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Karmiel Festival – Old, Good, and Renewed

On the innovations that await us this year at the festival



The 35th Karmiel Festival is just around the corner. It will take place from July 5-7, 2022. The preparations, the ideas, the innovations, the planning, the huge logistics, the choreographies – are already underway for this enormous cultural event.

We asked to interview those engaged in the production of the festival – **Lilach Vaxman Rana** – Festival Director, **Efrat Yitzhaki Melamed** – Executive Producer, **Gadi Bitton** – Artistic Director, **Dganit Rom** – Artistic Director of Israeli Dance for the Stage and **Yaron Carmel** – Artistic Director of the Dance Sessions (harkadot).

*Well, Lilach and Efrat, major personnel changes have recently taken place. The mayor has changed, the legendary festival CEO, **Aharon Solomon**, as well as the artistic director, **Shlomo Maman** and other officials have left. How do these generational changes affect the festival?*

Lilach: This is not a dramatic change. The leadership changes are a natural progression in the dynamics and development of a festival. We see this as a lever for growth and renewal. The mayor, Mr. **Moshe Koninsky**, sees great importance in the continuity of the festival in Karmiel. In recognition of its centrality and contribution to Israeli culture, we've received enormous support along the way. Retired officials will always be a part of us and these dear people are a source of inspiration.

What is changing and evolving are new artistic insights, appealing to additional audiences, new choreographers, and more dancers. The backbone, the DNA of the festival, is strong and the framework is stable and lasting.

This year there will be three large amphitheater performances; the auditoriums will also



Lilach Vaxman Rana

house many performances. The festival will continue to be a stage for professional dance performances from Israel and from around the world. Old familiar competitions will be held alongside new ones, and they will be combined with digital innovations. Both the old and the new will receive proper expression.

Can you share any new innovations?

Additional dance troupes from around the country will receive exposure. Choreographers are taking an active part in new productions. For the first time, there will be a Middle Eastern dance competition. The project, "Born to Create", will involve young choreographers, aged 17-18, who will create choreographies to be presented at the festival. These young choreographers who have exceptional skills, will receive professional guidance in their creative process. We are proud of the "Born to Create" participants and see them as a future national reserve of choreographers.

We will hold a unique artistic encounter between maestro **Gil Shohat** [classical music composer, conductor, pianist and lecturer], singer [an Israeli Opera Soprano] **Daniella Lugassy** and dancers, in an interesting original production. This time, the veteran dance troupes (vatikim) show will be a tribute to the poet, lyricist, and author, **Yoram Taharlev** [January 24, 1938 – January 6, 2022]. The children's dance troupes show will be dedicated to children around the world. All the performances will include leading Israeli singers. Soon we will publish the complete festival program and the names of the artists. There is something to look forward to!

Efrat, what about the competition for dance choreography on the stage?

The dance choreography for the stage competition will take place on the second day of the festival (Wednesday) at the amphitheater. All choreographies will be based on songs by **Idan Raichel** [singer-songwriter and musician]. The competition will have an international dimension with the addition of judges from various countries where Israeli folk dances are danced. As in other international dance competitions, the wonders of technology will star in our competition. There will be teams of judges who will send their votes online to our control center. The judges will be top dance leaders (markidim) and choreographers in their own countries. This year, two dance troupes from abroad will participate in the festival. Yes, there will be innovations and other approaches, as explained later in the article.

Lilach, a resident of Karmiel, has been involved with the festival for about 20 years in a variety of roles. From producing events and special projects to the management of the festival for this, her fourth year. At the age of five, she immigrated from Ukraine, directly to the city of Karmiel, where she grew up, danced and developed. As a child, she danced in the Matan camps – a cultural and art enterprise for youth – an organization established in 1981 whose goal is to locate and nurture youth in Israel who are talented in the arts. Lilach served as an actor in



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the IDF Theater. She is a graduate of Beit Zvi – School of the Performing Arts. She also studied directing and education at Seminar HaKibutzim [Kibbutzim College of Education, Technology and the Arts]. Among her plans are the renewal of the Karmiel Summer Course for Israeli Folk Dance Instructors from Abroad, and to establish a holistic arts camp, with an

emphasis on dance, for talented youth from all over

the country. Lilach is the head of the Municipal Culture Administration, the CEO of Heichal HaTarbut [the Hall of Culture] and responsible for the field of foreign relations at the Municipality.

