

Sara Levi-Tanai: Turning My Dance Assumptions Upside Down.  
By Judith Brin Ingber



I was teaching dance composition for the Batsheva-Bat Dor Society for apprentices of both Rothschild's companies when I received an unexpected letter from a dance writer I knew from New York. Selma Jeanne Cohen, editor and publisher of *Dance Perspectives* wrote to ask if I would write a monograph about the life and work of Sara Levi-Tanai, around 100 pages with photographs? Before answering the letter, I decided to consult with Gertrud Kraus, my confidant and unofficial guide to dance in Israel. We'd met the year before when I

moved to Tel Aviv with my new husband. In a way I had inherited Gertrud—she'd been the teacher and dance director in Vienna of my New York teacher Fred Berk.

It was a Tuesday, our usual breakfast day and I waited at Gertrud's favorite table at Ditzza Café near her apartment. She arrived but there was the usual morning parade of friends who came to greet her—actors from Habimah or the Cameri, dancers who had once performed with her, loyal new friends and regulars at the café. Finally I told her about the letter. She said she'd take me to Sara Levi-Tanai, but there were others I might want to meet, too. In the end, the *Dance Perspectives*<sup>1</sup> I wrote became

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<sup>1</sup> Judith Brin Ingber, "Shorashim: The Roots of Israeli Folk Dance," New York: *Dance Perspectives* #59, Autumn, 1974. In addition to a lengthy interview with Sara Levi-Tanai there are also oral histories of Gurit Kadman, Rivka Sturman, Lea Bergstein, Yardena Cohen, Shalom Hermon, Yoav Ashriel, Yonaton Karmon and Yitzhak Ha-Levi

the tale of Israeli folk dance though there was a big section about Sara Levi-Tanai and her contribution to folk dance. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

#### MEETING SARA LEVI-TANAI

Gertrud determined she would take me to meet Sara a few days later. On October 31, 1972, I walked over to Gertrud's basement apartment that had once also been her company studio. Immediately we launched into a discussion of the last dance performance Gertrud had seen while we walked a block to Dizengoff to catch the Number 5 bus to the Inbal studio. She said we'd have to walk some to reach it on Alexander Yanai Street. Conversing with Gertrud was always an odd combination of English, German and Hebrew interrupted with her sketching quickly in one of her notebooks to make a point about dance.

We arrived at the Inbal "studio" and it was certainly not what I had expected. There was no wood floor like at the well appointed Batsheva or Bat Dor studios. This Inbal space was unheated, and some of the men wore their army-issued jackets against the chill as they sat around on chairs, scattered in no particular order over the hard stone tile floor. There was no *barre* at the side of the room and no mirrors. Off to one side a musician was tuning a large many stringed instrument resting on three legs I'd never seen before. Later I learned it was a *kanoon*.

A dancer came in from some other room carrying two buckets of water, her lean arms flexing under their weight. She set them down, picked up the "sponja" and methodically began to wash the floor. The tuning of the close tones of the stringed instrument blended with laughter and conversation. Someone was passing around a cake-height looking bread, others were sharing something spicy. I assumed those were the dancers, but no one was dressed in the usual dance apparel, and no one was warming up. Some came over to Gertrud warmly greeting her.

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(Moshiko). These are updated and reprinted as Chapter 6 in my book *Seeing Israeli and Jewish Dance*, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2011.

A small woman in black orthopedic shoes slowly entered the room, her long skirt adding to her hobbled step. She carried several bags, set them down and joined the circle around Gertrud. Then I was introduced to her. This was Sara Levi-Tanai. She gave directions to some of the women and sent them out into the hallway to rehearse. Then she directed another group over to the stringed instrument where they began singing and others waited for the floor to dry drumming out rhythms on the floor as they waited. A cacophony of sounds and energy filled the room and hallway.

Sara's Hebrew was wholly different than Gertrud's, colored with an entirely different array of intonations. Her throaty voice with its dramatic lilt had a more guttural accent and sounds that rose into laughter or a song. I learned over time that much of what she sang to me, whether a child's tune (*Letzan katan sheli*) or a more ancient sounding song (like *El Ginat Egoz*) to illustrate her ideas, might already have been well accepted by the Israeli public as a folk song, never mind that they actually were a creation some years back of Sara's.

Her vocabulary was astounding, sometimes poetic and sometimes earthy. After that first morning at Inbal, we set up specific appointments, sometimes at the studio, and then at her apartment in the Bavli neighborhood. At first I interviewed Sara in a journalistic way asking introductory questions such as when was she born, where did she train, who influenced her stylistically and artistically? No answers were what I had anticipated. She didn't know exactly what year she was born. I understood she had no training in dance, had studied with no one in particular, and had only seen Gertrud's company in Tel Aviv before she decided to start her own. Nothing matched anything of my own dance experience or my own experience as a Jewish young woman, born in Minneapolis, Minnesota and educated at Sarah Lawrence College in New York.

I had many teachers in dance with many techniques. As a child I studied ballet with former de Basil Ballets Russes stars who had settled in Minneapolis, Lorand

Andahazy and Anna Andrianova. My parents insisted I get a college degree and they could afford to send me to Sarah Lawrence College in New York. There I joined one of the rare college dance program under the watchful eye of Bessie Schoenberg.<sup>2</sup> a renowned teacher even beyond the college. Bessie, as we all called her, had started her career in the Martha Graham Company during its revolutionary days. She performed in several of the early works but was especially known for her role in Graham's 1931 "Primitive Mysteries," which by my time was considered an iconic American modern dance.

