
Daniel Nagrin: On 'This and That' and Choreographic Methods as Jewishness

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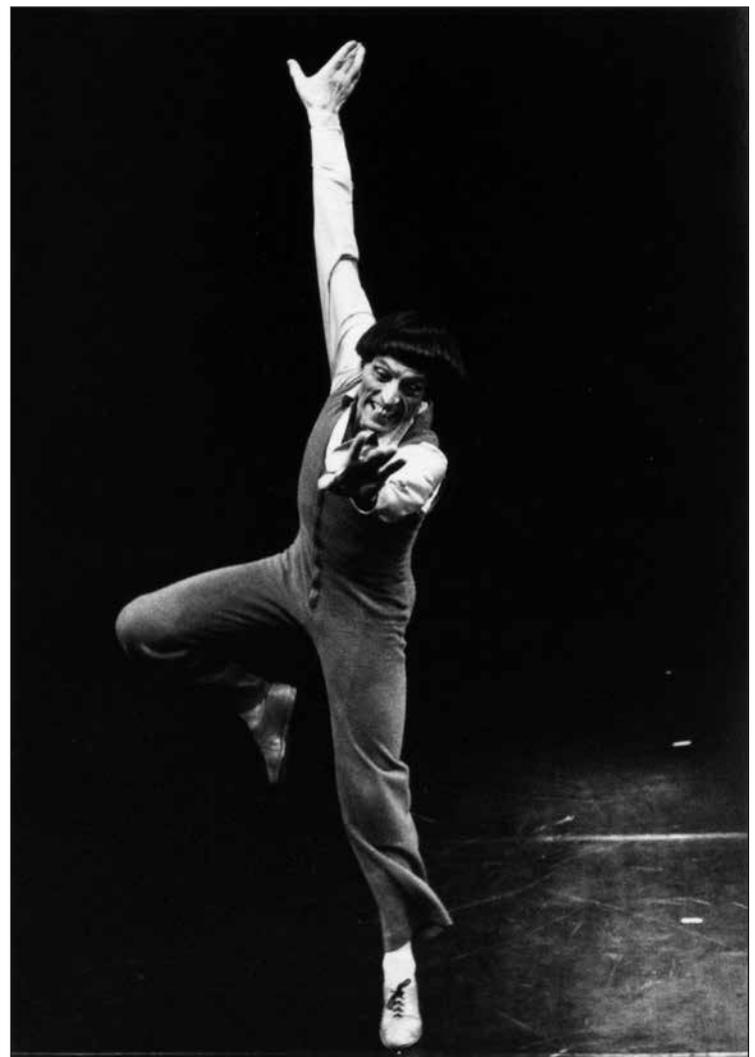
In this paper, I examine American choreographer and dancer Daniel Nagrin's choreographic methods as a study in Jewishness. I extend the notion that dancing Jewish not only resides explicitly through overtly Jewish themes, time and place, subject matter, and tropes (Brin Ingber 2011, Jackson 2011, and Rossen 2014), but also is posited subtly and discreetly within the methods, content/function, and structures and devices used to create and perform concert dances.

My personal experiences with Nagrin, first as a graduate student and later as a researcher, coupled with admiration for his work are the inspiration and force behind this paper. From viewing videotapes (Nagrin 1967, 1985) and tracing patterns (Adshead et al 1988, and Kane 2003), I assert that Nagrin's choreographic methods embody characteristics of Jewishness that are implicit yet tangible. My analysis contributes new knowledge to the dialogue surrounding not only Jewishness in American dance, but also American modern dance in general.

Jewish Identity

Daniel Nagrin (1917-2008) and his wife, the modern dance pioneer Helen Tamiris, were native New Yorkers who lived and danced in the cultural hotbed of New York City during the 20th Century.³ Both Nagrin and Tamiris were secular Jews whose parents fled the pogroms in Russia (Nagrin 1988). Nagrin's Jewishness, time, and place shaped his desire to create dances (see Banes 1987, Graff 1997, Jackson 2000, Prickett 1994a & b) that in turn reveal aspects of Jewish cultural identity, worldview, and values. Firstly I ask, what does it mean to be a Jew in America? What informs this identity? Then I ask, in what ways is Jewishness manifest in Nagrin's dances?

