

Company celebrates decade

From a single challenge 10 years ago Harriet Berg developed a dance company, the Festival Dancers, that has been defying tradition ever since.

The challenge came when the Detroit Musical Society asked Ms. Berg, dance teacher at the Jewish Community in Oak Park, to choreograph a dance to Leonard Bernstein's "Chichester Psalms."

She did and designed it for nine women and five children. It was given as a Christmas program at the Wayne State University Community Arts Auditorium and at least 50 more times in the three years following.

That's how the Festival Dancers, sponsored by the Jewish Community Center, came into existence. And they have been an integral part of the metropolitan dance scene ever since. There's hardly a suburban community or art institution where they haven't performed.

To celebrate this decade of art, the Festival Dancers will give two performances March 20, 21 which will amount to a grand dance family reunion.

Many of the early dances will be performed once again and this is no small feat. Dances aren't the same as words, they can't be written down and recorded in detail for posterity. Movements are elusive—something less than exact science. Ms. Berg has films of some of the later dances, but reviving the early ones hinges on memory and notebooks full of marks, directions and stick figure diagrams.

ONE COMPANY ALUMNA, Sheila Collins, now of Lincoln, Neb., whom Ms. Berg said, "has a marvelous memory for movement," is coming back on St. Patrick's Day to work with the company on the "Chichester Psalms."

"She's going to work with us every day and help me stage it," Ms. Berg said.

Ms. Collins, whom Ms. Berg said was heartbroken when she had to leave the Festival Dancers because of her husband's transfer, later formed her own Festival Dancers company in Lincoln.

Another alumna, Becky Malm of Troy who now heads the "Dance Alive" company at Birmingham Unitarian Church, is returning to help reconstruct three dances from her years with the company in the early 1970's.

Two other former members, Carol Halsted who heads the dance program at Oakland University and Jennifer

Petrick of Kingswood School, plan to contribute their recollections.

Festival Dancers who generally range in age from 20-40, many of them housewives with children, are frequently women with dance backgrounds seeking an artistic outlet.

"What I love about the company," said Ms. Berg, "is that these women are products of Detroit dance studios. All are married, most have children and they have all of the things in their lives that every other housewife has—meals, car pools, ski trips with their husbands, shopping and cleaning, yet, having this commitment makes them get their work done faster."

THEY ALL ATTEND a minimum of two classes a week and, when there are performances coming up, there are additional rehearsals. They are always reworking techniques and while a contemporary dance company, work in a number of styles—jazz, ballet, ethnic, and modern.

In the past year the Festival Dancers toured with a performance of "Women's Rights."

"This," explained Ms. Berg, "explores woman's life from birth to death."

Elaine Serling of Farmington Hills, came into the company as a singer. She sang in the "Woman's Rights" program and recently made recordings, but she is also a dancer with the company.

Other members of the present company are: Phyllis Berger, Southfield; Margo Cohen, Southfield; Reva Davenport, Detroit; Marcia Ferstenfeld, Southfield; Connie

Grossman, Oak Park; Victoria Haydon, Detroit; Bunny Nickman, Southfield; Beverly Olen, West Bloomfield; and Bonnie Steingold, Huntington Woods.

THE DANCERS REHEARSE at both the Oak Park and West Bloomfield buildings. And while, as Ms. Berg emphasized, the Jewish Community Center has sponsored the activity and provided a home for it, no membership restrictions have ever been placed on the company. The Festival Dancers, like all classes offered by the Jewish Community Center are open to both center members and non-members so not only do the dancers have varied dance backgrounds, they likewise represent a broad ethnic, religious and geographical cross-section.

Ms. Berg was director of the Wayne State University dance workshop in the

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1960s. With the encouragement of Ruth Murray, she completed her masters degree in humanities with a dance concentrate.

HER MASTERS PROJECT, a dance, "Les Dames d'Avignon," was taken from a Picasso painting of the same name. This was an early start for a theme which has permeated the 10 years of Festival Dancers' endeavors—the stress on the interrelationship of the visual and performing arts.



Time out for a minor repair—one of the hazards of the art.



HARRIET BERG

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