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American Dances searching for roots at the Blue House in Germany

By Miri Ben-Shalom

Miri Ben-Shalom was born in Israel and studied Theater at Tel Aviv University. Since 1973 in New York. Miri has been a documentary filmmaker and editor for more than twenty years. She worked for the major TV networks, as well as many independent productions. She co-produced and edited the documentary preserving the Past to Ensure the Future that was nominated for an Academy Award. For other works she is a Telly Awards recipient, a US International Film and Video Festival winner and received a 1998 National Headliners Award. She also wrote several feature length screenplays. In the last three years Miri returned to her original interest " theater. Currently, the play I Want the Whole World to See that I Can Cry through her non-profit company From Home to Homeland

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company, from *Home to Homeland, Inc.*, she is working on producing this play for the stage, as well as a touring Battery educational version for high school and college students to enhance the teaching of the WWII Holocaust curriculum. www.icancry.org . Mir i is also the Literary Liaison of The Genesis Theatre Guild www.genesiustheatre.org . e-mail : mirib@earthlink.net

As memories of the Second World War fade away with the passing of time and its survivors, with episodes of genocide still occurring, and as Europe experiences a resurgence of anti-Semitism, more and more decedents of Holocaust victims and survivors are turning back to the past. They are searching for roots, for reasons, for understanding. **Aviva Geismar and Jonathan Hollander**, two accomplished New York City dancer-choreographers are among them. They have found a unique path – the **Dances for the Blue House project**. From mid July through August 6th their two companies, **Drastic Action and Battery Dance Company**, will lead a series of events in two neighboring German towns, **Breisach and Freiburg**, responding to the historical events that led to the destruction of the Jewish community during WWII. Through educational workshops, site-specific presentations, and the creation of new dance pieces, culminating in a weekend of performances and

Production Point	weekend of performances and workshops on August 3rd through 6th, the project will draw together a broad
Productions on Tour	cross-section of Germans, Americans and people of other nationalities; Jews and Gentiles, students and the general
Recommended Website	public, in an exchange aimed at exploring how the next generation is
Research & Collections	dealing with the Holocaust.
Revisiting the Past	I met Aviva Geismar in a rehearsal studio in Astoria, Queens, as she was working with her company
Solo performance - Online Catalogue	Drastic Action on one of the pieces they will perform at The Blue House. “We’ll teach the students through the language of
Spanish	dance to express things that are important to them,” she says, “with the hope of building mutual
Story Theatre	respect and mutual understanding by working together and hearing each other’s experiences and
Success Story	views.” In addition to the dance workshops, an Israeli psychologist, an American psychoanalyst and a
The Arab-Israeli Melting Pot	German educator will lead story-telling workshops at The Blue House, using story-telling as a
The New York Scene	mode of healing for children of survivors and children of Nazis. “As a group,” Aviva continues, “through story-telling the group
Theatre and physics	members will find empathy and compassion to bridge their
Theatre in Spotlight	histories. Dance, in a different way, does the same thing.”
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At the heart of this cultural exchange is The Blue House. It is an old building, which served as a gathering center for the 500-year old Jewish Community in Breisach, up until itâ€™s demise in December, 1940. In 1999, after decades of neglect and decay, the house was slated for demolition. However, one person, Dr. **Christiane Walesch-Schneller**, in a demonstration of how the actions of individuals can change social and historical injustices, altered its fate. She enlisted a group of community members, and founded FÃ¶rderverein, **The Association to Preserve Jewish Culture in Breisach**. They purchased and restored the dilapidated building and transformed it into a living museum and memorial. They did not stop at that. With The Blue House as a base, they searched for survivors and descendents of Breisachâ€™s Jewish community, and for the past seven years have brought many of them back to connect and share their histories with current community members and schools. Moreover, the Forderverein, in its efforts to enlarge the scope of its activities, invited Geismar and Hollander to develop a new initiative joining art and social consciousness.

Jonathan Hollander and Chritiane-Walesch-Schneller befriended each other in 1967 as students. â€œAt some

point Christiane uncovered a history of her town that was repugnant to her," Hollander told me in his Soho Studio. "She is one of those people who has the drive, the momentum and the passion to try and make social changes in whatever way, and no matter how humble, no matter how modest she just wouldn't let go."

