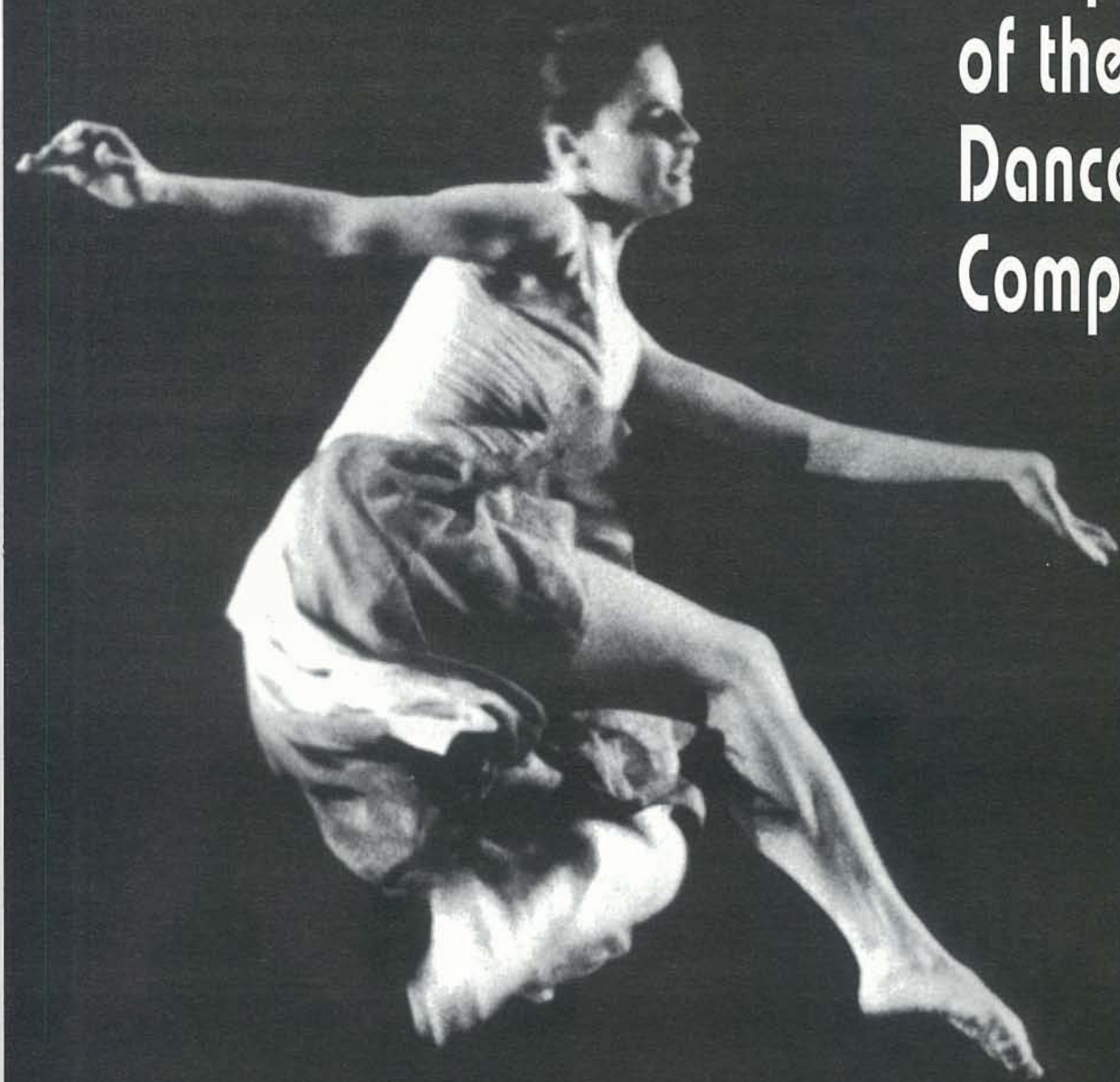


BEFORE THE BEGINNING

The prehistory
of the Kibbutz
Dance
Company



Founding and running a dance company is always an heroic act that requires some monomaniac visionary at the helm; but the difficulties encountered by the founders of the Kibbutz Dance Company were of unique magnitude. To understand how this very special company was born and what made it take the artistic path it has followed for the past 25 years, we have to delve into its prehistory and to investigate the development of artistic dance in the kibbutz movement since the 1940s and even earlier

B Y R U T H E S H E L

▶ Since 1920, when Baruch Agadati - the first Israeli modern dancer - began to perform and Margalit Ornstein opened her first dance and gymnastics studio, most of the country's dance activity was concentrated in Tel Aviv. In the newly founded kibbutzim the harsh physical conditions were not propitious for the development of the art of dance.

