

FROM A DANCE CRITIC'S DESK

BY GIORA MANOR

THE STATE OF THE NATION (DANCE)

In early spring, TV Channel 3 did a laudable thing: it devoted a whole evening, more than three hours, to a program about what is happening in Israeli dance.

The format was a panel discussion of experts with Arie Yass as moderator, interspersed with many film clips of recent as well as historical films and interviews with choreographers, to illustrate the argument. The overall impression was a rich tapestry of dance activities of all styles. The TV director Albert Gabai did a very good job of weaving all these materials together.

But the moderator began with a stupid question, asking his panelists whether, in their opinion, there was evidence of an Israeli style of dancing? So, apart of Dan Ronen and Yonatan Karmon — who spoke about Israeli folk dance — all those concerned with modern stage dance had to apologise for being unable to answer the misleading question in the affirmative. But is there a Dutch, French, Belgian, American or German national modern style? Should there be one in our global village? Are such choreographers as Jiri Kylian, Hans van Manen, Krisztina de Chatel "Dutch" artists?

Surprisingly enough, the Israel Ballet was hardly mentioned at all. Regardless of what one thinks about its artistic level and the choreographic talent of its chief creator, Berta Yampolsky, such an omission is an impossible, unjust distortion and insult. (Later, in a private conversation, it was explained to me that the artistic director of the Israel Ballet was invited to take part, but did not show up for the interview....) Nevertheless....

The most positive aspect of this composite portrait of our dance scene, were the many young choreographers who work for the established companies. Recently, there is very positive trend among them "to do their own thing", to found groups outside the establishment to create for. Some of these, such as Dror — Ben Gal or Ido Tadmor are successful, and making great efforts to overcome the huge financial problems involved in the running of an independent company.

With all its deficiencies, this was a fascinating program.

A DEPRESSING EVENING

Amanda Miller, an American working mainly in Europe, is usually listed among the "important" choreographers. I fail to see why. Perhaps my old eyes are at fault, but she loves to let her dancers move in pitch darkness. And the movement one is able to observe through a glass darkly, does not gel into any discernable pattern — let alone meaning.

She was invited to work for Batsheva and her "Toy Artist" is no exception. It was the only really new work of Batsheva's "Premieres '97" program.

Ohad Naharin, a very creative choreographer, tends to change and make over new variations on his already well-known works. He adapted his once brilliant dance "Black Milk" — originally produced in 1985 for five female dancers of the Kibbutz Company — into a sombre depressing work for five men. What was a fascinating, original, intriguing rite of cleansing of some ancient, remote tribe, became just obscure in its new version.

The third part of the program was Kylian's duet "No Sleep 'till Dawn of Day", already shown earlier in the season. This delicate dance for two mature women, to the sounds of a lullaby from the Salomon Islands, possesses a haunting beauty. But again, only Sonia d'Orelans-Juste had the mature authority it requires.

Did Batsheva need a premiere that desperately, that the program was put together so badly? It was a sad, disappointing evening.

COHEN & COHEN AT "INBAL"

It is impossible to say that "Inbal" — which last season became an "Ethnic Arts Centre" does not continue the Yemenite tradition it maintained for half a century.

Its present program of three new works was created by two choreographers of Yemenite

extraction, both bearing the family name Cohen. Ze'eva Cohen has lived and worked for about 30 years in New York; Han Cohen has danced and choreographed for Inbal all her life.

Ze'eva's "The Firstborn" is a dance for a man and four women, and is just one part of a whole program she presented in New York. It is danced to ancient Ladino songs from the 15th century. The male soloist was the brilliant Daniel Akilov, the scion of a dance artist dynasty from Tashkent, who is an accomplished performer. But the piece was very short, obviously just a fragment. It made one wish to see the whole piece.

Ze'eva Cohen has a penchant for nature, sand and water, forests and landscapes. Her "From Sand to Water", to music by Michael Keck (adapted by Bezlel Aloni) is a mood-piece, impressionistic in approach, full of drifting mists and shifting dunes. It isn't surprising that the overall impression is somewhat diffuse.

Hana Cohen's new large dance is entitled "Sajarra". It is danced to live music by Shlomo Bar and his band of oriental musicians. The stage set (by Talia Baron-Fried, who also designed the fine costumes) consists of a large three-dimensional dune or mound, over which the twelve dancers run, jump and cavort. They carry or wear bundles of sticks, apparently a central component of this tribe's culture, in a manner that reminds one of Kei Takei's work.

