Personal Territory

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When I recently learned that ZviDance (Zvi Gotheiner's New York–based dance company) was performing a forty-eight-minute work, *Dabke*, at Baruch Performing Arts Center, I was intrigued. The piece is loosely based on the traditional Arabic men's folk dance called by the same name.

Zvi Gotheiner grew up in Israel on a kibbutz dancing the Israeli version, the debka, at weekly Friday-night sessions. Almost seven thousand miles away I, too, did the debka at weekly dances at my local Jewish Center in Dallas, Texas. The infectious driving rhythms and exotic Middle Eastern melodies drew me into the dance. The increasing challenge of each variation on the footwork thrilled me. The postperformance endorphin rush left a warm, connected afterglow from the communal endeavor as we detached ourselves from the curved line formation with its characteristic hand, belt, or shoulder grip.

Gotheiner envisioned creating the piece when his Israeli partner and a waiter in a Lebanese restaurant in Stockholm became friendly and began dancing the dabke between the dining tables. Inspired by this bit of common ground, Gotheiner and his company started work on the piece by analyzing online videos of various dabkes. Members chose their favorite clips and improvised on them.

I decided to try the dabke YouTube exercise myself. There is a wide array of material, from Palestinian and Lebanese all-male wedding performances to an updated all-female Israeli Arab performing troupe to a co-ed flash mob of professional dancers in the Beirut International Airport. As I scratched the surface, it became apparent that this simple dance has become a new site for the ongoing Palestinian-Israeli conflict as well as the divergence between the Palestinian national narrative and the surrounding Arab world. Yes, they are fighting over the appropriation of a dance. Even the comments posted under the YouTube clips are highly politicized.

The Israeli debkas that Gotheiner and I danced as youngsters were rechoreographed from the local dabkes by early Zionist pioneers (1930s and 1940s) in Palestine. As part of the work of building a nation and a distinct national identity, they understood the importance of a national folk culture as a rallying point, and invested themselves in creating a new folk dance idiom for the renewed Jewish people in the state of Israel.

Israeli folk dances (including the debka) are relatively new forms (about seventy-five years old) based on, or borrowed from, previously existing Jewish as well as non-Jewish ethnic, religious, and folk dances. There was an especially strong push to develop dances from the existing Semitic communities – Yemenite Jews, local Arabs, Druze, and Bedouins – with the goal of reviving long-lost Jewish cultural practices of biblical times as well as shedding the image of the victimized wandering Jew of eastern Europe. Many of the early Zionist choreographers were women who nurtured the early folk dance culture and created the new Israeli debkas to conform with modern Israeli ideals of gender equality, so that women and men joined hands dancing together.

As a result of the 1947-48 conflict and the establishment of Israel, there was a large displacement of the Palestinian Arab population and their culture. As they dispersed to Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and the West Bank, the pan-Arab narrative appropriated the dabke as an expression of Arab identity, unity, and anticolonialism, producing popular folklore festivals and choreographing performance spectacles that incorporated many aspects of "Western" dance.

Palestinian nationalism began to replace pan-Arabism in the 1960s and the dabke was revived, reappropriated, and performed in the West Bank as a symbol of resistance. The Palestinians fostered an allegiance to the dance as

an embodiment of their attachment to their land. Again the dabke became a rallying device for a new and growing nationalism.

This time it was used to establish and defend a unique Palestinian identity as distinct from the surrounding Arab states and Israel. Performing the dabke was a means of supporting armed struggle so that the dance was transformed into a militant men's dance performed in military clothing by young, unmarried men featuring a masculinized style. I had never considered that dance could be such a charged political entity.

Some may use this dance as territory for conflict. Gotheiner used it as a landscape for brutally honest, revealing exploration. He took the essence of dabke and developed it into an examination of the dynamics of its practice, and then riffed on aspects of the greater Middle Eastern experience and current issues. The original musical score by Scott Killian (Gotheiner's frequent artistic collaborator) mirrors Gotheiner's choreographic references to the dabke folk dance by alternating traditional style dabke music by Ali El Deek with his own "new-age" sound, creating a musical collage that serves the piece well.

I sat in on the company's rehearsal for an upcoming performance in order to get a closer glimpse of that landscape. In the beginning we see a female trying to break into the male line and learn the closely guarded steps. It is an unsuccessful attempt. A riveting solo of introspection performed by David Norsworthy shows his internal conflict over whether to reveal his fragile interior. As Gotheiner put it, it is this softer, sensual male self that is at odds with the Middle Eastern male persona.

Todd Allen delivered a chilling solo that could be construed as a duet with his shirt, which he took off. The shirt became a prayer mat, the note on which he scribbled a suicide bomber's message, a stone to hurl, a veil to conceal a woman's face, a banner of protest, a flag of liberation, a cover-up for a loaded gun, a dabke dancer's handkerchief . . . In Gotheiner's imagination a sweaty shirt can be a potent symbol.

