

REAPPEARING ACTS:

From Jewish Life to Jewish Dance Theater

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Introduction

In 1913, in Lodz, Poland, a 15-year old cheder boy pushes his payes under his hat to go tango dancing with his sister. He wins a ballet scholarship to Berlin; and this youngest and only son of thirteen, whose Chasidic mother wants him to be a rabbi, changes tracks. Soon he is performing for even the Kaiser, with the Berlin Opera Ballet, then as soloist in operettas, and studying drama with Max Reinhardt. He enters the U.S. illegally in 1920.

In 1920, a liberal rabbi, is writing secular, humanistic plays produced throughout Germany while advocating more Jewish observance in the home. He and his pianist wife have a second daughter. She grows up in Berlin amidst artists and high achievers, dreaming of a great career onstage. At 11, she is pulled out of a recital minutes beforehand because of her Jewish name. Undeterred, she continues her dance studies.

In 1917, a widow who could out-dance anyone at a simcha, moves from Bialystok to Moscow with her nine children. Her eldest teaches Hebrew as a living language, and helps raise her 16-year old son. The elder brother has begun a cooperative theater company. In 1922, this group, Habima, working with Stanislavski and Vakhtangov, produces its groundbreaking work, The Dybbuk, performed in Hebrew. When the company, without the brothers, settles in Palestine, their first production is a play by the Berlin rabbi, Emil Bernhard Cohn.

Cohn had fled to Amsterdam with his daughter, Miriam, in 1937, after a third Nazi arrest. Miriam Cohn comes to San Francisco in 1940, then moves to Los Angeles as Miriam Rochlin with her American husband and daughter in 1945. The younger brother from Habima, Benjamin Zemach, now a force in his own right, returns to L.A. from New York in 1946. In 1948, Miriam takes his dance class at the University of Judaism. Noting her skill, Zemach invites her into his dance company. She has not revealed their connection, wanting to gain his respect on her own. She is 28 years old. Her dreams, fueled by the birthright of growing up in a family that was part of the Berlin artistic and Zionist elite, had been on hold.

In the early 1950's, Zemach invites that Polish dancer, Nathan Vizonsky, now living in L.A., to teach his company the Yiddish folk dances he has documented. Miriam shows me his 1942 book in 2000. She also shows me the 1967 film she has produced, The Art of Benjamin Zemach, with the 66-year old Zemach performing his dances.

Although a generation separated Rochlin from Vizonsky and Zemach, their influences were similar. Early life included Jewish tradition as well as social and artistic ferment. In dance, the 1890's saw the premiers of The Nutcracker and Swan Lake, and the first European appearances of early American modern dancers Isadora Duncan and

Ruth St. Denis. American and then German modern dance emphasized personal movement styles as opposed to the set vocabulary of ballet and the crucial concept, that dance was a legitimate "vehicle for conveying important ideas." (Reynolds, 78)

The zeitgeist of early modernism was a mix of geist and reality--to make palpable, emotion and spirit no longer evident in "decadent" mainstream art or mechanization. The imbalances of change, provoked by the industrial revolution forced all of society to ask the *real* "Jewish question," the one the *Jews* had been asking for millennia: "who am I now in this new place?" And from that, "who was I before." Identity needs the touchstones of ritual and art. In this regard, the mainstream could learn from the Jews and their inescapable culture from which they'd been creating, analyzing, interpreting all along. The parallel also extended to nationalism. Always subject to the kindness of people who often insisted upon being strangers, Jewish Nationalism inspired artists to look again to their own folksoul and its once and future homeland.

With immigration, socialism, Zionism and Nazism, Jewish artists had their thematic hands full. Jewish legend and heroism had resonance for assimilating Jews with or without religion attached, and more entree than usual into a mainstream culture with like interests. The Dybbuk, became a Jewish Swan Lake. Supernatural and symbolic, it became the must-see, must-produce Jewish masterpiece. If Ruth St. Denis from New Jersey could dance the exotic Hindu and Egyptian mysticisms, then Zemach and Vizonsky could dance their own mystical Chasids. If Fokine choreographed the Polovetsian Dances, of an ancient, heroic Russian age for the Ballets Russes, then the Maccabees could reappear in Jewish choreography.