It is a new and personal variation on the traditional Inbal movement style, based on the choreographic principles of Sara Levi-Tanai.

But all the good works in this new Inbal program should not distract the administrative director Haim Shiran, who also serves as artistic director, from the cardinal reason for Inbal's continued existence: namely, further reconstructions of the works of Sara Levi-Tanai, who personally attended the premiere.

FINALLY, THE REAL MCCOY KIROV

Since the demise of the Soviet empire, several "genuine" Russian ballet companies have visited Israel. "The Stars of...", "Soloist of Bolshoi", "Moscow City Ballet" all turned out to be ad hoc groups of soloists gathered together for profitable foreign touring. With the honourable exception of the Latvian ballet from Riga, they all were rather disappointing, even when occasionally brilliant dancers participated.

So many dance lovers in Israel were sceptical when the great Kirov was announced.

But the Israel Festival did build a very good stage and comfortable bleacher seating in the

the ceramic shards of the broken jars scattered on the stage boards.

Barak Marshall presented a new piece, "Emma Goldman's Wedding." Goldman was a very courageous American Jewish suffragist and progressive left-wing agitator. She was imprisoned during World War I and went to Russia after the October Revolution. But unlike many other sympathizers of the Soviet regime, she returned to the USA in the mid-1920s, disappointed from what she saw there. She was altogether a remarkable person.

And a really fantastic theme. But what Barak Marshall did was a shallow parody on a Jewish wedding in a Catskill hotel. What a waste of material! . He also - again! - put his mother, Margalit Oved, on stage for no apparent reason except because of his being her doting son.

A very special work was "Shakatak," a percussion and street-dance show of great originality. Attempts at 'taming' wild break-dance, hip-hop and other such varieties and using them in a stage framework were, until now, always unsuccessful. Like deep-sea creatures that die when lifted from the deep, street-dances wither when adapted to art.

But former Batsheva dancer, Zachi Patish, and musicians from the "The Tractor's Revenge" rock band created a movement and sound show of great vitality, rhythmic richness and originality. Their bodies are also their musical instruments.

As are household utensils and mechanical devices, all are used to play with and on by the performers. The only criticism I have to offer is that their costumes are too drab and the lighting - as usual - too dim.

Another choreographer who deserves praise is Inbal Pinto. She presented a duet for herself and another dancer, which was funny as well as original.

The duo of Emanuel Gat and his partner, the musician-cum-actor Maryano Weinstein, showed a politically-concerned cabaret piece, in which dance and texts, all kinds of stagecraft but primarily their talents were employed in voicing their strong criticism of us Israelis. Since I wrote this review, they have continued working on their "Arutz Al-Kuds" show, and what was at the premiere was nicely entertaining but diffused, has since improved and its critical barbs have become honed to a fine point.

It was altogether a fantastic, multicoloured presentation by a young new generation of choreographers, looking for self-expression on a high artistic level. In this respect, the Suzanne Dellal showcase performances were on a high level with good dancing and an abundance of interesting choreography.

NOA DAR ATTAINING MATURITY

I have known Noa Dar since she was, many years ago, a 'problematic' child from a kibbutz in the Jordan Valley, attending Yaron Margolin's dance school in Jerusalem. Dance was her tether to reality.

Since 1993, after she returned from studying in America, she began to choreograph. Her early works were always very personal, idiomatic to a degree of obscurity. She has a vivid imagination and a weakness (or fondness) for certain symbols which occur again and again in her dances, such as the suitcase with someone in it or lettuce leaves eaten on-stage.

All her ubiquitous symbols are part and parcel of her recent work, "To Bite The Rind." In this, she uses a sort of mast that turns a small podium into a ship, a suit of armor suspended from it into a flying machine or perhaps an iron suit of torture. The somewhat diffuse character of her movement has become clearer, more structured.

As in most of Noa Dar's work, the music is by Israel Breit.

Her four very good dancers - Nir de Wolf, Itamar Shachar, Renana Raz, Michal Herman - present their personal characteristics, which are used by the choreographer as components of the piece. This is another independent young group with a good potential for development.

THE INFLUENCE OF MOONLIGHT ON ANAT DANIELI

Another young choreographer who, so to speak, attained artistic independence and maturity is Anat Danieli. Her newest work is called "Luna." Her four dancers - Iris Erez, Galit Nemirovsky, Koby Tamir and Rotem Tashach - danced her moody, delicate movements perfectly.

