

IDENTITY PEDDLERS

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The challenge of translating Jewish experience into words, with all its ineffable elements, is akin to the problems of translating dance experience into words. But as it turns out, dance can be a rich medium for expressing Judaism.

If we look at dance as it is happening, the constantly changing shapes, lines and space are of constant interest and so is the individual dancer's shifting relationships to the group. The eye moves from solo figure to group and back – – this varying relationship can be a metaphor for the place of the individual in community. We can also notice tension between how the single person reacts and plays in relation to their community.

At this conference we have been considering how the individuals relate and identify themselves with their Jewish community. Dance, firstly as a community expression, as a religious element and further as an artistic medium, has been underrated in the whole big sweep of Judaism and its history. Rarely is it discussed except in its obvious component in wedding celebrations (as laid out in the Talmud in *Ketubot 17:A*). Dance was assumed to be part of the oral tradition and was passed on from generation to generation, but in rabbinic letters to communities, published in the *Responsa*, on questions of conduct there were often negative commentary about dance. Rabbis argued with their various community's penchant for dancing especially when men and women crossed rabbinic lines of modesty, or what was considered appropriate behavior. For example, in Renaissance Italy rabbis objected to copying their host culture with masked balls and dancing at Purim.

It is worth mentioning that the problem of discounting dance as an important cultural aspect of Judaism might touch on the fact that dance is body centered. There have been rabbinic difficulties discussing the female body and its allure and function, especially during certain monthly days. But, this issue will distract us from our discussion of identity.

Despite unenthusiastic and downright negative rabbinic response to dance, Jewish communities have always included it in establishing their identity, albeit with influence from culture and dance of their surrounding communities. As examples, let us examine the very first artist and dancer every mentioned in the Torah. We see it is nothing new to be wondering what is Jewish distinctiveness and individuality. The name of our first artist, Bezalel, and descriptions of his work are recounted in Exodus. He decorated the Ark, and the Tabernacle holding the Ark with our most holy object, the Ten Commandments. Just how "Jewish" was his work? And what did his decoration look like? As far as I can understand, Bezalel was an artisan in the Ancient Egyptian style. He worked in the style he knew from the place where he was trained and where he learned his crafts of weaving, woodworking and metalworking. The art must have looked Egyptian.

He was our first artist of the Diaspora. Our premiere dancer was also a Diaspora dancer. What is her story? Miriam we also know from Exodus which recounts that she led the women in a victory dance after crossing the Sea of Reeds. How extraordinary we know the name of our first choreographer/performer. As I thought about her, I realized that she, too, grew up in Ancient Egypt, so her dance must have looked like what she had seen. That does not mean that Miriam nor Bezalel are any less acclaimed nor hallowed as important artistic figures in Judaism for they enhanced moments and objects essential to us.

What do Bezalel and Miriam have to do with the European American dancers I want to talk about today? All of them developed from the same situation, that is as a consequence of their syncretistic life style with their host cultures. In this case it was not Ancient Egypt but Austro-Hungarian and Polish life.

Fred Berk, Katya Delakova, Claudia Vall, Felix Fibich and Judith Berg all studied and performed the expressionist theater dance of their time in pre-World War II Europe. Called *Ausdruckstanz*, it allowed them a forum for expressing their Jewish European experience whether based on urbane or traditional Jewish life. However, these dancers' education and life experiences were far different than what they would confront when they later all moved to America. What would their new audiences or students in America know of Warsaw, Berlin, Vienna and Zagreb, coffeehouses, Von Laban, Wigman, Klimt, Schoenberg or valued elders humiliated by washing streets, *Kristallnacht* or parents and siblings in concentration camps? How could these dancers come to express one of the most dramatic experiences that the Jews have endured?

Firstly, though these five dance artists represent vastly different Jewish family lives and experiences, though they all had the German expressionist dance training. Fibich was a child of a traditional arrangement. His father, a scholar from a Hasidic home, was a *Baal Kryia* (chanter of Torah) with a beautiful singing voice, acclaimed at the High Holidays. He was married off to Fibich's mother, the entrepreneur who ran a restaurant in the heart of Warsaw.

Fred Berk grew up in a family-run creamery at the heart of Jewish Vienna and was apprenticed by his traditional father to a goldsmith to learn a trade. It was hoped Berk would gain a better profession, but he felt he was doomed to bend over a work bench for his life. As boys, Fibich in Warsaw and Berk in Vienna shared a similarly odd experience that led to their later work. Inexplicably drawn to the arts, they both found ways to escape their chores – Berk to buy metals and Fibich to purchase groceries. The errands took them out onto the streets of their cities, independent and for indeterminate periods. What did both of these boys do? They snuck into theaters to watch rehearsals and became bewitched by what they saw.

