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# Celebrating a Legacy: "Jews and Jewishness in the Dance World"

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## An International Conference at Arizona State University October 2018

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The "Jews and Jewishness in the Dance World" conference took place October 13 - October 15, 2018 with pre-conference activities, including exhibits, workshops, performances and gatherings during the week prior to the conference. However, the experience truly began an entire year earlier, as the process leading up to the conference opened up a continuous dialogue, created connections, offered a community with which to share resources, and sparked international conversations on the wide and encompassing subject. Organized and spearheaded by professor Naomi Jackson, in close consultation with choreographer Liz Lerman, both part of Arizona University's School of Film, Dance and Theater. It was sponsored by ASU's Center for Jewish Studies and Herberger Institute for Design and the Arts. The conference was convened to celebrate and explore the substantial contribution of Jews to the world of dance and to reflect critically on how dance embodies the multitudes of Jewish narratives in dance and experiences. The conference also shed light on the social and cultural role that dance and dancing plays in the lives of Jewish communities world-wide.

Professor Jackson was inspired to create this conference in memory of her parents, "beacons of progressive Jewish intellectual and artistic energy". She felt that as this older generation disappears, the younger dance generation was in danger of losing its Jewish identity. Thus, she set out to create an opportunity for exploring the legacy and complexity of Jewish artistic expression, especially as it manifested in the dance world.

As a young person attending and presenting at the conference, I can attest that the mission of the conference was achieved. Surrounded by many mentors and people whom I admired for many years, I suddenly felt the enormity of the legacy our generation needed to fulfill. It was also a welcomed opportunity to connect with other young artists and scholars that were invested in exploring and contributing to this legacy, and like myself, were confused about this legacy, and how to navigate our own identities as Jewish artists and scholars.

***"Not just the people of the book, but the people of the body."***

These were the words that caught me as Liz Lerman and Wendy Perron playfully curated an evening of performances on the second night of the conference. The above quote represented a prevalent theme during the conference proceedings, whether it was manifested ritually, choreographically, or therapeutically. The embodiment of the multiplicity that is Jewishness appeared to be passed down and inherited from generation to generation. It was displayed in sessions that centered on homage to traumas of the past or conflicts of the present, but also appeared in subtleties, buried deep within the often conflicting identities of Jewishness. Many presenters shared that Judaism was an element of their identity they *did not* usually associate with their professional lives, yet the conference enabled them to realize how much their Jewish identity, in fact, permeates the very essence of their work.

As separate subjects, dance and Judaism have been addressed copiously. However, it is much rarer to focus attention on the intersection of these two research fields. Yet, when the conference platform was provided, the research, both scholarly and artistic, appeared abundant and rich. What many would assume to be a "niche" field, "Jews and Jewishness in the Dance World", in fact brought together a diverse range of scholars, performers, educators, and choreographers. Presenters and conference attendees ranged from seasoned professionals and published authors to University students. They converged on the Tempe Campus of Arizona State University from all across the US, Israel, and Europe and they proceeded to do what Jews do best: debate, investigate, question, and schmooze.

The "Jews and Jewishness in the Dance World" conference did not resemble your average academic conference. In the back of every lecture, stiff participants were stretching on the side, or doing relevés on the wall, and no one gave them a second glance. Participants could be found posing thoughtful questions at the end of a serious lecture, just to be seen ten minutes later in a workshop, prancing across a gym, discovering the connection of

spirit and body. Attendees used words such as, heartwarming, inspirational, stimulating, uplifting, and transformative, to reflect on their conference experience.

Pre-conference activities and sessions included a photo exhibition "Reimagining Communities Through Dance", a book signing and discussion with Judith Brin Ingber on her latest work, *Seeing Israeli and Jewish Dance*, and a communal Shabbat dinner, which involved a moving performance instillation by Suzanne and Mindy Miller, and a presentation by Philip Szporer on his latest photographic exhibit *1001 Lights*. Two major pre-conference workshops occurred on Saturday: an Embodied Torah Workshop, and a Dance Lab Workshop for experienced dancers and choreographers 39 and under. The Embodied Torah Workshop opened with a Shabbat morning service, led by Rabbi Diane Elliot, focusing on dance as devotion. The embodied Torah exploration continued throughout the day with eight breakout sessions including: Sh'ma, Kaddish, and Shalsholet. Meanwhile, the Dance Lab, which began in the afternoon, pulled from the techniques of a variety of young dancers and choreographers, to physically investigate the intersection of movement and Jewish identity, and work towards defining how Judaism informs our broader physical identity.

