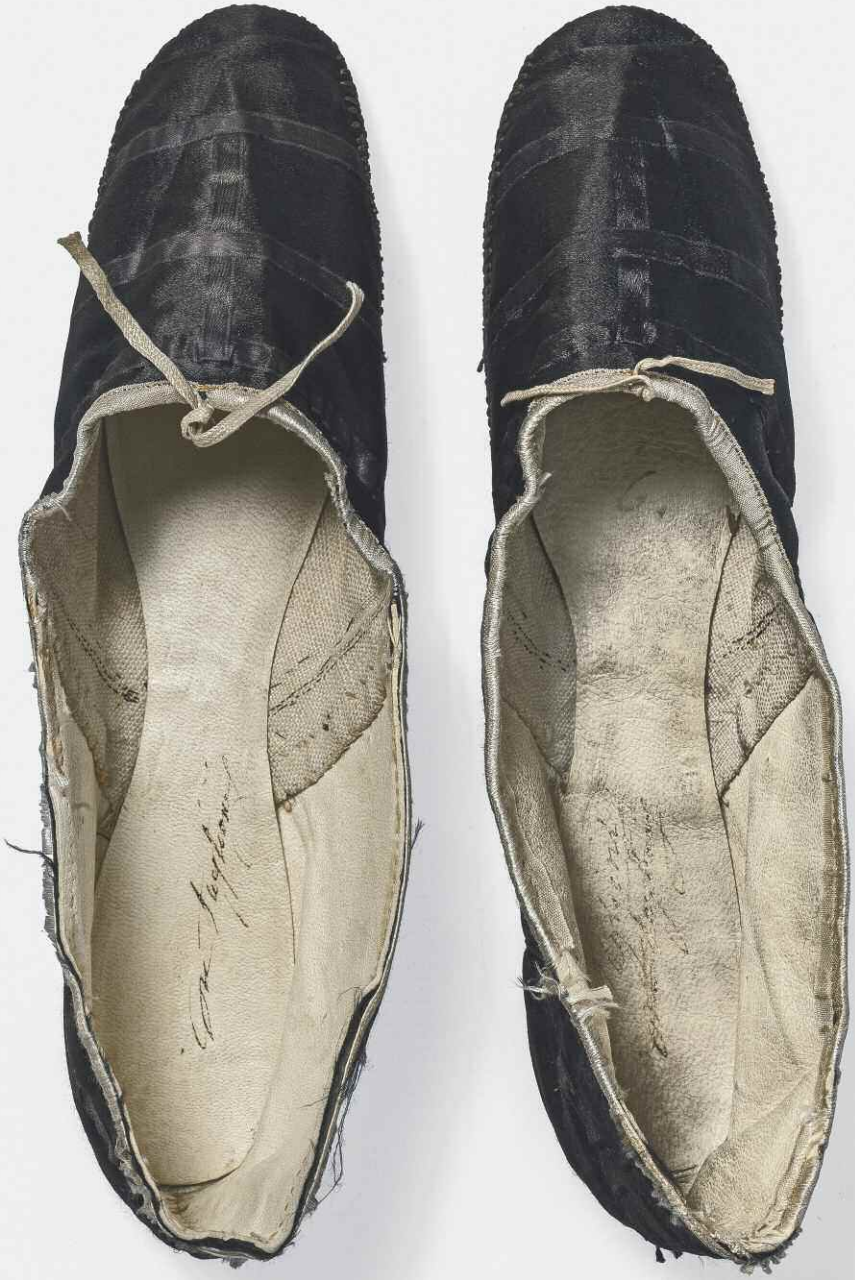
Summer 2018

Ballet Review



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Ballet Review 46.2
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Cover photograph by Jean Tholance, Musée des Arts Décoratifs: Marie Taglioni's ballet slippers, 1842.