At college, we studied Graham technique, Cunningham and also Hanya Holm's, Doris Humphrey's and ballet along with lighting for dance, set design, and music. But for me was Bessie's composition class. We would begin the class by walking in a free-form way, and then with Bessie's instruction, we improvised with a new dance idea, leading to an assignment. The dance study might be about "pedestrian movement" such as walking or running and then each assignment grew more and more complex until we had studied movement qualities, different styles and historical periods, made studies with objects, different musical influences, combining our solos into duets, until by the end of the course we were creating group pieces. Though I loved narrative dances from my years in ballet, but my aesthetic changed. Beauty and line were no longer important criteria—dances were abstractions of ideas and emotions, asymmetry and dissonance seemed the goals. Despite my familiarity with Bessie's choreographic tools and dance concepts I would never imagine only five years later I would begin to see a whole different way of working, a whole different trek through the Israeli landscape, Mizrahi culture, identity. Sara was my guide this time, and she took me on a stunning hike that wandered from the Bible to modern crossroads, she the only one with the map.

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<sup>2</sup>. Cynthia Nazzaro Nobel, *Bessie Schonberg, Pioneer Dance Educator and Choreographic Mentor*, United Kingdom: Edwin Mellen Press, 2005.

[http://fora.tv/1986/08/21/Bessie\\_Schnberg\\_How\\_to\\_Look\\_at\\_Dance](http://fora.tv/1986/08/21/Bessie_Schnberg_How_to_Look_at_Dance) (10.1 2.2011)

or however you write dates.

Bessie was an uncompromising yet inspiring mentor who had produced an astounding number of American dance artists, both innovative choreographers and performers. Jerome Robbins who had directed and choreographed the record setting “Fiddler on the Roof” still running on Broadway even claimed to have studied with Bessie. So had Lucinda Childs and Meredith Monk, both avant-garde dancers making their marks at the Judson Church in Greenwich Village, the most famous of the unconventional New York spaces.

At the end of my busy days at Sarah Lawrence, I ran to the train station to board a train for the twenty-minute ride to Manhattan. Then I would arrive at the Graham studio for the advanced technique class. Somehow I had learned that Bathsebee de Rothschild, Graham’s main financial supporter, was bringing dancers from Tel Aviv to the school to learn Graham repertory for a new company, The Batsheva Dance Company. I was hoping to meet the Israeli dancers and see them rehearse though that didn’t happen for a few more years.

1967

Even though there were Jews in my college classes, they seemed a different breed of Jew-- nonchalant and unidentified—compared to the Minnesota Jews I’d grown up with. What they cared passionately about was stopping the war in Viet Nam. I’d been pulled in, too, and had performed in a special New York City series called “Angry Artists Against the Viet Nam War.” It felt daring to have my name in print associated with such a project. On campus though, I saw no evidence of solidarity with other Jews and no discussion about Israel or what seemed to be the pending war.

My graduation week in May of 1967 coincided with Israel’s massive air strikes against Nassar’s army though the Egyptians managed to cross the Suez Canal, marching towards Israel. The armies of other Arab nations were lining up on Israel’s

other borders. On breaks between dance classes I'd rush to the radio to tune into reports of what was happening. Luckily we know that Israel survived what became known as the Six Day War.

Bowing to my parents' pressure, the day after I graduated I began my first job—as the editorial assistant to Lydia Joel, editor of *Dance Magazine*. We all assumed the center of the dance world was New York and I was right there at a heady time. Through the magazine office I received tickets to countless performances from the biggest ballet companies, traveling shows, Broadway performances and loft performances of avant-garde choreographers. I had to catch up to Lydia Joel's universal views of dance though. She had no hierarchy for dance with ballet and modern companies at the top. My first shock came working on the July *Dance Magazine* issue. The editor had chosen "Kolo," the Yugoslavian folk dance company performing in New York for the cover and lead story. I had been taught that folk forms were recreational and that there was no special technique or skills or choreography worth writing about.

After a few years my appetite for the hyper-energetic New York dance scene was changing. I left the magazine hoping to perform. I joined the cast of Meredith Monk's "Juice" at the Guggenheim Museum, and had some small performance successes, but after a while decided to regroup in my hometown of Minneapolis. Fortuitously, I met the man whom I would marry and since he was open to adventure and travel and was intrigued with the idea of going to Israel, we decided to move there for a few months at a Hebrew ulpan in Netanya.

We befriended a little boy in the neighborhood which we discovered was made up mostly of Yemenite families. Soon we were spending shabat at the Udi house, and that extended to Rosh Ha-ayin to meet relatives, and invitations to weddings. It was our first experience at a henna ceremony, or eating s'hug or any number of rites and rituals so exceedingly different than our mid-West American conservative Ashkenazic Jewish life. I was struck that dance, song and drumming were part of the

entire neighborhood's rhythm, not reserved for a special celebration or something learned in a studio.

But still, I kept wondering, how had Sara Levi-Tanai become who she had become and accomplished what she had? In one of our first interviews she told me about surviving starvation during World War I in Jerusalem where she was born. Only she and her father were left and with all the hardships, she was transferred to an orphanage in Safed. There was no possibility to study dance and the only performer in her experience was Baruch Agadati, the first dance performer of the yishuv. I doubt she'd ever actually seen him dance though she told me about his solos and his life. She showed me a rare book he had published about his career she'd found once by chance in South America. She knew, too, about Habimah and her dream was to join the company. However, she was rejected because of her accent, she told me.