Efrat, a resident of Kfar Tavor, and mother of two, has been a partner in the festival for over a decade. Her key role was organization, especially the foreign dance troupes. She is the main producer of the festival and an excellent professional. (Lilach kept complimenting her friend during the interview.) Previously, Efrat established an acting school in Tiberias.

Lilach and Efrat, what do you think about festivals in general, the impact of Covid 19, and the future?

As is well known, at the height of COVID19, the festival was canceled. Yet, we had a virtual festival, using Facebook and YouTube that attracted many viewers. Last year, a window of opportunity was created, and despite the Green Pass [Israelis who have been vaccinated with two doses of COVID-19 vaccine, who have recovered from COVID-19, or who are participating in a clinical trial for vaccine development in Israel] and other limitations, people came in droves. We were surprised and excited. It was beyond expectations. Dance lovers in Israel expect it and flood the festival every year. The excitement and motivation do not diminish.

Our vision is not narrow, and we do not criticize the existence of other festivals in the country, but each festival should have its own uniqueness. We will continue to give our best with all the innovations, creating year after year an interesting, fun, exciting, and special festival. (Lilach with a smile) We had great comedy sketches in the TV show, "Eretz Nehederet – A Wonderful Land", demonstrating that we are a significant and leading festival in Israeli culture. The Karmiel Festival is a national and international brand and we will continue to create, preserve and strengthen the existing one.

And a somewhat personal question: After all, you do not debate success and there is no doubt about Shlomo Maman's enormous contribution to the quality of the festival over a 20-year span. Yet, he was replaced. Why?

As stated earlier, this is the way of nature. Managers change and organizations are changing and renewing. We found it appropriate to make a change that is refreshing. It is providing an opportunity for new professionals to bring their artistic view and the directing abilities of new choreographers. **Shlomo Maman** is highly regarded. He was presented with the Lifetime Achievement Award for his significant work at the festival and his tremendous contribution to the field of Israeli dance for stage and Israeli folk dancing. **Shlomo Maman** has always been and will continue to be a part of us.



Gadi Bitton

Artistic Management

Gadi Bitton is the festival's "almost new" artistic director, full of ideas and with an innovative perspective, without harming the festival's tradition and character. In an interview for "Rokdim-Nirkoda", Gadi explains and details some of the insights and innovations that will happen at the upcoming festival, as well as those that will follow.

I recommend to all those who have stopped coming to performances at the festival, to come and enjoy something new, different and adapted for the time creations from choreographers of Israeli dance in all its forms.

The main shows, Gadi explains, will be full of insightful content, a kind of "story for viewers". It is not just a sequence of dances, which are beautiful in and of themselves, but with content and a technical connection between them. The average viewer is usually impressed by the body movements, the length of the legs, the costumes, the uniformity of the movement, and judges the quality of the performance, in a sense in a seemingly superficial visual perspective. I see something beyond just movement in the dance picture, something I will call – to play in the head, to think what the choreography expresses, to try to understand something with depth (to bring a story to the stage). In this way to generate interest, further insight, depth of thought, a holistic understanding and this is beyond just the beauty of the dance performance of the dance troupe or the lead dancer. This year, this approach will be integrated into the dance troupes' performances that are based on the songs of Idan Raichel (especially at the amphitheater events) and will also influence all the performances in the amphitheater, stadium and at Baruch Hall.

Overseas partners:

As in the past, we have audiences from around the world and they all take something from our folklore as well as from others, with an emphasis on the Jewish tradition. Our partners around the world will be an integral part of the festival in real time through digital networks. We will allow them to see most of the shows in real time and, though voting, to be active partners and have direct influence on the various competitions.

Packaging and technology

The events are "packaged" with the technological means suitable for the younger generation, adapted to the contemporary reality. Current, modern presentations guided by teasers to reach everyone including through social networks. At the dance sessions in the various halls, there will also be short performances that will give expression to the repertoire and to topics that will be addressed.

Gadi, let's talk about the future, the younger generation, who today seem quite detached from the matter of Israeli folk dances. What do you think and what can you do?

Indeed, the world is changing. Very few young people study





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music; they are disinterested in studying. The [cell] telephone determines what they do. The music of yesteryear is no longer suitable for the younger generation. It does not speak to them. The 2000s are different. The 20-year-olds do not connect with Daklon or even with **Shlomo Artzi**. Hip hop and rap are what moves them.

