



*Amphi* (1953/2020) by Omer Krieger

# AMPHI (1953/2020)

## Gaby Aldor

Only once before has an audience seen Noa Eshkol's commissioned choreographic performance in memory of the Pesach Warsaw Ghetto Uprising of 1943. The Eshkol premiere took place a decade after the uprising at Kibbutz Lohamei HaGhettaot (Ghetto Fighters), a kibbutz founded by survivors, many of whom had fought against the Nazis. The first and most comprehensive revival yet of this work with 40 dancers occurred at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, September 2018, as part of Yael's Bartana-commissioned public

performance – *Bury Our Weapons, Not Our Bodies!* (reconstructed by Ruth Sela and Mor Bashan). Another revival of this work occurred at the Amphitheatre at the Ghetto Fighters' Museum, 1 July 2020.<sup>1</sup> That performance is covered below by our esteemed dance writer Gaby Aldor.

Ruth Eshel, editor of *Dance Today*.

*Amphi*: Concept, direction, additional choreography by Omer Krieger. Producer: Yael Cohen. Dancers: Tamar Even-Chen, Dror Birger, Hila Berkman, Sheer Sivan, Nunzia Piccialo, Mishel Shalha. Music: Shushan. Costume designer: Neta Dror. Dramaturgy: Florian Malzmacher (Berlin). The act of recreating Eshkol's dance movements from 1953 was done by Ruti Sela and Mor Bashan. All the movement information gathered from the film was transcribed by Ruth Sela, using Eshkol-Wachman

Movement Notation (EWMN). Sunset show for the Ghetto Fighters' House Amphitheatre, by architect Shmuel Bickels.

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### Introduction

A rare filmed testimony of one of the earliest of Noa Eshkol's movement compositions is found at the Noa Eshkol Archive in Holon, Israel. The film is a collage depicting the ceremony that took place in 1953 at Kibbutz Lohamei Hagetaot, in memory of the Holocaust of European Jews, integrating dance and movement pieces and rehearsals, it was composed and directed by Noa Eshkol.

With the material accompanying the film there are handwritten notes by Eshkol, describing in Hebrew every movement and, at its side, the rhythm written in musical notes. From the filmed fragments and the written notes emerges a partial picture of the whole event, and only parts of the dances can be closely restored. This is a unique and unusual work in relation to Eshkol's first dances as well as, in a basic aspect, her whole opus.

In the case of this work, the plan for the dancers--their relations, order of appearance, and placement on the different stages--is accepted by the dance world, and regarded by Eshkol, as choreography. Although from the outset of her career, she did not consider herself as a choreographer but rather as a composer of dances. Unlike this choreographic work for 40 dancers, which was made for a group she worked with one time only, she ordinarily made dances for the group she founded--The Chamber Dance Group, an ensemble of two to five dancers. As in chamber music, there are no soloists in her Chamber Dance Group; her compositions are equally shared by the dancers.

In Israel, dances in the genre of the memorial ceremony, as well as dances embedded in holiday celebrations and other ceremonies, originated almost exclusively from the German "Expressionist Dance" (*Ausdruckstanz*), founded in Germany before World War I by Rudolf von Laban and Mary Wigman. Yet, from her own earliest works, Eshkol rejected and deplored von Laban's basic

concept of dance, which focuses on movement as a means of emotional expression. She described it as "simplistic symbolism of the plot, naïve expressionism of movements and demonstrated dramatization of expression." In Eshkol's view, the prevalent inclination in the dance world to prefer certain movement manners because they entail certain content or dictates, the way of observation and reaction, flattens their affect. These affinities, whether deliberate or intuitively inspired, are not definite and cannot be defined verbally.

In accordance with this view, Eshkol's dances are free of non-movement elements, such as musical accompaniment, costumes, lights, and scenery. They don't carry a dramatic message and are based only on the order of movement materials, organized in sequences and structures.

Eshkol looked for a tool of composition that would open a scope and range as wide as possible for new and uncharted movement sequences. This quest resulted in her creation, together with architect Avraham Wachman, of an elaborate notation system: The Eshkol-Wachman Movement Notation (EWMN). Using this notation, Eshkol developed innovative procedures of composition, which distinguish her dances in the context of the dance world.

