

FROM A DANCE CRITIC'S DESK

BY GIORA MANOR

Ballet routine

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All the competitors - non of them exhibiting exceptional talent or stage presence - chose well known snippets from the classical repertoire. The first prize went to Valeri Kaminer, and rightly so. Of the five only she has stage presence and managed to imbue her dance with some spirit.

Altogether, dancing quasi solos gleaned from traditional duets, without partners, is a rather inartistic procedure, robbing the well known dances of context and form; somewhat like playing a piano concerto with only the left hand...

Perhaps the organizers, who are dedicated to the propagation and enhancement of classical ballet in Israel, should do some basic rethinking. The participants should be asked to provide partners for themselves or choose real solos, composed for one dancer only. And if there are not enough participants to be found each year, perhaps the competition should take place only every other year.

Margalit Oved's "zaffa"

At Suzanne Dellal Centre a long awaited new programme of the Inbal Dance Theatre, which has hardly performed for over two

years, took place. Are we about to witness the rebirth of Israel's oldest professional dance company?

Margalit Oved, once the star of the company, who has spent nearly 30 years in California, was appointed more than a year ago the new artistic director of Inbal. Her appointment came after nearly four years of hiatus, for since the company's founder and nearly sole choreographer, Sara Levi-Tanai, was ousted and put out to pasture, the company hardly performed at all.

Clearly, the programme Margalit Oved devised is not a continuation of Levi-Tanai's work, nor was it expected to be. "Zaffa" - denoting the festive procession accompanying a groom to his bride's house - proved to be mainly Margalit's own works, some old and well know, some new. She herself is still a formidable singer, actor and percussionist, but among the other dancers of the company there is only one other outstanding artist - veteran Ilana Cohen. Cohen was excellent in Margalit's "The Mothers of Israel", a dance monologue performed this time under and in a huge sculptured tree, designed by David Sharir, a very good stage designer who used to work for Inbal in its halcyon days.

Margalit's son, Barak Marshall, contributed a dance-theatre piece entitled "Aunt Leah", which had already earned him praise at last April's "Gevanim be'Machol" showcase performances. Though well danced, the duet Oved composed for Amnon Damti (lately of Kol Demama) and Ronit Zlatin (until recently a dancer with Batsheva) was just another traditional, not to say old fashioned, modern dance trifle and quite out of place int the Inbal programme. Oved herself in her "Ballad" was stunning.

Conspicuous by her absence - as society correspondents like to write - was the Old Lady herself. Sara Levi-Tanai, the founder and leading spirit of the company was not represented in the new programme. And, having taken offence at a remark Margalit Oved made in a recent interview, neither did she attend the premiere. This is most unfortunate. Without at least some of Sara Levi-Tanai's works in its programmes the company has little right to continue performing. "Zaffa" was not a bad evening of dance theatre, but it sorely lacked the touch of genius of Levi-Tanai's choreography.

The dangers of success

That Ohad Naharin is a great choreographer need not be restated, nor that the company he leads, Batsheva, is an excellent one and its dancers dedicated to their art and in full identification with Naharin's work. The success of their large-scale works, such as "Anaphase" or "Opening Ceremony" (performed at the Israel Festival two seasons ago) was tremendous, and rightly so, as they were real masterpieces. But such triumphs raise the standard of expectations and even the greatest of artists does not always score hits.

Ohad Naharin artificially raised the curiosity level of the public by keeping all rehearsals of his new work, "Z/NA", under wraps right until the premiere, as if it were a secret military operation. Exaggerated expectations invite disappointment.

The first night of the Israel Festival (held on May 20, 1995 at the Sherover Theatre) was, in my opinion, a thrilling experience and most of its lengthy duration fascinating. It was a mature, better organized piece of Naharin staging, the design and choreography well focused. I think the central theme of the work is human aggression, on a personal as well as a national level, perhaps even in its specific Israeli manifestation.

"Z/NA" held many surprises, such as the line of men who sat with their backs to the spectators, seemingly masturbating, but when one of them turned to face the audience it transpired that they are soldiers cleaning their rifles... Later, when he pulled the trigger and fired a shot over our heads we were in for another surprise - a huge stuffed cow fell down. At once all the critics started commenting on whether it was supposed to represent the "intifada" (which has, thank God, subsided by now due to the peace process). But any such topical remarks about this remarkable work are beside the point. It would be better to address the intricate choreographic design and the masterly and unselfish dancing of the Batsheva company.

