Becoming
Kibbutz
Contemporary Dance Company

From Yehudit Arnon
to Rami Be'er

by Gdalit Neuman
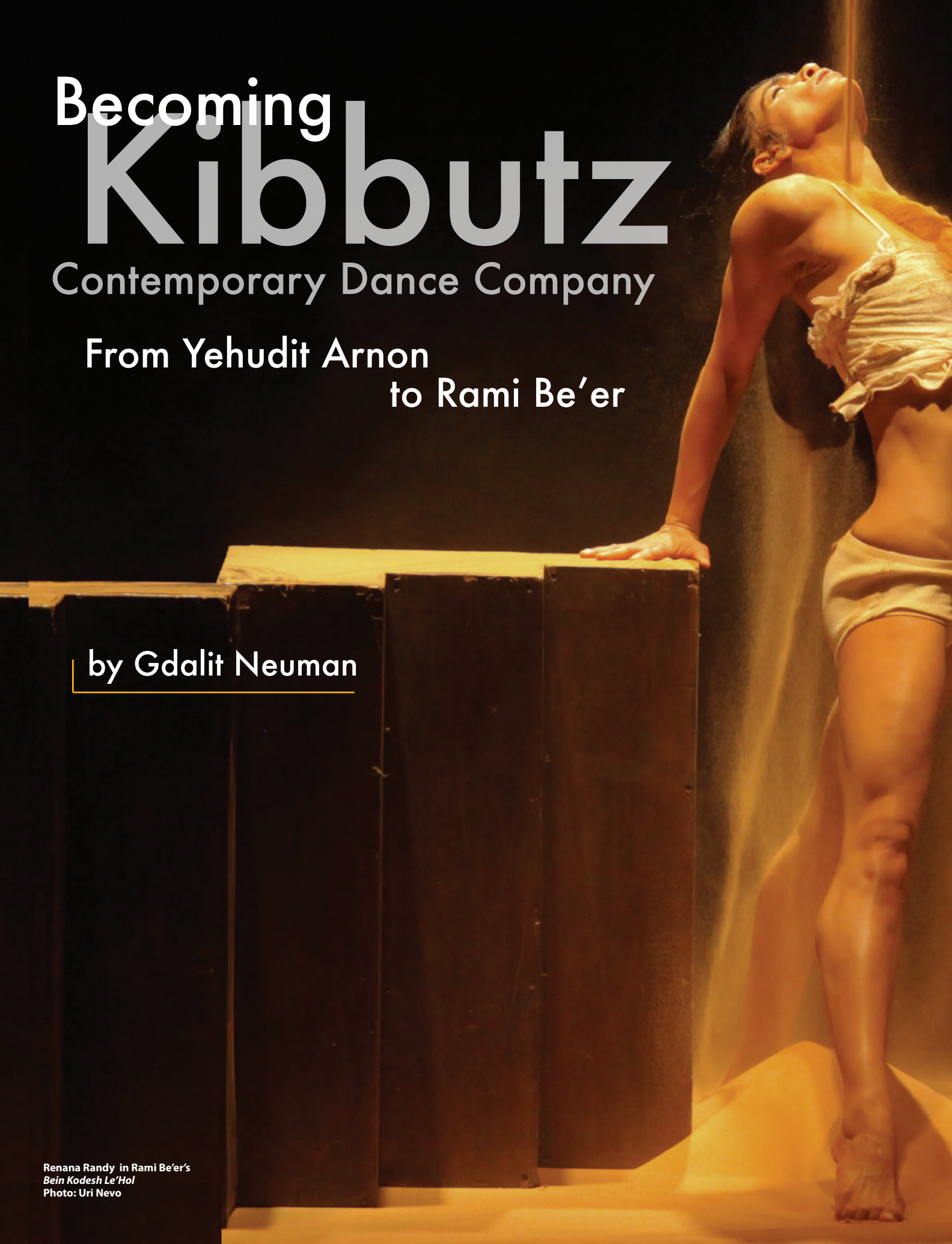
Renana Randy in Rami Be'er's
Bein Kodesh Le'Hol
Photo: Uri Nevo

Kibbutz Contemporary Dance Company operates out of tiny and remote Kibbutz Ga'aton in the Western Galilee of northern Israel, a stone's throw away from neighbouring Lebanon to the north. Kibbutzim (plural for kibbutz) are traditionally agricultural collective settlements that were fundamental to the Zionist ideology of settling the land in the periphery of the country, thus dictating the borders of the newly established state of Israel.

Over the years, Kibbutz Contemporary Dance Company — one of Israel's most established dance groups — has functioned under several names and only two artistic directors. The story of how the first, Yehudit Arnon — who received the Israel Prize in 1998 and passed away in August 2013 at the age of 87 — founded KCDC is closely tied to the Israeli Kibbutz Movement, which, from the beginning of the 20th century, was tremendously active in the production of new Israeli culture. The arts were highly valued and well developed, and Kibbutz Ga'aton — which Arnon helped found in 1948 — was, in particular, home to many artists.

