

# Concert and Ethnic Dance in Israel: A Century of Divergence and Convergence

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## ABSTRACT

*This article treats the Land of Israel as a cultural laboratory where ethnic, folk, and concert dance have cyclically diverged and converged. Tracing a century – from Ottoman rule and the Mandate through statehood and globalization – it follows early pioneers (Agadati, Nikova), Ausdruckstanz artists and holiday pageants, the post-1948 melting-pot government policy, and Sara Levi-Tanai's Inbal Dance Theater singular expansion of Yemenite sources. After an era of detachment (1960s–80s), rapprochement since the 1990s reflects pluralism and third-generation curiosity. Parallel Arab developments (dabkeh infrastructures, joint projects) and the Ethiopian-Israeli trajectory Eskesta Dance Troupe to Beta show how embodied micro-techniques can seed contemporary vocabularies. Recent exemplars Orly Portal and Stav Struz-Boutrous, expand languages from within while interrogating gender, power, and identity. The article argues that Israeli dance models a plural modernity, where archives, pedagogy, and equitable collaboration sustain living traditions as engines for contemporary creation*

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Building a new culture was part of realizing Zionism's aspiration to establish a national home on its historical land.<sup>1</sup> Many questions arose across all areas of life: should people speak and teach in Russian or German – the languages of immigrants before statehood – or revive Hebrew, the language

of the Bible? What will people wear in the hot climate, so different from Europe, what music should they listen to, and what would they dance? The ambition was to create a Hebrew concert dance, a Hebrew folk dance and a Hebrew holiday pageant – genres that did not yet exist. This raised questions: from where would the new Hebrew dance draw inspiration? One source was the ethnic

dances brought by Jewish communities as they immigrated to the Land of Israel.

In this study, I seek to identify junctions of connection and divergence in concert dance, folk and holiday pageants over the past hundred years, reflecting the ideological, political, and social changes the state has undergone, as well as influences from the wider world.

## II. WHAT IS “ETHNIC DANCE”?

The term “ethnic dance” is an umbrella under which gathers all dance expressions that serve the needs of a society whose members share genetic, linguistic, and cultural ties, with a special emphasis on cultural tradition. It is the widest base of dance within a given society, from which several types of branches out: ritual dance, folk dance, social dance, and concert dance (Bahat–Ratzon 2004:32). Folk dance, like ethnic dance, represents a specific cultural tradition, but places emphasis on the national element and a sense of belonging; it is the heritage of all strata of the people.<sup>2</sup> According to anthropologist and dance researcher Naomi Bahat–Ratzon, concert dance is positioned at the artistic apex of the pyramid. It is usually the product of an individual’s creative initiative as a medium for personal expression, requires professional training to perform and is intended for presentation before an audience (Ibid: 49).

Bahat–Ratzon classifies ethnic dances in Israel into three main groups:

1. Group One – Dances characteristic of Diaspora communities that were danced in exile and whose traditions are preserved in Israel as well. Although ethnic dance is not closed and is subject to environmental influences, these communities maintained unique, characteristic dance traditions. Upon returning to Israel, they continued to dance their characteristic dances, despite changes necessitated by time and place. A distinctive community tradition of dance has been preserved among Yemenite Jews of Central Yemen and among some Hasidic groups.
2. Group Two – Dances of the countries in the Diaspora that were adopted by Jewish communities while living there. This group includes Jewish communities that dance the dances of the peoples among whom they lived. Once these dances were adopted by a Jewish

community, they became identified with it internally and represented it externally. Included here are dances of Jews from Kurdistan; South and North Yemen; some communities from North Africa; Ethiopian Jews; Jewish communities in the Asiatic parts of Russia; and others.

3. Group Three – Dances of non–Jewish minority groups: Arabs, Bedouin, Druze, Circassians, and Armenians. In these groups we find ethnic dances characteristic of each group, which are largely like those of the same people in their countries of origin and in other diasporas (Ibid: 64–65).

## III. FROM OTTOMAN RULE TO THE BRITISH MANDATE

The First Aliyah, or wave of immigration (1881–1904) to the Land of Israel took place under Ottoman rule, when most of the land then formed part of the province of Southern Syria. From the First Aliyah through the Third (1919–1924), we witnessed beginnings of cultural life in the New Jewish Yishuv,<sup>3</sup> but not concert dance. The pioneers of these waves came from Eastern Europe, Asia, and Yemen. They were mostly individuals – except for the Yemenite immigration, which arrived in families – idealists who went to establish agricultural settlements. There were no professional dance artists among them. At times, after a grueling workday, they danced the folk dances on which they had grown up in their lands of origin. Gradually, Hebrew words with new content were set to Russian tunes – songs still sung by Israelis today.

After World War I the Ottoman Empire collapsed, and the Land of Israel was entrusted to Britain as a mandate. The British chose to call it “Palestine,” the name given by the Romans in 135 CE after suppressing the Bar Kokhba revolt.<sup>4</sup> The Romans changed the province’s name from Judaea to Syria Palaestina in order to erase and prevent the historical connection. All the inhabitants under the British mandate were considered Palestinians – Arabs and Jews. With the end of World War I in the early 1920s, a wave of immigration arrived, mostly from Eastern Europe, from the Bolshevik Revolution and the civil war in Russia. This time, the immigration included families, industrialists, writers, and artists – including those destined to become the pioneers of Hebrew concert dance: foremost Baruch Agadati, Rina Nikova, and Deborah Bertonoff

from the Soviet Union; Dania Levin (Turkmenistan); Margalit Ornstein (Austria).

Agadati and Nikova believed one should turn to ethnic dance as a source of inspiration for creating concert works. Their decision was reinforced by the national struggles for independence in late-19th-century Europe – the “Spring of Nations.” They turned to the small Yemenite community that had arrived on foot from

Yemen as early as 1881, a community perceived as the continuation of Jewish history broken by exile 2,000 years earlier. Influenced by European Orientalism, they also turned to the local Arabs. Agadati and Nikova did not seek to create dance from “primordial existence” – i.e., authentic or traditional – rather, they sought a modern Hebrew concert dance inspired by the figures and movement language of Yemenites and Arabs.



**Figure 1:** Baruch Agadati in his solo dance “Yemenite Ecstasy” (c.1920). Unknown photographer. Courtesy of the Israeli Dance Archive, Beit Ariela, Tel Aviv.

Agadati also drew inspiration from Hasidic dance. This was surprising, since at that time there was a tendency to reject Diaspora culture to make room for a Hebrew culture. The choice stemmed from a search for movement language, not religious reasons. He explained: “The Jew is full of movement and does not speak without his hands, and when he dances, he wants to explain. The expression of this specific movement is my goal in dance” (Agadati, *Tzfira*, 19.7.1927). Agadati’s varied background as a ballet dancer and an avantgarde painter found expression in his choreography and in the design of costumes and posters he created. His Hasidic-inspired dances and costumes were designed in a Constructivism style.<sup>5</sup> In the Yemenite-inspired works he was captivated by the delicate, inward, spiritual quality of movement that

evoked Impressionist painting and danced with musical accompaniment, in silence.<sup>6</sup> Critic Deborah Rozolio wrote of the Yemenite-inspired dances: “These dances do not rely solely on external forms: they probe their inner content – subtle emotional compositions that he discovers and expresses in his magnificent body” (Rozolio, 1927: Press clipping). Among his works is a solo titled “The Arab from Jaffa.” Usually rural types provided inspiration – especially shepherds, associated with biblical imagination that saw the Hebrews as shepherds with staff. Here, however, Agadati depicts an urban Arab figure that perhaps mirrors Agadati himself – dancing lightly on the border of effeminacy, always ready to pass from beauty to distortion.