The idealistic kibbutzniks were fond of social dancing and often indulged in them all night even during times of poverty and malaria, but artistic dance was not a part of their daily life and toil, though such artists as Gertrud Kraus, when they came on tour, performed in remote kibbutzim. The kibbutz audience was a culture loving one and the artists who performed for it held the kibbutzniks in high esteem as discerning and enthusiastic spectators. However, when it came to artists who were kibbutz members it was a different story altogether. There was resistance to allowing working hours to be devoted to something as "nonproductive" as dance. Lea Bergstein, a founding member of kibbutz Beit Alfa, who used to dance in the company of Gret Palucca, one of the leading modern dance companies in Germany during the 1920s: "When I arrived at Beit Alfa in 1925, I found a society quite unprepared to accept a professional dancer as such. I felt rather isolated. It soon dawned on me that if I wished to be accepted I had better work bloody hard at the jobs I was allotted, in the hope that my efforts would make them forgive me for being an artist" (Goren, 1983:27).

During the 1930s several well trained dancers arrived in Palestine, mainly refugees from Nazi Germany, the most important of which was Gertrud Kraus. They brought with them the Ausdrucksstanz (Dance of Expression), a modern dance style then often still called "German Dance", which emphasized contemporary subjects and individual expression. Some of the dancers who arrived were sent to kibbutzim, as many other immigrants in those days were. Else Dublon was directed to kibbutz Yagur where she soon realized that she was unable to combine the hard work in the fields or the kitchen with her artistic career and had to decide between kibbutz life and dance. She left Yagur to pursue her career in Tel Aviv and later in Jerusalem.

One who decided to stay on the kibbutz was the very first American modern dance artist to arrive in Palestine, Rachel Emmanuel. She was a student of one of Martha Graham's original dancers, Evelyn Sabin, and joined kibbutz Hatzor in 1939. Having decided to become a kibbutznik she began fighting for recognition of artistic dance by the kibbutz movement. "Why 'import' dancers from outside [in kibbutz parlance: from Tel Aviv or Haifa] instead of creating artistic dance ourselves?" - she said (Eshel 91:81). But it took her three years to convince the kibbutz to let her continue her studies with Gertrud Kraus in Tel Aviv. "The kibbutz gave me a year off work, but that was all. I did not get any further help, and to say the truth, there was nothing much to offer. It is hard to believe what sort of food and clothing we had" (Eshel 91:81).

*"ELEGY", 1969, CHOR.: YEHUDIT ARNON
REGIONAL DANCE GROUP*





"PICTURES FROM AN EXHIBITION", 1970

CHOR.: YEHUDIT ARNON

In kibbutz Nir David the seed of artistic modern dance was sown when Zilla Unger, a student at Yardena Cohen's studio in Haifa, began to teach movement and rhythmic to the kibbutz children.

The end of the Second World War brought several new dance artists to the kibbutzim. Yehudit Arnon and Shlomit Ratz came from Europe and Ada Levitt, Katya Delakova and Dina and Nachum Shachar arrived from the U.S.A. Though there were marked differences between European and American modern dance the newcomers found a common artistic language, as most of the American dancers had studied under and participated in the work of progressive, politically motivated "leftist" artists such as Anna Sokolow and the "Dance League".

In the aftermath of the War of Independence artistic dance was still not really accepted as a legitimate activity for kibbutz members. The few dance artists who did not give up their hope to continue to create dance were dispersed in different kibbutzim and therefore felt isolated and out of touch. Shlomit Ratz: "When I arrived at kibbutz Ein Hamifratz, soon after the war ended, I was shamed to tell the other members that I was a dancer. It wasn't pioneering enough... It took me several years even to tell my husband about my dancing" (Eshel 91:83).

However, in teachers' training courses in fields connected to dance and movement some real progress was made in the kibbutz movement in the early years after the establishment of the State of Israel. Three gymnastics teachers from Germany, Yehudit Binetter, Lotte Kristeller and Elli Fabian founded a course for gym teachers in the Kibbutz Teachers Seminar in Tel Aviv based on progressive principles and aiming to develop

The few dance artists who did not give up their hope to continue to create dance were dispersed in different kibbutzim and therefore felt isolated and out of touch

personal physical abilities, insight into the principles of human movement and creativity and self awareness rather than just athletic prowess. It took several more years for a specialized (two year) course for dance teachers to be established beside that for gymnastics (expanded in the 1960s to three years).

