H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Judith Brin Ingber, ed.. *Seeing Israeli and Jewish Dance.* Raphael Patai Series in Jewish Folklore and Anthropology. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2011. 504 pp. $34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8143-3330-3.

Reviewed by Marion Kant

Published on H-Judaic (May, 2012)

Commissioned by Jason Kalman (Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion)

The volume *Seeing Israeli and Jewish Dance* is a collection of nineteen essays, many of which are reprinted (some extended or revised) from journals or book chapters and most of which were gathered in the 2000 special edition of the journal *Jewish Folklore and Ethnology Review* on Jewish dance. However, the editor of the volume under consideration, Judith Brin Ingber, claims that this is the first book in English "devoted solely to the dance in Judaism and among Jews in Israel" (p. 2). The nineteen contributions are divided into seven categories: part 1, "In the Spotlight: Five Jewish Dance Artists in the Twentieth Century"; part 2, "Montage: Eretz Yisreal/Israel"; part 3, "Zoom In and Then Pan: Yemenite Jews to Ashkenazim"; part 4, "Cut Back to Europe: Different Sites and Epochs"; part 5, "Jump Cut: Ultra-Orthodox Dance"; part 6, "Going Live: Current Israeli Folk Dance"; and part 7, "Split Screen: Jews in American and Israeli Theater Dance." Though the sections bear impressive names, the two or three essays included in each are too few to investigate such broad topics as the complexity of Israel as a state, European "sites and epochs," the notion of "folklore," or the symbiotic and interdependent relationship between the political entities of Israel and the United States of America (and the parts of their respective populations that self-identify as Jewish).

Of the reprinted pieces some would have benefited from significant updating. As a case in point, the essay on Jews in the Soviet Union and the choreographer Leonid Jacobsen by Janice Ross, first published in 2000, does not include recent research. The blanket claims that Jews were denied their identity and suffered suppression and that Jacobsen was an "outcast" need to be examined in the context described by Yuri Slezkine in *The Jewish Century* (2004) (pp. 5, 57). The essay by Ingber on Jews, dance, and Nazi Germany rests on factually wrong suppositions and is naïve in its effort to summarize European, and particularly German, history. Expressionist dance was integrated into Nazi Germany, not forbidden, and that begs the question of how the Zionist students actually handled the heritage bequeathed by their German teachers and how it is that in one country that aesthetic glorified the Third Reich yet in the

other helped to launch Jewish socialist characteristics.

The book begins with the questions "What is dance?" and "What is Jewish?" and ends with Gaby Aldor's essay on the distinction between Israeli and Jewish dance. "Jewish" is understood as "uprooted," but also as a universalist concept that leaves religious, national, or ethnic ties behind or that has the ability to articulate controversial political positions (p. 377). One could not ask more existential questions and it remains open as to whether a scholarly volume can yield satisfactory answers or should even attempt to circumscribe the past and present identity problems or politics of Judaism and Jews in the modern world.

My reservations are as serious as the book is ambitious and they mainly concern the methodology and general approach; they do not intend in any way to belittle a very brave undertaking. That a book on dance in a series devoted to folklore and anthropology should take a vaguely anthropological approach, in the form of interviews and written-up fieldwork, is not surprising. But that the entire notion of "folklore" is only questioned in the essay by German scholar Elke Kaschel (with a nuanced self-awareness and thorough research on the subject) is somewhat astonishing. Such terms as "folklore" and "ethnic" are burdened by troublesome connotations of the nationalist movements of the nineteenth century; this terminology cannot be ignored nor be considered acceptable without explanation. They are most certainly not self-explanatory. In the context of the evolution of the Jewish state of Israel, Zionism as a form of nationalism defined "Jewish folklore." The roots of Zionism and its legacies are hotly disputed; the analyses of the nature, merits, or deficiencies of democracy and the realization or justification of national politics make for an explosive mixture. In the contemporary climate where political criticism of Israel is often described as antisemitic or self hating and a legitimate defense of Israel as Zionist propaganda, an intellectual discourse on the situation of Jews in this world is made very difficult. If the public debate on the state of Israel has become contentious then the introduction of dance into the equation muddles the problem even more. Are art and dance not embedded in this complexity of national refraction? In this book though, most essays serve the stereotype of dance as an integral activity of an "imagined," i.e. idealized, community; dance is little more than the projection of national wholeness and wholesomeness and it merely confirms an assumed and stereotypical national cohesion. In that sense it is a grand apology: dance as proof of the goodness of a people. Such dance never existed in the past and it certainly does not exist now. There is no happy and peaceful coexistence between the various religious and secular groups in Israel; to assume otherwise is an escapist fantasy. Ingber suggests: "This could be Jewish dance: The dance onstage begins behind a scrim--from the audience's point of view it seems like a blank screen. Suddenly the stage light shines just so, and with the illumination, figures move ... more and more is visible ... everything is clear" (p. 1). Such description does not say much that would not also refer to the dance of the Inuit, the dance of the Amazonian tribes, or a rave concert with intoxicated teenagers. She then circumscribes "Jewish" as something that reaches from orthodox to liberal and back again without realizing that these definitions cancel each other out. At present, some ultra-orthodox groups in Israel, with an extreme antifeminist agenda, are asking for the separation of the sexes whereas liberal Jewish dancers rejoiced in the independence and political freedom of women. Whereas some Haredi groups do not even recognize the state of Israel, Zionist pioneers portrayed in the book are celebrated for their activist contributions to the sovereignty of that state. Yet all are simply "Jewish." To base all these contradictory and exclusionary positions on a reading of "the Jewish body" rooted in Talmudic scripture then becomes really puzzling (p. 8).

Ingber asks in the introduction: “What ... makes dance Jewish?” (p. 5). Is it the dancers, the choreographers, the purpose or the content, or the place and circumstance of performance? And she answers that religion is most definitely a constituent factor, as much as Zionist visions. Hence, wedding dances are Jewish for their integration into a religious ritual. A dance performed in a kibbutz becomes an expression of Zionism and as such an affirmation of a particular kind of Judaism. Jewish dance as an allusion “to many forms of artistic, celebratory, communal and ritual movement” amounts to a “non-definition” (p. 4). But do movement patterns exist that distinguish a Jewish composition from, say, a Palestinian? Not if you base your definition on gesture derived from “common movements,” such as walking, etc. (p. 7). A definition that casts its net that wide would point to movement as a universalist endeavor. Or is it rather the social content that determines whether or not something is Jewish, whether a dance can be categorized as “Jewish”? We are none the wiser.

Despite the serious reservations raised here, this is an impressive volume and Ingber deserves our admiration for attempting to define one of the most problematic aspects of modern history, namely, the question of what constitutes Judaism and Jewishness in art and how “to be Jewish” manifests itself in dance. Its merits lie in the attempt to recall moments within the history of dance of the Jews, dance choreographed and performed by people who for various reasons considered themselves or were defined by the outside world as Jewish. The most convincing essays are connected to the research that Ingber has for many years undertaken: the achievements of the dance pioneers to establish a modernist movement culture in Palestine and Israel. The presentation of historical variety and the ways in which traditions and rituals have been preserved through movement practice enrich our understanding of a culture created by people who were or are “Jewish.”

:

i

?

asks Ingber in the introduction (p. 5).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-judaic

Citation: Marion Kant. Review of Ingber, Judith Brin, ed. *Seeing Israeli and Jewish Dance.* H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews. May, 2012.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=33699