

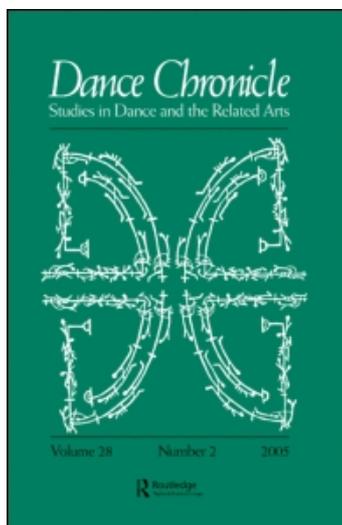
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Liora Malka Yellin

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VOICING ISRAELI DANCE

LIORA MALKA YELLIN

Dance Discourse in Israel

Edited by Dina Roginsky and Henia Rottenberg. 355 pp.
Illustrated.

Tel Aviv: Resling, 2009. NIS 89; \$24.00 paper. ISBN unavailable.

Israeli dance is a flourishing and vibrant field, with a rich variety of artistic expressions and styles. The study of Israeli dance, on the other hand, is deficient both in the amount published on Israeli theater dance and in employment of diverse analytical perspectives on the various genres or styles. In their introduction, editors Henia Rottenberg and Dina Roginsky address this issue when presenting the multiplicity of voices and dance discourses in this collection of articles. This multiplicity is reflected in the manifold topics informed by different knowledge fields and the various research methods illustrated throughout the book. It is the editors' approach that makes this book so valuable: it is not only a collection that gathers together the study of different Israeli dance activities from theater to folk dance and from professional to social dance, but also the first publication in Hebrew that presents a range of dance discourses. Each of the book's four sections focuses on a specific perspective: the first, history; the second, culture and identity issues; the third, body and gender topics; and the fourth, creativity.

The historical section includes two articles: Judith Brin Ingber's "Who's Right? Whose Rite? American, German or Israeli Views of Dance" and Ruth Eshel's "Concert Dance in Israel (1920–2008)." Ingber takes a personal and somewhat autobiographical view, while Eshel presents a historical survey of Israeli theater dance from its inception in the 1920s to the present. Ingber's exploration moves among theatrical and folk dance as well as Israeli, American, and European dance genres, thereby revealing the various sources on which Israeli modern dance has drawn

in the course of its evolution and development. Eshel unfolds the changes in Israeli theatrical dance in relation to European and American dance genres, exploring the characteristic attributes of Israeli dance. The two articles reveal the scope and range of the history of Israeli dance, heralding an understanding of dance in Israel as part of modern and contemporary Western dance manifestations.

The second section, "Culture and Identity," comprises three articles about different dance forms, artists, or historical contexts, each raising issues of cultural identity in light of the encounter between East and West. Dina Roginsky's "The National, the Ethnic and In-Between: Sociological Analysis of the Interrelations between Folk, Ethnic and Minority Dances in Israel" explores the crossover between national and ethnic categories within various folk dance traditions as well as in Israeli cultural discourse. That discourse generally divides the national and the ethnic into two separate categories, the first indicating the boundaries between Jews and Arabs and the second between Eastern and Western Jewry. This trend is reflected in the institutionalized categories in Israel, which differentiate between Israeli (Western), ethnic (Eastern), and minority (non-Jewish Eastern) folk dances. The article defies this customary separation and looks at Israeli folk dance forms as the crossroads between the national and the ethnic. In so doing, Roginsky reveals layers of national ideology intertwined with the institutional fostering of ethnic (Oriental Jewish) and minority (e.g., Arab or Druze) folk dance, springing from and enforcing the concept of modern (i.e., Western) Israeli national culture. The author unravels the ways in which the ethnic and minority folk dance forms are set against modern Israeli cultural identity. Moreover, the complexity of the cultural game between integration and differentiation is also explored in terms of cultural hegemony and national authority.