Even though it was then still impossible to be a kibbutz member and a professional dancer at the same time, it became practical to develop dance classes as a form of "education through movement" and to choreograph, as the demand for artistic expression in the kibbutz schools was growing. The integrative method of teaching at the kibbutz schools made inclusion of the

medium of dance in the curriculum acceptable. One important result of all this was the rich creative experience of the dance teachers as choreographers and stage directors.

If you were sent to study by the kibbutz, the kibbutz wished to see some concrete results after your graduation. Nira Ne'eman: "If you went and studied dance you were supposed to create dances. That was the proper way to serve the community". Noa Shapira: "One had the feeling one was expected to be some sort of 'kleizmer', obliged to provide a new dance for every wedding and bar mitzva" (Eshel 91:80).

As egalitarianism was a basic tenet of the kibbutz ethical code, the kibbutz choreographers were expected to involve everybody in their choreographies, regardless of talent. They had to find ways of concealing deficiencies and basing their dances on the available variety of people. Shlomit Ratz: "Art isn't democratic but in kibbutz performances everybody was expected to dance. The educational purpose took precedence over artistic considerations" (Eshel 91:86).

The creative aspect of artistic dance was also developing through the demand for staging of festive pageants to celebrate holidays and special kibbutz festivals such as anniversaries for example. Indeed, so strong was the creative urge that several dancers began to form amateur dance groups in their respective kibbutzim, and in 1952 some of these took part in a choreographers' competition in Tel Aviv, held under the auspices of Gertrud Kraus' "Israel

Ballet Theatre". Lea Bergstein brought her company from Ramat Jochanan, Rachel Emmanuel came with hers from Hatzor and Noa Rom brought the dancers of kibbutz Giv'at Brenner. The first prize went to Dina and Nachum Shachar from kibbutz Amir. An unsigned article in the **Film Weekly** of 10.1.1952 stated: "The performance of the kibbutz dance groups was perhaps the most encouraging phenomenon of the competition. One could observe the tremendous progress made in the art of dance and the important place it has gained in the life of the nation".

Also in 1952, Rachel Emmanuel founded the Dance Section of the Kibbutz Arzi Cultural Department. Later she was joined by Yehudit Arnon, Shlomit Ratz, Kitty Savir, Zilla Unger and Ada Levitt. The immediate task of the Dance Section was to try to deliver the dance artists in the kibbutzim from their isolation, to enhance their professional knowledge by organizing day meetings in town with guest teachers and, finally, to bring the kibbutz movement to recognize the importance of this art form for kibbutz life and allow members to practice it. Noa Shapira: "The kibbutz dancer was free of money worries but had to convince his kibbutz that what he did was constructive and important and that he was determined to enhance the art of dancing" (Eshel 91:90).

Towards the end of the 1950s a small group of committed kibbutz dance artists went on to create and to teach in the tradition of Ausdruckstanz. The veterans were joined by a group of younger dancers and teachers, belonging to another generation. The Dance Section organized weekly courses in Haifa and later in Tel Aviv too, in which about 20 dance teachers participated regularly. Among the faculty were Gertrud Kraus, Noa Eshkol, Yehudit Arnon, Naomi Bahat, Yizhar Yaron (music) and Gabriela Oren (a former student of Sigurd Leeder). American modern dance was taught by Rena Gluck and Nurit Cohen.

The grand priestess of these gatherings was Gertrud Kraus. As nearly all the participants often staged pageants in their kibbutzim, it became a tradition to discuss these performances and thrash out the problems that worried them. Noa Shapira: "We would create an étude, and the 'high priestess' Gertrud would analyze it, make critical remarks and advise us. It was great!" Shlomit Ratz: "There wasn't a premiere to which Gertrud was not invited. She had a keen eye and would tell us without beating about the bush this is o.k., this isn't, that's bullshit, this isn't true, that is fabulous" (Eshel 91:80).

Just as they began to feel they were no longer alone and could show some progress achieved in the sphere of dance education and choreography, the artistic climate in modern dance in Israel underwent a marked change. The visit of Martha Graham's company in the Holy Land, at the end



GA'ATON DANCE GROUP, PHOTO: MORDECAI ABRAHAMOV

DANCERS OF THE KCDE IN A BALLET CLASS WITH ARCHIPOVA GROSSMAN



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of its epochal world tour, was a climactic event for the local dancers and teachers. It was a sobering experience to compare themselves with the American dancers, both as regards technical ability and style. They suddenly realized that while in Israel the traditional Central European style still reigned supreme the world had turned towards American Graham-oriented modern dance. There began an exodus of dance students from the studios of the older teachers. Each young student wished to learn the gospel according to Martha Graham, and when the Batsheva dance company began to perform, under the artistic direction of Graham, in 1964,

that was the end of European modern dance in Israel.

