

# FROM A DANCE CRITIC'S DESK

BY GIORA MANOR

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## "THARP!" - AS AMERICAN AS MACDONALD'S

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Twyla was here and, for once, we watched an American dance company that dances.

Pina Bausch always tells how she grew up under the tin table at the bar of her parents' pub. Twyla Tharp grew up in her parents' drive-in cinema. Perhaps this explains some of her movement quality, which is "show-bussinessy" in a pleasant user-friendly way. Her show, succinctly and aptly entitled "THARP!" was a pleasure to see.

Her dancers flitted over the huge open-air stage at Caesarea - and really moved. It was fresh but, at the same time, traditional and conservative compared to the non-dancing works of latter-day choreographers who try to be politically correct, but often are choreographically very incorrect, indeed. (Am I simply becoming old and conservative, I wonder?)

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## HOMAGE TO THE BARONNESS

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For no apparent reason, the Bat-Dor company arranged a festive performance at the Mishkan Omanuiot Habamah in Tel-Aviv in homage to Batsheva de Rothschild, its founder and benefactor. Undoubtedly, de Rothschild is a very important figure in the annals of modern dance in Israel and she surely deserves being honoured. But the glittering gathering at the opera hall had something Orwellian in its atmosphere. The glossy program and the texts the actress Hanna Maron had to speak as mistress of ceremonies were full of "double-speak." Undoubtedly, the baroness' most important contribution to the art of dance in Israel is the founding in 1964 of Batsheva, the dance company that still bears her name. In the

program, there was hardly any mention of it. Probably because a few years after its founding and great initial successes, de Rothschild severed her ties with Batsheva and founded (in 1967) her "second company," Bat-Dor, to provide her protege, Jeannette Ordman, with a company she could run and dance with.

All these well-documented facts and events are unmentionable in the Bat-Dor context. Hence, the only new true fact that emerged at the gala was that Batsheva de Rothschild was born "in London, the year World War 1 began," i.e., 1914, which was, until now, a well-kept secret.

Batsheva de Rothschild is a remarkable woman, a true pioneer in the tradition of her family, who was instrumental not only in the field of modern dance in Israel and in United States and of helping Israeli dancers to study, but also in fostering scientific research and encouraging folk-arts.

What a pity this Diaghilev-like power behind the scenes was honoured by a rather weak program of dances, an event full of half-truths, a faux-pas if there ever was one.

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## MOVEMENTS AND TEARS

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Batsheva Ensemble - one of the liveliest dance groups in Israel - premiered works by Angelin Preljokaj, the Canadian choreographer Lynda Goudreau, Barak Marshall and Lara Barsacq. I fail to see any reason for re-staging Barsacq's rather obscure "Vain Ode", first performed two seasons ago, except as a means of saving electricity, as one could hardly see the dancers.

But Preljokaj's "Larmes Blanches" (White Tears) is wonderful. At first, the dancers, clad in white, "romantic" shirts and black pants, present the movement elements that constitute the movement-vocabulary of the piece to music by Bach. The symmetrical exposition (which was a bit too long for my taste) is, in the end, resolved in a cannon-like chromatic structure of rare beauty. Preljokaj's usual theatrical style has become formal and musical, somewhat reminding one of Kylian's "Six German Dances."

Lynda Gaudreau's world premiere of "100 Movements" began by each dancer in turn taking the centre of the stage and revealing one limb of his or her body. This was whetting our appetite, but stopped short of real revelation, making do with such "banal" body parts as arm, belly or shoulder. This is a well-constructed piece and Gaudreau is a talented choreographer worthy of being watched.

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## SIZZLING HOT SUMMER DANCE

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Yair Vardi, the head of the Suzanne Dellal Dance Center in Tel-Aviv, has a penchant for

inventing original titles. In July, he instigated another series of dance performances by (mainly) up-and-coming choreographers, which he called "Hot Dance."

Rina Schenfeld, the first lady of the older generation of dancers, is always busy doing new things. Apart from presenting her already-known works such as "Hemia" and the dreamy "An Angel Comes at Night," her dancers premiered a work, "Bang on a Can," that consists of five duets created by the dancers themselves under her supervision to music by several composers. Her influence on them is apparently so strong that the duets looked like variations or remakes of her own works.

