

# SITTING OUT FRONT

*By Joan Cass*

"In the long run, audiences answer all questions... Even the most richly endowed, privately or state-supported dance company cannot survive except by the acceptance of a public." Thus the great choreographer Doris Humphrey called our attention to the oft-neglected viewer, whose participation is indispensable to any performance in the theater, (quoted from "The Art of Making Dances").

Who makes up the audience in Israel ?

At best we are talking about 3% of the population. Dance is not a mass art in any country in the world and does not expect to attract the numbers that flock to soccer games or adventure movies. The major dance companies here are well aware of the need to build audiences, and in fact, each reports an encouraging increase in subscription lists which are drawn from every layer of society. Batsheva's administrator, Shlomo Bosmi, cites the young pupils, tourists and new immigrants who turn up at concerts. Barry Swersky, general manager of Bat-Dor, mentions employees of military industries and municipal governments. Director Hillel Markman reports that the public that comes to the Israel Classical Ballet is made up of representatives from every segment of the people. And they all report some success when they approach schools, cultural committees of trade unions, kibbutzim or moshavim.

According to a study made at the Hebrew University of the use of leisure time in Israel, compared with similar studies conducted in other countries, Israelis can justly claim a relatively higher percentage of attendance at cultural events. However, the assertion that people from every sector of the public come to dance concerts must be modified to take account of their education. The University study categorically states that among people with little or no education there is no interest in the arts. Therefore when we are told that 20 couples took subscriptions to Bat-Dor through the Haifa Port, we must

assume that the men involved have office or administrative jobs and are not among the porters. The one exception is the kibbutz, where nearly everybody comes to arranged performances, regardless of job or educational background.

For what they are worth, I offer subjective impressions gathered in over five years of concert-going in Israel, along with the results of conversations held with others in the audience. These would have been different, I am sure, if more of the performances concerned had been of classical ballet, folk or spectacular dance rather than modern dance, which occasioned most of these reactions. What I had already found in the course of 30 years of concert attendance in New York and Boston was more or less repeated in Tel-Aviv, Jerusalem and Haifa: the public is never as broad as the one for plays, museum exhibits and music. Audiences are weighted in favor of women, rather than men, and of dance students both past and present, professional dancers and members of the art world in general rather than the average laymen.

This estimate accorded with what others thought. A young woman who teaches Bible and is pursuing a doctorate in philosophy, studies dance as a hobby. She often goes to concerts where she does not see anyone in her wide circle of acquaintances except those she has met in dancing classes, and finds that men are usually "with" their wives.

A high school student said she likes to see new things. She takes a sculpture class and while she doesn't look for anything in particular in dance, she can't help but be aware of sculpture type composition.

A middle-aged man proudly admitted that he had been a student of Gertrud Kraus many years ago, and that this was his reason for being attracted to dance concerts.

One woman painter who enjoys dance reported that her husband doesn't relate at all to modern dance. He prefers

something like Flamenco, where he can identify the subject and where the music is stirring and emotional.

Several people have made a similar point about music. Dissonant music by itself often evokes a negative reaction, as we know from the experience of the Philharmonic orchestra. Certainly its presence as accompaniment to so much modern dance must influence many people not to lend themselves to this art form.

A group of dance students at the Jerusalem Rubin Academy of Music confirmed that few of their friends outside the profession attend dance concerts and when they do they always say: "I didn't understand it." Several girls voiced the opinion that it was a matter of education and continued exposure. They did note, however, that not only at the Rubin Academy but at almost all dance schools the students are overwhelmingly female. Since this was not the situation in art and music classes, they ruled out the reason that it was a question of a man's studying something from which he could be assured of making a living. There was no final agreement as to whether the preponderance of women and girls at both concerts and dance schools was because of prejudice or some other unknown factor. Someone hazarded a guess that made sense to me: there is a closer affinity on the part of women for the body as an expressive medium - in life as well as art.

Certainly the motivating force in the following couple was the woman who has a 6-year-old daughter in her second year of lessons: pointing out her husband who was standing nearby during an intermission, she said that he is "more serious and restrained". He always accompanies her to concerts, about which she loves to talk and give opinions. He doesn't tend to voice his own, but he agrees with hers, probably because she makes them so enthusiastically.

If we don't really know who makes up the audience and why each member is there, at least we do know what they are shown: the work of internationally known choreographers is represented primarily by Martha Graham, with an occasional piece by Jerome Robbins, John Cranko, Jose Limon, Glen Tetly, Anna Sokolow and a host of up-and-coming contemporary American artists. Two famous com-

positions from the early 1930's have been shown recently: Kurt Jooss's "The Green Table" of 1932 (Batsheva) and George Balanchine's "Serenade" of 1934 (The Israel Classical Ballet). Only in the last year or two, with the immigration of the Panovs and the upgrading of the Israel ballet company have our own groups started to present some good ballet.

