

FROM A DANCE CRITIC'S DESK

BY GIORA MANOR

THE STATE OF THE NATION (DANCE)

In early spring, TV Channel 3 did a laudable thing: it devoted a whole evening, more than three hours, to a program about what is happening in Israeli dance.

The format was a panel discussion of experts with Arie Yass as moderator, interspersed with many film clips of recent as well as historical films and interviews with choreographers, to illustrate the argument. The overall impression was a rich tapestry of dance activities of all styles. The TV director Albert Gabai did a very good job of weaving all these materials together.

But the moderator began with a stupid question, asking his panelists whether, in their opinion, there was evidence of an Israeli style of dancing? So, apart of Dan Ronen and Yonatan Karmon — who spoke about Israeli folk dance — all those concerned with modern stage dance had to apologise for being unable to answer the misleading question in the affirmative. But is there a Dutch, French, Belgian, American or German national modern style? Should there be one in our global village? Are such choreographers as Jiri Kylian, Hans van Manen, Krisztina de Chatel "Dutch" artists?

Surprisingly enough, the Israel Ballet was hardly mentioned at all. Regardless of what one thinks about its artistic level and the choreographic talent of its chief creator, Berta Yampolsky, such an omission is an impossible, unjust distortion and insult. (Later, in a private conversation, it was explained to me that the artistic director of the Israel Ballet was invited to take part, but did not show up for the interview....) Nevertheless....

The most positive aspect of this composite portrait of our dance scene, were the many young choreographers who work for the established companies. Recently, there is very positive trend among them "to do their own thing", to found groups outside the establishment to create for. Some of these, such as Dror — Ben-Gal or Ido Tadmor are successful, and making great efforts to overcome the huge financial problems involved in the running of an independent company.

With all its deficiencies, this was a fascinating program.

A DEPRESSING EVENING

Amanda Miller, an American working mainly in Europe, is usually listed among the "important" choreographers. I fail to see why. Perhaps my old eyes are at fault, but she loves to let her dancers move in pitch darkness. And the movement one is able to observe through a glass darkly, does not gel into any discernable pattern — let alone meaning.

She was invited to work for Batsheva and her "Toy Artist" is no exception. It was the only really new work of Batsheva's "Premieres '97" program.

Ohad Naharin, a very creative choreographer, tends to change and make ever new variations on his already well-known works. He adapted his once brilliant dance "Black Milk" — originally produced in 1985 for five female dancers of the Kibbutz Company — into a sombre depressing work for five men. What was a fascinating, original, intriguing rite of cleansing of some ancient, remote tribe, became just obscure in its new version.

The third part of the program was Kylian's duet "No Sleep 'till Dawn of Day", already shown earlier in the season. This delicate dance for two mature women, to the sounds of a lullaby from the Salomon Islands, possesses a haunting beauty. But again, only Sonia d'Orelans-Juste had the mature authority it requires.

Did Batsheva need a premiere that desperately, that the program was put together so badly? It was a sad, disappointing evening.

COHEN & COHEN AT "INBAL"

It is impossible to say that "Inbal" — which last season became an "Ethnic Arts Centre" — does not continue the Yemenite tradition it maintained for half a century.

Its present program of three new works was created by two choreographers of Yemenite

extraction, both bearing the family name Cohen. Ze'eva Cohen has lived and worked for about 30 years in New York; Ilan Cohen has danced and choreographed for Inbal all her life.

Ze'eva's "The Firstborn" is a dance for a man and four women, and is just one part of a whole program she presented in New York. It is danced to ancient Ladino songs from the 15th century. The male soloist was the brilliant Daniel Akilov, the scion of a dance-artist dynasty from Tashkent, who is an accomplished performer. But the piece was very short, obviously just a fragment. It made one wish to see the whole piece.

Ze'eva Cohen has a penchant for nature, sand and water, forests and landscapes. Her "From Sand to Water", to music by Michael Keck (adapted by Bezlel Aloni) is a mood-piece, impressionistic in approach, full of drifting mists and shifting dunes. It isn't surprising that the overall impression is somewhat diffuse.