Hofesh Shechter's *Grand Finale*. (Photo: Ian Douglas, Brooklyn Academy of Music)

Three Israeli Choreographers

Karen Greenspan

The modern state of Israel has continuously dealt with decisions of existential consequence since it declared its independence in 1948. It is a society where fighting and death are constant companions due to a history of wars, ongoing threats of war, frequent terrorist attacks, and the military service and reserve duty required of almost everyone. The result is an intensity about life and living with an in-your-face, direct manner that also manifests in an abundance of artistic creativity. Last fall, New York City got a taste of the bracing talent of a new generation of Israeli choreographers who are active on their home turf as well as on the international circuit.

Yossi Berg, a former dancer with the Batsheva Dance Company of Israel as well as DV8 Physical Theatre of London, has been part of this younger generation of choreographers. His work was nurtured by Batsheva in 1999 while he was dancing with the company. He and his codirector Oded Graf brought their new work *Come Jump With Me* to New York Live Arts. The production was presented by the American Dance Festival, where it premiered last summer. This physical theater fantasy uses theatricality and physicality as well as text and props in a bold and edgy but, ultimately, touching expression.

Berg and the equally committed and energetic performer Olivia Court Mesa dance this piece at full throttle, playing themselves as the characters in the piece. Their opening lines are commentary on aspects of life in Israel, which they deliver at increasing speeds while jumping rope in varied choreographed jumping patterns sustaining a driving rhythm for a full thirty minutes.

With a myriad of props, they create a playground or fantastical geography (of Israel), in which they play, dance, talk, fight, and love. Thick white tape is placed in jagged lines on the black floor and backdrop to illustrate the boundaries and borders – mountains on one side, the sea on the other. A golden balloon stuck to the backdrop becomes the sun. A chair held up sideways framing the face becomes a foxhole. Mounds of red lollypops stand in for mountains. The two perform a goofy dance in unison to circus music. They play "Let's Pretend" and imagine where they might escape to. In a poignant vignette, they mime throwing a stone and then being felled in slow motion by a stone returned. As the action is repeated with no sign of stopping, it morphs into a danced metaphor for a default mode of mindless aggression.

They introduce and return to the theme of how love of country is translated into fierce romantic love. This impulse for passionate connection is driven home by Mesa as she seduces us with her monologue about how much she loves Israel while provocatively licking a red, heart-shaped lollypop. In a most titillating delivery between lollypop licks she hovers between ingenuous child and alluring seductress as she recounts her story of moving to Israel from South America and converting to Judaism. Sitting on the floor amidst the wrapped lollypops, she inserts them one by one (still wrapped) into her mouth. Then like a circus stunt performer, with her mouth completely stuffed, she moves through a series of challenging inverted yoga balances while Berg frantically performs a step aerobics routine on a chair. He suddenly halts in a military salute to a bare, low-hanging light bulb. The work is humorous. It's absurd. It's haunting. What is it about? It is about the agony and the ecstasy of life in Israel.

Roy Assaf brought a completely different type of dance experience to the Baryshnikov Arts Center with his two works *Six Years Later* and *The Hill*. Assaf grew up in an agricultural community in southern Israel and did not begin formal dance training until age sixteen. That was short-lived as two years later he joined the army as a paratrooper to fulfill his compulsory military service. After the

