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**H**ow are the holidays of ancient Israeli history celebrated in modern Israel? This question pre-occupied the best of artistic and popular dance professionals in pre-state Israel of the 1930s and 1940s. Thus was born the pageant—a combination of Hebrew text declaimed and sung and of holiday dances performed under the open sky.

The relationship between artistic dancers and the creation of holiday pageants originated with Rudolf von Laban, the theoretician and great teacher of "dance of expression" or *Ausdruckstanz*. This modern dance flowered in central Europe in the years between the two world wars. Most of the dancers in Israel in the 1930s and 1940s had immigrated from Germany or had learned in that country, which saw the explosion of avant-garde modern dance. Von Laban, like many of his generation at

the turn of the century, thought that humanity stood at the threshold of a new era and that folk dance and traditional popular holidays were in eclipse. As a central figure of *Ausdruckstanz*, he was of the opinion that one of the functions of modern dance was to serve society. The creation of proletariat mass art, interwoven with new folk dances, seemed to him one of the objectives of the new dance.

Toward the end of the 1920s and at the beginning of the 1930s, von Laban organized the giant annual processions of the trade unions in Vienna. He set up movement choruses and speaking choruses, whose function was to express socialist ideas. This new popular dance was grounded on constructing dances with impressive visual effects precisely owing to the masses who took part in them and was based on simple motion materials that

# Hips Swirl Like a Mobile in Kibbutz Ein Hashofet



"HaOmer" by Lea Bergstein. Kibbutz Ramat –Yohanan archive  
מסכת "העומר" של לאה ברגשטיין- ארכיון קבוץ רמת יוחנן

everyone was capable of performing. These performances, under the direction of the great teacher, gave the dancers of *Ausdruckstanz* the legitimacy as well as the tools to create folk dances and pageants. His assistant for some of these events was the dancer Gertrud Kraus, who was to become the guru of modern dance in Israel in the years leading up to its founding.

Von Laban's vision did not take root in Europe, where folk dance was deeply rooted. Rather, it was in Israel where it found fertile ground. Pre-state Israel was an ideal place for implementing these revolutionary ideas. Here there was no tradition that had to be broken with and no folk dance that expressed the people's way of life, which was then new.

The pioneer generation rejected out of hand anything that smacked of their parents' home. Even when it came to Jewish holidays, they didn't know how to act—to maintain them or to avoid them. A typical solution was to conduct the holiday, but to relate to it with humor. Opposing the rigid ideology, however, was everyday life, which brought with it a thirst for some culture. Traditional culture was rejected, whereas an original culture had yet to be created. Thus an opening was paved for the entry of international culture: the music and songs of Bach, Beethoven, Handel, and others; folk dances learned from the peoples of Europe (Hora, Krakoviak, and others).<sup>1</sup>

Here, then, was a rare combination: a small, isolated country, the longing for original folk dance, and the rejuvenation of ancient agricultural festivals that would express the process of pioneering





"Ha'Omer" by Lea Bergstein  
 מסכת "העומר" מאת לאה ברגשטיין

in the Land of Israel and of *Ausdruckstanz* artists who had arrived from or studied in central Europe and who had the power to do so. So it was that the land of Israel in the 1930s and 1940s became an experimental laboratory. It was from von Laban's ideas, processed to fit the new reality, that the pageant was born. The dances interwoven in holiday pageants were intended to be danced as a staged performance, and their creators saw them as ceremonial-artistic dances adapted to amateur performers not as folk dances. At times, such a dance became popular and crossed the line—it was, as it were, requisitioned by the people from the pageant and the stage, and it became an authentic folk dance.

