Dancers Veronica Tennant and Gregory Osborne in David Allan's 1987 ballet *Masada*: *The Zealots*. Photo: John Mahler/ *Toronto Star* Archives

The Case of David Allan's 1987 Ballet *Masada*: Did it Matter that the Topic was Jewish?

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In 1987, choreographer David Allan made what critics called "a daring and controversial" 40-minute ballet called *Masada, The Zealots,* for the spring season of Toronto's National Ballet of Canada. It was based on a legend unfamiliar to most of its 27-dancer-cast, though the siege at Masada was well-known to North Americans who knew Jewish history or had visited Israel, or perhaps saw a TV version starring Peter O'Toole in the 1980s. Historical "Ballet Notes" were provided to the press and to audiences in pre-performance talks, explaining the tragic events of 74 A.D. at Herod's winter palace overlooking the Dead Sea. Jewish families had escaped the Roman victory over Jerusalem and fled to Masada. There it took the Roman army two years to build their siege ramp and finally break through the fortified walls. When they did, they made a gruesome discovery: to avoid capture, slavery, and worse, the families chose to end their own lives.[1]

Although many resources were invested in the ballet and several reviewers found it powerful and promising, *Masada* was never repeated. With this essay, I want to bring Allan's ballet back into the historical record, as well as pointing out how it affected people at the time, and how it leads to conversations about being Jewish in the North American ballet world. I begin with the critical reception of *Masada* from newspaper accounts and documents in the National Ballet of Canada archives, then focus on recent interviews with

the choreographer and seven members of his cast.[2] As an aesthetic product, the ballet was judged uneven but also vital and moving, a fresh and frank ballet at a time when large classical companies searched for new work that would keep up with the times. *Masada* became a distant memory to many; but, on a personal level, the ballet turns out to have meant a great deal more to select participants who felt invested in aspects of its Jewish theme.

Just Another Story Ballet

In many ways, *Masada* fitted into the classical ballet world in that it featured sympathetic characters, a compelling story, and an opportunity for dramatic solos, duets, and group dancing. It differs from the most prominent story ballets, in that they tend to feature Christian characters (or their imagined interactions on foreign soil), and Christian details, from the large cross on Giselle's grave, to the Prayer solo in *Coppélia*, the Christmas tree in *Nutcracker*, and the Friar who marries Romeo and Juliet. In other words, although separated from religious institutions officially, ballet has always reflected the culture in which it first developed, in the courts and theatres of Europe and Russia. Although Jewish themes have emerged in many Israeli ballets, the only one that comes to mind for a major North American ballet company is Jerome Robbins's *Dybbuk* for the New York City Ballet in 1974.

Did having Jewish subject matter make a difference in the reception or continuation of *Masada*? There is no evidence of anti-Semitism in the official record, although it was not unknown in Toronto in general.[3] *Masada* participants speculated that its fate was more likely affected by a change of artistic directors, after which it was not repeated. In the year after the premiere, there were plans by the Royal Winnipeg Ballet to film a version of the ballet on location in Israel, but that fell apart when the National Ballet of Canada withdrew any help with costumes or staging, citing too great a draw on its resources and other priorities.[4] Soon after *Masada*, David Allan had left his artistic home at the National Ballet to become a freelance choreographer.

For *Masada,* Allan chose to portray the last 24 hours of the doomed Jewish patriots, focusing on positive aspects of their besieged community. By having lovers say their last goodbyes, he had scope for traditional *pas de deux* (dance for two); to establish the group's strong ties, he used round dances that critics deemed particularly effective, with the circle motif echoed in loving embraces (Neufeld, 128). The sequential suicides by strangulation provided graphic moments that upset some audience members, according to all reviewers. These violent actions were deemed too melodramatic by a few (Smith 1987, Penfield 1987); for others, they were never "melodramatic or cloying" but instead, "dignified, even in the face of death" (Kelly 1987), making the ballet "a powerful work that at times rises to peaks of great vitality and majesty" (Currie 1987). Allan's choice of music, the emotion-filled *Symphonic Dances*, Opus 45, by Rachmaninov, seemed suitable to some reviewers (Littler, May 4, 1987; Neufeld 1987; Rasky 1987), while others thought an original score would have served the ballet better (Kelly 1987, Kardonne 1987). E.K. Ayotte's multi-level set evoked "the dusty but vibrant colors of a desert sunset" (Currie 1987), which were disturbed by lighting designer Robert Thompson's projections suggesting the fiery projectiles launched by the Romans (Rasky 1987).