The kibbutz dance teachers found it hard to accommodate to the new ways. The Graham technique required high technical skill, precise execution and strength which the kibbutzniks could not hope to achieve in a once a week course. The dancers in the big towns looked down upon them - clad in their denims and carrying their sandwiches to the studio.

Many of the kibbutz dance teachers, unable to compete with the new technical level, tried to

formulate a compromise - to use some external stylistic elements of the Graham technique combined with exercises gleaned from Noa Eshkol and Moshe Feldenkrais (two Israeli innovators who have since won international recognition). Yehudit Arnon: "I found it very hard to learn the Graham technique, not being a dancer myself. I had no choice but to invent a method that would be effective on stage in the given circumstances" (Eshel 91:86). Lea Bergstein: "When young dancers from Tel Aviv came to perform at my kibbutz and I spoke to them about Palucca [in whose company she used to dance], Laban or Mary Wigman, I found they had no inkling who these people were" (Interview with Eshel, 1988).

Many of the young kibbutz-born dancers preferred to study in the studios in town and left the kibbutz, and so the kibbutzim, unable to form a company of their own, came to supply such dance companies as Bat-Dor and Batsheva with dancers. No solution such as a move to town existed for the choreographers from the kibbutzim, as the professional companies would not employ anybody educated in the old Dance of Expression school. Nobody could then foresee that less than two decades later the Pina Bausch style "Tanztheater" (dance theatre) would again overturn the whole concept of stage dance.

During the 1950s several sporadic attempts were made to form small dance ensembles in the

kibbutzim, such as the group headed by the pantomime artist Willy (Ze'ev Lichtbaum). But the embryo Kibbutz Dance Company was the regional amateur dance group run by Yehudit Arnon at Ga'aton since 1959, a natural offshoot of the regional dance studio she headed. As early as 1955 she created dances with youngsters on her kibbutz on a "Youth Aliyah" programme. With them she staged a funny piece based on H.N. Bialik's poem "The Prince of Onion and the Duke of Garlick" and another using Prokofiev's "Peter and the Wolf". As she herself put it (in a programme in 1959): "Our

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group began when a number of members of kibbutz Ga'aton agreed to take regular dance classes after work - quite a strenuous task, but they enjoy what they do. Until now we just prepared performances for festivities held by our kibbutz. We had no intention of founding a