Debate soon flourished as to whether folk holidays were meant to evolve naturally or whether the process of their evolution could be accelerated. Were kibbutz residents or dance artists the ones who were to create these new holidays? Such questions pre-occupied the pioneers of folk dance in pre-State Israel. There were those who argued that folk dances are not created, that they spring up spontaneously. Echoes of the debate as to where original Israeli art will be created and who will do so may be found in the following lines summarizing the thoughts of choreographer and dancer Leah Bergstein:

- A. Original Israeli culture can evolve only at a considerable distance from the large cities.
- B. This culture must grow organically as something that rises from a closed society and is dissociated from any influence.
- C. The most appropriate place for this is the kibbutz, for a variety of reasons: the kibbutz maintains strong contact with the land,

and this connection with the land is the eternal connection that lies at the base of the holidays of all peoples at all times. Therefore, the holiday will sprout up in the kibbutz when it is based directly on this connection. The kibbutz, as a relatively closed cell, can develop its originality and distance itself from external influences. Pure cultural activity can grow on the kibbutz, activity that has nothing to do with from any accounting of money and box-office receipts. Well-rooted popular culture cannot be established by professional artists; only people who go to work every day know how to fuse this into artistic tools.<sup>2</sup>

In contrast, the folk dance

choreographer Rivka Sturman, who studied in Berlin with Jutta Klampt and in Israel with Gertrud Kraus, was among those who ascribed importance to cooperating with artists in creating folk dances. She was not unaware of the fact that most professional dancers were not Sabras—native Israelis—and that most were urban residents and did not necessarily sense the public as living close to the ground – but the need for cooperation was stronger than these limitations.

Leah Bergstein, a member of Kibbutz Beit Alpha and later Ramat Yochanan, has the honor of having created the first holiday pageant. Prior to emigrating to Palestine, she had danced in Germany with Skoronel's troupe and also in Tel Aviv with Gertrud Kraus' group. In 1931, she created with the composer Matityahu Shelem the first "sheep-sheering celebration" in the modern land of Israel. This celebration, which was created on Kibbutz Beit Alpha for a party of shepherders, had some characteristics that became paradigms:

- A. The time of the celebration is not arbitrarily determined but is related to what occurs with the flock; that is, the conclusion of the sheep sheering.
- B. The composers and the performers are principally shepherders.
- C. The celebration, at least in part, takes place alongside the sheep pen.<sup>3</sup> The folk dances "Shepherd and Shepherdess" and "Rejoice, Rejoice, and Be Happy" were originally solos performed by Bergstein for this pageant.

With the split in the kibbutz, Bergstein went with some of the



Beit Alpha people, among them Matityahu Shelem, to Kibbutz Ramat Yochanan. There she created the "Omer" celebrations, "Tu Be'Shvat" festivals (The tree planting festival), marriage ceremonies, and others.

In the pageant of the "Omer" harvest festival, Matityahu Shelem constructed a ceremony on the basis of the following principles, which in due course guided most pageant creators:

- A. The ceremony fundamentally needs to be conducted in the tradition of ancient ceremonial arrangements (in other words, the first step is historical research and reference to the Bible).
- B. In locations where the text of the ancient ceremony is applicable, it is desirable to use it.
- C. There is need to add to and expand those issues about which the ancient ceremony does not speak (in particular, going out to the field, the spring season, thanksgiving, and blessing)
- D. The ancient tradition does not tell us about dances and about songs that were used; therefore, that is the place where it is

possible and permissible to add to the old material.<sup>4</sup>

In searching for sources for the basic movement materials, Bergstein turned to the dances of ancient cultures and, as a dancer of Ausdruckstanz, was influenced by the movement style of Isadora Duncan and Rudolf von Laban. Quite a few dances from the pageants that Bergstein and Shelem created, such as "God Is My Might and My Praise" (1942), "They Took on Strength" (1942), "A Stalk of Grain in the Field" (1945), and "They Shall Rejoice" (1948), became permanent features of Eretz Israel folk dance. This was not, however, to Bergstein's liking. She considered them an inseparable part of her pageant. A half century later, the "Bikurim" (first fruits) celebration is still put on at Kibbutz Ramat Yochanan. Before her death, Bergstein managed to document in film the whole body of her creative work.