ZviDance's rehearsals can feel a bit like a psychotherapy session (or acting class). Gotheiner asked company members, "Why are you stomping?" One dancer replied, "Because I'm happy. It's a celebration!" While coaching Robert (Buddy) Valdez, Jr. through a solo, Gotheiner constantly questioned his dramatic intentions as he performed the movements. Gotheiner leaned toward me, "There is no right answer. I just want the dancers to have a clear intention. Otherwise it will not come across as authentic." Although he controls the choreographic vision, the company members have a lot of freedom within the structure.

As rehearsal concluded and the dancers were leaving, I sat down with Kuan Hui Chew, an intense wisp of a dancer from Singapore. She performs the solo that closes the piece, marked by repeated running in circles while frequently falling down, only to rise up again to continue to run. When I asked her what motivational cues she was given for this section, she said that the solo made reference to the Arab Spring, with its hopes, expectations, and disappointments.

The dramatic scenes within Gotheiner's choreographic canvas are held together by characteristic dabke rhythms, steps, mannerisms, and formations. Throughout the work there are references to the dance's roots and typical performance aspects. The dance hails from many different locales in the Middle East – Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan – and historically was performed at village festivities such as weddings. It is characterized by foot stomping and intensely rhythmic, sometimes virtuosic foot- and legwork that alternates between stationary timekeeping and propulsive movement through space.

At the head of the line of dancers, the leader (called *raas* meaning head or *lawweeh* meaning waver) twirls his handkerchief, short rope, string of beads, cane, or sometimes a rifle and sets the basic step pattern for the group. He periodically leaves the line and moves forward improvising a solo – usually facing the onlookers, although sometimes he dances facing his fellow dancers – while the group main-

Zvi Gotheiner's *Dabke*. (Photo: Jacqueline Chambord, ZviDance)

tains the basic step. Afterward he returns to his place at the head of the line and rejoins the communal step pattern.

The line of dancers defines a community and the support as well as the constraints it confers upon its members – like a kibbutz, a tribe, a political movement, a nation, or the entire Middle East. The leader's solo exhibits a permissible individuality and freedom of expression, always within the safety of the accepted structure. The relationship between the individual and the group is fluid, as implied by Gotheiner's use and deconstruction of the traditional dabke group formations.

Gotheiner's artistic incubation included training as a serious classical violinist as a teenager and dancing with the major Israeli modern dance companies during the 1970s, including Batsheva and Bat Dor. At that time both were Graham-trained, well-rounded repertory dance companies, performing the works of the greats – Martha Graham, José Limón, Glen Tetley, Jerome Robbins, Antony Tudor, Kurt Jooss – to name a few.

But Gotheiner attributes his language of choreography to the mentoring of his beloved teacher, Gertrude Kraus, a petite powerhouse who immigrated to Palestine from Vienna in the 1930s and brought the German expressionist influence to the Israeli classical dance scene. Kraus offered to make him "into an artist" after seeing an early piece of his choreography. Gotheiner described her composition technique as amorphous and loose. Kraus would conduct her classes in a hodge-podge of different languages that were unintelligible to her Israeli students.

Perhaps that was the perfect way to impart lessons about a nonverbal art form. These influences help to explain Gotheiner's thematically driven choreography drawn with stylistically varied movement, musical sensitivity, and genuine dramatic investigation.

The richly evocative movement vocabulary Gotheiner uses makes me wish he would refrain from reliance on the classic modern dance lexicon in this piece. When I asked him what prompted him to include modern dance

vocabulary, he responded that he wanted the expansive movements to contrast with the dabke folk style. I think it speaks to his conflict with Middle Eastern political and social constraints.

ZviDance, a company bubbling over with athletic and technical capability, is comprised of stylistically versatile and emotionally gripping performers who embody the contagious spirit of the dabke folk dance. The black-box dance theater at Baruch Performing Arts Center afforded the audience a view of the dancers as they awaited their entrances and made their exits. I particularly noted Chelsea Ainsworth, her eyes sparkling with unbridled enthusiasm as she waited to rejoin the action onstage.

With his *Dabke*, Gotheiner takes a charged and contentious source of collective identity and maintains that he is navigating through the territory without taking sides. I think he claims it as his very own for a personal exploration of issues connected with his Middle Eastern roots. "What is next for *Dabke*," I asked. He admitted that he wanted to see how Arabic audiences would respond to the piece. When I asked where that could happen, he mentioned a couple of dance festivals in Amman and Ramallah that presented possibilities. Gotheiner mused out loud, "I really should get to work on that."

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