



Koresh company in *Inner Sun*, 2017, photo by Pete Checchia

Is all that Jazzy Modern Dance Jewish?

Merilyn Jackson

For those unfamiliar with Philadelphia's dance scene, in this essay I introduce some members of the Jewish dance community (not that they identify themselves that way, except perhaps through programming at the Gershman Y, originally known as the YM & WHA) who preceded or are contemporaneous with Israeli Yemenite American choreographer Ronen (Roni) Koresh. In 1991 he founded the Koresh Dance Company (KDC). What follows are a sprinkling of the people who forged safe spaces and solid ground for KDC's often Jewish-themed choreographies. I argue that Jewish artists, dancers, choreographers, presenters, producers, entrepreneurs, critics and editors of prominent publications largely shaped the city's cultural dancescape.

Jewish dancer/choreographer/filmmaker Donya Feuer¹ was born to social activist parents in 1934 in what was then mostly Italian and Jewish-populated South Philadelphia. She went on to a career that began in New York with Paul Sanasardo and then to a lifelong collaboration with Ingmar Bergman, choreographing many of his films, and making her own.

Nadia Chilkovsky Nahumck, with her Philadelphia Dance School and Duncan training, and Joan Kerr, best known for her *Herodiade*, and who died in 1982 at 47, were two other significant choreographers of note with Jewish backgrounds who worked with Jewish or Judeo-political themes. Kerr could be tart when it came to her Jewish-themed work. Once, when a presenter came backstage to tell her how good it was, she said "What did you expect? Chopped liver?"

In the '70s, the late Ellen Forman created *Dream of Genesis*, a work about the process of creation, which had Biblical under and over tones. With Alice Forner, Forman had founded South Street Dance Company (STDC) Forman channeled Isadora Duncan quite fiercely with her solo "Moving Theater" program based on Duncan's works called *Your Spirit at the Window: A Solo Tribute to Isadora Duncan*.

I took classes at STDC and through the late 1970s, Ellen would visit me in my South Street cheese and gourmet food shop. We lunched on cups of soup in the shop or at South Street restaurants now and then, chatting about our children, her *body/language* series, which integrated text with movement, and Duncan explorations, Judaism and Jewish food. Once, when I said that her muscular

limbs in her Duncan dances reminded me of Sabra women, she smiled and thanked me, "Sometimes that's how I feel. Duncan's philosophies relate to strong women like the Sabra."

Although Leah Stein only recently came back to her Jewish roots in her choreography, a survey of Jewish dancemakers in Philadelphia would have to include this site-specific dancer/choreographer. She has worked in cemeteries, parks, churches, a Masonic temple and an armory.

"I made a piece in Poland's Silesia in an abandoned train garage in 2004," she told me in a fall 2018 interview. "The train cars were intact, strewn with objects like tools, tickets. Remnants of a repair garage stood in ruins – all in disarray. In one moment, all the performers, 15 young Polish students, were in one car. The door shut. The sound started quietly and slowly built to a full crescendo, and then cut off suddenly."

"My father loved trains," she continued, "I always have the image of trains used to transport Jews in my psyche somewhere - not sure I'm even conscious of it. It's like a shadow that I don't see at all." As a way to process her father's death and his significant influence on her, she created *Bellows Falls*.² It shows her lying at the edge of the precipice of the falls with small rocks covering her torso. As she slowly turns on her side the rocks fall with the water. She creates a searing metaphor of herself as her father's gravestone and the stones mourners have placed there.

Stein thinks about dislocation while making all her works: "The clear through line of my work was seeking to create a 'sense of place' and need and desire to 'locate.'" A friend told her this was no accident, and that she saw it as a counterbalance to the experience of dislocation, and the history of Jews being forced out.

In the mid '90s, Sheila Zagar worked through her paternal issues before her father's death. In her *Father Daughter/Dad & I*³ piece, she danced with him to a narrative stating, "I could see the only way I could spend more time with him was if I went to synagogue with him every week."

Randy Swartz, (now director of NextMove) is, to me, the counterpart and successor to powerful East Coast Jewish impresarios Moe Septee and his mentor Sol Hurok who had each brought much dance and theater to Philadelphia.⁴ I first saw Bella Lewitzky's work at the Walnut Street Theater in the late '70s or early '80s. I had known about her 1949 dance, *Warsaw Ghetto*, and was curious. I can't recall the program, but there was one dance which seemed to have a pink-clad Jackie Kennedy crawling over the heads of the other dancers as if to reach the Secret Service after her husband had been shot. The word "docu-dance" struck me like a lightning

bolt and Lewitzky's imagery certainly drove me on my road to becoming a dance reviewer/critic a few years later. Swartz had been presenting dance, much of it by Jewish dancemakers like her, to Philadelphia for over a decade and still is.

