

DANCES FROM THE OLYMPUS

The “Landscape Dances” of Sara Levi-Tanai

By Yaron Margolin

Sara Levi-Tanai is certainly one of the most original choreographers working today. Her “landscape dances” are very special. By the term “landscape dances” I do not mean choreographic works portraying any geographic site — though Sara often speaks of the desert as a source of inspiration — but the fact that one may discern in the structure of her choreography an aesthetic, imaginary landscape, in which the movement takes place.

Sara is an original artist in the true sense of the term: not an iconoclast who builds on the ruins of all that preceded, but one who is able to seek all that is good, take it and enhance it even further. Her is not originality which stems from ignorance of all that was created before her. She is aware of the roots of her art, building her own creation on that basis, just as all the great philosophers and artists in history enriched and developed what their predecessors had already accomplished. One may trace such a progression of development in the annals of the art of creating dance. Sara Levi-Tanai’s work, the subject of our present investigation, is an excellent example of such a progression.

PROGRESSIVE DEVELOPMENT IN DANCE HISTORY

A good example of progressive development is the way in which Michail Fokine developed Lev Ivanov’s *Swan Lake* in his *Dying Swan*. And in his turn, Vaslav Nijinsky took the work of Fokine and elevated what could be called “musical dance” to what became “poetic dance.” Unfortunately, this new degree of beauty attained by Nijinsky was lost in the work of choreographers arriving on the scene after him.

The achievements of Nijinsky in his *Afternoon of a Faun*

and *Jeux* went unnoticed by the next generation of choreographers. But what may be termed “dances of impression” created by Fokine in his very musical works was later developed by such artists as the Wiesenthal sisters and reached unprecedented heights in the works of Jiri Kylián. Nijinsky’s *Rite of Spring* is perhaps the earliest example of the “dances of impression.”

This line of development, starting with Nijinsky, is apparent in the work of Grete Wiesenthal, Gertrud Kraus, Doris Humphrey, Jose Limón, Anna Sokolow, Jiri Kylián and, in our own closer sphere, in the dances of Rina Shacham, Flora Cushman and Rami Be’er, who brought it to a very high standard indeed.

Sara Levi-Tanai does not belong to the category of Fokine’s “musical dance”, and surely her recent work shows no traces of the “story-line ballet” which preceded it. Neither is she an exponent of Nijinsky’s “poetical dance” or the “dances of impression.”

She created a totally new type of dance, which in itself is a most unusual phenomenon. She not only built a new world of dances, but was able to learn from her own work how to develop it even further. With the help of her students, she constructed her work from elements gleaned from ethnic materials, without recourse to the work of others, (as most artist in history had.) Indeed, the world of dance she created is so original, that it is difficult to define. That is perhaps the reason it has been called by all kinds of unsuitable names. As Israeli folk dance became popular, some deemed her work a contribution to that genre. As the new dance theatre became prominent, taking its name from some external attributes it showed, some saw her work as belonging to this new category. We are all prone to call things by names derived from some peripheral aspect of an art form. But, in the case of Sara Levi-Tanai, we are confronted with a dance world defined only by its own parameters. Of course she uses outward means to

express her dance ideas, and some of these are based on ancient Jewish dance traditions and steps. Likewise, the costumes she uses are derived from what may remind one of the traditions of Jewish communities, mainly those of the Middle East. Sometimes, it seems her choreography is pushed forward by an abstract static idea, gleaned from the religious or secular forms of poetry, such as the poetry of the Divan or the works of Shalom Shabazi. These may seem essential, especially in the eyes of an academically trained observer. But any artist clearly sees they are only of peripheral importance.

Her choreography creates independent dance forms, which require an aesthetic appraisal.

THE FIGURATIVE APPROACH

While thought tends to progress by means of words forming sentences, making them as clear as possible, imagination works by means of figurative associations. These engender emotions.

Especially in dance, the figurative point of view poses a difficult problem, as the central image is the human figure, which more than any other image fires the imagination. Perhaps that is one of the reasons there are so few great dance artists, as it is easy to get carried away by the figurative approach which tends to incite the spectator's emotions. The public enjoys the excitement, but it impairs critical judgement. Perhaps that is the reason hardly any serious philosopher regarded dance as a fit subject for philosophical discourse.