Each of our interviews proved to be part of a special course lesson conducted by a magical professor Levi-Tanai. I scrambled to find answers to the new concepts she was telling me about: Who were the Mizrahi Jews and how did Yemenite Judaism fit into that category? Whereas the population of Sephardic/Mizrahi Jews in all of America makes up somewhere near 200,000 mostly in port cities like New York, Atlanta, Galveston, Los Angeles and Seattle out of the total Jewish population of some 5,000,000. In Israel the numbers are closer to half the population. Sara explained to me that there were differences in dance style and culture depending on the different areas of Yemen and that not all the community had been flown to Israel in 1949. So I wondered when did her Yemenite family come to Jerusalem?

Sara really had no personal history to reveal because there was no one to tell her. One day she was leaning against her vast bookshelf, sitting on a little rush stool with no back and no cushion. She was simplicity itself to look at her; she never had any frills. Nothing was elaborate but her imagination. Sara said she was a simple *falaheen*, but what did she mean?

I saw that inspiration came to her from Mizrahi women and their improvisations. It took many conversations with Gurit and the Bahats to begin to learn about the inequities of traditional women. They didn't know what the men did who could read and write in Hebrew, and sing from text and liturgy. Without book learning, the Yemenite women improvised what they sang. Sara assured me there were also big differences between the men's traditional dance repertoire and the women's though there was always much room for improvisation. She told me she loved the opening *nasheed* form in the men's song and she love the *da'saah*. I wondered if she meant this was a step or a whole dance?

Gertrud didn't know those terms, and neither did any of the other dancers I was interviewing. Our Yemenite friends in Netanaya couldn't really explain either. They said I had danced a *da'saah* with them at Shmuel's wedding. I remembered standing shoulder to shoulder and trying to follow as the women moved counter clockwise swinging their arms in a rhythm I never caught on to.

In the beginning of the interviews with Sara I decided to treat each encounter with her and her concepts like they were new words to learn—I tried asking for more and more context until I could get a feeling, a flavor, or an understanding even if the exact word alluded me. But I was still in the dark.

Gertrud decided I should meet someone else who would be of help for my *Dance Perspectives* article. She wouldn't reveal anything as walked through the art gallery neighborhood to an old single house overlooking the Mediterranean. That was how I met Gurit Kadman,<sup>2</sup> whom I later learned also was an influence on Sara and

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<sup>2</sup>· Gurit Kadman had created and directed the first monumental Israeli dance festival at Kibbutz Dalia in 1944, followed by one in 1947. Gurit gave Sara her first public platform with an invitation to perform at the Dalia Festival. And to bring a group from Kibbutz Ramat Hakovesh where she was living and working. Her kibbutz group performed her dance *El Ginat Egoz*. Gurit accompanied by the song she also composed known by that name. Gurit also did much for me and the *Dance Perspectives* article, among others, she introduced me to the Yemenite music expert Avner Bahat and his wife Naomi who researched ethnic dance of the Yemenite Jews.

helpful to me in breaking down differences in the many cultures of Jewish life in Yemen and in Israel.

After several meetings with Sara she said to me, "You don't really sound like a journalist. Are you?" I revealed that I, too, was dancing, taking class in the mornings, teaching for the apprentices of Bat Dor and Batsheva and rehearsing some of my own dances. On the spot she invited me to teach a ballet class for Inbal.

Surprised, I asked if others had taught ballet to Inbal? From our conversations I was beginning to learn about the role ballet choreographer Jerome Robbins played in both Gertrud and Sara's careers. Though he'd come to Israel on a trip sponsored by an American organization interested in supporting the one dance company he would declare to them worth their money, he also was contemplating a move to Israel himself. Things were not going well for him in America with the political probes to find out what artists had been or were presently communist.<sup>3</sup> He had been immensely encouraging of Sara's choreography and arranged for the American modern dancer Anna Sokolow to come to Inbal. How could I follow Robbins in teaching ballet to Inbal? Maybe in fact there hadn't been actual classes for Inbal? One of Sara's lead dancers, Moshiko, who I was also interviewing for *Dance Perspectives* told me he was rehearsing Robbins's ballet "Interplay" at Mia Arbatova's ballet studio with a motley group of dancers in 1951 before he danced for Sara. Maybe Anna Sokolow had also taught ballet to the company? In any case, Sara was determined and spoke about it to me several times. She thought that ballet would be good medicine and I should be the one to deliver it to her dancers.

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Soon after I moved to Tel Aviv, Gurit created a festival by the Yarkon River called "Boi Temen" with many companies singing and dancing, reflecting all the different areas of Yemen and Jewish life there including the Habani, the Hadani, and those from Sa'ana.

<sup>3</sup>. Deborah Jowitt, *Jerome Robbins: His Life, His Theater, His Dance*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004, 191-195-210-213.

My return to the Inbal studio was to teach ballet class. We had a great time, me and the dancers who good naturedly tried to follow “pas de bouree” steps which I said was similar to the Yemenite step in folk dance except the rhythmic counts were different.

I also began to watch Sara in rehearsal with the dancers. I was still grappling with the facts that Sara who had never trained in dance, had no experience in a dance company, and no apparent aptitude herself for physical movement. How could she have created not only a world renowned company, with a new vision of expressing Israel and Judaism in dance, but was also Inbal’s resident choreographer?

The company manager, Gila Toledano, (besides giving me my checks for teaching) generously invited me to sit in her office to study her collection of programs and press about the company. There proved to be quite an archive. With each sitting Sara’s accomplishments took on bigger and bigger proportions.

In a way she seemed to come to that role burnished in the fire of rejection. Her father rejected her as the only living relative in what had been a family of eleven children and she was raised in an orphanage. She felt estranged from the children because she was the only Mizrahi in Safed, and later, deciding to act, she was rejected by the directors at Habimah. She faced rejections and objections so many times in her career a lesser artist would have long given up. Did she find a kinship in the dance artist she had told me about, Baruch Agadati—he so riled the rabbis with his portrayals of religious Jews and one of his costumes, in particular, was too offensive, reminiscent of dancing with a tallis. The portraits and costume created such a brouhaha, that Agadati was threatened with excommunication.

