

# Dancing back home

Founded on kibbutz ideals, a dance company carries with it the history of the Holocaust



**THE KIBBUTZ** Contemporary Dance Company performs in Budapest paying tribute to their founder, Holocaust survivor Yehudit Arnon, who died in August 2013.  
(Photos: Yoni Avital)

• BARRY DAVIS

The Kibbutz Contemporary Dance Company's recent trip to Budapest was an emotive experience for one and all, and for all kinds of reasons. The 16 dancers went to the Hungarian capital to put on two performances of *Aide Memoire*, which was created by the company's 56-year-old artistic director Rami Be'er.

The Hungarian chapter of the Holocaust occurred in 1944, and there are various state and other events lined up over the course of this year to mark the 70th anniversary of the cataclysmic events that overtook the Jewish community there. The KCDC's two shows, which took place at the grandly appointed MUPA Palace of Arts on January 5 and 6, opened the 2014 Hungarian Holocaust commemorative program.

For Be'er, the dancers and staff the KCDC's working visit to Budapest was about far more than just another professional foray in the company's busy international performance schedule. The company was founded by Yehudit Arnon in 1973 at Kibbutz Ga'aton, near Nahariya. Arnon, who died last August at the age of 87, was born in Komarno, Czechoslovakia, to an Orthodox family and displayed a natural talent for dance and movement from infancy. In June 1944 she was sent to Auschwitz together with her mother, who was immediately dispatched to the gas chambers. Arnon was sent to Birkenau concentration camp, and soon put her love of movement to positive effect, trying to keep the inmates in her hut in good spirits by dancing for them between the Spartan bunks.

Unfortunately, the Germans soon got wind of Arnon's extracurricular entertainment efforts and ordered her to dance for them at their Christmas gathering. But Arnon was made of sterner stuff and refused to comply. The Germans punished her by making her stand barefoot in the snow all night, presuming she would not survive the ordeal. As she stood shivering in the bitter cold she swore that, if she survived, she would devote her life to dance. She was very close to not making good on that promise in May 1945, when she and a group of other Jews were lined up in front of a firing squad at a Moravian camp. They were saved from certain death, literally at the last moment, when the Soviet army arrived and the Germans fled.

It was after the war that the Hungarian episode of Arnon's life took place, when she gravitated to Budapest. Despite not having had the benefit of any formal dance education, she taught youngsters at the local branch of Hashomer Hatzza'ir – Orthodox origins notwithstanding, she had been a member of the definitively secular youth movement before the Holocaust – and also choreographed events for them.

Arnon met other artists who were active at the time in Hashomer Hatzza'ir, including Irena Dückstein, a Hungarian dancer who had taught at the Budapest Academy of Physical Education and was dean of the Faculty of Movement Arts in the Hungarian capital. Dückstein was suitably impressed with Arnon's natural talent and wanted her to become her assistant. That would have been quite a feather in Arnon's professional cap but romance intervened, when she met and soon married Yedidya Ahronfeld, who was later to Hebraicize the family name. Before the couple left on their complicated journey to Palestine, Arnon received her first – albeit brief – taste of formal education, when Dückstein gave her a three-day crash course in dance theory and modern technique.

It took the young couple two years to make it to this part of the world and, on arrival, they immediately joined the rest of the founding members of the Galilean kibbutz, all of whom hailed from Hungary. When she wasn't busy working at the kibbutz laundry, Arnon devoted as much time as she could to developing her dancing skills, and managed to gain approval from the kibbutz members – back then there were all sorts of ideological issues to be negotiated if you wanted to do anything deemed “non-productive” – to take out time to study in Haifa with veteran dancers Gertrud Kraus and Yardena Cohen.

Arnon used her accrued experience and teaching skills to good effect back on the kibbutz, and was more than happy to introduce the children there to the wonders of movement. Be'er was one of the beneficiaries of Arnon's wisdom, talent and indomitable spirit. “Yehudit was my first dance teacher, when I was in the kibbutz kindergarten,” he recalls. “I was three years old when I started learning dance with her.”