For themselves and their audiences, they dealt with the challenges of Diaspora: how to honor and interface a past Jewish identity with an American one, while transmitting a now vanished world to following generations. With modern craft and concepts, the practices and folkways that had distinguished Jewish life were adapted and reappeared as acts of dance theater to again distinguish Jewish identity in this new world.

Nathan Vizonsky

Little is known of Nathan Vizonsky's early life in Lodz after his birth in 1898. He was exposed to idealized visions from the beginning, remaining a utopian idealist throughout his life. (Funari, letter) There was the Chasidism of Jewish Lodz, socialism, and dance classes. Jewish unions established art societies. There were strikes, arrests, pogroms and performances. Bialik, Peretz, Sholem Aleichem and others came to speak. (Egoldberg) Their work and Yiddish translations, including Mark Twain, Vizonsky read at home. In Berlin, he studied and performed ballet, saw Isadora and St. Denis, and learned theater and stagecraft from Max Reinhardt. From his roots and travel in Poland, he took the shtetl dances. And, he became a Communist. (Funari, letter)

His parents died during World War I. Without identification, he traveled to Amsterdam, and sailed to Montreal. Crossing into Detroit, he made it to his sister's in Paterson, New Jersey, so thin they feared T.B. (Funari, 2007) He soon taught dance there, beginning an association with various Jewish labor movement schools that would

last decades. He spent 5 years in Detroit, at the schools and at a studio teaching all dance forms and performing. He left in 1926 for Chicago to start a dance school, becoming what he would remain, a Jewish Dancing Master, (Sachs, 299) indispensable to the Jewish community of Chicago and nearby cities for all things dance. The authenticity of his Chasidic dance vocabulary was highly valued by the largely immigrant audience. (Barzel; Berk, 23; Lang) Everyone appreciated that Vizonsky could not only recreate the old folk dances, but could create living pictures of their heritage in a modernistic way. He called his style "Jewish Plastic Expression," creating tableaux to express feeling, character or place. "Plastique" was part of early modern dance, 20th century ballet, and the theater of Stanislavski and Reinhardt. (Reynolds, 16, 217, 245; Kendall, 191) The sculpted images could be abstractions of mood or scenes of shtetl life, capturing their essence in dances with a theatrical eye trained for emotional and gestural detail, appreciated by one critic who wrote if they had not been authentic, they would have been art. (Stinson) They did, however, come from both.

Vizonsky must have been aware of the Russian-Jewish folklore expeditions of Ansky, Engels, and others, for he mentions walking through Poland to document Chasidic dance. His first article, "About Jewish Folk Dance," appears in 1930 in the first edition of a Yiddish-language literary journal, Chicago. In it, he attempts to characterize and distinguish Jewish dance. (Vizonsky, Chicago) In 1942, Ten Jewish Folk Dances, a book of ten dances from Eastern Europe with explanations of the purpose of each dance, step-by-step directions, music scores for each arranged by Max Janowski, and wood-cut illustrations by Todros Geller, was published. (Vizonsky, Ten) It appears to be the first English-language book to attempt to document these dances, which as early as 1930, Vizonsky wrote were disappearing. Never republished, copies are hoarded by teachers and scholars.

In the 1930's, there were numerous concert performances and choreography for Soviet and Yiddish plays including The Dybbuk. His company, Artes Ballet, performed as early as February, 1931, on a John Reed Club program. In January, 1932, at the Jewish People's Institute, the company of 20 Jewish dancers gives a full program ranging from Waltzes by Brahms and Chopin to The Unemployed Worker.

On December 25, 1932, there was a sea change in the level of American-Jewish production with the performance of the first All-Chicago Chanukah Festival. It was the idea of Zionist activist Meyer Weisgal. Director Issac Van Grove, formerly of the Chicago Opera, modeled it on Reinhardt's The Miracle. (Citron, 24) Israel Reborn, took place at the Chicago Stadium with a cast of 1000, a chorus of 500, and Vizonsky as dance director and soloist. 25,000 attended. The Chicago Tribune reported: "Vibrant with the solemnity of its liturgy, stupendous in the sweep of its pageantry, the Feast of Lights, ...united the entire Jewish world of Chicago, orthodox and reformed...." (McLaughlin) The unity was another sea change.

