance and choreography Arnon staged huge performances and created dances by natural talent alone. She acquitted herself of these complicated tasks brilliantly. When she finally arrived in Israel and she and her husband joined kibbutz Ga'aton it was a matter of several years before she had her own dance company (See Ruth Eshel's article, page 136).

Arnon was upset when I shared with her my ideas about dance creators who do not themselves choreograph. Though she has choreographed only a few new works in recent years, she is at heart a choreographer still. I remember one of her last works, entitled "Three", which she created for three male dancers of her company. She took the boys who

were not otherwise engaged at the time and created a delightful piece for them, a "triptych portrait". Arnon is a competent choreographer but in discovering talent and developing close connections with teachers and choreographers (who then willingly come to the studio at Ga'aton to work with the KDC) she is unique. Early on Arnon realized that dancers who dance only two or three days a week and all the rest of the time are engaged as kindergarden teachers or put in charge of fruit orchards on the kibbutz cannot be expected to attain professional level. She also realized that if the fledgeling company is to become more than a curiosity professionalism must be attained.

The two teacher-choreographers who accomplished the breakthrough to professionalism for the Kibbutz Dance Company were Americans who had left the USA. Both had worked mainly in Europe, and one, Flora Cushman, who had taught at the London School of Contemporary Dance and at "Mudra", Maurice Bejart's school in Brussels, told me how she met Arnon and her company: "I was teaching a summer course at the Rubin Academy in Jerusalem when among the students I noticed a few who were somehow special". Inquiring who they were and where they had studied she discovered them all to be graduates of Arnon's Regional School at Ga'aton. What

was so unique about them? - "Their souls were connected to their bodies", she said, "and this made their movement fascinating in spite of technical deficiencies".

After some meetings and classes with the kibbutz dancers, Cushman began to regard Ga'aton as her home. She found her work there hard but satisfying. When she saw the company perform she realized how amateurish it was but realized too that the dancers were devoted to dance and able to identify with the movement. She taught them technique (mainly of the modern American, Graham inspired, style) and created several dances for them.

Like Cushman, Gene Hill-Sagan was an American in self imposed exile. He had danced in several European ballet companies before he was invited to teach in Israel. In Israel he stayed almost 12 years and became a frequent choreographer for all Israeli companies - Batsheva, Bat-Dor and the Israel Ballet, but he told me several times that the only place he felt at home at was the KDC.

Both Cushman and Hill-Sagan were hard taskmasters. Hill-Sagan's dances were often dark and full of atmosphere with pronounced aesthetic merit. In Cushman's work the strong points were emotion, a devotion to movement as

"SUNSET... SUNRISE", CHOR.: GENE HILL-SAGAN  
 DANCERS: MIKE LEVINE, MARTHA REIFELD  
 PHOTO: SVEN ULSA



conveyer of feelings and truths and identification of the dancer with the choreography.

The following sad tale illustrates Hill-Sagan's involvement with the Kibbutz Company: In 1970-71 a talented and very handsome dancer joined the KDC. Yair Shapira had much to learn both technically and personally and Hill-Sagan took him under his wing. It was obvious he was in love with the boy but despite his emotional involvement he drilled Shapira mercilessly. The results were spectacular and Shapira was invited to dance with the leading dance ensemble in Israel - Batsheva, before reaching army age. Having reached the age of enlistment he joined the army and was killed in the early stages of the 1973 War. Hill-Sagan was devastated and when Bat-Dor asked him to create a work for them the result was his masterpiece dedicated to the memory of Yair Shapira - "...And After".

Gene Hill-Sagan continued to create for the KCDC (the new initial "C" stands for "contemporary", which was added to the company's name once it was realized that on foreign tours many journalists and spectators expected a kibbutz company to present folklore). until his sudden death in 1991. A few weeks after his death Arnon found a parcel addressed to her and was deeply shocked to discover it contained a small tin can with the ashes of Gene Hill-Sagan inside. He wished to be buried at Ga'aton, the place he belonged to more than to any other. His ashes lie in a big earthenware jar in the garden before the studios.

A dance company is an organism and as it grows older and matures it has to be constantly replenished with young dancers. Yehudit Arnon always believed that the school she was in charge of was the bloodline of the company, but other studios, many connected with kibbutzim, also ensured a constant flow of new dancers. In addition she has pursued a constant national and international search for good choreographers to enrich the company's repertoire as well as the individual artistic standard of each dancer, and she has always invited the best teachers available to work at Ga'aton, such as Laverne Meyer, Jeane Solan, Sieghilt Pahl and Ivan Kramer, to name but a few of international fame.

