

Creative Process in Transformation

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The past — it's not dead; it's not even past.

William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun*.

Introduction

In Voltaire's satirical novel, the protagonist, Candide, is an innocent young man, who has been taught by Pangloss, his former philosophy teacher, that everything is for the best and that "this is the best of all possible worlds." Pangloss tells Candide that had he not been driven out of the beautiful castle with "hard kicks in the behind because of your love for Lady Cunegonde, if you hadn't been seized by the Inquisition, if you hadn't wandered over America on foot, if you hadn't thrust your sword through the baron, and if you hadn't lost all your sheep from the land of Eldorado, you wouldn't be here eating candied citrons and pistachio nuts" (Voltaire, p.168). Voltaire is making fun of the facile optimism and pseudo- reasoning of the elite of his Enlightenment era, and I can relate to Candide who wants less theorizing and rather to focus on cultivating his garden. Nevertheless, Pangloss makes a point; we are the sum of our experiences, not only personal but historical.

Throughout my career, I have identified myself as a dancer, choreographer and an educator. Over the years I have become more and aware that each new journey into choreography has enlarged my reality- and yet the sea is not full. In this paper, I will describe my formative process of becoming an artist. I consider my own experience in terms of my consciousness and creative process. Like Pangloss, I recognize that I do not create in a vacuum and that my dances are a response not only to all my personal experiences, but also to a larger historical relationship that has given me the ground on which I stand. While dance uses the body as a medium of expression, I am aware that all the arts- music, literature, painting, drama - as well as and the ups and downs of daily life have influenced me greatly. My art has been maturing since the age of 19 when I first arrived to the studio of the Inbal Dance Theater in Israel to begin my journey. I have identified this period as a formative experience in my creative process. At that point I was aware of missing links in my identity, and I felt that going to Israel and living with this ancient community of Inbal, sharing their folklore, art and traditions, could help me to find my way.

Afterwards, the openness and freedom of expression at Stanford helped me explore my skills and artistic aspirations in choreography.

Individuation in Conversation with the Historical Backdrop

In making dances I have always had the feeling of rediscovering something that was always there. Socrates and Plato brought focus to the idea that we are relearning what we already knew. For Freud and Jung, the collective memory is like the memory of the individual. Freud wrote, “Nothing once formed in the mind could ever perish, everything survives in some way or other, and is capable under certain conditions of being brought to life again” (Freud, 1930, 14-15). He believed that even the memory trace of prehistoric events as well as certain symbols could be inherited. Jung centered his life’s work on the basis that we are all drawing our images from a universal pool.

Certainly, in many old indigenous dance traditions such as the ceremonies of the Plains Indians, or the Hopi rain dances, the body is always a part of nature and the dancing body has transformative power. Both magical and mythical consciousness is embodied in these rituals as Jonas describes in his book, *Dancing*: “The natural world pulsed with powers; since the same powers animated the human body, the body could serve as a kind of lever to bring about changes in the world. Some kinds of dance led to states of altered consciousness: through trance it was possible to make contact with the ancestors who lived on in another realm and who provided wise counsel in times of need” (Jonas, p.26-27). Similarly, in describing the kachina dances of the Pueblo Indians in his book, *Dance: Rituals of Experience*, Highwater writes, “the creative power of the rituals like the kachina dances lie in their capacity to awaken imagery within us, to compound mystery with more mystery, and to illuminate the unknown without reducing it to the commonplace” (Highwater, p.18).

Looking to the evolution of dance, struggles of class, race and sexism leave their trace in the dance form. Cultures that have been forced to leave their homes carry their dance and song with them as their cultural legacy. Often traditional forms fuse in contact with a foreign culture. In the dance forms of the African Diaspora, for example, such as in Brazilian candomble, there is a melding of ritual dances of Yoruba sources from Africa with ritual gestures from Christianity in deference to the Portuguese landowners who permitted the slaves to engage in their rituals as long as their deities could find a counterpart in Christianity.