Arnon was interested in developing modern dance activities on the kibbutz and she honed her expertise by travelling to Haifa, the closest major city, to study with important Israeli dance artists Gertrud Kraus, Mia Arbatova and Yardena Cohen. She was confronted with some resistance to her work as the socialist kibbutz ideology favoured folk dance, in which everyone could participate no matter their talent or skill level. Eventually, Arnon managed to convince her kibbutz of the importance of modern dance, which she taught along with her usual kibbutz duties. In 1959, she formed the Ga'aton Dance Company, which represented the Kibbutz Artzi, a national movement, and was exclusive to kibbutz members from all over Israel.

"The original company members were only Kibbutznikim [members of kibbutzim]," recalls Noa Kaplunik, a Ga'aton native. "After I returned to dance with the company, following army service, there was already a framework in place whereby professional dancers [from the kibbutzim] were allocated three days in which to dance." For the remainder of the week, the eight company dancers were integrated into various agricultural jobs on their kibbutzim.

In 1970, the group was renamed Inter-Kibbutz Dance Company, which a few years later became Kibbutz Dance Company. Under Arnon's leadership, the company developed a unique repertoire that featured her choreography as well as that of leading Israeli dance artists such as Oshra Elkayam and Hedda Oren. *Three*, choreographed in 1979 by Arnon, showcased the bold physicality of three of her male dancers. The fact that they were also farmers and soldiers in addition to being professional dancers was not overlooked by the audience, who appreciated this specifically Israeli circumstance. It contributed to a unique muscular aesthetic, associated with the demands of kibbutz life, which distinguished Kibbutz Dance Company from others working at the time. A powerful and daring movement vocabulary is still a signature of the group today.

Etai Peri in Rami Be'er's *Aide Memoire*
Photo: Uri Nevo

in creating a professional modern dance company in rural and remote Israel, but she had raised generations of dancers along the way, some of whom are currently well-respected choreographers in their own right, both in Israel and abroad. Arnon's successor, Rami Be'er, is a perfect example.

Be'er was born on Kibbutz Ga'aton. His parents were among the settlement's founders. Be'er's father, an architect by trade, designed Kibbutz Ga'aton's communal dining hall, today one of Kibbutz Contemporary Dance Company's largest dance studios. Growing up in a family of musicians, Be'er studied the cello and took dance classes with Arnon. "She identified my potential and knew how to develop it," Be'er told me during an interview when I visited Ga'aton this past November. Following army service, he joined the company in 1981 and in addition to dancing, was drawn to choreography early on.

Under Be'er's directorship, Kibbutz Contemporary Dance Company has undergone significant changes. Importantly, he opened up auditions to dancers from all over Israel and the world, not only the kibbutzim. "I spoke to Yehudit about opening it up to all dancers. It was logical. With such a small population to choose from, the selection was too limited." This evolution reflects the privatization trend of kibbutzim all over the country, which began in the 1980s, and during which the kibbutz's entire ethos was put into question. Be'er's first full-length work, *Real Time* (1991), explores these tensions.

Never one to shy away from difficult themes, several of Be'er's pieces tackle key Israeli issues. In *Reservist's Diary* (1989), he used Israeli writer Zvika Sternfeld's poetry to help articulate a soldier's inner struggle. Sternfeld's poem describes the tone of the work: "it is unclear … who is chasing, who's chasing after whom and who's the one being chased after; the chase itself is what rules." Be'er's provocative work presented a mirror onto Israeli society at a time when political tensions had reached a boiling point.

Be'er is the first to recognize the influence his environment has on the work he produces. "I believe that, in one way or another, we are all the product of the landscape of our childhood and our homeland," he told me. "I research ideas that concern me and that relate to our existence and our experience as human beings. There is great power in dance and art to build bridges between cultures and nations and, in a modest way, make the world a better place in which to live. Not that art and dance can change the world in that [they] can [directly] affect politics or society, but the individual audience member can leave a performance with more questions and points of reflections than they had going in."

The company's current repertoire is substantial and diverse. In addition to work by guest choreographers, Be'er's contribution includes more than 50 pieces. Perhaps the most iconic of these is *Aide Memoire*, which he choreographed in 1994 while still under the tutelage of Arnon. In this work, Be'er contemplates his own experience as a child of Holocaust survivors. The silence that surrounded family histories and the pain that was nonetheless tangible characterize Israeli collective memory. His latest creation, *Undivided Void* (2013), premiered at the Israel Festival in Jerusalem. Here, Be'er illuminates our aspirations for completeness in our lives, for what is whole and what is missing. He investigates relationships: the individual within, partnerships, the individual versus the group, the individual versus society.

