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Translation:
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Lehakat Inbal came to perform in Beit Hanan. From that moment on, she knew that this was the company she wanted to dance in. She dreamed only of Inbal.

The Dance of Life

The Story of Ilana Cohen –
Dancer, Choreographer
and Artistic Director



Introduction

When I came to visit **Ilana Cohen** at her home in Rehovot, sirens of the "Swords of Iron" war were heard. The house at the beginning of Amora'im Street is on land leased to her family since they arrived in Israel from Yemen in 1908. She was born in the very same house. Later, the house passed into her possession, and Ilana and her husband **Moshe** have lived there for decades.

The meeting began with great Yemenite food and continued by viewing albums of photos from decades of Ilana's dance career. From there we continued on to a conversation about her life and work, mainly her time with the Inbal Dance Theatre, as a dancer, choreographer and performance producer.

Teenage Years

Shortly after she was born in Rehovot, Ilana moved to Beit Hanan, where she lived until high school. The family worked in agriculture, and her nephew, Ra'anan, even studied at Kadoorie Agricultural High School. She remembers how as a child she used to ride a donkey. Her mother, Sarah, of Yemenite descent, was a woman of culture who loved literature, reading works of Hebrew writers such as **Agnon, Bialik, Tchernichovsky,** and **Leah Goldberg**. She loved theater as well. Beit Hanan had a dance teacher. Ilana's parents did not send her to dance lessons, but the teacher saw that she was peeking in the window and took her to her class, perhaps because of her natural flexibility...

As a child, she saw many classical dance films and thought about becoming a classical dancer, until Lehakat Inbal came to perform in Beit Hanan. From that moment on, she knew that this was the company she wanted to dance in. She dreamed only of Inbal.

When they returned to Rehovot, Ilana was not accepted to the De Shalit High School for various reasons. The only school to accept her was a religious school. Ilana chose

kibbutz life instead because that reminded her of her time in Beit Hanan. Thus, she came to study at Kibbutz Beit Oren, located in northern Israel on Mount Carmel, where she began to learn folk dancing and to participate in kibbutz performances.

The kibbutz members noticed her talent and sent her to study dance with **Nahum and Dina Shahar**, pioneers of dance instruction in Israel. She would travel to Haifa twice a week to study classical and modern dance and would stay overnight with her mother's sister. She also maintained a warm relationship with her kibbutz parents and their family, even after they moved to Beersheba.

The Journey to "Lehakat Inbal"

When Ilana joined the army, she attended a course of Gadna instructors at Midreshet Ben-Gurion [also known as Midreshet Sde Boker located in the Negev Desert. Gadna is an Israeli military program that prepares young people for military service in the Israel Defense Forces]. For their final performance at the end of the course, she prepared a dance for the girls to a piece of music by **Borodin** titled "In the Steppes of Central Asia", a symphonic poem which he dedicated to **Franz Liszt**, that she found on a record in the collection there. She felt that this piece expressed the atmosphere of the desert. The Chief Education Officer and **David Ben-Gurion** attended the performance, which was highly praised.

The Gadna Education Officer connected her to Inbal, and later, **Sara Levi-Tanai** [founder and artistic director of Inbal] invited her to audition for the company. Ilana recalls how, during the audition, she presented the dance, "Im Hashachar", choreographed by **Margalit Oved** (music: folk, lyrics: Sara Levi-Tanai), and even sang the song "Etkashet Li Ba'abaya". Many girls with a better background and technique than hers came to the audition, but Ilana viscerally felt that these pieces would speak to Sara Levi-Tanai. They must have, because she was accepted into the Lehaka.

During her training at Inbal she studied music and flute with **Ovadia Tuvia**, who also composed many songs. She studied modern dance with **Prof. Ze'eva Cohen**, while Margalit Oved taught her style.