Judith Berg came from a cosmopolitan family in Warsaw and following her university education was sent to Mary Wigman's famous school in Berlin to get a dance pedagogy degree. With the valuable Wigman degree, Berg was able to open her own approved government dance studio in Warsaw. Delakova was the daughter of a journalist who moved her from Zagreb to Vienna. Because of her father's work she was unusually aware of all the drastic political changes afoot in Europe.

Vall was from the most well-to-do of the five and also had the greatest understanding of both Sephardic and Ashkenazic ways. Though daughter of a Zagreb

factory owner, German was her mother tongue; she was expected to be a proper daughter with proper musical training. She was sent to the Vienna State Academy of Music and Dance with a governess chaperone in tow.

All five artists became trained professionally in dance and also theater. Fibich joined the radical theater group called the Yung Teatre and was in plays criticizing and satirizing America's racial and political problems such as the Sacco and Vanzetti trial, as well as plays on Jewish issues. Berk saw the Vilna Truppe perform "The Dybbuk" and could not stop talking about it from then on. He also saw Kraus performing in a park and followed her to her studio. From the bottom of her staircase when she turned to ask what he wanted, he was smitten. She invited him to take lessons and shortly thereafter took him into her company. Vall, at the Vienna State Academy sought out something different than the cold, modern dance teacher there, Gertrud Bodenwieser. So Vall auditioned for Max Reinhardt's "The Miracle" and of all things, was accepted to play a prostitute. Every night she was taken to the stage door and met there afterwards by her governess chaperone. Later, Vall also sought out Kraus and was accepted in the Gertrud Kraus Dance Theater.

To reiterate, Berk, Vall and Delakova all found themselves in the school and company of Gertrud Kraus, the famed Viennese modern dancer. They participated in programs for the Socialists and the Communists but the dance themes in the Kraus company became more Jewish after Kraus's first grand tour in 1933 to Alexandria, Cairo and then by train to Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, Haifa and Beirut. She was profoundly inspired by the Jewish sights and characters, especially in Jerusalem. Upon her return to Vienna, she created dances about "The Wall" and Miriam. She also created "Song of the Ghetto," which became a prize-winning work. Discouraged and insightful about the Nazi politics, Kraus left for Palestine in 1935 and slowly each of her three performers managed to flee the Nazis through different complicated and hair-raising routes.

Vall went first to perform in Florence in the company of the Jewish Italian Angela Sartorio. Delakova and Berk tried to maintain their own studios until the laws forbidding Jews to work closed them down. Through her journalist connections, Delakova bargained an uncle out of Dachau and journeyed to America with a rare, legal visa. Berk went to Holland on a fictitious work visa, and miraculously bribed his way to England. With a convoluted and remarkable escape story, he ended up in Cuba surprising Vall who had reached Cuba a year earlier through the good offices of an elderly sympathetic German diplomat in Italy.

Felix Fibich and Judith Berg separately escaped by foot from the Nazis fleeing eastward from Warsaw, he evading a work detail from the ghetto. They joined a Yiddish revue touring first to Moscow and Odessa, then Ashkhabad and Turkmanistan. When repatriated to Poland in 1945, they were shocked to find the Nazi "solution" left them with no family. The remnants of the once vital Jewish community asked them to teach orphans who had been hidden in the countryside even in pigsties or ransomed back from monasteries and convents. For five years they revived the children's Judaism by teaching culture through dance and music until escaping Polish communism for Paris. Their performances in major Parisian theaters were whole-heartedly received by the Jewish refugee community as well as by arts patrons. Fibich and Berg expressed for them the experiences of the war years in their dances such as "The Beloved" which needed no program notes to explain it was an elegy for their families and their lost

communities. The duo arrived in America in 1951, later than the other dancers I have mentioned.

In America, silence greeted all five. Not only because they were refugees from Europe and very few audiences were interested in their experiences but their dance art was simply not embraced. Claudia Vall tried to book the Berk-Vall duo with a program they had developed in Cuba in the European modern dance tradition using character and folk duets as well as duets using their broad theatrical fashion ranging from comedy to tragedy. She discovered there was no interest in any political dance either. A Los Angeles agent told Vall, "I would not cross the street to see that!" When she went to teach in the successful modern dance studio of Lester Horton (mentor to Alvin Ailey and Bella Lewitsky) no one was interested in Vall's modern style either, so she fell back on ballet and ballroom and became a teacher of both. Though she was an interpreter of Gertrud Kraus, one of the most important Jewish and modern dancers in Europe, Vall was silenced in the US and instead, made her name as a teacher who successfully prepared professional children for a lifetime of work on stage.

