

DANCE VIEW

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One Man's Contribution to the History of Modern Dance

Modern dance is still so young an art form that a comprehensive history of its development has yet to be written. If the pioneers in the field are familiar, there are many dancers of lesser importance who stand to be lost to that history even if they were known in their own time.

In some cases, these choreographers and dancers made a special contribution that should be noted for its own value — and also as an element that explains aspects of modern dance's development. One of these dancers was Fred Berk, who died in 1980 and who was best known as a teacher of Israeli folk dances but who also started out as a modern dancer in his native Vienna and then was involved in American modern dance on many levels — dancer, choreographer, teacher and impresario.

Among his contributions were innovations such as a professional modern dance company aimed at children — the Merry-Go-Rounders — co-founded with Doris Humphrey and others. Still fewer people realize that in 1951, he originated the idea of a dance series at the Brooklyn Museum. The dancers performed in the museum's sculpture court. Since Merce Cunningham was on that series, it is very possible that the Cunningham "Events" — begun in a museum space in Vienna 13 years later — might have had their roots here.

Berk's life and career are now chronicled in the kind of book that might get lost in the shuffle because it seems to be treating an over-specialized subject. As someone who did not follow Berk's activities closely — mainly because I had typed him as a folk dance teacher — I now found this book highly instructive, even moving. "Victory Dances" by Judith Brin Ingber, is subtitled "The Story of Fred Berk, a Modern Day Jewish Dancing Master."

Mrs. Ingber, who now lives in her native Minneapolis, spent five years in Israel after graduating as a dance major from Sarah Lawrence. She has worked at Dance magazine in New York and as a dance historian she has specialized in Israeli dances.

"Victory Dances" (Israel Dance Library, publisher; distributed by Emmet Publishing, 2861 Burnham Boulevard, Minneapolis, Minn., 55416) is not, however, about Israeli dance. Mrs. Ingber is completely open about the fact that Berk asked her to write his biography. While she has done excellent research, much of the material came from him. Repeatedly, this study sheds light on the spirit of dance in the 1940's and 1950's in New York. In addition, some of the experimental dancers identified with the 1960's, including Meredith Monk and Jeff Duncan, co-founder of Dance Theater Workshop, learned folk dances from Berk: whether you were Jewish did not matter. Mr. Duncan also told the author that the clarity of form Berk

passed on to his folk classes served as a model of craft that was useful in modern dance choreography.

Interestingly, Berk's own attitude toward Israeli folk dancing changed. Perhaps because Israel was a new state and many felt its community dances needed to be created from scratch, authenticity in ethnic forms was not a concern. As Mrs. Ingber writes, Berk later felt more drawn to what he called ethnic dances, as opposed to folk dances. The latter were regarded as recreational dances that also symbolized a communal and modern spirit.

The ideas discussed in "Victory Dances" are especially timely in view of a forthcoming large-scale conference scheduled for next September in New York and called "In Search of a Dance Tradition: Jews and Judaism in Dance." The opening gala on Sept. 20 is to honor Anna Sokolow, and the three-day conference will treat the following subjects: "The Bible and Dance" (featuring a symposium on Martha Graham's biblical works and George Balanchine's "Prodigal Son"); "A Jewish Dance Master in Renaissance Italy, Gulielmo Ebreo, and the Emergence of Theatrical Dance" (with Renaissance dances supervised by Ingrid Brainard); "Hasidic Dance"; "Eastern European Jewish Folk Life as a Source of Theatrical Dance" (with films and performances); "Yemenite and North African Dance and Ritual"; "Folk and Ethnic Dance in Israel"; "Contemporary Jewish Visions in Dance" (with a panel of American choreographers) and "Jewish Dance Sources in Modernism."

David Eden is the project director for the event, sponsored by the National Foundation for Jewish Culture with the 92d Street Young Men's-Young Women's Hebrew Association.

The 92d Street Y became the center of modern-dance activity in New York after the late William Kolodney became the institution's education director in 1934. Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, Charles Weidman, Hanya Holm and Pauline Koner were already relatively established when they gave concerts and lecture demonstrations there in the 1930's.

Kolodney's poetry, music and dance series were designed to contribute to the cultural life of the city as a whole. Dance nonetheless occupied a prominent place through the 1950's under Kolodney, and perhaps this stemmed in part from his openness to new talent. In 1942, he inaugurated a concert series based on auditions. Sybil Shearer, Valerie Bettis, Paul Draper, Pearl Primus and others obtained public exposure through the Y at its Kaufmann Concert Hall in this manner. In 1942, Kolodney gave a chance to Fred Berk and Katya Delakova, his partner, who later became his wife.

Berk had just arrived as a refugee in New York the

year before. Born Friedrich Berger in 1911 into a Jewish family in Vienna, he became a student of Gertrud Kraus, a Viennese modern dancer who had briefly worked with Rudolf von Laban, the father of Central European modern dance. Berk joined Miss Kraus's company and in 1934 won a prize for his own choreography in an international dance competition held in Vienna.

Miss Kraus emigrated to Israel before World War II and trained some of the key choreographers there who created the folk dances that would spread throughout the population. Mrs. Ingber quotes Berk as recalling that he was not originally drawn to Jewish themes — that while he admired the occasional dances on Jewish themes Miss Kraus included in her repertory, his “untapped feelings of Jewish identification” were to be “crystallized into a deep ongoing commitment to Jewish dance” only after he fled the Nazis via Cuba to New York.

There is a certain irony in noting that the German and Viennese modern-dance pioneers, some of whom were exploited by the Nazis for their own ends, also influenced future Israeli folk-oriented choreographers. Ballet choreographers in Israel seem mainly to have come from Russia and appeared less attracted to creating folk dances than the modern-dancers.

Folk forms of all types were present on the early pro-

grams Berk (he changed his name in Cuba) performed in New York in the 1940's with Miss Delakova. A 1944 program already listed items as varied as a Palestinian folk duet, an African ritual with interludes of American folk songs.

There appear to have been two aspects to Berk's subsequent career. In New York, at summer camps and in Israel, he taught choreography and dances related to the Jewish heritage as well as new Israeli folk dances, created by himself or choreographers in Israel. He was founder and director of the Jewish Dance division at the Y for 28 years. He also appeared as a modern dancer with Hanya Holm in Colorado Springs, where he met Alwin Nikolais and Glen Tetley, whom he enlisted in the Merry-Go-Rounders. He used nonprofessional dancers in Hebraica Dancers, the company that grew out of his classes at the Y in 1955. Yet professional dancers like Mary Hinkson and Doris Rudko appeared in his choreography in the Brooklyn Museum series; another of his companies, Ariel, like Merry-Go-Rounders, was a repertory company. Often, his interests overlapped. Like Kolodney, who developed a Jewish Dance department as well a modern-dance center at the Y, Berk wove an unusual thread into the general fabric of modern dance. His contribution is more a chapter than a footnote in this story. ■