Be'er went to Budapest earlier this month with plenty of personal baggage. His parents, like Arnon, were Holocaust survivors, and they are Hungarian by birth. “They got to Israel in 1948, with the Hashomer Hatzza'ir group,” he recalls. “A large part of my family perished at Auschwitz, and my parents eventually made it to Israel in October 1948, after being turned back by the British and spending some time in a DP camp in Cyprus.”

Be'er knew he was in good hands, even in infancy. “Yehudit recognized that I was gifted, and she was very adept at guiding and encouraging me as I grew up. She was always organizing dance events on the kibbutz, including for the children, and also all over the western Galilee.”

Be'er became a bona fide member of the Kibbutz Contemporary Dance Company when he joined as a dancer and choreographer in 1981. However, when he was small his father wanted him to follow a different artistic route. “My father plays violin and viola, and I learned to play the cello,” explains the artistic director. “My three sisters all play instruments and, to this day, we get together >>>





**FROM LEFT:** Hagai Mei-Zehav, deputy chief of mission at the Israeli Embassy in Budapest; Csaba Káel, general manager of Múpa Palace of Arts; and Rami Be'er, artistic director of the dance company.

once in a while to play chamber music. I grew up in a very cultured home.”

It seems Be'er Sr. was also something of a trailblazer himself, à la Arnon. “He was the first person from the Kibbutz Movement to attend the Technion[-Israel Institute of Technology], and he became an architect,” explains the proud son. “That was in the 1950s, and anyone who wanted to do something outside the kibbutz, something that was not considered productive or contributing to the welfare of the community, was frowned upon. Actually, there were a few more members of Ga'aton who were talented in the arts, and they all managed to work in their chosen field.”

Be'er's mother's family had owned a publishing house in Hungary, by the name of Dante, so there were plenty of books in the Be'er household, too. “All the things we had at home – music, literature and art – eventually informed my work.”

By the time Be'er joined KCDC the company was up and running very smoothly, and he soon made his mark on the scene. Even so, he came perilously close to furthering his dance craft elsewhere. “In those days all important decisions were voted on by all the kibbutz members, and when I said I wanted to devote my life to dance – after I'd worked in the avocado grove and done other regular kibbutz work for a year after I got out of the army – a vote took place. In the end, my request was approved by just one vote. I told them that if they did not allow me to dance with Yehudit, I would look for a different dance company. Luckily it worked out at Ga'aton.”

Be'er danced and choreographed with the company for about 14 years, and when Arnon retired in 1996 he took over the reins, and has produced a string of stirring and entertaining works since then.

When Arnon established KCDC, it was clear in her mind that the enterprise was going to be about far more than a pure dance company. Today all the artists work and live in a dance village on the kibbutz, and the sense of family and intimacy between the dancers was palpable on the Hungarian trip. All the members of the group displayed utter devotion to their craft throughout. The pre-show warm-up classes were very serious, albeit fun, affairs and one got the feeling that they were all there for each other.

David Ben-Shimon, who hails from Virginia Beach, has been with the company for around three-and-a-half years and is delighted to be part of the setup. “It is such a great feeling being with these people, and the dance is on such a high level,” he says, adding, however, that his decision to relocate to this part of the world almost caused some familial strife. “When I told my mother I was moving to Israel, she was upset

that I was going to make it to Israel before her,” he laughs.

The 30-year-old Ben-Shimon joined the KCDC's second company in August 2010, as part of the Jewish Agency and state Masa Israel Journey project, and graduated to the main group a couple of years later. The American's entry into the International Dance Village was via the KCDC five-month international Dance Journey study program, which operates twice a year, starting in February and September. The program is open to dancers from all over the world, aged 18 to 35, and Be'er and the company used the Budapest visit to put 33 young dancers from all over Europe through their paces, as an audition for this year's two programs. The impressive bunch of youngsters came from Sweden, Bulgaria, Italy, France and elsewhere around the continent, and were all enthused about the possibility of spending five months at Kibbutz Ga'aton.

After the audition the candidates were given the rundown on the company, and Israel, by KCDC international director Yoni Avital. Avital's congenial professional elucidation was further enhanced by Adrienn Acs, a Hungarian dancer who attended the Dance Journey study program in 2010 and fielded the auditioners' questions about the way things work at the Dance Village.