Yonat Rotman's article, "In between East and West: Oriental Landscapes in the Dances of Moshe Efrati and Barak Marshall," reveals that, although working at different times, these artists have at least two traits in common: both hail from an Eastern origin, and both integrate Eastern and Western elements into their works. They are, thus, among the very few artists who have interrupted the common Western trend typifying Israeli theater dance since the 1960s. Furthermore, in their works the two raise issues

of Israeli Eastern identity while presenting a multicultural society in which, contrary to the mainstream society, a reciprocal relationship exists between East and West. To present such a society, however, the artists place their dance within different cultural contexts—Gypsy and Ladino—in the two works Rotman discusses as examples. This strategy of distancing while maintaining the social category of otherness may be explained in view of the Israeli bias against Eastern culture and Jewry, well documented in this and the previous article. This strategy facilitates the expression of local Eastern culture seen against the hegemony of Western culture, while also voicing its “otherness.” As different as the two selected dances are, they both express issues of internal strangeness rooted in the existential state of being at home yet feeling exiled, thus challenging the Zionist meta-narrative as much as the aesthetic principles of mainstream theater dance.

Not only did these two choreographers work against the common trend of their times, but their uniqueness is also marked by a thread connecting them to early Israeli theater dance. In the formative period, Israeli theater dancers and choreographers undertook the artistic and cultural search for local dance expression, their main method being the integration of Western and Eastern dance styles and movement syntax. Sari Elron’s essay, “Dancing Hebrew: Rina Nikova and Her Yemenite Group,” takes us to this early period by discussing one of the first Hebraic dancer-choreographers working in Palestine, Rina Nikova. Although she was among the early founders of Israeli theater dance, no substantial study of her work has yet been undertaken, a striking fact that makes this article, and Elron’s doctoral research on which it is based, so vital. Nikova, a Russian ballet dancer who immigrated to Palestine, performed ballet pieces and choreographed in the classical manner, but her objective was to create an authentic and original Hebraic dance form. For Nikova and her audience, the path to such a dance form was the revival of Jewish, chiefly biblical, themes and the assimilation of Eastern and Western dance styles. Founding an all-Yemenite dance group in 1933 was a key step Nikova took in this direction, reflecting her belief that the East was a source of “the special Semitic rhythm needed to create a national dance form integrating Eastern and Western attributes” (p. 171). These were the terms by which she defined authentic Hebraic artistic identity. At the beginning, Elron notes, this was

an abstract idea colored by an Orientalist view of the East, but because of the Yemenite dancers she employed, it gradually became an embodied expression. The dance compositions assimilated elements from various Eastern and Western sources, a fact that led to significant differences in the dances' reception. While the Jewish audience saw this mixture of styles in national terms as an expression of the new Hebraic cultural identity, Europeans who saw the group's performances during its 1938–39 tour were puzzled and confused, taking Hebraic elements as Arabic.

This confusion is highly telling since it not only exposes the vagueness of cultural boundaries, but also introduces the association, generally accepted in Israeli society, between Eastern Jewry and Arabs. In this respect the disparity between Nikova and the choreographers discussed in the previous article—Efrati and Marshall—is highlighted, reflecting the move from an idealistic, albeit biased, look at the East, to a critical Eastern standpoint. That cultural hegemony is problematic is also evident, especially when one reads the three articles in this section, which together bring to the fore issues of dance and cultural studies while emphasizing the conflict between an Eastern and a Western stance.

Three articles are gathered in the section dealing with issues of body and gender within different contexts. Youth culture and feminine identity as expressed in the ballet studio is the topic of Dalia Liran-Alper's essay, "Is There an Israeli Swan? Gender and Fantasy in Ballet Classes for Girls." Deborah Heifetz's article, "Sexuality, Sensuality, and the Power of Pleasure," explores the expression and function of sexuality and sensuality in the salsa dance studio. Ethnic traditional dances and gender roles as manifested in female wedding dances is the subject of Naomi Bahat-Ratzon's "Women Dancing in Wedding Ceremonies in Jewish Traditions: Culture and Gender." Although these articles cover dance activities in Israel, their discussions and findings are not necessarily related to Israeli culture per se. In fact, Liran-Alper raises precisely the question of what makes ballet classes Israeli. Her analytical strategy is mainly ethnographic, based on observations and interviews, and explores the local attributes that lie beneath the façade of ballet's international symbols. Her findings point to a strong international inclination promoted by both teachers and mothers, acting as social agents, with a few local modifications that impart nothing significant either to the studio classes or to the girls'

public presentations. On the contrary, a vast separation between elitist ballet culture and local Israeli popular culture is clearly shown, facilitating the internalization of the ballerina's enchanting image. The universal features, as Liran-Alper asserts, are dominant within the "feminine fantasy" (p. 216) and appear so consistent that they move across socioeconomic and cultural differences, creating a universalized notion of the ballerina's feminine attributes.