There were Jewish-run dance schools in Philadelphia. I studied at Jay Dash Studio under Jewish teachers, until only recently realizing they were Jewish. Once, when interviewing Joan Myers Brown, the founder of the mixed-race company, Philadanco, she told me she was denied admittance there because she was black.

I covered Philadanco's 2001 trip to Poland for *Dance Magazine*,⁵ *The Warsaw Voice* and *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. Accompanying the young dancers and Brown to Auschwitz - my second and most reluctant visit - I stood next to her before an exhibit. "I'd have been killed twice," Brown said drily, "once for being black, and once for having had a German Jewish grandmother," which surprised me to learn.

So, this leads to one of the many questions the "Jews and Jewishness in the Dance World" conference raises: How do we know, either by blood, direct assertion, or interpretation, who or what or how any dance is Jewish? And, how does Philadelphia's substantially Ashkenazi/Eastern European community and Koresh's Israeli/Yemenite background play out in Philadelphia? I asked Koresh if he noted any difference in support from either community.

"There are small neighborhoods of Sephardic and Yemenite Jews in Philadelphia," he said. "To my knowledge they are not often among the more wealthy Ashkenazi communities. It seems to me that

in America there is more blending, while in Israel I was not even allowed to date an Ashkenazi girl. I was considered black," he shrugged, matter-of-factly.

As Stein said, "I feel there's as much diversity in the Jewish community as connection." With awareness of these differences, Koresh espouses all aspects of the Jewish experience. At least as it applies to Europe, America and the Middle East, he works towards a representation of Jewish unity.

Former Koresh dancer Asya Zlatina, a Moscow-born artist, made a dance called *Barry Mamaloshen*, a kitschy and joyful celebration of Yiddish life in the interwar and post war years. Zlatina said it's a universal message of how life triumphs over darkness. Since leaving Koresh, Zlatina has developed her own group in Philadelphia. Unlike Koresh's schedule of performances, hers starts on Wednesday to Sunday, but she does not perform on Friday night or hold matinees on the Sabbath.

To my eye and to well-known critics like Miriam Seidel (formerly my colleague for many years at the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and other



Koresh company in *Sense of Human* 2017, photo by Frank Bicking

publications) and Lisa Traiger who writes on dance in Washington, DC, Koresh bridges Jewish diversity through dances with themes relatable to both Ashkenazi and Sephardic communities.

Philadelphia, PA has a Jewish population of more than a quarter million and a rich dance culture boasting five professional and internationally-known companies in as many ethnicities and dance genres. The city is a likely stage for a Jewish dance company. The first fully professional Jewish American dance company with performance and touring schedule of 38-52 weeks, Koresh Dance Company, (KDC) was founded by Israeli Yemenite choreographer Ronen (Roni) Koresh in 1991. From its inception, KDC enjoyed wide popularity in the region and even more on national tours. Becoming the resident company at Philadelphia's newest Avenue of the Arts (Broad St.) venue, the Suzanne Roberts Theater in 2008, gave it an even greater presence in the city's cultural framework.

While there have been attempts to create professional Jewish dance companies in America, they never rose beyond semi-professional, performing mainly in synagogues and colleges. Perhaps because Koresh Dance Company is primarily a contemporary dance company with a strong bent towards Jewish themes that fit into universal themes, and with a firm business model that employs many people, it not only represents Jewish dance in Philadelphia, but nationally, and appeals to a wide audience.

Born of Yemenite parents just outside of Tel Aviv, Roni and his brothers Alon and Nir served what was then the requisite three years in the Israeli military. Roni Koresh had begun competing in dance clubs by age thirteen. His first dance teacher, Alida Gera, brought him to the attention of the Batsheva administration. He studied jazz and ballet in addition to Graham technique, in Batsheva's second company. At 18, the Israeli military called Koresh up for his compulsory service.

In her 2004 *Dance Magazine* feature,⁶ Seidel noted that Koresh convinced a commanding officer to reassign him to a base closer to dance classes. After each day's shift, Koresh said, "I would climb through a fence and hitchhike to get to the studio in Tel Aviv. Sometimes I couldn't even change to tights, so I would take ballet classes in my uniform, with ballet slippers."