A year after Bergstein and Shelem created their first pageant, the Tel Aviv choreographer Judith Ornstein took part in a "Bikurim"

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event conducted in Haifa was staged by Moshe Halevi, the artistic director of the Ohel Theater. The year was 1932, and more than 4,000 people watched the huge procession, which included motorcyclists alongside torchbearers, conducting itself along Herzl Street, the city's main thoroughfare. Ornstein's pupils, accompanied by an honor guard of the Ha'Poel sports organization, danced the bearing of the first fruits while holding onto giant palm fronds. Throughout the 1940s and the early 1950s, Ornstein continued to put on pageants in various locations, in new-immigrant camps, in Givat Hayim, Ayanot, Kvutzat Schiller, Givat Brenner, and Dafna.

In 1937, water was found on Kibbutz Na'an, and in honor of this

When she returned to Palestine, she made solo appearances and in the 1940s designed festivals for settlements in the region of the Ephraim mountains and Jezreel Valley. These celebrations became well known throughout the country and a source of inspiration and imitation.

Cohen wanted to create a folk holiday that would merge past and present. "The stories of the Bible stood so alive in front of my eyes," she was to write. "I lived entirely in the holiday atmosphere of ancient days...It was clear to me that first we had to renew foundations that are inherent in every people from the dawn of their formation and that are sources for dance, music, poetry, and clothing".<sup>6</sup>

Yardena Cohen wanted to cancel the boundary between performers and audience—at the height of the festival, all members of the kibbutz, all age groups, joined in with the dancers. The event was total: it included the various elements found on the kibbutz, making utmost use of the topography and the historical contexts of the location. The festival often lasted until morning, and the festival meal itself took place in the field. "The field was the table, around which the members arranged themselves as farmers on their land".<sup>7</sup>

The first festival that Yardena Cohen created was the festival of "Bikurim" at Kibbutz Ein Hashofet in 1943. Aharon Ziv of that kibbutz relates: "Every kibbutz would try to outdo the

others. Then there was the Israeli holiday competition. After the first meeting, Yardena decided that from now on she would devote her time to releasing the pelvis and shoulders. After two weeks, our shoulders started to come out of their sockets, they seemed to move on their own; our hips swirled like a mobile".<sup>8</sup>

About a year later, in 1944, she designed the vineyard festival, which fell on the 15<sup>th</sup> of the Hebrew month of Av. As someone who viewed the rejuvenation of the stories of the past as part of the integration with the landscape, she based the pageant she created on the biblical story of the daughters of Shilo, who went dancing in the vineyards and were seen by the sons of the tribe of Benjamin, who proceeded to abduct them. Cohen placed a chorus in a tent to sing the chapter describing the event. Yizhar Yaron composed the music for the pageant, which Cohen defined as a dance pantomime. On the tenth anniversary of the founding



"Yael and Sisra" by Yardena Cohen. Kibbutz Mishmar HaAmakim. Photography: Julina First  
 מסכת "יעל וסיסרה" מאת ירדנה כהן. קבוץ שער העמקים. צילום: יוליאן פירסט

event Else Dublon, who had been a dancer with Mary Wigman's troupe, composed the "Water, Water" dance with the composer Yehuda Sharet for a water pageant. In time, "Water, Water" ("Mayim, Mayim") became a very well-known folk dance. Dublon explained about movement materials and the structure of the dance: "The dance begins with a 'passing cross-over' step to the left, which I felt expresses waves of water. The second part was to express the drawing of water or its eruption from the ground... I had to add simple steps, since the participants were not dancers, but I did not want them to dance only the Hora. 'Water, Water' was danced within circles, three-four circles within one another."<sup>5</sup>

The most prominent creative artist for holiday pageants was the Haifa dancer, teacher, and choreographer Yardena Cohen. A sixth-generation Holy Land native, she had traveled to Dresden to study modern dance with Tille Rossler and Gert Palucca.



of Kibbutz Shaar-Haamakim, situated on the location where in ancient times Yael, wife of a member of the Kinite tribe, the prophetess Devora, Barak her general, and Sisera the enemy of Israel all met on the battlefield, she based her pageant for the occasion on the biblical story.