For Judith Berg and Felix Fibich, their transformation was also difficult despite the fact that Berg was already famous in Europe for choreographing and performing in the last important Yiddish film to be produced in Warsaw called "The Dybbuk." In New York, the duo found work in the Yiddish theater, though greatly diminished from its heyday in previous years. They also worked for the Workman's Circle. Fibich and Berg tried their hand at American modern dance, earning one scholarship between the two for study at the New Dance Group. They worked at conquering the Graham technique which they had first seen when the American dance company performed in Paris.

Berg and Fibich found security at Camp Boiberik and in Folksbeine Yiddish productions, and Fibich made a name for himself through the Third Seders he choreographed at the Waldorf Astoria. The duo also discovered Holocaust themes were not what East Coast audiences wanted to see or hear about. The dancers' brand of humor in their performances was too broad for American audiences so they had to adjust. When they toured to Israel, their *Yiddishkeit* was also out of step with the culture of the New Jew, though some kibbutz audiences loved their programs. Nevertheless, Fibich decided his calling was expressing his *Yiddishkeit*, understanding that he could not be cut off from his roots.

Fibich was invited to choreograph for CBS's "Lamp Unto My Feet" and NBC's "If Not Higher" and three shows on Broadway ("Let's Sing Yiddish," "Light, Lively" and "Sing, Israel, Sing"). He also choreographed for the movie "The Chosen" and starred in a Joseph Papp produced play, "Café Crowne," which moved to Broadway. Fibich realized that the general Jewish population was coming to appreciate him. By the '90's, when he himself was in his eighties, Fibich found himself in a kind of renaissance as actor and teacher. Now in his nineties, he brings his training and imagination to new generations as a master teacher at *KlezKamp*, or on television spots such as "Law and Order" or the French film hit "Extra Large" with Gerard Depardieu (a role in which Fibich drew on his French, Polish, Yiddish, English language skills and both his dance and theater training). He and Berg were recognized with the 1987 Centennial Honorees of the Arts for the Promotion of Jewish Culture from the Jewish Theological Seminary. Their life stories are part of permanent exhibitions at the New York Museum of Jewish Heritage. Fibich later was awarded special recognition by

the Dance Library of Israel in 2007 and as a Master of Jewish Dance by the Congress for Jewish Culture in 2008.

Only one producer, William Kolodney, cared about the Jewish dance work of Fred Berk and Katya Delakova in the late '40s. However, he was a key figure in the Jewish community of New York as the educational director and program curator at the 92nd St Y in New York City. He positively affected Berk's career which impacted Jewish dance in America. Delakova and Berk appeared at the Y and started a dance company with Jewish themes there, training a new generation of dancers. They also taught dance at the Brandeis-Bardin camps and also toured extensively. By the early '50s Berk began the Jewish Dance Division at the 92nd St. Y which he developed into the most important bridge to Israeli folk dance in America. He also directed Y dance companies called The Merry-Go-Rounders and Hebraica which were outlets for his choreography, including "Holiday in Israel" and "Ghetto Dance." He also ran the important annual Israeli dance festival in New York and the Israeli folk dance section for Camp Blue Star. Before his death in 1980 he realized his dream of moving to Israel.

In Delakova's later years she returned to Israel and to Europe to teach and became a recognized master teacher at the Jewish Arts School in New York City. Vall, at the time of this conference is ninety-nine and continues to be an inspiration and a source for artists and dance researchers. For example, she was interviewed extensively by the New York/Israeli choreographer Zvi Gotheiner as he developed his work "Gertrud" for his dance company Zvidance. It premiered in the spring of 2007 in New York. Gertrud Kraus, as I mentioned, had been the teacher for Berk, Delakova and Vall, but also was Gotheiner's teacher in Tel Aviv.

The patience and dedication for expressing Judaism by these dancers allowed them eventually to build on their stories in movement and garner new appreciation. Over many years, a sea change in American Judaism meant that there was a hunger for connecting to the European Jewish past and for grappling with the legacy of the Holocaust. These dance artists became a vehicle for audiences and students alike.

Berk, Delakova, Vall, Fibich and Berg, as artists striving to express themselves, were first received reluctantly but later eagerly. In their metamorphosis they were both witnesses and carriers of Jewish experience. By persevering, teaching, performing, choreographing and directing they touched young and old, students and professionals, audiences from Broadway to summer camps, elementary schools to universities, and viewers of television and film. They have peddled their dance theater wares from the time they arrived in America more than 50 years ago, deepening the Jewish identity of America.