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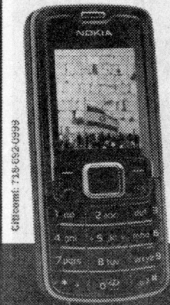
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Pearl Lang And The Choreography Of Prayer

Dance

Remembering the dancer-choreographer who deeply explored Jewish identity and the ties that bind.

Judith Brin Ingber

Special To The Jewish Week

I was fortunate to see Pearl Lang dance in her signature piece, “Shirah” (or “Song”), in the late 1960s at Hunter College, which was known then as the place to go for modern dance performances. A famous dance series, “Angry Artists Against Viet Nam,” presented at Hunter in ’67, included Twyla Tharp, Eleo Pomare and others. Lang had her own evening, steering clear of politics.

We young dancers knew of Lang’s reputation as a star in Martha Graham’s company and her impeccable interpretations of Graham’s passionate Greek goddesses or Americana heroines. However, what drew me to Lang, who died here on Feb. 24 at 87, was her steadfast exploration of Jewish identity.

I, too, was a Midwesterner transposed to New York, trying to find my own way in the rich and heady dance scene. I knew Lang had come from Chicago, where she was raised in a cultured but poor Yiddish-speaking family. Her breathtaking career as a Graham dancer meant she had toured the world. And she often performed with her own company, the Pearl Lang Dance Theater, at the famed 92nd Street Y’s theater, where I went for performances by modern dance legends and for Fred Berk’s Wednesday night Israeli folk dancing. But now I was going to Hunter to see Lang’s “Shirah,” which she created in 1960.

She had adapted a parable of Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav, showing in movement that at the end of the world stands a high mountain and from it flows a spring. The heart of the world was opposite the mountain, which must always keep the spring in sight. If it loses sight of the spring, the world would lose all life. I still remember how radiant Lang was and how easily her limbs flew upward, with no care for the bounds of gravity. At first, I was puzzled watching the stage fill with strips of fabric connecting the dancers in complicated layers of elasticized relationships.

All these years later, I realize Lang’s success was not only her performance but how she embodied connections, showing that ties between people — whether tenuous and delicate or firm and furious — are the world’s wellspring of life.

Lang created over 50 works, some solos and some for her company, which she founded some 55 years ago. An early Lang solo I know through photos is her “Song of Deborah.” The camera captured a moment in motion, with Lang standing on one leg, the other effortlessly thrown high, and one raised arm entwined in a dark twist of fabric reminiscent of a man’s sign of devout prayer, the tefillin. In 1953, when Lang choreographed this dance, Jewish women in America had made no effort to revolutionize the style in which they prayed, and using tefillin was taboo. By clothing the prophet and judge Deborah with tefillin, Lang re-made the well-known male sign of power and Jewish piety for her heroine.

Yiddish literature often inspired Lang’s dances. Though I was an apostate of Yiddish literature, it was through Lang’s dances that I learned to appreciate Itzig Manger among others. The Yiddish theater drama “The Dybbuk” was a theme Lang returned to throughout her life; while co-directing a version for the Canadian Broadcasting Company, she met her future husband, the actor Joseph Wiseman, who survives her. (They married in 1964 and shared a love of performing Yiddish poetry). The dance she named “The Possessed,” based on the Yiddish play, premiered in 1975, and she created a film version that



Pearl Lang, who died Feb. 24, moved to a Jewish muse.

took some 12 years to complete, and opened at Lincoln Center in 2001.

The setting for “The Dybbuk” is an Eastern European chasidic town where two friends pledge that if they have a son and a daughter, the two will eventually marry. The drama arises when the beautiful Leya comes of age and her father breaks his vow by offering her in marriage not to Channon but to the son of a wealthy family. Channon dies of a broken heart and Leya is tormented by Channon’s restless soul, which has entered her body as a Dybbuk, driving Leya out of her mind. An exorcism is attempted but fails and the bride dies. One of the film’s final images shows Leya and Channon amid floating prayer shawls, reunited as if in another world.

As in all of Lang’s performances, she used top dancers, and Channon was played by William Carter, a versatile ballet and modern dance principal. Channon’s wronged father in the Lang movie version was played by the Yiddish actor/dancer Felix Fibich. His connections to “The Dybbuk” and to Lang are quite remarkable.

Fibich spoke of Lang by phone on Sunday, his voice crackling with emotion.

Last November, both Fibich and Lang received the Masters of the Art of Jewish Dance Award presented to them by the Congress for Jewish Culture here. They traveled to and from the ceremony in the same car and reaped much mutual admiration.

Fibich, a trained actor and dancer in pre-World War II Warsaw, often partnered his wife, Judith Berg, in performances of their own Jewish works throughout Europe and the Soviet Union. Berg had been the esteemed choreographer for the 1937 filmed version of “The Dybbuk,” the last important Yiddish film to be made in Poland. Their escape route from the Nazis and communism was hair-raising, but eventually they lived on West 97th Street, directly across from Lang.

“I am very proud of my friendship with Lang and it is painful for me to speak about her. Perhaps now I am the only one left from our generation. She did her Jewish work in dance from the prism of the Graham technique. What stood out for me, you see, was that she was so honest with her interpretations of Yiddish literature. I accepted her ideas though they were so different from what I knew. After all, it was Pearl’s interpretation of how she saw the chasidic world, and it was never a caricature. She was always respectful and she emphasized the mysticism and departure from reality in ‘The Dybbuk.’ ... Her song was that love is stronger than death and that is the true meaning of the story.”

This week we read in the Torah about Judaism’s first named artist, Bezalel, who decorated the Ark, and Pearl Lang’s artistry came to mind. We also read about the lurid dance around the Golden Calf, which drew people in. Lang’s dance drew in everyone, too, but she bound together those in her audiences through positive forces of her energy, artistry and imagination. Her dance beautified moments, it beautified our literature, and she made us see the power in our identity and culture. May her memory be for a blessing. ■

Judith Brin Ingber is a dancer/writer completing a manuscript on Jewish dance and dance in Israel for Wayne State University Press. She also wrote the entry for Pearl Lang in the new edition of the “Encyclopedia Judaica.”