Between 1922 and 1926, Agadati toured Europe. He saw himself as a Land-of-Israel dancer of Russian origin, performing exotic Hebrew dances of Yemenites, Arabs, and Hasidim with an avant-garde approach. In an article by journalist Uri Kesari, Agadati addressed European expectations: "It is interesting that everywhere I went I found great enthusiasm precisely among non-Jews. They love the specificity in my dances, the specificity in my expression, and this very specificity does not satisfy Jews, who would prefer to see in me a regular improvement upon European dances." (Kesari, *Doar Ha-Yom*, 13.2.1928).

Like Agadati, Rina Nikova's professional training was in classical ballet. She founded a company with young Yemenite women and sought "to show on the stage the splendid weave of our ancient history. It differs from Israeli dance [i.e., folk dance] in that it is more theatrical, more literary and decorative, and less purely movement based" (Interview with Nikova 30.11.1953). Her dances were situated in a romantic-pastoral atmosphere in nature; the return to nature was felt as an existential experience symbolizing the renewal of the Hebrew pioneer.



Figure 2: Nikova Biblical Ballet. "Work in Yemen" (c.1930). Photo: Ernst Kraus. Ruth Eshel Archive.

In 1937 the company sailed for a European tour. Europe was already infected by the spread of Nazism and Fascism; accordingly, they did not perform in Germany, Austria, or Italy, but did perform in Switzerland, Belgium, the Netherlands, England, Poland, Scandinavia, and the Baltic states. According to dance scholar Sari Elron, "Non-Jews described her more as 'Arab' and less as 'Hebrew'; the Jewish audience, by contrast, received the company as an authentic representative of the burgeoning Land-of-Israel culture" (Elron, 2022:17).

#### IV. THE RISE OF THE NAZIS

In the mid-1930s, following the Nazis' ascent to power in Europe, Jews fled, and some arrived in the Land of Israel (Palestine). Immigration from

Central Europe brought dancers who had performed in leading Ausdruckstanz (German Dance of Expression) companies, including those of Vera Skoronel and Mary Wigman. These dancers esteemed the ethnic soloists who had toured Europe between the wars, and their repertoires included ethnic dances adapted for the stage. The popularity can be partly explained by the early-20th-century archaeological discoveries in ancient Egypt and Heinrich Schliemann's discoveries of ancient Troy, which fired the Western imagination; "the exotic" became a fashionable trend.

The dancers who arrived were proud to belong to Ausdruckstanz - a style in formation and considered avant-garde in its time. They believed

Ausdruckstanz provided a sufficiently open framework to convey universal ideas as well as national ones. Thus, Hebrew dance topics were often biblical yet expressed in the movement language of Ausdruckstanz. Gertrud Kraus – formerly Rudolf von Laban’s assistant in Europe and a noted dancer-choreographer – created in Austria her suite “Ghetto Dances,” drawing on Hasidic dance and Biblical subjects. Upon immigrating, she recognized the Orientalist stamp on those figures and rejected them. Instead, in 1935, she choreographed and danced “Impression of Eretz-Israeli Landscapes,” a suite that was danced in silence and featured The Blessing of Dawn, Hamsin (heat wave from the desert), Tree Song, Stone, Twilight, Night, and Sun. These were minimalist dances, the essence of an expression. She said, “The Eretz-Israeliness of art is a tone, perhaps a color, or a ray of light skimming all. The artist absorbs from the land, created from its roots” (Kraus 1947: press clipping).

An exception among Ausdruckstanz artists was Yardena Cohen, born in the country, sixth generation on her father’s side. In 1929 she went to Dresden and studied with Gret Palucca. Back home,

Cohen regarded the Arab culture in which she was raised as a natural source for the creation of Bible dances, depicting biblical women in dramatic moments. Like her colleagues in the 1930s, she performed solo programs, yet her style sparked debate. Poet-critic Leah Goldberg wrote: “Yardena Cohen dances Eastern dance, but it is a photograph. We, Jews who rolled about for two thousand years in European lands, who heard Beethoven and saw Russian ballet, the companies of modern dancers from Isadora Duncan onward – is this really our feeling of the East? Can we react to our Hamsin [hot wind from the desert] exactly as some Bedouin woman does?” (Goldberg, *Davar*, 22.10.1937). However, theater critic Haim Gamzu, by contrast, addressed the modernist element he perceived in her work: “There is a special character to Yardena Cohen’s dances: an identification with Eastern rhythm, a spiritual identification, not an imitation. Not for a moment does the viewer sense that a pure Eastern dance is before us. There are here the perfumes of the East – and something else. And that something else imposes a measured discipline, expressed in the secret of restraint in movement....” (Gamzu, 1939: Press clipping).



**Figure 3:** Yardena Cohen dances her solo “The Mourner” (1937). Photo: Hella Fernbach. Courtesy of the Israeli Dance Archive, Beit Ariela, Tel Aviv.

## V. EXPRESSIONIST DANCE ARTISTS AND THE “HOLIDAY PAGEANTS”

Most pioneers who arrived were secular and needed new holidays and rituals to replace religious ones – frameworks that could unify internally and represent externally. Rudolf von Laban, the theoretician and guru of Ausdruckstanz, argued that one role of artists in this field was to create “movement choirs” in place of traditional folk dances. He staged mass spectacles on themes of trade unions for amateurs – works in the “spirit of the times” (Manor, 1978: 33).

The Land of Israel was a rare laboratory for his ideas: a small, isolated country yearning for original folk-dances and the revival of ancient agricultural festivals to express the pioneering

renewal in the land, and Ausdruckstanzartists who had come from or studied in Central Europe with the ability to realize this vision. Thus, in the 1930s – 40s, drawing on Laban’s ideas, concert dancers created the massehet (pageant in Hebrew) – a synthesis of movement, dance, text, and song. Pageants were staged under open skies; the holiday’s content emerged from the site’s historical context, with the topography itself serving as natural scenography. The dances interwoven into the pageants were designed for the pageant’s directed performance; their creators saw them as artistic-ritual dances adapted to amateur performers. Land-of-Israel composers wrote music for these spoken-song-dance events. Occasionally such a dance became popular and crossed over – “seized by the people” from pageant and stage to become a true folk dance.



Figure 4: Members of Kibbutz Ramat Yohanan in the “Spring Omer Festival” procession to the special stage built in the fields, c.1940.

Unknown photographer. Courtesy of the Inter-Kibbutz Institute – Holidays/Festivals – Ramat Yohanan.



**Figure 5:** Leah Bergstein's "Spring Omer Festival" took place on a special stage built in the fields of Kibbutz Ramat Yohanan, c.1940. Unknown photographer. Courtesy of the Inter-Kibbutz Institute – Holidays/Festivals – Ramat Yohanan.

