

# NEW STEPS IN JEWISH DANCE

MODERN CHOREOGRAPHERS ARE EXPLORING THEIR HERITAGE, FINDING INSPIRATION FOR NEW WORKS IN THE HOLOCAUST AND BEYOND.

By Susan Josephs

Several years ago, Carolyn Dorfman celebrated Hanukka at her local synagogue. A group of musicians began to play klezmer, and Dorfman discovered she could not resist moving to the melodies. "I thought, 'Oh my God, this is the celebration music of my family, of my people,'" she recalls. "I stood up and started dancing with my kids. I thought, 'This needs to be in my work.'" For years, Dorfman, a New Jersey-based choreographer and a child of Holocaust survivors, had focused on depicting pain when creating works related to Jewish life. "The Holocaust connected me to Judaism," she says. "But when I looked at my kids, I saw that death alone is not going to keep them connected to their heritage."

Dorfman's epiphany resulted in *Mayne Mentshn*, a work about pre-Hitler European Jewish life, postwar immigration and assimilation in America. "This was the first work I made that was a culmination of everything I am—artist, Jew, mother, child," she says.

Dorfman is among a group of prominent choreographers who have significantly expanded the number of Jewish-themed modern dances. For some, the impetus sprang from a new or latent desire to delve into their backgrounds. For others, opportunities to collaborate with Jewish artists working in other mediums or intellectual interest ultimately led to the creation of a new work.

For example, that the Pilobolus Dance Theater created two Jewish-themed works within a two-year period is coincidental, according to Jonathan Wolken, one of the company's four artistic directors. "This is not our Jewish phase," he insists.

Nevertheless, in the past five years the contemporary dance world has yielded works that reflect Jewish experiences from a variety of perspectives. Not surprisingly, many deal with the Holocaust. But like Dorfman's *Mayne Mentshn*, others offer a more upbeat point of view. What these dances share is a desire to explore Jewish life with movements that transcend caricature or kitsch.

"Had I not done my homework as a Jew, I could not have made my ballet," says Bronx-based choreographer Suki John, who created *Sh'ma*, a dance about her family's Holocaust experiences. "And this was the ballet I had to make."

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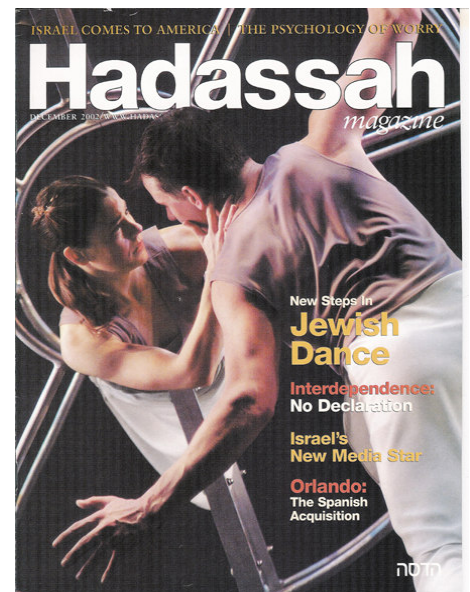
By the time New York's 92nd Street Y presented *Sh'ma*, the modern dance world already possessed a considerable number of Holocaust-themed pieces. Companies ranging from the theatrical and acrobatic Minneapolis-based Shapiro & Smith to the more classical Kibbutz Contemporary Dance Company in northern Israel have created productions full of crawling, writhing, anguished movements. In 1994, Tamar Rogoff produced a dance called *The Ilye Project*, where she worked in the town of Ilye in Belarus with both dancers and Holocaust survivors. The dance was performed on the site where Nazis murdered 2,500 people in one day, including 29 members of her family.

According to John, *Sh'ma* began during a trip to Yugoslavia, just before the Bosnian war. She received a commission from a multinational theater there to create a work for local dancers. The maternal side of her family had lived in Hungary. In 1944, the Nazis sent her mother to Bergen-Belsen. Her mother survived, and this "story was always in me," says John. "It just didn't take the form of a dance until I had this opportunity."

