

## ISRAELI CUSTOMS

By Gus Dick Andros

At the risk of not being politically correct I would like to say that there is definitely a "Middle Eastern" mentality. I am sure that any American who transplants him or herself to the Middle East will find a cultural chasm that is hard to cross.

When I was offered the job as assistant director of the Bat Dor Dance Company in Israel, I had many misgivings about such a dramatic move, but after much consideration I took the position. The company was financed by the Baroness Bathsheva de Rothchild. Although I signed a contract for a year, there was the possibility that I would stay indefinitely.

Not knowing what would become of this venture, I sublet my apartment in New York City. I wanted to make sure I had a place to come back to. Packing for my move to Israel, I had to take not only dance clothes, but clothes for every season. To save money I sent a foot-locker, two suitcases, and my bicycle by unaccompanied luggage.

The first week in Israel, customs informed me by postcard that my luggage had arrived. I called them to have my luggage delivered to the studio, but then I was told that they did not have my luggage. I called customs everyday for two weeks, and they said that my luggage must be lost. I reminded them of the card they had sent me. They agreed to continue looking; but it was getting very cold and my winter clothes were in the foot locker. I complained to the Baroness who said, "I hate to use my position on such a small issue." I said nothing and continued to call the airport everyday. Finally I couldn't stand it any longer, and I told the Baroness I was leaving. She could see that I meant it and made arrangement for me to go to Ben Gurion Airport to look for my possessions.

The Baroness sent the Israeli Public Relations Officer, Joseph Frenkel, with me to help with the language. On the way to the airport Frenkel kept saying, "You, American, be bad guy. They get mad with me if I make trouble."

"Believe me, I will be the bad guy, because I am so mad I could rip the place apart," I said, preparing to create a scene.

"They no like Americans, but they let them have their way," Frenkel said.

After being in Israel more than a month, I knew being an American was a disadvantage.

"You like Israel?" he asked.

"Yes and no, I can't understand why they treat newcomers so harshly," I complained.

"We must make everybody prove themselves."

"Prove what? I breathe just like they do."

"No! You no understand. If we can run over you, then we find if you weak."

I realized then why I was having trouble with some dancers. Many of them would deliberately refuse my directions.

"I think that is stupid. Why not work together to get things done faster?" I asked.

"You don't understand Israelis. If you think Tel Aviv is bad, you should go Kibbutz."

"If they're like the dancers in the company I can live without them."

As we got closer to the airport he reminded me again, "You be bad guy."

I had a letter of introduction from the Baroness to the head of customs. He was very polite to us and gave us a pass to the storage room so I could look for my luggage. Not five feet from the door of the storage room was my luggage, with the tags turned down, no one had bothered to turn the tags to see to whom they belonged. I gave them my tickets and they put my foot-locker and suitcases on the counter and proceeded to inspect them. There was no problem with what I was bringing into the country, even my bicycle passed.

They handed me a bill for seven weeks storage. "What! You have to be out of your mind," I shouted. "Why should I pay for your stupidity. You can put that God damn luggage on the next plane to America. I wouldn't stay in this country another minute." I could be heard throughout the building.

Then my friend Joe Frenkel, who was about 6'4" reached across the counter and pulled the customs officer across the counter. Joe was calling him every dirty name in the Hebrew language, and we were suddenly surrounded by armed guards and our arms were pulled behind our backs. I shouted, "Get me the head man. Don't you dare hold my arms! You son-of-a bitch, let me go!" Now my Greek temper had reached its peak, and I tried to pull away, but they held my arm firm and had guns pointed at me. I was their prisoner and I was getting worried.

The head of customs arrived and ordered, "Let them go." He calmed the situation, and I explained to him how I had called every day and they told me that my luggage was lost and yet it was within five feet of their phone. "Now they want to charge me seven weeks storage," my voice reaching feverish pitch.

"Help them load their car," he said smiling as if it were a joke. The men who had their guns pointed at us picked up the luggage and loaded our car. "Give the Baroness de Rothchild my regards and let her know that you got your luggage."

I thanked him and Joe and I drove away.

"Bathsheva has a lot of pull doesn't she?" I said to Joe, but he just sat behind the wheel of his car, his chest pumped up, and a look of triumph on his face.

"You see me pull guy across counter?" He proudly said.

"I thought you wanted me to be the bad guy."

"You American, me, I'm Israeli!"

Joe wasn't declaring his nationality, but his mind set.

The incident at the airport was a game to see who would back down first. There was no question who was right, but had I paid the storage, in their eyes I would have been weak.

I am sure that this game was played long before I arrived and would continue long after I left.

My mind set is that life is too short to deliberately start every day with an argument.