The most important source of new talent for the KCDC is the two-year workshop for dancers, either completing high-school diploma in dance or just back from army service. This group of some 20 full time students is the reservoir from which the company draws new talent. As happens in dance companies around the world, some KCDC dancers have left to join other companies and others will no doubt do so in the future.



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What happens to dancers when they reach retirement is one of the signs by which to tell a healthy from an unhealthy dance company. In the KCDC nearly all those who work behind the scenes are former dancers. Rehearsal directors and stage managers were all performing artists with the company just a few years ago. This state of affairs creates a pleasant and friendly atmosphere and Yehudit Arnon is very much aware of the importance of the social climate in the studio and on stage. The Kibbutz Company, though familiar with the temperamental outbursts and hysterical tantrums typical of life behind the scenes of any ensemble, benefits from the kibbutz spirit of compromise and quest for solutions to social problems without undue

confrontation. For Arnon the care for the emotional and artistic well being of the dancers is an integral part of artistic directorship. This is no simple task, because, as the British theatre critic Ivor Brown so well put it, the stage is the most collective of art forms executed by the most egotistical people...

Ever since modern communication has turned the world into a global village it is almost impossible to establish a distinct company style. There is hardly any national style discernible in modern dance, perhaps with the exception of Germany's Tanztheater and Japanese Butoh. A company's style in our day and age is mostly determined by the personality of the house

choreographer/s, and it is difficult to find just the right blend of works by great contemporary creators and the resident choreographer. The KCDC is very fortunate in having raised a brilliant choreographer of its own, namely Rami Be'er, who was born and bred in Ga'aton and has developed into an internationally acknowledged talent in the field.

Be'er has always been interested in social issues and his full-length works to date have dealt with such prickly subjects as the Palestinian uprising (the Intifada), kibbutz education, the modern megapolis and memories of Holocaust survivors (his own parents included). However, he has never stooped to an "ideological" or propagandistic style. He has achieved his goals by artistic means alone and has developed a style which includes not only movement but architecture and scenery, mainly ramps, scaffolding and podia, which lend his choreography a three-dimensional aspect seldom to be found in other works. His work is musically sensitive and usually the sound he uses is made up of segments rather than whole compositions or musical pieces. His forte is the duet, while the rest of the movement is often meaningful only in the context of the work and in the space created by his sets.

The dynamics of a dance company - including such personal events as pregnancies, family problems and aging, make changeover among the artists an inescapable fact of company life, but somehow some aspects of the KCDC's original spirit have proved constant through the

quarter of a century of its existence. Its performance maintains a quality of dedication and identification with the works performed, without the one-up-manship and cutthroat competition so often felt in other companies.

The kibbutz movement (comprising 230 kibbutzim) is going through an existential crisis. Most kibbutzim have changed many of the basic rules of collective life and abandoned collectivist principles by privatizing services such as welfare, education and health. Some are even contemplating differential wages for members, a step which might well destroy the very basis of kibbutz life. This ideological and economic upheaval has of course influenced the dance company. Officially it "belongs" to the Federation of Kibbutzim ("Brit Hatnu'ah Hakibbutzit"), but diminishing funds and a tendency to minimize the influence and responsibility of the central organs of the federation and let each kibbutz and even each member fend for themselves (even as regards art and culture) are endangering the central artistic institutions of the kibbutz movement, such as the chamber orchestra, theatre group, gallery and the dance company.

The financial situation of the KCDC is relatively better than that of the other artistic kibbutz projects, as it has so far enjoyed substantial governmental support. However, this may shortly be cut by the newly appointed (orthodox) Minister of Education and Culture. The Kibbutz Company has been trying to ease the work load of its performers with hired work

- dancers who are not kibbutz members, to perform its popular dances for young audiences in schools and remote auditoriums in the mornings.

Not so many years ago hired work was a bone of contention in the kibbutzim. Today it has become common practice in most. This doubtful achievement has made it possible for the Kibbutz Dance Company to hold "open" auditions in Israel and abroad for talented dancers to supplement the often insufficient number of kibbutz youngsters wishing to become professional dancers. Several of the foreign dancers currently employed were impressed by performances of the company they had seen abroad. Some have become important members of the company and some have even formed family ties in Israel.

Yehudit Arnon is aware of the problems that a hired work contingent may give rise to and keeps it at a constant 25 percent or less. Without its kibbutz base the KCDC would become just another modern dance company. It would no longer be the very special artistic endeavour which attracts illustrious choreographers from all over the world and talented dancers from Israel and abroad.



"IN REAL TIME"  
CHOR.: RAMI BE'ER