When describing his role as choreographer, Be'er uses the image of a sponge that soaks up many different elements as sources for inspiration: music, sound, design, plastic arts, nature, people,

Arnon brought Israel's finest teachers and choreographers to the kibbutz, and she didn't stop there. In the 1980s, she invited the most distinguished international choreographers to work with them. Jirí Kylián set *La Cathédrale Engloutie* and *Stoolgame* on the company in 1980 and 1982 respectively. Mats Ek staged *Down North* in 1986 and *Fireplace* in 1987. In 1989, Ek agreed to set his *Soweto* free of charge, on the condition that Arnon herself dance the role of Mother Earth. That was the year the company's name changed once more to the one it goes by today: Kibbutz Contemporary Dance Company. Other major choreographers who have worked with them include Susanne Linke, Anna Sokolow and Kei Takei.

By the time Arnon retired in 1996, she had not only succeeded

animals and movement itself. These ideas, according to Be'er, pass through a prism and float, until they manifest in the studio through movement exploration and a unique collaboration with the dancers.

Bold physicality, theatricality and sensitive musicality characterize Be'er's choreography. Often described by Israeli dance scholars as a "complete artist," Be'er's creative choices encompass all aspects of the production, including elaborate set design, lighting and costuming. He often incorporates props into his choreography, such as giant pears and moving bleachers in *Real Time*, and sand in *Bein Kodesh Le'Hol* (Between Sacred and Secular). His titles are poetic and many times incorporate double meanings in Hebrew. An example is *Haser Ha-Shalem*, which literally translates to The Missing Whole, though its English title is *Undivided Void*.

Today, Kibbutz Contemporary Dance Company is a multifaceted organization. The main company presents Be'er's repertoire both nationally and internationally. The second company, KCDC 2,

performs locally, and a third troupe specializes in programs designed for children. The International Dance Village of Kibbutz Ga'aton, where the dance company is based, also hosts a regional dance school and workshops for advanced dancers, as well as long-term programs and summer intensives for international students. Additionally, the company is involved in community outreach initiatives such as workshops for at-risk youth, new immigrants and people with special needs. Company members teach movement workshops in public schools and work with young dancers from surrounding Arab villages. Dance workshops for adults, tours, seminars and performances are regular occurrences in the International Dance Village.

Kibbutz Contemporary Dance Company continues to be relevant to global audiences by exposing universal themes, all the while representing something particularly local and Israeli. And, yes, even Rami Be'er worked in agriculture while dancing professionally for the company in those early days. "I worked in the avocado grove," recalls Be'er with a smile. ▼

YEHUDIT ARNON'S
REMARKABLE JOURNEY

Yehudit Arnon was born Yehudit Schischa-Halevy in 1926 in Komárno, Czechoslovakia (today's Slovakia) into an orthodox Jewish Hungarian family. Her older siblings played music and she demonstrated a natural gift for movement from an early age, but was not allowed to take formal dance lessons due to the emphasis placed on modesty in the Jewish religious tradition. Instead, Arnon attended popular Zionist youth movement activities, where she participated in folk dancing. These groups, which were both social and political in nature, sprang up throughout the

Jewish Diaspora as a reaction to the Zionist movement, which propagated a return to Israel and the creation of a Jewish national homeland.

In June 1944, after six years of Nazi occupation over Czechoslovakia, Arnon and her parents were sent to Auschwitz concentration camp in Poland. She was immediately separated from her parents and taken to work along with the other young people. Arnon entertained the 1,000 women in her barrack by performing acrobatics, pantomime and dance, thus providing them with a few moments of escape. The Nazis soon heard of her talents, and Arnon was summoned to perform for them during their Christmas party in December 1944. When she refused, the Nazis tied her up and left her to freeze outside for several hours, wearing only a thin dress. It was then that Arnon decided to dedicate the rest of her life to dance, should she survive the war.

Following liberation in 1945, Arnon worked in Budapest at a camp for child Holocaust survivors run by Hashomer Hatzair (The Young Guard) Zionist youth movement. One of her greatest achievements was orchestrating a dance pageant for 350 children, called the Pageant of Victory. While in Budapest, Arnon spent a few intense days with Irena Dückstein, who was the dean of the Faculty of Movement Arts at the Budapest Academy of Physical Education, and had worked with Kurt Jooss, the founding father of German tanztheater.

Arnon, accompanied by Yedidya Arnon, who was soon to be her husband, left Budapest with 100 child Holocaust survivors from various countries of origin. Two years later, in 1948, they arrived in Israel, joining their friends from Hashomer Hatzair once more. Soon they were among the founding members of Kibbutz Ga'aton.

— **GDALIT NEUMAN**