Her powers of creativity and her charismatic ability to round up anyone around her to make plays, dances or song saved her. The orphanage sent her on to study to be a nursery teacher but even while a student, she inspired attention in the

administration with her ability to create materials for children where no songs existed. Soon she was teaching the teachers.

Her biography is told elsewhere in this volume, but as we talked and I read through news articles in Gila's office, I was struck over and over by her Sisyphean character arising again from defeat to create again. I read that in 1962 Inbal faced a particularly lean year, but the company was offered a job: they could travel to Hollywood to perform in "the Greatest Story Ever Told" and earn handsomely for their film work. Sara decided they should go. I heard from some of the dancers how exciting it was to watch the film stars at work, particularly the inspiring Max Van Sydow as Jesus. Also spending seven months on the set improved everyone's English immensely.

Sara was in a difficult situation at home, I read in another article that had been saved from October 16, 1962: "Chief Rabbi Nissim and the Rabbinat yesterday asked Inbal's management to withdraw from its contract to appear in the Hollywood film. In its letter, the Rabbinat accuses the ensemble of opportunism. Furthermore, participating in a film dealing with the life of the Nazerene is contrary to Jewish ethics. Sara Levi-Tanai countered that nothing is offensive to Judaism in the script and that Inbal had consulted with the Minister of Education and the Chairman of the Jewish Agency and they endorsed the company's participation in the film. She said that Jewish congregational rabbis in the United States also scrutinized the script. Besides, "the dancers' role in the film is visual, auditory and atmospheric. Max von Sydow went to Shabat services conducted by the dancers during the weeks of filming on site in Utah where they all stayed. He thought it would help him in his part as Jesus to participate and he even learned some Hebrew."

As Sara and I talked I tried to get the arc of her work. Instead, in an unsigned short news item from an unidentified newspaper of Oct. 10, 1968, I saw how difficult it was to run the company: "Inbal had a two year break but it has come to life again.

The company's existence was assured by a grant from the Ministry of Education and the American Fund for Israel Institutions."

There was no new work, but two pieces I especially loved were in rehearsals for shows at Nahmani theatre and other venues. I never tired of watching the women dancing in unison and singing in "Nashim." The gestures of women's work, gossiping together, grinding wheat, making pita and other chores were so specifically Yemenite, yet at the same time so universal.

I also loved Lea Avraham in "Kad." A young woman with a water pitcher, sometimes on her head, sometimes between her shoulders, and then for a moment, resting with the jug between her legs on the floor. Sara seemed to have an endless store variations. Was that partly how she kept the interest of dancers who had been with her for decades? Sara used transformation, metamorphosis, and her themes treated anew. Lea whipped out a blue silk from the neck of the jar, shimmying the fabric, making it flow along the floor in such a way that water was surely running before my eyes.

Lea reflected on Sara. "Imagine Sara creating a company in Israel in the 1950s during the severe period of rationing—*tzena*. Yemenites worked as simple janitors and charwomen. But Sara saw something different for all of us, something that would stand for all of Israel and represent the country in a magical way. Sara convinced the Yemenites to work with her, that her ideas would be worthwhile. Never mind that the powers that be, the Ashkenazim, looked down on the Mizrahi, down on the Yemenites. They thought they were above us. Imagine what it took not to see us as primitive like the rest of Israeli society. To know instead that we were gems and our knowledge pearls—to believe in the worth of our Yemenite song, and dance. Sara took all of us and our skills and gave us a unique setting."

I asked Lea how she learned about Inbal in the first place? "My family came from Yemen, and I walked along with them through the desert to the planes of the airlift

to Israel when I was only 6. We hardly had a thing. We settled in a small Yemenite community, here, called Kadimah. I wore rags to school but there I had a teacher, Yosi Abuhav, who saw something else. He taught folk dancing and I so loved it. When I was 15 he took me to the Inbal studio so I could dance for Sara. Afterwards, she said I must finish school and the army but then I should come to her. I remember I was also taken to a choir directed by Ovadia Tuvia and I sang for him. As soon as I finished my army service, I returned to them and was accepted into the company. It was 1962 and a month and a half later, we had a tour to Europe. I learned the repertory, especially "The Story of Ruth." Then I was ready and that was that. "

"It wasn't just dancing. I met my husband in the company. We danced together until he had a motorcycle accident in 1970." As far as I knew, Moshiko worked with other choreographers including Jerome Robbins and Hadassah Badoch joined the Graham company in the U.S. But in the 70's, Lea was the only dancer I knew to make the jump from Inbal to the Batsheva Company.

Some time after I started teaching ballet for Inbal, Sara asked me if I would join the company for their fall 1973 tour to South America? The tour was to last over two months. I wasn't sure if she wanted me as a dancer or as a teaching coach, as a confidant or a stage manager? I was learning her descriptions of who did what in the company were fluid and people took on multiple roles without flinching: star performer and scrub woman, wardrobe mistress and daughter. Sara's inferences about work were unclear, and in this case, though I badly wanted to dance on stage in her works, and touring was still so appealing, I had my writing assignment to complete and I didn't think I wanted to leave my new life with my new husband for so long. Sara, my husband and I met "for a coffee" and I could feel her persuasive powers, trying to lure me in further and further to her plans. After talking with my husband, sadly, regretfully, I slowly told her that I could not join Inbal for the tour, I simply did not want to leave my husband.