A surfeit of emotions easily degrades dance into mere entertainment. In good traditional dance forms, the best choreographers tried to solve this problem by presenting beautiful movements in the haphazard progression of the dance. When there is no coherent structure, external theatrical means supply the choreographic presentation with points of interest, directing the spectator's attention towards "beautiful execution of perfect forms."

The problem of figurativeness was always present in dance. Sara Levi-Tanai solves it by what may be called "landscape dance." She transfers the figurative element from the dancer's figure to the form created by the movement of the group of dancers, to dance space.

In her choreographic work there are no accidental

movement clusters as are to be seen in, for example, the energetic dances of Lar Lubovitch, the rather static works of Graham or Pina Bausch, and the showbusinessy dances of Béjart. In Sara's work there is always careful development of the overall choreographic design, while the subjective component finds expression in the small movements and is never neglected.

She does not need virtuosily for its own sake. That is perhaps a point where her work is close to that of Nijinsky in his poetic dances, or to the work of Anna Sokolow who has been close to "Inball" for many years.

DANCE SPACE

Dance space or spatial dance is not measurable in concrete terms, but may be observed and felt. It isn't the form dictated by the choreographer or the floor patterns traced by the dancers' movements. Rather, it is a sum of the movement, its impetus as well as the emotional result it achieves; that of the visible as well as the invisible, hidden movement.

But it isn't the "negative" of the dancer's body moving in space.

Dance space being an imprecise, imaginary term, it may best be explained by a metaphor:

Dance space is similar to the space traced by a flock of birds wheeling in the sky or a school of fish swimming in the water. Such sculpted space is to be found in the dances created by Sara Levi-Tanai.

In the two examples of fish and birds, dance space contracts and expands continuously. It constitutes an independent dance entity, and inside it all kinds of life processes take place.

That the stage is a defined, room-like space creates problems of its own. For example, the movements of a pack of wolves, in spite of the individuals in it keeping a more or less constant distance between them, doesn't create dance space because everything moves on one level only, as movement patterns on a stage tend to do. Such a single level "room space" exists in most dances — but not in those created by Sara.

Birds fly in the air, fishes swim in water, and dancers dance on a floor. In the case of birds or fish, the location and position of their dance space is determined by

practical goals. It exists as long as a certain distance is kept between each individual and the other. When one of them takes off, it ceases to be part of the dance space. When most of the group leave the formation, dance space ceases to exist.

Sara's dances do not take place in a room-like stage space. Like a fetus in the womb, they float in their dance space. The stage is where they are located, and they therefore obey the rules of staging meticulously, to be presented in the best possible form to the spectator, just as a sculptor positions his sculpture in the best possible spot in the gallery, where it is well lit, without changing his work itself.

DANCE POETRY

Movement motifs enter into the general dance space, thus creating secondary dance space of their own — the “diminutive dance,” which will be discussed in depth later in this article.

These small movements are personal, subjective ones, often based on oriental rhythms. But they do not necessarily express these rhythms, as is usual in Yemenite folk dance or in flamenco. These small movements are also not the practical ones, such as the musician's foot marking the beat or the clapping of hands accompanying a song. They tend to ally themselves to the poetic element of Sara's dance. Their form is determined by the images of the poem and occurs in the order in which they appear in the poetry.

These diminutive movements are versatile, capable of expressing supplication as well as anger, belief as well as repulsion. This form of expression was developed by the creators of “dances of impression,” such as Grete Wiesenthal's *Death and the Maiden* to music by F. Schubert.

In the case of Sara Levi-Tanai's *Song of Songs*, the large, general dance space, which is determined by the large movements executed by the whole body of the dancer, follow the verbs, as they appear in the Biblical text: “I will rise now”; “The watchmen... found me,” etc.

On the other hand, adverbs and adjectives which abound in poetry can be expressed not by the movement itself, but only through the dancer's execution of movement, through the proper play of tension and relaxation, the division of time and the telling pause.

Sara Levi-Tanai has a great talent for choosing a poetical pretext for her choreography. Her *Song of Songs*, a very great work indeed, is based on texts which do not always lend themselves to choreographic interpretation. For example, the verse: “Thou art beautiful, O my love, as Tirzah, comely as Jerusalem...”, does not include even a single verb which prompts movement.