Sara Levi-Tanai herself did not grow up in Yemenite culture; she absorbed the components of Yemenite culture from the dancers in Inbal: the "da'asa", the movements of the core. She learned not only Yemenite movements, but also those of North Africa and the Far East. This is how the "Inbal" language developed. There was always a process of searching. Sara made changes to the choreographies and invested a lot in the orchestration and theatrical texture.



Ilana with her daughters



From "Chatzi Galimat Malchut": Eli Gorenstein, Zion Marciano, Osnat Sharabi and Ilana Cohen



Ilana Cohen - "HaKad" (dance of the pitcher)



In 1982, Ilana decided to give expression in dance to her mourning for her brother who had been killed in an accident in the army twenty years earlier. She approached Inbal's artistic committee, headed by Sara Levi-Tanai and Haim Shiran, and chose Malka Hajbi to dance with her in a duet.

Ilana met her husband, **Moshe**, when he was a Gadna instructor in the army. They met at a spring gathering of Gadna and their students. With their keen senses, they immediately decided that they should be a couple. And, so it happened. At the end of 1964, they got married.

When Ilana joined Lehakat Inbal in 1964, danced and even played leading roles, Moshe was also invited to join the company, but he was not interested in the dancing. He did join the company as stage manager, and remained in this profession until, after ten years at Inbal, he moved to the "Cameri" [Cameri Theatre].

Moshe is a technical man, and they joke about being Scorpio and Libra, very complementary in character. At our meeting, Moshe joked that his wife has no technical sense and that every electrical appliance she touched broke down... He helps her with all the housework in order to free up her time for her artistic pursuits.

In the early 1960s, Ilana began performing with "Lehakat Inbal" as a principal dancer in many performances. Some pieces were originally choreographed as early as 1961. Among the shows in which she has performed over the years are "Megilat Ruth", "Vered Bar", "Kad", "Achoti Kallah", "HaPnina Ve'Ha'Almog", "Shir HaShirim" and "Otiyot Porchot". In these performances, she collaborated and performed with many wonderful dancers such as **Malka Hajbi, Racheli Sela, Sara Zarav, Leah Avraham, Yoni Carr, Tzion Nuriel**, and the late singer and dancer **Moti Abramov**. She spoke warmly and appreciatively about how **Yoni Carr**, upon leaving the company in 1988, mentored her and taught her the lead role in the show, "Vered Bar". It is important for Ilana to note that **Haim Shiran** was the best director Inbal had and therefore was asked to return for a second time to manage and revive Inbal.

From Dancer to Choreographer

Ilana's first work as a choreographer was "Lamentation". In 1982, Ilana decided to give expression in dance to her mourning for her brother who had been killed in an accident in the army twenty years earlier. She approached Inbal's artistic committee, headed by Sara Levi-Tanai and Haim Shiran, and chose Malka Hajbi to dance with her in a duet.

מפגש אמן
עם הרקדנית והיוצרת, אילנה כהן

המפגש משלב סיפור חיים, קטעי מחול, הקרנות מחור, המופעים והפעלה של הקהל, סדנה מיוחדת לתלמידי מגמות מחול.

אילנה כהן

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In 1988, Ilana created her work "Veil", to the music of the Egyptian band, Nafas. The work dealt with a strong and independent woman who wants to break boundaries. The choreography was gradually developed in collaboration and in interaction with Sara Levi-Tanai. The show incorporated an element of cloak and veil.

Sara Levi-Tanai was completely invested in all aspects of the choreography for "Inbal" and it was difficult for her to have Lehaka members share in its creation. This was also the reason why, many years earlier, **Moshiko** (Moshe Yitzhak Halevy) had left Inbal to take an independent artistic path. He had felt that he had limited opportunities to express his creative energies there.

The same was true with Ilana. Although they were very close and Sara even perceived Ilana as her "right hand", it was difficult to sway Sara. But in this case Haim Shiran and **Leah Avraham**, who were also on the committee, insisted and gave full backing to Ilana's choreography. Thus, the work was launched.