Koresh originally came to the U. S. to study for a year at The Ailey School in New York (and briefly at the Martha Graham studio). Another well-known Israeli émigré, choreographer Shimon Braun - who still teaches in his studio just outside Philadelphia - saw Koresh dancing there and invited him to join his highly successful commercial dance company, the Philadelphia-based WAVES. Roni danced with them throughout the 1980s.

Eventually, the brothers regrouped with Roni in Philadelphia taking roles in the company. Alon now runs the dance company and Nir oversees the dance school. The company tours nationally and internationally, and as one of four leading companies in residence at major theaters along Philadelphia's Avenue of the Arts, Suzanne Roberts Theatre, it performs a winter and spring season.

Since its beginning, KDC found solid footing with audiences. Despite at first feeling marginalized by dancers, funders and some critics for its commercial dance origins, KDC struggled through and enjoyed remarkable growth and transformation. The Koresh brothers have become popular members among Philly's dancers. But, Roni Koresh admitted to Seidel, "I felt like an outlier. I was cocky, sensuous. I wanted to make a splash, to connect with audiences. I didn't want to rely on grants, and, with Alon and Nir, we've made it pretty far without as much private funding as other companies depend on. Because what do you do when that dries up?"

Roni Koresh has taught at Philadelphia's University of the Arts (UArts) since 1986. He often cherry picks his dancers from among his students, offering them paid work upon graduation. The brothers run the company and school as viable businesses.

"All my life I've worked to create jobs. I once told a funder that I pay my dancers \$400 a week and he seemed appalled. How weird is that?" he asked. "These are the people who put my work out to the audience. When I started, I told those kids who danced for me, 'I'll take you to the Promised Land.' How can I let them down? They are my family and I can only look as good as they make me look. I'd pay them ten times more if I could."

Writing in the *Jewish Forward*,⁷ Lisa Traiger said Koresh stopped performing onstage in his late 30s. The decision came when he saw many of his UArts students graduate to no jobs in the dance field. "I decided to create a place for people in the arts, primarily dance, to make a living in a respectable way, in a way they deserve to."

Traiger sees that much of his choreography deals with interpersonal issues of abandonment, heartbreak, existential loneliness and the challenges of living in the modern world. Her interview validates what Seidel and I have often written about: though Koresh doesn't concentrate exclusively on Jewish or Israeli themes, he doesn't deny that deep cultural connections play a role in his artistic output. "I don't think you can remove the heritage you grow up in," he told her. "Everything I do has my Israeli identity in it. We went through struggles that give you an appreciation for everyday life. We like immediate gratification because we know that tomorrow may not be around."

The Koreshes have expanded on their success by providing the regional dance community with the use of its home stage at The Suzanne Roberts Theatre, presenting an annual festival, "Come Together." Of course, Koresh uses the festival to promote his own signature works or works-in-progress in each evening's finale. A section called "Water Ceremony" from a work titled *Come Together*, looked like a *mikvah* - a cleansing or blessing ceremony - but was cloaked in such sensuality that it also called to mind the story of David and Bathsheba. A section called *Home*, had the full company out in white dress in a sunny, laid-back sidestepping dance to cascading melodies of Tel Aviv's Touré-Raichel Collective. A stumbling quartet in rags in another section reminded me of stories of Biblical lepers.

Being on the festival's roster has brought many a new talent to a wider public view than they might otherwise have enjoyed. And the

vibe after every show is as celebratory and familial as at a Bar Mitzvah, with the brothers seeming almost avuncular as they schmooze around the lobby.

"Koresh freely acknowledges wanting to offer audiences a good night's entertainment," Seidel wrote. "His larger works, however, also embody his earnest reflections on such big-ticket themes as war - *Exile* is a narrative of an embattled community; the roots of violence show in the Biblical fable of Cain and Abel in *Of God and Evil*. While his work is grounded in Luigi technique, and both Bob Fosse and Jerome Robbins come up in conversations about his style, another key to his sensibility may be Martha Graham with whom he briefly studied. In place of her characters from Greek mythology, he has offered biblical and other archetypes that allow him to explore similarly primal themes."

Seidel's observation illuminates Koresh's stylistically diverse repertoire that derives from all these influences yielding rich sources of socio-historical, folk, and biblical motifs laced with wit and playfulness, sensuality and menace. As an example, in 1991's *Facing the Sun*, he portrays the Holocaust. It opens with a steam engine's glaring headlight bearing down on the audience to sounds of a chugging train. The evening length, epic work had the full company of ten facing the horror of the Holocaust while heroically striving to remain committed to their community. The choreography and tattered costumes were extremely literal. Wary and watchful dancers kept in tight assembly in crouching movements progressing and regressing across the stage on a diagonal to sounds of clanging chains and gates and distant trains. A surefire signifier of the era, the women performed bent-kneed goose steps. Finally, single shots take down each dancer before intensifying into machine gun fire.