At the beginning of the 20th Century, the New York Jewish identity emanated from a reaction to impoverishment, oppression, pogroms, and mass unemployment in czarist Russia. These issues produced a need for altruism (Smithsonian 2004, Goldberg 1988, Jackson 2000) which manifested in the common bonds of community, non-religion, and largely collective Marxist ideals (Franko 1995, Jackson 2000, Perelman 2004). Overall, Jewish immigrants were intellectual, artistic, socially conscious, humanistic, and sensitive to the Eastern European Jewish experience as evidenced in



Daniel Nagrin in *Ruminations*, photo by Michael Hunold. [*Ruminations*, Box 17.4], digital scan obtained by the author from the Daniel Nagrin Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. Special thanks to Libby Smigel of the Library of Congress, and to Jeremy Rowe and Beth Lessard of the Daniel Nagrin Theatre, Film and Dance Foundation, Inc.

their art, ideology, and values (Copeland 2004, Greenberg 1955, Jackson 2000). In conversations with Nagrin and from examining his dances and writings (Nagrin 1967, 1985, 1989, 2001, and LoC 2014), he embraced many of these ideals. He was agnostic (Nagrin 2001, 193), eschewed all religions including Judaism, and called reli-

gion a 'crutch for the weak.' He would quote Karl Marx, "religion is the opiate of the masses."

However, I argue that he did embrace Jewishness as his cultural ethos, and it is embodied throughout his choreographic works (see Albright 1997, Foulkes 2002, Giersdorf 2013). Since his high school Depression days of the 1930s, Nagrin adopted the philosophy of skepticism. By the late 1940s and 1950s the Marxist existentialists, particularly Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre, offered what Nagrin embraced as a "lovely gift" of confusion. As a result, Nagrin grounded his thinking in doubt and uncertainty, which were "exciting" ways to live and not unusual in that existential, post-Holocaust period as he was "sure of nothing" (Nagrin 1997: xvi). His personal philosophy transferred to his dances, evidenced by the ambiguous and thought-provoking nature of his works, including *The Fall* (1977) based on Camus' work of the same title. His dances were full of "unknowns and mysteries," causing the viewer to think and ask self-reflexive questions. The aim was to achieve understanding to improve one's self by personalizing or making it "our own poem" (Nagrin 2001, 15).

Insights into Nagrin's choreographic impetus can be understood by situating his existentialism within the larger frame of Jewishness. In his book *Thou Shalt Innovate*, Avi Jorisch (2018) discusses how Israel's prophetic tradition over thousands of years produced an innovative culture that benefits and blesses the entire world. For example, on his list of 50 top Israeli innovations are Feldenkrais' Awareness through Movement and Eshkol and Wachman's Language of Dance movement notation system (Jorisch 2018, 185). Based in Jewish tradition emanating from the prophet Isaiah (42, 6), it commanded the Jew to make the world a better place by being a 'light unto the nations.' This is symbolized by Israel's national emblem, the menorah (which illuminates Jewish concepts). The Biblical idea mandates "taking responsibility for repairing the world," which is engaging in *Tikkun Olam* (Jorisch 2018, 6-7).

With this interpretation, *Tikkun Olam* therefore is the core of Jewish identity at the "heart and soul" of the Jew. It produces a culture that seeks higher meaning through the defining purpose of mending, repairing, and improving through the *chutzpah* of persistence, talent, determination, and intellect. *Tikkun Olam* is the "secret sauce" embedded deeply into the cultural DNA of the Jewish people and thus is part of their cultural "osmosis" (Jorisch 2018: XVII). The innovative success behind it comes from several factors. One of these is encouraging one another to "challenge authority, ask the next question, and defy the obvious" (ibid., 4). Another factor is "elevating the mundane" as seen in everyday rituals, blessings, and activities which then "transforms it into something holy" (ibid., 6). I will show how these factors or characteristics of Jewishness, particularly with its tradition of Talmudic study and debate through questioning, are threaded throughout Nagrin's works.

Agency and The Human Condition

Nagrin's methods and works harmonized well with both Judaism's *Tikkun Olam* and early 20th Century's aesthetic ethos. Art now was ameliorative and reflective of one's own experiences and ideals for the purpose of improving society, maintaining order, and producing solidarity (Sparshott 1970, Habermas 1999). Leo Tolstoy's Russian

Socialist Realism regarded art as useful because communicating feelings produced unity. This "progressive ideology of tolerance and egalitarianism" appealed to the New York independent Jewish choreographers (Jackson 2000, 9, Perelman 2004, Prickett 1994a). Francis Sparshott asserted (1970, 295) that in a society that values the human condition, the greatest value will be placed on artistic works that embody the deepest feelings and ideas "about the world in which he lives." Thus, the unifying message was to transcend circumstances in order to make positive, powerful statements for oneself and the community/world. For the Jewish artist in New York City, the answer emerged in the fusion of *Tikkun Olam*, Russian Socialist Realism, and forging an American identity through modern dance. All three are posited in Nagrin's works.