Through the years I have been exposed to a world of dance. This exposure has included direct physical participation: improvising in the privacy of my own room, as a participant in a celebration such as a wedding, for recreation, as a student in a highly structured dance class, as a member of a dance company, and as a dance instructor and choreographer working in collaboration with others. I have also always paid attention to dance. I have always noticed it in the world around me, whether in the media, as an audience member, or seeing the interplay of all of life's movement as a danced choreography. I have also read about dance and dancers and my imagination has taken flight into full blown choreographies, but it has not been limited to text, it has always happened when I listen to music, been moved by poetry, a personal event, in short, just about anything is grist for me to think dance.

In each of my choreographies I have made intentional movement choices. If you were to view several of my choreographies you would be able to identify my "style", a certain emphasis that is the result of choices I have made in order for my approach to have meaning for me - the result of a process where I have sifted out the grains of personal value. Yet, while countless decisions that go into creating a dance seem to go on beneath the level of conscious thought, I must acknowledge an entire historical heritage, because it is against this backdrop that I have chosen what I will emphasize as unique to me.

But how do I come to even speak of myself, a woman in the 21st century, as a dance person, or even be so bold as to use the word "choreographer"? To begin to answer this question, I ponder the words of the Renaissance philosopher Mirandola who in his Oration "On the Dignity of Man", has God telling Adam: "Thou mayest sculpt thyself into whatever shape thou dost prefer", and yet elucidates this freedom by stating that "the seeds that each man cultivates will grow and bear their fruit in him" (Mirandola, 15). Although these words describe a sense of personal agency many today take for granted, I reflect upon the impact these words must have had in an environment where historically theologians had espoused man's limited nature. Mirandola drew on a wide-range of sources: Greek, Latin, Christian, Jewish, Babylonian and Persian, and I deeply appreciate that he believed that by considering all records he could develop a more critical understanding of man which emphasized the idea of free will, giving man both freedom and responsibility to rise through his actions to God, or to sink very low.

Indeed, Renaissance thinkers and artists pushed the envelope of personal agency and consciousness that I claim as my heritage. The Renaissance artist could determine perspective on a religious scene, even to indicate infinity, as the lines of perspective converge and then vanish. Gebser (1985) associated the rise of self-awareness with the beginning of this perspectival consciousness. The newly elevated stature of the individual

artist reflected this change - a dramatic shift from the Middle Ages where artists were considered craftsmen who underwent a straightforward apprenticeship which discouraged independent innovation. By contrast, through defining perspective and uncovering geometrical relationships underlying the construction of reality, Renaissance artists felt the power of creation pulse through their works.

I too feel this pulse in the trajectory of the dancing body, and its historic affect on me: from its mythic origins to the courts of Europe, and then as a criticism of Enlightenment's rational values, a movement that reached back to touch the sacred and ritual origins of dance as a way for modern artists to express their innermost being.

With its defiance of gravity and focus on woman as angel or sylph, ballet was the cultural expression that was given form by men at the Court of Versailles. The "spectacles" were constructed to be seen from a fixed frontal perspective which was determined by where the King, Queen and nobility would sit. This in large part shaped the "turned out" ballet vocabulary and aesthetic. For King Louis XIV dance at Court was a tool to maintain social order. If the nobility were not preparing for war, Louis kept them busy learning their dance steps - one could be thrown out of court for making a "faux pas" on the dance floor.

Ballet found immense popularity in the courts of Europe and Russia, and later on the stages of the world. Ballet, like other classical Western art forms prior to the 20th century, was controlled by men and often expressive of Christianity's worldview. Men were the ballet choreographers and directors, composers and libretto authors. As manifested in the cathedrals of Europe with spires reaching to the sky and stained glass windows that get lighter as the eye moves upward, a Christian's spiritual goal was to leave the heavy, weighted material self behind, and for one's soul to reach upwards, to where God sits on His Throne. Male dancers played a chivalrous role as the support of woman, and as the one who would lift her to heaven, away from the earth. Still, women were the instrument upon which men played their ideas.

