Tel –Aviv University

The Yolanda and David Katz Faculty of the Arts

Theatre Studies Department

Movement-Theater in Israel, 1976-1991

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by

Ruth Eshel

This research was supervised by: Prof. Ahuva Belkin

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ABSTRACT

After fifty years of artistic dance in Israel—beginning with expressive dance (*Ausdruckstanz*), which lasted from the 1920s to the early 1960s, and continuing with American dance mainly in the style of Martha Graham and her disciples—the mid-1970s saw the creation of a new artistic style, movement-theater. This style combined the art of dance with avant-garde theater of the time. The main creators of this type in Israel, as well as around the world, were women who came from the field of dance.

The style can be said to have lasted in Israel from 1976, when Ruth Ziv-Ayal produced Secret *Places*, the first work of the type, to the beginning of the 1990s, when *Let`s Dance*, by Gabi Aldor and Yigal Ezrati (1991), may be cited as the start of the dimming of this style.

"Movement-theater" is defined as a style in order to separate it from other categories of dance: post-modern dance, post-modern dance-theater, visual theater, and pantomime. The definition enables making a list of works created in Israel between 1976 and the mid-1990s.

Three international streams influenced the development of movement-theater in Israel: (1) American post-modern dance, with its sub-streams—analytical post-modern dance of the 1960s and metaphorical post-modern dance of the 1970s; (2) German *Tanztheater* of the 1980s, on which the movement-theater style was grounded, its most prominent creator being Pina Bausch; (3) and *Ausdruckstanz*, which continues to be generated almost unawares by Israeli creators even after its apparent disappearance from the Israeli dance map in the late 1950s. The influence of the three streams was not equal and was felt for limited periods of time. Post-modern dance was of influence from the second half of the 1970s to the first tour of appearances of Pina Bausch's Wuppertal Dance-Theater in 1982. Bausch's influence lasted until the end of the 1980s, and then gradually diminished. *Ausdruckstanz* continued inconspicuously among local creators until Bausch's Israeli tour, following which it gained new appreciation.

In order to examine the influence of international dance styles on movement-theater in Israel, an original model was constructed that presented their distinctive characteristics. The model served as a useful analytical tool for discovering to what extent and which elements influenced movement-theater creators in Israel.

Three “generations” of Israeli creators stand out in the movement-theater style: the first generation began to create in the second half of the 1970s, and the prominent figures were Ruth Ziv-Ayal, Rachel Cafri, Rina Schenfeld, and Ruth Eshel. Joining this group in the early 1980s were Oshra Elkayam-Ronen, Nava Zukerman, and, still later, Liat Dror, Nir Ben-Gal, and Gabi Aldor.

Post-modern dance was brought to Israel by Israeli choreographers who went abroad to study in the 1970s and by local dancers/creators who wanted to free themselves of the traditional canon of American modern dance, especially that of Martha Graham. Israeli artists, among them the choreographers Ruth Ziv-Ayal, Heda Oren, Ronit Land, as well as the dancers/creators Rachel Cafri, Ruth Eshel, and Rina Schenfeld, gave birth, as it were, to the “Fringe” in dance, some of this Fringe activity being movement-theater.

Four works of main creators in the style in the second half of the 1970s were analyzed: *Remembered Headlines* (1977) by Ruth Ziv-Ayal; *Portrait of a Demagogue* (1977) by Rachel Cafri; *Tins* (1979) by Rina Schenfeld; and *A Gown of Stones* (1980) by Ruth Eshel. Post-modern dance also supplied legitimacy for local creators to rebel against modern dance and to seek a new world of opportunities, some of which they adopted and some of which they rejected.

Unconsciously the Israeli creators adopted identical characteristics from post-modern dance: the rebellion against modern dance, the revolt against canons and familiar styles. They were bent on seeking a new and personal language of movement based on minimalist daily movement emphasizing simplicity of movement, costume, and stage decoration. Similarly they rejected the stress on the technical skill of dancers while maintaining theatricality, content, and emotion. The distancing from familiar styles and dance techniques opened up new possibilities, and they assembled actors, too, into the performances.

In contrast to analytical post-modern dance, though like metaphorical post-modern dance, they worked on elevating a planed-down choreography in which daily movement materials received artistic treatment, movement polish, and a quality of execution that was concentrated and precise. Unlike the outlook of analytical post-modern dance, the local creators did not reject theatricality, plot, message, and emotion; like metaphorical post-modern dance, they did not return to the familiar format of traditional dance, but assimilated the value of distancing with the aid of tools that analytical post-modern dance provided them. Again, in contrast to the outlook of others, there was a separation

in movement-theater in Israel between life and art. The performances, which were produced for the most part, preserved the partition between audience and stage.

