



From Dream to Reality: Israeli Dance

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Dance Spreads Its Wings: Concert Dance in Israel, 1920–2000
By Ruth Eshel. 704 pages.
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In her book *Dance Spreads Its Wings: Concert Dance in Israel, 1920–2000*, dance researcher Ruth Eshel shares the history of Israeli dance from its early twentieth-century origins through examinations of its artistic tendencies over time. Sources of inspiration for this dance came from without and within Israel’s borders: Eshel examines how outside influences were woven into the local fabric, and brings to life, as well, the obstacles confronting the development of this young Israeli art. She reveals, with abundant details, the companies, artists, and aesthetic trends that have characterized Israeli dance. This book fills a critical gap both because no such comprehensive book on the topic has yet appeared and because Eshel’s work reveals the fascinations of an Israeli art genre, born only at the beginning of the twentieth century, that today has become a leading force in the dance worldwide.

Ruth Eshel, now aged seventy-five, is a dance researcher, choreographer, and dancer. She was the first in Israel to publish wide-ranging books on dance and was also renowned as an important groundbreaker in the experimental language of Israeli alternative dance. When asked in an interview about how she saw her role as a dance critic, she responded, “As a vision and as a mission. The language of movement was always the most important in my eyes—I wasn’t interested in the story behind the dance. I came as an avant-garde choreographer, who was looking for refreshing things.”¹

As in her critical writing, Eshel’s writing in *Dance Spreads Its Wings* is marked by a rigorous search for words to express the movement language she is discussing in as fresh, tangible, and unmediated a manner as possible. Eshel examines her subject from two perspectives: that of a veteran researcher providing an overview of the historical processes and trends in Israeli dance since its inception, and that of a dancer and creator in her own right, participating in the most significant dance movements in Israel. The book also contains rare photographs from exciting and important

moments in this history, such as Bethsabée de Rothschild and Martha Graham (p. 186) in de Rothschild's luxurious home in Tel Aviv, or Jerome Robbins's heartwarming meeting in the early 1950s with Israel's earliest dancer-teachers (p. 101), including Tehila Ressler, Shoshana Ornstein, Rachel Nadav, Devorah Bertonov, Mia Arbatova, and Gertrud Kraus, as they sit together and share one enormous smile. Eshel's colorful descriptions are so vibrant that the reader experiences the art of Israeli dance as accessible and tangible—almost physical.

A new Israeli body

Scholar Susan L. Foster regards “bodily writing” as shaped by and revealing geopolitical context; as such, it can serve as a historical document even more reliable than written language.² In chapter one, Eshel examines the social atmosphere of Israeli dance, opening with her investigation of the general body image that was shaped in the “settlement” days, and in the first few decades following the establishment of the State of Israel. Later, she explores the shift that occurred at the end of the 1970s in Israeli art in general, and in the art of dance in particular, since the body started revealing its uniqueness.

The book opens in the early days of the “settlement,” with the societal aspiration of “building a new Hebraic body in the Land of Israel” (p. 23), a goal that was influenced by the evolution of “body culture” (*Körperkultur*) in Europe, in the early decades of the twentieth century. Most of the pioneers of body arts in Israel were born in Germany and educated by the teachers of the expressionist dance in Germany, as were Bett Mensdik, who established “gymnastics” as a physical activity based on the rhythm of breathing, and Émile Jaques-Dalcroze, who founded Eurhythmics, a method for developing musicality by means of movement. After World War I, “expressive dance” (*Ausdruckstanz*) bloomed in Europe. According to Eshel, the birth of a new artistic dance in Europe, which constituted an alternative to ballet, was essential to the evolution of dance in the land of Israel. Expressive dance enabled dancers in the Israeli settlement to express the intense excitement of the pioneering encounter with the homeland.

In Germany, Expressionism's search for meaning led to a focus on death, fate, and magic; in the settlement, artists found meaning in the mythological characters of ancient Israel, expressing connection to the land and a renewed link to biblical sites. The expressive dance served the first creators, including Margalit Ornstein, Gertrud Kraus, Elsa Dublon, Tehila Ressler, and others, as a framework to express both universal and national ideas, corresponding ideologically with the social humanism prevalent in the settlement (p. 48).