Significantly, as an antithesis to the ballet, modern dance was very earth oriented. From the margins, women claimed their position as artists and as individuals as they created their own movement language. The beginning of the 20th century was a time when corsets were pulled tight and women wore up to twelve layers in clothing. The modern dancers rebelled against confinement on their movement, both literally and figuratively. They embodied this rebellion in their art as they discarded the restrictive toe shoes and tutus of ballet, in favor of bare feet and loose free-flowing garments. But to speak of the dress is to speak of surface indicators. Women of this period had few rights, and yet the intention of these trailblazers was to make meaningful dances that expressed their total being.

To do this they reached back to the mythic. Modern dancers looked to the roles that women had been relegated to in ballets, and recast them. Their representations were most often a challenge to the status quo. They were the “other”, whether it was Ruth St. Denis evoking the exotic other from the mystical East, or Martha Graham whose body of work in large part has to do with her stance separate from a community that requires her to conform. Graham was moved by the Native American rituals she had the honor to attend in New Mexico, and upon her return to her studio in New York, she transformed this experience into “Primitive Mysteries”, which was a pivotal event in her creative process. Highwater explains how while many of us understand that aspect of ritual which is arrived at over many generations and captures the groups’ essential worldview, there is another type of ritual, one that the modern dance creators were engaged and fully committed to, one that “is the creation of an exceptional individual who transforms his or her experience into a metaphoric idiom known as ‘art’” (Highwater, p. 14). I would place my teacher Sara Levi- Tanai from Inbal, in this group of trailblazers, as she developed a new movement language by validating the beauty of the artistic expressions of a particular traditional community, that of the Yemenite Jew.

By not denying the play of gravity on the body, with concepts such as “fall and recovery” (Doris Humphrey) and “contraction and release” (Martha Graham) these early modern dancers and choreographers challenged their audiences to reconsider deep- seated images of grace and beauty inherited from the courts of Europe, as dance philosopher Fraleigh writes:

“In admitting the reality of gravity, the dancer can work with it and come to know it in experience, not only in dreaded dead weight but in weight that is alive and mobile. Grace is not just any light and floating motion; it is the weightless light that floats free of actions we perform in harmony with nature or those that become second nature, having passed through effort to finally release us from it. These are integral, not defiant, actions, which bring us into harmony with our surroundings and others. They are cognizant of weight, thus they can relinquish effort and will as well as exert it. Such actions are not defiant of, detached from, or unaware of gravity but exist in relation to it” (Fraleigh, 100).

On the heels of their teachers, dance mavericks such as Paul Taylor and Merce Cunningham continued in their individual ways to still push the envelope in terms of expanding our consciousness. Like their predecessors, they were able to put forward their message in such a way that members of the audience could collectively engage in a dialogue with their own anxiety, and still not be overly frightened. Modern dance, as well as modern ballet, strayed far from fairy tales and romantic storytelling. In fact, dance did not have to “be” about something.

Beginning in the 1960's, choreographic "Happenings" were no longer relegated to the proscenium stage, but could take place in parking lots, rooftops, and even on the sides of buildings. Especially influenced by the work of Cunningham and Cage, dancers and choreographers began to use the element of chance in their work. Improvisation became an essential element in the choreographer's toolbox. Dances were often performed in silence, and performers did not need to conform to a certain body type as had been the requirement for ballet artists. Experiments in collaborative process exemplified by the dance company "Pilobolus" further widened the potential for new visions, by emphasizing abstraction, gymnastic contortions and the element of risk. For a short while, the audience was not considered essential to the performance; dancers and choreographers were doing their art, and if the audience happened to be there, they were on their own to find something of value. But as choreographers found their audiences abandoning them, most rethought this approach. Nevertheless, this struggle paved the way for performances to be viewed from multiple vantage points and even for the audience to become physically active performers in danced productions.

