

# The Right Moves

## A Dance Instructor's Recollections of Defying Apartheid in South Africa

By David E. Kaplan

\*This article first appeared in Lay of the Land in August 2021

A marine biologist and tour guide friend of Fonda Dubb in Eilat had a bad fall and was rushed to Emergency at Israel's southern coastal city hospital – Yoseftal Medical Center. After being patched-up, Colin Porter, said the stitching done by the Arab doctor on duty was so well done that he characterised it as a “tapestry” and wanting to show his appreciation, offered to teach him snorkeling.

Touched by this gesture, the Arab doctor agreed and said it was the first time he would be socialising with a Jew!

What this story or extended “tapestry” of life unveils is that too few people from worlds culturally separate, fail to meaningfully engage beyond the workplace. “This happens across the globe,” says Fonda. “We leave it to the politicians who are generally lousy at this job instead of us ordinary people engaging on a grassroots person-to-person level.”

Fonda knows exactly what she is talking about from her experiences in South Africa during the darkest days of Apartheid when she went out of her way to bring people who would not otherwise connect – together!

She made every effort, frequently putting herself in danger in crossing boundaries – geographic as well as personal.

What her story reveals is that while we are more familiar with the high-profile opponents of Apartheid, we are less so of the ordinary people who in their own ordinary way achieved extraordinary results. Such was the case of Fonda Dubb of Eilat.

As a dance teacher in the late sixties in Port Elizabeth, Fonda led a kind of double life. While in the city she taught kids at a dance studio exclusively for whites, she also immersed herself in teaching boys and girls at the **Gelvandale Toynbee Ballet School** in the Coloured district of Port Elizabeth.



**Not Dancing to the Tune of Apartheid.** Fonda Dubb's students at Gelvandale Ballet School.

At the city studio, "Coloureds" were excluded because of the ugly **Group Areas Act**, which assigned racial groups to different residential and business sections in urban areas in a system of urban Apartheid. 'So I used to drive backwards and forwards to the township, a one hour drive away. I was totally unperturbed visiting an area where very few Whites ever went, although I was under surveillance and at times stopped by the police enquiring where I was going and what I was doing.' When there were clashes with the police in Gelvandale or on the route, "someone would phone and warn me not to come. "

There was no stopping Fonda. If Whites were blocked from being culturally exposed to the Coloured community, Fonda 'pirouetted' devising a reverse step. "I was determined that my students perform in front of White audiences and so, I would apply for permits to the Administration of Coloured Affairs for every such performance."

**Testing Times.** Through Fonda Dubb's perseverance, these Coloured students would perform in White areas of Port Elizabeth.



Knowing the moves on the dance floor were not enough; Fonda had to 'choreograph' a path through Apartheid's labyrinthian bureaucracy!

From a file, Fonda takes out a humiliating relic of the Apartheid era, the permit which imposed the following conditions:

“...that no social mixing with the audience occurs, that the Coloured do not make use of any of the change-rooms or any other facilities provided for Whites and that they leave the premises immediately after their performance.” And if they needed to use the toilets, “who knows what they were expected to do,” sighs Fonda, shaking her head.



**A Good Mix.** Fonda Dubb and her committee receiving a grant for the Gelvandale Toynbee Ballet School. Besides the Treasurer Colin Melmed (left), the only other White on the Committee, Fonda says “This to my knowledge was the only mixed committee during the Apartheid era.”

Fonda relates how they overcame problems that today, 26 years after the fall of Apartheid, appear strangely surreal:

“If I received a permit, which only allowed for the exact number of my dances, then that would exclude the Coloured staff, particularly their drivers. To surmount this problem, because we had to strictly comply with the conditions, of the permit, my late husband Mark and I would drive backwards and forwards in our own cars, taking and fetching the students.”



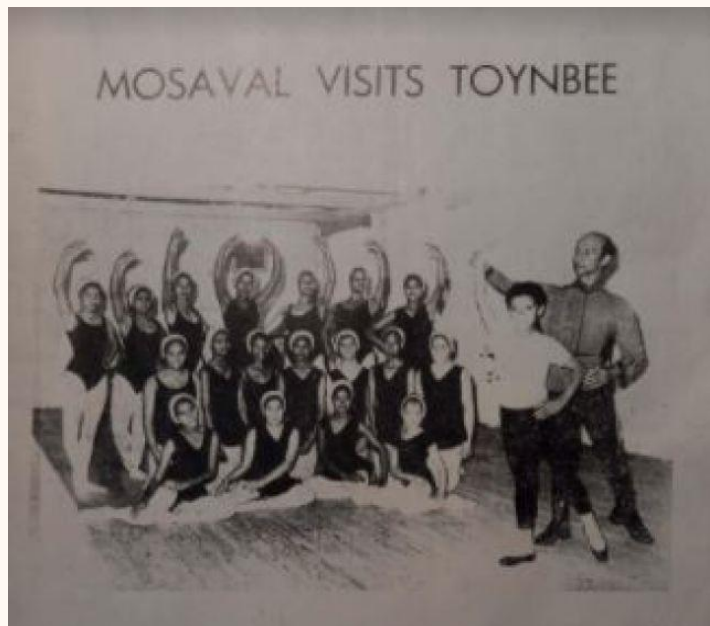


**Aspiring Dancers.** Fonda Dubb's young students receiving awards in 1974.

Her coloured students frequently received the highest marks in Port Elizabeth. Following their progress, Fonda always felt proud to see how they overcame the many Apartheid-related obstacles. “Some would go on to UCT’s ballet School, others would become teachers, while a few went on to perform overseas.”

Following Dulcie Howes – considered the Prima Ballerina Assoluta of South African ballet – introducing Ballet as a matric subject in South African schools, two of the first graduates in the programme “were my Coloured students who would go on to receive bursaries to study at UCT, where after they returned to teach at Coloured schools in Gelvendale. I think this was one on my proudest moments!”

**Going Great.** On a visit to the Toynbee Ballet School, the former principal dancer of the Royal Ballet, London Johaar Mosaval, says he was most impressed with the caliber of the students who Fonda Dubb, had been entering for R.A.D exams since 1970.



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\***'The Right Moves'** first appeared in the **'Lay of the Land'** publication in August 2021. The above piece on Dancing is an excerpt of the longer article.

Permission to publish it in the CHOL MEMOIR site, has been kindly given by the writer, David Kaplan.

The link to the article is: <https://layoftheland.online/2021/08/31/the-right-moves>