



Yaron Meishar

Translation:
Ruth Goodman
and Allen King

From The Days Of "Anu Banu" (era of the early Aliyot) To Artificial Intelligence (AI)



On the development of folk dances and recreational dances

The field of folk dance can be divided into two main categories:

A. Israeli dance (folk dance) for the stage.

B. Recreational dances (folk dances) for the general public.

There have been developments and changes in these two areas during the seventy-six years of the State of Israel worthy of observation and understanding. I'll try to explain here:

A. Israeli dance (folk dance) for the stage

During the early years, the dancers in dance companies were selected from the Israeli folk dance chugim (sessions). The dancers who danced beautifully, with stylish movements, were chosen to dance in the dance troupes (lehakot), most of which were dance troupes that represented municipalities, workers councils, and community centers.

The choreographies were simple and mainly featured working the land, plowing, harvesting, fishing, and also, love. The choreographers led both the dance troupes and the chugim, and the dancers in the troupes continued to dance simultaneously in the weekly folk dance sessions. They influenced and were influenced by the



"Lehakat Tze'irim Yetzugit" (Representative Youth Troupe) of "Mehola Ramat HaSharon" from an Israeli dance choreographed by Yael Hoffman Alfassi.

Photo: Tomer Halperin

I predict that in a year or two it will be possible to get a ready-made dance for any melody from programs like yours (AI)



"Chad Gadya": Lehakat Mehola 2005. Choreography: Yaniv Hoffman;
Photo: Dorit Hoffman

Talented choreographers with an affinity for modern dance, jazz, hip-hop, and even professional dance company dancers entered the field of folk dance for the stage and brought with them their abilities and aspirations for excellence, virtuosity and artistic abilities

dances of the general public. Dances that were danced on stage were sometimes adapted into dances for the general public. Yonatan Karmon's folk dances all began as stage dances. Ha'Ro'a Ha'Ktana, Al Tira, Nad Ilan, Mazurka, Orcha Bamidbar (Yamin U'Smol), Elem Ve'Susato, Me'Emek Le'Giva, Gozi Li and more, were brought from the stage to

the dance floor by Karmon dancer and session leader **Danny Uziel**.

The dancers in the dance troupes raised the dance level in the chugim and set the standard for folk dance for the general public.

Over time, the national culture slowly shifted from an emphasis on the general and the group to emphasis on the individual and self-actualization. Dance troupes also moved to a repertoire that focused on the individual and their dancing ability, and less to working the land, group values and sharing.

Talented choreographers with an affinity for modern dance, jazz, hip-hop, and even professional dance company dancers entered the field of folk dance for the stage and brought with them their abilities and aspirations for excellence, virtuosity and artistic abilities that did not resemble the movements of folk dance for the general public.

So too did the dancers in the dance troupes. There were those who aspired to dance in professional companies such as Bat Dor, Batsheva, Kibbutz Contemporary Dance Company, Inbal Dance Theatre, and more. Most of them had no connection to folk dance chugim and no knowledge of folk dance. Their ambitions left them neither time nor interest for recreational folk dancing.

Of course, the dance medleys performed by the dance troupes also emphasized the dance ability of the individual over that of the group. The dances became more complicated and "sophisticated" and required a much higher technical level. Therefore, the dancers also required more intensive training and investment in this field at the expense of their connection to folk dance.



"Ten Belibenu", from a torch lighting ceremony in 2021.
Choreography: Dorit Hoffman and Noa Hoffman.
Photo: Dorit Hoffman

The result has been a growing disconnect and separation between the dance troupes and folk dancing for the general public. **In one sentence: folk dance for the stage aspires to be equal to professional dance (modern dance, jazz, ballet, etc.).**

B. Recreational dances (folk dances) for the general public

In one sentence: Recreational dances (folk dances) strive and try to match the dances for the stage. Folk dancing began with a search for a path to the roots: the cultivation of the land, group cohesiveness, Jewish heritage, and the traditions brought to Israel by different immigrant communities.

Gurit Kadman – the mother of our folk dance - moved between the immigrant transit camps in order to learn the origins of dance in the different communities and bring them to the dance floor.

Rivka Shturman tried in her dances "Mecholot Ha'Shneyim", "Eiti Mi'Levanon" and "Dodi Li" from the late 1940s, to create folk dances that would somewhat resemble the ballroom dances that were popular among the youth: a basic step based on the Yemenite step, with the addition of a small change to the basic step each time.

Leah Bergstein sought a connection to Jewish holidays and tradition, with an emphasis on working the land on kibbutzim.

There were many more like them.

The steps were simple with the goal of dancing together, executing simple movements - movements that everyone could do. The challenge was to create a group in a circle, in which everyone danced the same movements while holding hands in the circle. The dancers would dance as a "group" rather than as "individuals". And indeed, this is how it was at the beginning. The enjoyment the dancers obtained was from moving together and not from dancing solo.

The dances were simple, but the requirements were strict. The dancers were required to learn the choreography of each dance accurately, and a relatively long time was devoted to teaching a dance.

Over time, as the culture of the country slowly shifted from an emphasis on a general sense of community to an emphasis on the individual and on self-actualization, folk dances became recreational dances with an emphasis on the dancing ability of the individual. The movements became more and more complex, the dance phrases longer and more challenging.

Recreational dances (folk dances) strive and try to match the dances for the stage.



