

The Arts

Dance Lessons

In a small, bucolic German town, two dance companies staged a program based on human resilience and memory.

By **Toby Axelrod**

Men, women and children are standing outdoors under multicolored clusters of umbrellas. It was here, 68 years ago, on the former Judengass, Jews Street, of Breisach, Germany, that a synagogue burned. Today, on the final evening of a nearly three-week dance program, the crowd watches as a group of dancers wearing shades of orange and red take up their positions. As if on cue, just as the four women begin to twist and turn their bodies to become children playing patty-cake and other childhood games, the skies open. And with the rain coming down in torrents, the dancers continue to play as children do, excluding one of their own.

A SCENE CHANGE: THE DANCERS LEAD THE AUDIENCE from the site of the former synagogue up Judengass to a small, two-story painted-blue house. Performers appear in each window of the house. Against a medley of contemporary music, Yiddish folk songs and klezmer, they open and close the shutters, hang banners out the windows, peer at each other and lean over the sills—spying, sharing secrets or hiding.

The dance ends and the audience applauds. Children in the crowd, their hair and faces wet, smile in wonder with eyes shining, even if they might not fully understand the

meaning of the dance. But Mercedes Marschall, 82, gets it.

“It is a symbol of shutting out,” she said. She recalled her Jewish classmate, Hildegard Voss, and how “Hildchen” suddenly “was not there one day,” so many years ago.

The dancers “play, and then something shocks them,” said Marschall, standing on the street. And, abruptly, she adds about the past: “It was so terribly difficult. How does a young person get over it?”

Coming to terms with the past is a German obsession, and rightly so. But recently, two Jewish choreographers from New York—Jonathan Hollander of the Battery Dance Company and Aviva Geismar of Drastic Action—came here to take part in the process. The result was powerful, both on a communal and personal level.

The rain-drenched performance of Geismar’s original “Closer Than It Appears” was part of *Dances for the Blue House*, a 19-day program held July 18 through August 5, created by the two choreographers. The title refers to the small house with a peaked roof where Breisach’s Jews held services after their synagogue was destroyed on *Kristallnacht*, November 9, 1938, when hundreds of synagogues across Germany and Austria were set afire.

The program began with educational workshops for local German teens that culminated in the creation of several short original dance pieces. The last days of the program, August 3 through 6, were dedicated to performanc-





Stones and Water *The Battery Dance Company in 'Secrets of the Paving Stones,' based on the history of Kraków, Poland; (opposite page) the rain-drenched final performance of 'Closer Than It Appears' took place on Jews Street in Breisach.*

es and concerts, each evening beginning with the site-specific "Closer Than It Appears" danced by members of both companies and followed by concerts, dances by high school students and a program of four dances at the Festspiele, an outdoor amphitheater.

The quartet of dances from the professional troupes were chosen for their connection to issues and events raised by the Holocaust. Drastic Action's pieces explored social dynamics. In "All Fall Down," four women dance together and apart in broad gestures that describe power struggles within a group. "The Unbidden and Unhinged" is a solo piece in which a dancer's twists and lurches are

symbolic of the struggle of the individual in a social system that has gone awry. The Battery Dance Company staged two pieces inspired by the complex history of Kraków, Poland: "Secrets of the Paving Stones," which the troupe will bring to New York this month, and "Between Heaven and Earth."

The entire program was a gift to the local populace from the choreographers. Geismar, 41, had only recently learned that her paternal grandparents, who died in Auschwitz, were born in Breisach. Geismar's parents, Ludwig and Shirley Geismar, watched the dance on the very street where Ludwig's parents had lived. "It was a real emotional expe-

rience,” said Ludwig Geismar, who for decades avoided discussing his family’s fate. “I still have goose pimples.”

“This has to be the most emotionally churning experience I have had in the arts for 31 years,” said Hollander, 55, adding that he felt like an adoptive member of the community.

THIS SMALL GERMAN TOWN IN the verdant wine country near the Alsatian border with France had a Jewish community as far back as the 15th century. At its peak some 150 years ago, the Jewish popu-

happened had Walesch-Schneller not gone to Bethesda, Maryland, as an exchange student with the American Friends Service in 1967. It was there that she met Jonathan Hollander and their friendship began.