As part of the folk dance competition, what will be done for the first time is that we'll have a theme, "Songs Left Behind". Dances will be created to songs prior to the year 2000. In addition, we will challenge several talented choreographers from different fields to create Israeli folk dances to modern music from different areas that the younger generation would love to hear and dance to.

We will create folk dances to this music. For example, a simple folk dance for the Twist. We will turn ballroom dances into folk dances. Music and songs from **Static and Ben El** and others will serve as a basis for folk dances. Sounds a bit delusional yet it is possible. A revolution, connecting Israeli folk dances to contemporary music, in a new way. This does not prevent the veteran dancers from continuing to dance to the sounds of their favorite old songs; each generation and its culture.

Your idea Gadi, "A creator is born". "The Trend – Born to Create". What is it?

It is in the field of stage choreography. We have become accustomed to the names of our veterans who bring great choreographies to us at every festival. But with all due respect to them, has a new generation of choreographers arisen in the country? Is there continuity to this art? Perhaps in the near future we will face a stalemate? One must think about it and prepare a new generation that will bring a new artistic message. I was thinking of a new way to promote this occupation. Just as there is "Dancing with the Stars", we will have "Creating with the Stars". In each dance troupe, when a dancer with outstanding skills is discovered, we will assign them a mentor, a renowned and experienced choreographer, who will guide them in choreographing a new dance.

Indeed, the troupe that this dancer is a part of, will perform the dance created by this young choreographer. A spark of fresh and new creation. This year the festival will feature stage choreographies by twelve young choreographers. Enormous momentum for the rest of the generation.

Gadi, "Eurodance"?

That's also in my head. Already this year, Israeli folk dance centers from around the world will participate in judging the Choreography Competition. As in the Eurovision Song Contest, our friends from our folk dance communities, will watch the competition and send in their scores online to our judging system. This will connect them in an integral way to the festival, generate interest and give an international dimension to the event in Karmiel. We have colleagues in many countries who will find great interest in such a partnership.

Later, possibly as soon as next year, 12 representative troupes, from 12 different countries will participate in the choreography competition at the festival. The judging points will be in participating countries and a score will be given as in the Eurovision Song Contest. We will call it "Eurodance", a huge international event.

But there is one important difference. Compared to the Eurovision Song Contest, this competition will take place every year in Karmiel, even if the winning troupe is from another country. After all, Israeli folk dances are our unique national asset.

A new spirit in the Harkadot (dance sessions)

Yaron Carmel (48), got involved with the festival from its first day in 1988, as a dancer in **Dado Kraus'** dance troupe, Hora Pardes Hanna. Since then, he has been a partner in other productions such as Camp Bitnua, Festival Chalav Udvash (Milk and Honey) in Nahalal, the Masada Dance Conference and more... Yaron leads dance sessions in various places such as the Merav Center in Hof Ha'Carmel, Kibbutz HaOgen, the Caesarea Maritime Center, "Navon" Center in Kiryat Motzkin, Zichron Yaacov. Perhaps we've missed something.

Yaron talks about several innovations in the in the field of folkdance sessions:

Dance troupes at the Harkadot [dance sessions], a refreshing and interesting innovation. This year, during the daily dance sessions, performances by dance troupes from stage performances will also be included. A dance troupe of a certain style (e.g., Yemenite, Romanian) will perform for about 4 minutes during the folk dance session. Israeli folk dance sessions take place from 10:00 am to 7:00 pm at various venues, i.e., community centers, in the "Horowitz" Sports Hall and under covered tennis courts. This short show will bring color and quality to the many dancers. A kind of artistic twist, a synergy of professionalism and folklore. Fifteen dance troupes will participate in this special venture that will be implemented in the daytime dance sessions only. Night time dance sessions will continue as before.

Is the idea of integrating teenage troupes in dance sessions, to expose them to our Israeli folk dances and perhaps also to infect them with this love?

Yes, that is the basis of the idea. I do not know how much these young people will be attracted to the dance circles (which are mostly the adults), but nonetheless there is still a chance to attract them to the trend that currently pervades tens of thousands in the country. (And maybe the youth will agree to join the partner dancing for a little while. D.B"A.) Anyway, I think this combination will give the adult dancers a chance to enjoy professionalism on their dance floors and will also give the dance troupes themselves another stage on which to perform in addition to performing on the various stages during the festival. As for the night time dance sessions, Yaron speaks of 15,000 dancers during the festival, and about 3,000 who dance on the tennis courts every night. The night dance sessions last for many hours, until dawn.



