Batsheva at 50

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The Batsheva Dance Company of Israel celebrated its fiftieth anniversary with a jubilee international tour that stopped in New York City for a week. The celebratory events included a photo exhibition at the New York Public Library (NYPL) for the Performing Arts entitled *Batsheva Dance Company at 50: American Concepts and the Israeli Spirit*, an artist's talk by Batsheva's artistic director and choreographer Ohad Naharin and performances of his *Sadeh21* at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, and an open master class in Gaga (Naharin's movement method) at the Mark Morris Dance Center, across the street from BAM.

Naharin has revolutionized the international modern dance landscape with his provocative choreography, original and vastly textured movement language, and reinvention of Batsheva – the international troupe of dancers filled with their signature, liquid energy. A fiftieth anniversary suggests an opportunity to reflect on the evolution of Batsheva, to appreciate the significance of Naharin's influence and work in relation to the company's overall history.

In 1964 Martha Graham came to Israel at the bidding of Baroness Batsheva (Bethsabée) de Rothschild to found the Batsheva Dance Company. Graham had come to Israel several times prior to that to work with Israeli artists. The young State of Israel was eager to develop an organizational framework for the performing arts that would demonstrate the highest levels of professionalism. Thus, with the Baroness providing financial backing and Graham serving as a very active artistic adviser, the modern dance company was formed. Dancers trained in the Graham technique and, other than Graham's own company, were the first to perform her choreography and her own roles.

In *The First Night*, a video documentary by Gilad Tocatly, included in the NYPL exhibition, several of the original Batsheva dancers describe the electric excitement they felt during the start-up of the company. Rina Schenfeld reveals her deep connection with Graham when she declares, "Her blood flows in my blood. Her voice sings through me." These feelings were reciprocated. In the memoir, *The Batsheva Dance Company 1964-1980: My Story*, the author Rena Gluck recounts how Graham acknowledged to her, "I like the changes you made in my technique – you make allowances for the energy of the Israelis and this environment – that is right."

Iris Lana, director of the Batsheva Dance Company Archive Project and curator of the exhibition, explained that Martha Graham staged seven of her works for the Batsheva dancers, as well as choreographed an original piece for the company. Glen Tetley, José Limón, Donald McKayle, Robert Cohan, Jerome Robbins, and others, came to Israel to set works on the young company because of its close association with Graham. In fact, Graham's influence on Batsheva during its formative years was so profound that her style and aesthetic pervaded the Israeli dance scene for years.

In 1974, at age twenty-two, Ohad Naharin had just completed his compulsory army service when his mother arranged for him to take his first dance class at the Batsheva studios in Tel Aviv. One month later, he was in rehearsals with the company. When Graham came to choreograph the piece *Dream* for Batsheva's tenth anniversary that year, she cast Naharin and gave him his first choreographic assignment – to create a solo for himself within the piece. Graham included the solo and invited Naharin to New York to study at her school and subsequently to perform with her company.

After stints studying at Juilliard, performing with Maurice Béjart's Ballet of the XXth Century, and performing with Israel's second modern dance company, Bat-Dor, Naharin began working on his own choreography. Naharin made his New York City choreographic debut in 1980 at the Kazuko Hirabayashi

Studio with his duet *Haru No Umi*. This simple balleto-modern composition for a man and a woman skillfully incorporated complementary shapes, balletic lines, and basic modern dance elements set to a lyrical score for Japanese flute and harp by Michio Miyagi.

Naharin and his wife, then-Alvin Ailey dancer Mari Kajiwara, formed the Ohad Naharin Dance Company that same year. From 1980 through 1990, Naharin's company regularly performed at New York City venues such as Dance Theater Workshop and the Riverside Dance Festival, showcasing his early choreographic works like *Pas de Pepsi*, *Inostress*, and his timeless masterpiece *Black Milk*. Many of the pieces from this period were commissioned or restaged for the repertories of Batsheva and several other international companies.