After performing it in Yugoslavia, John set *Sh'ma* aside. In 1999, she received a grant from the 92nd Street Y to revive the dance. Later, she staged the work at the Washington Irving High School in New York, an experience she calls "an artistic triumph and commercial disaster. I went broke, but no other dance has had this much meaning in my life," she says.

*Sh'ma* blurs the lines between dance and theater as it tells the story of John's family. One scene, called "Nightmare," is a solo for a young woman who represents John's mother after the racial laws have taken effect. The woman races wildly around on a bare stage, rolling on the floor and bumping against the walls. Her energy and movements evoke a hurricane newly descended on a small town and a caged wild animal desperately trying to escape.

Though clearly about the Holocaust, John says working on the piece coincided with a desire to



explore "what else Judaism was about." Raised in a secular family, she began attending synagogue and lighting Sabbath candles. Though she married a non-Jew, John insisted on a Jewish wedding. "In... *Sh'ma*, there are traditional cantorial melodies that have to do with me finding the religion of being a Jew," she says.

Pilobolus also presented its first Holocaust-themed work in 1999. But unlike John, who created a deeply personal work, the Connecticut-based dance company began *A Selection* out of a collaboration with author and illustrator Maurice Sendak, best known for his children's book *Where the Wild Things Are*.

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The dance, performed in the company's signature acrobatic, theatrical and collaborative style, revolves around a group of performers who miss the last train out of town and are trapped in Nazi Germany. At the train station, they encounter an eccentric, clownish stranger. The drama is set against a burning European cityscape designed by Sendak, with music by Czech composers Pavel Haas and Hans Krasa, both of whom died in Auschwitz.

Initially, interactions between the stranger and the performers are playful. But then the leader of the performers expresses disapproval of the stranger and begins to intimidate those who befriend the stranger. The dance grows increasingly sinister, particularly when the stranger takes control of the group.

Though Sendak had the Holocaust in mind when he worked on the set, Pilobolus, says Robby Barnett, an artistic director at the company, began by "exploring movements. Only later did we develop the narrative. What we were really doing was examining the nature of a group in times of stress.... The decision to make this about the Holocaust came at the end of the process."

A film about the making of *A Selection*, called *Last Dance* and produced by First Run Features, is being shown nationwide in film festivals through March 2003. It features interviews with Sendak and Pilobolus artistic directors and thrilling performances revealing the nuances of the creative process. For more information, go to [www.firstrunfeatures.com/th/Last/thmain.html](http://www.firstrunfeatures.com/th/Last/thmain.html).

As the sole Jewish artistic director in Pilobolus, Wolken observes that he had never wanted to make a Holocaust piece, even though he lost family in the concentration camps. But, he says, collaborating with Sendak alerted him to the possibility that within the recesses of his consciousness "the Holocaust is there."

The making of *A Selection* led Wolken to consider using Jewish music in other works. His interest in klezmer, and a commission from the National Foundation for Jewish Culture, led to *Davenen*, which premiered last year. Featuring music by the Klezmatics, the dance explores the nature of prayer and offers an upbeat and spiritual perspective on the human quest for salvation.

Davenen begins with six interlocked dancers, suggestive of a human tumbleweed. Gradually, they whirl away and stand apart, *shuckling* like pious Jews in an attempt to find a path to the Divine. The dancers ultimately reconnect in both loving and violent ways. For example, a man and a woman engage in prayer. Then they glance at each other sideways before arching their backs, hands heading for the floor. In the backbend position, they exchange a kiss. The man then resumes praying but incurs the wrath of the woman, who pokes and hits him to get his attention. Though his body contorts in reaction, the man steadfastly continues to pray.

The dance's "Jewishness," according to Wolken, stems from research he and Barnett conducted before working with the performers. They met with rabbis, read Isaac Bashevis Singer's *Satan in Goray* and found themselves fascinated by Shabbetai Zevi, the notorious seventeenth-century false messiah.

For Barnett, research was a starting point to "help us find a structure beyond Jewish iconography. Our dancers come from a variety of backgrounds, and we needed a way of engaging everyone," he says. "So we explored what levels of universality there are with prayer."