Yaron Carmel

We sent the dance instructors in Israel requests for ideas for dance sessions under their leadership. So far, about 150 dance instructors have responded to our request. I addressed this request to dance instructors according to a criterion of professionalism and popularity. Each dance instructor gets half an hour to lead a session, and a full hour is assigned to a pair of instructors. Last year, 124 dance instructors led sessions at the festival. This time the relationship with the dance instructors is directly through us and not through the Association of Folk Dance Instructors and Choreographers in Israel and Abroad. This year we will also include about ten dance instructors from abroad. This is a professional Zionist move with important implications for our activities in various countries.

After all, Yaron does not work alone in this huge endeavor. He highlights the assistance of those involved in the complex organization: **Orly Sivan, Moshik Sardins, Almog Ben Ami, Dror Davidi** and **Lauren Amiri**.

Innovation in stage shows

This year, too, the stage performances at the festival will be a center of attraction for tens of thousands of dance enthusiasts from Israel and around the world, according to the Artistic Director of Stage Performances, **Dganit Rom**. With considerable enthusiasm, Dganit lays out a huge sheet of dance performances of all kinds and styles. Three days of celebration of movement, color, and music, and quite a few innovative ideas.

Dganit Rom, married with two children, lives in Yuvalim – a community south of Karmiel. Dganit is a well-known choreographer and stage director and has been a partner in the festival since its third year. She attests that this festival is literally her home, both on a performance and a mental level. For thirty years, she has been active in the Misgav Regional Council. She founded the well-known Misgav Dance Troupe, which currently numbers three hundred dancers in a variety of representative troupes that are, of course, regularly active partners in the Karmiel Festival. She said her "motto" for the dance troupes is education and love. She has been directing the big amphitheater shows for four years.

Dganit, what should we expect this year at the festival that is coming up?

As in the past, this year there will also be three major events held in the amphitheater, alongside many off-main stage events, as I will detail below. The amphitheater performances will revolve around a story, with unique content, with the troupes presenting choreographies that match the content of the story. This is a new conceptual approach from the artistic director, **Gadi Bitton**.

This time, the opening show will be about women in the Bible. The show will be called, "The Voice of the Mothers" – a movement journey around the women of the Bible and is directed by Gadi Bitton and **Itzik Cohen**. Heroines in the Bible presented with a contemporary

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Dganit Rom

This time, the final performance at the amphitheater will be dedicated to a central theme – "A Salute to the Israeli Dance Troupes". The best dance troupes in Israel will participate with well-known vocal artists, who will present outstanding works from the past year.



perspective and to present day contemporary songs. The best dance troupes in Israel have been selected in collaboration with well-known vocal artists, who will present premieres on the subject of a female figure from the Bible. Each figure will tell its own biblical story in the context of today. Interesting choreographies will be presented, and we look forward to spectacular ideas and performances.

The middle show, "Dancing Raichel", will be dedicated to the choreography competition, dances choreographed for the stage, something that in most of the of the prior years has taken place in the stadium or at **Ofira Park**, and now is being upgraded to an amphitheater show. It will be in the Eurovision format. As mentioned above, all dances are new, choreographed to tunes that **Idan Raichel** composed, along with his presence on stage. Raichel will conclude the evening with a performance of a compilation of his songs. This lineup ensures maximum public interest.

This time, the final performance at the amphitheater will be dedicated to a central theme – "A Salute to the Israeli Dance Troupes". The best dance troupes in Israel will participate with well-known vocal artists, who will present outstanding works from the past year. This is a salute to the world of Israeli folk dance, with young, fluid direction. These will be works that express the behind-the-scenes look, how a troupe is formed, the winding road until it reaches the stage spotlights. From the novice dancer back at his first rehearsal, to his development as a stage performer. The maturation in movement to a professional adolescent and much more. All with link clips, matching music, transitional sections, etc. Indeed, the troupes standing on stage in a perfect display deserve to be known and understood by the spectators for the long and difficult road the dance troupes traverse for the perfect three-minute performance on the main stage. This closing show of Karmiel Dance Festival 2022 is directed by Gadi Bitton and me [David Ben Asher].

And apart from the amphitheater performances, what else is ahead for us at the festival?