Among the leading creators were Lea Bergstein, who arrived from Austria and created the "Festival of Sheep Shearing," and the "Omer (harvest) festival" at Kibbutz Ramat Yohanan.<sup>7</sup> Yardena Cohen reconstructed at Kibbutz Sha'ar HaAmakim the biblical story of Yael and Sisera [*Book of Judges*, chapters 4–5] upon discovering it had occurred there. She took the event outdoors, to the original landscape, inviting all kibbutz members to participate and even neighbors from nearby Arab villages. Cohen wrote: "On the holiday, I asked a vendor from the Jezreel Valley to invite the nearby Arab village, perched on the hilltop, to celebrate with us. They even joined the light field feast in the courtyard. When they came, dressed in festive clothes with their wives and children to rejoice with us, I heard them say: 'By God, they are not Jews, but the Children of Israel...'" (Cohen, 1963:50). In the "Water Festival," sprinklers played a role, as did shepherds moving in the background with their herds. Their model was adopted by most concert-dance creators, who also produced holiday pageants.<sup>8</sup> The 1940s saw the first attempts to create Israeli folk dance, thanks mainly to two immigrants from Europe, Gurit Kadman (née Grete Lowenstein Kaufman) and Rivka Shturman. From 1944 through 1958 there were five folk dance

festivals at Kibbutz Dalia, located in the Galilee region, about 30 km southeast of Haifa. The festival aimed to bring together people working in folk dance, and holiday pageants such as Yardena Cohen, Lea Bergstein, Sara Levi-Tanai, Gurit Kadman and Rivka Shturman.

The first Dalia Festival 1944 symbolically and practically marked the beginning of the folk-dance movement as an institutionalized movement under national governing bodies, foremost among them the Histadrut – General Organization of Workers in the Land of Israel (Roginsky 2004: 25). Because the Dalia festival occurred shortly after World War II and many thought it was not a time for a dance celebration. However, Gurit–Kadman who organized the first Dalia Festival "decided to hold the festival in spite of the unfathomable tragedy and suffering, the events embodied defiance: They showcased the new Jewish body and epitomized Hebrew strength precisely at a time when Jews were being annihilated" (Spigel 2013:135).

The idea of creating a folk dance, like the idea of creating a concert dance, sparked debates both for and against. Critic Leah Goldberg addressed this issue: "They showed [Dalia 1944] the dances and with them the basic question was also shown: the

question of the dance – of a nation in particular, and the question of folklore in general – is it possible to create folk art not in a natural-historical path, but out of a wish and direct cultivation,” (*Al HaMishmar*, 23.7.1944). But despite the debate on the matter, the Jews in the Yishuv wanted folk dances of their own. “Dalia Madness’ seemed to infect Tel Aviv like the other towns and villages. Nobody remembered anything quite like it,” (*Palestine Post*, 22.6.1947).

The second Dalia Festival 1947 took place on the eve of the War of Independence. During this

time of great political tension, and despite a British imposed curfew under which no one could travel after sunset, 25,000 people arrived – approximately 5 percent of the Jewish population. Whereas at the first Dalia Festival the debates revolved mainly around whether it was possible to create folk dances artificially and rapidly, at the 1947 festival the debates centered on the abundance of performances by concert dance artists and their contribution.



Figure 6: Dalia Festival 1947. “Harmonika” by Rivka Shturman. Unknown photographer. Courtesy of The Israeli Dance Archive at Beit Ariela, Tel-Aviv.



Figure 7: Dalia Festival 1947. “The Well” performed by students of the Mikveh-Israel Agricultural school. Unknown photographer. Courtesy of the Israeli Dance Archive, Beit Ariela, Tel Aviv.

In 1947, Gertrud Kraus opened the festival with her new dance "Davka" (in spite of it being in Hebrew) after hearing that her mother had been taken to a concentration camp. For her and the Yishuv, "Davka" meant that we will go on dancing, and go on living. In addition, Agadati performed his "Ora [awaken in Hebrew] Gllilit" (1924) the first Hebrew folk-dance.<sup>9</sup> Dance and theatre critic Giora Manor states, "In the dance he is seen holding a shepherd; staff in his hand, in deep pli  , while raising his leg high, the bent knee and raised leg lending extra emphasis to the stamping typical of the Hora, an exaggeration not found in the dance as usually executed: (Manor, 1984:9). Yemenite women from Rina Nikova's dance troupe performed at the event and Yardena Cohen created a fisherman's dance and Ausdruckstanz dancer Elsa Dublon performed her folk dance "Ma-yim, Ma-yim" (water in Hebrew).<sup>10</sup>

Kadman's original intention was for the festival to showcase the accomplishments in the field of Israeli folk dance. However, once performances were transferred onto a formal stage, the folk dancers appeared as amateurs, and a process of intermingling with concert dance ensued. "Because folk and theatrical dance were created at the same time by many of the same people, who also shared several notions about source of authenticity, these two arenas overlapped. Yet each form simultaneously aimed to distinguish itself from the other and to establish its own character" (Spiegel 2013: 147).

There are several reasons why the Dalia Festivals ended after 1968. The festival form may have become less suited to the evolving tastes of dance audiences and practitioners, especially as concert dance and other modern dance trends gained dominance. In addition, the tradition and symbolic role once held by Dalia were, in later decades, taken up by newer dance festivals – most prominently the Karmiel Dance Festival, launched in 1987 (more later).

## VI. STATEHOOD AND THE "MELTING POT" POLICY

World War II broke out in 1939. The country became culturally isolated and relied on its internal reservoir. While Ausdruckstanz collapsed in Europe and was rejected in many countries as identified with Nazi Germany, Ausdruckstanz concert dance in Eretz Israel/Palestine flourished. After the War, the

European powers began divesting from their colonies in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. The UN Partition Plan to divide the land into two states (Jewish and Arab) was adopted on November 29, 1947, with Jewish agreement. The British Mandate ended on May 15, 1948, and seven Arab armies invaded to destroy the nascent state. Israel's victory established new borders and also produced waves of refugees – Arab and Jewish. Arabs left – either voluntarily, confident of Arab armies' victory, or were expelled from their homes in the Land of Israel (an issue debated to this day). At the same time, Jews were expelled from all Arab and Muslim countries and arrived destitute. They came from enemy states, spoke their languages, and were shaped by their cultures. Whole communities arrived from Iraq, Yemen, Libya, Morocco, Iran, Tunisia, and Egypt. Holocaust survivors arrived from Europe's death camps after losing loved ones and property. Immigrants also came from the USA, South Africa, England, India, and even China. The number of newcomers exceeded that of the absorbing population.

The young state became a Tower of Babel – a m  lange of cultures of Jews from across the globe. To address this, the government formulated a melting-pot policy, which argued against cultivating each community's heritage to create a shared core for all. From this core, it was hoped Israeli culture would emerge.

Gurit Kadman saw with alarm the imminent danger to ethnic heritages and feared it was immediate and acute. She was the prime mover behind encouraging, supporting, and advising members of different communities who sought to cultivate their heritage and characteristic dances. In the mass immigration period after statehood, she went out with cameras and recording devices – sometimes just days after a community's arrival – to document their dances in their original form. She worked alongside ethnomusicologist Dr. Esther Gerson-Kiwi, who recorded instrumental and vocal music of the communities, including Arabs, Druze, and Circassians. This rare material is housed in the Dance Library at Beit Ariela in Tel Aviv.

With statehood, Israel opened to the world. Ausdruckstanz was rejected, and in its place the American dance – Martha Graham's style – was embraced. This style offered Israeli concert dancers a codified movement lexicon, a method for training dancers, and a language for choreography.

The aspiration of Israel's dance community was to professionalize to a universal standard – to be "like America."