Through appearances of visiting artists we have seen programs by Alwin Nikolais, and individual selections by Fokine, Agnes de Mille, Frederick Ashton and others. On the whole, these, along with our "local" choreographers like Moshe Efrati, Oshra Elkayam, Gene Hill-Sagan, Mirali Sharon, Rena Gluck and others, have given our audiences a good sampling of dance styles current and past. With the exception of Sara Levi-Tanai, who has arranged and created the Yemenite output of Inbal, we cannot speak of an Israeli style, since most of our artists have developed abroad. However, this is part of a worldwide trend. The jet plane, bringing New York dancers to every port of call, fosters a homogeneous international dance expression which may be somewhat foreign to many in the Mexico City, Copenhagen, or Tel-Aviv audiences.

In one respect Israeli audiences have been deprived. They have seen bits and pieces, but never a full-length presentation of "Swan Lake", "Giselle", "Sleeping Beauty", "Les Sylphides", "Firebird", "Pillar of Fire", "The Moor's Pavane", "Appalachian Spring" and dozens more classics of both ballet and modern dance, acquaintance with which is necessary for a broad background in this art form. So far we have to rely on the many who were born elsewhere or who travel abroad, to provide our audiences with members familiar with the main body of dance repertory.

What might be the preferences of Israeli audiences if they were exposed to these things, is impossible to say. Within the limits of their experience, they tend to like dances that follow a strong dramatic or story line, with the next favorite being humour, according to Joseph Frankel, who for several years administered the joint subscriptions to concerts of Batsheva and Bat Dor.

I pass on to you the results of a tiny opinion poll I took

after the November 15 Batsheva concert which featured the premiere of "The Green Table," a rather literal dance with a strong ironic comment on war and diplomacy and many scenes of vivid theatrical action. The program also contained two abstract dance pieces of 1975.

\* A doctor (originally from Poland) said he enjoyed "The Green Table" best. It was so clearly, beautifully arranged with its varied characters and dramatic tableaux and sharp message.

\* The mother of "a child who shows exceptional talent in dance" was most impressed by "Monodrama," a work by Mirali Sharon which portrays one woman in various moods and aspects. She found soloist Rina Shenfeld magnificent in the way she expressed joy, fear, "just everything."

\* A teacher preferred "The Green Table" again - a strong creation, obviously by a genius, although it was not "super-modern."

\* A musician found "The Green Table" interesting but too simple and too stylized - a period piece. She could relate best to "Monodrama" - experiencing what was happening in it emotionally, without labelling each part.

\* A teen-age immigrant in Israel from America six years ago liked "The Green Table" best. She was surprised by it because it was the first modern dance that she ever saw which she could understand so well.

\* Three pupils of the Rubin Academy, with the contrariness of Israelis, each preferred a different number - one the Kurt Jooss, one Mirali Sharon's, and one "The Burning Ground", a frenetic, passionate group composition by Gene Hill-Sagan which this girl felt "really got to me."

Once I asked my Hebrew tutor why she never sees any dance. She says it's because of education. It doesn't appeal to her to experience an art form with no understanding of it. She deliberately trained herself for several years to understand music by listening to the radio for hours each day, and now she enjoys music concerts enormously. But how will she learn about dance? To buy tickets to an occasion-

al concert wouldn't teach her enough and it would make each "dance lesson" too expensive!

There is much agreement, then, that education is a big factor in building audiences. It is too bad that producers often miss out on their easiest method - the simple practice of providing helpful program notes. A woman who sat near me when the Israel Classical Ballet presented the pas de deux from Bournonville's "Flower Festival" commented disappointedly that the dancers didn't leap and jump in the exciting way she once saw in another place. It would perhaps have satisfied her a little were she told that this Danish composition from 1858 represents a style that specialized in swift lightness and delicate line rather than spectacular feats of acrobatics.

After Talley Beatty's "The Road of the Phoebe Snow" was given by Batsheva, my confused guest grasped the whole thing readily once I pointed out that the title referred to the railroad-bed of a Chicago-New York express train, where the girl fell to her death after a hostile flare-up in her gang. Notes on this point would surely have avoided an unnecessary "I didn't understand it".

A good educational technique is to bring performances outside the usual circuit, thereby reaching potential new concert-goers. Under Hasia Levy's direction the "Jerusalem Contemporary Dance Group" has been touring for many years in two special areas: army camps and schools. Her approach is to show the development of dance styles through history: primitive dance, Biblical episodes, Renaissance court dances, ballet, modern, jazz, folk, etc. Always tailored to the age and circumstances of the particular group, examples are shown and explanations given. Young children are often invited on to the stage to take part in "creative experiments" and as for the soldiers, they are often stimulated to dance with the performers far into the night.