The "Dance for Camera" event, curated by Ellen Bromberg, officially opened the conference with a screening of nine different short dance films. Broad in scope, the films ranged from "My Grandfather Dances", a 1994 film directed by Douglas Rosenberg where Anna Halprin tells the story of dancing with her grandfather as a child, to Jacob Jonas' 2018 dance film, "Able"; a collaboration with the ILL-Abilities Dance Crew (a hip-hop dance crew representing the differently-abled community). The films featured a variety of dance genres and technical abilities, a range of environments (even going as far as a polar science mission in the Arctic), and played between gravity and humor. Most did not specifically focus on Jewish themes, but instead the screening displayed the role and impact of Jewish directors and choreographers on the field of dance films. The opening screening event was followed by a moving Havdalah ceremony led by Rabbi Diane Elliot, honoring Judith Brin Ingber, and her enormous contribution to the field of Jewish dance studies. Multiple participants expressed their thanks to her for paving the way and inspiring them to do the same. Finally, we stood hand in hand, swaying together, singing and dancing Shabbat to a close. The Havdalah ceremony set the tone for the days to follow. This was not just a conference, but as many participants stated, "a homecoming".

The next two days of the conference were packed with multiple simultaneous keynote speakers, lectures, panels, roundtable discussions, and workshops. Sunday's subjects included Jewish narrative of dance, social and popular dance, pedagogy, Yiddish dance, dance therapy, diaspora, memory and embodiment, Jewish-Arab relations and Israeli-Palestinian relations, Yemenite Jewish dance tradition, Hasidic dance, ballet and Jewishness, and dance in Israel.

Sunday night concluded with a live performance, "Seven Dances, Three Arguments, and a Glimpse of Wonder", curated by Wendy Perron and Liz Lerman. Perron and Lerman's playful banter interjected the program's seven works, thus adding Jewish humor, debate, and truly poignant insight. Their "arguments" encouraged us to continue to question and think deeply as we experienced the

performance. The works themselves boasted the same diversity and range as appeared in the screening the night before. However, when comparing the works to the dance film screenings, the themes of Jewish identity and Judaism were much more present and visible. Maggie Waller (a student at ASU) performed her solo, *To take apart, then build again* (2018), grappling specifically with her personal identity as a Jewish woman, while Adam McKinney's solo, *Ha Mapah/The Map* (2010), also explored his identity, but specifically addressed the lack of overt representation of Black Jewishness on dance stages. Ephrat Asherie explored her Jewish roots through her unique b-girl movement style in her solo, *Papirosen*. Meanwhile, Jesse Zaritt's excerpt from, *send off* (2014) explored Jewish themes as his stunning physicality investigated ecstasy, service, and sacrifice, to a recorded text from Hanoch Levin's play "Queen of the Bathtub", a play that at the time of its publication was banned for political "moral" reasons. Another bible story was revisited in Sara Pearson's solo from *The Return of Lot's Wife* (2003). Salt danced across the stage, as Pearson humorously envisions Lot's wife confronting God in her 1950's Brooklyn kitchen, a reference to Pearson's own struggle to experience the presence of God when she has considered herself an atheist her entire life. Finally, two works on the program grappled with Jewish identity and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The first work, *Women* (2015) was an adapted solo from an ensemble collaboration between Nicole Bindler and Palestinian dancers from the Diyar theater in the West Bank. The second work on this theme was a moving solo, by Hadar Ahuvia, *Joy Vey* (excerpt, 2015). The piece aims to "confront a Zionist legacy and its mythologies by rehashing beloved Israeli folk songs and dances to face the Nakba". Ahuvia claimed, "I am curious about how Ashkenazi Jews have imagined and do imagine themselves in the dances of 'others' in Palestine and in the USA, and how others see themselves in the "dances of Jews". The evening ended with "Influence Circles", a task in identifying generational connections. The names of influential Jewish dancers and choreographers, including Anna Halprin, Meredith Monk, Daniel Nagrin, and Ze'eva Cohen were called out, and with each name a circle of those they influenced was formed on the stage. Thus, a glimpse of the future of Jewish dance, was completed by paying homage to the significance of Jewish dancers of the past. On the last day of the conference, new inquiry subjects were introduced, addressing the Holocaust and embodying memory and trauma, Jewish body culture, Jewish women choreographers and social justice, art and legacy, dance studies through writing, choreography in concert and congregation, site-specific work, politics of Israeli folk dance, and dancing "Jewish", just to name a few.