This year, stage performances will also take place at the Stadium, Heichal HaTarbut, the Baruch Center and the Horowitz Sports Hall. This is in addition to the performances by the

troupes in the daily dance sessions, as reported by the dance sessions director, **Yaron Carmel**. All the shows are planned by Gadi Bitton and by me, and we look forward to sixteen great performances including various dance styles such as ballroom, classical, modern and more.

Which dance troupes, how many, what to expect in this vast variety?

There will be participation by about 40 children's dance troupes, about 25 Vatikim (veteran) dance troupes, plus youth troupes (and we expect troupes from abroad, fewer due to Covid 19).

How do you choose the dance troupes to perform at the festival, who does the selecting and what are the criteria?

After deciding on the themes and framework of the festival, in general, we had a Zoom conference with the dance troupe managers and choreographers in Israel, where we explained the content and themes for the year. Eighty people who are engaged in the field joined the zoom conference. The interested parties later presented us with their plan for execution. They sent their music, dance and theme. Among them there were those individuals who already had a prepared dance, and others that were creating new choreography to match the theme. We approve or disqualify the material presented and from that moment they have four months to work on the chosen dance. The motivation is extremely high, and consequently, also the disappointment of remaining out (to perhaps being fulfilled next time).

Already, at the time of our conversation, the dance troupes are in the midst of their final preparations for the festival. I can point out that in Israel we have about 20 artistic directors at the highest level and who actually are leaders in the field of dance for the stage. As Gadi noted, already this year we are creating a program to promote talented young people as the future reserve of Israel's choreographers and artistic directors.

The Mayor, Mr. Moshe Koninsky's thoughts on the Karmiel Dance Festival

In an interview for this article, The Mayor of Karmiel, **Mr. Moshe Koninsky**, lays out his beliefs about the Karmiel Dance Festival:

We will continue to be the dance capital of Israel and beyond. I will start with fact that the former mayor and his predecessor did wonderful things for creating and establishing the festival. So did the past CEO of the festival, **Aharon Solomon**, and the members of the professional staff who each contributed their abilities to the success of the festival. Continuity must exist and so we will continue with the festival. We cannot stop this melody, the Israeli music, the Israeli dance. The professional team, naturally, introduces new and updated things all the time. This innovation brings with it a new course of action. After all, reality is changing, the dancers have changed. Even my wife who dances, attests to dance innovations and changes in variety.

Indeed, the Karmiel Festival attracts perhaps one hundred or two hundred thousand visitors and dancers every year. It is a kind of beacon that projects the scope of folk dance and its style in Israel. Is there a trend to add to this number, which is respectable in itself?

As our physical conditions allow, we will aspire to more visitors to the festival. I do not object to a number of visitors of 300,000 or even 400,000 during the three days of the festival. I want to open this cultural event to many diverse communities.



Karmiel Mayor
Moshe Koninsky

Also, from abroad? Should your festival be labeled as an international festival?

All the years, dancers from abroad came to the festival, both dance troupes and individuals. Prior to Covid, troupes from seventeen countries came. This is an incredibly positive and desirable trend. This year, because of Covid 19, they will come in smaller numbers. In the future, we will strive to include many more Israeli folk dancers and dance troupes from around the world. Last year already, there were broadcasts and judging of festival competitions in other countries, and we will continue with that to give the festival an international touch.

How are you personally involved?

As mentioned, my wife dances and represents me faithfully. As mayor, obviously, I'm busy. As for the style, I connect more with the Beatles and Static and Ben-El. This year there will be both traditional and new content. Everyone will choose what suits him/her, circles, couples, new, old, everything. We will enjoy the dancing and music, camaraderie, friendship, and love of dance.

Guests of Honor at this festival, as in preceding festivals? (Every year, Yitzhak Navon was a regular guest of honor).

Every year the festival honors a key figure in the country. This year, we will be honored by at least two ministers, and perhaps the president of Israel.

A question is asked regarding the folk dance trend in Israeli folk dance sessions. At present, the average age of the dancers is between 50-70 years. What will happen to the younger generation for whom Israeli folk dancing does not really interest?

Indeed, innovation is necessary. Reality needs to adapt to young people, and not just in folk dancing, rather in Israeli culture in general.

A concluding sentence, Mr. Mayor?

I invite all dancers, wherever they are, and dance enthusiasts in general, to the 35th Karmiel Dance Festival and to the dance capital of Israel – Karmiel. Enjoy a variety of shows, harkadot (dance sessions) and surprises. 