But how does one actually do *Tikkun Olam*? Jorisch assures (2018) it is by doing good, helping others, and engaging in social activism. Nagrin's driving concern for the world around him can be defined as social activism or what anthropologists call agency. His "doing-acting" approach wove character, intentions, and emotions into deliberate social actions (Meglin 1999, 105, Schlundt 1997, 2). John Gruen recognized (1975) them as aesthetic social gestures that contained meaning, an idea extended from cultural theory (Desmond 1997). Nagrin's actions assigned a specific kind of agency to his culture-current characters. His dances are embodied expressions (see Franko 1995) of contemporary social and political actions that move and motivate audiences.

Anthropologist Jennifer Hornsby's theories (2004, 16 & 21) are very useful to elucidate *Tikkun Olam's* human agency in Nagrin's works. Hornsby views human agency's "realistic" bodily actions as *deliberate, willful, and intentional*. Actions are ethical choices with causal power, or agent-causation (1980 and 2004, 19). Nagrin defined action as "the inner life that drives what we see on the stage... It refers to the *verb* that drives the dance and the dancer" (Nagrin 2001, 44).

Through the deliberate actions of his characters, Nagrin grappled with the human condition by confronting audiences with conflicted yet relatable characters in order to think and reformulate for themselves. His specific characters embodied a critique of society that confirms Hornsby's concept of agent/causation: persons [agents] who do something [action/cause] that bring about "the things that they actually do" [effect/causation] (Hornsby 2004, 16). Nagrin wanted his audiences to "look at their lives and think about their values" (Schlundt 1997, 62 and 1998). His characters prompted viewers to acknowledge personal biases and to reflect upon relevant, current social issues (Evans 2002). He articulated his agency as: "It makes no sense to make dances unless you bring news. You bring something that a community needs, something from you: a vision, an insight, a question from where you are and what churns you up" (Nagrin 2001, 21).

From viewing videotapes (Nagrin 1967, 1985) of his works, some examples of agency that emerge include displaying fears of nuclear annihilation in *Indeterminate Figure* (1957) and confronting racism in *Not Me but Him* (1965) and *Poems Off the Wall* (1982). His focus on disturbing, dysfunctional relationships through *Jacaranda's* (1978) self-centered, cold-hearted lover (Nuchtern 1979, 38) and the blatant

domestic abuse in *The Duet* (1971) brought attention and immediacy to these societal issues. Nagrin blurred the boundaries between art and life, becoming “one step closer to real experience” (Kahn 1972, 79). By exposing and grappling with these messier aspects of life, Nagrin’s *Tikkun Olam* reflexively connected and compelled the viewer to grapple with, repair, and make the world a better place by looking first at one’s own life and resolving to change positively.

Structures and Devices

Nagrin’s use of choreographic structures and devices is examined. In and of itself, these are not peculiar Jewish traits; but I argue that the way in which Nagrin used them are examples of Jewishness through *Tikkun Olam*’s agentic mandate to challenge authority, ask the next question, and defy the obvious (Jorisch 2018). Nagrin presented, problematized, and challenged relationships and hegemonic ideals through questioning and reflection to produce an “enquiring, cynical spectator” (Evans 2002, Nagrin 1997, 82 & Schlundt 1997).



Daniel Nagrin in *Ruminations*, photo by Michael Hunold. [Ruminations, Box 17.4], digital scan obtained by the author from the Daniel Nagrin Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. Special thanks to Libby Smigel of the Library of Congress, and to Jeremy Rowe and Beth Lessard of the Daniel Nagrin Theatre, Film and Dance Foundation, Inc.