At the center of the work, Ilana placed a contrast between two women and each one's own way of expressing "mourning." She took figures from her life – when her brother (who was General Israel Tal's driver) was killed, her mother expressed her grief in a very restrained way, while the young wife of Ilana's brother, who had immigrated from Yemen not long before, expressed her grief in a very extreme way, to the point of rolling on the floor and scratching her face. This contrast was very real for her and she expressed it in the piece, which is performed by two dancers. The music in the show was composed by **Shlomo Bar** and performed by him with his band, Habreira Hativit. The show received excellent reviews in Israel and was called "a masterpiece" when it was performed abroad.

Her second work, "Ha'Eim – The Mother", in 1987, was accompanied by the music of Richard Farber. This work also received excellent reviews, and Ilana especially mentions the critic Giora Manor, who wrote that the work had enough ideas to support three choreographies... Indeed, later on, Ilana identified many signs of the influence of "Ha'Eim" in her other works.

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Ilana Cohen performing at a festival in Japan



Sara Levi-Tanai. The show incorporated an element of cloak and veil.

The work "Chatzi Galimat Malchut – Half a Royal Cloak" (1990), included the actor **Eli Gorenstein**, who with his great talent also acted, played the cello and danced. The piece was built around a story about ten women sewing a cloak for the king, and when it was torn, the king took ten other women, who were unable to make the same robe. The dance expresses the idea that when a moment in life passes, it cannot be recreated.

In addition to Eli Gorenstein, the show featured two pairs of dancers, one expressing the young couple, and the other, the couple at a later age, and the tension and contrast between them. The music for the show was written by **Ori Vidislavski**. The work was based on a book by **Shlomit Cohen-Assif** and one poem by the poetess, **Rachel**.

At that time, **Rena Sharett** replaced Sara Levi-Tanai as company artistic director, followed by **Margalit Oved**.

This was when attendance at Inbal productions diminished, and in 1997 **Shulamit Aloni** decided to close the Inbal Dance Theatre. The work "Sajarra" (1997) was created during this period, with the threat of closure hovering over Inbal due to budget problems.

Even though only a limited budget remained for the purpose of documenting Inbal's earlier works, the theater succeeded in presenting "Sajarra". The work dealt with generational gaps, old and young, and used the motif of a "convoy". The situation was complicated. There was an insufficient budget to support the company members, and everyone worked in other jobs as well. So, it was complicated to gather them for rehearsals. In addition to five "Inbal" veterans, immigrant dancers from the Soviet Union were also incorporated. In this work, Ilana collaborated again with the musician Shlomo Bar. With humor, she recalls that it was not easy to work with him because he was so enthusiastic that he rapidly increased the tempo of his singing to the point where the dancers did not have time to perform the steps. Ilana had to signal him in order to keep his tempo at the right pace.

Another of Ilana's most important works, "Ben Adam –



From the children's play "King Solomon"

Ilana's exotic beauty really attracted the journalists, and the hotel owner even offered for her and her husband to stay and work; she as a "jewelry model" for his business and her husband Moshe to work polishing diamonds.

Son of Man", was inspired by the prophets of rebuke, **Isaiah and Ezekiel**. This work featured actor **Mati Seri**, who embodied the image of the prophet. This work was very successful.

In addition to continuing her choreographic work as part of "Inbal", she revived Sara's works.

Ilana also began working with the "Orna Porat Theater". Of particular note is a series of children's plays she did with **Haim Idisis** – "King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba" (2001), "Jacob and Esau" (2003), and "David and Goliath" (2007). The music for all these plays was written by **Racheli Sela**.

Ilana choreographed for a number of other theater and folk companies such as "Lehakat Misgav" under the direction of **Dganit Rom**, for the shows "The Bedouin", "Adama" and "Besabasi", and **Dado Kraus'** "Lehakat Hadera" for the show, "Iriyat Boeret – Burning Town" in memory of the Holocaust, performed at the Karmiel Festival.