## VII. INBAL DANCE THEATER

Against this background, the development of Inbal Dance Theater was exceptional. Sara Levy-Tanai was born into a Yemenite family, orphaned young, and raised in a youth village on the foundations of European culture. At forty, seeking to tap her creative force, she gathered young Yemenite women and formed the Oriental Troupe. In an interview to dancer and researcher Judith Brin-Ingber, Levi-Tanai said: "The yellow desert landscape, the capricious climate, the vision of the dunes next to the sea, the veils of sand that are carried by the southeast winds, the camels' steps,

their proud necks held high, their bells ringing, the horses' galloping hoofs all influenced me. The ecstasy of the song of the Jewish pioneers who were my first teachers, and their wild dancing in the nights, all nurtured the worlds of my childhood and were the sources that awoke my spirit and body to urge me to create" (In Brin -Ingber, editor, 2011:29).

In 1951, American choreographer Jerome Robbins visited Israel, was captivated by the dark-skinned Jewish dancers and an unfamiliar movement language – and upon his recommendation, the Israel Foundation Fund began to support the Oriental Troupe, which became Inbal Dance Theater, the first supported professional company. He also recruited American choreographer-dancer Anna Sokolow to come to Israel and train the company.



Figure 8: Inbal Dance Theatre. "A Psalm of David" (1963) by Sara Levi-Tanai. Dancers: Lea Avraham and Zion Nuriel. Photo: Mula Eshet. Courtesy of the Israeli Dance Archive, Beit Ariela, Tel Aviv



**Figure 9 :** Inbal Dance Theatre. "Songs of Songs" (1982) by Sara Levi-Tanai. Upper row: Zion Nuriel, Tamar Salomi. Photo: Gerar Allon. Courtesy of the Israeli Dance Archive, Beit Ariela, Tel Aviv.

Levi-Tanai distinctiveness – compared with earlier artists who turned to Yemenite sources – lay in expanding the movement language from within, i.e., from the ethnic DNA, while distancing it from movement elements identified with other genres (Eshel in Rottenberg and Roginsky, 2015: 281). She deconstructed and recomposed movement materials characteristic of the ethnic dance of Yemenite Jews and created a rich lexicon for stage dance for her personal expression. The "Inbalit" language grew together with the repertoire; the body of works across years enabled ongoing development, with the dancers as partners in its construction.<sup>11</sup> From the late 1950s onward, Inbal toured extensively and enjoyed meteoric success. Paradoxically, this very success – representing Israel's dance abroad – intensified ambivalence at home. Pride in their achievements was coupled with discomfort that an ethnic troupe identified with a small, specific community represented Israeli dance overseas – precisely at a time when the young state sought to project unity rather than segmentation and multiculturalism.

Perhaps such sensitivities about representation would not have grown so charged had Inbal been just one among several Israeli companies touring abroad. But after statehood, Inbal was the first stage dance company to appear abroad.

After Levy-Tanai's retirement, Rina Sharet was appointed artistic director, followed by former soloists Margalit Oved and Ilana Cohen. They created works for the company, but no successor emerged with Levy-Tanai's choreographic genius to lead the company forward.

### VIII. DETACHMENT AND THE CREATION OF "ISRAELI STAGE DANCE"

From the 1960s to the late 1980s – about three decades – concert dance and ethnic dance moved apart. Concert dance professionalized and toured the world – led by Batsheva, Bat-Dor, and Kibbutz Contemporary Dance Company. According to dance scholar Dan Ronen, for many professional dance figures ethnic dance and the communities' folk dances seemed tied to outdated worldviews of

nationalism – at odds with fashionable ideas of “artistic freedom,” “the end of nationalism,” “multiculturalism,” etc (Ronen 2004: 78). While, in parallel, several ethnic folk ensembles were founded, seeking to represent the dance traditions they brought from their countries of origin.

If the professional companies showed little interest in ethnic and folk dances, the void was filled by a new form known as “Israeli Dance for the Stage” (Mahol Yisra’eli la-bama). Jhonatan Karmon, who studied dance with Gertrud Kraus and ballet with Mia Arbatova, developed in the 1950s a professional dance company, created stage-oriented folk style, combining basic elements of then-characteristic Israeli folk dance (steps, skips, runs, etc.) with movement components from ethnic dances of Israel’s communities and ballet. It is likely that he was influenced by the Igor Moiseyev

Dance Company, which was founded in 1937 in the Soviet Union. Scholar Anthony Shay: “He [Igor Moiseyev] greatly expanded and developed character dance to produce a folklorized dance style that was initially unique to the Moiseyev Dance Company, and subsequently many other companies, both inside and outside of the former Soviet Union, faithfully emulated it” (Shay 1999:43). In 1959 the Karmon Dance Company went on its first U.S. tour, achieved great success, and continued touring for many years. Karmon’s company was perceived as a folk and ethnic-dance ensemble adapted for the stage – a kind of Israeli counterpart to the Soviet Moiseyev Company. Over time, generations of choreographers – mostly his students – developed this direction, which continues vigorously today.



Figure 10: Karmon Dance Company – Karmon Company Archive. Alon Schmidt Collection.

Seeking to bring flourishing concert dance together with Israeli folk and ethnic dances, Karmon and Tirza Hodes founded the Karmiel Dance Festival in 1988, which, in the eyes of many, was a continuation of the Dalia Festivals. For over a decade it combined folk ensembles, ethnic and minority dances, international folk groups, and troupes of children, youth, adults, and people with disabilities – together with concert dance companies from Israel and abroad. It was a successful formula that merged stage dance with a public that also dances. There were hopes that Karmiel – this meeting of audiences – would also generate a meeting of genres. “On the festival

grounds they shared the same space, but each retained autonomy. The festival did not initiate or provide a framework for dialogue between the professional artistic field and others” (Ronen, 2004:80).

## IX. FIRST SIGNS OF RAPPROCHEMENT

For the first time, in the early 1990s, we see several works by choreographers integrating ethnic elements into their contemporary creations. Reasons included: a domestic climate supporting pluralism; globalization – “the shrinking world” – which increased uniformity in economy, culture,

lifestyle, and consumption; and postmodern ideology encouraging the weaving and blending of cultures from any time and place.

Despite doomsday prophecies – and perhaps as a counter-reaction to the erosion of identities – there remained and even grew an understanding of citizens' responsibility to choose between preserving uniqueness and community on the one hand and joining globalization on the other. Thus, after three decades of disconnect, we can identify early signs of rapprochement.

A common trait among the choreographers discussed here is that all are veteran, recognized creators in contemporary dance who dared to turn to an ethnic source – each for their own reasons.

In 1990, 500 years after the expulsion of the Jews from Spain by the Inquisition, a festival in Israel encouraged several companies to create

works on the theme. One outcome of the expulsion was the dispersal of the then largest and wealthiest Jewish center across Europe and the Mediterranean basin; some came to Jerusalem and settled there. To this day they speak Ladino, developed from medieval Spanish enriched with Hebrew, Aramaic, and words from the languages of their new lands. Choreographer Moshe Efrati, a former principal with Batsheva dance company and himself of Sephardi heritage, created "Camina Y Tourna" (1990), a dance about Jewish wandering and exile through the generations, interweaving scenes of Sephardi folkways – such as healing rituals recalling exorcism – proverbs, and dances. The hugely popular musical "Bustan Sfaradi" (Spanish Orchard) by Israel's fifth President Yitzhak Navon likewise is devoted – through story and dance – to the Sephardi community and is still staged today.