Likewise there is no way to describe “Jerusalem” in movement. The image is, in any case, much too large and quite unsuitable for expression in diminutive or large dance moves.

Unless there is movement in the image itself, all one can do is to use the opposites of stillness and movement, the transition between the two, as the Japanese Kabuki artists do so well.

When the poet writes, as if by invitation of the choreographer: “My beloved is gone down into his garden, to the beds of spices, to feed in the gardens and to gather lilies,” it is comparatively easy to translate all this action into movement without miming and imitating reality. Of course, one may just let the dancer sit quietly and make us believe she is watching her beloved doing all those things mentioned, but such an approach tends to lead us into the realm of “spectacular dance.” Sara therefore ignores such passages, being faithful only to her dance, implanting the poetry in the overall design of her dance like morsels of spice.

Poetic passages that do not lend themselves to choreographic expression may nevertheless be expressed in music. Sara is aware of this, utilizing the rhythms of the music to accommodate the full spectrum of emotions expressed in it.

This she does in the “diminutive movements,” mainly those of the hands which follow the musical rhythms on all levels, from low movements near the floor to high ones with the arms held up.

Opposite the sitting girl, a group of dancers may now move in a Debka-like dance in which hand movements portraying vine leaves (“I went down into the garden... to see whether the vine flourished...”) are implanted.

THE DIMINUTIVE DANCE

The small movements are implanted into the overall choreographic design ornament and embellish it. These

small elements mainly utilize the extremities of the limbs (fingers and palms, toes and soles), the head, the shoulders or the center of the chest. But mostly it is the hand which gains independence, becoming, so to speak, an additional dancer.

The hands become pomegranates, flying birds, a window that opens, a crown, characters in holy texts or the traditional finger gesture of the Priests' Blessing ("Birkat Hacohanim").

By means of virtuoso choreography, they appear and vanish, change forms, enter and leave the overall choreographic design.

For these small movements, Sara delves into poetry and traditional Jewish lore, until they become like the vowel signs of Hebrew script ("nikkud") or the symbols of cantillation in Biblical texts.

But sometimes their origin is a different one. For example, her solo *Vatabineh* is a monologue of a Yemenite woman, whose husband has recently married a younger wife, her adversary, the eponymous "vatabineh". In this solo, the small movements are based on everyday household chores and traditional gestures of lament and cursing.

In *Women* the small movements are gleaned from cooking, cleaning, gathering wood, or fetching water. In *Ra'alah* (the veil hiding a woman's face in Arab traditional societies), the Bedouin woman's toilet and make-up inspire the small movements.

The use of these elements is neither realistic nor explanatory. They develop according to the general design of the choreography. One can't find those of *Ra'alah* in *Vatabineh*, but one may discover some of those of *Ra'alah* in *The Song of Songs*.

The "diminutive dance" in Sara's work is neither a grace note, nor a complementary rhythmical element as it is often found in Occidental European dance, nor logical and explanatory as it is in Far Eastern dance culture. Nor is it an expression of the music or the accompanying drum rhythms, as in traditional Yemenite dance or in flamenco.

One may perhaps compare it to the threads of gold woven into the fabric of a "talith" (prayer shawl) or a "parochet" (the ornate curtain covering the cupboard containing the Torah scrolls in the synagogue).

The diminutive dance is something very special to Sara and "Inbal." None of those imitating the "Inbal" style have used it, as imitation always deals only with typical overall features, and does not represent the inner workings of a work of art. The most developed instance of the "small dance" is to be found in Sara's *Otiot Porchot* (Winged Lettres).

THE HERALD

The figure of the herald is that of a harbinger, calling attention to a new situation about to happen, announcing the imminent entry of a new element.

For example, a herald entering the town square announcing the entrance of the king changes the whole life pattern of the square. Should he announce the outbreak of war, he would alter the patterns of behavior even more radically. The same is true if, for example, it starts raining. The first rain drops are a sort of herald. Once they arrive, each individual modifies his activity, though all act in accordance with a common motive, namely the falling rain, in the form of counterpoint.