In retrospect, some themes seemed to resurface throughout the conference, for example: minority voices within the Jewish dance community, including Mizrahi, Ethiopian, and queer experiences. The conference highlighted that there are minorities within the Jewish minority, that cannot be overlooked when reflecting on Jewish identity and the Jewish experience. Social justice, *Tikun Olam*, and conflict resolution were also dominant themes in the conference. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and Jewish-Arab relations, were not shied away from, and were often approached from conflicting perspectives. The younger generation especially seemed to be struggling with how the conflict influenced their

identity as Jews. Yet, the fact that the conference made room for a variety of opinions, narratives, and experiences, is a testament to its inclusivity.

Another subject that resurfaced was the idea of "passing" as white. Many presenters reflected on balancing their sense of privilege because they are able to pass as white, yet ostracized in other situations due to their being Jewish (even if they identify as secular). Secular Jewish identification, was another recurring theme in the conference. Despite a significant number of presenters identifying themselves as secular Jews, their cultural Jewish identity seemed to compose a strong part of their identity and their work. Even those who were raised without a connection to their Jewish heritage, rediscovered it, or searched for it later in their lives. The conference also highlighted how Jewish dance artists were a major influence in the modern dance world, especially in the post-modernist movement, including the infamous Judson Dance Theater. The question arose on whether this was happenstance or due to a deep-set Jewish inquisitiveness that aimed to push the boundaries of the norm. Finally, an important question continued to resurface on what is, or rather who is, a contemporary Jew? The answers are as numerous and varied as the kinds of Jewish experiences that exist today.

While Professor Naomi Jackson may have instigated the conference to honor the past and preserve a legacy, she succeeded in providing us with a greater gift: a family, or as she called it in Yiddish, a *mishpucha*. A gift Naomi herself said she had not realized she had been searching for until the conference was underway. During the evening of curated performances, Liz Lerman made another very powerful statement, "You're not alone, you never were". Here, in Israel, as Israeli artists, we take being Jewish for granted. Judaism is part of the makeup of our surroundings; it dictates our lives whether we want it to or not. Thus, especially at a period where the Israeli dance scene attracts dancers and patrons from all over the world and Israeli dance is exported as a commodity, the concept that there are "other" Jewish dancers and scholars outside of Israel, that are continuously shaping and contributing to the global dance scene, is important to note and remember. Furthermore, if you put yourself in the shoes of American Jews or European Jews, who grew up as the minority, the realization of the possible connections between Jewishness and dance are powerful. To recognize Jewish ties and heritage with matriarchs, like Anna Halprin, Anna Sokolow, and others who shaped the modern, post-modern, and contemporary dance scene, as well as with leading

critics, writers, and academics, this sense of belonging is not to be taken for granted and must be continuously cultivated.

As humans, we always strive for a greater sense of belonging, and this seemed to be the true undercurrent of the conference. What this conference taught us, is that not only are the overlapping circles of Jewishness and Dance quite large, but the web of relations between the two fields is often interdependent. Judaism and Jewish artists have played a vital role in the world of dance, but also, at a subtler level, movement and dance have long informed Jewish ritual and tradition.

Nothing could embody this better than the final moments of the conference. The closing ceremony consisted of a live performance by David Dorfman and Dan Froot. The performance entailed an imagined dialogue and performance recreation between a future Dan and Dave (grandsons of their namesakes), in an attempt to perform the conference and conference themes back to the participants, as if they were sitting at a reunion many years in the future. Dorfman and Froot bantered about the events of the weekend, reflecting often on new jargon, such as "jewyness", that had emerged. They also recreated their own Jewish-inflected collaborative duets, *Live Sax Acts*. As the performance drew to a close, they invited Lerman and Perron on to the stage to join in their dancing. Soon, others were brought down as well, until, in the end, the whole audience descended upon the stage. An impromptu dance broke out, strangers partnering up to polka around together, and even more spontaneously, the group broke into concentric circles, grape-vining around and around, instinctively falling into the common folk dances that are integral to Jewish celebratory gatherings.

There could be no better way to end such a conference, than to enact a ritual that embodied its very essence: to bring people together, to preserve a legacy, and to start a new tradition.

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