Heifetz's examination of salsa involves no specific local issues and was initially motivated by the contrast between the formal gender-bound instructions and her personal experience while learning and dancing salsa. Formally, men are the lead dancers in salsa; instructors, regardless of their gender, insisted on maintaining the established gender roles. Yet Heifetz's personal experience is depicted in terms of power and empowering acts that transcend gender functions. The difference between body and embodiment is thus revealed as rooted, according to the author's reasoning, in the space between sexuality and sensuality. While sexuality involves power relations and is thus embedded within gender traits, sensuality, in contrast, entails mutual attentiveness anchored in equality. Sensual intimacy thus allows for the flouting of bodily boundaries, violating gender functions and social categories while promoting a joyful experience of the lived movement.

Bahat-Ratzon's article focusing on Jewish ethnic wedding dances aims at illustrating as accurately as possible the traditional dancing of different communities, mostly Eastern, in the Diaspora. Ethnographic documentation reveals differences among the communities that were studied. Of particular note is the diversity in attitude toward women dancing in public ceremonies, viewed in this article as a general reflection of their gendered roles and social functions within these communities. Although each developed distinct forms of female dance, certain shared principles, particularly modesty, are found. Toward the end of her discussion, Bahat-Ratzon raises an interesting issue concerning the changes these traditional dances underwent in their incorporation into Israeli culture, which is, by and large, far less traditional in regard to the functions and codes of female appearance in public. The will to preserve traditional ethnic practices as a sign of cultural affiliation, albeit in changing form, is evident within this evolving cultural space.

The two articles that close this collection refer to different but important phenomena within Israeli dance culture: movement notation and dance works. The first, Nira Al-Dor's "Eshkol-Wachman Movement Notation: Reading, Writing, Dancing, Changing," discusses certain properties of the movement notation method invented by choreographer Noa Eshkol and architect Abraham Wachman in the 1950s. As a movement rather than a dance notation, this method is applicable to different dance styles as well as to different fields of human or animal movement study. Following a general introduction to the basic principles of this method, the article mainly presents pedagogical research the writer undertook in 2003–04 investigating the effect the Eshkol-Wachman notation system, when learned conceptually and practically, can have on students' coordination and movement skills. The researcher designed a model based on movement exercises and dance sequences for teaching, developing, and evaluating coordination and followed its application in practice. The highly positive results, showing both the adequacy and adaptability of the research method as well as clear improvement in students' movement coordination, point to such possible new curricular directions involving Eshkol-Wachman notation as addressing problems of coordination and motor skills in pupils with learning disorders.

The Israeli dance field is known for its vibrant and wide range of creative activity in the making and performing of dance works. Henia Rottenberg's essay, "The Enigma of *Oyster* by Inbal Pinto and Avshalom Pollak," analyzes one of the most significant works made during the 1990s. *Oyster* was a groundbreaking work, Rottenberg asserts, that followed no established trend in the Israeli dance field and created a space of its own marked by a complex weave of elements from various performance traditions such as dance, theater, and circus, generating multilayered imagery and texts. Rottenberg's analysis unfolds the intertextual modes by which the work correlates to the history of dance and theater, while mainly exploring issues of representation strategies. Constructed as a complex web of narratives and images presented in multiple frames of theater within theater, the work's games of illusion and its somewhat enigmatic nature are laid bare. *Oyster's* open play of interpretive strategies based on associations makes interactive spectatorship the key element framing and directing the theatrical experience.

The broad scope this collection presents reflects current changes in dance studies in Israel marked by the opening of the field to cultural studies and other artistic perspectives. The vast gap between creating and studying Israeli dance is well recognized by both scholars and practitioners, especially in regard to theater dance. Closing this gap is essential to making dance studies a significant field with an active part in both academic and cultural discourses. This is the most vital context in which this collection can be valued as a whole. Obviously, no one book can bring dance studies to this level of realization, but it appears that the editors had precisely this context in mind in their decision to illustrate a variety of issues and perspectives that also point toward possible future research directions. Beyond the value of each individual article, the collection as a whole thus represents a significant achievement in the current state of dance studies in Israel.