Ilana Cohen's new large dance is entitled "Sajarra". It is danced to live music by Shlomo Bar and his band of oriental musicians. The stage set (by Talia Baron-Fried, who also designed the fine costumes) consists of a large three-dimensional dune or mound, over which the twelve dancers run, jump and cavort. They carry or wear bundles of sticks, apparently a central component of this tribe's culture, in a manner that reminds one of Kei Takei's work.

It is a new and personal variation on the traditional Inbal movement style, based on the choreographic principles of Sara Levi-Tanai.

But all the good works in this new Inbal program should not distract the administrative director Haim Shiran, who also serves as artistic director, from the cardinal reason for Inbal's continued existence: namely, further reconstructions of the works of Sara Levi-Tanai, who personally attended the premiere.

FINALLY, THE REAL M^CCOY KIROV

Since the demise of the Soviet empire, several "genuine" Russian ballet companies have visited Israel. "The Stars of...", "Soloist of Bolshoi", "Moscow City Ballet" all turned out to be ad hoc groups of soloists gathered together for profitable foreign touring. With the honourable exception of the Latvian ballet from Riga, they all were rather disappointing, even when occasionally brilliant dancers participated.

So many dance lovers in Israel were sceptical when the great Kirov was announced.

But the Israel Festival did build a very good stage and comfortable bleacher seating in the

Sultan's Pool in Jerusalem. And the Kirov "Swan Lake" was a pure joy to watch. The company, from the accomplished soloists to the last corps de ballet youth, move with fantastic smoothness, have style down to their fingertips, are brilliant but not showy. Even the usually boring first and third acts, where there is often little dancing and a lot of old-fashioned mime, were fascinating. One could see the genius of undiluted and uncorrupted Petipa.

Poor Ivanov, his partner — a drunkard despised by his contemporaries — proved to be a choreographer of genius who created the two sublimely beautiful "white" acts.

This was as close as one can get to the original, even though the program states "editing" by Konstantine Sergeiev. For once, the one hundred year-old masterpiece was not "after Petpa and Ivanov", but the genuine article.

And it was amazing to see how Fokine, the great innovator of ballet, got his revolutionary ideas out of Ivanov's last act. Down to the Dying Swan of Pavlova fame.

THREE FROM VIENNA

Stravinsky and Renato Zanella, Gustav Mahler and Keneth MacMillan — that was the menu brought to Tel-Aviv by the Vienna State Opera Ballet in May. An excellent program, though in the end it turned out to be somehow not exciting enough.

Stravinsky's "Symphony" (in three movements) has already been used by several choreographers who were — I assume — attracted to its energy flow and the contrasting three parts. Zanella uses his dancers well, but not only them. The stage and the shining black costumes, the side-curtains that flutter in a mysterious breeze, with lit candles at their bases, created a very special atmosphere.

Especially the second part, a quartet of three men and a woman, which was aesthetic, personal and interesting.

"Moves", also danced to a well-known score by Stravinsky, served Renato Zanella to create a dark, moody ballet, well danced by the Viennese artists. Simona Noja was brilliant — as she often is.

