

An uplifting journey

Talented dancers come to Israel to witness positive aspects of life here

• By BARRY DAVIS

If our political leaders are looking to do something about our profile in the international community, they would do well to take a leaf out of the aesthetically delightful and spiritually uplifting book of the Kibbutz Contemporary Dance Company. KCDC was founded by Yehudit Arnon, a Czechoslovakian-born Holocaust survivor who made her way to Israel as a young wife from Budapest in the early days of the state. After surviving the Birkenau concentration camp and later a firing squad, Arnon lived for a while in Budapest before making aliya. Ga'aton was established by olim from Hungary. Arnon died last August at the age of 87.

The company has been comfortably ensconced at Kibbutz Ga'aton near Nahariya for four decades and is headed by artistic director Rami Be'er, whose love for dance was first ignited by Arnon when he was very young. He has been with the company since 1981 and has been responsible for its creative output since 1996, following Arnon's retirement. In the interim, he has produced a string of stirring and entertaining works that have been performed all over the world. Earlier this month his *Aide Memoire*, a work based on the Holocaust and on Arnon's life, was performed at the MUPA Palace of Arts in Budapest and garnered rapturous responses.

On Monday, KCDC will hold a gala event at the Performing Arts Center in Herzliya, and there is a US tour lined up for late February-early March.

The company comprises a number of study and performance units, including the main group and a second-tier dance group, while several educational and training programs are held at the Dance Village during the year. The latter include a couple of five-month international Dance Journey courses, which start annually in February and September, and a 10-month program.

The international Dance Journey programs are run in conjunction with the Jewish Agency's Masa project (*masa* in Hebrew means "journey"). In addition to providing

The Kibbutz Contemporary Dance Company was founded by Czech-born Yehudit Arnon, who survived Birkenau and a firing squad. (Uri Nevo)





The upcoming five-month program starts on February 4. The 10-month fall program begins in late August. (Uri Nevo)

the participants with first-rate dance instruction, the programs offer a way of bringing several dozen talented dancers over age 18 to this part of the world and showing them some of the positive aspects of life here that may not find their way into the international media.

In addition to honing their creative skills, the participants also take three guided trips around the country, study Hebrew and do voluntary work at various communities and institutions.

Dance Journey, which started life in 2009, is an ideal vehicle for imparting the intricacies and beauty of the dance techniques used at Ga'aton.

"We set it up as part of the basic ethos of the Kibbutz Contemporary Dance Company not only to deal with top-notch arts and dance but, more specifically, education," says KCDC international director Yoni Avital. "It was a way for us to open up dance not only to Israeli dancers but also to dancers from all over the world," he explains.

I caught some of that action during the company's trip to Budapest in the first week of January when some 30 young dancers took part in an audition for this year's five-month Dance Journey courses. The candidates came from all over Europe,



Artistic director Rami Be'er has headed the dance company since 1996. (Uri Nevo)

including Sweden, Hungary, Bulgaria, Italy and France. Following the dance session, they were given the rundown on the company, the village and Israel by Avital, followed by a personal account of her own experience with Dance Journey by Acs Adrienn, a Hungarian dancer who attended the program in 2010.

"The idea is to open up dance education on a more professional level," says Avital. "It is geared more for university age and for people who have graduated from a bachelor of

One-time Dance Journey participant David Ben-Shimon dances atop Masada. Today he is a member of the Kibbutz Contemporary Dance Company. (KCDC)





Young dancers are in for something of a utopian experience. (Uri Nevo)

fine arts program in North America and Europe. It is a mixed group of people of a higher caliber who have already decided that they want to do dance as a profession."

The upcoming five-month program starts on February 4, while the fall program starts in late August and is designed to last for 10 months.

"Dancers will be coming to us from all over the world for the full academic year," he explains. "For those who come to the September program, we offer the option to stay with us until the following June. That works well for people who are on a bachelor's degree program, who can come to us on a student exchange program. KCDC is recognized by academic institutions around the world."

In many ways, Avital and KCDC are offering young dancers something of a utopian study experience. For a start, the village is located in one of the country's most beautiful regions. And the participants are provided with the best possible conditions to hone their artistic skills uninterrupted by the pressures of the rat race in ideal logistical and study circumstances.

"They live in the village, and it takes them all of two minutes to walk in their dance clothes to the studio," says the director. "They are able to interact professionally and socially with the dancers of the main company and the second company."

The students are also given the opportunity to display the fruits of their Dance Journey labors towards the end of the course.

"They are able to create, which is an opportunity a lot of programs don't necessarily offer. They create their own original choreography. They are given free studio space and the

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– **Kibbutz Contemporary Dance Company**
international director
Yoni Avital

time and whatever kind of support and instruction they might need in order to create. The last program just ended, and the students put on their own pieces at our theater, the Zichri Theater," says Avital.

Presumably, over the years there have been more and more graduates of the KCDC program spreading the word around the globe about what's on offer at Kibbutz Ga'aton.

"These alumni are definitely our best promotion," admits Avital.

That claim is fully corroborated by past Dance Journey participant Sara Grenga from Italy.

"The Dance Journey program has been a great experience for me on a professional and from a human standpoint," she asserts. "I learned so much about myself and about dance. I greatly improved my skills as a dancer and I got to know Israel, an amazing country I fell in love with so much that I did everything I could to stay here, and I eventually made it."

Californian Alex Bradshaw was similarly enthused by his time at the Dance Village, the facilities on offer



'Alumni are our best promotion,' says KCDC international director Yoni Avital. (Rinat Halon)

and the tranquil locale.

"Forme, it has been an immeasurably unique privilege to thrive as a dancer in a non-urban setting," he says. "This place is a one-of-a-kind international dance laboratory nestled in the rural hills of northern Israel. We spend our days dancing alongside accomplished artists. We work in bright studios overlooking meadows and expansive blue ocean."

"A lot of the people who have been on Dance Journey say it is the best thing they could have done," says Avital. "We are talking about professional and personal growth. It

really is tremendous."

While the main KCDC company dancers will be doing their thing in Reno, Dallas and Los Angeles, Avital and his wife, Dorry Aden, a former KCDC dancer, will be doing the rounds of various universities and academic institutions to spread the KCDC word.

Expect more good things from Kibbutz Ga'aton in the years to come.

On Monday, the Kibbutz Contemporary Dance Company will hold a gala event at the Performing Arts Center in Herzliya. For more information about KCDC: www.kcdc.co.il/en.html