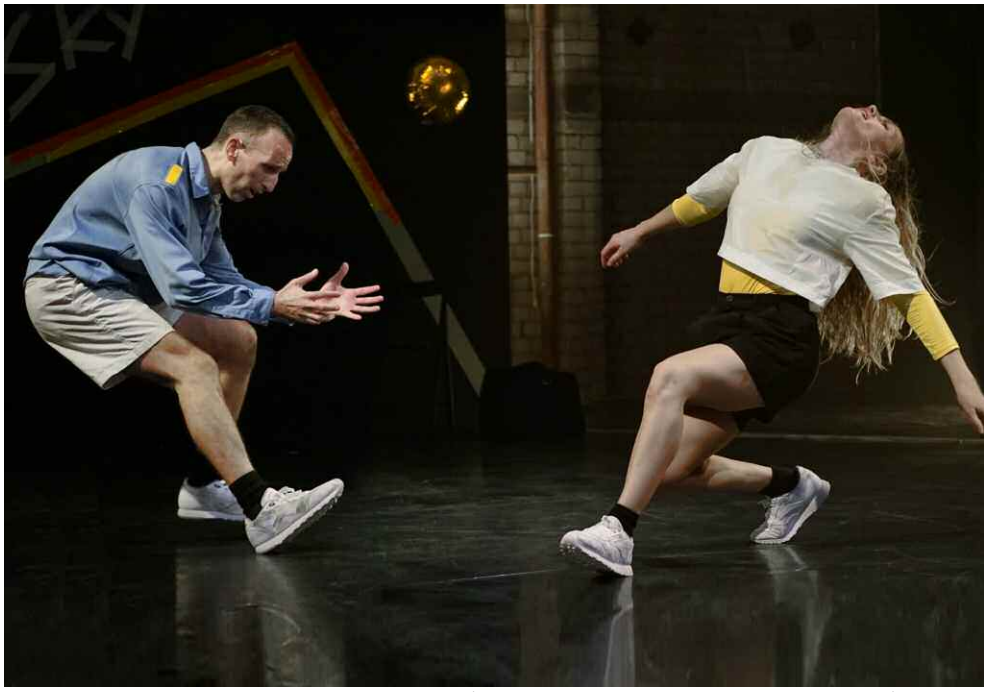
army, Assaf met and danced with Israeli choreographer Emmanuel Gat. Since 2010, he has developed and toured his own works. What is particular to his dance language is its kinetic and emotional purity. It has no technical or stylistic identifiers. It is simply physical movement that is deeply expressive of real human experience.

Six Years Later is a fascinating duet for a man and a woman set to a sound mix that incorporates Beethoven, Handel, and 1960s pop. The piece, performed by Assaf and Madison Hoke begins as they move about the periphery of the stage together – physically connected, but not necessarily in the usual ways. Their bodies lightly graze each other's – hands graze hands, hands graze the other's head, one's head grazes some other body part – in a most sensual connection between two people. The physical contact is maintained through their relational actions of leading, following, pushing, pulling, leaning, falling, supporting, and so forth.

It is a gem of a composition with emotional range, dynamic tension, surprise, and resolution. Assaf's movement language is original and utterly human – particularly in a face-off in which the dancers trade shoulder bops and chest thumps with hands glued to their hips. The sequence takes on the rhythm of a boxing match, especially when the man stops and stands still while the woman thumps on. This is not a fairy tale romance, but rather a view of intense intimacy.

The Hill, in contrast, is a male trio that explores with unbridled honesty and physicality a different type of intimacy – that of male kinship and interdependence that arise in the crucible of the military and live combat. Bright lights and military parade tunes amplify the sense of naïve enthusiasm of new, male army conscripts. Assaf and dancers Igal Furman and Avshalom Latucha bumble awkwardly into formations performing patriotic gestures and marching in a farcical montage.

The mood shifts with the change in music to an Israeli song about a hard-fought, bloody battle during the Six-Day War called *"Givat Hatachmoshet"* or "Ammunition Hill," to which the title of the dance refers. The dancing be-



Yossi Berg and Oded Graf's *Come Jump With Me*. (Photo: Gadi Dagon, American Dance Festival)

comes a physically entwined swirl of three connected men. They fly about the stage flinging, lifting, and supporting one another. The song narrates the deadly battle. With each new verse, the musical chords modulate up to a new key and the dancing, too, builds to a new tension-filled pitch. At times, the movements turn aggressive; at others, they playfully incorporate brotherhood handshakes and hugs. The men grab arms and perform a stomping, male, Israeli folk dance. The line dance becomes a circle. Even after the music has ended, the stomping rhythm of the folk dance steps continues. It is interesting how simulated folk dance frequently finds its way into Israeli contemporary choreography – probably because it is a societal experience of camaraderie and belonging for Israelis both young and old.

The men disconnect and dance off into their own individual spaces to the Bee Gees' song "I Started a Joke." The men fight, slam each other around, lie down, and degenerate into full-bodied self-beating as the poignant lyrics conclude, "Oh, if I'd only seen that the joke was on me."