Owing to the lack of a visual record and the fact that Eshkol only noted the movement content verbally, there is no way of knowing whether and to what extent she used her notation in composing this work. Yet, it seems that despite the grave loaded context of the ceremony in which her dances are integrated here, she succeeded in avoiding the naïve expressionism of movements and demonstrative dramatization of the context.

Michal Shoshani studied and practiced movement, movement notation, and research on movement notations and dance with Noa Eshkol, in Holon. She was awarded a master's in Dance Research

from the University of Surrey, in England, in 1995; her specializations were history, anthropology, and analysis of dance. Until 2007, she taught these subjects, together with those of dance, Eshkol-Wachman Movement Notation, and other movement and dance notations, as a member of the Dance faculty of the Academy of Music and Dance in Jerusalem. Currently, she serves as head of the Movement Notation Archive of the Noa Eshkol Foundation of Movement Notation.



*Amphi* 1953 by Noa Eshkol

אמפי 1953 תחת נועה אשכול

### *Amphi* (1953/2020)

The amphitheater is empty. It is built on the slope of hills at the foot of the museum, and its emptiness emphasizes the beauty of the locale. It is dusk: the night slowly ascends as clouds float by. Silence falls on the surrounding fields. Museumgoers and staff have already returned home. Slowly, one by one, guests are coming through the entrance of the museum to the amphitheater. They are loyal Noa Eshkol followers who had been close to the dance notation pioneer over the years. (Eshkol



was born in 1924 and died in 2007). Those reverently walking into the amphitheater include dancers and teachers of notation who had accompanied Eshkol on her untried journey. Students, too, are joining the audience. Perhaps they have come from kibbutzim, or from the Academy of Dance and Music in Jerusalem or the Seminar HaKibbutzim College of Education in Tel Aviv, the two institutions where the Eshkol-Wachman notation and theories have been curriculum mainstays through the years. Eshkol's enthusiasts would not miss such a rare opportunity to see her choreography. It had been forgotten for so many years that even the loyal Eshkol Dance Group had not remembered its existence.

There are tempting treats on the table awaiting the guests: watermelon slices and butter cookies with an additional offering of wine. The soft breeze seems to stroke us all; longtime friends are happy to meet once again. But it is a meeting with restrictions in place dictated by the Coronavirus.

A hand of one of the dancers reaches forward and leads the head down as the dancer crouches; the pelvis follows and falls. Then the torso lifts until the dancer is led by one hand into standing. The hand returns to its forward position. The dancers move in unison, running towards the fields and retreating far off into the distance. They wait—it is not clear that the music contributes to their vigor, surely not rhythmically because the rhythm does not match the movement.

Perhaps the change to piano has itself been a kind of signal, for they completely disappear, only to reappear on the edges of the amphitheater steps. They spread out on the stage and regroup in a line going back and forth, from one side to another, shifting their weight and also revolving in quarter turns. Their right hands softly slide to their chests and rest on their hearts.

In one of the photographs taken at the original performance in 1953, now housed in the museum archives, we see a group in a cramped, tight circle, looking down. Only one has his or her head



*Amphi (1953/2020)* by Omer Krieger. The Ghetto Fighter's museum is in the background

There is such excitement in the air to see this revival. Five dancers enter onto the stone stage. Expectation, too, is present: that we will again see what are the very foundation stones of Eshkol's work. On the one hand, there is her simplicity and, on the other, there is Eshkol's insistence, even a stubbornness, about the founding principles governing rhythm, time and space.

The five, dressed in pink tops and pants, walk back and forth to an accompaniment of percussive knocking sounds. The dancers then stand still. A usual dance audience would have already started protesting and whistling with impatience. The dancers in the front shift their weight from one foot to the other. The sunset overhead is streaked in pink clouds. The dancers bend down but their heads arch back, their chins lifting. A piano is heard in the background.

held high, gazing upward. The tension between the solo dancer and the group never abated. In the small group we see now in the amphitheater, however, this opposition is missing.