Embarking on the Choreographic Journey

"Fiddler on the Roof"

I often find myself using cooking images when thinking upon the choreographic process. I have to find and gather my ingredients. I gaze upon them, smell them, imagine how the confluence of flavors might appeal to my senses and to those whom I love. What special touch is mine alone that will transform these ingredients? I wrestle with myself. How does my interaction with people and my environment affect the outcome? I then chop and discard what is not to be included. From there it is low cooking, bring to boil and at the auspicious moment, serve steaming hot.

I had just returned to the US from several years of dancing with the Inbal Dance Theater in Israel to finish my degree in Cultural Anthropology at Stanford. I was approached by a fellow student requesting that I consider doing the choreography for a student production of "Fiddler on the Roof". Although I had never choreographed a full scale production, in terms of preparation, I could not have been more primed. I was bursting with a sense of wanting to share what I knew of the significance of the movement that was unique to this project. My ingredients were at hand. I felt that I had personally touched both the fervent and the gentle swaying of prayer, the loving gestures of mothers

blessing the Sabbath candles and simultaneously blessing their entire household. Through my contact with the dance of the Yemenite Jewish man, whose narrow moves yearned upward into a form that Jerome Robbins had described as “Yemenite gothic”, I also felt part of those Hassidic moves that yearned upward away from the mundane, but were still grounded. This was my level of consciousness that brought me to challenge myself with this production based on the book of the great Yiddish writer Shalom Aleichem. This was also my grandmother’s story, a story so depressing it had to be made sacred, or to be made fun of. Indeed I remember my grandmother telling me in her limited English of the devastating pogroms of her girlhood. As my grandmother recognized that her shtetl was rapidly approaching its death, she courageously took on the challenge of charting her course toward a future of hope.

As I came into contact with the other students who were to produce this musical, I realized that I was with a highly energized team that would stop at nothing to achieve their vision. I was stimulated by their contagious enthusiasm and seriousness of purpose. Moving through the audition process, however, I was taken aback that while many had seen the musical on stage, or even the film, only a very few students had what I felt was a requisite understanding of this village of Anatevka that we would need to create. Yet, although the students were each balancing demanding academic loads, there was no doubt that they were talented and would give their all to this experience. This group of fifty students knew of commitment and hard work, and I was inspired with the notion that we would leave no stone unturned in this process.

I was not disappointed. The director had immersed himself in detailed research and did his best to communicate the spirit with which each potentially happy occasion was translated into a semi- sacred ritual in order to shore up the dignity of the Jews of Anatevka. Their humor was crucial as a way to cope with life...”I laughed, but my heart was breaking”, “God will provide – if only He will provide until He provides”. For me, the dance, singing and music were always a prayer: an expression of longing, faith and perseverance, but especially a communal expression- in Anatevka no one was alone. As friendships grew among the cast over the weeks of rehearsal, the play took on further meaning as the bonds of our own village grew. While bolstering each other to follow through with daily commitments the students were still striving to achieve artistic perfection.

The embodiment of Gebser’s magical and mythical experiences of the artist became very real to me during the choreography of Tevye’s dream. This sequence brought forth my own memories of encountering a spirit of “the other world” that I came to know through reflecting upon many legends told by the older members of the traditional Yemenite Jewish community that I came to know in Israel as well as my internal dialogue with my Russian

immigrant grandparents. With the melding of imaginative set, lighting, and costume, the choreography was also bound to the dreams I had been touched by in the work of Chagall with whom I already closely identified. Years later, I still open books to look upon his work for inspiration. With regard to his subjects, Chagall's work conveys personal love to people, animals and a communal way of life he left behind, filled with both sorrow and exaltation. Chagall's metamorphic worldview includes the Fauve vision which allows for blue cows and green faces, as well as the Cubist reconstruction in which "figures inhabit spaces of transmutation, in which references to the past and the present meet, and the relationships between the sky and the earth, or the foreground and the background are often inverted" and "figures are superimposed and soar through the air, heads are separated from trunks, limbs divide, and drapery breaks into facets" (Faerna, 5- 6).