In order to create a novel social framework, the pioneers who arrived in the early decades of the twentieth century sought new kinds of holidays and rituals as replacements for ancient religious rituals. Eshel describes the connection between the holiday dances and the work of Rudolf Laban. Laban's "movement choirs" and the massive processions he produced were born out of his convictions about the potential of socialist humanism. In those dances, the individual person exchanged personal physical expression for the power located in belonging to a society (pp. 68–69). Laban's movement formations were adopted by dancers in the settlement and, since the 1930s, "groups for movement and speech" were established in the General Union of the Hebrew Workers in the land of Israel, pouring Zionist content into this Central-European model.

Eshel's book covers mainly the establishing of the Israeli concert dance, but, in chapter 1, she also deals with the Israeli folk dances that were an inseparable part of the establishment of the Zionist narrative. Although the movement material came from various edges of the Diaspora, as well as from the Arab residents of the country, the new texts embodied by these folk dances carried clear, Zionist messages. In another context, researcher Dina Roginski suggests that Israeli folk dancing emphasized "Israeli collectivism" as a supreme value.³ Eshel addresses this connection between the Zionist dream and the shaping of a unique language of new Hebraic dance art with a particular examination of how the hora may be viewed as an ideological dance (p. 51). Eshel's point is supported by Zionism scholar Oz Almog, who also claims that in the early settlement period, the private body of the individual was donated to the pioneering circle, shaping a body image that symbolized socialist values. For example, the hora dance, which was invented as part of the national revival narrative, was a symbolic and tangible expression of the strong connection between the pioneer and the country, and thus the popular dance has become one of the ritualistic instruments of the Zionist nationalist-religion.⁴

World War II and the Israeli War of Independence left stage dance in Israel in a state of crisis. In 1956, at the initiative of Baroness Bethsabée de Rothschild, the Martha Graham Dance Company visited Israel for the first time. The exposure to Graham's innovative, clean technique and to her use of sets and lighting aroused enthusiasm and admiration. Eshel analyzes this American influence on Israeli dance: following the introduction to Graham's style, dancers abandoned the studios of the expressive dance creators in order to learn American dance from Rina Gluck and Rina Shaham, dancers who immigrated to Israel from America and opened schools in Tel Aviv. With the establishment of the Batsheva Dance Company in 1964, most Israeli dance artists left behind expressive dance language and dedicated themselves to the American method (p. 95).

Eshel also reviews the history of Israeli classical ballet, which developed parallel to the establishment of the Graham technique as a training method for Israeli dancers. For them, the ballet represented the world of the past and the aristocracy. Its courtly manners were seen as unsuited to the spirit of integrating immigrants, draining swamps, paving roads, and the other laborious work of establishing settlements in Israel. The main criticism was aimed at the work of Mia Arbatova, who was determined to pave a professional path for ballet education, operating her studio from the morning hours to the middle of the night (p. 156). In 1945, Arbatova presented her first student program, and in 1957 she was appointed director of the ballet department of the Israeli Opera. Her determination caused a change in the perceptions of dancers who came to realize the essentiality of the ballet language as a means to institutionalize and professionalize Israeli dance art.

The quest for self-definition of dance in Israel coincided with the search for self-determination of the young nation. In his book on **Israeli dance** in the late 1980s, Gideon Ofrat wrote,

Are we treading on the rotten mounds of past failures, in the style of the European conception? Are we marching toward a future following a technological, pragmatic, American path? Do we create here out of the passivity of an oriental God of time? Do we create out of Jewish cultural genetics, which unifies the dynamics of destruction and salvation? ... [W]e haven't yet created the synthesis, but the contradictions of the four cultural options divide every moment of our being; ... this is the fate of every artist here. ... They have to connect to this complex channel, not to America, not to Europe, not to the East, not to Judaism, but to all together.⁵

Like Ofrat, Eshel examines the way Israeli dance was inspired by Europe and the United States at the same time as the unique Hebraic voice began to be heard. Israeli cultural identity is an unstable unity in which East and West, traditional and new, are combined in confusing disarray. Given the reality of multiple sources of inspiration, the “merging of exiles” was necessary. Even dance creators who were educated in Europe and in the United States reshaped their language according to the conditions of the Hebraic dance art in its early days. In this context, Eshel explores the work of Gertrud Kraus as one who was essential in establishing the unique language of Hebraic dance. As Kraus said,