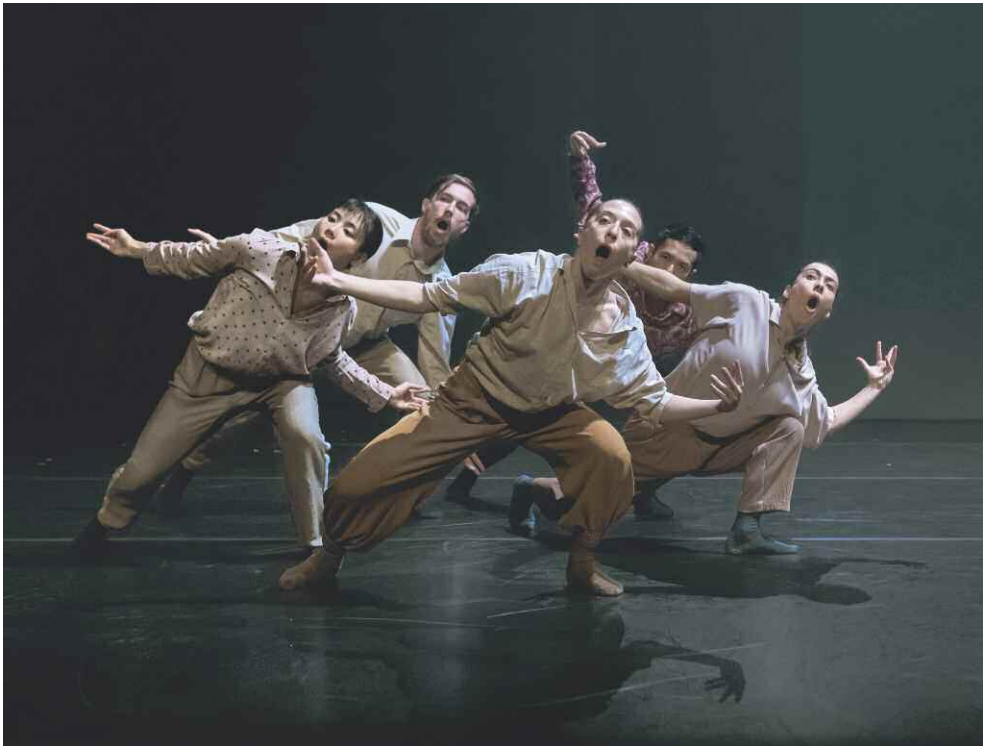
I spoke with Assaf during a post-performance reception and asked how Israeli audiences reacted to the piece. He shared that on either side of the political spectrum people see the dance as a reflection of themselves.

Six Years Later with Madison Hoke and Roy Assaf.
(Photo: Stephanie Berger, Baryshnikov Arts Center)

And for a final act, Hofesh Shechter brought his London-based company of dancers and musicians to the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Howard Gilman Opera House with his latest work *Grand Finale*. Although this was a completely different theatrical experience, I can't help but note the similarity in title to Ohad Naharin's *Last Work*, which we saw performed by the Batsheva Dance Company on the same stage only last season.

With attention-grabbing interplay of movement, sound, lights, and set, Shechter creates a dreamlike dance of doom that portrays humans driven with a default bias toward tribal obsession and self-destruction. The body language of Shechter's tribe is identifiably Israeli, although the message and theme are easily extrapolated to the universal.

Born in Jerusalem, Shechter first trained in classical music (piano) before getting involved



Hofesh Shechter's *Grand Finale*. (Photo: Ian Douglas, BAM)

with Israeli folk dance and, later, contemporary dance. During his military service, he was given an evening clerical job so he could dance with the Batsheva Ensemble (Batsheva's junior company). Two years later he joined the main company. After three years with Batsheva, Shechter abruptly left and turned his energies back to music – studying drums and percussion and playing in a rock band. In 2002, Shechter moved to London and began working as a dancer again as he was feeling the urge to explore his own creativity. His choreographic debut of *Fragments* in 2003 led to a commission the following year by The Place, a leading center for contemporary dance in the U.K. In a meteoric rise to success, one commission led to another and another, and by 2008 he had formed the Hofesh Shechter Company. It is currently the Resident Company of Brighton Dome and Shechter is an associate artist at Sadler's Wells. His artistry is recognized and sought after; he receives commissions from both contemporary dance and ballet companies across Europe. He also choreographs for opera productions as well as the recent Broadway revival of *Fiddler on the Roof*.