**Figure 11:** Moshe Efrati Dance Company – Kol Demama. "Camina-Y-Tourna" (1991) by Moshe Efrati. Dancers: Avital Cohen (above), left to right: Adi Baram, Orly Portal, and Tal Bet-Halachmi. Photo: Yoram Rubin. Courtesy of Moshe Efrati

The duo Liat Dror and Nir Ben-Gal represented the young Israeli dance of the early 1990s. They surprised by integrating Middle Eastern belly dance in "Inta Omri" (1994, the Arabic phrase means: 'you are my life'), and "Dance of Nothing" (1999). This was not in response to the global belly-dance trend but part of a genuine effort to integrate into the Middle East. "Inta Omri" opened with Dror in a modest black outfit, performing a belly-dance solo – an ode to the female pelvis/hips – soft, undulating movement: a kind of 'Great Mother,' ever-present, threatening and radiating security. She danced with upturned eyes, as if to herself, inviting the audience to contemplate her

inner landscape rather than consume her as a belly dancer; the moves were not alluring but defiant (Eshel 2017: 628). "Dance of Nothing" was presented in a large tent – a kind of life-ritual of a Middle Eastern tribe living in a desert encampment, baking cookies for guests. Over two hours, they dance, love, rest, and listen together to the mother's storytelling (Dror). There are no beginning, middle, and end – only a mantra-like undulation in the body and the time of baking trailing them; once the cookies were ready, they offered them to the audience. Later, Dror and Ben-Gal left Tel Aviv for Mitzpe Ramon in the desert to live simply and later opened a dance program in Sderot near Gaza.



**Figure 12:** The Liat Dror and Nir Ben Gal—the Company. "The Dance of Nothing" (1999) by Dror and Ben Gal. Photo: Vardi Kahana. Courtesy of Liat Dror and Nir Ben Gal.

Choreographer, singer, and playwright Barak Marshall is known for his bold, theatrical works that blend dance, music, and storytelling. Barak Marshall grew up in Los Angeles to a Yemenite mother (Margalit Oved, the ballerina of Inbal's original troupe) and an American Jewish father. He studied social theory and philosophy at Harvard University before turning to choreography. In 1994 he came to Israel after his mother was appointed Inbal's artistic director and began creating independently. The differences between American and Yemenite cultures – and the equal weight both held in his development – led him to create dances in which the fusion of identities feels natural. His works

include Hasidic dance, Yemenite dance, folk motifs, pop, contemporary dance, humor, and theatricality. They comprise scenes with sharp transitions between cultures, times, and places, delivered via costumes and a collage-like musical world: Middle Eastern ethnic music, classical, Hasidic, opera, and more. Notable works include "Monger" (2008), and "Rooster" (2009), and "Wonderland" (2020). In an interview with scholar Yonat Rothman (Rothman 2009: 13–15), he describes the inner conflict from which the dances are born: on the one hand a sense of belonging to the country because of proximity to family in Israel, friends, and dancers; Israeli dancers, he says, are full of energy, with

warmth and humanity in their movement that helps him express himself. Marshall divides his time between Los Angeles – where he directs a

successful company – and Israel. In late 2025 he was appointed artistic director of Inbal Dance Theater.



**Figure 13:** “Rooster” (2000), choreographed by Barak Marshall. Batsheva Dance Company. Left to right: Jasper Throp, Yaniv Nagar, Adi Slant, and Keren Malkit. Photo: Gadi Dagon. Courtesy of the Batsheva Dance Company Archive and the Israeli Dance Archive, Beit Ariela, Tel Aviv.

Dancer-choreographer Renana Raz explores Israeli identity and created “Kazueria” (Cassowaries) inspired by Druse Dabkeh.<sup>12</sup> Dance researcher Einav Rosenblit writes: “The women on Raz’s stage appear stronger than the men. When their bodies adopt the energy of the masculine dabkeh, a feminine physical capacity is revealed that surpasses the

customary masculine stomping of the original dance. The uncompromising physicality leaves the five dancers tired but smiling, towards the men who enter at the end and join them in a joint dabkeh that suddenly seems easy to perform. Raz dances the powers of the woman, who may be the stronger sex” (Rosenblit, 2009:12)



**Figure 14:** “Kazueria” (2009), choreographed by Renana Raz. Photo: Avi Natan

## X. ARAB ETHNIC DANCE

After the Nakba (Catastrophe in Arabic)<sup>13</sup>, Israel's Arab population<sup>14</sup> was bereft of its cultural elite, cut off from its connections with Arab nations and cultural centers to which their eyes had turned – Egypt, Lebanon, and Damascus in Syria. The Israeli Arabs turned to preserve and develop folklore as part of a quest for national identity; "Dabkeh" became prominent. The Communist Party influenced the promotion of "Dabkeh" companies and ballet in the Arab population. This requires an explanation regarding ballet. The first Israeli Knesset (parliament) of 1949 included three Arab members. As in other lands around the world within the Soviet sphere of influence, local Arab Communist activists were invited to the USSR for continuing education. There they encountered ballet as a great art capable of expressing any idea, including socialist ones. They brought love of and respect for ballet home with them.

From the middle of the 1980s and during the 1990s there were dance classes at Kfar Yasif, Haifa, Shfar'am, Nazareth, and Jaffa, with some developing into dance centers where the following generations would grow up. Most of this was among Christian Arabs. By the late 1990s, Arab students were

entering higher-education dance programs such as the Workshop at Kibbutz Ga'aton (home to Kibbutz Contemporary Dance Company), the Jerusalem Academy of Music and Dance, and the dance school at Seminar HaKibbutzim at Tel Aviv. Footnote 15 The first Arab-society dance company, founded in Haifa in 1979, was Salma. Founder-director Ferial Khashiboun developed her own style blending free expressive-dance style with Middle Eastern dances: Egyptian, Lebanese, Arab, and Palestinian. Her aim, she said, was to shape an innovative dance with cultural and social message (interview with Eshel, 7.7.2016). The first seeds of the Sawiya (together, in Arabic) dance School at Shfa'arm were sown at the beginning of the 1990s when Rotary Shfar'am found a large hall at Nazareth Nuns convent and invited Rita Wakim to teach ballet there. Towards the late 2000s, the director Rahiv Hadad, asked Shaul Gilad, who had been running the music and dance studio at the Beit She'an (Jordan river) Regional Council for 26 years, to direct the dance track at Sawiya for four years. The new generation of teachers included Sahar Damouni, Shaden Abu Ellassal (Arab), Diti Tor and Rachel Efrat-Assaf (Jewish). In Nazareth, Wedad Atallah founded Al-Amal (Hope in Arabic), combining ballet, modern, and Oriental dance. Other teachers who founded companies include Irina Jamal (ballet and Eastern dance) and Rita Shukair Wakim (Eastern dance and flamenco).



Figure 15: Sawiya Dance School – Shfar'am, "State of Siege" (2012) by Sahar Damouni, Shaden Abu Ellassal, Diti Tor, and Wassim Hair. Photo: Rula Nasir. Courtesy of Sahar Damouni.