Similarly, the Batsheva Dance Company is performing for schools in the framework of the "Youth Theatre", presenting a program started last year which is being expanded this season to also include the Israel Classical Ballet Co. There is also a plan afoot to make dance an elective in high schools, to be included in the list of subjects for the matri-

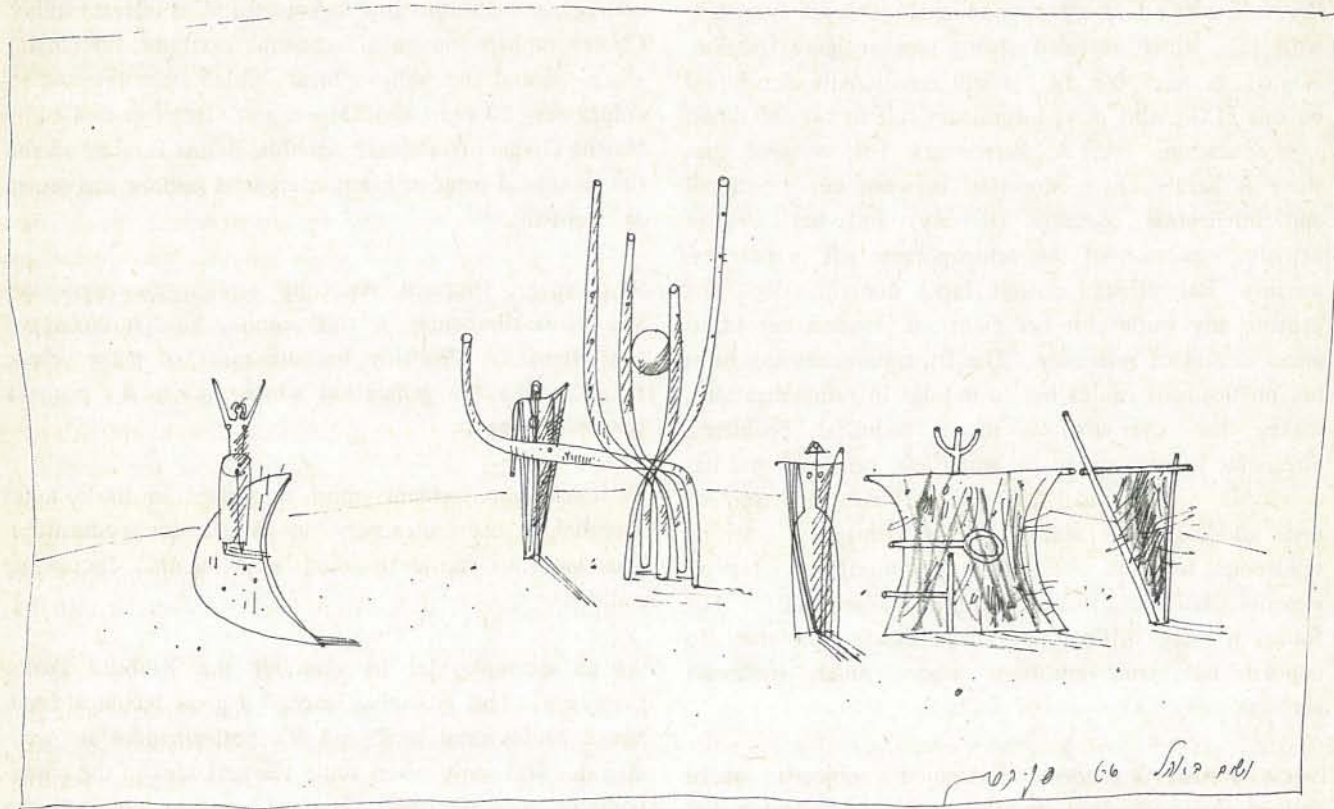
culatation examinations necessary for high school graduation. Newspaper columns about dance make an excellent source of facts and stimulation for the general reader.

Whatever the impetus, certainly the Israeli dance public is growing steadily. Every year there is more dance activity, which in turn sparks more interest, which in turn creates more activity. You can read elsewhere in this publication about the number and variety of dance performances that were presented in Israel during 1975. Consider further institutions like the Dance Ulpan at Kibbutz Ga'aton, Lia Schubert's Haifa school, the Bat Dor School, the Rubin Academy and dozens of other schools offering expanded curriculum in all phases of dance, studied by a growing number of pupils. Hundreds of Israeli children last year qualified in the British sponsored Royal Academy of

Dancing Examinations, for example. Each one of these becomes a 'dance salesman' to his doting relatives and friends.

In 1969 a 'conflict' upset the Israeli dance world when performances by two companies were scheduled for one evening. How could the meager dance audience be in two places at once? In 1975 Batsheva, Bat-Dor and the Panovs all appeared in separate Tel Aviv theatres on the same date, all dancing to full houses.

This growth will continue as long as people find something valid in store for them, once they go into a concert hall. It is my opinion that the dance-art, as well as the audience, would benefit greatly if those on each side of the foot lights could find more ways to communicate with each other!



*Danni Karavan - Sketch for "Bat-Sheva" Dance Company.*

דני קרוון - רישום ללהקת "בת-שבע"