Meanwhile, in Israel, the Batsheva company was suffering through a contentious divorce. Because the company refused to accommodate de Rothschild's choice for a new company director in 1974, the Baroness withdrew her financial support and demanded that Graham pull her repertory from Batsheva. De Rothschild backed the formation of a new dance company, Bat-Dor, for the benefit of her chosen directorial candidate, Jeanette Ordman. Now the beneficiary of de Rothschild's largesse, the new company was well equipped with modern studios, a dance theater (which was off-limits to Batsheva), and repertory and commissions by the most renowned artists. Suddenly, Batsheva was financially and artistically on its own.

Starting in 1975, the Batsheva leadership placed a new emphasis on nurturing Israeli choreographic talent, and due to budgetary constraints, resorted to reviving dances from the past repertory rather than commissioning new works from foreign choreographers. In 1978, Paul Sanasardo was appointed artistic director. He brought several ballet-trained dancers from Bat-Dor into the company. Sanasardo's leadership, the lapse in Graham repertory, incoming Bat-Dor dancers, and the influence of Batsheva dancers frequently shuttling to and from New York, where modern dancers were typically training in ballet, led the company to replace Graham technique with ballet training for the daily company class. By the end of the decade, Batsheva had relinquished the defining qualities of its Graham roots.

In the 1980s, under the artistic direction of David Dvir, Batsheva renewed its strong relationship with American dance, cultivating a repertory that included works by Daniel Ezralow, David Parsons, Mark Morris, and Doug Varone. They also actively produced the work of Israeli choreographers to a greater extent than in the past. During this period the company's adoption of daily ballet training created dancers more malleable to any style and the repertory tended to be lighter and more abstract than the dramatic works of the 1970s.

In 1990 Naharin returned to Batsheva when he was invited to be artistic director of the company. He was joined by Mari Kajiwara, who danced with Batsheva and also served as rehearsal director until her death from cancer in 2001. According to Iris Lana, "The search committee noticed that Naharin had good choreographic skills, but inviting him was a kind of a gamble."

With Naharin's arrival, things began to change. In 1989 the company had moved to the newly designed Suzanne Dellal Centre in Tel Aviv – a multilevel performing arts complex housing four performance halls, numerous rehearsal studios, outdoor performance spaces, and eateries. Naharin negotiated more pay for the dancers and expected them to work longer hours – developing evening-length works and sometimes collaborating with popular musicians.

At first Naharin brought in outside choreographers such as Jiří Kylián, Charles Moulton, Angelin Preljocaj, Tero Saarinen, and Elizabeth Streb. He also produced the work of a new crop of Israeli choreographers – Inbal Pinto, Sharon Eyal, Barak Marshall, Yossi Berg, and others – encouraging a vibrant, alive contemporary dance scene in Israel. These changes transformed the dance audience in

Israel; Batsheva began reaching a younger and wider demographic. By the new millennium, Batsheva's identity as a repertory company was shifting. For the past thirteen years, when the company has toured the United States, it has performed Naharin's evening-length works.

As Naharin taught over the years, he began working on his own movement method that he later named Gaga. During BAM's preshow artist's talk, Naharin revealed that the name "gaga" was chosen when he tired of constantly referring to it as "Naharin's movement method." The word "Gaga" implies baby language – something that anyone can speak. Naharin explained that the method helps to reconnect with the beautiful, efficient, instinctive movement information we all possess. When asked how he uses Gaga in the choreographic process, Naharin responded, "Gaga is the toolbox." It is training that helps develop a more articulate and "available" dancer.

One of the inviolable precepts of Gaga is that there is no mirror; nor are observers allowed. In order to experience the "toolbox" for myself, I participated in the Gaga master class in Brooklyn, taught by Batsheva company member Ian Robinson. It was completely sold out, as Gaga classes are quite popular among New York's modern dancers. Ongoing weekly classes are available for both dancers and non-dancers at Gibney Dance Center and Mark Morris Dance Center. Gaga Intensives are well attended all over the world.