In March of 1933, he co-directed the Weisgal-produced Purim Carnival. Then, the Jewish community was asked to participate in the 1933 Chicago World's Fair. Rather than an exhibition hall, a grander pageant was planned: Romance of a People. The Jewish People's own great narrative could best remind them and the world of their history and their destiny in Palestine. (Roth) Vizonsky again was dance director. His solos included his well known Chasidic dance, Dudele, and The Prophecy of Isaiah, as well as dances from the time periods and stories portrayed in the pageant. (Chubatz)

There were 6,200 performers for an audience of 125,000 at Soldier Field --a real *show* of identity. It was encored shortly after, with many church groups attending, and went on to play New York, Philadelphia, Cleveland and Detroit. (Citron, 118-119) The pageant was successful in all ways. Raising \$100,000 with its first performance to resettle German Jews in Palestine, it was spectacle for social change through Jewish unity and gentile understanding.

Vizonsky began touring the Midwest with Rosalind Glickman, a pianist-dramatist, with Eastern European and Israeli dances, songs and poetry. 1933-34, there were three more major pageants, including the second Purim pageant, which he directed. During this time, he started another company, the Jewish Folklore Ballet, saying in publicity that he wanted to create a full-sized Jewish ballet company. For a cast of 25, he created a three-act ballet, Lilith, with original music by Joseph Elson. The point again, to make high art from Jewish folklore.

In July 1936, his wife was killed in a gas explosion. In 1937, he remarried. In 1937 and '38, he choreographed, co-directed and acted for two WPA Yiddish Unit plays, and for an original operetta, Chalutzim. A publicity photo shows Vizonsky, along with the writer, composer, librettist and director posed against a black background dressed in suits, looking thoughtfully down at a script or at each other. This photo, with its idealization of the fine and serious nature of artistic identity, speaks to the importance of art to this community of immigrants and workers.

He and wife Siome moved to L.A. in 1944, and he was immediately involved in all the same ways. Daughter Phyllis was born that year. In 1946, he was diagnosed with T.B., lost a lung and spent almost three years at City of Hope. From 1950 until his death in 1967, he continued to teach, choreograph and write for the Jewish community. Once a Chasid, but still a dancer, everyone knew he was the real deal. And the real deal played to packed stadiums.

Benjamin Zemach

Benjamin Zemach was born in 1902. When the Zemach family and Habima came to Moscow in 1917, its founder, his older brother, Nahum Zemach went to Stanislavski. Benjamin has said, "Stanislavski was not afraid and did not think it would lower his prestige to work with the Habima. He was obsessed with continuity. He also felt that the people in the arts owed something to the Jewish people since they had contributed so much to culture in the past." (Prevots, article) Benjamin's training with Stanislavski, Vakhtangov and Meyerhold remained the basis of his work and he was a respected teacher of their approaches.

He began dancing in Moscow. Teachers included Vera Moslova of the Bolshoi, and Nina Alexandrova, the director of the Eurythmics Institute. There was Ina Cherneskaya, who had studied a style called "abstract pantomime," based on posturing and plastique...." (Reynolds, 95) She had studied Expressionism and Duncan technique in Germany, and had developed a dramatic style based on character studies. (Reynolds, 245) She collaborated with Zemach on the "The Beggar," his signature piece, and character continued as a main source in his later work. He had seen a beggar "at a rich man's table and the beggar's emotions of yearning, subservience and anger, " a metaphor, his daughter suggests, for the Jews of Europe. (Zemach, 2007)

Habima toured Europe and Benjamin acted and gave post-play dance performances. Arriving in New York in 1927, he focused on dance. He studied with Martha Graham, with whom he had a relationship, and performed on programs with her and other highly influential modern dancers until 1931. Before Zemach arrived, Graham, like other moderns, had made dances that spanned the globe musically and thematically, including a quartet to Bloch's Baal Shem. (McDonagh, 306) Zemach, too, had been experimenting with other cultures, but he realized that in creating from the authority of his own heritage, he embodied the exoticism and spirituality that was the driving force behind modern dance's ethnic explorations.