Differences were revealed between the first and second generations in the use of objects and in the attitude toward music. Merce Cunningham's creative cooperation with the sculptor Robert Rauschenberg and with the composer John Cage influenced movement-theater in Israel. Objects occupied an important place in most of the works in the movement-theater style that were created in Israel in the 1970s and 1980s. If objects served the first generation of movement-theater creators in Israel as a means of discovering a new body language, they served the second generation—except for Schenfeld—mainly as a means of visually reinforcing the messages of these works. The two generations rejected the conception according to which every medium maintains its independence and the use of objects is made by way of combining arts (*Gesamtkunstwerk*), similar to that done by metaphorical post-modern artists.

At the same time, it was made clear that musical accompaniment to dance was undergoing a revolution. The local creators rejected both classic and modern music, and instead adopted Cage's outlook, that any sound could be material for the creation of music. At first, we find in movement-theater works in Israel sound decorations, composed of natural sounds, like the use of voice, banging of stones, beating tin cans, and so forth. There was also the use of original electronic music composed by local creators, the more prominent among them being Yosef Dorfman and Yossi Mar-Hayyim.

A dynamic may be seen in the influence of visiting dance troupes from abroad. Despite the success accorded Merce Cunningham's tour in Israel (1977) and despite the fact that his and Cage's theories of post-modern dance were received with great interest, in actuality his style of movement never took hold here. In contrast, Caroline Carlson's visit with her Paris Opera Research Workshop (1981) may be seen to have exerted a strong effect.

In 1982, Bausch arrived with the Wuppertal Dance Theater for a tour of performances; and in contrast to prevailing opinion of the time, she arrived at the place from which for the past six years works were being created in the movement-theater style under the influence of American post-modern dance. This was the first contact of local creators with *Tanztheater*, which in their eyes was an embodiment of movement-theater at its best. Since the first generation of movement-theater creators in Israel did

not go with the stream of analytical post-modern dance, which wanted to cancel theatricality, content, and emotion, local artists felt much greater closeness to Bausch's style, which had a place for these elements. Bausch's visit made it clear that post-modern dance was not the home port of artists in Israel, and they turned their back on America and once again looked toward Europe.

In order to investigate the influence of *Tanztheater* on dance in Israel, four works by central creators of the second and third generation of movement-theater were analyzed: *Five Screams* (1986), by Nava Zukerman; *Ladders* (1988), by Oshra Elkayam-Ronen; *Donkeys* (1988), by Liat Dror and Nir Ben-Gal; and *Let`s Dance* (1991), by Gabi Eldor and Yigal Ezrati. Bausch's immediate influence was in turning the interest of local creators to the subject of the failure of gender and of the occupation with human inter-relationships. Nevertheless, the attitude of Israeli choreographers to this subject differed from Bausch's. Israeli creators did not display the physical violence that was so striking in Bausch's works. Instead, they emphasized the mental aspect of violence. The relationship of local creators to gender failure was more humoristic (Elkayam), perhaps more painful but not hopeless (Zukerman); it sought to examine the subject from the starting point of equality, of people who try to dissociate themselves from social norms (Liat Dror and Nir Ben-Gal). The work of Gabi Aldor and Yigal Ezrati, *Let`s Dance*, was exceptional in that it dealt with political failure. The principal reason for this was the participation of the director, Ezrati, who came from the world of theater, in which politics has been a central theme in the past decade.

Unlike the figures in Bausch's work, most of which radiate false external behavior, the figures in the works of local creators in Israel demonstrate authenticity and honesty. Whereas emotion in Bausch is created from the tension of repetition of the same movement that turns softness to aggression, no expression of the element of repetition is seen in the works of Aldor and Elkayam and only in small amounts in Zukerman. The use of the element of repetition stands out in Dror/Ben-Gal, but it is of a different nature than Bausch's. The repetition is closer to the repetition in post-modern dance; it carries no dramatic, emotional messages.

In contrast, under the influence of Bausch, richer use was made of gestures than in the works of the first generation of creators. Most of the works of movement-theater creators in Israel in the first half of the 1980s also employed actors, whereas dancers filled the parts in Bausch's works. Both Bausch and Israeli creators, however, make

few technical physical demands. Even though the language of movement is based on everyday movement, which requires minimal development, some Israeli creators do show more of an interest in movement. Prominent in the work of both Bausch and Israeli creators are a professional polish and precision of fine details. While German *Tanztheater* is characterized by huge productions, with scores of participants, monumental set decorations and lighting, meant for the opera stage, Israel movement-theater is modest and chamber-like in nature.