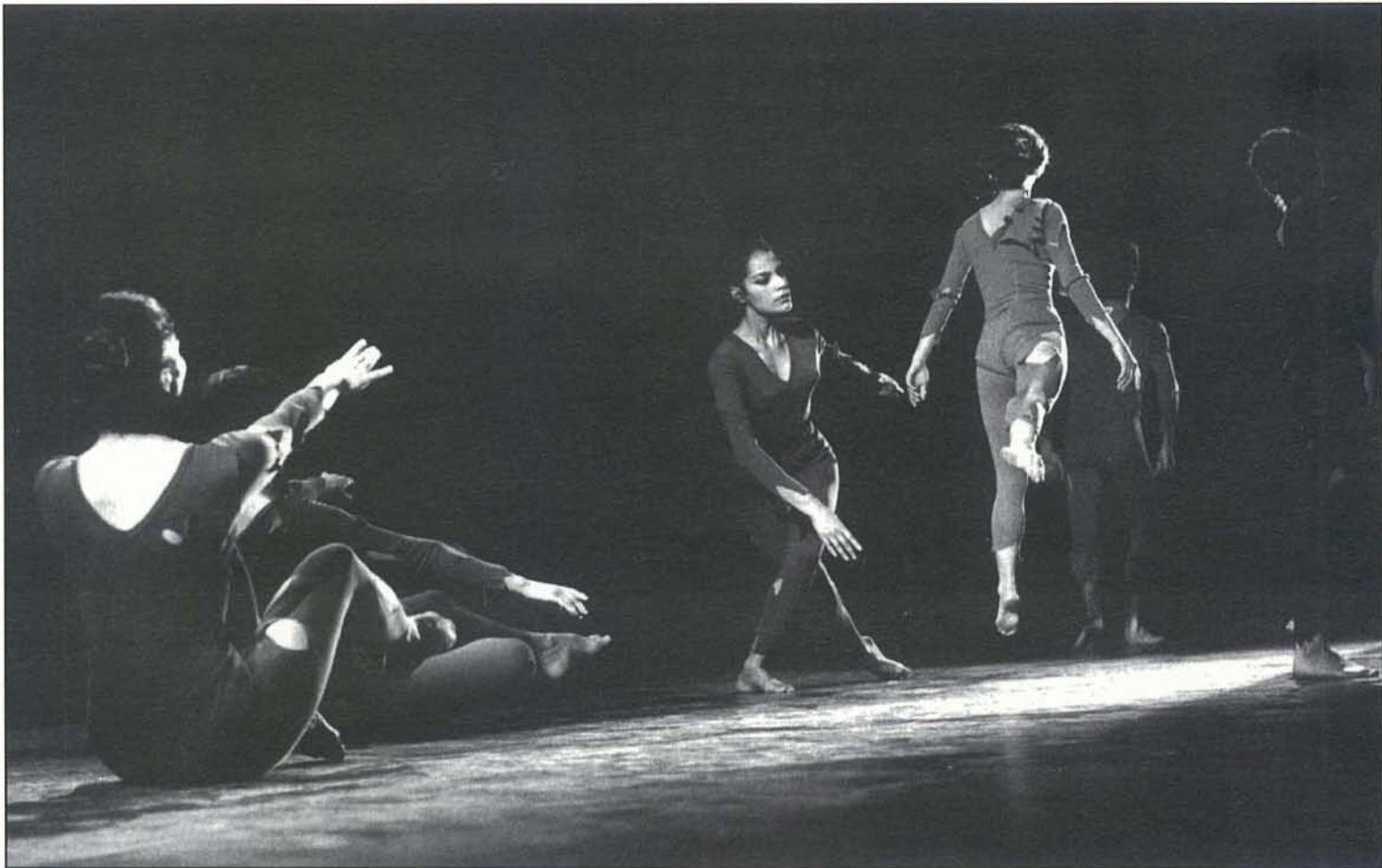
dance company, and we are still unable to offer a full evening's programme. We are constrained by the physical conditions we have to work in and hope the audience will bear with us".

In 1962 the Ga'aton Company won first prize at the first Israel Festival for Young Artists and in 1964 it was invited by the National Council for the Arts to perform in what was later to become "Bimat Hachoreograph" - a showcase for new creative talent in dance. The kibbutz cultural establishment regarded this as an important step forward. Gabriella Oren, at that time in charge of the Kibbutz Arzi Dance Section, wrote to Yehudit Arnon: "The time is ripe to show your work outside your home. You should appear on the stage together with others who work in much better conditions. I appreciate your courage" (Eshel 91:82). Four of the works performed at the show in Tel Aviv were choreographies by Yehudit Arnon.

Once it had gained recognition, following the recommendation of Gertrud Kraus, the National Council decided to grant financial help towards enabling the dancers in the company to rehearse one afternoon a week for ten months "as part of their work schedule on the kibbutz" and a full month every year for final rehearsals and public performances. This innovative proposal was submitted by Arnon to the Kibbutz Artzi secretariat, but was rejected by kibbutz officialdom, that objected to external financial funding for only one kibbutz. "We sweated and toiled and when finally we got recognition the functionaries said 'No!'. It was a blow" (Arnon in an interview with Eshel, 1988). The

