

From the Suites on the Stage to the Dancing Halls



Danny Uziel

dancer, choreographer,
teacher and session
leader

Translation:

Ruth Goodman

He molded me as a dancer with the passion to enjoy dancing and to spread the joyful, energetic spirit that defined him.

I met **Yonatan Karmon** in the mid 1950's at Café Kassit in Tel Aviv. In those days, **Yoav** and **Mira Ashriel** were the choreographers of the Hapoel Tel Aviv performing group in which I was a dancer. When we met Karmon at Kassit, Yonatan was beginning to organize a group comprised of the best dancers in Israel. That group became HaLehaka HaMerkazit (The Central Performing Troupe) of the Misrad LeChinuch Ve'Tarbut (Department of Education and Culture) of the Histadrut, which was then under the direction of **Tirza Hodes**.

Yonatan asked me to join the Lehaka and I was delighted to accept his invitation. I will never forget my first rehearsal. During the warm ups, the group was doing classical ballet chaînés turns (quick spinning turns on both feet) from corner to corner of the room. The trained dancers were comfortable with spotting so they didn't lose their balance, but those of us without the classical ballet training ended up all over the room! With time, Yonatan brought us to the level where we were able to execute the turns comfortably.

This was one of his great talents – he was able to recognize the raw ability of natural dancers without the trained technique and bring them to a high level of performance without losing their inherent sense of dance, i.e., Yonatan was able to blend technical and natural qualities in his dancers that created a uniquely spontaneous spirit that captivated audiences.

Whether we came from a professional or amateur background, he expected us to rehearse as professionals and to focus on his every move. To emphasize this point, when Yonatan introduced

"Ha'Ro'a Ha'Ktana" as part of a Shepherd Dance Suite, one of the dancers asked Yonatan, "Which foot do we start with?" Yonatan replied, "Sit down" and he then asked for another dancer to take his place stating that "If you want to dance with us, you need to know how to follow my movements".

In the late 1950s, a lead ballet dancer, **Y. Mashiach**, who had performed in the Israeli Opera, was in a car accident which unfortunately resulted in his having one of his legs amputated. Many of the theatrical performers in Israel – singers, dancers, actors – decided to hold a benefit performance for him in the Ziratron (a large amphitheater) in Ramat Gan and HaLehaka HaMerkazit was invited to be part of the performance.

This was the debut performance of Halehaka HaMerkazit and we presented a suite of dances



Danny Uziel in Yonatan Karmon's partner dance "Elem Ve'Susato" in the Hapoel Tel Aviv performing group, 1959

Danny Uziel



From right: Yonatan Karmon, Danny Uziel and Shlomo Maman. Photo: Alex Huber

choreographed by Karmon comprised of "Mi Yivne Bayit", "Yamin U'Smol" (Orcha Ba'Midbar) and "Al Tira". This medley became one of the best known stage dances and it was adapted by many performing groups around the world.

The more elaborate form of costumes and the long ponytail hairstyle of the girls became the identifying signature of all Israeli folk dance performing troupes everywhere. After the benefit performance concluded, two journalists came backstage to make sure that we were indeed Israelis because our energy and spirit were so outstanding.

After some time, when **Yoav** and **Mira** left Hapoel Tel Aviv, I took over the Open Sessions and performing group. I asked Yonatan to choreograph for the performing group. He accepted and prepared several new dance suites. In 1960, the group was invited to perform in Cyprus – the first amateur Israeli dance group to perform there.

During the time that I took over the sessions of Hapoel Tel Aviv, I decided to introduce three of the Karmon dances that I adapted from our performing suites: "Ha'Roa Ha'Ktana" (<http://bit.ly/3aO4rXz>) and "Al Tira" (<http://bit.ly/2W5X1eg>) – circle dances, and "Yamin U'smol" (<http://bit.ly/2xysAmN>) (Orcha Bamidbar) – a partner dance.

These dances were enthusiastically received when first introduced more than 60 years ago and to this day, they are still danced in sessions throughout the world, despite the initial resistance from some traditionalists to the change in the style of recreational Israeli folk dances. Well, the rest is history!

When I left Israel in 1961, **Yonatan Gabay** z"l, who also performed in HaLehaka HaMerkazit, decided to introduce some of these adapted Karmon folk dances in Haifa as well.

When I arrived in the United States (in 1961) and began to give workshops in New York, I introduced nine additional Karmon dances adapted from the performance medleys: a circle dance – "Nad Ilan" (<http://bit.ly/2W4ivrK>); and eight partner dances – "Israeli Mazurka" (<http://bit.ly/3cQeTiW>), "Shibolet Basadeh" (<http://bit.ly/2TWRJ1Z>), "Gozi Li" (<http://bit.ly/3cTajAs>), "Elem Ve'Susato" (<http://bit.ly/2TYVMKV>), "Me'Emek Le'Givah" (Shtu Ha'Adarim), "Mi Yivneh Bayit", "Mechol Ha'Yain" (<http://bit.ly/2Q3K7te>) (Mechol Hakerem) and "Shiru Ha'Shir". In total, there were twelve adapted Karmon dances that I introduced into the Israeli folk dance repertoire.

In 2005, as part of a special tribute to me at Hilulim Dance Camp in New York, **Gadi Bitton** surprised me by inviting Yonatan to come from Israel to celebrate with me. It was personally very emotional, and when Yonatan was introduced on the dance floor at the camp, we hugged each other and I was choked up with tears in my eyes. This is a moment that I will never forget.

Yonatan Karmon really changed my life. He molded me as a dancer with the passion to enjoy dancing and to spread the joyful, energetic spirit that defined him. He personally encouraged me to always be better and better, especially when I lacked confidence – and he was successful! Thank you, Yonatan for the special gift that you gave to me and to so many others in the dance world.

I would like to suggest that every year on Yonatan's birthday, July 28th, we commemorate his life by having dance sessions throughout the world dance Ha'Roa Ha'Ktana. 🙌



If you want to dance with us, you need to know how to follow my movements. 🙌