

The Jerusalem Report
September 9, 2002

Dancing Through Time and Space

By Shlomo Schwartzberg, Toronto

Son of a kosher butcher, a one-time judo and wrestling champ, Allen Kaeja is now making his mark – as a dancer. His Kaeja d’Dance troupe is on a roll, with creations that the critics are raving about, extolling them as “beautifully evocative” (Washington Post) and “redolent with disturbing beauty” (Time Out London). The Company’s short films, cinematic adaptations of its dance works, are hits at film festivals around the world, and are seen on television in Canada. And its Toronto-based founders, husband and wife Allen and Karen Kaeja (pronounced Kay-jah), dancers, choreographers, teachers and now authors (with a recent book about the teaching of dance), are seemingly everywhere.

The acclaim and interest has much to do with the dance troupe’s Holocaust-themed work, which actually constitutes, says Allen Kaeja, only a small part of his prodigious output. “What’s interesting to me is that over the last 10 years I’ve created 42 works, only six dealing with the Holocaust.” Nevertheless, all of Kaeja d’Dance’s films – comprising two trilogies, including such acclaimed shorts as “Sarah”, “Witnessed” and their latest 24-minute short, “Resistance” – have been concerned with the Holocaust.

Since a film has the potential to reach a much wider audience than a dance performance, one can argue that the Holocaust is the central motif in the KDD repertoire, though it has also received kudos for its other pieces, dealing with more general social issues. (“Lost Innocence,” a 1991 piece about child abuse, was one of the troupe’s first works, stemming from Allen’s brief stint running a group home for abused kids while he studied child psychology at Ontario’s University of Waterloo.)

Kaeja d’Dance’s cinematic explorations of the Holocaust – co-directed by Allen Kaeja and Mark Adam – introduce modern dance to many who would likely never bother going to a dance performance of any sort. The eight-person troupe also tours internationally – this fall, it will be in Spain and India, as well as Toronto’s “Ashkenaz” festival of new Yiddish culture – and brings its expertise and its works to schools around the province of Ontario, where it presents the reality of the Shoah to students in a form they likely have never witnessed before.

“The first thing that happens is the kids are being turned on by the physicality of the piece but they’re also being educated by it,” says Kaeja. And a lot of these kids do not know about the Holocaust, despite its being part of the province’s educational curriculum. “When you say ‘Holocaust’, the younger generation associates that with many happenings around the world. Many of these kids have no clue about the Second World War and the Jewish extermination.”

The Holocaust dance pieces typically meld stark images of the Shoah – Jews with their luggage waiting to board the cattle cars (“Zummel”, Yiddish for “Gathering Place”) or making a last stand as they await their demise in a locked synagogue, flames licking at the doors (“Resistance”) – with acrobatic, physical scenes, emblematic of all the troupe’s work. But when the company’s dancers leap about and twirl their partners, their actions are informed by the desperation of individuals awaiting certain death and destruction. Allen describes the troupe’s style as an “explosive physicality combined with strong theatrical imagery.”

Even though Allen’s father was a Polish-born survivor who lost his entire family to the Nazis, and KDD’s pieces on the subject are executed with great conviction, it’s not a topic that Allen has always felt drawn to. Nor, despite the ease of his dancing, was it an art form he was involved with from childhood, as is usually the case with accomplished artists.

In fact, Allen, an ebullient, muscular 43-year-old, was not only a student of child psychology before taking up dance, but for nine years his athletic passions were directed toward wrestling and judo, for which he won many prizes. There was a period of overlap between the wrestling, judo and dance, but it didn’t last long.

“The year that I started dancing, 1980, I was invited to the trials for both the Maccabiah games and the Olympic try-outs,” says Allen, handling most of the interview while Karen packs for the family’s – the couple has two young children – move to larger quarters. “In my first year of dancing, I was still heavily involved in judo and wrestling. But, I realized, when I took my first dance class, that dance gave me something that combative sports didn’t and that was the creative process. The dance class took my physicality, which I was so driven by, to a whole new direction and level. I realized that this was what I wanted to spend my whole life focusing on.”

Karen, 40, also started dance relatively late, at age 18, as a natural outgrowth of her student work in movement therapy with hospital patients. She met Allen in 1981, during her first year at Toronto’s York University; he was already at the Toronto Dance Theatre. “We didn’t start dating until four years later and we got married in 1989,” says Allen. Kaeja d’Dance was founded the following year. (Karen also choreographs, and has won awards for her own dance pieces, on feminist themes, which are not part of KDD’s repertoire.)