Peloponnesian War is one of the best examples of Nagrin’s structuring device of strategic interruption, which compels the audience to react or respond by personally identifying with X. Nagrin allowed the sound tape to run for several minutes while the audience waited in the dark for the performance to begin. When the light arose, he was dressed as one of them - an audience member. Then he imitated their actions from his seat on stage as they stood for the national anthem (Schlundt 1997, Siegel 1969). After a performance in Guam, a spectator told Nagrin that he resented the performer/audience role reversal by implicitly making the audience the spectacle. Nagrin said this man captured the core of the performance. Nagrin challenged the automatic willingness of the audience to act without thinking, which elicited contradictory and angry responses

from them (Schlundt 1997). Considering the work’s subject matter as protesting the Vietnam War, it was a particularly decisive moment. He also used “visceral responses” (Goldberg 1988, 205) such as “continuous blackouts and bump ups - to make darkness and fear palpable,” suspended a chicken about to have its head cut off, used a live snake, fired a rifle point-blank at the audience, and threw things at them (Schlundt 1997, Siegel 1969, 23). With the exception of the Judson group, Meredith Monk, and Pina Bausch, this “manner of working the audience” (Goldberg 1988, Nagrin 1997, 83) differed from most companies of the time.

In general, at this time, American audiences were familiar with German playwright Bertolt Brecht’s (1898-1956) “epic theatre” of alienation (Chaikin 199, 38). The playwright was known professionally as Be. Its aim was to alienate, dislocate, or interrupt strategically the habitual frames of reference or convention through a critical opposite. The agentic effect was that the startling obvious, the ordinary, and the familiar were rendered strange and peculiar (Mitter 1992) which caused the spectator to assume a reflexive attitude through dissociation, but without pity. Also called ‘detachment,’ it presented events unsentimentally yet called the audience to action, even if only in choosing between two things (Chaikin 1991). It was achieved through iconic gestures, tasks, metaphors, improvisation, and privileging the everyday (Banes 2003). For example, in *Getting Well*, the audience relived his injury and convalescence “in total empathy” (Rosen 1979, 12). In *The Fall* (1977), Nagrin abruptly looked into his audiences and asked whether they had a similar experience with an unpleasant, sad relationship. *Jacaranda*’s moral theme of “loss” (Robertson 1979, 47) invited personal reflection.

Jorisch states (2018, 6) that perhaps the center of all *Tikkun Olam* teachings is to elevate and transform the mundane, including rituals, blessing, and everyday things, “into something holy.” Used in this way, alienation manifested as ordinary tasks becomes an agentic device. For instance, in *Spring ’65*, Nagrin chatted informally with the audience during and in between his dances while doing collectively familiar activities such as changing clothes and shoes and sipping a glass of water. He thus drew the audience into the performance through the familiarity of everyday actions, but then defamiliarized or detached them from their quotidian contexts. These became part of the dance by displacing or dislocating them within a performance framework.

Another example is *Ruminations* (1976). He first depicted his mother washing dishes (Nuchtern 1976) and then commenced literally to build a bench. He then questioned and challenged the viewer: “can you be sure that the carpenter driving in the nail is simply driving in that nail” or was it something deeper (Nagrin 1997, 56)? He hinted it was a personal tribute to his father, a skilled woodworking artisan (ibid).

Nagrin’s common, ordinary tasks elicited deeper metaphorical meaning. The methodical, repetitious box-step pattern travelling on a downstage diagonal in *Path* (1965) while carrying a board was a solemn, agentic homage to the hard labor of construction workers. The simple, non-codified, mundane movement in *Getting Well* (1978) was not just a metaphor, but also his actual convalescence

from knee surgery that “orchestrated an ode to the joy of locomotion” (Robertson 1979, 110).



Daniel Nagrin lunging in *Man of Action's*, photo by Marcus Blechman, Museum of the City of New York. [Ruminations, Box 17.4], digital scan obtained by the author from the Daniel Nagrin Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. Special thanks to Libby Smigel of the Library of Congress, and to Jeremy Rowe and Beth Lessard of the Daniel Nagrin Theatre, Film and Dance Foundation, Inc.

Sally Banes (1999) argues that the analytic task dancers of the 1960s and 1970s primarily did not use metaphor as meaning, as their meaning or content occurred in performing the task itself and nothing more. Nagrin challenged his contemporaries on this idea. His very different view used tasks as acts he viewed strongly as metaphor to reveal the human condition rather than ‘art for art’s sake’ or tasks as new ways to find movements individually and as a group.