In Europe, I still had the courage to dance the Bible and the ghetto. ... But when I came here, ... I waited until I developed within myself the feeling and the security felt by a person who has put down roots. In Europe, my attitude ... [was] of longing for the land of my forefathers, while here I had to search and find the homeland, ... to elevate artistic inspiration to a level of maturity. (p. 58)

Kraus, like other pioneer dancers, gave up a promising career abroad to join the founders of this art in Israel. A study of the history of Israeli dance

reveals that in its beginning, this artistic genre was controlled by women. The growth of Israeli dance, therefore, was not only a cultural expression serving the national revival narrative of Zionist ideology, but also a significant feminist endeavor. After this period of visionary women dancers and teachers, the “pioneers” had to make room for “pioneerettes,” who have since been dancing at the forefront of the stage. Seen in this light, the early history of Israeli dance can actually be read as “her-story.”

The alternative dance

In her 1990 article, “Ninety Years of Israeli Stage Dance,” Eshel wrote,

In order for the “Israeli” essence to be revealed, we had to take a long journey—from the dance in the settlement period, and the aspiration to prove that “we are Hebraic,” through losing faith in ourselves, turning to look outward and mimic what we saw, and back again to ourselves. . . . If in the time of the settlement people danced the dream, then today we dance life itself.⁶

In *Dance Spreads Its Wings*, Eshel reviews how that dream became reality, in the course of which the dance in Israel was transformed from a dance in service of the national narrative into a personal dance expressing the individuality of the creator, then moving on to what has been called “alternative dance” since the end of the 1970s.

“Alternative dance” was an avant-garde, fringe movement of independent creators, inspired by American postmodern dance, with a mission to rebel against the canons of modern dance, to search for a movement language based on quotidian actions, and to employ minimalism, which became an aesthetic value for movement, lighting, and sets. The creators of alternative dance joined members of the alternative theater movement, performing on the same stages. Most of their first performances were held on the small stage of the Tzavta Theater in Tel Aviv.

The process of growing an independent Israeli dance movement began at the end of the 1970s, intensified in the 1990s, and reached its peak in the 2000s. According to Eshel, those years heralded a new era in Israeli dance, which has become a thriving and original genre. In 1982 Pina Bausch came to Israel with the Wuppertal Tanztheater for a tour, the first encounter of Israeli artists with her work. Bausch’s artistic language was integrated into Israeli dance art and, to this day, continues to influence choreographers’ work processes. Eshel writes about the new generation of creators, including Nir Ben Gal and Liat Dror, Adi Sha’al and Noa Wertheim, Noa Dar, Anat Danieli, Ido Tadmor, Inbal Pinto, and others (p. 555). In 1989, Curtain Up (Haramat Masach) was founded and has since become an important framework for professional dance projects. Eshel describes the new creative spirit of Israeli dance since the 1990s that has also developed

as a result of the establishment of the Suzanne Dellal Centre in Tel Aviv, among other venues that have become institutionalized homes for this art in Israel (p. 565).

Contemporary dance as a form of criticism

Israeli contemporary dance is no longer exuberant about the vision of “the country underway,” since the country has become a reality. Instead of the question of “to be or not to be,” contemporary Israeli art, and dance as part of it, deals with the individual’s existence within the national framework and takes a critical stance. In her article, “The Flourishing of Contemporary Dance in Israel Today,” Eshel wrote,

The body moving in contemporary dance is direct, blunt, impudent. But underneath this facade of straightforwardness lie softness, vulnerability, and sensitivity. Perhaps, after all, the image of the Israeli as the sabra fruit, which is quickly ridiculed in this era of post-Zionism, is true even now. The sabra is a fruit with a thick, stiff, and thorny shell on the outside, and it is soft and sweet on the inside. ... The Israeli dance is not polished, doesn’t shine like china, and the choreographers touch, specifically, the faulty and imperfect spots in the spectators’ souls.⁷

Since the 1980s, concert dance in Israel has expressed a new kind of national identity, in a unique, subversive movement language characterized by directness, immediacy, and bluntness—much like the local Israeli culture. Israeli contemporary dance is not a politically regulated art, and no social or political demand is made to promote the Zionist vision. Rather, the moving body asks questions about nationality, but also examines the motivations of the individual soul and lingers specifically on anxiety, cries, and tears. Today, the dancers onstage are not characters from a biblical or pioneering story, but, rather, they represent themselves, exploring the personal and the state of the individual in relation to the group. Dancers separate art from national values, an initiative that permits them to refine the artistic product.