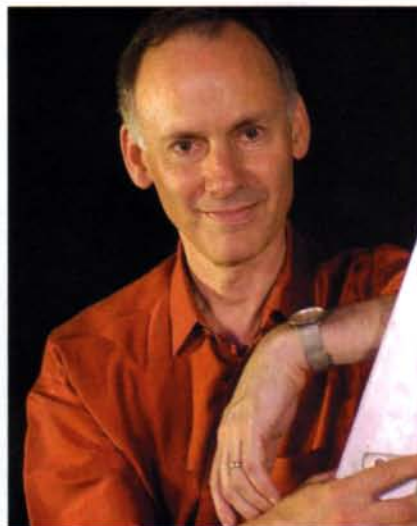
Walesch-Schneller moved to Breisach 25 years ago. Urged on by Jews who had lived there, and by their children, she helped organize an association to buy and restore the Blue House “as a place of remembrance, of learning,” she said.

“Relationships between Jews and Germans are not normal,” said Wal-

entation “was about returning to roots, from the perspective of Jewish Breisachers” around the world, said Hollander, and included a film in which names of murdered Breisach Jews were read aloud. “By chance [some of] the names [in the film] were the Geismars.”

Hollander immediately thought of Aviva Geismar, who rented space in his dance studio. He approached her and asked if her family was from Breisach.

“I said, ‘I don’t know,’” she recalled, “and I called my Dad. He said,



Collaborators *The Dances for the Blue House* program was created by (from left) choreographers Aviva Geismar and Jonathan Hollander and inspired by the work of local historian, psychoanalyst Christiane Walesch-Schneller (right).

lation numbered about 550. The Nazis deported the remaining Jews of Breisach one Sukkot morning in 1940. Most of them died in Auschwitz.

That history has been documented and preserved by Christiane Walesch-Schneller, 56, a psychoanalyst and chairwoman of the Society for the Promotion of the Former Jewish Community House in Breisach. Walesch-Schneller, who is not Jewish, said her childhood friendship with a Jewish girl in post-war Germany awakened her interest in German Jewish history.

“It has moved me more or less all my life,” she explained.

The dance project would not have

esch-Schneller, who in 2004, together with other citizens of Breisach, received an Obermayer German Jewish History Award for rescuing the former Jewish community center from oblivion. (Boston-based Jewish businessman and philanthropist Arthur Obermayer, with family roots in Creglingen, Germany, initiated the award in 2000 to honor non-Jews who uncover German Jewish history and establish contact with German Jews around the world.)

In 2003, Walesch-Schneller invited Hollander to attend a presentation on the Blue House at the Stephen Wise Free Synagogue in New York. The pres-

“Oh yeah, my parents were from Breisach.” It was the key to a long-suppressed history. “My father didn’t talk about it. He had two photos of his parents,” she continued. That was all.

Geismar said she wanted “to do something that would be a tribute to the community that had been here and also that would recognize the work done to remember the community.”

The choreographers decided to take both their companies to Breisach. Hollander, in particular, wanted to bring his “Secrets of the Paving Stones,” associated with his own Polish roots, to the German town. The dance, he said, is “fed by the air, the light, the

stones, the willow trees and the buildings of Kraków.”

IN “SECRETS OF THE PAVING STONES,” two men and two women, wearing costumes reminiscent of the Middle Ages, take to the floor, weaving patterns around each other in a courtly, formal dance. Against a score by the Crakow Klezmer Band, the dancers shed layers of clothing and, as the piece progresses, the movements change from East European folk traditions to modern, Western ones. The dancers might be echoing the centuries of Jewish life in Europe or, as they remove bits of their costume, discarding the trappings of assimilation and returning to their roots.

Performing that dance is “like walking through a really old house, up into an attic, and seeing an object on the floor from someone else’s life,” said Battery dancer Jeanene Winston, originally of Kansas. “It opens the history of those people. And it is very serious, almost like seeing the spirits of past lives. I really feel like the responsibility of the tragedies are in all our hands, it is up to us to change the future from the past.”

As the Breisach project evolved, the choreographers and Walesch-Schneller decided to include the local population by adding a student program (see sidebar, right), including a number of sessions on healing and reconciliation with Israeli psychotherapist Dan Bar-On; New York psychoanalyst Deena Harris, a daughter of survivors; and Renata Roeder, an educator from Cologne whose father was a Nazi war criminal executed after the war.

Walesch-Schneller also invited the Chagall Quartet of Frankfurt to perform works by 20th-century Jewish composers on the last day of the program. The concert included pieces by Josef Koffler of Poland, who was killed in the Holocaust; German-born Paul Ben-Haim, who immigrated to



Bridge to the Past

Instead of sports and sun, this past July and August dozens of teens from three Freiburg, Germany, high schools got in touch with their inner dancer. They worked with members of Drastic Action and the Battery Dance Company to create original works shown as part of the Dances for the Blue House program.