There was a new tumultuousness as the company was readied for the tour. Many times in rehearsal Sara's comments to the dancers were fiercely harsh. I didn't know where to put myself as the shower of unflattering words poured out, at first preachy leading to a pitch of reprimands which sank to complaints about their lack of education and how uncouth they were, belittling them unmercifully. Sometimes I wondered if the abuse she dealt out was a result of what she had suffered, a kind of self-hatred of the Mizrahi, like what many felt Philip Ross expressed in his writing as a self-hating Jew in the US. Maybe it was true we absorbed the negative stereotypes as descriptions of ourselves, perpetuating them in some way, as unwanted and as detrimental as we knew them to be. Unfortunately I witnessed her rants along with her creative rehearsals.

The company left, and I busied myself with other interviews around the country, getting to know Yardena Cohen, Lea Bergstein, Rivka Sturman and others also attended rehearsals of Anna Sokolow's new work for the Batsheva Company. She was creating an elegiac solo about the Holocaust for Rina Shenfeld called "In Memory of No. 52436." This spurred my curiosity about Sokolow's<sup>4</sup> work with Inbal.

I wondered what was Anna and Sara's relationship really like in the '50s and '60s? and now a decade later, with Anna working at Batsheva Company. It hadn't existed during the beginning years of Inbal, and now I wondered what Sara thought about all the attention and money given to Rothschild's company? Sara had basically raised herself without the benefit of any mentor (except perhaps attention from Yoel Engel who believed in Sara's music) so what was it like with Anna as the company mentor also giving the training and support to her dancers that she herself never received?

In the Inbal archives I found a news report (unfortunately clipped in such a way that only the date of August 1954 survived) quoting Sokolow from her early days with

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<sup>4</sup> For more information see Larry Warren, *Anna Sokolow, The Rebellious Spirit*, Princeton: A Dance Horizons Book, 1991, 133-143; 268-270.

the company: "The Inbal dancers are the most innocent people I've ever met. They are like flowers which must be carefully tended and not walked on.' She's training them in preparation for their American tour with no common language apart from brief commands and counts in English. She's been giving the company a most intensive course in modern dance to teach them to use their bodies correctly but not to replace their own native dance rhythms. I've never touched their creative work. I've tried to give them an attitude towards their work to make them into professionals." I knew Sara saw her dancers as no hothouse flowers. They weren't fragile, but tough collaborators, and she depended on them for their knowledge, for their singing and drumming skills and their ready emotions. But she also saw them like her kindergarten pupils. She was the one to educate them.

I knew she had a double edged relationship with Moshiko and saw him sometimes as a cheeky up-start though after all the years together she encouraged him to choreography and included his choreography in her *Min ha-midbar* (From the Desert) suite two years ago. She told me she was speaking with him to be a potential artistic assistant to the company and that she would give him new opportunities to choreograph. I watched Sara set up rehearsals for him but then resented the time they took from her own works. Out of disappointment and frustration, he left the company after years of service.

Yom Kippur was coming and my husband and I made plans to walk down Natan Hahkam Street where we lived to a little shul at the foot of the hill. The holy day brought all the traffic to a standstill, Tel Aviv's streets stilled in eerie quiet so unlike anything I'd known in Minneapolis and New York at the holy day. While we were sitting in *shul* (little synagogue) we heard cars and trucks starting up; men started leaving the service. Afterwards as we walked up the hill to our apartment and an air raid siren suddenly wailed. Instantly we joined all the others, running to the nearest shelter. The Yom Kippur surprise war had begun.

Anna Sokolow packed up and abandoned her work for Batsheva, leaving the next day. I was shocked that despite her years of commitment to Israel and the Inbal dancers, she fled to the safety of America. There were difficulties for Israelis abroad to return but somehow Inbal was still able to secure passage home. The men joined their respective defense units. Air raids in the night robbed us of our sleep and a sense of security. My classes at Bat Dor continued, and on my way to teach, I noticed Magen David trucks backed up on Dizengoff Street corners to get donations of blood for the wounded. Sara and I resumed our interviews for my monograph and she asked me if I would come to her office to write letters for her in English. The days of war continued, black outs at night and air raid sirens, rations at the store and streets empty of young men and then the tides turned and it finished.

We resumed what had been before. Miraculously all the men returned and so did the intense schedule of rehearsals. Sara decided I should help her in rehearsals by charting what she was doing in rehearsals so she wouldn't waste time trying to remember what she'd done the previous day. I slipped into a much more regular schedule at Inbal, not just observing her working but writing down, sketching out what she did for each measure of music, what did each dancer and each group do? The dancers laughed at my efforts. By now they were so adept at remembering all the different versions Sara proposed for multiple sections of a dance they needed no aid. Observing closely I saw that Sara loved posing one group in opposition to another like contrapuntal melody lines in a fugue, and then she'd resolve the differences in the groups with the dancers coming together in unison at unexpected moments. My respect for how she plotted the groups in space increased but I gave up on her request for charts.

I was referred to now as Sara's assistant and it gave me great pride to join those working for Sara. There was a loyalty I had never understood and a feeling of family I had underestimated. She took me into her confidences. To my amazement I discovered she couldn't write down her own music either. She said it took away time to try to decipher the musical page but she wanted me to have a new book of

her songs. It is a treasure. She inscribed it “”to her young, delicate friend who knows how to think.”<sup>5</sup> One day we were sitting together in her office and she suddenly declared “If God wished to punish a woman, He made her a mother and an artist.” I had no idea how to respond. I thought of dancers who had come in to talk to Sara in our office—divulging difficult family problems which inevitably seemed of no concern to Sara. She could be heartless at times, and she would close the discussion with the same solution. Go back to the studio, just continue working.