The pink costuming stands out against the natural background of the green and mottled yellow fields and the ancient stones marked by a patina of time. The intensity of the sunset increases with its slow-moving rose-colored clouds. Suddenly, as if an alarm sounds, the dancers move away from each other and spread widely in all directions, back to the fields. Our eye hunts for them beyond the amphitheater and we find them suddenly reappearing on the steps with their backs to us. It is as if they will disappear momentarily once again.

The protagonists of this work are absence and expectation. We seem to know how to fill in what is missing on our own. The absence and void live in us as part of our history, vacillating between annihilation and survival. These are the things that are impossible to dance or even to write about in poetry. We can approximate it by accompanying one who signifies continuity, even as that person approaches us and then retreats, or comes and goes.

Only one movement—drawn in a circle from the chest, into the air overhead, and back—signifies a kind of joy that there will be no end. The circular movement embodies the whole plot of the dance—including both change and consistency.

But one figure is moving frantically from one side of the amphitheater to the other: the hyperactive photographer, trying to capture everything that is happening on the stage.

The original pageant was performed close to the Roman aqueducts built in the Land of Israel when it was ruled by Rome. Only the structure remains. One stage light illuminates two flags under the tall vaults of the aqueduct, giving them a pinkish cast even though no one is there, emphasizing the eeriness of witnessing absence and expectation.

The kibbutz organized the original memorial rite for Yom HaShoah (or the annual Memorial Day to the Holocaust). Noa Eshkol was appointed creator of the pageant, along with the artist Chaim Guri, who wrote the text, which was sung and also read by both a female and a male narrator. The memorial—presented as a pageant or “Masekhet,” a form uniting several performance elements, which was favored by the kibbutzim—was held outdoors.

The original creator of this kind of genre was Rudolf von Laban, one of the founders of *Ausdruckstanz* or European Expressive dance. He worked first in Ascona, Switzerland, at an artist



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Suddenly, the music changes to a Middle Eastern sound and the group returns to a kind of rhythmic Hora, including jumps. The dance continues, and then the dancers spread apart and disappear one after the other.

For help in reconstructing this section, Naomi Polani, from the 1953 cast, was a wonderful resource. She remembered all the steps that were in the original Hora. All the complex details of rhythm and suspension she recalled made this section into a gem of a small masterpiece. It was indeed quite a contrast to the somber pageant. What is left is a void, the dancers' bodies pressing into the space, as if to make an imprint on something that is essentially empty.

cooperative, where he began his experiments in improvisation, nudity, vegetarianism, mystic practice, and the investing of lay people as well as trained dancers with a way to move together. Then he worked in Germany and eventually fled the Nazis to England. The idea of The Movement Choir grew out of his first collaborations in Ascona. Mary Wigman was von Laban's student there, and his collaborator, and she later became a major choreographic influence in her own right. She, too, inspired Movement Choirs. Until 1933 and the rise of the Nazi movement, she had many Jewish pupils and some performers in her company; several key dancers in the development of dance in Israel came from Wigman and other Expressionist modern dance studios in Europe. Von Laban's ideas for his Movement Choir were not about choreography but rather about the process of creating

and experiencing movement for professional, semi-professional, and lay people all to take part, most often outside, in nature.<sup>2</sup>

Eshkol's *Ausdruckstanz* or European Expressionist dance background began with her own dance studies between 1943 and 1945 in Tel Aviv, under Tille or Tehila Rössler: Eshkol was one of the *Ausdruckstanz* dance artists, trained in European Expressionism in Europe, who escaped to Israel. From 1946 to 1948, she studied in Manchester, England with Rudolf von Laban and Lisa Ullmann, at their Art of Movement Studio. Eshkol then studied in London at the Sigurd Leeder School of Modern Dance.<sup>3</sup> Her theories led her to look beyond the then- conventional ideas of cultural style and habits, which helped her to develop her own ideas about elemental movement. In 1954, she developed and coded the Eshkol-Wachman notation system for dance together with the architect Avraham Wachman.<sup>4</sup>