While passion, speed and eroticism infuse Koresh's entire oeuvre, minstrelsy, vaudeville, slapstick comedy and acrobatic feats also inflect the repertoire. For Koresh, Jewishness is out there, in there, and, even in shadow, always reaching out to engage the world. He doesn't provide concrete answers, but leaves many questions open about his experience of Jewishness.

Ohad Naharin's Gaga discipline emerged as Koresh was refining his own style, and shared elements can be detected throughout Koresh's choreography – as if the land of milk and honey and sorrow and tragedy informs the movement of its native choreographers. The 2008 inaugural concert as dance company-in-residence at the Suzanne Roberts Theatre featured the U. S. premiere of *Things I Told Nobody* by guest choreographer, Itzik Galili, director of Galili Dance in the Netherlands. Choreographers Donald Byrd and Robert Battle set dances on the company and Ohad Naharin remounted *Passomezzo* (a work from 1989) on KDC, giving audiences a fair assessment of how Koresh's dancers also excel within other choreographic styles.

In *Twisted Pleasures*, Koresh put aside much of his jazz-based idiom and moved easily into folk dance, but never before with such wit and faithfulness to a primal era. The vaguely Middle Eastern music was overlaid with the typically techno beat which Koresh uses to drive dancers and audiences to a froth.

With its tribal eroticism, the work had the feel of a desert encampment: the company danced as if in an orgy before exhausting themselves into a fitful sleep. Longtime lead dancer Melissa Rector disturbs their dreams and, as in a clairvoyant nightmare, four men rise, arms entwined in a line dance. Near the end, they dance separately from the women, Hasidic style.

So how did Koresh go from outlier to insider? "We all grew up," he shrugged. "We took the journey alone and together. And that's how it's come together." It has been fascinating to watch KDC's evolution from nostalgic, sometimes even homesick motifs, to a total embrace of, and pride in being a Jewish American. His 2015 *After-shock* is a love-letter to his adopted homeland. "The juxtaposition between old and new creates interesting landscapes and endless possibilities for expressiveness in my dancers,"⁸ said Koresh.

"Every angel is terrible," said Rainer Maria Rilke. In many of Koresh's works, I could see angels, terrifyingly beautiful.

Notes

¹ Mark Franko, *Excursion for Miracles: Paul Sanasardo, Donya Feuer, and Studio for Dance, 1955-1964*, Middletown, CT.: Wesleyan University Press, 2005. Feuer's darkly Holocaust-related film, *Dance of the Condemned Women*, opens with four females of varying ages entering the space through a narrow passageway, suggesting birth, and at the same time, death in a Nazi death camp.

² Leah Stein, <https://vimeo.com/252810622> (accessed June 5, 2019).

³ Sheila Zagar, *Father/Daughter dance* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SLA24HF7p8g> (accessed June 10, 2019).

⁴ Davies Hunter and Steve Martinot, *Philadelphia Jewish Life, 1940-2000*, Temple U Press 2003, 209; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sol_Hurok (accessed June 20, 2019); <https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-1-d&q=Moe+Septee> (accessed June 20, 2019).

⁵ Marilyn Jackson, "It's Raining Dance," *The Warsaw Voice*, July 1, 2001; "Contemporary Dance Lights Up the Polish Stage," *Dance Magazine* (December 2001); "For Philadanco, Poland Proves Challenging Tour," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, August 12, 2001.

⁶ Miriam Seidel, "Roni on the Rise: Ronen Koresh and his Dazzling Company," *Dance Magazine* (December 2004).

⁷ Lisa Traiger, "A Twist of Israel in Pennsylvania," *Jewish Forward* (December 2, 2011).

⁸ Ronen Koresh, "Sense of Human" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vpodWnzIH4Q> (accessed June 21, 2019).

Merilyn Jackson has published more than 1,000 articles on dance, theater, food, and Eastern European culture in diverse publications including *tanz*, Berlin and primarily for *The Philadelphia Inquirer* since 1996. She was an NEA Critics Fellow, and a Pennsylvania Council on the Arts Fellow for her novel in progress, *Solitary Host*. An earlier version of this paper was published by *Toronto's Fjord Review*, where her recent work is published. merilynjj@yahoo.com