



## Special love shines through their art

*By Camilla Warrick, Post staff reporter*

Bonia Shur sits at the piano, working the chords free.

It's 9 a.m. in what was once the living room of his North Avondale home. Now only bare or stockinged feet traverse its shiny oak floor, and its furniture has disappeared - unless you consider a massage table and some inflated, colored balls, piled in one corner, "furniture."

This is a studio for dance, therapy and invention. It is for chanting and singing, drumbeats and shouts, words that tumble out uncensored and movement that never needs to be right or wrong.

Fanchon breezes over, kisses the top of his head. Her hair mixes with his. Both long, wavy, the color of driftwood.

Fanchon Shur, the dancer. Bonia Shur, the composer. Together: Artists, partners, parents, playmates, collaborators. For almost 25 years they have been fixtures at many religious gatherings in Greater Cincinnati, challenging groups to participate as well as listen.

His melody, layered with harmonies, continues. She begins to move, then drops, like a scared child, head bowed and beats the floor. "Everybody is looking at me, waiting for something," she wails, "and I have nothing to give."

His left hand still makes chords, but his right hand switches to a tall conga drum standing next to the piano. A new rhythm asserts itself. "Birim bam, birim bam, birim bam" he chants. "Birim bam," she responds and moves again, light as a flame, joining him for a prayer chorus they wrote together a week ago:

"Waves are rising, swelling, crash and roll,

Waves are breaking, ripple, crest and fall.

May the song flowing from my soul,

Like the oceans heal and bless us all."

The session was neither planned nor rehearsed. Her anguish was not a performance, nor was her affection, when she straddled the piano bench, circled his waist and stroked the inside of his palms as he drummed.

This is the way they work - in the moment. They call it, giggling, the Shur System of Structured Improvisation.

"November 1, 1960," he reminds her, though she needs no reminding. That was the day they met in Los Angeles, each linked to a different mate, family, artistic discipline.

"Ours is the partnership of the century," she said once, with neither pride, nor self-deprecating mirth. Another time she offered, "It's not about being *something*. It's about being in that connected place together."

Out of this union has come dozens of choral works, dances, award-winning compositions and the conviction in each of their teaching. Even when they are working alone, the connection is essential, they said.

"From the moment I fell in love with her the fuel was not only sexual or emotional, but creative," said Bonia. "The potential is so great. It never stops."

Bonia, the director of liturgical arts at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, teaches rabbinical students, writes music used in Reform synagogues across the country, composes long commissioned pieces, directs choirs. Fanchon choreographs, dances, writes poetry, teaches and does movement therapy. She is 63; he 75.

"I've known them for close to 30 years," said Dr. Alfred Gottschalk, chancellor of HUC. "I've seen enormous maturation in both and an exploration of inwardness, especially in Fanchon. . . . To her, each person is a gift from God and that's the way she treats people. She's remarkable in every respect.

"And Bonia is a genius. Incredible."

It was Dr. Gottschalk, HUC's president from 1971 to 1995, who created the post of director of liturgical arts and recruited Shur to fill it in 1974. Dr. Gottschalk's hope was to bring a professional's direction to the college's singers, broaden the school's musical archives and enrich the content of Reform worship.

"I'm as pleased as I can be," Dr. Gottschalk said. "He's done all of that."

Bonia draws from Jewish traditions of many countries and weaves them into the American experience. Fanchon, a ready crosser of boundaries both religious and cultural, applauds these endeavors and often joins him.

Hand her a Jewish prayer shawl and she will see in it an umbilical cord, a Torah scroll, a snake, a tree, a wedding canopy. She will lengthen it to 40 feet and bring in other dancers, and an important ritual object becomes a membrane, which gives life and connects them to other lives.

This dance, called Taalit, with a sound-track created by Bonia, has been performed hundreds of times around the country.

According to Bonia, "I musically guide her creative mind." According to Fanchon, "We're not even sure about what's so magical and powerful between us."

In another breath, she said, "We're always punching each other tenderly."

Each requests to speak for him or herself. They air complaints openly and sometimes sharply. Artistic gifts are described in distinct terms.

"He has a strong, rhythmic, formal, tonal, sound sense," said Fanchon. "I have a depth, a devouring grasp of

primal imagery."

To Dr. Gottschalk, Bonia and Fanchon are iconoclasts, though not necessarily in the same arena. But one wall they both assail is the one between performer and spectator. They like to turn observers into participants and worshipers into liturgists.

This has challenged many gatherings, particularly in Cincinnati. Maybe that's because they don't just invite people to sing along, but raise hands, breath deeply and move - sometimes even on the floor (like reptiles) or over it (like insects).

"We don't want to look at ourselves or other people," said Dr. Karla Goldman, associate professor of American Jewish History at HUC. "People are uncomfortable with this. Yet they (the Shurs) have persevered. I think that's a desirable contribution."

Fanchon's goal is not to generate discomfort, but to get observers to appreciate themselves as part of a community still under construction. She is always looking for "moments of authenticity" to break through the expected and acceptable.

She recalls her excitement, at age 12 or 13, when she witnessed the folk dances born in Israel as the young nation was creating an identity from many cultures. She saw movement as a powerful tool of self-expression, not merely entertainment.

As a younger child, gifted in dance, she resisted her mother's proddings to "dance for them" - gatherings of adults who wanted to be charmed. She realized in her early 20s that providing entertainment was not what motivated her to dance. Something wild, at once personal and impersonal, did.

Fanchon made it through three years of college as an engineering major. But it was no good. It wasn't in her to become a soil scientist who would turn the deserts of Israel green. She was still fascinated by Israel, particularly the kibbutz movement, but she had to return to dance.

In the fall of 1960, when she was married and the mother of two young sons, she met Bonia Shur. She was choreographing a commissioned dance and needed a composer. He was an Israeli composer, a kibbutznik visiting the U.S. for a year, who needed an outlet for his creative fire.

Born in Dvinsk, Latvia in the early 1920s, Bonia had escaped the Nazis hours before they took over his city. He then joined the Russian army, made it through World War II though most fellow soldiers were killed, moved to Poland and later to Tel Aviv.

He too was married and the father of two. His family rented a duplex across the street from Fanchon's family in a shabby neighborhood of Los Angeles.

Theirs was not an instant romance. It was a collaboration. But love followed two years later with surprising intensity.

Fanchon divorced and went through a difficult period alone - without her children or Bonia. "I tried to commit suicide. I thought I couldn't get what I needed. I didn't know that what I needed was in here," she said, pointing to her heart.

Eventually, she and Bonia did marry. Into their blended family of four children they welcomed two more of

their own. From L.A., they went to jobs in Seattle, then Cincinnati.

Together and apart they have created hundreds of works. Being married and raising children with a professional collaborator isn't easy. "It has its positives and pitfalls," said Bonia.

"It's a tremendous burden and a great strength," said Fanchon. "It's hard when I can't escape him or when I'm intensely drawn to him and he's not there."

But more often than not, they are there. Their "structured improvisations" may occur in the morning or late at night.

"We always find a way to understand each other," said Bonia.

"Our relationship," said Fanchon, "is the core. It's the core of something extraordinary."

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