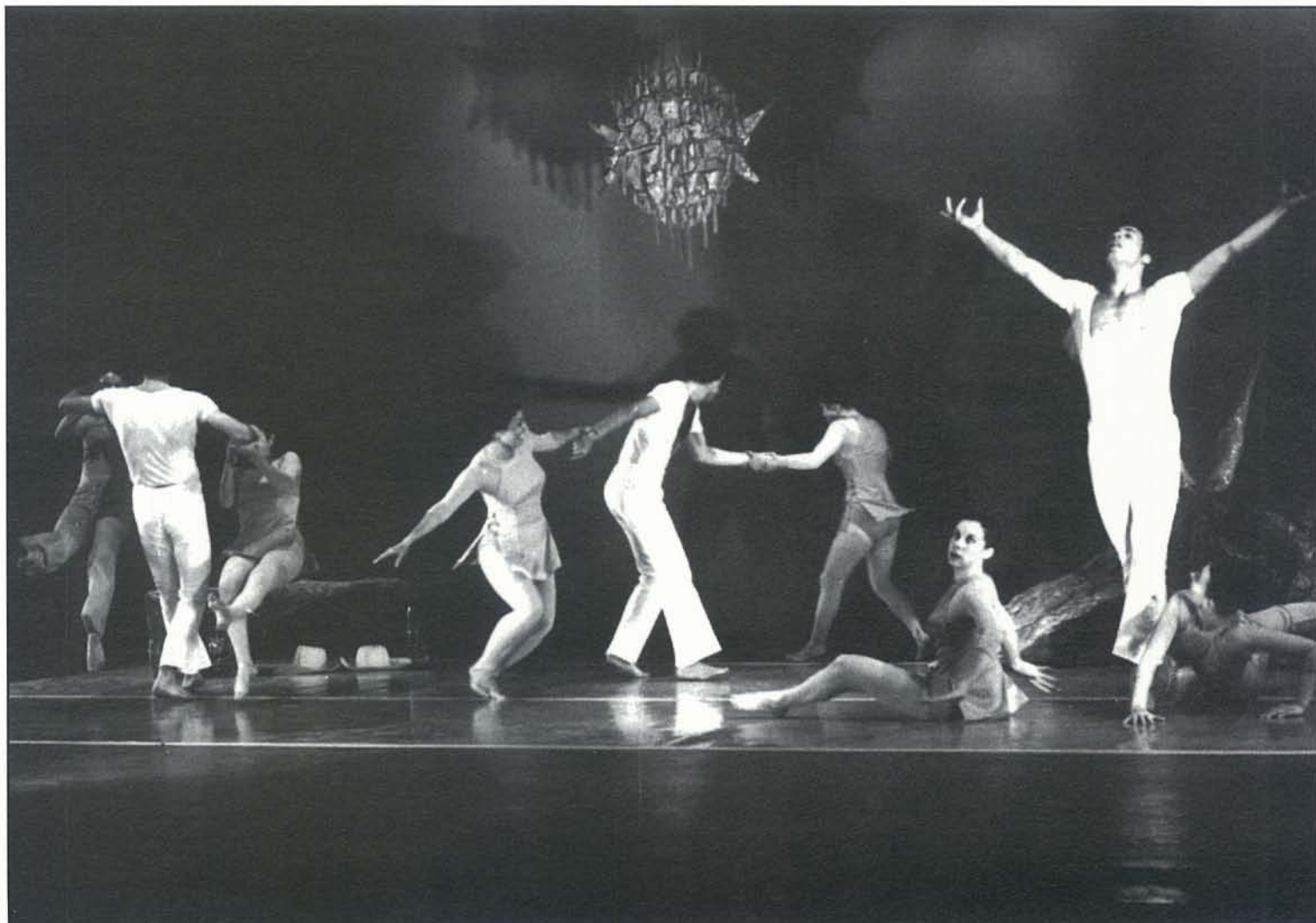
"WITCHES' SABBATH", 1970, CHOR.: OSHRA ELKAYAM
KIBBUTZ COMPANY





"ON THE WAY", 1970, CHOR.: HERMONA LINN
FROM THE FIRST PROGRAM OF THE KIBBUTZ COMPANY

"SUN, SEA AND SAND", 1972, CHOR.: HERMONA LINN
THE KIBBUTZ COMPANY



immediate result was that two of the group's best performers, Victoria Green and Rahamim Ron, left their respective kibbutzim and went to live in town. That was the year Batsheva company was founded.

The situation was bleak and it seemed futile to go on devoting so much time and energy to creating a kibbutz dance company. Luckily the head of the Regional Council of Ga'aton thought that a regional dance studio is important and with his help an old council building was turned into a studio in 1965, and the dancers who had not moved to town in the interim became the nucleus of a new regional dance company - the "Western Galilee Dance Group".

Until 1969 they used to meet three evenings a week after work to study and rehearse. Yehudit Arnon hoped "to build a company able to reflect the artistic values created here". Dance teachers from neighbouring kibbutzim were the regular instructors (Yehudit Arnon, Naomi Bahat, Nira Ne'eman) and in addition there were some guest teachers, among them Gertrud Kraus, Valentina Archipova-Grossmann Rahamim Ron, Ada Segal and the present writer. The company comprised 17 dancers and put up two programmes. Its first premiere took place in Naharia in October 1967 with works by Gabriella Oren, Hedda Oren and Yehudit Arnon. The second programme included choreographies by Yehudit Arnon, Hermona Linn, Naomi Bahat and Rachamim Ron. In 1969 the company presented a new work by Arnon to music by Mordechai Seter as part of the annual commemoration of the Holocaust. The last work the company prepared was by Linda Rabin, a dancer and choreographer from Canada.

