

# Dance Oasis

Almost all of the world's top contemporary dance companies are based in major metropolitan centres, with one singular exception: Kibbutz Contemporary Dance Company. PAY speaks to artistic director Rami Be'er and international director Yoni Avital to find out how the company has created an oasis of incredible dance on a remote Kibbutz.

All performing arts companies want to create amazing work, and in that regard Kibbutz Contemporary Dance Company (KCDC) is no different. But for KCDC performance is just one element in a huge portfolio of activities that ranges from sold out shows at Sydney Opera House to community cohesion efforts that build bridges between Arabs and Israelis. KCDC is more than just a dance company: it's a social movement.

'There are many dimensions to our work, and creation is just one of them,' acknowledges artistic director Rami Be'er. 'I want to search for truth...to succeed in saying something about our individual and collective existence through dance. But we also exist to encourage others, and that is where our other work comes in.'

Be'er is a charismatic man whose words carry a mystical quality; an artistic leader with powerful ideas and panoramic visions of what KCDC should stand for.

Founded in 1973, KCDC owes its existence to the drive and determination of one woman: Yehudit Arnon. Born in Czechoslovakia in 1926, Arnon and her family were imprisoned at Auschwitz concentration camp during WWII. In Auschwitz Arnon would dance for her fellow inmates, but refused to dance for the guards – a decision that almost led to her death, as she was thrown out into the freezing snow.

'She decided if she could survive the camp she would dedicate her life to dance and teaching others,' says KCDC international director Yoni Avital, as he tells me about the company's history. 'She managed to survive the freezing snow, and eventually emigrated to Kibbutz Ga'aton in the late 40s.'

Although Arnon had to work on the collective community farm like every other member of the Kibbutz she never lost her love for dance, and was eventually rewarded with her own dance studio at Kibbutz Ga'aton in the early 70s. Be'er, whose parents were also Holocaust survivors, was one of her early pupils, making him the perfect person to carry on Arnon's legacy (Arnon passed away in 2013).

'She was a very special lady who influenced me a lot,' says Be'er, thoughtfully. 'I took a lot from her work on education, and I've continued to develop her vision since I took over from her.'

That education covers a number of strands, but starts with three major programmes: a short summer course, a five or 10-month training programme and a youth dance company named KCDC2.

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'In the mid 90s we decided to become more involved in education through KCDC2, in line with Arnon's approach to dance,' says Avital. 'KCDC2's mission is to introduce young people to dance. The company has a rigorous and busy schedule and performs for elementary and high schools around Israel as well as internationally.'

'Then in 2009 we opened up a programme called Dance Journey. This is a five or 10-month scheme for dancers over the age of 18, who come to us from dance academies all over the world. They study repertoire, learn Hebrew and do voluntary work in the community. It's a high level pre-professional programme. We also offer a Summer Intensive, where young dancers can come for two, four or six week placements.'

Photo: MODAFE Festival Seoul



The programme isn't only about making great dancers though, as Avital is quick to point out. 'It's about persona development. Yes, many of the attendees go on to have successful professional careers – some members of KCDC came through this programme – but it is also about helping to create caring and compassionate adults who are engaged with the world beyond dance.'

This idea of service is something Be'er picks up on: 'I believe that dance is a source of life – it is life actually – so the activity of the company goes to the whole community, from the top dancer to the second company to the different staff, to the students at the schools – the whole community.'

For example, KCDC runs dance workshops and classes in local Arabic villages, giving them a chance for self expression and skill development that they otherwise would miss out on. It also runs a project that helps the victims of domestic abuse.

'Our company has made it a point to develop programmes in the Arab community, and use our field of performing arts to build bridges between Israelis and Arabs,' says Avital. 'Dance is just a tool, like any other performing art, and we believe it can be used to create a stronger community locally, and beyond that a better world.'

All of this community work is of course incredibly important, but it would not exist were it not for the internationally acclaimed dance works that Be'er and his team create. Recent successes include *If At All*, which was one of the highlights of last year's Festival Grec de Barcelon, and *Horses in the Sky*, which premiered to critical acclaim at Sydney Opera House on 31 August, 2016.

Perhaps surprisingly given the powerful story of KCDC's history, Be'er does not create works that have a strong central narrative. Instead, his pieces are abstract and intensely emotional.

'With my work I invite the audience on a journey, but a journey that is personal to them,' says the artistic director. 'I lead them until a certain point, and then leave him to connect in their own way through the

piece. The audience can bring their own associations, their own memories and their own feelings – in other words, they can tell their own story through my work. Each piece I create has as many possibly interpretations as there are audience members – there is a freedom of meaning.'

'Of course, I have my reasons for choosing certain things, and I have my own thoughts about what a piece might mean...but it is more important that the audience makes their own connections. That is what my work offers to spectators.'

Right now Be'er is working on his latest piece, which will premiere during the company's annual Spring Gala. Says Avital: 'Rami premieres a new work each year during our gala event, which acts as a fundraiser and promotion tool for things like the co-existence and domestic violence work.'

The next major projects for KCDC – which already boasts eight dance studios and a theatre – is major expansion for the dance village. 'We have a theatre that is 150 seats, and that is going to rise to 400 so it can become a performing arts centre for all of Galilee. We also want a building to house international guests such as dance presenters and journalists.'

That need to host visitors has increased due to the new dance and movement festival that it is hosting each spring, which brings together performing artists from all over the world. The 2017 programme includes performances and workshops that Avital says will engage people of all ages, from all backgrounds.'

Avital and Be'er say the festival is just one more example of KCDC's spirit. 'There is no ego here,' concludes Avital. 'Even though there are different levels, everyone is working together. From the youngest student to the most senior dancer, everyone comes together to work and socialise as equals – it truly is a collective.'

[kcdc.co.il](http://kcdc.co.il)



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Photo: Eyal Hirsch