Yet while all seemed to be proceeding so well, I had to acknowledge a terribly unsettling juncture. It was one that I would encounter as a choreographer innumerable times in years to come, each time as if for the first time. This would be the sense that with the performance date just around the corner, the student performers, while they knew their lines and choreography, were somehow veiled, they were not breaking through to the audience, and they were not communicating their understanding of what they were doing.

I brought my woes to the ears of my husband who had what he considered the obvious solution. Given that we were looking to celebrate Passover, why not conduct a cast Passover, a first experience for almost all involved, and one that will touch the essence of much of what we had been aiming for. We quickly engaged the cast in preparations, organized one of the residence halls, sat fifty students around an enormous Persian carpet, and my husband began to tell the mythic story of suffering and the enslavement of the Jews in Egypt approximately 3,500 years ago. He himself had experienced difficult conditions growing up as a Jew in Morocco. The Exodus story, told in a colorful and experiential way, evoked all the human emotions of the involved students, who, until this moment, had felt remote from this Tevye's saga.

It proved to be the transformational moment. The entire art became more elevated in my eyes and to those around me and all the elements worked in harmony. Our tall gangly twenty-one year old redheaded Tevye was the Everyman character, who would be meaningless if not understood in the context of history and in the context of his village.



Chagall's "I and the Village" (1911)

"Decision"

When Martha Graham left Los Angeles and moved to New York to make her own dances, she initially found that she could only choreograph dances that were very much like the one's she had been dancing as a Denishawn company member. They were derivative. She was searching for her own direction, but first had to distance herself mentally from the influence of her teachers. Through tears, sleepless nights, and aching body, I knew of this struggle in my own experience. The creation of a short solo, "Decision", represented a milestone; it was the moment that I moved resolutely beyond the voice of my teachers to find, shape, and embrace my own voice.

To do this, I was able to draw on a personal movement vocabulary that I had cultivated up until that point. Obviously it was a vocabulary and outlook that had been shaped by my experiences, but I had made choices within these experiences. I felt that with this work I was speaking with my own voice, but it was not without struggle. I somehow needed to find myself first, to dig deep within and to have patience and faith even though I was at a crossroads and the outcome was uncertain.

I designed my parameters: the solo would be no longer than 3 minutes (it was 2 min.10 sec), and be constructed in an ABC format- thesis, antithesis and synthesis. This

inspiration was stimulated by my reading and reflecting on Hegel's concept of dialectic in history.

Hegel saw the ongoing struggle between opposing forces as the dynamic behind events. He defined these forces as opposing ideas. The dominant idea at any given stage he defined as the thesis, which (because it is imperfect and incomplete) calls forth an opposing idea or antithesis. In the conflict between the two, neither is entirely destroyed. I wanted this choreographic dialectic to be reflected both in terms of movement and in terms of music. I scavenged the music library knowing that what I was searching for was in there somewhere, and after many days, I did indeed find it in a composition by Hovhaness, an American composer deeply affected by the Armenian chants he heard as a young boy. It was as if I had been led to this composer and this specific composition. I can still remember walking away from the music library, elated that I had found it. The process seemed magical at that moment. Although I only later learned to call this "synchronicity" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), I soon became aware of its familiar presence in my creative process. Many years later I became more conscious of my deep connection to Hovhaness' music that resonates sadness which I interpret as deriving from his ancestral heritage centered on the Armenian expulsion. I was also attracted to the playfulness in the music that seemed to convey a decisive message that life should go on. The music spoke to me and as I gave myself over to movement improvisation, I could begin to feel the dance unfold.