Like her former dances, "Luna" is poetic, with the symbolic language very personal and never over-defined, leaving the task of meaning to the spectator.

A REALLY CRAZY PIECE

Ohad Naharin's "Sabotage Baby" (the titles of his works get "curiouser and curiouser" as Alice in Wonderland said), is fantasy incarnate, a really extraordinary work.

Full of colour and surprises, it starts even before it begins; the curtain is half open as the spectators file into their seats as a dancer (Shai Tamir) dances slowly, his mind seemingly looking inwards like in a dream, in a totally introverted dance.

But don't be fooled! As soon as all are seated, after about 15 minutes pandemonium starts (Israelis

are notorious late-comers, unconcerned by the inconvenience caused to all those who have to get up to let them pass to their seats. There seems to exist some international law, according to which those who have seats at the middle of the row, are always the very last to arrive).

The most striking feature of "Sabotage Baby" is the sound accompaniment of the dance. A group of two Dutch musicians and their two helpers make music with the help of machinery, a welding torch, a metal saw and other "what nots." "Concrete music" has been in existence since the 1940s, but what these musicians do is not just sound, but real music.

All kinds of amazing things happen: a girl is moved by black-masked (i.e., invisible) helpers, like in Japanese "Bunraku puppet-theatre", then later a dancer enters on stilts and in the final part, three men dance on even higher stilts in a marvelous finale, with everyone wearing aprons in front, but nothing behind.

There are clever projections, the curtain and, indeed, all the stage-machinery dances, participating in the piece. This mobilization of the whole theatrical apparatus as a component of the choreography was learned by Ohad from his friend and colleague, Jiri Kylian.

All those who have opined lately that Naharin has seemingly exhausted his sources of imagination and invention, now will have to eat their words. His new piece is full of inventions, very well built in which a quiet scene is followed by a turbulent one and, thank God, there is no fashionable murky darkness as the brilliant lighting is by - who else but - Bambi Avi-Yonah. There is even a welcome break after about 50 minutes and the second act is even better than the wonderful first one.

Naharin is still the most inventive and convincing choreographer in Israel - and beyond.

INBAL AT A NEW PEAK

All those faithful followers of Sara Levi Tanai, the founder and creative spirit of Inbal for half a century, have finally proved to have been right all along.

This time around, there was a reconstruction of one of her "miniatures", namely the duet "The Silversmith" ("Hatzoref" - 1977) and her more recent "Winged Letters" ("Otiot Porchot").

Sara Levi-Tanai always insisted that her predilection for miniatures is part of her eastern Yemenite soul. In her "Silversmith," she makes the fingers of the jeweller become a crown, which he puts on the head of his beloved and the palms of his hands become the fluttering wings of a dove - his very soul. Motti Abramov, the veteran Inbal dancer, has improved with maturity



and experience and imbues his role with real love. This is a small exquisite masterpiece.

Sara Levi-Tanai created her "Winged Letters" in 1986. It is a dance dealing with the written characters of holy scrolls. The letters of the Torah or of the mezzuzah (the small box a Jew affixes to each door of his abode) as containing godly holiness is traditional. The dance commences with a beautiful illuminated "parochet" - the curtain covering the niche holding the Torah scrolls in a synagogue. From it, extend the palms of the dancers' hands.

What commences is an example of fine choreographic structure, complete with movement motifs, with contrasting themes, variations and embellishments. It should be studied by choreographers as a textbook.

Both works were faithfully reconstructed by Ilana Cohen.

"Ruach Kadim" ("Hot Desert Wind" as called in everyday modern Hebrew "chamsin") by another veteran Inbal dancer, Racheli Sella, is based on Oriental Arab music and rhythms. She was responsible not only for the choreography but for the music and costumes as well. In this respect as well as in the use of Middle Eastern music, she is following a trend much in evidence in contemporary Israeli dance.

In her piece, the dancers are symmetrically distributed and never budge from their places. It is very decorative, but lacks motion and emotion. The vessels full of water which the dancers hold sparkle, but the piece is very static.

The company, comprised of older and younger dancers, was excellent. For a long time, Inbal hadn't looked as vigorous and well-trained as it does now.

A BRILLIANT PERFORMANCE BY THE "BATSHEVA ENSEMBLE"

Batsheva's young company, the "Ensemble," has become a company in its own right, not just a hothouse for grooming the next generation for the main company. Its premiere in December 1997 showed the young dancers to their best advantage. Alas, since then, due to financial difficulties, its activities have - temporarily, I hope - been suspended and its director, Naomi Perlov, dismissed. Quel damage.