A central figure is Rabeah Morkus, formerly a dancer with Kibbutz Contemporary Dance Company at Ga'aton, who in 2007 opened her own school in Kfar Yasif; her troupe blends contemporary dance with motifs from Oriental and Sufi dance. Some of her works address the Nakba, & her dance vocabulary is based on contemporary dance with Oriental motifs. In 2010, she presented her piece "Exodus and the Odyssey" at an

international dance festival at Ramallah (The Palestinian Authority) & Jordan. Morkus established the first dance track in the Arab sector at the Notre Dance High School in the Christian village Mi'ilya, and she is one of the faculty in the theater at the Western Galilee College. Together with Sharon Ashkenazi and later Ilanit Tadmor, she formed Bridges Dance Group (2014), connecting Jewish and Arab youth through dance (Tadmor 1988).



Figure 16: "Sufi Dance" (2011), choreographed and performed by Rabeah Morkus. Courtesy of Rabeah Morkus.

In 1993 the Arab-Jewish Community Center was founded in Jaffa's Ajami neighborhood by the Tel Aviv Municipality in partnership with the LA Jewish community, to further coexistence and tolerance among the Arab and Jewish populations there. Its school and stage projects are created in partnership with Batsheva Dance Company and

Israeli artists – prominently Yasmeen Godder. Sahar Damoni is a Palestinian Arab Christian dancer. She was born in Shfar'am and holds a Bachelor's in dance and Movement for Practicing Teachers from Kibbutzim College of Education. Her work engages deeply with themes of gender, identity, politics, and the body in the context of Palestinian/Arab society.



**Figure 17:** *"We Love Arabs"* (2014), choreographed by Hillel Kogan. Dancers: Adi Boutrous and Hillel Kogan. Photo: Gadi Dagon. Courtesy of Hillel Kogan.

Unlike in the past, when cooperating with Jews was considered betrayal in the eyes of the Palestinians, today there is a willingness to take part in choreographies by Israeli creators. There are also few joint Jewish–Arab stage projects, among them featuring Hillel Kogan's *"We Love Arabs"* with Adi Boutrous – an Arab Christian dancer – mixing dance, text, and humor to grapple with identity and politics in the Middle East. "Body Dance Place – Performance Encounters City" is an annual project conceived and directed by Neta Pulvermacher, in her capacity as Artistic Director of the Dance Ensemble of the Jerusalem Academy of Music and Dance. "Body Dance Place" is an eight-month research and creative process shared by Israeli and Palestinian artists (dancers, singers, dramaturgs, designers, and choreographers). Its central theme is the city of Jerusalem and its diverse communities. The process culminates each year in a series of site-specific performances that take place in a different public or historical site in Jerusalem. Neta Pulvermacher's aspiration is to bring the rival nations closer together.

## XI. RENEWED CONVERGENCE

From the early 2000s, Israeli contemporary dance has blossomed. Whereas in the early 1990s only a few choreographers integrated ethnic dance – and, apart from Liat Dror, usually in a single work the situation has shifted: several artists now build

an oeuvre consistently fusing contemporary dance with an ethnic source. I believe several factors are at play:

- A supportive pluralist spirit. Yossi Yona, former head of the Forum for Society and Culture, captured a supportive pluralist spirit: "We must give expression to pluralism while avoiding the cultivation of separatism and enmity. We can build here a society with a shared denominator if every citizen can define their identity as part of the Israeli collective that seeks to shed sectarian features, while also allowing them to define their collective identity within sub-communities."
- A growing interest of contemporary choreographers in original movement languages and finding one's own specific voice.
- According to Goren-Kadman there is a universal pattern among immigrant communities: the first generation remains rooted in the culture of origin; the second tends to shed ancestral traditions to integrate into the dominant modern culture; the third – already integrated – develops an ambivalent stance, including renewed curiosity about the grandparents' traditions (Goren-Kadman 2009: 15).

Ronen concludes, "Anyone engaged in folk dance and heritage preservation discovers forces –

perhaps as an antithesis to globalization and identity loss – working to preserve and revive cultural heritages and to continue creating in styles appropriate to the contemporary world” (2004: 79).

## XII. DANCING SHOULDERS

Israel's residents looked on in amazement and pride on May 24–25, 1991, when over 24 hours dozens of Israeli planes flew to Addis Ababa and airlifted 15,000 members of the Ethiopian Jewish community – Operation Solomon. It was preceded by the secret Operation Moses in the early 1980s, when thousands of Jews fled Communist Ethiopia and crossed the Sudanese desert to points where Israeli planes waited. When the secret became known, the operation was cut short. The estimate is that 5,000 Jews lost their lives during Operation Moses..

That dream, of Ethiopian Jews (known as Falasha – strangers, or Beta Israel – house of Israel as they call themselves) was to immigrate to "Yerusalem" (Jerusalem, the Land of Israel). The longing for Jerusalem, was passed on from father to son, and from generation to generation. Most of the Ethiopian Jews lived in North Ethiopia in small villages, situated in the middle of nature, and their small houses, made of mud and straw. There was no running water in the house and no electricity. All the people in the villages were Jews who preserved

their Judaism devoutly over many years. Today, 2025, Israelis of Ethiopian origin number about 190,000.

That year, during Operation Solomon (1991), Gila Toledano, head of Israel's Dance Library, asked me to conduct an ethnographic study. The Ethiopian community – whose legend traces descent to King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba – intrigued me. I bought a video camera and toured the country's absorption caravan sites for Ethiopian and Russian immigrants,<sup>15</sup> depositing dozens of hours of documentation in the Dance Library at Beit-Ariela.

Most Ethiopian Jews came from the Gondar region (some from what is now Eritrea). They dance the Eskesta – “shoulder dances” – learned from the Amhara among whom they lived. Their distinctively Jewish component is their liturgy, sung in Ge'ez,<sup>16</sup> the ancient language predating Ethiopia's Christianization. Eskesta offers a rich world of shoulder motifs differing in rhythms, directions, and qualities. Shoulders move vertically and horizontally, in straight lines or half-circles (twist), symmetrically or asymmetrically. Basic movements are amplified by imaginary scales of displacement – like a map of stations for the shoulders. To intensify the shoulders, one can add upper-torso flexion forward and backward. The arms are passive, elbows bent to the sides, thumbs resting on the hip



Figure 18: Eskesta Dance Troupe. “Opus for Shoulders” (2001), choreographed by Ruth Eshel. Photo: Ofer Zvulun. Ruth Eshel Archive.

In late 1995 I founded the Eskesta Dance Theatre at the University of Haifa, then home to some 300 Ethiopian-origin students. The company worked there for a decade; later I founded Beta ("house" in Amharic) at the Neve Yosef Community Center – a neighborhood of immigrants from Ethiopia and the former Soviet Union.<sup>17</sup> My aim was

to create a contemporary Ethiopian dance, to expand the language from within through the dancers' natural movement – steering clear of recognizable Western stage genres. The creative process relied on image-based instructions I gave and asked the dancers to improvise in silence to heighten inner listening.



Figure 19: Beta Dance Troupe. "What the Shoulders Remember" (2005) by Ruth Eshel. Left to right: Gilat Bayenne, Gila Betualin, and Dege Feder (front).

Photo: Reuven Eshel. Ruth Eshel Archive

In 2005 I transferred Beta's artistic direction to Dege [Levi] Feder, a former soloist in both companies. Dege was born in a village in north Ethiopia. When she was eight years old, she joined her big brothers, who were then twelve and fourteen to join Operation Moses. Her brothers were caught by the police, and put in prison, accused of treason. Dege succeeded to hide and later joined other Jews who were beginning the journey to cross the Sudan desert. "We traveled by foot, without shoes. We traveled only at night, without any light, in order not to be caught by local residents or the dangerous robbers who would wait to find opportunities along the way, and during the day we would stop hiding. At a certain point in the journey, we ran out of food

and drink. We had to continue for several days without eating or drinking," (Feder in Jackson, Pappas and Shapiro-Phim 2022:175).