What conflicts Sara must have. Did she envy Graham and Sokolow without the responsibility of children and husband? Did she think that allowed them more time for their work or that they could be more single-minded? Sara was so dedicated. Maybe Sara decided to prove her art could be more important than any one person, more important than what happened to her dancers, more important than her own personal life. She was driven.

In 1972 Sara made no new works. She gave Rina Sharett a chance to choreograph again for the company. Sara grumbled but Rina Sharett’s rehearsals for her dance “Nimrod” continued apace. She coaxed the dancers to a different level than they were used to, low to the ground in crouching, loping movements. At the performances the dancers’ lithe bodies were clothed in sleek leotards and shiny tights with amazing headdresses of imaginative antlers balanced on their heads. They were the animals Nimrod hunted and the look was unlike any other Inbal works.

The morning of May 6, 1973 I was going to Inbal on the bus, the bus radio on full blast so everyone could hear the news broadcast over the usual din of talking and traffic . I couldn’t believe my ears. I heard the radio announcer say the names of the winners of the Israel Prize. Sara Levi-Tanai was one of the winners! It was as if everyone on the bus were cheering with me—everyone understood that her

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<sup>5</sup>. Shlomo Kaplan, Avner Bahat, eds., *Zmirot*, Tel Avi: hozaot mercaz letarbut vlheenuch

constant striving to create a symbol of Israel recognized the world over – humorous, poignant, beautiful and unique was finally acknowledged. She was so demanding of herself and her dancers. It wasn't egotism, it was art and Sara was finally awarded. Israel was giving her their highest respect. The following day I learned she was part of the ceremony at the Jerusalem Theatre, the president of Israel, Zalman Shazar, presenting her with the amazing prize for those who had really made a difference to the nation.

In a way it was only a figurative prize, though, and I began to see that things continued just as they had. There was always the same search for funding, for new performance dates and new tours. What did materialize was Sara's newest work, "Jacob in Haran" and that was something to behold. I hardly noticed it beginning. Sara the older choreographer came up to one of her young male dancers and asked him to chant a passage from the Torah. She handed him a copy of the *Humash* (first five books of the Torah) and he thumbed right to the story of Jacob in Haran. Missing a *kippah*, he managed a strange maneuver worthy of Sara. To cover his head with his kaki jacket, he pulled it upward over his hair, all the while his arms still in his sleeves. He chanted the *pasuk* (section) in the traditional Yemenite *nusah* and I could see Sara beginning to sway and build movement in time to the chant. She transformed the tones, crooning in her hoarse sort of way a tune to the *kanoon* player that he interpreted more fully on his multiple stringed instrument. Then, coaxing dancers here and there into standing and crouching formations I myself began to see what Sara was imagining. A virile, energetic Jacob emerged while others, weaker, cowered by a stone too heavy for them to remove from the mouth of the well. The feel of the landscape desert made clear in the quality of movement seemed to permeate even the cold tile of the room. Was it a tableau she had made before? I wouldn't know, but I see so much in the scene and I could also sense the remarkable feelings of unity and respect as everyone worked together.

Sara began to talk about a plan for enlarging the scope of the company. She wanted other Sephardic dancers to choreograph for Inbal. She saw the company arriving at a

new threshold, no longer just Yemenite based but speaking for all of Mizrahi culture. There was a conflict when she went too far out of her usual bailiwick, critics would criticize. But if others could be persuaded to contribute maybe there could be new growth. She approached Moshe Efrati to create a dance for Inbal using his own Mizrahi background. Collaborating with artists to contribute to her own works had resulted in many important dances; it hadn't bothered her for others to design sets or even music, but I think as company director, the hardest collaboration for her was allowing other choreographers to work with her dancers.

Efrati decided not to accept her invitation. The repertoire continued as it had been. Life changed for me though. Our first son, Shai was born. Sara came to visit us and pronounced my husband Abu-Shai, laughing and so happy to sing to the baby and to celebrate with us. I still came to the studio, but now there was a different technique teacher for ballet. Giora Manor and I had started "The Israel Dance Annual" so I collected information and photos for the Annual and still occasionally wrote letters for Sara and watched her rehearsals, but there seemed less and less I could really do for her. The two of us decided that I would no longer continue as her assistant.

My husband and I decided to return to Minneapolis and I thought my experience with Sara was completed. I watched the rehearsals for her new piece *Watanabe*, with a kind of hunger and total sadness, thinking it was the last time I would see the master at work. The dance was a new solo for the remarkable Malka Hajbe and the theme dealt with a problem I'd only heard whispered about in the Yemenite neighborhood in Netanya: the fact that some Yemenite families had come to Israel with more than one wife. How did the women feel and in particular, what was the mood of the first wife when a second came to the household? Sara's answer was found in every moment, every sound, every movement of the dance. The way Malka portrayed the spurned wife was amazing. She waddled out onto the stage under an enormous bundle of bedding perched on her head, throwing it down in disgust, her possessions spewing out on the floor, including her coffee pot which clattering and rolled every which way. She yelled and bellowed in an angry stream

of actual words accompanying her percussive jerking movements as she tried to rearrange her possessions and her life, as if she were some kind of injured beast of burden. It didn't matter we couldn't understand the Yemeni she was yelling. Every movement meant we were witnessing a scorned woman, pushed aside by a younger wife and husband we keenly felt but never saw.

