

Los Angeles Times

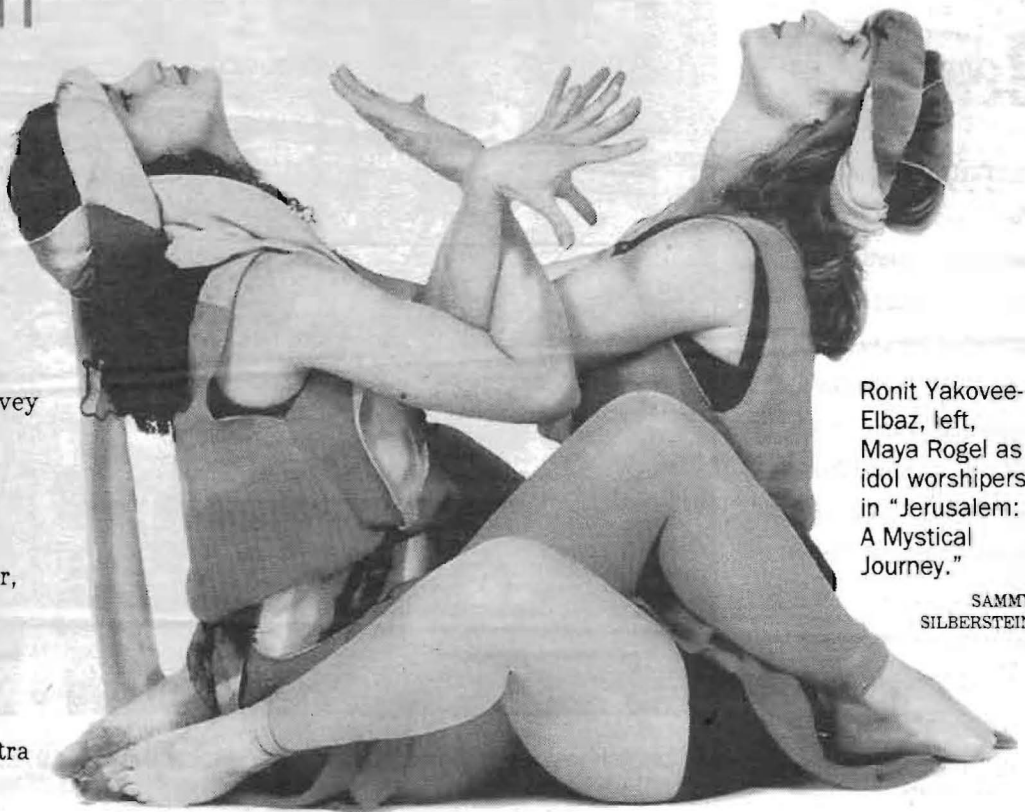
VALLEY EDITION

LOS ANGELES TIMES • THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 19, 1998

CALENDAR WEEKEND

8:30pm
Dance

Celebrating Israel's 50th anniversary, the locally based Keshet Chaim Dance Ensemble premieres **"Jerusalem: A Mystical Journey,"** a survey of Talmudic, biblical, Kabbalistic and historical lore that also features Israeli singer David De'or, the American-Israeli Rainbow of Life dance group and recorded narration by Frank Sinatra Jr. From the opening of Genesis through the Diaspora, the Holocaust and the founding of the State of Israel, this 40-minute piece traces the evolution of Jewish thought, with



Ronit Yakovee-Elbaz, left, Maya Rogel as idol worshipers in "Jerusalem: A Mystical Journey."

SAMMY SILBERSTEIN

Jerusalem portrayed as the universal center of divine creation. A song-set by De'or and his band completes the program. **Story, Page 36**

■ **"Jerusalem: A Mystical Journey,"** New Performing Arts Center, Cal State Northridge, 18111 Nordhoff St. Also Sunday, 2 and 7:30 p.m. \$20-\$75. (818) 677-2488.

'Jerusalem' dancers
lend personal
expression to city's
mystical history.

BY ROBIN RAUZI
TIMES STAFF WRITER

This year is to the Keshet Chaim Dance Ensemble what an Olympic year is to athletes.

The American-Israeli troupe—one of the only such professional groups in the country—has performance requests piling up. Each wants the dancers to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the founding of Israel.

Artistic director Eytan Avisar's stock response is wait, please. Before he commits to anything, he wants to get through the premiere of "Jerusalem: A Mystical Journey" at the Cal State Northridge Performing Arts center this weekend.