Shechter composes his own music, thereby retaining another dimension of control over the staged experience. In a conversation with dramaturg Guy Cools, published in Cools's book *Imaginative Bodies: Dialogues in Performance Practices*, when asked how he develops both the music and the choreography, Shechter responded, "It is a messy business, not linear in any way. It never actually happens that I make the score and then just do the choreography to it. There are little explosions of creating music, little explosions of choreography – the two inspire one another."

The six-piece chamber ensemble is a significant presence in the choreography. The music makers constantly move around and inhabit different spaces onstage in relationship to the tribe-like group of ten dancers; the kinetic stage set of tall, rectangular, dark, canvas-like structures; and the murky, expres-

sive lighting by Tom Visser. All of these elements move and shape the endlessly shifting dreamscape of *Grand Finale*.

From the onset, the rectangular canvases by theater design artist Tom Scutt glide about the stage changing formation and suggesting many recognizable images – an ancient stone circle, an elevator, a gauntlet, a night club, a gas chamber. The piece opens with a single, standing figure facing one of the tall structures. The figure suddenly falls limp to the floor. With this movement statement, Shechter introduces an oft-repeated theme – limp (dead) bodies collapsing while the living must engage with this reality and pick up the pieces. They drag the collapsed bodies offstage, hug them, cradle them, try to revive them with CPR chest compressions, and eventually partner them in a surreal en masse couples' dance. In this bizarre scene, the animated dancers partner the limp dancers to Franz Lehar's "Merry Widow Waltz." (Maybe a pun *was* intended.)

The one hour, forty-five-minute work (with intermission) appears to be a comment on how we deal with the presence of death and impermanence. Shechter's tribe repeatedly oscillates from manic rave that incorporates hyped up Israeli folk dance stomps and steps, to the body language of orthodox Jewish males enthralled in ecstatic religious fervor, to the driving rhythmic dance and mantra chanting of mystical desert sects rapt in spiritual release. Shechter's dance language melds expressionistic movement with dance forms and physical movement habits of various segments of society in Israel. It references the Middle Eastern rhythms and flavor that permeate his embodied experience from having grown up in the Israeli melting pot.

Shechter interrupts this persistent rotation of identities with an apocalyptic scene that calls up visions of ghosts of past generations who have witnessed and suffered unspeakable horrors of war and death. They dance with arms that seem dislocated from their shoulder joints and disconnected from any normal pattern of coordination. Their mouths are agape, frozen in mid-scream, as if they have been lifted out of an Edvard Munch canvas. From this dance macabre, the bodies melt to the floor like molten candle wax and then recover to walk forward with arms raised and palms forward in a march of surrender.

There is no dispute that for Shechter the music is key to the work. He gives us a classical string ensemble that threads a reassuring but somber musical theme of three ascending and descending tones throughout the entire piece. Intermittent musical sections with celebratory klezmer passages vie with competing strains of mystical, pulsating desert music driven by assertive drums and suffused with impassioned mantra singing.

Shechter poignantly concludes this turbulent montage with a series of snapshots. The music ensemble returns to the bittersweet three-note theme as the canvases are positioned to form a small chamber that the dancers inhabit. Each time the lights come up from a total blackout they reveal the dancers engaged in a final, evocative parade of scenes that encapsulate the human condition – a group of couples dancing an intimate partner dance, people standing motionless as if waiting in an elevator, a single couple embracing and kissing, a man in a striped shirt kneeling as he faces a wall, a group of exhausted people sitting asleep and leaning on one another, a group of people standing and waiting.

These Israeli choreographers were shaped in the context of heightened existential unease that has always been part of life in the modern nation of Israel. It is fascinating to observe how that tension is inscribed in the dance vocabulary, human relationships, and life views they articulate through their challenging, artistic work.