

Prima facie it seems obvious that dance and mental or corporal handicap do not go well together. But lately we see more and more "heavy dancers" – to use an apt name invented by the author, actor and director Itzik Weingarten for his monodrama "To Dance with My Father"

by Giora Manor

This very moving play – moving in both senses of the term – deals with a young retarded person, the son of a dance teacher and choreographer. Striving to describe himself and his special brand of dance he calls himself "a heavy dancer".

Interest in dance by mentally retarded and physically handicapped persons is growing not only in Israel, but in other parts of the world as well.

Jan Parry, the dance critic of the London "Observer" writes: "CandoCo", is a new dance group including three performers in wheelchairs. "Flying in the Face of..." [the title of the piece] seems a necessary first phase, minimising instead of exploiting the differences between variously able bodies. The long piece was encumbered with caring choreography and new age music; nonetheless, fascinating possibilities gleam through the darkness, waiting to be developed once CandoCo and its audience can accept that 'strange' is interesting, not freakish".

Oliver Sacks, in his book "The Man Who Mistook his Wife for a Hat" deals with the problems of art, and its meaning and application in the life of mentally retarded persons.

"The power of music, narrative and drama is of the greatest practical and theoretical importance. One may see this even in the case of idiots, with IQs below 20 [IQ 100 is the average, "normal"] and the re-extremest motor incompetence and bewilderment.

Their uncouth movements may disappear in a moment. The music transforms them and suddenly they know how to move. We see how the retarded, unable to perform fairly simple tasks involving perhaps four or five movements or procedures in sequence, can do these perfectly if they work to music".

Handicaps which miraculously become an advantage in dance are a recent phenomenon. Undoubtedly, an extreme case of this unique aesthetic experience is the dance of Tamar Raban, a young Israeli dancer who suffered serious injuries in a car accident, leaving her lower extremities paralyzed. She created a dance for herself, moving with the help of a metal frame, utilizing all her movement potential that remained. There is a strange beauty in her restricted dance. She was invited last year to perform at the Montpellier dance festival in France.

Tamar does not agree that her dance is really different from that of able-bodied

dancers. In her opinion, every dancer has to deal with physical limits. No one can fly or levitate. Her limitations are just different.

Raya Spivak, an experienced folk dance instructor, has been working with retarded dancers for more than a decade. About three years ago she and her colleagues began to organize annual public recitals of their retarded dancers. The performance is titled "Hearts and Flowers".

When Raya literally "dragged" me at the Karmiel dance festival to watch the show, I was in for a tremendous surprise, because the performance was not only a remarkable therapeutic achievement, but an aesthetic and moving experience of sorts.

HEAVY DANCERS DANCING

I was unprepared for that kind of experience. I asked myself why the dance of the retarded dancers was so impressive. I came to the conclusion, that what made the simple dance so powerful was that each step, every raising of an arm or leg demanded complete dedication and concentration from the dancers. The effort of remembering the correct sequence of steps, in which direction to move, imbued every move with meaning.

The simple dance became a triumph of art over body and mind, exactly what is so often missing from the dance of well trained performers.

The lack of polish in the dance of the retarded, who have to fight for every step, was much more moving than the technical prowess of professional dancers.

Each step was a victory of the human soul over handicap. Where may one observe such an achievement in a 'normal' dance performance?

Surely, there is an important lesson in the phenomenon of the dance of the retarded.