In 2012 she choreographed and danced at the Cameri Theater with **Victor Atar** in Agnon's play "Ha'Adonit Ve'Ha'Rochel – The Lady and the Peddler", directed by **Geula Atar**, which she also performed "Off Broadway" in New York.

Performances Abroad

Lehakat Inbal began performing abroad and gaining fame even before Ilana joined. She first toured Australia with Inbal in 1987, when they performed "Vered Bar" in which **Yoni Carr** performed the lead role. After the trip, Yoni left for Lehakat Karmon and transferred the role to Ilana.

Her husband says that Ilana's exotic beauty really attracted the journalists, and the hotel owner even offered for her and her husband to stay and work; she as a "jewelry model" for his business and her husband Moshe to work polishing diamonds. Despite the tempting economic offer, they returned to Israel. Ilana's desire to continue dancing and homesickness for her country and family prevailed. However, Ilana kept in touch with the hotel owner, who later helped her financially with one of her creative works.

In 1989, Ilana was invited to represent Israel at a festival in North Carolina (USA) with the works "Lamentation" and "Veil". There she met and studied with dance trailblazers such as **Alvin Ailey, José Limón, Paul Taylor** and others.

This is the place to say that Ilana's two daughters, **Anat and Calanit**, were also involved in dance. Anat, the eldest, was very talented and performed with the Bat-Dor Dance Company and danced flamenco with **Silvia Duran**. She later left dance and became a religiously observant Jew, while Calanit, who started dancing at



From the children's play "David and Goliath"

an older age, developed dance into a career and today runs a dance school.

On Ilana's trip to the United States, Calanit, then 13, joined her. Ilana proudly recounts how, when Calanit joined the workshops of **Alvin Ailey** and **Martha Graham**, she copied and easily did things that were not easy even for adult dancers. Alvin Ailey even suggested that Calanit stay and get a scholarship at his school, but Ilana was afraid to leave her daughter in New York, which was not a safe city at the time.

In 1999, Ilana performed at a festival in Japan. There she collaborated with **Kei Takei** and for her performances, she was even paired with a famous Japanese musician with whom she worked for a month on a 20-minute performance on the theme of "A dancer who is losing her sanity." Ilana remembers her admiration of Japanese culture, the overcrowding on the trains, the lack of crime, to the point where you could leave a wallet on the table. She and Moshe were enthusiastic about everything except the food. They preferred eating in Indian restaurants.

Over the years, Ilana participated in and presented her works at other festivals in Germany, South Africa, and more. Even when she traveled with Moshe on her trips, there were sometimes surprises. Thus, in China, when she visited a dance school – a huge building with a huge number of young and talented students – she gave them a lesson, without the possibility of verbal communication, in which she taught them a hand dance accompanied by a story. They imitated and followed her.

In Israel, Ilana continues her educational activities, giving seminars and workshops for teachers on various topics of the Inbal language, and about the legacy of **Rabbi Shalom Shabazi**, one of the greatest poets of Yemen, whose father and grandfather, I learned from Ilana, also wrote and were influenced by Aramaic, Sephardic and Babylonian poetry.

Over the years, Ilana has won several prestigious awards. Among them we can mention the **Lifetime Achievement Award of the Israel Artists Association**, in 2017, and in 2023 she won the **Lifetime Achievement Award** named after **Arik Einstein**.



Tsuchitori – the Japanese composer and musician

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Epilogue

I was happy to meet and get to know Ilana Cohen and her warm family; to hear stories about an illustrious career in dance, choreography and productions in the Inbal Dance Company and beyond; to learn about performances at festivals abroad and experiences of meetings with great artists; to hear the story of Lehakat Inbal and the artistic uniqueness of the company alongside its managerial challenges.

Ilana notes that these management challenges not only led to the closure of Lehakat Inbal, but also remained a situation in which a number of the company's works remain undocumented. I hope that Ilana, in her ongoing involvement in education and conducting workshops in the field, will give continuity to the company's work and to the special choreographic language of Lehakat Inbal and of the Yemenite community as a whole.