When we returned to Minneapolis, I still kept up with all Inbal's news. Sara proved to be a wonderful correspondent and she often sent news clippings in her letters. In April of 1982 she sent me a story by Giora entitled "Inbal—A New Era?" Like the Israel Dance Annual, he published "The Voice of Dance" in both Hebrew and English and this article was accompanied by many handsome photos of Inbal and a rehearsal shot of her new work "Song of Songs." Giora reported that a new general manager had been hired for Inbal, ex-TV director Haim Shiran. Reading between the lines I could see trouble. Shiran had many new plans which "if implemented will radically change the artistic policy of the company. Until now, the basis of Inbal's work and indeed its *raison d'être* were Sara Levi-Tanai's ballets." Inbal's new building was to be renamed the Ethnic Multicultural Center Inbal. Giora also wrote "with the bleak days of paring budgets for culture to the bone and even the very marrow, it is heartening to watch efforts being made to pull Inbal out of the doldrums. But any new planning has to take into account the real *specialite de la maison* is the canon of Sara's works which make Inbal so special."

These new quarters were built for Inbal at the new Suzanne Dellal Center ironically found in the old Yemenite quarter of Tel Aviv. I visited Sara soon after the move. I thought I was well versed in the chronology of her life and where she had lived, but she surprised me as we walked on the site. She pointed to a well hole covered with a metal grating in the ground and told me she remembered it as a child. She had attended a public school on the very site when she was small. I had always pictured her in Jerusalem first and then a waif in the Safed orphanage. But for a time she had been in the Tel Aviv neighborhood too.

What should have felt triumphant for her in Inbal's new building, re-enforced her feeling that the company was an after thought, their place literally a far walk from the street, set behind the other more important buildings featuring the main dance theatre. Besides, it was a difficult chore for Sara to reach the Inbal building by bus, and she struggled on her long walk from the bus stop. When she did reach the building breathless, she still had a flight of stairs ahead to reach her charming little theatre. Unlike America, new construction did not require a handicapped access to the second floor.

The continuation of the company was still threatened with lack of funding, and by 1984, a lack of touring abroad. Everything with her now seemed desperate. She sent me a two page newspaper spread with the photos and the headline "Mashber Gil ha-40" (Crisis at Age 40). Though Sara was shaping a dance she'd brewed about for years honoring Baruch Agadati, she needed more real support. She called on her most faithful Jerome Robbins and proudly sent me his letter dated Feb. 13, 1984: "To Whom It May concern: Sara Levi-Tanai is the most original and authentic dance artist to come out of Israel. Her roots stem from the oldest existing traditions of Jewish culture, the Yemenites. Her knowledge of the language, song, costume, religion, folk art and dance are one of Israel's greatest treasures and she has managed to capture and preserve this knowledge in her work. I recommend this performance of hers most highly indeed, as it is such a beautiful insight into one of Israel's ancient Heritages."

Sara and I saw each other again in 1986, this time in New York City. I was the key note speaker at the two-day September international conference "Jews and Judaism in Dance: Reflections and Celebrations. Sara accompanied Inbal on their tour, presenting a lecture demonstration with Pearl Lang called "Yemenite and Eastern European dance from Ceremony to Stage," a workshop on Inbalit technique, an evening of "Women of Yemen" with Ze'eva Cohen and former Inbal star Margalit Oved. In addition, Sara staged a wonderful tribute to Anna Sokolow during the

festival, a *zafeh* or processional to bring her to the stage, a kind of colorful *huppa* held aloft over Anna's head by the dancers who escorted her with drum and song and movement.

The company also performed at the small La Mama theatre, a different spring weekend in New York. During that visit she was tired and I served as her ad hoc translator for the audience who asked far too many questions after the performance but she didn't ignore a one. We spoke at length in a restaurant and as of old, she convinced me to help her bring the company to Minneapolis. Now my son Shai was 12 and his brother 9, and I a faculty member in the dance program at the University of Minnesota. I created a dance residency for Inbal at the University, booked a performance on campus, arranged a workshop for Jewish students sponsored by Hillel, and raised the necessary funds.

How I loved watching her address her audience in one of her famous curtain speeches explaining the importance of landscape in her dances, what was Jewish about them, and how she believed in the beauty of her people. The workshop for the University dance students taught by company members Ilana Cohen, Malka Hajbi, Moti Avraham, Zion Nuriel, and others was the best rendering of movement, space, shape, dynamics and ethnic inspiration they had ever experienced, they told me. They spoke of her Inbalit elements with all the modern dance jargon, thrilled to try Sara's Inbalit request for turned up toes, stepping on the floor in different accented rhythms. The Inbal dancers demonstrated how to hold their elongated fingers together as their palms curled and swirled while lowering their bodies into a deep plie or traveling the long diagonals of the gym with quivering impulses in the chest and nodding head movements on odd accents.

Later in 1988 the incorrigible Sara sent me a letter she'd written in Hebrew, but at the top she had carefully penciled in English: "To Whom It May Concern." The text said that "One would think at the beginning of Inbal's 40<sup>th</sup> year, it would be time to rest." Instead, she was conducting a fundraiser for a new dance. I wrote back that I was too far away to offer her any kind of help.