An investigation of the influence of *Ausdruckstanz* on movement-theater in Israel shows that Pina Bausch's visit here roused the connection of local creators with *Ausdruckstanz* from its slumber; this connection had been pushed off the Israel dance map in the early 1960s with the establishment of the Bat-Sheva dance troupe (1964). Since the roots of Bausch's *Tanztheater* lie in *Ausdruckstanz* from between the two world wars, local creators began a re-examination of this type's influence on them and on dance in Israel. Most of the leading figures of post-modern dance and movement-theater in Israel, it seems, had studied with teachers who identified with *Ausdruckstanz*, among them Gertrude Kraus, Yardena Cohen, Naomi Aleskovsky, and Yehudit Arnon. The local choreographers rejected the rationalist formulas of analytical post-modern dance as a starting point for their works. In contrast, their starting point was rooted, as in *Ausdruckstanz*, in the daily "I" ("Ich"), from which it developed, by way of association and fantasy, in the search for answers to questions connected with the essence of life. The recitals that characterized movement-theater in Israel at the outset corresponded with recitals that characterized the artists of *Ausdruckstanz* at its apex, prior to the establishment of the State. The revolt of post-modern dance against the American canons of the 1950s and a return to the collaboration of choreographer and dancers also communicated with local choreographers as a striking characteristic of this style, which had been shoved aside with the absorption of American modern dance.

It may be concluded, then, that the movement-theater style in Israel is a combination of the American and European conceptions. Under the influence of American post-modern dance, movement-theater in Israel is more varied in movement and more abstract than *Tanztheater*. Under the influence of *Ausdruckstanz* and *Tanztheater*, movement-theater in Israel has emotion, theatricality, and content.

The taxonomy of dance works presented here and the analysis of the components and style of representative selected works by means of the model clearly point to a

rising line of development, followed by a sinking of movement-theater in Israel: the beginning of the line, in the mid-1970s, its flowering in the first half of the 1980s, and the beginning of its sunset toward the end of the 1980s. An analysis of *Donkeys* (1988), by Dror and Ben-Gal, reveals the new influence of young choreographers, like Ann Teresa de Keermaeker and Jan Farber, who sprouted in Europe in the early 1980s and turned their back on Bausch. Compared with her works or with earlier works by Israeli creators in the style of movement-theater, Dror and Ben-Gal's creations are much more energetic, rapid, and physical, transmitting their messages through choreographic composition, not gestures.

The distancing from dance and the coming closer to theater is found in Aldor and Ezrati's *Let`s Dance* (1991). The movement lexicon, which is a more modest performance than that of Bausch, is based principally on stage acting in a movement context of gestures. There is no preoccupation with gender, and there is no repetition of movement sentences. Instead of a collage, scenes are constructed according to a prepared dramaturgical plan.

The taxonomy shows that although an average of three to four new works were created each year in the 1980s, most of them were quality creations. Among these are *Terminal* (1981), *Tremolo in Zoll and a Half* (1984), and *Ladders* (1988) by Elkayam; *Drink Coffee* (1984) and *It's Not a Movie* (1990) by Zuckerman; *Cycle* (1982), *Rag* (1983), and *The Window* (1984) by Ruth Ziv-Ayal; *Diapered Branches* (1983) and *Times* (1986) by Ruth Eshel; *Silk* (1983) and *Summer in My Room* (1987) by Schenfeld; *An Hour of Calm* (1988) by Alice Dor-Cohen; *Two-Room Apartment* (1987), *Donkeys* (1988), and *The Third Dance* (1990) by Liat Dror and Nir Ben-Gal. In the 1990s, the number of new works dropped to one a year, there being years in which not even one work was created.

Most of the main choreographers of the movement-theater style in Israel returned to dance, except for Zukerman, who went into theater. It may be concluded from this that creators who came from the field of dance reached a dead end, in which the balance between content (concept) and form (movement) was violated. If in the beginning content served as an excuse for elevating new movement materials and creating "another dance type," it subsequently became the central element and began to chip away at the art of movement, which wanted the right to exist.

In contrast to the sinking of movement-theater, we have been witness in the past decade to the flowering of another post-modernist theatrical dance, as reflected in the works of Ohad Naharin, Amir Kolban, Noa Dar, Inbal Pinto, Nir Ben-Gal and Liat Dror (The Company), Ido Tadmor, and others. This style adopted some of the characteristics of American post-modern dance and of the *Tanztheater*, along with additional characteristics, a discussion of which exceed the scope of the present study. Contrary to movement-theater, the new style requires a high level of virtuoso ability, which only very well-trained dancers can execute.

Only the future will be able to confirm or refute the hypothesis that movement-theater in Israel in its present format, which dance people have led, has waned. Now, when choreographers have left movement-theater and moved on to a style requiring virtuoso dancing, the theater director may fill the vacuum that was created.