In Sara Levi-Tanai's choreography there is always a herald. A few raindrops signify an imminent change in the general dance space, a new chapter or part, sometimes heralded by a change of props or some different type of costume entering the picture or some new small movement. The market place still acts as before. More raindrops fall and someone may pay attention to what is about to happen. Then others, too, change their activity until the whole stage reacts to the new element. When this process is complete, we have arrived at a new phrase.

The first drops of rain represent the transition between two parts of the dance. The rain itself is the herald that ushers in the new development.

The herald may be the figure of a dancer or dancers, as in *Nasheed Veshirah*, where there are "camels," i.e., a woman riding the shoulders of a man, swaying along in camel-like motion. At the end of the first part (*Nasheed A* the variation on the Yemenite step) a "camel" enters, lets the woman down at stage center, takes another woman on his shoulders, and both retreat to the background. The couple stay there observing *Nasheed B*, a wild, energetic dance.

Nasheed C begins with another entrance by another "camel" after the dancers of the preceding section,

including the first "camel", have left the stage.

The herald figure now commences to prepare the next section in which the "camel" changes to an "olive tree," another of Sara's images.

A dancer may become a herald figure even if he or she has participated in the preceding part. This is accomplished by sudden radical change in his position on stage. For example, in the penultimate section of *Song of Songs* ("O my dove, that art in the clefts of the rock"), one of the men crosses the stage and positions himself beneath the crown on top of the canopy at stage center. The movement of his hands becomes the "small dance," which then develops in a crescendo to become an image of a flower in which all the dancers take part.

The herald figure may serve as an overture preparing the entry of a "diminutive dance" as an implant into the space of the large movement.

Indeed, the herald figure doesn't always disappear in the large design. It may be expressed as a certain form of activity, such as the transition from talking to the use of props as in *Vatabineh*. In *Women* the women start a conversation in the middle of dancing and again return to dancing.

Indeed, one may observe the use of a herald figure in the authentic improvised Yemenite ethnic dance. One of the two male dancers entertaining the wedding guests modifies his movement, and his junior partner follows suit. The dancing usually commences only after an overture by the musician getting his act together, starting the drumming on a tin, inviting the senior dancer to perform, who in turn entices his partner to join him.

This is one of the aspects of genuine Yemenite ethnic dance traditions to be found in the work of Sara Levi-Tanai. Contrary to what many people think, her works are not based on folk dancing, but are an independent, very sophisticated contemporary dance form.

THE COLOR OF MOVEMENT

Apart from a few instances, the content of the movement is bestowed on the dance by the dancer, not by the overall design created by the choreographer. Usually the accompanying music helps the dancer in this aspect. If the dancer possesses musicality, it is possible for him to identify with the music and absorb,

consciously or unconsciously, the music's emotional content into the movement. This is possible only if there exists a degree of mutual coordination between the musical space and the movement design, or at least a measure of coordination with the rhythmic element of the music. Good examples of this are Grete Wiesenthal's *Valse* to Op. 388 of Johann Strauss or Gertrud Kraus' *The Poet's Dream* to Schubert's "Unfinished Symphony."

In the work of Sara Levi-Tanai, the music is situated in such a way that apart from a few exceptions, the dancer is unable to identify with the "large dance design." Examples of this are the "garden of nuts" solo and the solw plié movement of the whole group in her *Hora*.

The "diminutive dance" accommodates the emotional elements of the music, not the overall design or the basic idea behind the music as is the case in Kraus' "dances of impression." Therefore, Sara tends to use ethnic or folk music.

The costumes, their colors and texture, compensate for what the music may lack, creating a kaleidoscope of hues, harmony and emotion.

Thus we are able to distinguish between three separate but simultaneous aspects of dance:

- * The large dance design
- * The diminutive dance
- * The dance of colours.

THE IMAGINARY LANDSCAPE

The idea of a specific dance space is not identical to, but is related to, the space of painting. Dance space is three-dimensional and takes place in time, while painting space does not. This helps us to describe the imaginary landscape in which Sara Levi-Tanai's choreography takes place.

Dance space should exist in every dance but, alas, does not. Sara's dance space is an imaginary landscape to which she returns time and again.

She takes this landscape and slices it, stretching it upwards, enveloping in it her dance. This landscape comprises a valley between two mountains, a narrow wadi and a tree situated at the foot of one the mountains, at stage right from the viewpoint of the spectator.

