

Feb. 25, 2004

Jewish soul in Tinseltown

By KELLY HARTOG

On February 21, hundreds of people made their way to the Scottish Rite Auditorium on Wilshire Blvd., Los Angeles to see the premiere production of the California-based Israeli dance ensemble Keshet Chaim (*Rainbow of Life: Neshama - Stories of the Soul*).

Sponsored by the Tel Aviv-Los Angeles Partnership of the Jewish Federation of Greater Los Angeles and the Consulate General of Israel, the affair drew an audience that was divided fairly evenly between the local Jewish community and ex-pat Israelis.

In fact, there was more Hebrew than English spoken in the auditorium. But that's not surprising, given that almost half of the professional non-profit dance ensemble hails from Israel. As a result, the troupe of 26 dancers has garnered quite a following.

According to Keshet Chaim's founder and artistic director Elyan Avisar - an ex-pat Israeli who moved to LA to marry the woman of his dreams - the company's mission is to "express the global spirit of Judaism and Israeli culture throughout the world, and to combat prejudice and anti-Semitism through education and entertainment."

That's a pretty tall order for Tinseltown, where many contend spirituality and strong Jewish values have taken an extended vacation. But for the 60-year-old Avisar, who turned to religion 10 years ago, all his works are imbued with a deep spirituality. *Neshama* - three years in the making - reflects that.

The two-hour show is a multimedia production - a kind of Judaism by numbers - a straightforward and literal interpretation of the history of the Jews from creation to the birth of the State of Israel to the belief in the eventual coming of the Messiah. There's a sense that it's really trying to appeal to the lowest common Jewish denominator in a city full of

assimilated Jews and cynical ex-pat Israelis.

Nevertheless, Avisar remains unfazed. And the audience does indeed lap up the light and sound show, the energetic dancing - a strange combination of modern dance and Israeli folk steps - and the heartfelt but kitschy narration and its accompanying slide show.

Yet the real highlight of the performance was guest David D'Or, who has worked with Keshet on four previous occasions. He flew in for 48 hours to sing with the troupe before returning to Israel to prepare for the upcoming Eurovision song contest.

He's already a huge name in Israel and in classical music circles worldwide, and the Israelis at the show couldn't get enough of him. As if at a rock concert, massive rounds of applause broke out as D'Or sang several of his well-known ballads, including the hit "Ba Neshama."

It was actually from this song that part of the idea for Keshet's production of *Neshama* was born.

"Keshet choreographed a piece about the Jewish people with my song, and that touched me a lot," said D'Or.

"It was wonderful and exciting that they were creating the story of the people of Israel through my songs."

And as for the simplicity of Keshet's production, D'Or says he believes it's the kind of show that speaks more to the Jewish heart abroad.

"Israelis are far more cynical because of what's going on in Israel and what we're going through. But if the American Jews

here come away with a little bit of a sense of belonging, then that's a great thing."

Yet with or without D'Or, Keshet has clearly carved its own niche within the Los Angeles Jewish community - managing to target both the locals and the ex-pat Israelis.

Over the years, the company's works have managed to imbue its audiences with both a love of Judaism and of Israel, and they perform to critical acclaim both locally and overseas.

Avisar intends to keep creating such productions until the Messiah comes - and beyond.



Keshet Chaim gives a literal interpretation of Jewish history in *Neshama - Stories of the Soul*.