

Dancing on the Edge of a Rainbow: Margot Mink Colbert's ballet, TRANSIT(ION): *Emigration Transformation*

Roberta Sabbath

Performed most recently in Jerusalem's Beit Shmuel Auditorium on July 4-5, 2014, Margot Mink Colbert's ballet, TRANSIT(ION): *Emigration Transformation*, was scheduled for a third night. Margot cancelled. On July 6, 2014, explosions from Gaza tunnels triggered Israel's Operation Protective Edge, beginning days of Gaza rocket launches interrupted by Israel's Iron Dome Missile Defense System. In Tel Aviv, Margot heard the pop of successful interceptions. The experience could not have been more emblematic of Jewish survival. Margot dubs her decision to cancel the performance beforehand a miracle.

The ballet dances the epic story of twentieth-century Eastern European Jews from the Pale of Settlement who, as immigrants and artists, faced the trials and gifts of everyday assimilation and artistic creativity—the exodus that refused slavery, desired liberation, struggled with freedom. Her work embraces the drive to survive in the New Country and a critical view of capitalism and materialist culture. She has choreographed what Hans Blumenberg calls the impulse to resist utopic vision for realistic solution. We hear the human story of the laughter through the tears. As one father mused, "America's a free country. You're perfectly free to keep your opinions to yourself. You can't even tell your own daughter what to do."

The multimedia ballet incorporates a montage of archival projections, klezmer music by Danish composer Heinrich Goldschmidt, a narrative voice for historical and literary references, and an eclectic choreography. Trained in traditional balletic style, dancers perform a Eastern European village hora, the Lower East Side sidewalk game of potsy, the Charleston dance and ballroom pieces of 1920s, the unemployment line of the 1930s, the power of Rosie the Riveter that emerged in the wartime 1940s, and the

Philippe Petit tightrope walk of 1974, a feat that Margot sees as a metaphor for the miracle of Jewish survival.

At the heart of the ballet is Polish immigrant Anzia Yeziarska (1880-1970), author of *Hungry Hearts*, the 1920 novel about the struggles, alienation, and hopes of immigrant Jews. She explains soul-crushing work in the shirtwaist factory: "I felt a strangling in my throat as I neared the sweatshop prison; all my nerves screwed together into iron hardness to endure the day's torture." We see her stomping, writhing in frustration and exhaustion, finally screaming aloud, reminiscent of Munch's *The Scream*. To express her elation when Samuel Goldwyn produces the movie *Hungry Hearts*, choreography takes us to the Roaring Twenties and Hollywood glitz. Then, Anzia declines a \$100,000 contract offer. "Writing is everything I am. ... It's my search for a meaning. I can't sign it away." She rejects the materialism, frantic competition, and the "machinery of success."

Through choreography, we see the narrative trajectory that includes devastation and elation. We hear the lyrics of Gerald Stern "Dear Waves": "Lucky you can be purified over and over again." Through music, we hear Yiddish refrains and American jazz. For Margot, the dancing body is emblematic of our humanity, its strength, its creativity, its grace, and its spirit. In her words, Jewish life from the Old Country to the New was like dancing on the brink of a miracle, a dream, a rainbow.

As assistant visiting professor at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, ROBERTA SABBATH teaches Jewish Studies and English literature classes and serves as Religious Studies Coordinator for Campus and Community Partnerships. Sabbath's Sacred Body: Profane Illuminations in Jewish Polemics, a monograph-in-progress, addresses Mink Colbert's ballet as one of several exemplary works.



From Margot Mink Colbert's ballet, *TRANSIT(ION): Emigration Transformation*.
Photos by Per Morten Abrahamsen.

The Golem: Old Monster, New Horrors

Olga Gershenson

Stories of the golem, a magically crafted human-shaped creature, originated in medieval Jewish sources. Since then, the legend, like the golem itself, has transformed. It has been told in different ways, with different agendas: with the golem's body made from clay, wood, earth—or in contemporary mediations—metal and plastic (Gershom Scholem named the first Israeli computer Golem Aleph); in some stories it was human-size, in others, the golem grew enormously or was giant from the start. Some golems appeared mute and zombie-like, others were more sentient, endowed with a gift of speech and even self-reflection. Some golems were created as a metaphysical exercise with no practical purpose, others as servants or protectors. In its distinctly modern incarnations, the golem story was used as a symbol of antisemitic persecution or of Jewish self-defense; it was a metaphor for the relationship between artist and creation, and a cautionary tale of artificial intelligence. Whatever the version, the question arises, can this engineered body have a soul or agency? Every golem story forces us to confront the issues of body, autonomy, and violence.

An Israeli horror film *The Golem* (Yoav and Doron Paz, 2018) is the most recent adaptation of the legend. It keeps the trappings of the best-known version—a golem is created to protect the Jewish community, but later becomes too violent and needs to be destroyed. But in a departure from tradition, the 2018 film reimagines both the golem's creator and destroyer as women. The film opens with a scene set in the synagogue in Prague, where an enormous golem murders the old Maharal. A little girl steps out of the shadows and kills the monster, succeeding where the distinguished rabbi failed.

Fast-forward a few decades to a Lithuanian shtetl, where a tightly knit Jewish community is threatened by menacing outsiders in plague-doctor masks. They accuse the Jews of causing an epidemic and promise violence. In the face of existential danger and the lack