Nagrin relied upon improvisation to abstract literal gestures into movement metaphors. His gestures contained deeper meaning which causes us to look at our own lives. This is part of *Tikkun Olam* ethos. For example, *Strange Hero* (1948) heightened pedestrian antics of smoking, running, chasing, and shooting were metaphors showing the absurdity of America’s cult hero worship of gangsters. *Man of Action's* (1948) stressed-out busy businessman, who looks frantically at his wristwatch, sits anxiously in a meeting, and runs to hail a taxi, still resonates in today’s fast-paced world. His wide, second-position lunges both literally and metaphorically attest to being pulled in two directions before finally collapsing backward. Gestural metaphors revealed not only the identity and agency of X, but also the relationship between his characters, whether real or imagined.

Nagrin’s choreographic process relied upon internal questioning and debate, what Nagrin often referred to as “this and that.” The

way I make sense of this as a gentile, albeit not as complex, is to compare it to how Tevye from *Fiddler on the Roof* made decisions by questioning and debating with himself. Nagrin was an actor before he started to dance, and thus he began to choreograph in the way that was inherent in both his professional aesthetic and larger Jewish cultural ethos which were grounded in thorough questioning. Since this was familiar and central to Nagrin, it seems only natural that the six-question acting model of Moscow Art Theatre’s famous director Constantine Stanislavski (1924 & 1936) appealed to him. With encouragement from Tamiris, Nagrin schematically adapted it into his own six-step way of working: who, is doing what, to whom, where and when, why, and what’s the obstacle/tension? (Nagrin 1997, 34). I affectionately dubbed it The Nagrin Method.

Content and Marginalization

Nagrin’s commitment to human agency came with a price. It fit neither with modern dance’s hegemonic classicist canon nor with its aesthetic guidelines set by Graham, Holm, Horst, Humphrey, Laban, the Judsons, and Merce Cunningham. These formalist, expressionist (Franko 1995) artists elevated empirical, external structures of classical form by manipulating space, floor pattern, body shape, texture, rhythm, and dynamics. Nagrin’s works contrasted sharply. He preferred the grittier, weightier, Dionysian aspects of contemporary life. Several critics, dancers, and writers (see Horst 1957, Schlundt 1997, O’Hara 2005, Martin cited in Schlundt 1997) noted his radical Hellenistic penchant. However, one of the main critics of the time, Doris Hering (1951), did not approve of his non-formalism. Nagrin mentioned to me that because of her acerbic reviews, he did not choreograph for another five years.

According to aesthetics philosophers Sheldon Cheney (1946) and Louis Arnaud Reid (1969, 80), art consists of two strands, “the discovery and construction of form,” or finding and making, respectively. Therefore, Nagrin is a ‘dance finder’, not a ‘dance maker,’ since he created his dances through the discovery of motivations and actions rather than by manipulating formal elements. His maverick-yet-unpopular treatment of privileging content is the defining characteristic that distinguishes The Nagrin Method and style. Therefore, Nagrin’s *Tikkun Olam* positions him within a separate strand of modernism as he dared to challenge and defy modern dance formalism. These differences are important when considering Nagrin’s place in the history of American modern dance since these highly visible formalists constructed its prevailing view (Jackson 2000, Kane 2002).

Summary and Conclusion

I argued that Daniel Nagrin’s dances are studies in Jewishness based in the historical and cultural values of *Tikkun Olam*, which produces an innovative people. Nagrin’s innovative choreographic methods and dances focused on the messier, complicated web of human interactions, relationships, and relevant issues from the world around him. The aim was to bring about both reflexivity and change in the viewer, his version of repairing the world and making it a better place, through confrontation, questioning, and reflection. By examining The Nagrin Method and its content, function, structures, and devices as examples of *Tikkun Olam*, dancing Jewish emerges clearly through Nagrin’s identity, agency (Hornsby (2004, 23), and questioning.

Nagrin's greatest gift to improve the world, his *Tikkun Olam*, is his innovative, six-step method of choreographic inquiry. The Nagrin Method provides an alternative lens through which we can analyze, read, and narrate the genre of American modern dance and elucidate Jewishness in new ways. He was a maverick and a man of conviction, not afraid to privilege content over form even though it placed him at odds with others and led to his marginalization. His strand of modernism merits a re-visiting of historical strategies and modes of analyzing choreographic processes. His dancing Jewish also calls for an examination of what constitutes Jewishness in dance.

Notes

See article "An Exploration of the Life and Work of Helen Tamiris, 1920-1966" by Elizabeth McPherson and JoAnne Tucker elsewhere in this issue.

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Daniel Nagrin in *Ruminations*, photo by Michael Hunold

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