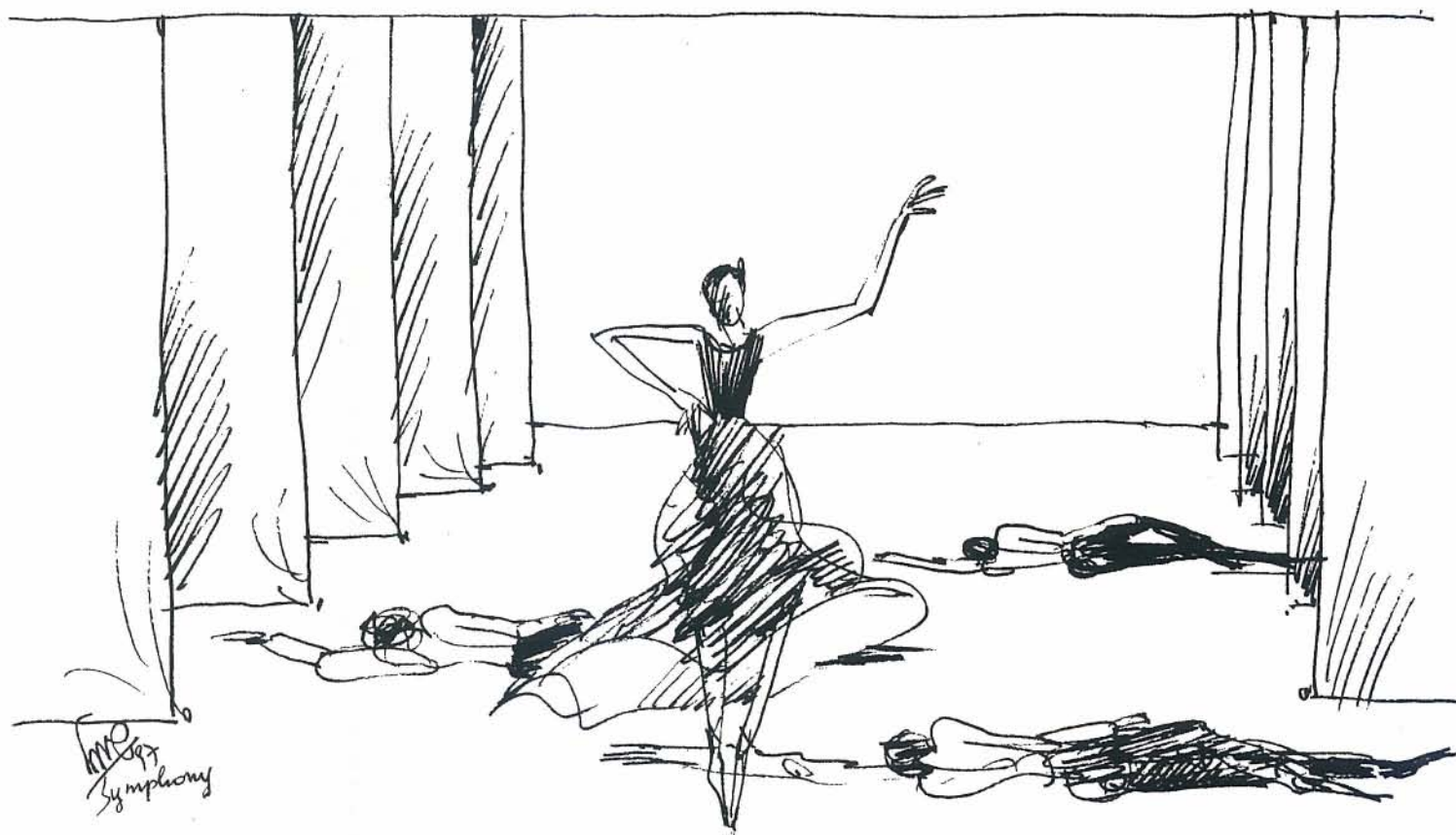
MacMillan's "Song of the Earth" was created by him for the Stuttgart ballet in 1965. It clearly belongs to another era and shows all the telltale signs of the 'symphonic ballet', typical of Massine and Ashton in the 1940's and 1950's. Zanella, who grew up as an artist in Stuttgart, knows this beautiful work from his own experience. It's revival forges another link in time with the present, also observable in the choreography of such creators as John Neumeier or Willian Forsythe — both alumni of Stuttgart.

"Song of the Earth" has aged but not faded. One may observe signs of another time, such as the somewhat old-fashioned bodystockings, or the device of putting dancers who are not needed in

a scene into a sort of "holding rectangle", like aircraft waiting for permission to land on a crowded runway. "They also serve who only stand and wait...", as Milton said, but it looks old-fashioned to me.

I do not know why Zanella did not include his futuristic and exciting version of "The Rite of Spring" in the tour program. Had this piece been danced in Israel (as it was at the Stravinsky program in Vienna), it might have added the missing excitement.

Since Renato Zanella arrived in Vienna less than two years ago, the State Opera Ballet has become a vigorous, lively company, worthwhile watching.



"SYMPHONY", FIRST MOVEMENT, CHOR.: RENATO ZANELLA, ILL.: SHMUEL KATZ