The program consisted of three works by guest choreographers. "100 Movements" by Canadian Lynda Gaudreau is a formal, plotless piece that begins by eight dancers presenting diverse limbs, such as arms or legs and less attenuated ones, like bellies. The lighting isolates the body parts and the main compositional tools are variations on the theme of "pars pro toto".

For once, there were no symbols to decipher, no hidden agenda to discover. A dance

concerned with just movement is refreshing in the Tanztheater deluge flooding our stages.

As an antipasto, two men (Yaron Barami with Piotr Torzawa-Giro at the premiere and Matan Zamir and Nir Tamir in other performances) in white laboratory coats portray mad scientists busy with a faltering theory. "L'ecroulement de la theorie" by the French choreographer, Frederic Lescure is droll, entertaining and fresh (in both meanings of that term).

But the best piece, by far, was the world premiere of "Tremolo, Tremolo" by Joaquim Sabate, who also designed the music and stage set. Born in Spain, he works mainly in Holland and is an accomplished counter-tenor.

His nine dancers-musicians-singers make music by using among other instruments, an accordion and their own bodies as percussion pieces. The diversity of happenings, sheer

imagination in movement and sound is astounding. Sabate even choreographed a dance for that rubber cup on a stem used for unblocking washing basin plumbing. The real star of the evening was Yaron Barami, a very young dancer who ended up in "Teremolo Tremolo" with the sanitary vacuum tool sticking to his bare behind. Sabate is a man to watch.

ROMEO, JULIET AND THE MILITARY DICTATORSHIP OF VERONA

Thou shall not use the name of Shakespeare in vain! Angelin Preljocaj, a gifted choreographer by any standard, brought his company to the Tel Aviv Performing Arts Center in January 1998 to perform his version of "Romeo and Juliet." At least that was what the program said. The music was the well-known one by Prokofiev. The designer built a sort of prison yard and

watchtower with an armed guard walking a dog to and fro on its ballustrade. On the ground, a bunch of homeless figures huddle at an opening in the fortress wall. Juliet (Claudia de Smet) turned out to be the daughter of some fascist dictator called Capulet, until now unknown to history or literature.

Apparently, Romeo is the head of the opposing Montagues. While Shakespeare's hero is a cheeky, unruly but likeable teenager, Sylvain Groud (no doubt a very good dancer) looks somewhat middle-aged and has thinning hair, which makes the star-crossed lovers incongruous.

I was sure the famous balcony scene would take place on the parapet where the guard and his dog promenade. But, I am sorry to state, as far as I was able to see, there was no balcony scene at all.

Altogether Preljocaj handled the the story in a cavalier manner. The very good dancers moved in a rather mechanical way, with very sharp angles. The Nurse became a pair of female clowns in white/black wide pantaloons. Only God (or perhaps M. Preljocaj) knows why.

Obviously, there was no connection to the music. Better to forget about it all and wait for another work by Preljocaj.

TO TALK IN TONGUES

In Christian theology, there is a strange notion of holiness called "glasolalia," meaning "talking in strange tongues," what is known unto actors, as well as many others as gibberish. The early Christians regarded it as the language of the angels.

In Rina Schenfeld's recent program entitled "Eudaimonia" - meaning a benevolent demon in old Greek - there are, according to the program, "monologues for movement and voice." In recent dance pieces, there is a lot of talking. So to present it as a novelty is preposterous. Rina has recently embarked on a new venture, that of writing poetry. But her literary talent isn't as spectacular as her dancing used to be.

The dancers wear translucent masks. But the movement language is neither original nor special. The set design is by Oren Pravda and the beautiful costumes by Ayelet Yaffe.

Seven female dancers and two male ones take part. The girls are well-trained, the boys look amateurish. The best component of the whole piece, which lasts about 50 minutes, is the imaginative lighting by Shai Yehudai.

THE SECRETS OF INDIAN DANCING

In the framework of the Jerusalem "Bamah Theatre," Vera Goldman as narrator and MC presented her pupil, Raphael Mashilkar, an Israeli-born dancer whose parents came from India many years ago. He recently returned



"אוקטובר", להקת ענת דניאלי

כור: ענת דניאלי, צילום: גדי דגון

"OCTOBER", CHOR.: ANAT DANIELI, PHOTO: GADI DAGON