The herald, after signalling the coming "large dance," becomes this tree. His twisted posture is reminiscent of the gnarled trunk of an ancient olive tree, and from it the movement will commence. Usually the two mountains are represented by two groups of dancers, which descend the slopes like a flock of goats. This may be seen in *Nasheed*, part 3, or in the opening section of *Song of Songs*.

The dance of the two groups may become a dialogue between them, as in *Women*, or they may change sides or integrate into one entity. One or more participants may again turn into an olive tree, become the wadi or another, new mountain, as happens in *Song of Songs*, *Winged Letters* and *The Story of Ruth*. In *Nashed Veshirah* the two groups develop into three.

The hills may be rocky, full of boulders, or terraced. Sometimes they are soft, contoured sand dunes which are translated into rhythm and small dance movement.

In other instances a cloud may descend, partially obliterating the mountains by enveloping them in silence or by the use of a diaphanous fabric, a veil, as in *Song of Songs*.

Sometimes the tree remains alone with the righthand hill, as if the spectator has changed his viewpoint.

In the "Tell me, O thou whom my soul loveth" section of *Song of Songs*, the woman who dances the tree is alone opposite the other woman who dance the righthand hill.

Sometimes a couple may become the tree, or even three or a whole group, at different levels, who are related in spite of the distance separating them from each other. A lonely figure may invade the landscape, crossing the whole stage on a diagonal. Even two figures may move simultaneously in two diagonals as in the first section of *Hora*.

A single figure may enter and wander about until it finds its proper place and turns out to be the herald ushering in a new section.

Sara does not always use a diagonal path. In the third section of *Nasheed Veshirah* the figure crosses parallel to the proscenium.

In the final part of *Song of Songs* there is a whole section which is indeed a development of this device. One after another, one or a couple of dancers enter the stage from

different directions. That is similar to the opening section of *Hora*, but on a higher plane, since all the company is gathered together in the end as one huge olive tree.

CONNECTING THE PARTS

There is a dance within a dance. The large dance created by the body of the dancer in the imaginary landscape creates a context reminiscent of the landscapes of Renaissance painters. Into it the small dance is inserted, and both are colored by the changing hues of the costumes. The music floats in space.

In Sara's work it is usually a simple, tuneful folk song enhanced by percussion instruments. On this stage setup Sara arranges her inner landscape as it appears in her soul. She moves it according to basic laws of stage production, such as those so well defined in Doris Humphrey's book *The Art of Making Dances*.

The diminutive dance corresponds to the rhythmic elements of the music and is inserted, as she likes to put it, "in filigree, with a pair of tweezers."

Thus, "the elements," a term Sara is very fond of, are woven into a fabric of movement.

FORMS OF DEVELOPMENT

Song of Songs is a multifaceted brilliant work. Following are four examples of movement development found in it.

1) **Orchestration of rhythm.** In the opening section, one female dancer emerges from beneath the crown in the center-piece (the tree), while the men are on the left, and the women are on the right (two hills). The men twist their torsos in a spiral movement, while the women move theirs back and forth like a pendulum, transferring the rhythm from the shoulder to the head and the rising arm, while the arms of the men descend.

The hand of the soloist turns into a flower, which becomes a sort of "stirring the pot" movement (the diminutive dance). The men move to the right, behind the women, creating a rich colour effect, while the central couple (the tree) moves to the left to balance the stage.

Later, when a piece of material is placed on the female

soloist's head as a bridal veil and the men have covered the male soloists' shoulders with a similar cloth as if by a prayer shawl (the herald), the couple (the tree) lead the dance in two groups (the hills). Each group's rhythm is different, but they are complementary.

The women move in a clipped staccato movement, which becomes the traditional Yemenite step, the "da'assa," while the men sway in a conical movement from the hips, which becomes a spiral movement of the spine, a variation on that of the opening section. The movement of the women is also a variation on what they were doing earlier. The men's movement becomes gradually slower as they move in unison, progressing in a crescendo until their torsos are parallel to the floor. Likewise, the Yemenite step of the women becomes larger until they are in an "attitude", which is the central motif of the solo sance leading to the section using staves, in the "I am black, but comely" section.