Anat Danieli and her company presented her beautiful, slow and poetic "October," a work one can watch more than once. Her "Poppins" is an entertaining rendition of the famous airborne nanny and her umbrella.

Michal Natan is interested in Spanish dance and isn't the only one attracted to flamenco. But her company of female dancers misses an important aspect of this very demanding style and she has yet to free herself from the deadening unisono she employs, which is diametrically opposed to the individualistic, even egocentric aesthetics of flamenco dancing.

The "Vertigo" group from Jerusalem celebrated its fifth birthday as an independent group. It again showed its "Bordomino," a dance piece that takes place in a night-club, which is a metaphor for the world. It is an excellent work, full of atmosphere and brilliant dancing. (On page 14 there is a portrait of "Vertigo" and its choreographers, Adi Sha'al and Noa Wertheim, in Hebrew)

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## A PRISONER OF THE MOUSE

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Usually one assumes that parents should nourish their infants. In Israeli dance, it is the opposite: performances for young audiences finance (at least partially) the companies' adult appearances. Batsheva has its Ensemble for that purpose, the Kibbutz Company has its "Young Company;" the other groups, large and small, all do morning shows in schools.

'Vertigo' decided it was time for them to increase their income by creating a special show for children. The result is very good indeed. "Power Dance" based on an idea by Adi Sha'al, who also directed, is a piece about a 10-year old computer freak. The stage set consists of a huge computer made of inflatable plastic, which literally collapses at the point where the power is cut off. Its mouse is a central character and Danni, a computer freak, the kid gets involved in dance, even ballet and, of course, with the four Power Rangers who emerge live from the computer screen. (Fusing screen and live actors was the invention of the Czech *Laterna Magica* in the

1960's, but that doesn't detract from Sha'al's clever use of this technique.

The text was written by Hamutal Ben-Ze'ev, choreography is by Noa Wertheim. It is an altogether enjoyable show.

## ALL THE WORLD COMES TO KARMIEL

Apart from the many folk dance groups, the festival management tries to persuade as many Israeli artistic dance companies as possible to bring new works to be premiered at Karmiel. But only the Kibbutz Contemporary Dance Company, whose base is situated just a few kilometers from the town, so it is on home turf at Karmiel, and upheld the tradition of presenting new work there. In July, Batsheva is almost always abroad and the rest - Bat-Dor, the Israel Ballet and Koldemama take annual turns at coming to the festival.

Last Summer, the Israel Ballet only participated in the grandiose opening performance. At the last moment, they reneged on their promise to prepare a whole new work by Berta Yampolsky. What they did do was to dance a quasi-Hungarian operetta-like trite military ballet scene - another Yampolsky "creation", which looked strange and disconnected to the rest of the evening.

What made this year's festival lively and interesting were the many good foreign companies participating in it.

It seemed improbable that just a few days after the handing over of Hong Kong to China the City Contemporary Dance Company would actually arrive. But they came and conquered the audience with their special blending of "Western" modern dance and indigenous Chinese theatrical traditions.

(The excellent CCDC of Hong Kong was already discussed in detail in issue nr. 5 of the Israel Dance Quarterly.)

Their program in Karmiel included a work prepared specially for the take-over festivities that took place in Hong Kong one week before they arrived in Israel, Helen Lai's "Millenium Mix", a colourful celebration with all the ingredients of a Chinese feast, such as dancing with long ribbons, was a joy to watch.

Willy Tsau - the artistic director of CCDC - was represented by his "China Wind-China Fire," which also dealt with Chinese theatrical traditions in juxtaposition to modern dance elements. In the beginning the dancers wore off-white kaftans (what in our part of the world is called "gallabieh") which, as I later discovered, is the traditional undergarment the singer-dancers of Beijing Opera don, usually concealed beneath their elaborate costumes. The very long sleeves were used as an extension of the arms. Later the dancers shed the modern costumes they wore and returned to the off-white "nightshirts." An excellent work, it was danced with conviction and vigour by the well-trained dancers.

Another interesting company from a distant country was the Australian ensemble called "Expressions." This compact, young company from Brisbane was founded by Maggi Sietsma in 1985.

"Expressions" started their program with a fascinating work by Natalie Weir based on the dance photos of Lois Greenfeld, the American photographer who charges her dance pictures with unusual movement, defying gravity, making the camera move with the dancers. As in her photos, the Australian dancers "fly" in a set frame, take off and put on garments in a whirlwind of movement.