It was a few years later, when Karen was pregnant with the couple’s first daughter, Aniya, now 8 (daughter number 2, Mika, is 4 years old) that Allen became aware of the unconscious influence of his father’s history on him. “I remember [thinking], you’re about to become a dad, it’s very joyous, really thrilling. You know that your life is going to change but at the same time I began to feel overwhelmed, terrified, with the feeling that I could lose my family. I didn’t know where this was coming from, it was really bizarre.”

It was then that he created his first dance piece, "In Blood", for two men. Only as he worked on it, he says, did he understand what its source was. It was an attempt to comprehend and interpret "the relationship between my father and his brother, who died in his arms in Auschwitz."

That was succeeded by a collaboration between Allen and Karen about his father's first wife, which later became the dance piece and later the film, "Sarah."

The man born and raised as Allen Norris grew up in the small city of Kitchener, Ontario. At the time, Kitchener had 500 Jewish families, most of them Orthodox. Allen's father was the town's kosher butcher, and his family observed the Sabbath and holidays, but today the son comments that "I wouldn't say we were very Jewish." His father, he says, "sort of fell into the role" of butcher, which more or less dictated that he be Sabbath-observant, "but he wanted as little to do with Judaism as possible." (For her part, Karen grew up in a Conservative household in Toronto, the daughter of Canadian-born children of European immigrants.)

One step toward establishing their own identity came when Karen and Allen adopted Kaeja as their new surname. "I wanted to create a name that was unique to Karen and me," says Allen, "two individuals entering into a new whole. I never felt a real affiliation with that last name [Norris], it had no real significance. I didn't want to go back to Nossal," his father's family name before he emigrated from Poland. So he and Karen took letters from their given names and from that of Allen's father.

The same independence of spirit that led Allen to change his last name was behind his being kicked out of the Toronto Dance Theatre, to which he was, ironically, invited back a decade later to join the faculty, along with Karen. "You have to understand, 20 years ago, independent [art] was not fostered. Somebody needing to choreograph, to go off on their own, to create their own language or own company was not encouraged, and that was the direction I was moving in almost from the day I started there." Despite some support from a mentor at the school, co-founder Trish Beatty, Allen Kaeja was asked to leave soon after his first concert and tour.

That's a distant memory for the troupe now, which has grown by leaps and bounds in the last few years. Its working budget has gone from \$200,000 to \$500,000, most of it coming from various Canadian funding bodies, on the federal, provincial and municipal levels. Along with hiring an administrative staff, and moving to larger quarters, they have set up a second company, which for two months of the year allows them to act as mentors to up-and-coming dancers. Kaeja d'Dance boasts eight performers; Kd'D2 is made up of six performers and two apprentices.

Relations with other artists are crucial to the Kaejas, perhaps none more than that with composer Edgardo Moreno, “who has scored all my Holocaust-based works and most of my major work,” says Allen. “He comes from an environment of persecution; his family had to escape Chile under Pinochet. There’s also a belief in his family that they may be descended from Marranos who escaped Spain,” during the period following the Inquisition.

A visit Allen took with Aniya to Poland last year, while the troupe was touring Europe, to see where his own father’s father and grandmother were born became the basis of his newest work, “Silent/Still”, which is not about the Holocaust per se but the resonance of space, symbolized by his and Aniya’s long search for the Jewish graveyard in his grandmother’s town of Ivaniska.

This fall, Allen and Karen Kaeja will also be performing in Chennai (formerly Madras), India, as well as at the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain. Despite such wide travels, however, the duo has not yet made it to Israel. Allen describes it as just one of those things; the troupe has not been invited to perform there nor does he know whom to reach out to for an invitation. He insists he’d like to perform there in the future.

All those Holocaust pieces have brought Allen closer in a way to the experiences of his father, who died in 1985. “In one sense, I’ve created a testament to my father with these trilogies, both on stage and, thank goodness, in film,” which has greater permanence.

But after two trilogies of Holocaust-themed works, has Allen Kaeja exhausted the subject? Not at all. “I came up with sort of a seventh piece, a contemporary work, about a modern-day woman who is still very affected by the Holocaust.” One suspects, that as long as Allen and Karen Kaeja are involved with dance, the Holocaust won’t be far behind.