KCDC has a multilayered structure. “I call it a pyramid,” says Be'er. “There is the group at the top, and then there is the second group, which is the reserve for the main group. A lot of the dancers who performed here, in Budapest in *Aide Memoire*, came through the second group. I take the suitable dancers from the second group into the main group, and the others leave to dance with other companies around the world, and teach.”

“Suitable” is the operative word here, and embodies a multitude of attributes. “That relates to the dancers' personality, their artistic ability and physique – I call that talent – their physicality, expression and the way they project themselves. It is a whole bunch of parameters.”

Be'er also tries to keep things visually interesting. “You'll notice the dancers are short, tall, dark, light-colored,” he continues. “I don't look for stereotypes. I look for strong individuals who project their personality authentically, and I look for some kind of connection with them – what they project to me. It is also important for the individuals to fuse and be able to complement each other, and to work together seamlessly.”

KCDC sets out to spread the dance word as far and wide as possible, and to all ages. “We have a group that performs for children, including for kindergartens, all over the country,” notes Be'er. “I created a show based on *Peter and the Wolf*, and another one based on *The Carnival of the Animals*, to music by [French composer Charles-Camille] Saint-Saens.”

It is, says Be'er, a good way of introducing kids to the joys and magic of dance. “Education for dance starts at a young age, as it did for me. Exposure to dance and movement is important, right from kindergarten age, and to provide children with the tools they need to be able to appreciate a dance show, which is non-verbal. There are sorts of characters and images which connect with each individual's inner world, with their associative appreciation.”

While KCDC is a forward-seeking contemporary dance outfit, Be'er says the nuts and bolts of the craft are an indispensable part of the way he and the dancers go about their business. “All the dancers have to know the classical dance technique. That provides them with important tools, and develops abilities of awareness and control. The language incorporates all the human abilities that relate to body movement. That can be a mundane movement which we all do every day – like walking, running or sitting down. There are more complex movements which use gravity, and other things.”

All this is designed to produce an aesthetically captivating bottom line. “All the movement should flow,” explains Be'er, “and should involve the correct use of gravity and the body. My work uses movement and the body, together with music and lighting, and the way the stage is designed, and the costumes and the text. All that comprises a final product which conveys a message, about our existence, about us as human beings, and about our credo. You can say something of value through dance. It is not just about art or aesthetics per se.”

That was abundantly clear at MUPA. *Aide Memoire* is a powerful piece which feeds off the legacy of the Holocaust, ➤➤



**THE SENSE** of family and intimacy between the dancers is palpable, having been developed by living together on the kibbutz.

both through Be'er's bond with Arnon, and his own familial background. The packed audiences at MUPA were suitably taken with the show, and the dancers and Be'er took several curtain calls.

*Aide Memoire* was an apt choice for the company's Budapest jaunt. "This is a universal work which, of course, stems from things connected to my own life," notes Be'er. "Here in Budapest, there is the added baggage of all the stories I heard from my grandmother and parents who lived here."

The artistic director adds, however, that he was wary of becoming too entrenched in his personal history. "I wanted this work to have a universal core. I use a text from the Book of Ecclesiastes at the beginning and end of *Aide Memoire*, which says something about the here and now, about the world in which we live – against violence and racism, and about the belief in humanity and peace. I also convey a strong visual sense of a concentration camp on the stage, and in the costumes. I think that is a human message that anyone can appreciate."

The emotional baggage of the subject matter comes at you in no uncertain manner. At one stage in the show's proceedings there are cries of "Raus!" – "Get out!" in German – which immediately conjures up images of Nazi soldiers ordering Jews out of their home or on a train. The performance oscillates between frenetic, almost feral, action interspersed with tender romantic moments and intense eroticism. *Aide Memoire* is as definitively theatrical a dance production as you could ever hope to see.

The back of the stage is occupied by a row of high slabs of rust-colored metal, which are used to good effect as the dancers clamber over and onto them, undulate between them, and even run into them and drum on them wildly. "That can give you a sense of a kind of wall of death, and with this dance I chose to break the convention of the two-dimensional stage, with the wall at the back, and to imbue the work with a more spiritual element."

Korina Fraiman, who has been with the main dance group since 2009 and has performed in *Aide Memoire* several times since then, says she never gets bored with the work. "I first took part in this work four years ago, in a different role," says the 24-year-old. "For me it is a new experience every time. It is a work that comes from the heart and from the guts."

