

REVIEWS

A new kind of Orthodox movement

DANCE
JOY SABLE

A SMALL GROUP of Orthodox Jewish men are swaying, their bodies dipping in unison as they daven, lips moving soundlessly, devotion etched upon their faces. But these men are not praying — they are dancing on a stage. They are members of Ka'et Ensemble, a contemporary dance troupe unlike any other, made up of Israeli men from a traditional Orthodox community more commonly associated with learning than performing.

Ka'et Ensemble will be making its UK debut at JW3 next week, performing the world premiere of *Heroes*, a work choreographed by company founder Ronen Izhaki. The piece examines Jewish masculinity — an intriguing area for exploration, as a typical Jewish man is usually depicted as the intellectual, the scholar or the Woody Allen-type *nebbish*. The concept obviously struck a chord with JW3's Kayne Foundation Dance Commission, which chose the work for performance over a number of different dance companies.

If *Heroes* explores the idea of a Jewish male archetype, then Izhaki wants to show that it is not just the whey-faced scholar, or even the Israeli soldier or farmer. "We try to bring about a discussion about the body; what is the Jewish man in Israel, what is the identity of his body, and we try to work with it from different angles," he says.

PHOTO: YARDEN MEEROVITCH

Ka'et
Ensemble:
Exploring
religious
male
Jewish
identity

dance training prior to coming to the school. The three-year course is led by a group of teachers whom Ronen describes as "the best in Israel". Promising students have the opportunity to join the Ensemble.

Three out of the Ensemble's four dancers are visiting London for the performances of *Heroes*, and they have other jobs which fit around their dancing: one is a rabbi, one a social worker and one works at the dance centre. Ronen acknowledges that for some religious people, there is a conflict between learning Torah and performing.

"It depends who you ask. You can see people who wouldn't like it. But most people invite us to their yeshiva to perform or teach. We teach in more than 30 or 40 yeshivas around Jerusalem. When we have a performance in Jerusalem, it is sold out a few days before."

Those packed audiences include both the secular and the religious, as those who watch Ka'et Ensemble come from all strands of Israeli life. "We enjoy creating this moment of communication, even if it is not easy. It is unique in Israel and gives us a lot of energy to go on." He is even contemplating starting a project that will involve Israeli Arabs. Before that comes about, he wants more communication through dance to bring people together.

"We want a movement class in every yeshiva and, on the other side, we want to invite the secular community of dancers to discover and open old books. We work for both sides."

Ka'et Ensemble will perform at JW3, 341-351 Finchley Road, London NW3 on Tuesday 21 and Wednesday 22 June at 7.30pm. Tickets £10.

can do yoga, change nappies, cook, and many other things, but professional dancing is something that is not quite acceptable for many men in Israel. If you look at the schools or go to the studios, you see a lot of girls with pink tutus but you cannot see boys because boys have to make money, be strong, not flexible and there is no interest in contemporary dance.

But it says [in our prayers] 'all my bones shall say'. The interest in dance is coming from being religious."

His students have had no formal

me — religious — from Jerusalem. It took me maybe 15 or 20 minutes to realise that their body language is unique, very special."

Until Ronen Izhaki formed Ka'et Ensemble, he says that religious men were able to express their dancing only at weddings, but things are beginning to change, with what he calls "kind of a revolution for the Jewish man in his relationship with his body".

Current Israeli culture may mean that the revolution takes time. "Men

Izhaki is director of the Between Heaven and Earth Centre in Jerusalem, which is home to dance productions, his company and a theatre-dance school for 20 students, all of whom are Orthodox.

It was purely chance that led him to work with the Orthodox community. "About 15 years ago, I got an offer to work with people from a yeshiva. I was a young, secular choreographer from Tel Aviv and I had to make money, so I said okay. I met people who were very different from