Benjamin followed Nahum to Los Angeles in late 1931. In 1932, he gave a full dance concert at the Pasadena Playhouse. His group was part of the Olympic Arts Dance Festival and toured West Coast Jewish Centers and to the Cornish School. (Maddow)

In 1933, he was invited to create a work for the Hollywood Bowl, which showcased important resident choreographers such as Adolph Bolm and Lester Horton. It was noteworthy for being the first program of Jewish material there. Fragments of Israel included an expanded version of his Hasidic Farewell to Queen Sabbath. Capturing authentic gesture combined with expressionistic elements, it "exemplifies something core to his dance. There was always the interplay between the crushing weight of life and reaching up to God, a continuous dialogue between the harshness of the world and uplift of the infinite." (Zemach, 2004) The 2nd part of the program, a new work, Ora, or "light," was about the Jewish contribution to Western culture and a future Jewish nation. With 49 performers, a chorus of 23 men, and the Bowl orchestra, the Los Angeles Times called it "a profound and beautiful ritual..." (Prevots, 209) In that same summer, half the country apart, Zemach like Vizonsky, had a Jewish dance company and large-scale productions. It is not clear if they knew of each other yet, but the zeitgeist is clear. Jewish dancework of this scale had not been done or demanded before.

Zemach was invited back to the Bowl in 1935 and staged The Victory Ball, inspired by Alfred Noyes' sardonic anti-war poem. Depicting the horrors of war, it was a great success. (Hollywood Bowl Program; Prevots, 212)

That year he was nominated for an Oscar for blazing ritual dances in *She*. Max Reinhardt saw Victory Ball, and invited Zemach to New York to choreograph the next Meyer Weisgal pageant, 1937's The Eternal Road. Weisgal wanted to focus world attention on the looming tragedy in Germany. Reinhardt also chose Kurt Weill and Franz Werfel to collaborate. Ironically, these three, just forced out of Germany, were too assimilated to know or be concerned with the Jewish authenticity that Zemach wanted. Hired as choreographer, he also did much of the four-hour production's staging for which he did not receive credit. (Zemach)

After that, Zemach worked in New York with periods in Canada, Israel and L.A. He choreographed and directed for a number of ARTEF productions (Prevots, article) and the musical, Pins and Needles. Beginning as a Ladies Garment Workers' ILGWU production, it had a Broadway run of 1108 performances. (Wikipedia)

Returning to L.A., he became dance and drama director at the University of Judaism and the Bureau of Jewish Education, a dialogue coach at RKO. His acting students included Sam Jaffee, Lee J. Cobb, Herschel Bernardi and Alan Arkin. (Rochlin, 2000) Forced to retire in 1971, he and his wife Elizabeth, actress and acting teacher, went to Israel, where as his daughter says, he rebuilt his career from scratch, and added to his legacy. I have seen his influence most recently in the work of his onetime student Mendy Cahan, performer, and founder of the Vilnius Yiddish Institute and YUNG YIDISH cultural center in Jerusalem. "Although I come from a Hassidic background and have absorbed its movements and body language, I owe much to Binyomin in learning how to render them as stylized art-form on stage." (Cahan, 2007)

Zemach prayed twice daily. Late afternoons, teaching at a Hollywood dance studio, the owner shushed her young daughter because "Mr. Zemach was praying." (Rochlin, 2007) When he moved to Israel in 1971, he resumed laying Tefillin, which along with his dance exercises, he did until he died at 95. In all ways, a practicing Jew.

Miriam Rochlin

Miriam Rochlin's father's father, Bernhard Cohn, was a somewhat assimilated doctor until an anti-Semitic smear campaign. In 1896, he published almost simultaneously to Herzl, a pamphlet titled Before the Storm: A Serious Warning to the Jews of Germany. He wrote of the danger of German anti-Semitism because it had "method.... The demand is not for our defeat or submission--this they have already achieved--but for our destruction." (Elon, 287) The family became important Zionist activists and most of his children immigrated to Palestine in the 1920's, except for his son Rabbi Cohn and his family, who because of his commitments to his congregation and to speaking out against the Nazi's, remained longer.