Renana Randy, 40 and the longest-serving member of KCDC, got her first taste of Be'er's creative expertise as a child, when she lived on Kibbutz Ein Gedi. "They performed Rami's works *Peter and the Wolf* and *The Carnival of the Animals*, and I was amazed by them," recalls Randy. "There was a girl on the kibbutz who had attended the workshop program at Ga'aton,

and she recommended I try it out."

Although enthused by her stint at Ga'aton, it took Randy a while to opt for dance as the central theme of her life. After serving in an IDF combat unit, Randy got in touch with Arnon and was invited up north to join workshop. "But I still wasn't thinking seriously about dance at the time," she admits. "One day, Rami gave us a lesson and he saw I was talented. I was surprised; I didn't think I was particularly gifted. Rami and Yehudit arranged a scholarship for me, which made me think that perhaps I had some talent, after all. After two years on the workshop program I joined the group."

Eighteen years on, Randy's natural gift and years of training came through loud and clear in *Aide Memoire* as she put on a spellbinding performance displaying, along with her KCDC cohorts, relentless intensity and attention to detail, married with ferocious emotion. "I owe so much to Rami and Yehudit," says Randy. "I was blessed to learn from Yehudit and to take from her a love of movement and dance, and to dance with the others who learned from Yehudit. I have a very strong bond with Yehudit and everyone in the company, and with Ga'aton and the Dance Village. It is home."

Randy took some time out from KCDC and spent about a year dancing with the Inbal Pinto and Avshalom Pollak Dance Company, but returned to Ga'aton, and in 2002 received a prize for performance excellence from the Culture and Sport Ministry. "I also have a Pilates treatment studio at Ga'aton, so I work with everyone there," says Randy. "Yehudit wanted everyone to dance, and I want everyone to engage in movement and do Pilates."

Martin Harriague came from much further away than Ein Gedi to join in the dance action at Ga'aton. Last year, the 27-year-old Frenchman was busy working with the Noord Nederlandse Dans group in Holland when a colleague returned from a stint at the Dance Village. Intrigued, Harriague joined the company in September. "There is something special about Israeli dance," he enthuses. "I believe there is a special type of Israeli dance, and there is also Israeli feeling in dance. The Israelis have a way of expressing themselves on stage that we don't have in Europe."

Part of that, suggests Harriague, is down to the history of this part of the world. "The element of conflict comes through in Israeli dance, and there is soul and heart in it too."

The Frenchman adds that KCDC brings its own added value to Israeli dance. "In Holland I worked with [Israeli choreographer] Itzik Galili, but he has a different approach to dance. The physical elements are not the same; it is big and going through the space. Where, for example, with [the] Batsheva [Dance Company] you will have more detail, and it unifies the group with [Batsheva founder Ohad Naharin's] Gaga [movement] language, Rami is more interested in different personalities. That can be annoying, because it is a lot to take in with the eyes, but it can be very interesting to have different ways of expressing one movement. And, of course, as a dancer that gives me more freedom to express myself."

The Budapest jaunt also featured plenty of earnest off-stage activity, including a walk around the Jewish Quarter and the Neolog Dohány Street Synagogue in Budapest, the second-largest synagogue in the world. There was also an emotive visit to the Jewish Museum behind the synagogue and the Holocaust monument in the inner yard. That was followed by a visit to the nearby Israeli Cultural Center, where the group met a bunch of young dancers from the Budapest Contemporary Dance Academy. Avital and Be'er talked to the youngsters about the Dance Village and KCDC, while the British-born company's fund-raiser Natan Golan, whose family hails from Hungary, addressed those present in Hungarian.

All in all, it was an impressive and emotive start to Hungarian events to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the Holocaust there.

And there is a chance to catch two performances of *Aide Memoire* at Kibbutz Ga'aton, on January 27 – International Holocaust Remembrance Day – and January 28 (both 7 p.m.). The program will also include a talk about the life and work of Yehudit Arnon. ■

For more information about the Kibbutz Contemporary Dance Company: [www.kcdc.co.il/en.html](http://www.kcdc.co.il/en.html)