Dance historian James Neufeld, writing in an academic publication a few months after seeing the ballet, noted that "The hothouse atmosphere surrounding *Masada*'s premiere made a balanced critical assessment at the time difficult," referring to company leadership changes and a previous choreographer's sudden departure (Neufeld, 127). Neufeld pronounces any of the ballet's weaknesses "respectable ones" and called it "the product of a strong and musical imagination" (p.127) that had "the virtues of simplicity and sincerity" (p. 128). Along with all reviewers, Neufeld praised specific performances, but also emphasized Allan's role in casting with "a keen eye for the individual characteristics of company members" (p. 128). For Neufeld, a longtime historian of the company, Allan had justified artistic director Erik Bruhn's faith in assigning him a major commission with *Masada* (p.127).

A Choreographer's Point of View

Still dancing while he developed as a choreographer at the National Ballet of Canada, David Allan had made twelve ballets before taking on *Masada*, at the age of 30. This was his first main- stage commission (from then-artistic director Erik Bruhn) and Allan's only ballet with Jewish subject matter, inspired by his grandparents' photos and brochures from their trip to Israel. He does not recall any objection or controversy over the topic, only that dancers were thrilled to be in a new creation with such dramatic subject matter. Allan and most of the dancers interviewed do remember an emphasis on universality in pre-performance lectures by company archivist Assis Carreiro. "She would say, 'It's not a Jewish ballet, they just happened to be Jewish'," Allan says. "So she could emphasize that it was about what these people went through in the face of indomitable odds." In interviews at the time, Allan said something similar, that "It's a ballet that speaks foremost about the human race" (Kelly, C9), but he also emphasized the particular subject matter when he said, "To me *Masada* is a great universal celebration about the Jewish spirit and that is what has attracted me" (Littler, April 26, 1987, D3). In other words, Allan did not object to the archivist saying "It's not a Jewish ballet," although it surely was.

The idea of the subject matter being both universal and specifically Jewish reflects Allan's thinking about his own identity, in that he sees being Jewish and being a ballet-world citizen as both important aspects of who he is. Growing up St. Louis, Missouri, being Jewish gave him "a great sense of uniqueness and pride." Being observant held importance mainly because of strong relationships with his grandparents, for whom Friday night Sabbath dinners and synagogue attendance mattered. Another revered relative was his great-grandfather, a Holocaust survivor who had started a new life in the U.S. after the war. At Allan's *bar mitzvah*, his great-grandfather praised his recital of his Torah portion, then asked, "But what was all that dancing about?!" (Allan had run through a few simple *barre* movements at the podium to calm his nerves).

After moving to Toronto to enter the National Ballet School at 14, Allan's ballet practice started to replace Jewish rituals, especially after the deaths of his grandparents. But, "it all came roaring back

when I decided to do *Masada*," he remembers. "I was going to tell a story that happened to be Jewish, and that was something I could truly feel inside my soul and in my blood." Except for *Masada* memories, Allan had trouble at first thinking of his time in the ballet world in terms of being Jewish, in particular. Gradually, he warmed to the topic as he described close company friendships with about seven or eight other Jewish dancers or staff, even though religious observance and cultural practices varied. He says everyone knew him as "a friendly little Jewish guy" who brought *kugel* to company Christmas parties, happy to be who he was and reflect his roots. *Masada* allowed him to fuse together his artistic and Jewish identities in a way he hadn't even known was missing. In terms of casting the ballet, he doesn't recall thinking of who was Jewish--"The main thing was whether they were right for the ballet." Looking back, he sees that he probably cast all the Jewish dancers in the company (three, plus Allan, at the time).[5]

Did it Matter if You Were Jewish in the Ballet World? Dancers Remember

The seven *Masada* cast members interviewed recall the excitement of being cast in a new creation, appreciating the way it allowed them to expand their range with a talented and popular choreographer who was still dancing with the company. For leading ballerina Veronica Tennant, Allan's musicality and depiction of humanity had the emotional power of *Romeo and Juliet*, which she was renowned for dancing at the time. Artistically, *Masada* felt like part of a revolution in that era for all of them, especially after endless tours of *Sleeping Beauty* in the 1970s, when the National Ballet of Canada became more prominent than before for touring with Rudolf Nureyev's production. For *Masada*, Tennant recalls, "You threw yourself into it," with every rehearsal energized, every performance being danced as if it were the last. Tennant thinks *Masada* could be performed by today's dancers "with even more guts and power," and that it wouldn't be so radical or surprising but still "very human" and "a very contemporary ballet."