The Cohn's friends, included poet Elsa Lasker-Shuler and Catholic opera star Henny Wolf, who was called "aunt" by the children. Leading stage and film actor Alexander Granach was "uncle." Miriam's mother's mother remained a successful banker after her husband's death and was the only female member of a poker club in Muelheim/Ruhr. Her mother's cousin married Gurit Kadman, who became the mother of Israeli folk dance. Everything was discussed at the dinner table: art, religion, love affairs, sexual preferences of friends. But the dinner was kosher and blessings said. For about a year, when Miriam was 10, she and her father spent time every day translating Genesis from Hebrew to German. As Miriam told me of this two-sided identity, "we were quick-change artists."

Inspired to choreograph after seeing her first ballet at age six, she studied ballet and interpretive dance. She saw famous Expressionist dancers and Hollywood musicals. In 1933, the Nazis required Jews to attend Jewish schools only. In 1934, she wanted to study for teacher certification in dance at a German institute, which would take her only under another name. Her mother refused. She was taken into the Juta Klamt Institute, but could only afford one day a week. After her second class, Juta's husband, in the Nazi hierarchy, told her she could come every day at no extra charge, which she did for 2 years until it became too dangerous. For another year, she went to an institute, taught by a Russian émigré, training in modern, ballet, anatomy and kinesiology. In January, 1937, she received her diploma, and left for Holland with her

father, the rest of the family leaving soon after. Babysitting and housecleaning, she studied medical massage and corrective exercise to have a skill for immigration. Following her family to San Francisco after a year as a nanny to British cousins, she found work in a spa teaching exercise.

In Los Angeles, she soon found herself president of a Hadassah chapter at age 25, because no one knew about Zionism as she did, nor could be so articulate and effective. It took three years to finally start taking dance class again. She worked with Zemach for 20 years as his assistant and in both his dance and theater companies. She taught dance and drama for Jewish schools and for the city school system's Adult Schools. She acted in a number of plays Zemach directed. She taught Confluent Education at Hebrew Union College, using movement, art and music to teach the Bible Through Improvisation, and the same class at a Catholic high school. In 1971, she choreographed The Dybbuk for USC, and in the 1980's, Miriam led pre-performance discussions for a major L.A. production of The Dybbuk. In 1986, she showed The Art of Benjamin Zemach at the 92nd St. Y for the conference Jews and Judaism in Dance. This is the only film of him dancing, and it is an important document, with dances dating back to early 1920's Moscow and circa 1930 New York. In Israel from 1979–81, Miriam, taught a variety of classes. She said of standing on Dizengoff Street on Shabbat evening: "A millstone fell off my neck. I was no longer a minority." Despite her religious training, Miriam was an atheist from a young age. Despite her atheism, her Jewishness has been her core. A sort of modern dance Chasid, her dancing and teaching has always been about joy. Still teaching at 87, she says "My attitude is to assume from the beginning that everyone *is* beautiful. *Isn't* that *marvelous!* Fly out! Fly out!"

Flying out into art, the identities of Vizonsky, Zemach and Rochlin remained geknipt un gebindn -- knotted and bound -- as Jews and artists, embodying memory and future for American-Jewish communities.

NOTE

The author is indebted to the Miriam Rochlin, Phyllis Funari and Amielle Zemach for their time and thoughtfulness in the interviews and follow-up questions. All information not specifically attributed, comes from them. Ms. Funari graciously sent me Nathan Vizonsky's entire scrapbook, filled with clippings and programs from performances from the 1920's – 1960's, in both English and Yiddish. Through them I have begun to piece together the specifics of his career. Many of the clippings are without dates or publication attributions, so they are not cited in this article. However, they come from such publications as Chicago's Herald & Examiner, the Chicago American, the Daily Jewish Courier (in both English and Yiddish) and the Sentinel, and Yiddish-language newspapers in Chicago and Detroit, such as Freiheit and Forward.

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