The Western Galilee Company was the only one of its kind in the kibbutz movement. Yehudit Arnon told Bazalel Lev, the editor of a periodical published by the Kibbutz Artzi (6.9.1967): "During rehearsals I cry a lot but I am also often happy... I am good at working with people, but am the most disorganized person I know. I just do what's necessary, but never plan ahead... I learned to do everything with fierce tenacity because otherwise nothing will keep the company alive and dancing... unfortunately, we have no encouragement or help from the kibbutz movement. We feel totally 'unrecognized' by the kibbutz organization, though we have been performing for years".

Emulating the example of Ga'aton, several other regional dance studios were founded in many parts of the country and by 1970 there were already five such centres. A report of the Dance Section from 1968 lists 77 professional members, among them 58 dance teachers, all graduates of the Kibbutz Teachers Seminar in Tel Aviv and the Rubin Academy in Jerusalem.

Like the studios in the towns, the regional studios taught classical ballet, modern dance (mainly the Graham technique) and jazz based

on Alvin Ailey, but the kibbutz studios also taught choreography and encouraged creativity - aspects lacking in other dance schools. The traditional attitude of the Ausdurckstanz dance - of regarding creativity as an integral part of the dancer's art, seeing personal expression and the dancer's identification with the movement as crucial and never neglecting the content were kept alive in the regional kibbutz studios, even as they became obsolete in the schools in Haifa, Tel Aviv and Jerusalem.

In 1970 the kibbutz movement already had a theatre troupe, an orchestra and a choir, so "why not a dance company, to give artistic expression to what is special in our life?" The Dance Section of the kibbutz movement, led by Shlomit Ratz, sponsored a decision by all the components of the roof organization of the kibbutz movements providing for the foundation of a central dance company. Shlomit Ratz said in an interview: "About 85 percent of the dancers come from Kibbutz Arzi kibbutzim. The dancers have been meeting in Haifa once a week for nine months and then they had a month of intensive rehearsals. One may hope that after a year of preparations the company will start performing in kibbutzim. A committee to make artistic policy decisions was elected" (*Hashavua*, 21.11.1970). The members of the artistic management were Gertrud Kraus, David Raban (administrative and economical adviser), Rodda Reilinger (stage designer), Yirmiyahu Savir, Hermona Linn, Tirtza Shoham, Shlomit Ratz and Nira Ale. Micha Linn was appointed as administrator and general manager. "The dancers are being given technique classes by three teachers: Yehudit Arnon, Gabriella Oren and Tirtza Shoham". Members of the first company were the dancers Zichri Dagan, Nava Shenkar, Tamar Sulami, Shula Genosar, Hanka Poran, Sara Helman, Rachel Efraim, Shlomo Zahavi and Alex Rotem. Auditions took place in December 1969 with Kraus, Arnon and Nurit Cohen presiding. The dominant figures in the new company were Shlomit Ratz, Hermona and Micha Linn. Yehudit Arnon taught there and even encouraged her own dancers to go to the auditions, but she was sceptical about its chances of attaining a high professional standard. After all, she had three years of two weekly meetings with her regional company behind her, and she knew that the technical level of her dancers was far from professional.

Hedda Oren, one of the choreographers involved in the company's first programme: "The rehearsals took place in a large hall unsuited for dance. The floor was concrete and there were no barres. Our resources were so limited and the working conditions so poor they were causing us despair. We soon learned how hard the task is and that it's very difficult to persuade the kibbutz functionaries to agree to more intensive activity" (Interview by Eshel, 1996).

Micha Linn, the administrator: "To get the dancers away from their kibbutzim once a week



RACHEL EMANUEL

Nobody wished to let them dance instead of milking the cows, driving a tractor or whatever. There was a lot of doubt and not a few sarcastic remarks. We had to break a lot of taboos that today seem ridiculous

The dancers looked heavy and amateurish but what can one expect from one rehearsal a week? The movement language seemed oldfashioned and boring

"NICE TO KNOW", 1972, CHOR.: HEDDA OREN



I had to fight... When we organized a full month of rehearsals I had to go and talk to each secretariat, literally to prize them free. Nobody wished to let them dance instead of milking the cows, driving a tractor or whatever. There was a lot of doubt and not a few sarcastic remarks. We had to break a lot of taboos that today seem ridiculous, but then it was like ramming one's head into a brick wall. We were lucky in having a man like Friedel [David Raban, head of the cultural committee], who was both an experienced treasurer and an art lover, and secured the necessary budget [for the running of the dance company]" (Interview with Manor, 1996).