Asked about *Masada*'s relationship to Jewishness, Tennant did not feel "comfortable" associating *Masada* with "any religious aspect," preferring to focus on Allan's talent and accomplishments - it was the dance that mattered, and ballets were about all sorts of subjects. On the other hand, fellow non-Jewish cast members Tony Randazzo and Stephen Legate recall feeling that *Masada* had a special Jewish resonance that was worthy of respect because they could feel Allan's personal investment in his heritage. Legate, the son of a Baptist minister, actually knew about the story beforehand and thinks the military aspect of the Romans building the ramp and patriots fighting back would have interested him as a young man. Like Legate, Randazzo thought of the ballet as both an artistic challenge and one that "had to be done right" to honor the people he felt he understood better because of Allan's connection. These dancers had no experience with anti-Semitism, nor did they suspect any in the ballet world. It turned out that other dancers had had different experiences.

For the three Jewish cast members of *Masada* I interviewed, the ballet's Jewish theme had special importance. They had crossed themselves or knelt before Catholic crosses in ballets like *Coppélia, Giselle,* or *Romeo and Juliet*, and understood that Christian details were common in classical ballet. "But this was *our* history, and that kind of thing never happened," said Nina Goldman. "For the first time, it felt like we belonged." Julia Adam thinks she might have been the only dancer in the cast who had visited the Masada site in Israel. Tourists were able to visit because the famed archeologist Yigal Yadin had conducted an expedition there to prove that Masada was not a legend. Though the first excavation predated the premiere of the ballet by 24 years, there was still much excitement about his discoveries. Julia Adam found it "exhilarating to convey a Jewish story" on the ballet stage. At the end of *Masada*, she recalls feeling very emotional as she lay "dead" on the stage: "I felt like I was doing something real, not *Swan Lake* or *La Sylphide* - they were okay, but this was a real story that came from my ancestors."

Wanting and needing to see their own cultural background onstage, the Jewish dancers had not expected it to happen, having assimilated to the world of professional ballet where they were always in the minority. The company was gracious about giving Jewish holidays "off," they reported, unless they conflicted with key rehearsals or performances. And although colleagues did not always seem to understand the holidays' importance, the atmosphere was generally one of eclectic acceptance. But training at the company's associated school was a different matter. The most dramatically negative story came from Donna Rubin, who, as a student of the company's associated school, was the target of anti-Semitic taunts in the late '70s and early '80s. They came mainly (and perhaps only - she doesn't recall) from a couple who ran the residence where ballet students lived. "When no one else was around," she says, "they would say things to me - the usual negative Jewish stereotypes," she remembers, "and many times, I'd be blamed for something I didn't do." Rubin had come to the School of the National Ballet from her native Montreal and didn't dare tell her parents about the harassment, for fear they would make her leave the school.

Rubin felt miserable but persevered, always wondering whether decisions about her talent resulted from bias, having heard rumors that anti-Semitism existed among her ballet teachers. Being singled out and insulted for being Jewish at a young age tapped into her own insecurities about being a "good enough" dancer, though she became braver about later decisions in her successful career. Not offered a place in the company through teacher recommendation, a usual way to transfer from the school to the company, she left for New York City, then returned to Toronto to train as a ballet teacher. Regaining her confidence, she took the initiative to win an apprentice spot in the company (granted by Bruhn), then was promoted to the corps de ballet. "It was only ever about your weight," an important teacher who did not support her apprenticeship later said, almost apologizing. But Rubin noted that other young dancers with fluctuating weight problems received encouragement and advice, whereas she received constant criticism.

Fellow Jewish dancer Julia Adam thinks she herself escaped anti-Semitic remarks as a student because her "blond Scottish looks" meant she was not identified as Jewish by the people Rubin encountered. Nina Goldman, the third Jewish cast member in *Masada*, had not attended the school but trained in New York City, where

she was often the only Jewish girl in advanced ballet classes. All three noted a lack of Jewish ballerina role models as they trained. Though there were in fact a few prominent Jewish ballerinas at the New York City Ballet (such as Melissa Hayden and Allegra Kent), their Jewishness was not known to the aspiring dancers at the time. Nor was the fact that the founding director of the National Ballet of Canada was Jewish. Celia Franca, the towering figure at the ballet school and artistic director of the company from 1951 to 1976, had retired over a decade before *Masada* was commissioned. The *Masada* dancers knew her from her annual staging of her version of *The Nutcracker*. Franca's relationship to being Jewish is worth a small detour into a previous era before *Masada* emerged.

