

U.S.-Israeli dancers debut in S.F. for Shaare Zedek

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Every Halloween while growing up in the San Fernando Valley, Genie Benson went trick-or-treating dressed as a ballerina. Today, the 15-year veteran dancer with the L.A.-based Keshet Chaim Dance Ensemble has a far more colorful set of costumes to choose from.

Since 1983, Keshet Chaim (Hebrew for "Rainbow of Life") has been dazzling audiences with its unusual take on Jewish folk dance. Founded by artistic director Eytan Avisar, the company combines original choreography, commissioned musical works and the talents of 25 American and Israeli-born dancers, all trained in ballet, modern and folk dance.

The troupe's upcoming appearance at the Shaare Zedek Medical Center's 100th anniversary celebration on Thursday marks Keshet Chaim's San Francisco debut.

The audience will not get a rendition of that raucous "Hava Negilah" free-for-all at cousin Sheldon's bar mitzvah. In addition to traditional Israeli folk dance, Keshet Chaim draws on a wide world of Jewish dance culture, including Yemenite, Moroccan, Sephardi and Chassidic.

Says Benson, who also serves as

the ensemble's executive director, "Keshet Chaim is more than a troupe of performing dancers. We're a cultural

institution. We've worked with the Jewish federation, the Israeli Consulate, the Skirball Cultural Center and the University of Judaism. We provide many services for the community."

Perhaps most importantly, Keshet Chaim has sought to "express the global spirit of Judaism and Israeli culture throughout the world, and to combat prejudice and anti-Semitism through entertainment and education," as noted on the company's Web site, www.kcdancers.org

Over the years the dance troupe has lived up to its goals, spearheading a cultural education program for local schoolchildren at L.A.'s Skirball Center. Last year, the ensemble brought Israel's acclaimed folk dance company Inbal to the United States for an intensive artistic collaboration, complete with a dual-

company concert performance.

Artistically, Keshet Chaim strives to stay close to the cutting edge. The company often commissions new works from American and Israeli choreographers and composers such as Sharon Farber, who recently composed three pieces

for the group's ambitious "Jerusalem Suite," set to premiere next year.

The San Francisco audience



Photo — Glenda Hydlar
A Keshet Chaim dancer performs "Shorashim" ("Roots"), which features authentic Moroccan costumes and portrays the mixture of Moroccan, African and Yemenite cultures.

can expect a more casual and high-spirited performance than

Keshet Chaim's usual concert pieces. "We bring Jewish content to the events we play," says Benson, "and lift the mood of the people in attendance. There is often an interactive component. In fact, we once did a hora at a church and had 2,000 people in the aisles."

A nonprofit entity, Keshet Chaim has mounted and promoted its own concert performances for years. The group also produces concerts for visiting Israeli musicians.

The company toured Israel in 1988 and 1990, and was set to return this past summer as part of its Inbal exchange. The ongoing terror attacks forced the ensemble to cancel.

"We hope to go next year," says Benson, adding, "These are hard times, but we have to do whatever we can to raise people's spirits here so they will send more money over there, such as to the Shaare Zedek Medical Center. It's part of our job."

That's good news for David Cohen, executive director of the northwest region of the American Committee for Shaare Zedek Medical Center.

With private donations comprising 15 percent of the Jerusalem hospital's \$130 million

annual budget, Cohen welcomes the participation of Keshet Chaim to help raise funds at next week's event.

"We're saying thank you to our Bay Area supporters," says Cohen, "and providing them with something special."

Local Jewish community stalwarts Rita Semel and Earl Raab will be honored at the event, and broadcast journalist Belva Davis will serve as emcee.

In 1902, Shaare Zedek opened the doors of its first hospital on the Jaffa Road in Jerusalem's Old City. In 1979, the hospital moved to its present 500-bed location near Mount Herzl in the heart of Jerusalem.

Cohen says funds raised will go to Shaare Zedek's newly expanded emergency room facility. "It's going to be a 70-bed department," he says. "With the ongoing intifada and the prospect of a regional war, all funds raised at the gala go toward this critical need of the hospital."

Shaare Zedek 100th anniversary celebration takes place Thursday evening at the Westin St. Francis Hotel, Union Square, S.F. 6 p.m. reception, 7 p.m. dinner. Tickets: \$200. Information: (415) 957-1288.