"The Maid from Doremy"

I think upon Martha Graham speaking about her choreography of "Errand into the Maze". She said that it was only years later, when in a plane on the way to Teheran, the engines malfunctioned and the aircraft was tossed about in the wind currents like a paper toy. It was then that she really "knew fear" and became fully conscious of the deep fear that she was expressing in her choreography. From my own experience, I found that the meaning of my own work often became clear to me only years later, and this was the case for me in "The Maid from Doremy". I had been referred to the conductor, Andor Toth, for his music production of the opera recitative of Honegger's "Joan of Arc", libretto by Paul Claudel. We met briefly to discuss the basic logistics of the production. Upon first listening to the music, I was concerned. I could not connect with the music, and the music did not evoke any special movement feeling. I listened again and again. By my fifth trial there was a turning; I started to connect deeply. I realize in retrospect that as the music was very new to my ears, I needed time to assimilate it, to learn how to hear it. My encounter with

the strange and unfamiliar might be understood as similar to those who learned to hear and appreciate Stravinsky's "Rite of Spring" years after it caused a riot. By collaborating with other artists' consciousness, the individual artist discovers and expands his own level of consciousness, identifies with it, and this in turn enables him to connect, to create and develop his art form in a meaningful way.

I marked off three sections that I identified with most and those that seemed to shed light on our contemporary circumstances. The first section focused on the young and naïve shepherdess Joan in the countryside of France who hears the voices of St. Catherine and St. Margaret urging her to lead. For this section, I had a wealth of motifs to draw upon from my endeavors as an artist. This section drew from a feeling of the sacred, and I strove for a dreamlike effect. My involvement in Mexican folkloric stories of struggle and redemption in many of their dance forms found an outlet as I drew from this treasure chest.

The second section illuminated the intrigues and bombast nature of the King and Queens of the period. The words of Paul Claudel inspired an absurd "game of chess" where the pieces are Kings and Queens moving exclusively in their own self interest. Although not of the same time period, but rather of the 18th century, I was inspired by Watteau's "Departure from Cythera" and knew that for the section where Joan encounters nobility who discount her, I wanted to capture the feeling of reality as a stage set in the style of Rococo, where the elite isolated themselves in idyllic settings with no hint of their age's problems.

The third section was the Trial, certainly the most dramatic, but in this case eased by humor. As indicated in Claudel's words, those who tried Joan were animals, and he played on the name of Bishop Cauchon who conspired her downfall, to assign roles in her trial to a pig (cochon the Judge), an ass (the clerk), and sheep(the jury). I was fortunate to make contact with a recent graduate, who upon our first meeting told me, "If I could make animal masks for the rest of the rest of my life, I would be so happy". She did indeed make beautiful masks, each with special qualities, and it was my challenge to collaborate with both dancers and mask maker to find just the right movement and gestures to give life to these roles.

To prepare for "The Maid of Doremy", I read the historical accounts, as well as the play "Saint Joan" by George Bernard Shaw. To extend my resources, I also read Kafka's "The Trial", which takes as its focus a Joseph K., a minor government official who is accused of a nameless crime and denied justice by the authorities. He is eventually convicted by a mysterious court and executed by two bureaucrats in top hats. Both Paul Claudel and Kafka would surely recognize much of the same "dis ease" of their respective stories in

society today. Any “difference” creates gossip and rumors, and the “different” person might find himself unexpectedly alienated.

Like Graham’s reflections regarding “Errand”, I came to know the meaning of Joan’s trial when, within a year of the dance, I advocated for people with disabilities. I was still in my early 20’s, and felt as if on the threshold of a deeper appreciation and awareness of the responsibilities we each carry for the other. I was also Joan the naive, speaking from the heart though my words went unheeded before a Board of, I dare say, animals.



Watteau’s Departure from Cythera



Rouen tower where Joan awaited trial

A Formative Experience

In search of identity and my purpose as an artist, I went to Israel to follow my passion: to get to the source of a dance expression with which I closely identified. That source was in Tel Aviv at the Inbal Dance Theater which was founded in 1951 as soon as the Yemenite Jews returned to Israel after the long exile which began around 586 B. C. For several years, I was a member of this theater. At that time, the Inbal reflected many of the values of the larger Yemenite Jewish community in Israel, both in its day to day work and its staged performances. Many members of the dance group were related to each other (brother/sister, aunt niece, and husband/wife). Sara Levi- Tanai who founded the

company in 1950 nurtured her own Yemenite roots through her artistry. Her parents had crossed the Arabian Desert on foot from Yemen to Israel in 1880's. Sara had been orphaned as a child, but had received an excellent education in the orphanage. In 1949, Sara, now a kindergarten teacher, first met Yemenite Jewish children who had been airlifted to Israel in "Operation Magic Carpet". In this encounter she not only reconnected with her own heritage, but she realized its unique beauty and depth. She justifiably felt that the prevalent cultural trend of the "melting pot," would not recognize the import of this cultural treasure. From this impetus she began to find her voice and emerge as a poet, songwriter and choreographer to tell the old saga of her own people and the nascent Jewish nation.