According to Theodor W. Adorno, the greatness of a work of art lies in its lack of pretense: “Artworks participate in enlightenment because they do not lie; ... they are real as answers to the puzzle externally posed to them.”⁸ Thus, the artistic experience is only autonomous when it is critical, when it focuses the viewer’s attention on what is distorted in the existing reality and demands its amendment. In this sense, art is not entertainment, but rather holds the potential to be emancipatory. Like much postmodern American dance and the *Tanztheater* of Pina Bausch, Israeli contemporary dance, born of these same sources, is alert to art’s critical purpose. Israeli artists choose to present an authentic reality, even if it is difficult and demanding to watch, without offering easy answers.*

* For example, Ohad Naharin’s *Virus* (2001) deliberately insults audience members.

The last part of Eshel's book focuses on this contemporary dance revolution, on dance as a subversive art. Deconstructions of reality are accompanied by the creators' constant inquiry and self-examination, also revealing the complex hidden areas of their souls. Contemporary dance creators are autobiographic, bringing to their work the pain, the pleasure, the desires, and the disappointments experienced by their private bodies. By this means, current Israeli dance serves as an instrument for closely observing the changing Israeli identity, as well as becoming a channel through which creators express their demands for change.

Dance Spreads Its Wings reveals that Israeli stage dance has undergone an accelerated maturation process. While in its first days it contributed to the shaping of the homogenous self-definition of the Israeli nation, a hundred years later it seeks to cast doubt on those definitions. It undermines past definitions of identity and demands acknowledgment of the transformations that have occurred in Israel's social reality today.

Recently, Eshel recreated her dance work from the early 1980s, *Gown of Stones*, which she performed for the public. In this, Eshel is like others among the unique founders of the dance world in Israel: Yardena Cohen (1910–2012), Deborah Bertonov (1915–2010), and Yehudit Arnon (1926–2013) did not stop dancing until their old age. It seems that this art gave them breath and has lengthened their days.

In the second decade of the twenty-first century, the art of Israeli dance has progressed markedly and it appears that its growth will continue. Today, a wealth of dance works deeply investigates the body's qualities and the innermost experiences burned into it.⁹ Therefore, the Israeli dance scene today has become one of the most relevant channels for dealing with cultural and social urgencies. *Dance Spreads Its Wings*, showing the evolution and revolution of this art, is an essential contribution to the dance research flourishing today in Israel.

Notes

1. Itay Stern, "I Will No Longer Die a Frustrated Woman" [in Hebrew], Gallery-Holiday, *Haaretz*, October 11, 2017, 4. All translations are made by the author.
2. Susan, L. Foster, *Choreographing History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 5.
3. Dina Roginski, "The Israeli Folk Dance Movement: Structural Changes and Cultural Meanings," in *Seeing Israeli and Jewish Dance*, ed. Judith Brin Ingber (Detroit: Wayne University Press, 2011), 323–25.
4. Oz Almog, *The Sabre: A Profile* [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1998), 361–62.
5. Gideon Ofra, *Touch: Israeli Art at the End of the 1980s* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Israel Art Publishing, 1988), 59–60.
6. Ruth Eshel, "Ninety Years of Israeli Stage Dance," in *Dance Discourse in Israel*, eds. H. Rotenberg and D. Roginski [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2009), 88–89.

7. Ruth Eshel, "The Flourishing of Contemporary Dance in Israel Today," *Dance Today: Journal of Dance in Israel*, no. 14 [in Hebrew] (October 2008): 6.
8. Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. and trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 5.
9. Einav Rosenblit, *Too Human Body: Zen Buddhism in the Art of Contemporary Dance* (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2014), 10.

EINAV ROSENBLIT is a dance researcher and a lecturer of dance research and philosophy of arts. She received her PhD from the Faculty of the Arts in Tel Aviv University. Her dissertation, entitled "The Original Face of the Body," presented philosophical research of contemporary dance. Her book *Too Human Body: Zen Buddhism in the Art of Contemporary Dance* (in Hebrew) was published by Resling Publishing (Tel Aviv) in 2014; *Hungry Ghost: Israeli Dance and National Identity* (in Hebrew), her second book, was published by Resling Publishing in September 2018.