

ISRAELI DANCING

In the family of ethnic dance, Israeli folk dance is a very "odd child" indeed, but one that is loved and accepted no less because of its unique qualities. The obvious difference between the dances of Israel and those of other countries is that the Israeli dances have not been passed down from generation to generation. Rather, they are the miraculous fruits of a mere thirty years.

In order to take a closer look at the development of this unique art form, we must begin with the waves of Jewish migration to Palestine that occurred in the late 1800's and in the first half of this century. These pioneers of "chalutzeem" came mainly from Russia and eastern Europe, and they transported with them the cultures of the countries from which they came, especially their folk dances. Had you paid a visit to those early settlements you would have seen the polka, Roumanian hora, krakowiak, cherkessia, but no indigenous Jewish dances.

In the spring of 1944 a group of interested persons gathered to examine the state of the dance in Palestine. They were disappointed at what they found; i.e., dances borrowed from other cultures. Just as they longed for a homeland of their own, so they longed for dances of their own--dances that would capture their feelings and experiences as a people and not simply reflect the centuries in exile.

It seems impossible that the Jewish people with one of the oldest traditions in the world should be lacking a dance tradition, so an investigation was begun. Scriptures and historical sources were scoured for references to dance. It quickly became apparent that the Jews in biblical times had indeed been a dance-loving, dance-rich people. There were dances for holy days and sacrifices, for nature festivals and for all of life's important occasions. Unfortunately, there was no hint given as to how the dances were done or what they looked like. There was no way to revive these dances of antiquity. One thing became clear. If there was going to be a Jewish Palestinian (soon to be Israeli) folk dance, it would have to be created.

The brave artists who were to create an Israeli folk dance were faced with quite a task. They had to have faith, energy, and considerable "chutzpah" to tackle it. For in order to establish a tradition of their own, they had to break the laws of development of folk culture the world over and compress a process of hundreds of years into just a few. It was a psychological hurdle that had to be jumped.

Fortunately, they also had a few things well in their favor. First of all, they had motivation; their need for dance was great. Secondly, they had a wealth of cultural and spiritual material to draw from and give them inspiration. The key word was action.

A dance festival was held on a farming settlement in the summer of 1944 and it had a surprisingly good turnout. It was basically a display of borrowed dances from other cultures, but that was its only disappointing feature. The festival had great impact in that



it drew attention to the subject of folk dance and was followed by a general awakening of dance enthusiasm in the communal settlements and by a period of feverish creativity. As one choreographer put it, "New dances grew up like mushrooms after the rain."

There were many influences on the formation of these dance, some subtle, some obvious. The choreographers moved away from European styling, absorbing some dance patterns from their Arab neighbors and picking up an oriental flavor from the Yemenite tradition. The developing Israeli style of dancing was also affected by the dances of the Chassidic Jews of eastern Europe for whom dance was an ecstatic expression of worship. Like the Chassidim, the Israeli tend to use the entire body when dancing and to infuse their movements with spirit and intensity that make them seem electrically charged.

In addition to styling, there was also the important consideration of theme--what would the dances be about? What stories would they tell? Basically, there were two stories to tell, the old and the new. Often choreographers would turn to ancient sources for inspiration, plucking phrases and events out of the Old Testament, having them set to music, and then creating a dance around them.

The new story was equally stimulating. There was something very strong that grew out of the day to day experiences of the modern Israeli, experiences colored by a constant preparation for war and a longing for peace and by a sheer love of the land and a desire to redeem it and make it beautiful and productive.

All of these elements, modern and ancient, are embodied in the folk dances of Israel. That is why they deserve a place among the folk dances of the world as an authentic and eloquent expression of the soul of a people.

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