In Israel she studied Art at the University Haifa, where she joined Eskesta Dance Troupe and subsequently, she was part of the ensemble of dancers who, together with me, founded the Beta Dance Troupe. Today, although she is a well-known and esteemed artist, she faces difficulties: "My work cannot be labeled in a straightforward manner as 'contemporary dance' or 'Ethiopian dance,' as I straddle the boundary between the two. On the one hand, I was lucky to have been raised in Ethiopia, and absorbed the environment, in the way of life,

the character, the connection to nature, and the culture of Ethiopia, and on the other hand when I arrived in Israel I absorbed the modern way of life and the possibility of observing and learning about a variety of other cultures. My encounter with two worlds gave me creative freedom to think, and an ability to be inspired by all the worlds. From that richness, and over years of work, there developed in

me a distinctive language of movement which is characteristic of both my cultures, and it identified with me" (Ibid 2022:188–189). Dege places emphasis on abstract compositions and movement language, and integrates in her dances both Ethiopian-origin dancers and Israeli "franjim" (light-skinned Israelis) who are enthusiastic to work with her.



Figure 20: "Jalo", choreographed and performed by Dege Feder. Photo: Dan Ben-Ari.

Dege Feder has received several awards, including the Minister of Aliyah (immigration) and Integration Prize for Outstanding Contribution and a prize for Original Contemporary Creation.

### Orly Portal – "I Felt I Came Home"

Orly Portal is Israel's most prominent figure successfully integrating tribal and Moroccan folk traditions with contemporary dance. She grew up in Kiryat Shmona near the Syrian border, in a neighborhood of North-African immigrants. Portal experienced it as a Moroccan village frozen in time – surrounded by simple, family-oriented people living by the customs they carried from the Atlas Mountains.

As she grew up Portal went on to study at the Jerusalem Academy, trained in classical ballet and modern dance. She danced with Moshe Efrati's

company, with Batsheva Ensemble, and performed contact-improvisation programs with choreographer Arye Burstein. Improvisation drew her away from classical/modern techniques toward exploring natural movement and intuitive flow rooted in inner bodily listening. She says: "I investigated possibilities in the hip joints, the connection of movement and breath, and the weight of the body and pelvis. I began discovering and exploring the water quality in the body [...] the body began to be experienced as a large vessel of water [...] relaxation, the deep percolation of the water into the floor and earth, and their oscillations during movement led me to deep physical and emotional experiences that surfaced repressed memories and ancient feelings" (Portal 2021: 13)



**Figure 21:** Orly Portal Dance Company. "Rabia" (2012), choreographed by Orly Portal. Photo: Alex apt. Courtesy of Orly Portal.

She began performing solo programs in 1996 with leading Israeli musicians turning to their Middle Eastern roots. Alongside empowering experiences, she also faced difficult moments when spectators expected "belly dancer" entertainment. In 2009, she founded the Orly Portal Dance Company. "I created what was natural to me – simple movements connected to ancient, rooted, tribal experiences that had dwelt for years in my body. I transmitted them to the dancers through many repetitions, as in the folk world where embodied learning is by repetition. Repetition enables the magic – through simplicity, efficiency, and precision" (Ibid). Over the years, Portal created a new movement language; her programs receive excellent reviews in Israel and abroad. In addition, she developed a teaching method called "The Pelvis – Orly Portal Method" (2025:63–67), has her own school and is a member of the teaching faculty at the Jerusalem Academy of Music and Dance where she teaches her own style.

Portal is also a laureate of Israel's highest heritage prize.

### **Stav Struz-Boutros**

On the prestigious stage of Sadler's Wells in London, Stav Struz-Boutros received first prize – the Bloom Prize – in The Rose International Dance Prize

2025, awarded to experienced choreographers who have forged bold, innovative styles. The judges' statement of reasons for granting the award: "Stav interpreted this dance with her own body in mind and also put these movements in conversation with female Georgian dance. She reflects on how this helped her create a new dance language for herself." In the competition, Struz created and danced a full-length program, the solo "Sepia," offering an inner view of a female Georgian warrior.

Born in 1990 to parents who immigrated from Georgia, Struz-Boutros recalls: "Georgian tradition was not present at home; it was displaced from the family geography, just as my grandfather's surname, Sapiashvili, was changed to Sapiro. What remains to me are the memory of his appearance – to which I return to absorb his physical and emotional presence – two traditional swords my grandmother passed to me and my sister, and a dance book on Georgian dance in Israel" (Struz-Boutros 2022: 8).

She trained at the Jerusalem Academy of Music and Dance, danced with Batsheva Ensemble, Batsheva Dance Company, and Inbal Pinto & Avshalom Pollak Dance Company. During the COVID-19 shutdown – when artistic activity dwindled – an urge surfaced to experience Georgian dance forms, leading her to research in her body

the cultures of the Caucasus and the USSR; she delved into films and archival videos of traditional dances.

With the artistic counsel of her husband, acclaimed dancer-choreographer Adi Boutrous, she created several programs marked by balance between traditional and contemporary, by minimalism, precision, and repetition – allowing the viewer to perceive movement’s complexity and giving it time to be digested and breathed. Through improvisation, she expanded the language from the DNA of the traditional idiom, abstracting it from its

rules into personal expression.

Her work pays close attention to actions such as handwork – thumbs, fists – foot stamps,, knee-gliding, rising and sliding on the toes. In traditional materials, roles are often gendered – powerful, warlike virtuosity for men; doll-like lightness for women. She crafts a movement space that blends these qualities and roles, dissolving old stereotypes about how men and women should appear and move.



Figure 22: “Sepia” choreographed and performed by Stav Struz-Boutrous. Photo: Zohar Ron.

She created “Sepia” in 2021, conceiving the stage as a battle space. The piece opens with traditional throat-singing in the Tuvan language (the Tuvans live in Russia, Mongolia, and China and speak a Siberian Turkic language); the music gathers and prepares the audience. On stage she wears a shimmering jumpsuit, a headscarf with two long braided extensions, and a fur cape symbolizing the Golden Fleece, which Greek myth places in Colchis in the Caucasus. Lanterns cast warm light, white fur rugs, a slender brown branch with small green leaves. “My grandfather’s sword lies onstage throughout – a reminder of the pain of wars hovering over us. In Georgian culture, the sword is a masculine tool; only men carry it. Over time it became a status ornament. During the piece I hold

it, bring it close to my body, pass it by my mouth and eyes, rest it on my crown, and finally cradle it wrapped in white cloth – quieting its power” (Ibid 2022: 9).

In the duet “Nomads” (2022), about wandering, she broadened her cultural range – Azerbaijan, Armenia, Chechnya, the USSR – forming the research base. The work offers an intimate view of a domestic sphere – longing, yearning, solace – of two women, who share the fate of nomadic life in an abandoned space. Struz-Boutous gravitates to music that stirs nostalgia and emotions, completing the choreographic imagery. The soundtracks include melodies from Chechnya, Armenia, the USSR, and Turkey, merging cultures into a musical mosaic. In

2025 she premiered "Farewells," another gem in her string of works.