A laboratory for experiential movement research without the visual feedback of the studio mirror, Gaga causes the mover to relate to movement through its sensation rather than appearance. It is the unfettered experience of guided movement exploration. For those familiar with mindfulness meditation, Gaga is a mindfulness *moving* meditation. One becomes mindful, or aware, of possibilities for movement and their physical sensations while moving in response to verbal suggestions.

In the class I took, the instructor stationed himself toward the center of the room and initially the students angled toward him as he gave instructions while demonstrating the type of movement he was verbally cuing. As we maintained an inward focus and gaze, I didn't notice how much the instructor was actually demonstrating, nor do I know if any individual feedback is given in a regular ongoing class.

Beginning in a natural, wide plié stance, we were directed to move as if we were seaweed floating underwater. A significant amount of time was given to the exploration of horizontal movement with various body parts leading the investigation. Attention was shifted to awakening movement in the spine. We explored the dynamics of shaking and bubbling, allowing these qualities to increase to the point that they emerged through our voices. We collapsed to the floor and played with movement in that domain until we were directed to peel ourselves off the floor to experiment with varying textures in footwork.

We were frequently reminded to "connect with the pleasure in the effort" and the class did – reaching a thrilling crescendo as we traveled in a whirling vortex, playing out our jumping and leaping fantasies. The session came to closure as the concentric circles quieted and we sank into a deep plié, staying there for what seemed like an interminable length of time. A sense of penetrating, inner heat permeated the studio.

After the class, I chatted briefly with company member Bobbi Smith about Gaga – its origins and dissemination. The company's current training regimen consists mainly of Gaga, although when Naharin was asked about this in the BAM talk, he added that they incorporate a ballet class once a week. The one-hour-and-fifteen-minute Gaga sessions are generally taught by Naharin, although six other company members sometimes rotate teaching responsibilities. There are no prescribed exercises. Instead, verbal cues are given that suggest an avenue of exploration. These verbal cues are prescribed, but there is no defined order to the progression, which leaves plenty of room for instructor individuality.

In 2012 Naharin conducted a formal instructor training and certification course in Tel Aviv so that now Gaga classes offered anywhere in the world should be taught by a certified instructor. During the BAM talk, Naharin discussed that there would be upcoming research conducted in Atlanta on Gaga training for Parkinson's patients – indicating his interest and dedication to exploring its potential for the nondancer population. Simply perusing the Gaga link on the Batsheva website provides a glimpse into a vast and highly developed organization.

When I asked Smith about how she joined Batsheva, she recounted that she had set her sights on dancing with the company when she first saw them perform *Anaphaza* at Lincoln Center in 2003. "I had never seen women move like that," she confided. (I must confess I emerged from that same performance astounded by the company's transformation into a troupe of super-dancers – exuding intense physicality, assuming unfathomable positions, and moving in the most unexpected ways.) Smith approached Naharin about dancing with Batsheva while she was a student at Juilliard and he was teaching as a guest artist. When he invited her to come to Israel to join the junior company, she left Juilliard (before graduating), got a passport, and purchased a ticket to Tel Aviv. After dancing with the junior Batsheva Ensemble for three years, she joined the company in 2008.

Similar stories can be found among this dedicated crew of dancers from around the world. The Batsheva Dance Company along with its junior ensemble employs an international roster of thirty-four dancers. They maintain a rigorous schedule performing in Israel and touring abroad. Batsheva company members are now chosen from the Ensemble for which admission is extremely competitive. When asked how he finds dancers, Naharin responded that his dancers don't fit a model, but they love work and have passion, curiosity, skill, and imagination. He wants dancers who share his love of moving and, therefore, share his commitment to the investigation of movement potential through Gaga. However, it doesn't take much to appreciate that Batsheva dancers are also highly trained, with phenomenal technical ability.