Their other piece is of a quite different kind; in a stylized realistic flat with translucent walls the people "live" and move. It reminded me of the TV-series dealing with the 20-plus generation. Also very enjoyable.

Another guest company from a far country was the National Ballet of Korea. In South-East Asia people tend to take classical ballet very seriously indeed, perhaps a bit too seriously. Technique is the supreme goal; the spirit of ballet is neglected.

The Korean dancers are - technically - superb. Every limb, each eyelash is perfectly placed. They presented the traditional program of virtuosic tidbits from "Swan Lake," "Le corsair" (adding to the ballerina and the premier danseur another male dancer), the ubiquitous pas de deux from "Don Q". It all was mechanical, perfect and boring.



"MASSA-SOD", CHOR.: RAMI BE'ER, KCDC,  
1997 KARMIEL FESTIVAL

From South Africa there came a chamber size company called "PACT." The white and black dancers try to make a melange of traditional indigenous African dance and modern dance. As is the case in basketball, in dance, too, it is dangerous to pit white dancers against black ones. The white ones always emerge from such a competition of talents as the losers. It's a pity, this talented company tends towards entertaining instead of looking for real choreography.

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**THE PRINCE FIGHTS  
THE ROT**

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Amir Kolben and his group, "Combina," premiered their new show based on the "The Hamlet Machine," a play by the German playwright, Heiner Müller. Itself an adaptation of the Shakespearian tragedy, Kolben uses some of the texts (mainly spoken by an actor) and builds the choreography as his free interpretation of the subject.

His Hamlet (danced by more than one dancer, somewhat like Suzanne Linke's "Hamlet") is, of course, a rebel of sorts. The show starts with Yitzhak Rabin's foul murderer, Yigal Amir, shown on a TV screen, so that even the most stupid spectator should realize Kolben wishes to deal with Israeli reality, not a mythical medieval Denmark.

But he doesn't get caught in the trap of reality and topicality. The dancing is real dancing, his

movement vocabulary is vigorous and the staging is rich in invention. Kolben himself appears only momentarily in the first scene, which is a pity as he is still an accomplished dancer.

The imaginative costumes, mainly shiny plastic black and golden vests and very short sexy shorts (designed by Uri Freistadt) and the rich expressive lighting (by Shai Yehuda'i) make the show visually expressive.

Kolben's "Kombina" is another good young independent group.

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**MOSHE EFRATI LOOKS  
BACK**

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Moshe Efrati's new work, premiered at the Suzanne Centre in September, has a curious name - "Anti-Mechikon" - which in Hebrew means "Anti-Eraser." This was the name of a peculiar Israeli invention of the 1970s when our TV was still broadcasting in black and white, yet people of means who imported TV sets from abroad, had access to colour signals. In those days of governmental paternalistic policies of equality, technicians used an electronic contraption which prevented the colours to appear on the tubes at home. As there is no limit to the Jewish genius, other engineers invented the "Anti-Eraser" to overcome it.

As Efrati also states in the program, he wishes to delve into his and his company's "archives." So the title is appropriate as he not only uses

tapes from past performances, but involves a mime, clad in black, with a red flower in his hand, using sign-language - a last remnant of what was once Koldemama's 'specialite de la maison', namely deaf dancers. The role is performed by the last of the dancers with impaired hearing still in the company, Joseph Moyal, who is very touching and honest in this role combining, so to speak, Marcel Marceau's "Bip" with Kazuo Ohno's touching flower-solos. But the movement itself, and even the lycra body-stockings, reek of the 1970s.

On the one hand, Efrati's ability to run a large company of 16 dancers in these hard time is commendable, but on the other, and as usual, he attempts to convey too many thoughts and ideas. The sole really up-to-date aspect of the new piece is Efrati's lighting, which is very modern and beautiful.

His effort to inject something contemporary into the well-wrought choreography is the projection of a video film. But I fail to see the message of projected pictures of a cocktail party, in which many Israeli stage personalities participate and even the late prime minister appears in the context of Efrati's piece. It does not manage to connect the two parts of the evening.

As is often the case with Efrati, there are several good moments. But just as his conversation is full of often brilliant ideas mixed in a jumble that makes them hardly understandable, his latest dance is confused and confusing.