A Different Era: The Down-low Jewish Identity of Celia Franca

If you consider the isolation that the three Jewish cast members of *Masada* felt, to varying degrees, during their ballet training, you might guess that having a Jewish ballerina role model close by could have helped them. Celia Franca was not that role model, though she could have been. It's just that few people knew she was Jewish.[6] In fact, her *New York Times* obituary did not mention it (Anderson 2007); and her biographer faced disbelief and had to explain why she was discussing her book at a Jewish Book Fair (Bishop-Gwyn 2018). From most accounts of anyone in the dance world, Franca was a formidable, ambitious force, admired for her "resilience and toughness" (Bishop-Gwyn 2012). Not in any way approachable, she was often feared, even by mature dancers, much less students. Allan never suspected he had anything but ballet in common with her. "All I saw is, 'You're British, and you're scaring the shit out of me," he says now, with both humor and sincerity.

Franca's relationship to her Jewish identity vacillated over the years. The daughter of Polish Jewish immigrants, raised in the East End of London, Celia Franks changed her name as she started to dance professionally with the company that would become Britain's Royal Ballet. Taking a professional name for the stage was not an unusual practice, and it also seems an understandable move with the threat of German invasion hanging over London during the war years. She may certainly have faced anti-Semitism in her native Britain, especially given ballet director Ninette de Valois's preference for casting "nice, middle-class white-Anglo-Saxon Protestant girls" (Bishop-Gwyn 2012). But during the difficult years of wartime shortages, Franca had the opportunity to dance many leading roles before she took an invitation to come to Toronto and help found the National Ballet of Canada in 1951. There, she continued to dance in the early years, then focused on choreographing, fundraising, overseeing the school, and promoting the company tirelessly. Bishop-Gwyn, in conversations after her book came out, speculated that Franca downplayed her Jewish identity in Toronto as she courted wealthy patrons who almost surely held anti-Semitic views (Howe 2012; Bishop-Gwyn 2018).

Franca's liaisons with Jewish organizations waned over the years, as noted throughout Bishop-Gwyn's biography. At the age of nine, Franca had received a grant from the Jewish Education Aid Society to help her study dance; and, as a cultural leader in Toronto, she accepted awards from Jewish organizations. Yet by the mid-1970s, she refused to be included in a book about Jews in Canada by saying that she didn't practice "the Jewish or any other religion," and that her husband was not Jewish, and his relatives might be upset by her being mentioned in the book. She was much more likely to emphasize her cockney identity, playfully using rhyming slang with British choreographer Antony Tudor. On the other hand, Franca arrived in Canada with "an intimidating, near-perfect, posh accent" that might have been carefully cultivated, or at least was proclaimed "phony" by Franca's longtime colleague and nemesis Betty Oliphant (Bishop Gwyn 2012). Certainly, in 1940s Britain, Franca might have learned that class-consciousness and prejudice could affect her dancing career.

For whatever personal or strategic reasons, once Franca faced anti-Semitism in Toronto, said Bishop-Gwyn at a writers' festival discussion, she "decided to turn away from Judaism completely and certainly did feel like an outsider because of her 'dark, sultry, Eastern atmosphere'" (qtd. in Howe 2012). What Celia Franca thought of *Masada* is not on record, though she most likely saw it. Would she have allowed herself some feeling of "special resonance", publicly, if she had been born into a slightly more liberated ballet atmosphere, long after her experiences in wartime Britain? Her example makes clear that individual experiences, as well as the prevailing ethos of the times, affects the way Jewish identities are negotiated when it comes to the ballet world.

Masada's Legacy of Inspiration

For Jewish dancers in the 1980s - and perhaps for Jewish audience members - representation was important, so they celebrated the appearance on the ballet stage of a work based on their history. Its impact, however, did not only reach those who could relate to it through shared heritage. For cast member Ronda Nychka, who was raised Anglican and attended the National Ballet school from the age of 9, it felt at first like just another opportunity to progress from her position in the corps. Then, something else happened. "Being in *Masada* truly changed the course of my life," she says. "It was a turning point for me, awakening spiritual longings that took me on a journey that continues today." She recalls that rehearsals started to sharpen her focus because of their intensity at a time when she felt something was missing in her dancing. "There was a gap, from being onstage to everything else in life," she says. "Onstage, the world would sometimes disintegrate, go away. But that gap, that empty space, started to be filled." *Masada*'s story of sacrifice for a greater cause made her feel that, although dance can be a fleeting experience, she got "a glimpse of eternity that stayed with me."