From the beginning, Sara chose to dig deep into ancient sources to create a vital contemporary expression. Her subjects most often incorporated the traditional element of suffering and spiritual salvation. Her choreographed "Yemenite Wedding", with its historic ritual, delicate and human, composed one of the larger segments of the repertory and mined one of the most significant moments of experience for a traditional Yemenite Jew. Other works such as "Jacob in Haran", "Ruth in the Fields" and "The Song of Deborah" underscored the community's strong identification with their ancestors.

In the studio, she inspired us with imagery of the landscape around us. Images of new buds of spring in Song of Songs mixed with images of the waves of the sea, the heat of the sand, and the patter of sheep's feet. So much of her environment seemed to actually converse with her. Once, upon arriving to the studio she told me that the stones along her way were speaking to her. At another time, when seeing a company member praying on a holiday, she told me that she saw the prayer shawl within which he was wrapped as extending downward like the roots of a tree.

She was also extremely observant of the small things that make communal life, whether it was people talking in groups, or a person reflecting alone. Work tools became theatrical props, while elements of traditional dress could be stylized into costumes. When working with composers such as Ovadia Tuvia or Jossi Mar-Haim she could motivate them with an original melody that she created or even rhythms that seemed to come out of her spontaneously. Set designers such as David Sharir, or Dani Karavan, were inspired by her images to build something new while tapping the essence of traditional sources.

From the vantage point of a child sized chair just five feet away, she would carefully observe us. And when she saw something usable she bounded to her feet and began to say "not like this, like that". Sara was not a trained dancer, so rather than demonstrate the movement, she would sculpt our shapes with verbal directions and sometimes hands -on manipulations. I believe that in part that is why the movement tended to be contained

almost as if she was painting in miniature, but this might have been her aesthetic choice even if she had danced, as the contained movement could be honed to convey yearning, modesty and simplicity. She used the word “filigree” when describing the movement of the hands and feet, thus creating a new dance terminology that gave value to the special jewelry design work that the Yemenites have become famous for. Although she felt no need to separate male from female dancers according to tradition, Sara drew on the woman’s soft and modest traditional steps and the traditional men’s fervent body impulse.

When I arrived to Inbal, I naively told Sara that I was more interested to choreograph than to dance. To which she rather sternly replied “You will dance”. In this company, the only way to be in the studio on a daily basis was as a performer, and of course I am grateful that I did end up as a dancer, and in this way was able to engage in the creative process on a daily basis as well as learn the repertory from the inside out.

Sara’s investment was total. When speaking of her relationship to her company, I told Inbal set designer David Sharir, “Well, Inbal is her baby”, to which he replied, “It’s not a question of motherhood”, implying that it goes far beyond that. During this period, at the age of sixty- three, she would arrive each day with pages of notes and limitless energy. She needed to be working in the studio the way others need air to breathe. This sometimes created a problem for us as dancers, as she would try to keep us beyond our scheduled hours, and often our union members would have to speak up. I understand now how fervently she wanted to write the history of the Jews in a dance form, to link us to our ancestry directly - viscerally.



Margalit Oved in “Yemenite Wedding” (lf) and “In the Footsteps of the Flock” (rt)

And Back Again

Twenty two years later, after having choreographed over sixty diverse works as part of my destiny as a dance educator, I decided that it was time to go back to my sources, and plan a stay with the Inbal company. By now I had broad exposure to world dance forms and had become immersed especially in Modern and Flamenco dance and I was looking forward to the possibility of collaboration with members of the company.

