

Jews and Jewishness in the Dance World

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***THIS AND THAT: JEWISHNESS IN THE DANCES
OF DANIEL NAGRIN***

by

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Abstract. In this paper, I examine American choreographer and dancer Daniel Nagrin's choreographic method as a study in Jewishness. I attempt to add to the multilayered dynamic framework begun by Naomi Jackson (in Ingber 2011) and Rebecca Rossen (2014). I argue that dancing Jewish not only resides explicitly through the selection of overtly Jewish themes, time, place, subject matter, and tropes but also is posited implicitly in the strategies, methods, content, and function used to create and perform concert dances. I ask, "In what ways do Daniel Nagrin's dances tacitly affirm Jewishness through identity, questioning, agency, and site?"

I demonstrate that Jewishness is implied yet evident through these four cultural markers. I examine how Nagrin's Russian-Jewish secular heritage combined with living and dancing in New York City during most of the 20th Century (Jackson 2000) shaped his identity and worldview (Banes 1987, Graff 1997, Prickett 1994), thus impacting the way he choreographed. His action-based portraits of non-Jewish but specific characters in conflict differed from his contemporaries' methods. His six-question approach, which I call The Nagrin Method, was adapted from the six-step acting model of Russian theatre director Constantine Stanislavski (1924). Nagrin located/found his content through "this and that" or internal questioning and debate expressed through movement metaphors. His driving concern for the world around him exhibited through his characters' actions are embodied expressions (Franko 1995) of contemporary social and political actions. These can be defined as social justice, or what anthropologists Jennifer Hornsby (1980, 2004) and Drid Williams (2004) term 'agency.' Site is re-negotiated through daring binary tropes of virtuosity/pedestrian movements, concert stage/non-traditional spaces, choreography/improvisation, music/sound, talking/silence, and live/video performances.

Primary source materials include Nagrin's written books (Nagrin 1994, 1997, and 2001), videos (1967, 1985), and several boxes in the Library of Congress Daniel Nagrin Collection archives. Other videotapes, professional critiques, and reviews are probed. As a dancer, I rely upon my choreographic studies with Nagrin and draw further from the corporeal approaches of Jens Giersdorf (2013) and Rebecca Rossen (2014). The body-as-culture theories of Ann Cooper Albright (1997), Jane Desmond (1997), Susan Foster (2005), and Janet Lansdale (2007) in which aesthetic, social, and cultural moments are constructed and embodied through the performing body are useful. The adapted post-structural models of Janet Adshead (1988) and Angela Kane (2003) are used to probe and analyze select dances, concluding with a case-study of *Path* (1965). By tracing patterns in his choreographic method, my analysis both contributes new knowledge to the dialogue surrounding Jewishness in American dance and problematizes the criteria used to define modern dance. I assert that Nagrin's dances imply Jewishness and are worthy to open for debate; as a result, rethinking what constitutes dance modernism is needed.

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