In 1947, Yarden Cohen created the water festival at Kibbutz Ganigar. This time, she drew inspiration from all the books of the Bible that related to the search for water. In order to express the joy involved with finding water, she positioned in the middle of the field a real large drilling machine, decorated with greenery. Following the water blessing, a strong jet of water burst forth from it, and the kibbutz members encircled it in dance.

Another important creator of pageants was Sara Levi-Tanai, founder of the Inbal dance troupe. She created "The Spring Festival" (1943) on Kibbutz Ramat Hakovesh, and a year later "Song of Songs" a pageant from which the Yemenite-style dances "El Ginat Egoz" ("Into the Garden of Nuts") and "Anah Pana Dodech" were adopted as folk dances. Following these festivals, two others, "Megillath Ruth" ("The Book of Ruth") and the pageant "Bereshit" ("In the Beginning"), were born at Mishmar Hasharon.

In 1944, the first Dalia gathering took place at the initiative and under the direction of Gurit Kadman, at which the complete repertoire of Eretz Israeli folk dances of the time were presented. The dance "Hallel" opened the large dance festival, a composition describing the bearing of the first fruits to the Holy Temple in a straw basket. It was taken from the first-fruits festival that Yarden Cohen had designed only a year earlier for Kibbutz Ein Hashofet. Gertrud Kraus created "Davka" for the Dalia festival, set to her own music. It was danced by a male sextet holding daggers. Appearing in two of the dances was a Yemenite dance troupe under the direction of the actor Saadia Damari and Rachel Nadav, who later became a soloist with Rina Nikova's troupe.

Among other artistic dance personages that the various pageants of the 1940s and 1950s produced were Shoshana Ornstein (at Kibbutz Negba); Arye Calev (at the Shefeya Youth Village, from 1943-50); and Grete Salos, a pupil of Mary Wigman, who created festivals at the Hadassim educational institute and Tova Zimbel.

While joining folk dancing classes and circles grew in popularity, festival pageants began to appear naive to the 1960s society. "The exclusive weight of the kibbutz and of agricultural settlement in Israeli society drops with the weakening of collective values... In addressing the bourgeois crowd, propaganda and advertising crystallize into an array of images that creates a local version of the American dream...Tel Aviv, an effervescent, noisy city with changing rhythms and a characteristic urban texture, becomes a

symbol of this developing dynamic culture and places the individual at its center".<sup>9</sup>

Against this background, this artistic-social phenomenon lost its shine. The relationship between artistic dance and folk dances and pageants was broken by the end of the 1950s. The generation of young dancers, who absorbed the influence of Martha Graham modern dance, rejected *Ausdruckstanz* completely and showed no interest in folk dance, even less in creating festivals.

Today, after the dance world giants whom we worshipped in the 1960s and 1970s fell and others have risen and fallen, after the rise and setting of post-modern dance, and the breakthrough of Pina Bausch's Tanztheater, the sources of which lie in *Ausdruckstanz*; after the legitimation of total theater, integrating movement, pantomime, dance, text, poetry, film, and the breaking of the wall between audience and stage; and at a time when performances are taken out of the halls to the roofs of houses, public gardens, and airplane hangars, it seems that the artistic concept of the pageant is not obsolete, but was even ahead of its time.

The Karmiel Dance Festival, which Yonatan Karmon founded and directed (1988 - 1999), was among others a bridge for the return of artistic and folk dance under one roof.



Lea Bergstein in Ha'Omer  
לאה ברגשטיין במסכת "העומר"

#### Notes:

1. Yoram Goren, *Fields Dressed in Dance*, Kibbutz Ramat Yochanan, 1983, p.32.
2. *Ibid.*, p.58.
3. *Ibid.*, p.58.
4. *Ibid.*, p.63.
5. Interview with Else Dublon, November 1987.
6. Yarden Cohen, *With Drum and Dance*, Sifriyat Hapoalim, 1964, p.47.
7. *Ibid.*, p.58.
8. *Ibid.*, p.109.
9. Batya Dooner, *To Live with the Dream*, Dvir, 1989, p.87.