The premiere took place at the theatre in Yagur on 17.2.1970. Giora Manor about the performance: "The programme began with Noa Shapira's 'People', six short pieces originally composed for a pageant for her kibbutz, Ma'abarot, welded together for the Kibbutz Company performance. This was followed by Hedda Oren's 'The Dream'... Oshra Elkayam called her suite 'Inspired by the Paintings of Paul Klee', but I find no real interpretation of this Swiss painter's paintings in the dance. There is rather an evocation of his playful spirit and sense of fun". Hermona Linn's "Baderech" and "Witches Sabbath" by Oshra Elkayam were also part of the programme. Manor goes on to

conclude that "Perhaps it isn't due to chance that the programme brought forth no stars and not even one dance was built on soloists. It was a real group-evening, and that is their strength. For some reason we tend not to take art created by kibbutz artist as seriously as we should" (**Al Hamishmar**, 18.2.1970).

As a dancer and part time teacher of the company I remember having mixed feelings about that first performance. I recall both a sort of condescending empathy for these non-professionals and a great admiration for their tenacity and perseverance. The dancers looked heavy and amateurish but what can one expect from one rehearsal a week? The movement language seemed oldfashioned and boring. On top of all that, at the premiere there was an electricity problem and all the people who had come from far and wide to witness the birth of the Kibbutz Company waited in the dark for about an hour for the curtain to go up.

After the premiere there were about 15 more performances, but not one in Tel Aviv, they didn't dare. Micha Linn: "I had to take a car and actually drive and bring all the dancers from their respective kibbutzim to the performance and get them home after the show. As some came from the Upper Galilee and others from the centre of the country, this was no mean task. It took hours" (Interview with Manor, 1966).

In a newspaper article the question was raised whether the audience should expect the best from the Kibbutz Dance Company as from any other performing group, or be less strict in its demands (and thus perhaps patronizing?) due to empathy with the personal and kibbutz associated problems of the dancers and choreographers. "Furthermore, isn't it high time the kibbutz movement made it possible for its artists to devote all their time to their artistic activities?... The kibbutz audience and its dancers deserve better than to be leniently judged. True, the economic burden [of maintaining a professional dance company] is heavy, but the social and personal price for being condemned to eternal mediocrity is no less than growing bitterness. Again the ancient question emerges - how long can a society without creative artists hope to survive?" (**Al Hamishmar**, 24.5.1972).

After the first programme ended its run Arnon was asked to take the lead in the new company. She stipulated the following conditions: the company offices will be moved to Ga'aton, the rehearsals will be held there and the dancers would have two days a week off work to devote to dancing. As producers she was assisted by Gabriella Oren and Nira Evyatar and new teachers were invited to work with the fledgeling company, among them Gene Hill-Sagan, Kaj Lothman (once the star of the

"NICE TO KNOW", 1972, CHOR.: HEDDA OREN





Swedish Royal Ballet), who all worked at the ballet school founded by Lia Schubert and Kaj Lothman in Haifa.

The second programme (1972) was timidly entitled "For Young Audiences". It was performed mainly in kibbutzim, but also twice in Tel Aviv. Avner Bahat covered the Tel Aviv performance in *Al Hamishmar* of 11.2.1972: "The movement in Yehudit Arnon's 'Pictures in an Exhibition', with decor by Leo Flatau, is concentrated and precise; its choreographic structure tight and wonderful. 'Nice to Know You, Mrs. Perach' by Hedda Oren is pleasant and funny. 'Sun, Sea and Sand' by Hermona Linn is a picture of youths frolicking on the beach".

Dora Sowden wrote in *Yedioth Ahronoth* of 24.5.1972: "Even without taking into account the merits of the programme, that dance in the kibbutzim is taking on a new and fascinating form is important in itself. As to the quality of the dancing, it is too early to demand from a company that isn't professional yet to teach the dancers not to just hop about but to dance in the funny scenes".

In 1973 Yehudit Arnon was officially appointed artistic director of the Kibbutz Dance Company. She had many qualms regarding the choice of artistic direction. "Our right to exist will depend on whether we are going to have something special to offer", she told Ruth Hazan who wrote about this problem in *Al Hamishmar* of 24.5.1972: "No further *raison d'être* is required but that a professional kibbutz dance company offers an opportunity for people for whom dance is the heart and soul of existence. The company's ability to survive is another problem altogether".

The long and arduous track of a small but courageous woman at the helm of a dance company began. She had to entice the powers that be in Tel Aviv to support the company, she

had to attract artists and teachers from the great centres of art in the world to a tiny remote kibbutz in the hills of Western Galilee to make her vision come true, and she did. ✓

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