### XIII. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study indicate that political circumstances – such as wars (World War I, World War II, and the Israeli War of Independence) and political revolutions (the Russian Revolution and the Communist Revolution in Ethiopia) – exert a direct impact on immigration waves: the countries of origin, the timing of immigration, the immigrants' contribution to the receiving society, and the worldviews they introduced. These factors, in turn, influence the degree of convergence or divergence between concert dance and ethnic dance. When the genre of a specific concert dance attains international recognition and establishes a self-sufficient artistic system – including a distinct movement language and a codified pedagogical methodology (for example, Martha Graham's technique or Ausdruckstanz) the less interest it has in ethnic dance. Rudolf von Laban (the main Ausdruckstanz theoretician) encouraged concert dance artists to apply their knowledge toward the creation of a new folk dance form. This responded to the Yishuv's aspiration to create a Hebrew folk dance. Ausdruckstanz concert dance artists also took a major part in the effort to create new agricultural festivals (holiday pageants) that had been lost following the expulsion of the Jews from their land. Sociodemographic considerations and governmental policies may promote a "melting pot" ideology, wherein diverse ethnic communities are expected to relinquish particularistic identities in favor of a shared national culture. Nevertheless, such policies cannot suppress the artist's intrinsic need for cultural and personal expression rooted in their own heritage, as exemplified by Sara Levi-Tanai (Inbal Dance Theater). As some concert dance artists mature artistically and achieve professional recognition, they overcome apprehension about engaging with ethnicity to answer a specific idea of need, even if such engagements are episodic (as in the works of Moshe Efrati and Renana Raz). By contrast, contemporary concert dance artists motivated by a desire to situate themselves within a specific geographic and cultural landscape tend to incorporate ethnic elements not as isolated experiments but as a sustained artistic worldview (for instance, Liat Dror and Nir Ben-Gal). In the postmodern era, the pursuit in Israel after an original movement language capable of

distinguishing one artist from another further legitimized the exploration of multiple ethnic movement vocabularies. Among third-generation immigrants (for instance, Orly Portal and Stav Struz-Boutrous), there is a discernible aspiration to reexamine and reconnect with ancestral roots. In the Israeli context, this tendency is manifested by contemporary dance artists who trained and performed with prestigious companies and subsequently turned toward uncovering what they perceive as their "authentic movement language." This emerging phenomenon in Israel merits continued scholarly attention and longitudinal investigation.

### XIV. FOOTNOTES

1. In the Hebrew Bible, Zion first referred to a specific hill in Jerusalem. Later, it became synonymous with Jerusalem as a whole, and eventually with the entire Land of Israel
2. In her seminal 1969 essay "An Anthropologist Looks at Ballet as a Form of Ethnic Dance," Joann Kealiinohomoku argues that all dance is ethnic, since every movement style reflects the cultural, social, and historical context in which it developed. She challenges the distinction between "art" and "ethnic" dance, showing that even classical ballet expresses the values of European Christian culture – hierarchy, control, and idealized lightness. In her view, every dance form mirrors the culture to which it belongs.
3. The Yishuv (in Hebrew, meaning "settlement") is the term used to describe the organized Jewish community before the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. The Old Yishuv refers to Jewish communities that had lived in the cities like Jerusalem, Safed, Tiberias, and Hebron, mostly religious and supported by donations from abroad. The New Yishuv refers to the modern waves of Jewish immigration (Aliyah) from the late 19th century onward, who came with Zionist or other national/ideological motivations.
4. After the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE, Jewish life in Judea continued under Roman rule. The revolt was led by Simon Bar Kokhba. The consequences for the Jewish population were devastating. Jewish settlement in Judea was severely reduced, leading to a shift of Jewish life to the diaspora.
5. Constructivism – an abstract style in Russian art after World War I, which influenced experimental dance (and theatre) by replacing

conventional painted "flats" with three-dimensional stage sets built of timber, metal or glass and by the rostrums and other spatial structures.

6. Several modern dance creators experimented in dance independent of musical accompaniment. Mary Wigman often used only percussion in her dances. Agadati was more radical than most and danced without any acoustic accompaniment, which was so innovative it caused hostile reactions for his listeners in Tel Aviv to the point where it made him abandon dance altogether.
7. Kibbutz means "collective." In a kibbutz the income, and resources were shared equally. Housing, dining (communal dining halls), and education were often shared. Today, many kibbutzim have undergone privatization – members often earn individual salaries, though some communal elements remain.
8. Even today one can still see holiday pageant at Kibbutz Ramat Yohanan, and in a few other kibbutzim and moshavim
9. Agadati created the dance to a Moldavian melody. In Dalia 1947 Kadman changed it to a Hebrew melody.
10. The main source of water is the Sea of Galilee, but the rest of the land is dry. The inhabitants had to rely on digging wells. Every discovery of water was a reason to dance and sing.
11. See Henia Rottenberg: "The Inbalit Language: Sara Levi-Tanai Creations," 251–290. In Sara Levi-Tanai: a Life of Creation edited by Dina Roginsky and Henia Rottenberg.
12. Dabke is a traditional folk dance from the Levant. The name comes from the Arabic word for stamping.
13. The Nakba in Arabic, meaning "the catastrophe" refers to the mass displacement during the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, which followed the declaration of the State of Israel.
14. The Political changes caused changing definitions in Israel's Arab population. Under the Mandate, The British called both Jews and Arabs "Palestinians." After the establishment of the State of Israel, the Jews became Israelis while the Arabs, named Israeli Arabs. After the Oslo Accords (1993), the Israeli Arabs termed themselves Palestinians.
15. This program is an opportunity to transition from education workers to certified teachers in just one year, without disrupting their work routine or livelihood. The program is intended for dance teachers who are actively engaged in teaching.
16. At the same time as the immigration of Ethiopian Jews during Operation Solomon (1990), there were large waves of immigration of Jews from the former Soviet Union. Caravan camps were set up throughout Israel to house the newcomers. The Jews from the former Soviet Union brought with them ballet artists, who contributed to raising the standard of ballet in the country, as well as an audience of ballet enthusiasts.

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## XVI. AUTHOR

Dr. Ruth Eshel has a rich background in performance and research in dance. Having danced and choreographed many multi-disciplinary solo recitals (1977 - 1987) she went on to establish the contemporary Ethiopian dance troupes, Eskesta (1995-2005) and Beta ( 2005). She is the founding editor of the periodical *Mahol Akhshav (Dance Today) - The Dance Magazine of Israel* (from 2000) and a dance critic for *Ha'aretz Daily* (from 1991-2017).

Dr. Eshel is the author of the book *Dance Spreads Its Wings - Israeli Concert Dance 1920-2010*. , Published by De Gruyter, December 2021 - English. She established the website *Israel Dance Diaries* ([www.israeldance-diaries.com](http://www.israeldance-diaries.com)) that serves a platform for high-quality writing about dance and features dance in Israel. It includes *Israel Dance Annual* (1975-1990), *Israel Dance Quarterly* (1992-2000) and *Mahol Akhshav - Dance Today* (2000 and henceforth). Eshel is the author or prose historical novels *The Underground Engineer* [2022, English] and *The King on his Way to Kaplan?*(2025). She received the Minister of Culture's Lifetime Achievement Award in Artistic Dance in 2012, EMI (Union of Israeli Artists) for Life Achievement in Dance (2018) and was named Honorary Fellow of the Jerusalem Academy of Music and Dance (2021) and Tel-Aviv prize for Life Achievement (2025).