For this jubilee tour, Batsheva is performing *Sadeh 21*, a piece choreographed by Naharin in 2011. The eighteen dancers move with a refreshing combination of childlike innocence and animal physicality. *Sadeh* means "field" in Hebrew. But, Naharin shared that he doesn't place too much importance on the names of his works. The fields referred to in the title could be fields of play or simply, movement studies. A white wall spans the back of the stage and three wide, white pillars on both sides of the stage serve as wings. Each numbered sadeh, or scene, is introduced by a title projected on the back wall (sometimes with humorous variations).

Sadeh21. (Photo: Stephanie Berger, BAM)

Wearing tank tops and either dance shorts or tights in a variety of muted tones, dancers enter one at a time to perform a series of solos in Sadeh 1. Moving like quicksilver, they play with a variety of textures, qualities, and

change of direction. The unpredictable contrast between explosive athleticism and achingly slow sinuousness punctuated by occasional stillness grabs our attention. Sadeh 2 introduces duets and the inherent tension between two human beings and two moving bodies in space. The stage gathers complexity as three women form a group and move with an undulating quality while two couples dance duets embodying other distinct qualities. Naharin is a master at grouping dancers in space and layering many movement textures on his canvas.

In an evocative interlude, an ever-growing group holds hands in a circle and slowly circumambulates. Meanwhile, a male/female couple breaks away to perform what resembles a courtship and coupling of two insect-like creatures. After a violent climax, the female breaks away and returns to the circle, where she is reabsorbed into the permeable flowing structure, while the male exits. The inventive movement and use of a traditional dance formation resonate with powerful social commentary – though none may have been intended.

Naharin's invention may just as easily emerge through sound as through dance. He frequently mixes the soundtrack, composes, and performs music for his dance works, but does not choreograph to illustrate the music. Naharin may employ a repetitive movement that visualizes an element of the music. For instance, in Sadeh 3, a female dancer moves about the stage performing a peculiar waddling gait throughout the entire musical section (without any emotional affect), simply providing an unusual physical embodiment of the music's underlying rhythm.

Naharin has a wonderful technique of using dancers to set and repeat an audible rhythm through the repetition of a movement (like one dancer slapping another dancer's heart, or men stomping their feet in a folk dance). The "heard" movement adds a rich dimension that sometimes has emotional implications, depending on the nature of the movement.

My favorite was Sadeh 5, a movement fantasy danced to a sultry tango. A female dancer, with bare legs and in a sleeveless red leotard, dances a provocative solo culminating in a yoga headstand. Behind her, a cartoonish chorus of female dancers wearing tight shorts and tank tops performs cool, tight, groovy moves. Layered behind them is a group of males, costumed in strapless, black, taffeta evening dresses, dancing generous, flamboyant, sweeping movements across this outrageous dreamscape. In one last capricious flip of gender roles, the taffeta-gowned men partner up with the female groovy movers and sweep them off their feet.

In the final tableau of *Sadeh21*, a dancer appears standing on top of the back wall. After a long pause he falls backward. Soon after, other dancers emerge on top of the wall and turn around to fall forward. The slow romantic music, the warm glow of the lighting, and the continual flow of dancers languidly appearing at the top of the wall to stand and wait before leaping, diving, spinning, holding hands while jumping, and many other variations – like children at a high perch over a swimming hole – create a dreamy ideal field of play. *Sadeh21* is the spiritual place where ecstasy is the act of letting go.

Over the last twenty-four years, Naharin has not only transformed the dance conversation and reality in Israel, but he and Batsheva have also become a significant force on the international dance scene. His works have been performed by other major companies including Nederlands Dans Theater, Lyon Opera Ballet, Paris Opera Ballet, and Les Grands Ballets Canadiens. In addition to many prestigious prizes in Israel, Naharin was awarded the 2009 Samuel H. Scripps American Dance Festival Award for Lifetime Achievement, and in 2013, an honorary doctorate from Juilliard. His revolutionary remake of Israel's Batsheva Dance Company and his iconoclastic influence on contemporary dance making and training is a remarkably audacious accomplishment. Then again, from Naharin, you learn to expect the unexpected.