Noa Eshkol: "Eshkol-Wachman Movement Notation is a thinking tool that can teach people the art of observation, i.e. encourage them to aspire for the ultimate level of seeing. It does so by organizing the 'material' known as movements of the human body in relatively simple categories, thereby allowing us an insight (insight) into the complexity of this phenomenon as a whole."<sup>5</sup>

The Memorial Masekhet to the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising was created for the Kibbutz and was therefore a special event, rich and varied in its elements. It proved to be different from other kibbutz performances that the performers were acquainted with—there was no pathos and there were no dramatic peaks, except for the one moment of exuberance with the Hora, complex in its details, as if she had assembled a complex tapestry with the help of her loyal dancers.

The original performance had many participants, including youth dressed in khaki from other nearby kibbutzim. There is a short film that was shot at the time showing a few groupings and gatherings with the performers walking or stamping or suddenly bending down. The dancers included Avraham Wachman and Naomi Polani together with dozens of high school students under Eshkol's instruction, accompanied by music by Herbert Brün. The pathos was clear from the script by Chaim Guri. Following are excerpts from that script, which I researched for my lecture about the influence of the Bauhaus on dance that I gave at the University of Leipzig, Germany.

The narrator speaks. There are three sections.

"Ten years have passed since 1943":

1. Mourning the debris. It is a lamentation over the ruins.
2. The Voices of the Uprising.
3. Hymn of the Rebirth, Voices of the Uprising.

Instructions for the audience were to please stand to bless the spirit, the blood, and the fighting. The audience rises to its feet.

The female narrator announces the same sentence and asks that the audience stand up to sanctify the mourning and the catastrophe. The male narrator asks that the public bless their sons and daughters, who mourn the myriad people murdered by the Germans. It would be impossible to exhale all the screams that were ignored and never heard by the world. The public sits down through the remaining text, which is dramatic; the dancing, however, is formal, correct, and of simple movements. The original performance took place on raised platforms erected near and along the Roman aqueduct. At one point we see a sudden burst of small steps by those on a higher platform. Suddenly, the dancers plunge into a big downward step; then, rising on tiptoe, they repeat the fast steps, and then they are moving again into deep forward steps, lunging. Eshkol herself referred to this section as a folk dance.

We can dream what redemption was brought to those watching the original pageant as we relive Eshkol's work.

### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> See "The making of Amphi," <https://vimeo.com/506192843>.

<sup>2</sup> <https://exhibitions.lib.umd.edu/bartenieff/movement-choirs> Accessed July 2021 ,13.

<sup>3</sup> [https://second.wiki/wiki/noa\\_eshkol](https://second.wiki/wiki/noa_eshkol). Accessed July 2021 ,13.

<sup>4</sup> The system developed by the Israeli dance theorist Noa Eshkol and the architect Avraham Wachman was first published in English as *Movement Notation* in 1958. It took an anatomical and mathematical view of movement and initially had the aim of exploring the abstract shapes and designs of movement rather than recording existing dance patterns, which had been the primary goal of all previous systems. Numbers and a small selection of symbols are used to represent each possible physical motion. The full horizontal staff provides a space for each body segment. Eshkol's original aim was to create a method of recording her own choreography; however, the Movement Notation Society in Israel (the center for this system) subsequently published books on folk dance, ballet, and other art forms and also illustrated the uses of the system in recording the movements of animals.

<sup>5</sup> <http://noaeshkol.org/about-eshkol-wachman-movement-notation/>, accessed July 13,2021.

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**Gaby Aldor**, a dance critic, journalist, and writer, lectures extensively about Israeli dance in Israel and abroad. She has published in France, the US and Germany and is the writer of the entries on Israeli dance in the *Larousse Dictionnaire de la danse*. Aldor is a co-founder of the Arab-Hebrew Theater of Jaffa, where she also directs and acts. She authored the books *And how does a camel dance?*, about her family of dance pioneers in Israel (1925-1950), and *Naharin*, about conversations with and the dances of Ohad Naharin, choreographer of the Batsheva Dance Company.