The schools were chosen in part because of previous contacts. Teacher Rosita Dienst-Demuth of the Lessing School was a copresenter of a 2003 program on the Blue House in Breisach at the Stephen Wise Free Synagogue in New York. Wolfgang Borchardt, a history teacher at Freiburg’s Kepler Gymnasium, met Jonathan Hollander, director of the Battery Dance Company, through a mutual friend; Borchardt brought the Theodor-Heuss Gymnasium into the project. In all, some 100 students took part. “All of [them] said it was a life-altering experience,” said Stevan Novakovich of the Battery Dance Company, who helped lead dance workshops in a nearby studio. “They are taking this whole project personally.”

The teens also learned about Breisach’s Jewish community, though neither Hollander nor Aviva Geismar, artistic director of Drastic Action, wanted them to feel guilty for the crimes of past generations. But Geismar discovered she had problems talking about her background. “In the schools, teachers asked me to explain why I am here,” she said. “I told them, ‘My grandparents were born in Breisach and my family is Jewish.’ I didn’t say, ‘I am Jewish.’” She later found both she and the students “started to open up and reveal more of themselves through the dancing.”

The teens created their own dances, some with a direct connection to the history of Breisach’s Jewish community, many with themes of rejection and inclusion. In one, students wearing white moved together like a school of fish swimming in a gentle current—monolithic, yet somehow vulnerable. In another, students formed small, exclusive groups. And another group ended its dance by kneeling, as if in a church, and calling out the names of Jewish students deported from Breisach.

Dance is “another way of going into the theme of the Holocaust,” said Franziska Lusser, 19, of the Kepler Gymnasium. “I tried to put myself in the place of someone who lived at the time and had to survive. It was very, very intense.”

“Our dance is about injustice,” said David Vaultont, 18, of the Theodor-Heuss Gymnasium. “You can convey it on one hand through emotions and the presentation, and on other hand, you can try to portray situations of injustice.”

On the final evening of the Blue House program, the two troupes and the students had to perform their dances in the town gymnasium because of rain (above). The basketball hoops were raised and colored lights set up on the blue-painted floor. The audience of about 300 sat in bleachers and in chairs set in a semicircle.

Each group of students entered the darkened room in turn, their feet slapping on the gym floor. And each time the lights came on again, awkward teenagers were transformed into dancers, swaying or stamping, reaching and pulling back.

“Watching the kids in the studio, I was bowled over,” said Hollander. “I felt my face, my soul dissolving.... I thanked them for making themselves vulnerable. I did not realize I was making myself vulnerable, too.”

Said Pablo Clauss, 16, a student at the Kepler Gymnasium, “We make a direct connection, a bridge from today to the past.” —T.A.

Israel and died in 1984; and Polish-born Szimon Laks, whom the Nazis forced to perform music in Auschwitz. Laks died in Paris in 1983.

"To remember the Jews is a very painful thing, associated with shame and guilt, erupting into [Germans'] everyday life," said Walesch-Schneller, noting that she did not get much positive response from local Germans when she started restoring the Blue House several years back.

ATTITUDES HAVE CHANGED. THE city helped with funding and logistics for Dances for the Blue House. The project was sponsored through grants from the United States Embassy in Berlin, the United States Consulate General in Frankfurt, Citigroup Germany, the Hamburg-based Körber Foundation, the State Foundation of Baden Württemberg, Aktion Mensch, the Kapuziner Garten



The Blue House Site of the former synagogue and a modern dance piece.

Hotel in Breisach, Festspiele (the summer festival of Breisach) and 50 private donors. It was also supported by the Society for the Promotion of the Former Jewish Community House in Breisach.

"The dancing in the streets has attracted many people—children and grandparents," Walesch-Schneller said. "Five little Turkish boys came to every performance."

"The aim of the Blue House is just this: to include people, so people who may be refugees or immigrants discover the history," she added. It is also about remembering that Jewish life in Germany was rich and varied, with joy and celebration.

On that last rainy afternoon, while preparing for the dance in the Blue House, performer Roberta Cooper of Drastic Action had that same feeling.

"I don't want to get too New Agey, but there is a presence here," she said. "But I do not feel sadness and pain, but joy." **H**

Performance Dates

The Battery Dance Company will perform "Secrets of the Paving Stones" and other dances on November 15 and 16 at the Tribeca Performing Arts Center in New York (212-219-3910; www.tribecapac.org).

TOBY AXELROD

Memories Of The Shtetl

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