Everyone involved acknowledges that "Jerusalem" is the most challenging and potentially sophisticated work Keshet Chaim has attempted in its 14-year history. Through a series of multimedia vignettes, the company explores the spiritual and mystical history of the ancient city.

Some segments are specific stories, such as the tale of Abraham and Isaac, while others have more abstract themes, such as pilgrimage or internal struggle. In sum, the 40-minute piece starts at creation and ends after the founding of Israel, addressing the central question: Why is there a place called Jerusalem?

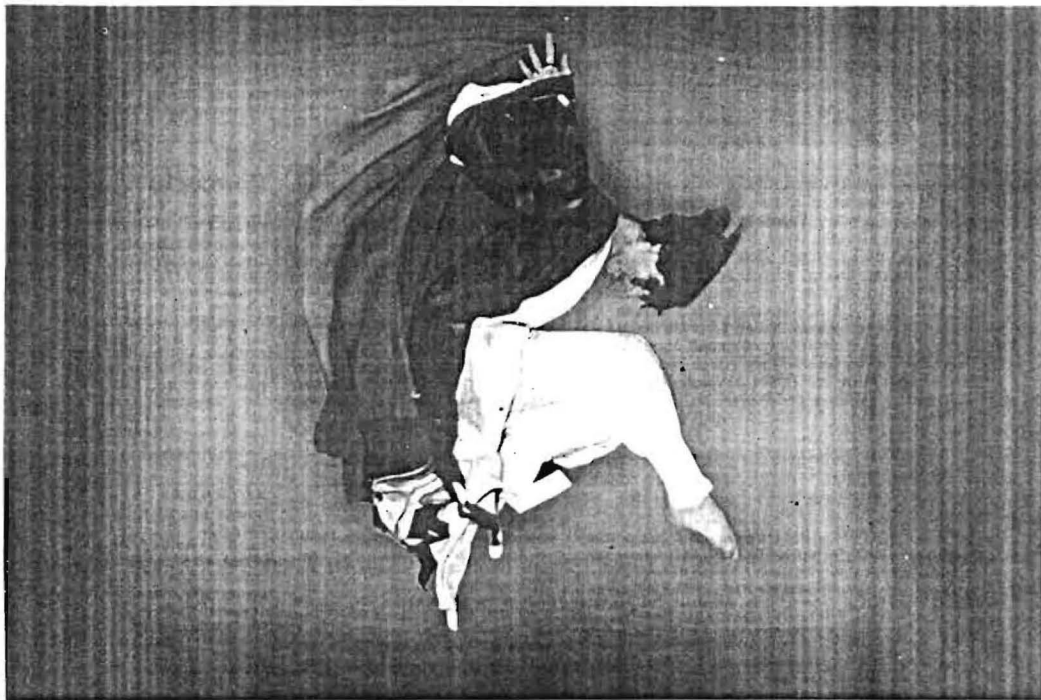
"It is very ambitious," said Avisar. "We've never touched on anything that has this kind of meaning or that had this much research put into it."

Keshet Chaim, translated from Hebrew, means rainbow of life, an appropriate moniker for a 20-member troupe that tries to incorporate the many global influences on Israel into its dance.

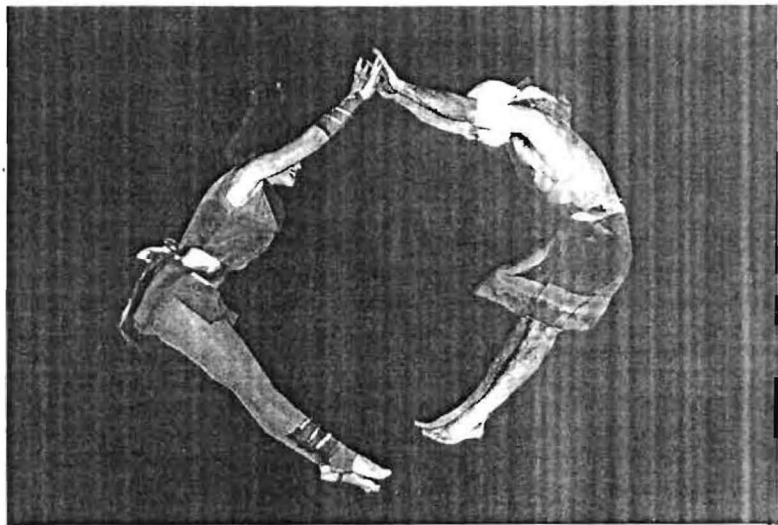
The scattering of Jews around the globe during the Diaspora resulted in their absorbing aspects of various regional cultures into their own, said managing director Genie Benson. After the founding of Israel in 1948, Jews emigrated from all over the world, bringing their customs—including dance—with them.

