



PHOTOGRAPH BY ENOCH CHAN

DANCING THROUGH THE AGES

by LIZ LERMAN

THE IDEA

No Jews were in the first group of elderly folks that I got to dance at Washington, DC's Roosevelt for Senior Citizens in 1975 — none, that is, except for the spirit of my wonderful mother, whose death sparked my decision to enter this residence for the aged. Making the dance *Woman of the Clear Vision* changed everything in my artist's life. I learned that dance may start as recreation but can become a powerful path of understanding, joy and reflection of life's losses.

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What happens when an older person dances? Now that I am older myself, perhaps I will discover new insights. But what I already know is that the moving body can lead to fresh thinking, change perceptions, and allow for new connections inwardly and among the people with whom one is sharing space. In Jewish institutions, dancing can lead to new insights about text, self, friends and community.

THE WOMEN

Since starting the Dance Exchange in 1976, I have found my way into many Jewish settings in which older adults have come to connect body and prayer, personal history and touch, inward exploration and outward expression. No one has exemplified this more than the remarkable Bea Wattenberg. A widow in her

60s, she came into our midst expecting to find a social dance scene and left ten years later a beautiful performer, an accomplished choreographer and a brilliant collaborator in developing worship services. Watching her develop a new relationship with her Judaism was one of my deeper pleasures at that time. This culminated in a piece we made, *The Good Jew?*, in which I was on trial as to whether I was Jewish enough. Bea's contribution included a moment in which she recited and performed her own recipe: "Take two cups of Torah, a cup of Shabbat and a fist full of justice, vigorously beaten ... Combine the essence of kindness, tolerance, charity, humility and humor ... So that it shouldn't be too sweet, stir up a mixture of memories, bitter herbs, pogroms, Holocaust, and stir them in the pot ... Fill the rest of the pot with all the *mitzvot* you can

hold. Keep this over a steady flame, never letting it die out.”

The arrival of Shula Strassfeld to the company in the past few years has brought even more intensity to my understanding of what is possible. Shula auditioned for the company when she was turning 61. Unlike Bea, she came to us with extensive dance training and stage experience, though a great part of her life was devoted to family and to the Jewish community as the daughter, sister and former wife of rabbis. I was very happy to have her physical beauty and vast Jewish knowledge brought to bear on the collaborative gifts of all members of the Dance Exchange.

Shula came to the Dance Exchange just after we premiered *Small Dances About Big Ideas* at a conference observing the 60th anniversary of the Nuremberg Trials. The work had been commissioned with the particular request that we “remember the body” in considering the topic of genocide and justice.

As part of our “animated keynote” at the CAJE conference in 2008, we decided to show a portion of *Small Dances* and let the audience in on what each dancer was thinking as each laid down to form the pile of corpses featured in the scene. They described everything from the basics of “hitting my proper position on stage” to the performance challenge of “what to do with my eyes if I’m supposed to be dead.” When it was Shula’s turn, she walked in with her calm grace, lay across the bodies already formed on the floor, and said, first in Hebrew and then in English, “This, I have been told, is how my father’s family died.”

As I watched this performance, I heard a loud whisper from the audience: “This is not the same Dance Exchange. Something has happened. Very Jewish.” The speaker was

responding in part to how Shula brought her knowledge and her Jewishness to bear on each and everything she does. She is an example of how art can fulfill a later role in life and of how older people can provide vitality, insight and the force of history to the creation of art.

THE CONTEXTS

Washington’s Temple Micah is my home. This is where I have worked out so many of the ways I have come to see dance become a part of a spiritual community. Even on the afternoon of Yom Kippur, we dance. The Rabbi selects a group of participants from the synagogue who work with me to prepare a participatory dance for the whole congregation. The group is always intergenerational. And when, one-by-one, they step up to the center of the *bima* to introduce their movement and story, it is always the elders who make the work of the moment possible.

One year, an older man who had lost his wife during the previous year participated. Seeing him stand in front of all those people to tell a little story and make a simple movement brought us to tears. It was authentic, beautiful and a way to exist both backwards and forwards in time. We could see him moving into the future without his beloved, but we could still remember him connected to her when in our midst. The dancing was the bridge. Life and death joined in a moment of public observance.

In 1986, I was asked to create a dance in celebration of the centennial of the Statue of Liberty. I composed a short work for the company that lasted about nine minutes, taking the final three minutes to fill the outdoor stage at the tip of Manhattan with older adults. The idea that immigrants were still

coming to America gave me a chance to observe my own heritage as the descendent of Russian Jews. Working with Dancing in the Streets, who commissioned the piece, we recruited dancers from two different groups.

The first place we went to was the 92nd Street Y, a place of some renown for the connection between modern dance and Judaism. There we gathered a group of mostly older Jewish women who had danced for much of their lives. We also recruited from a senior center at Coney Island. The people in that group had just recently arrived from Russia and could not yet speak English. So we did a lot of translating and gesturing, and general good will permeated all the rehearsals. A few days before we were to perform, I discovered that some of the immigrants came from Odessa. I told them that my grandfather had lived in that city before travelling west and that I always wanted to go there. The next day, at the final rehearsal before the big performance, one of the Russian women approached me with a large volume in her arms. It was a picture book of Odessa. She sat me down and made me look at each page with her. She spoke in a tongue I couldn’t fathom, but her arm around me conveyed a language I understood completely.

Dancing between generations is not just good for the older folks. It is good for all of us. Our ability to convey curiosity, love, commitment and care can live in the body, in the counts, in the music and in the structure of learning that dancing together provides. As far as I am concerned, every synagogue, home for the aged, day school and Jewish institution can use an infusion of movement practices. Jewish life in America is so full of possibility. This is one more way to fulfill its promise. ■



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