About two years ago, while attending a presentation about The Blue House in New York, Hollander noticed the name Geismar in the family tree of the Jews of Breisach and wondered whether his colleague Aviva Geismar was connected to the town.

"I didn't know anything about my family history," says Aviva. "My father never spoke about his past." It turned out that indeed, Aviva's grandparents were from Breisach. Her father, together with his sister, arrived to the US at age 17, but the rest of the family did not survive the Holocaust. He became a sociology professor and now, at the age of 85 he plans to return to Breisach to participate in the project and attend his daughter's performance.

"Christiane was an inspiration to me, as well as to Aviva," said Hollander. "She tapped on certain themes that I have felt through out my life. I didn't

“I want to be an artist who creates jewels-like pieces. I wanted to be connected to society and to the environment around me and to create accordingly. I want to create works that resonates and the older I get the more passionate I feel about it.”

Following his passion Jonathan Hollander and his Battery Dance Company have been collaborating with artists in India and Sri Lanka, Israel and Jordan, Hungary, Malaysia and Australia. They were performing throughout the U.S., Middle East, North Africa, Eastern Europe, Scandinavia, Pacific Rim and South Asia. In 2005 the company represented the U.S. as a cultural link to Vietnam for the 10th anniversary of normalized relations between the two countries. Hollander has also collaborated extensively with Polish choreographers, dancers and musicians.

“Through the work in Poland, and by perhaps walking on the same streets, the same pavement, that ancestors of mine might have walked, living in Shtetles or in these buildings – this face to face realization that you confront when you go to the places where your ancestors lived that forces you to think of what conditions they endured. What opportunities did they have? And it also makes you feel very spoiled, with our computers and frequent flyer miles and

so forth, weâ€™re so privileged. No matter how we struggle â€” and itâ€™s a struggle to keep a dance company in New York City for 30 years â€” but weâ€™re privileged that we have the opportunity to make a choice like that. That you can make a choice to sacrifice, which is different from being born into a life of sacrifices. Where you have no choice to get out of that.â€” Hollanderâ€™s experience in Poland and the powerfully evocative score by the Krakow Klezmer Band inspired him to create Secrets of the Paving Stones, which portrays the historic changes of the human spirit to which the cobbled streets of KrakÃ³w have borne witness.

Aviva has also gone through a process of self-discovery through this project. â€œMy work has always been influenced by my background and my fatherâ€™s history, mostly not in a conscious, but in a subconscious way,â€” she says. â€œI didnâ€™t know about The Blue House and their work. I found out about it from Jonathan, and then my father confirmed that his parents were from Breisach. This started the collaboration and the connection between Christiane and my father that started impacting my work.â€” â€œHer works have always had this quality of edginess,â€” says Jonathan, â€œa sort of expressionistic

**...of expressive
vocabulary. She told me at one
point that she is learning where a
lot of her impetuosity comes
from, through gaining knowledge of
her personal history.â€**

All Fall Down, Geismarâ€™s creation with Drastic Action, deals with Holocaust-related issues. It is an absurdist exploration of group dynamics, betrayal and the ambiguity of interpersonal relationships: power and victimization and how easy it is to move from being a victim to victimizing. With stomping rhythmical riffs and haughty feminine gestures, four women vie for power and attention. Annabelle Chvostekâ€™s score creates a surreal landscape in which slippery alliances form and reform as their play veers dangerously out of control.

Dr. Christiane Walesch-Schneller knows every house in Breisach where every Jewish family lived at the time of their deportation. She knows who is buried under every gravestone at the desecrated cemetery. â€œThere is such a sense of history all around you here,â€ says Aviva. â€œChristiane is so passionate about preserving it all, remembering what happened and remembering the people. And, it was so amazing to me. We live in a culture where we just look forward. We donâ€™t look back. This was my fatherâ€™s outlook, he was the kind of immigrant

outlook, he was the kind of immigrant that just looked ahead. He probably had to psychologically do it in order to survive. However, here- all this energy is going into looking back, and I felt perhaps it was time for me to explore how I could be part of it.â€

And that is just what she is doing. After over 18 months of extensive preparation, and with the generosity of many partners and sponsors, both German and American, a fascinating project, which includes a spectacle of incredibly beautiful and moving dance pieces, will soon become a reality.

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