Ulpan Gordon for new immigrants in Tel Aviv enjoying a harkada



Ulpan Gordon for new immigrants in Tel Aviv enjoying a harkada

The individual was required to have better dancing skills. The values of togetherness changed to a focus on individualism and partners. Today, most dancers prefer partner dances over circle dances.

The dancers with better dancing skills have almost disappeared from the dance floors. They dance in the professional dance companies. This all-important connection between folk dancers on stage and dancing in chugim is disappearing. Go out and see how many of the thousands of dancers who dance on stages at the Karmiel and Ashdodance festivals also dance after the performance in folk dance sessions?

Folk dances of other countries don't have

a "finishing flourish" with a final hand gesture. In a desire to resemble the structured manner of dances on stage, these hand movements were added to our circle dances and our partner dances. Sometimes the finalé movement is more important to the choreographer of the dance than the steps of the dance itself.

More and more dancers want to choreograph dances, to express their feelings and skills (which are sometimes nonexistent), while they aspire to stand at the center of the circle and be recognized. The ultimate goal is to be invited to teach abroad. In order to receive an invitation abroad, it is necessary and obligatory to continually produce more new dances. Dance camps abroad became a "turbo engine" for choreographing dances and a relentless struggle to find good, catchy songs. The choreographer who "grabs" the best new song first and registers it in his/her name on the Irgun's (Association of Folk Dance Instructors and Choreographers) website is "the winner".

This multiplicity of dances inevitably has led to the situation that, in many dances, the steps are the same, but only danced in a different order. And, in reality, it is the song that determines the success of the dance, not the choreography.

Dance instruction in classes has become more rushed and less important. Many dancers actually dance in a "copy-paste" way (see the article in issue 114: <https://magazines.rokdim.co.il/en/article/follow-me-copy-paste/>). This situation is not black and white; the process of the change in how dances are taught and learned is slow, and it is difficult to notice it at any point in time, but it will accelerate and intensify.

In the past, dance steps were recorded in a vocabulary common to all instructors and it was possible to learn a dance from the dance notation accurately. Today we have videos, but they, too, have become rushed. See the American method that also came to Israel – A video of a walkthrough with the instructor calling out the steps while dancing them. The dancers behind him in the video simultaneously walk through the dance. This is what video instruction has become.

The instructor courses that exist today are shorter than in the past and much less

thorough. The desire of dancers to quickly obtain a "Dance Instructor Certificate" is combined with the competition between the courses for students, which inevitably comes at the expense of training quality. The dance language, the common step names, were replaced by a sloppy unfamiliar language. The students no longer know how to read written dance instructions and certainly do not know how to notate dance steps.

Today anyone can choreograph a dance, make a video and upload it online. The quality of the video doesn't matter. Often there is no visible marking for the center of the dance floor in the video, the hall does not look good and the video does not contain instruction, only the dance performed along with the music. In the opening credits on the video, if they appear at all, the names of the choreographers, song lyricists, music composers, and singers are left out. Only the name of the choreographer of the dance might appear on the screen.

As I was writing this article, I decided to "consult" with AI. This is the conversation between us:

Me:

Artificial Intelligence, I am currently writing an article about the development of folk dance and I will write in it that I predict that in a year or two it will be possible to get a ready-made dance for any melody from programs like yours.

AI:

I understand your hope that in the future there will be software that will be able to automatically create original folk dances for every tune that is entered. This is indeed an interesting goal to pursue.

However, it is important to remember that despite the significant progress in the field of artificial intelligence, an original artistic work that combines movement, music and emotional expression is an extremely complex task for computer systems.

There are already advanced computer models today that can synchronize virtual body movements to music in a technical way. But putting together an artistic and meaningful folk dance that requires cultural sensitivity, creative inspiration and deep emotional expression is still a significant challenge for AI.

However, the rapid development in this field also produces surprising advances. It is possible that we will soon see software that will be able to create an eclectic and interesting initial choreography for a folk dance to a given song.



Ulpan Gordon for new immigrants in Tel Aviv enjoying a harkada

More and more dancers want to choreograph dances, to express their feelings and skills (which are sometimes nonexistent), while they aspire to stand at the center of the circle and be recognized. The ultimate goal is to be invited to teach abroad.

Even if such a feature were to be developed, a great deal of human involvement would still be required to adapt, edit and inspire the final choreography. The interaction between the capabilities of artificial intelligence and human creativity could yield fascinating results in this field.

Me:

Already today, in my opinion, there are dances that are choreographed to beautiful songs that have been already registered with the Irgun, but they are just made up of common steps set to the music.

AI:

I understand your criticism of the trend you describe among certain folk dance choreographers. Indeed, an approach of mechanically combining steps and existing dance pieces with new songs, without true inspiration and creativity, is problematic and contrary to the artistic and cultural spirit of folk dance.

True folk dances should grow out of their cultural, musical and community context. They reflect the traditions, emotions and unique character of the peoples and regions they come from. Folk dance is more than a mechanical combination of movements. It expresses identity, stories and spirit.

Unfortunately, the "artificial" approach you described of combining existing steps without original creativity, is contrary to this traditional spirit. It may transform folk dance into an empty and meaningless form, instead of preserving and developing the rich cultural heritage inherent in this medium.

In order for folk dances and their continuity to be properly preserved, it is important that choreographers come with an honest, sensitive and in-depth approach to the cultural contexts from which the songs grew. Only in this way will their dances be able to preserve the true spirit and deep meaning that these dances are supposed to express. 🧑🏻‍🎨



Ulpan Gordon for new immigrants in Tel Aviv enjoying a harkada