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Movement



and Meaning



VIGNETTES OF HISTORY:
Members of Keshet Chaim Dance Ensemble perform in the multimedia piece, "Jerusalem: A Mystical Journey," which premieres at CSUN this weekend.

Dance: Keshet Chaim Pays Homage to Jerusalem

Continued from 36

It has been the role of Keshet Chaim, which has about a dozen Israeli dancers, to interpret and integrate these varied styles, from Yemenite to Eastern European, Mediterranean to North African. Until now, the company has performed these dances individually, or explored the steps they have in common.

Even with a repertoire as broad as that, "Jerusalem" is unlike anything Keshet Chaim has attempted before.

"'Jerusalem' is an artistic and spiritual approach to concepts that are deeply embedded in scripture and historical texts," said dancer Sammy Silberstein, a company member since 1984. The city is anthropomorphized, its destruction and rebuilding paralleling the ups and downs of a person's life, or the collective history of the Jews.

The process of developing "Jerusalem" lasted nearly three years. Shortly after the death of his 18-year-old nephew during an Israeli Army training exercise, Avisar traveled to Jerusalem and visited the Western Wall. The two experiences started him on a personal quest. He began researching Jewish mysticism and cabalistic literature, in addition to reading passages from the Bible, Talmud and Midrash.

He drew the dancers into his quest, as well. Many evenings were spent discussing issues such as creation with rabbis. Avisar learned about a form of Jewish meditation that is based on Hebrew letters. Each letter has a corresponding meaning and a movement that is done while meditating. The letter *aleph*, for example, means fire, and its motion ends in a position that resembles the letter. These motions are a recurring motif in "Jerusalem."

"Maybe it sounds a little heavy," said Avisar. "If you take the pieces of the story line, it's fascinating enough. But we try to make it be a



Soloist in the 20-member dance ensemble performs in Roman-style costume.

little bit more."

Later, Avisar had the dancers meditate during rehearsal. "Jerusalem" demanded a lot more of the troupe than simply mastering dance steps—it required acting and understanding what their motions were trying to convey.

"In a piece like this, you need to feel pain and feel joy and feel fear and express them," said dancer Silberstein. "It's very difficult, and we all feel these things in different ways and express them in different ways."

"I would be lying if I didn't tell you that there was a lot of confusion and disagreement. You can't expect everyone to see these things the same way. But the piece is made to do that, to convey peaceful times and not-so peaceful times."

Company members created most of the choreography, though Irene Feigenheimer, managing director of L.A.'s Dance Resource Center, signed on as consultant. Yet movement was not enough to communicate the broad message of "Jerusalem." Silberstein created background projections. To set the tone, Keshet Chaim hired veteran set designer Christa Bartels and Eileen Cooley, winner of two Lester Horton dance awards for lighting design.

Plus, Miriyam Glazer, chairwoman of the literature department at the University of Judaism, wrote narration, which was recorded by Frank Sinatra Jr.

Uri Ophir, an Israel-based composer and arranger, wrote original music. And Israeli singer David De'or, a contra tenor with a 3½-octave range, will perform live during "Jerusalem."

De'or, who has rarely performed in the United States, is an up-and-coming singer in Israel who has released two gold albums and performed with the Israeli Philharmonic under Zubin Mehta. Before "Jerusalem," he will give a short concert with his five-person band.

As for Avisar, his quest will draw to a close with the performances of "Jerusalem: A Mystical Journey" this weekend. He has dug deep into himself, his history and his faith to put the show together. All that is left is to see if the audience is more than entertained.

"This is something more than a story," he said. "Something that has to do with ancient thoughts and why we are here."

The 50th anniversary of Israel, he said, deserves nothing less.

BE THERE

"Jerusalem: A Mystical Journey," by the Keshet Chaim Dance Ensemble, Cal State Northridge Performing Arts Center, 18111 Nordhoff St. Saturday, 8:30 p.m.; and Sunday, 2 and 7:30 p.m. \$20-\$35. (818)