After *Masada,* Nychka left Canada to performing in Berlin and then became a principal dancer with the Maurice Béjart company in Switzerland. But she never forgot *Masada*, making a point to see the site while on tour in Israel. When she left performing, she studied Jewish theology at divinity school, eventually becoming ordained in the Anglican church and working with vulnerable urban populations. Having stayed active as a ballet master, teacher, and choreographer, she now is considering a focus on dance as therapy. She has kept in touch with Allan, thanking him for the powerful awakening to spiritual connections through embodying one of the Masada residents during their fateful last hours. For Nychka, the specifically Jewish story opened a portal for sensing a wider universe and scope for her spiritual life.

In the memories of the participants and in the archive, then, *Masada* was both specifically important, for personal reasons, and "just another ballet," whether described as admirable, flawed, glorious, or history-making. For the researcher, it became a rich line of inquiry to bring out stories and attitudes about being Jewish in the ballet world, because even today, it's a topic that is not much discussed in the North American context, or maybe beyond. My major question became, "What difference did it make, to be Jewish or bring Jewish themes to the ballet world?" "No difference," non-Jews said quickly, emphasizing the universal nature of art and perhaps quick to counter any notion of prejudice. "Big difference," said Jewish dancers who longed to connect their ballet and their Jewish identities, recognizing that representation matters.

Later, Adam choreographed her own Jewish-themed ballets for Houston Ballet and Ballet Memphis, adding to the usual topics that ballet tends to revolve around. For Nychka, *Masada* inspired her dive into theology, starting with Jewish studies. For other cast members, and potentially for audience members, *Masada* added to their knowledge of Jewish history. And for Allan, it still represents the one time he could bring a resonant part of his heritage and identity to the fore, in his chosen realm of ballet.

Notes

[1] "Ballet Notes" were a convention of the National Ballet of Canada, distributed to press, assembled in this case by Assis Carreiro, the archivist and education coordinator at the time. Her summary of Masada history came from an assortment of sources available at the time. A map of Israel and a sketch of the Masada plateau as imagined before the siege were included. These notes are now available in the National Ballet of Canada archives.

[2] Except for my interview with choreographer David Allan, all interviews were conducted by telephone, with the following *Masada* cast members, to whom I am grateful for their time and memories: Julia Adam, Nina Goldman, Stephen Legate, Ronda Nychka, Tony Randazzo, Donna Rubin, and Veronica Tennant. All conversations took place in August and September of 2018, except that Allan (a former colleague from University of California, Irvine) and I spoke about the ballet on many occasions, in person and by email, after our first formal interview in December 2017.

[3] In his comprehensive overview of anti-Semitism in Canada, Ira Robinson states that in the 1950s (when the National Ballet of Canada was founded), "...anti-Semitism remained a recognizable feature of Canadian Jewish life" (113). Over many chapters, Robinson traces the diminishing overt evidence of anti-Semitism, still noting its presence in Canada, in many ways over time.

[4] A letter to this effect can be found in the archival folder of *Masada* found in the archives of the National Ballet of Canada. Erik Bruhn had died a year before the ballet's premiere (April 1, 1986), and was replaced as artistic director by Valerie Wilder and Lynn Wallis (1986-89). In 1989, Reid Anderson took over, followed in 1996 by present artistic director Karen Kain.

[5] Donna Rubin and Nina Goldman remembered that there "were a lot of Jewish dancers" in the National Ballet of Canada, varying from four to six during the time they were there. This contrasted with what they knew from professional training classes and other major ballet companies, where they knew no Jews, or at most, one or two. Julia Adam believed that artistic director Erik Bruhn's era was one of "more diversity," because he seemed "so worldly. He was like a breath of fresh air. You could feel he was a risk-taker - who else would do David's ballet on Masada? After Bruhn left, a lot of others left, too. We didn't feel the company would be like that anymore."

[6] In my eight interviews, as well as in many conversations with other members of the ballet community in Toronto, I have found that few people had an inkling that Franca was Jewish before the 2012 biography by Carol Bishop-Gwyn, throughout which there is evidence of Franca's mercurial relationship to her Jewish identity. Whether or not someone is Jewish may seem incidental to ballet world citizens, where dance dominates consciousness. Yet it still seems odd that Franca's dancers and others were unaware of that aspect of a well-known figure in Canadian dance history.

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