Three summers later, though I was once again touched by a new Levi-Tanai work unlike anything she'd done before. It was presented at the Karmiel Dance Festival, which had become a huge annual summer event. It transformed the town of Karmiel and any place you looked-- the tennis courts, the sports arena, the hillside amphitheatre for 50,000, the city parks and the schools --all throbbed with dance, tourists and Israelis from all over the country participating and watching. The Karmiel festival was directed by Yonaton Karmon and he brought Inbal to the 1990 festival. I saw the Inbal evening concert at the cultural arts center in a well appointed theater with seats for hundreds. The program included Sara's "*Reglayich, Musia,*" (Your Legs, Musia), her elegy to a heroine of the Holocaust named Musia Daichas, a dancer whose legs were broken by the Nazis. Despite her pain and injuries, Musia inspired the young women around her to hang on to life. Survivors made her story known and it was her friends who had commissioned the work. Sara's dramatic gift relayed the story in scene after scene, through transformations of emotion and movement. The costumes also changed before one's eyes, whips and ropes of slavery peeled off of the women's bodies like vests unraveling. The ropes lashed them into a tableau of submission and then pulled them forward into a new time. The critics weren't kind though. Perhaps they were so used to Sara's Mizrahi stance they were unable to see the worth of her projecting a Holocaust theme. The dance was not long in the Inbal repertory. Nor did Sara stay long connected to the company.

The administration gave her a new title: emeritus director and she was retired from the daily work of Inbal. Sara fumed in her letters to me. She did not understand that the title "emeritus" was honorary; for her it only meant forced retirement. She sent me a two page newspaper spread in color of her standing with her arm out and the caption that she was 86. She looked to me like a beggar and I shuddered. The *Yidiot Ahronot* story started with a big headline, "Sometimes Simply, I'm fed up" (*Liphamim pashoot nemas Li.*) She confides in the writer, Varda Horvitz that she feels lonely,

without work, without friends and I thought to myself, here is the orphan speaking. How unfair to those so loyal like the ever faithful Gila.

I came for a visit after she had moved, with her daughter and son's help, to a special residence for elders on Dizengoff. On the way I stopped at a flower shop to buy her a bouquet of orange and purple flowers. The florist argued with me that those were too garish a combination. I thought to myself, if only he knew Sara. Perhaps she looked plain and old, carrying her little navy blue cloth bag. I supposed inside were her papers and a little tablet held together with a rubber band, her mechanical pencil there, too. She would have penciled messages to herself in her clearly formed handwriting, each individual letter alone, evenly running along line after line, spelling out poetic words in her little notebook. They expressed her dashing heart and daring soul. I thought wild colors together would be perfect for Sara.

Sara wasn't quietly sitting in her new residence. She was creating a new program! Two dancers she'd worked with for years, Moti Abramov and Zvea Bar, were coming to her residence to work with her on their own time, helping Sara with a program of duets she called "He Kissed Her." The residence had allowed her to set up a kind of free space between the chairs and the tables, with no special wooden floor, no special mirrors, no grant to pay the dancers, no publicity machine to spread her successes. Here she was, again creating a program which Zvea was able to book in small Tel Aviv venues. I realized then that Eros visited Sara and inspired her. She was never fettered by time or her own aged body that swayed as she walked, held up on painful feet; her tentative steps had no bearing on her choreography. I thought then with surprise that how a body looks or ages can be quite divorced from the inner life of the choreographer artist.

I also came the next year and visited Sara, and twice more I saw her in her final residence as her memory began to slip. The 2001 visit was incredibly joyful for Gila, me and Giora Manor all together with Sara. Giora presented her with his beautiful picture book, *The Choreography of Sara Levi-Tanai*, (in Hebrew *Darka*

*haChoreographit Shel Sara Levi-Tanai.*) She giggled her special multi-tuned laugh and we all hugged each other.

As I conclude, I want to remember Sara living on Dizengoff, between the famous coffee houses. The old bookstores had mostly given way to fashionable dress shops and shoe stores. Just down from her residence candles flickered in front of the charred flower shop where I'd gotten the garish bouquet. I was buzzed into her building, and she was waiting for me. Had I seen the flower shop she asked immediately? A terrorist bomb planted on a #5 the city bus had exploded right in front. Amongst the dead was the flower shop proprietor. I took a breath, darkened with the thought of violence that seemed never to end.

We sat by the chairs and tables. With a sly smile Sara asked, "Would you like to hear about my newest idea for a ballet? It's about our esteemed Rabbi Akiva, but not when he was Judaism's respected scholar. No, it would be set at the time of his youth when he was a simple illiterate worker, with his older wife, the wiser, educated one." Once again Sara's words beguiled me. I could already imagine Inbal dancers showing us the story. I caught myself wondering would Lea or would Ilana dance the part of Akiva's wife? In her husky voice, Sara described love scenes of tenderness and encouragement between the heroines, of moments when Akiva hungered for his wife and for learning or the scene where the curious and earnest young Akiva would climb onto the yeshiva roof, straining to listening to rabbis studying and arguing below. Sara also described a scene of Akiva climbing into a tree, cleaving to it, resting in the crotch of its branches.

Unlimited by tradition, her imagination soared and took her inside the young Akiva's mind. Sara defied categories. Untrained, she could study Jewish scripture and come up with utterly unique interpretations realized in dance. Without family as a child, she yet had the charisma to attract others to help her realize her plans to make a little play or a special game. She got better and better, first as a teacher of teachers without text or music, creating the songs and ditties and dances she needed for

children and teachers alike. She called herself a simple *falaheen* worker, a simple woman, yet she was endowed with magical and complicated powers, creating the first modern dance company of the new Israel. Untrained, she paradoxically created professional dances that inspired artists and audiences alike; She took the specifics of Yemenite cultural treasures and placed them in her own settings for all to appreciate, *klal yisrael*—not just the Sephardim or the Mizrahim, Though her dances seemed so specific, she still arrived at universal emotions and tales, touching audiences well beyond Israel. Never mind she was the emeritus director of Inbal, and an elder in a home for the elderly. Once again, she ensnared me and I could see her complete ballet before my eyes. The limits melted and, I was transported again, ready to help her, if only I could.

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