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Dorfman's personal connection to her subject has to do with her evolving perceptions of Jewish identity. Raised in Detroit, "I was totally immersed in the Jewish community," she says, "but I was an odd bird, the child of European parents." Her parent's thick accents set her apart in high school, where, she recalls, most of her friends' parents were American or assimilated into American culture.

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Before *Mayne Mentshn*, Dorfman created *Lifeline* and *Cries of the Children*. Both expressed feelings about being the child of survivors and the need for intergenerational communication. "Early in my career, I was wrestling with the Holocaust," she says. "Retrospectively, I see that works where I had no intention of dealing with Jewish issues still reflected the culture I was raised in."

*Mayne Mentshn* is divided into two main sections, "The Klezmer Sketch" and "The American Dream," and uses contemporary movements. Smaller sections like "My Father's Solo" and "The Three Sisters" look at interactions between Dorfman and her relatives, while "The Table" is an ode to the Jewish holiday meal. In it, performers pass around plates, exploring movements that can happen while sitting or standing on chairs.

In "The Wedding," a bride and groom leap and spin around and on top of two chairs, in motions that could be found in other dances about betrothal. Only at the end does the groom mime the breaking of the glass at a Jewish ceremony.

"For me," Dorfman says, "it's not the mechanics of movement that make the piece Jewish. It's the metaphors that the movements bring about. So for non-Jewish audiences, *Mayne Mentshn* can be a vehicle to learn about [Jews]."

"It's also been a tremendous vehicle for the Jewish community," she adds, "for people who see the humor and challenges of their own culture."

Ask David Dorfman (no relation to Carolyn Dorfman) about Jewish humor. A New York choreographer known for athleticism and the blurring of artistic mediums, Dorfman recently premiered *Shtuck* with Dan Froot, a Los Angeles-based performance artist. Froot and Dorfman have collaborated for the past decade and have acquired a reputation as a seriocomic, multimedia performance duo with a special interest in shtick.

*Shtuck* in particular is "intertwined with who we are as Jews," says Dorfman. "We identify with this element of self-deprecation. Call it a Woody Allen complex, not that I want to be...Allen, but I identify with the need to make people laugh."

Combining dance, music and theater, shtuck unfolds as a vaudevillian "day-in-the-life" show. Dressed in baggy pants, jackets and hats, Dorfman and Froot repeatedly introduce each other and frequently critique each other's performance. The men also lampoon the distinction between on- and off-stage behavior by taking a break in front of the audience. Froot eats a banana and tries to read the newspaper.

As an artist, Dorfman, who was raised in a culturally Jewish home in Chicago, says he neither consciously shied away nor embraced his Jewishness. Prior to *Shtuck*, Dorfman created *Dayenu*, a solo that he starts in an upside-down position and describes as "an argument with God. My mom had died and I had...friends dying from AIDS. I could have called the piece *Enough* but I called it *Dayenu*," he recalls. "I would say there's this religion inside me but that I have problems with concepts like the Chosen People. I guess I try to express the conflicts I have and hope it will be interesting to an audience."

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Dorfman doesn't know if he will produce other Jewish works. "Not a day goes by that I don't think about Jewishness in my life," he says. "It's not something I can escape from but I don't know where I'm going with it."

Dorfman echoes the sentiments of Israeli-born choreographer Zvi Gotheiner, who after years of running a company in New York recognized the futility of trying to ignore his roots. "Israel is imprinted in my soul and in the way I perceive the world," he says. "The farther I tried to get away from it, the more it would come back to me." Today, he no longer tries to assimilate into the greater culture and has created performances like *Dust*, which celebrates Yemenite Jewry, and *Checkpoint*, which explores the cultural dislocation of immigrants. The same life lessons apply to Gotheiner's American colleagues—the ones who believe dance can serve as a powerful transmitter of Jewish culture and identity.

"There is a universality to the language of dance that transcends spoken words," says Carolyn Dorfman. "There's an immediate connection to the spirit, to emotions and to the intellect. It's visceral and I think a crucial part of Jewish education in the arts."