This experience renewed my artistic identity and allowed for reassessment. By this time, Sara was eighty eight years old, yet still active in the creative process. I was able to relate to her now more as a colleague than a student. I made notes of our conversations which included discussion of the inception of choreographic ideas and preliminary musical motifs.

I was deeply impressed by the survival of the company despite financial difficulties, political turmoil, and administrative debacles. I credited this success to the perseverance of Sara and several of the original company members I had known in my youth. Taking a company technique class daily over the course of several months was a humbling experience. Several of the company members who were already in their fifties took class as well, and were still performing with the strength and passion of twenty years earlier. This completely contradicted the common age prejudice prevalent in the dance world of the West and filled me with a new energy to defy any age stereotype.

I was able to create a modern dance choreography on two wonderful performers. The choreography, "Rivers of Babylonia" evolved out of improvisations and dealt with biblical references related to the First Temple Exile to Babylonia. The choice of subject was influenced by an annual memorial celebrated during my stay. The experience of creating a choreography that evolved from improvisations, where the choreographer and dancers were drawing from common sources, was an experience where I knew the "flow state" as described by Csikszentmihalyi, for extended periods. I was also able to bring in ideas that I had cultivated over the years through immersion in flamenco and modern idioms. I remember that throughout the development stage, the imagery of a tree came to my mind often. The tree is organic, a part of nature. Just as the tree bears the marking of time and environment so our forms seem to evolve with branches giving offspring to new offshoots. This experience allowed me to go back to my roots to replenish my sources. I could again touch these sources, yet with confidence bring in personalized aspects and meld them together in an individual poetic expression.

Conclusion

The vision of Sara, and the way the members of the theater invited me to their homes to engage in the song, dance, and life's celebrations was a magical experience for me. Growing up in California as the daughter of a holocaust survivor, my family distanced itself from history and heritage. But the moment I arrived in Israel's Lod airport, I found a total contrast to the way I grew up; strong feelings linked me to my soul through the art form. Although as a child, dance had been my personal sanctuary, through my encounter with the Inbal Theater, I became especially aware of an ongoing process of inner transformation. Through the dance I forged a path in my life, a path upon which I found my own voice and connected to others through shared experience. This path brought both a quality of freedom and a sense of the sacred to my understanding of my place in the world.

In his book, *The Empty Space*, Peter Brook writes:

"Anyone interested in processes in the natural world would be greatly rewarded by a study of theater conditions. His discovery would be far more applicable to general society than the study of bees and ants. Under the magnifying glass he would see a group of people living all the time according to precise, shared but unnamed standards. He would see that in any community a theater has either no particular function or a unique one" (Brook, p. 45).

Just a few years ago, prior to Sara's passing, the Inbal Dance Theater was at a loss in terms of leadership, support, and direction. Although the company had recently been honored with its own theater in the beautiful Suzanne Dellal Plaza, a decision was made to close the company and reinvent the theater space as a venue for multicultural performances of music, dance and theater. The "unique function" of the Inbal Dance Theater was no longer viable, but the legacy remains as it is reflected in my own work and other Inbal offshoots.

In reviewing my first efforts in choreography, I am especially aware of my struggle to find my personal roadmap in a landscape of risk and uncertain terrain. At each step I concerned myself with the creative process both in terms of those with whom I collaborated (living and deceased), and in relationship to my subject matter. At different stages I questioned whether the ground on which I stood offered me what I needed, or whether I needed to reach out and embrace that which would offer new possibilities.

Whether as an active artist, or as an appreciator of art, each of us enters into the art experience through our own door shaped by our own level of awareness. My experience in dance and the arts has continuously called my own level of awareness into question and it

has changed over time. While the art experience is not quantifiable in the way that our current educational policy makers make use of numbers to justify curricular offerings, I would argue that the arts mine our most untapped ways of knowing that have the potential to offer what we need most in our global environment: self - understanding, and a way to be ethically responsive to and alive for each other.

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