Godunoff - the end

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understood why the western press, and the dance correspondents in particular, accepted the Soviet quasi moral judgment that anyone who leaves his country of birth is "defecting", as if emigration was in itself unethical and the emigrant some sort of traitor.

Anyhow, Godunoff turned out to be a not so brilliant dancer, certainly not another Nureyev or Baryshnikov... When he appeared in Tel Aviv with the Israel Ballet, there was little to admire. His rude behaviour during rehearsals left a more lasting impression than his dancing. He simply wasn't Goodenough.

Iddo Tadmor's pots and pans

Tadmor, a brilliant dancer, returned to the stage after working abroad (in the U.S.A.) and recuperating from injuries, this time both as dancer and his own choreographer.

His "Sima's Pot", a work for a group of six dancers and a lot of kitchen utensils, has some inventive duets for two men and tender moments as well as violent ones. What these many vessels contain - pots and pans are after all there to contain something - was not clear. But the dancing was strong and the choreography, to music by J.S.Bach, well worked out, so I cannot complain. It all ended in the, now, traditional shower, with real water pouring down on the stage and the dancers standing each in his or her own tub. So, finally, the buckets did contain something and were put to use.

It is rumoured that the group is thinking of ways to continue working under the leadership of Iddo Tadmor. We wish them success in their difficult endeavour.

Berta's boys

On May 28, 1995, the Israel Ballet premiered its new programme at the new "Mishkan le'Omanuyot ha-Bama" in Tel Aviv. The performance began by what has already become the hallmark of the company, Balanchine's "Serenade" to music by Tchaikovski. Nina Gershman excelled in this veritable masterpiece of 1934 vintage.

Until now, the male contingent of the company has usually been rather weak. Hence the pleasant surprise to watch a piece by Vicente Nebrada, "Percussion for Six Men", in which new recruits to the Israeli company, such as Ildar

Mukmatchen, showed good technique and panache.

The Israel Festival - the menu

As regards dance the Israel Festival had little to offer this year. It was mainly traditional fare, most of the companies having been on tours to Israel before. This does not mean the guests were no good. For example, Jean-Claude Gallotta presented his "Ulysse" (1981), which is a very beautiful abstract work about the flow of time and movement. For some reason several of my colleagues found the piece boring. I thought it aesthetic and very well danced.

And there was Netta Pulvermacher's work about her kibbutz childhood. Apparently she remembers her early days in the childrens' house as a nightmare, so she put a great distance between herself and her childhood by living and working in New York. I am all in favour of inviting Israeli artists living abroad to perform here, but why such a mediocre choreographer, and especially while neglecting local artists altogether?

Danni Ezralow and his weird friends provided a much needed comic relief. Ezralow and co., including a marvellous American-Indian dancer, the excellent Taro Saarinen from Finland (who was not given the proper opportunity to show his mettle) and several other thrilling dancers were a sort of delicious dance-souffle.

And the festival ended with Trisha Brown's company, a somewhat superfluous reminder of the 1960's in the U.S.A., when modern dance was turning "post".

There is new dance in Jerusalem

Jerusalem is the official capital of Israel, but in dance - as in several other aspects - the real centre is Tel Aviv. In the last two or three years, "The Stage" (an experimental fringe theatre) is trying hard to provide opportunities for Jerusalemite dancers to present their work. The artistic leader of this venture is Rachel Bilsky-Cohen.

In the recent season (6-15th June, 1995) two programmes were presented, showing

13 works by several choreographers. Among these was Gal Alster (familiar to our readers as a correspondent and author), who danced two of his original works, accompanied by his brother Shlomi on the trombone. "Zachil" ("Crawl") is a funny piece about one who finds it hard to rise and shine in the morning, presented as a witty piece of absurd dance theatre, and the other dance is a Japanese samurai movement study.

Ruthi Weistock danced her impressive solo, "Mugbal" ("Limited" or "Restrained"). Yael Shani showed her group dance "Adam-ma", for four female dancers and a brilliant male percussionist, with excellent live music.

The second programme comprised works which had already been presented in a similar showcase performance in Tel Aviv.

So, there is new dance in the capital after all.