The contrasting rhythms, the different steps, the clear grouping and the colours are all integrated in what one may call counterpoint.

2) **The staff motif.** The staff motif is introduced by the female soloist ("Tell me, O thou whom my soul loveth") in her solo, and it is developed both in the small as well as in the large dance.

The staves, held either parallel or crossed, enrich the diminutive dance and therefore reflect the relationship of the small dance to the music.

The solo starts by the soloist putting the staves on her throat as if strangling herself. They then pass into the hands of two dancers and finally to a group.

In order to explain this development, a digression on the use of props in dance is necessary.

THE USE OF PROPS

Very few choreographers are able to utilize props fully. Most of the time a prop is confined to only one or two possibilities it offers, thus limiting the emotional options the prop presents.

Using props in dance is nowadays quite fashionable. As is to be expected, Sara's use of props is far from simple. There are several ways in which she uses props.

a) The prop as everyday utensil. The staff in *Song of*

Song is a walking stick used by the male soloist or a shepherd's staff when the dancers put their palms on it and rest their chins on their hands.

b) As an image, being "humanized". The staff becomes a percussion instrument, a weapon (in the men's dance), two or more suddenly form a window, to look through or to be seen in its frame, even a sort of prison or cage when the night watchmen catch the Shunamite.

At another point the staff becomes like the one traditionally used by the spies returning from Canaan carrying the huge bundle of grapes, or the one used by hunters to carry a stag. It even becomes a sort of throne.

c) The dancer as a part or reflection of the prop. This is a device post-modern choreographers love. In the solo, the woman puts the staves parallel to her legs, as if comparing between her body and the lines the staves make.

d) Searching for possibilities the prop offers the dancer, to create and enhance the movement with or inside the prop.

e) The synthesis of all these ways and means.

3) **The hand motif.** In the final section of *Song of Songs* the hand motif is developed in a crescendo. After a protracted preparation the "crown" returns to the stage as a hint of what is to follow, another herald.

The dance circles vigorously around the stage as the main protagonist carries the chief female character on stage as if carrying the Torah scroll in the synagogue. Together they are the herald of what is to come.

At the climax of the horizontal dance, one man enters beneath the "crown," heralding the hand motif in the diminutive dance. The couple are covered by a white cloth (the olive tree). The stage is suddenly completely still.

A hand moving in an undulating movement emerges from beneath the cloth to the sounds of a flute.

It is typical of Sara's choreography, that there hardly ever is a full stop in the dance, a lengthy pause. Into each situation she introduces a hint of the next diminutive dance. If the large dance stops, the small one never ceases at the same time, but continues even in silence. The two never halt at the same time.

The chorus standing behind the woman takes up her hand motif. She is positioned between the two hills, thus adding a vertical line of movement to the horizontal. The back of the hands of the chorus touch their eyes in unison, and they raise their arms until these become the poetic image of palm branches.

Another woman puts her hand on top of that of the man, on the opposite side from where the first hand emerged. The dance develops as a dialogue of the diminutive dance, in which the groups participate as in the large dance.

4) **Wheeling movement.** A further type of development may be observed at the beginning of the stave section. One of the men sits on the floor in fourth position and begins to move around his own axis. This turning is taken up by the woman forming the righthand hill until a single woman also starts spinning. She introduces a jumpy promenade step into it. The rhythm of her movement is a preparation for transferring it into the men's stave dance.

In spite of all the discussions and struggles taking place

in "Inbal" as I write these lines, I do hope, as one who holds "Inbal" very close to his heart, that a solution to all its problems will be found and that the company will continue to give us many fine fruits. Especially I hope that we will see reconstructions of Sara's early works. If she gives her permission for such a venture, those great works of art will not only be seen again in live performance, but also preserved an video for future generations.

Sara Levi-Tanai is one of the greatest living artists and her work will be esteemed and studied by future generations as befits great art.

She is a jewel in the crown of Jewish art and "Inbal" one of the few points of pride and self-esteem of our country, a nation building its own culture.

I am deeply grateful to her for continuing to create her dances to sustain our souls in the face of all the adversity she has had to overcome. After all, the deep need to continue to create is the great secret of her life. ■

אולפן למחול מטה אשר

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