

ISRAELI FOLK DANCE BETWEEN FOLKLORE AND ENTERTAINMENT

by Zvi Friedhaber

What is commonly known as Israeli folk dance passed through several phases since its beginnings, about 60 years ago.

At first, its main function was to enrich and diversify the rather meager repertoire of the social dances of the pioneers, who would start and conclude each dance gathering with the same Horas and Rondos. These did not satisfy the growing needs of their cultural as well as social life. The demand for an original Eretz-Israeli, what was then termed "Hebrew", dance was voiced by them. (1)

Another reason were the feasts, holiday celebrations and other mass performances in the kibbutzim, for which dances had been created. These demanded greater diversity and better standards of execution. For the staging of pageants celebrating the Omer (Passover), Hag Habikkurim (first fruits of the season) Hag Ha'asif (harvest celebrations) and the Seder Pesah - all of which gained increasing importance in the cultural lives of the settlers, more and more dances were needed and had to be choreographed.

There was a shortage of dancers-choreographers, who would undertake this task. Therefore the choreography remained in the hands of people lacking professional skills, anonymous artists who were unable to develop a true basis for serious dance tradition.

In the 1920s an important development in the creation of festive dances took place, when the first skilled dance artists arrived in the country. Parallel to that, choreographers and dancers born in Israel began to appear on the scene.(2)

A marked change occurred in the 1930s, when professional choreographers, some of them members of kibbutzim, others employed by the settlements, were engaged to create the dances for the festivals and celebrations or stage the whole event. (3)

The choreographers had to face two different sorts of problems when creating the pageants. One being the need for a movement language suitable to the ceremonial character of the events, which demanded a basically artistic mode of expression, the other being the necessity of using untrained dancers in their works. The dancers participating in what was called "Massechet", (a multimedia stage form mixing music, texts, acting and dance) were ordinary workers, whose sole knowledge of dancing was their experience in folk dances they knew in their countries of origin, which served them at social gatherings as leisure activity.

In those early days one important human element was missing: namely that of children and teenagers. The children born in the country were still



mostly too young to participate in the pageants.

The creator of the staged pageants had to satisfy two demands simultaneously: that of artistic dance and that of folk dance. They had to take into account the fact that the dancers were untrained. Hence the necessity to use only easily executed steps in the choreography of the pageants, which could be danced by large groups of dancers.

Some of these dances, after being performed in festive pageants became popular and began to be danced at social gatherings. Thus their function changed and they became a leisure activity.

The longing for an indigenous, 'Eretz-Israeli' culture was felt in the urban quarters of workers as well as in the rural, especially kibbutz settlements. This demand found expression in many articles published in periodicals of those times and reappears much later in books of reminiscences written by survivors of the period.(4)

A Dancing Nation

The newly created dances soon found their place among the repertory of imported folk dances, such as the hora, krakowiak, rondo or cherkessia and began to replace them.

As they became ubiquitous at the gatherings of groups of folk dancers, they turned into proper folk dances on which the choreographers who had created them had no influence any more.

In order to examine this transition of stage dance into folk dance, we have to quote a well known statement of Gurit Kadman - the mother of Israeli folk dance - who claimed that as was the case in several [cultural] spheres, the demand for them will create folk dances. And she said categorically that in order for that to happen, the people of Israel had first of all to become "a dancing nation."(5)

For that purpose she was willing to use almost any means, even those radically different from the 'natural' traditional processes which caused the emergence of folk dances of other nations.

In no encyclopedia or lexicon is there a definition for "creator of folk dance", so common in Israeli literature dealing with the subject. The term folk dance creator emerged mainly in the second half of the 20th century, when photography, film, video-recording and the beginning of research brought the names of folk dance creators to the attention of many people. Indeed, reality proved Gurit Kadman right in her prediction, that only history and the dancers themselves will

determine which of the newly created dances and their creators will, in the end, survive and become part and parcel of future tradition.

Only Two Out of a Dozen

Examining Gurit's prediction I came to the following conclusions concerning dances created in the past half century, which have since become true folk dances.

From 12 dances that started as components of festive celebrations, only two made the transition, passing the acid test of history and the spontaneous selection process by many dance groups until they became folk dances.

Looking at dances created in that period not primarily for stage performance, we recognise about twenty dances that gained permanence and feature constantly in the repertory of folk dance groups. Among these are 5 of anonymous origin, the name of their creators being unknown.

Only six dances have shown permanence, from about 30 created since the Dalia gathering in 1944.

Folk dance groups proliferated and reached diverse groups of Israelis, who enjoyed this form of popular cultural and social activity. These dancers were the source of demand for ever more new dances, to be taught at the groups' meetings. The addition of new dances diversified the dance groups' activities.

The cultural demands of the rural settlements also grew, as new forms of celebration, such as the anniversaries of the foundation of the settlements were added to the traditional ones. Both artistic expression through choreography and new folk dances needed for these occasions proliferated. The latter served as the main element in these events.(6)

Outside this section of the population, from institutions of education and culture and youth movements not belonging to the rural settlements, the demand for increasing variety of new folk dances grew, as more and more dance groups met on a regular basis and needed the new dances to diversify their repertory.

There too a demand for folk culture as part of local festivities and celebrations was heard. Independence Day, the "Maccabia" and "Hapoel" sport meeting opening ceremonies, the annual folk dance meeting at Zemah and in recent years the Karmiel dance festival, all accelerated the creation of more and more new dances.

Apart from folk dance groups meeting on a social leisure basis, a not insignificant number of stage dance groups, providing folk dance for the above listed occasions was formed.

Elements of Oriental Culture

An important source of enrichment of Israeli folk dance were the new immigrants from Middle Eastern countries, who brought with them folk traditions during the 1950s.

At the beginning creation of new folk dances was needed to turn Israelis into "a dancing nation" and for the laying of foundations of a folk dance culture, as the endeavour succeeded, the popular demand called for entertainment and "hits".

Every new song which became a hit was quickly used for creating a new dance

The influence of these imported traditions on Israeli folk dance was revolutionary. In a short time many of these dance traditions found their way from the sphere of ethnic dance into Israeli folk dance.

The proliferation of folk dance groups, which spread into all strata of Israel's population, (folk dance meetings becoming an everyday occurrence), pushed folk dance more and more into the sphere of entertainment.

This in turn encouraged more and more new dances to be invented, to supply the growing demand. The proliferation of such new fangled "creations" had nothing to do with the development of real Israeli folk dance.

"Hits"

There occurred a total inversion of the creative process. While at the beginning creation of new folk dances was needed to turn Israelis into "a dancing nation" and for the laying of foundations of a folk dance culture, as the endeavour succeeded beyond what its originators dreamed of, the popular demand called for entertainment and "hits".

The result was a populist, shallow style. Every new song which became a hit was quickly used for creating a new dance. Not only Israeli songs, but also international pop songs were used by "dance creators" for their purposes.

This rather negative, quasi "creation", erroneously called by its originators "folk dance", may, after all, also have a positive element: perhaps one or two of these dances will finally become true folk dances.

[This article is based on a paper delivered at the 12th inter-university meeting on research in Jewish folk lore, held in Jerusalem in May, 1993.]

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