

Fall-Winter 2019

Ballet Review



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Batsheva's Legacy

Karen Greenspan

The Batsheva Dance Company returned to the Brooklyn Academy of Music last season with an evening-length work *Venezuela*. As bold and commanding as ever, the Batsheva dancers continue to confront audiences with their superhuman facility for movement and its many textures as they perform the brazen and unpredictable work of Ohad Naharin.

Although Naharin has relinquished the role of Batsheva's artistic director, which he has held for nearly thirty years, he continues to be the "house choreographer." The position of artistic director has now been assumed by Gili Navot, a former company dancer. Although it is certain that Naharin is thrilled to be relieved of the administrative tasks, for audiences, fortunately, not much has changed. Naharin is still the mad wizard cooking up a bubbling cauldron of the human condition – populated with the sublime and the absurd.

Over the last few years, however, several of Batsheva's memorable dancers have left the company to fulfill their own thirst for creative expression. This is where one can truly see the legacy that Naharin has unleashed with his movement exploration process called Gaga. Because the company regularly trains in Gaga (not a technique or style – but a process of exploring one's own movement potential), this new generation of choreographers who have emerged from Batsheva's crucible has the nuclear code for making powerhouse dances –

about their own issues. It is a fertile field of exceptional dance making.

*

Venezuela was performed in two forty-minute sections with a brief blackout in-between. There is no apparent reason for the choice of name; the work was created before the country's political situation reached its current boiling point. The piece employs the formal idiom and etiquette of ballroom dance in juxtaposition with a rebellious breakdown of socially acceptable mores and obsessive, crazed behaviors. A parade of seemingly unrelated sequences unfolds: a tight group of dancers



Venezuela.. (Photo: Stephanie Berger, BAM)

sways, slowly inching upstage with backs to the audience until they miraculously partner up to perform slick and speedy ballroom dance routines. A contingent of royal princesses appears to ride camelback (on crawling men) moving with minimalist sensuality in a repetitive, hypnotic scene. The live delivery of a rap number shocks with its obscene references spoken directly to the audience with unwavering eye contact and tightly crafted con-

frontational movement. Then, as if marching in protest, the entire cast slowly crosses the stage carrying flag-size pieces of white muslin fabric held against their chests as identity markers. They break from their measured entrance steps and, in a crazed free-for-all, thrash and slap the floor with the flags, eventually tossing them up in the air. They finally use the flags to enshroud a dancer as if he were a corpse. The series of visual scenes progresses until the dancers partner up ballroom style one last time. After a slow-motion, repeated switching of partners, the section ends as a woman plants several kisses on her partner's face with such obsessive force that it looks as if she is saying, "Take that! And that! And that!"

The first forty-minute segment is performed to the spacious, unmeasured, holy sounds of Gregorian chant. The movements appear strangely incongruous to the sound. As the second forty-minute section proceeds, it becomes clear that you are watching the exact same choreography. However, this time the dancers have switched roles and they dance to a musical collage designed and edited by Naharin (under his pseudonym Maxim Waratt). And suddenly it all makes sense. Impressions

that began to form during the first half come into high relief with the change in context. The white muslin rectangles are now painted with the colors of the Palestinian flag. The new musical components inspire, match, and describe the choreography exactly. It feels like the dance has found itself. Thank you, Naharin, for a brilliant lesson in the power of contextual choreographic choices. There is no doubt that Batsheva continues to astound viewers with its raw physicality and endless movement innovation and capacity.

L-E-V

To open the 2019 season at the Joyce Theater, Sharon Eyal and her company L-E-V presented their latest lovelorn commentary, *Love Chapter 2*. The name L-E-V means "heart" in Hebrew, and the company's most recent works, *OCD Love* from 2016 and the current work showcased at the Joyce are preoccupied (or obsessed) with matters of the heart.

Eyal is fully endowed with fluency in Gaga and its use in movement exploration and creation. She spent eighteen years dancing in the Batsheva Dance Company and also served as associate artistic director and house choreographer for the company. In 2013, Eyal launched

L-E-V in collaboration with her personal and professional partner Gai Behar, a producer and designer of multimedia events and parties. They are joined in their enterprise by DJ and musician Ori Lichtik, who is one of the originators of the techno rave scene in Israel. Together, they have created an hour-long engagement with our darkest demons when the human yearning for love and connection goes unfulfilled.

To call the piece dark is actually an understatement.



L-E-V in Sharon Eyal's *Love Chapter 2*. (Photo: Yi-Chun Wu)

ment. These artists have conspired to create a dystopian environment of physical and emotional agony. *Love Chapter 2* opens with dim lighting and a black stage (scrim and flooring) as six highly articulate dancers with bare legs and wearing pasty gray sleeveless leotards and black socks perform a pulsing parade of ugliness to unrelenting, metered, electronic sound.

Although they slither, fold, twitch, reach, and grasp at the air with a creature-like beauty, their gestures and cries of anguish – clutching the throat, covering the mouth, holding the belly, vocalizing screams – evoke a dance macabre. As the dancers parade around the stage in a ritual of the grotesque, one dancer repeatedly dives backward into a yogic backbend and pulls at his belly as if disemboweling himself.

The lights and sound intensify the oppressive repetition of this nightmare when, finally, the sound score takes on the rhythm and quality of a heartbeat – a sign of life? Lichtik's onsite sound creation morphs into a Latin couple dance – with lyrics. However, the humanizing music did not manage to liberate this suffering tribe. A few dancers coupled up or formed a connected line, but they were eventually overtaken with nervous twitching, shaking, self-choking, self-grasping, and silent screams. The piece ended with lights dimming as the sufferers began rapidly circling in an endless rat race.

In *Love Chapter 2* L-E-V spiraled into the darkest reaches of the human psyche without redemption, release, or even a glimmer of possible escape. I hope in the future to see Eyal's talent and intensity put to the service of rendering a heart that is at the very least "half full."

Shamel Pitts

Shamel Pitts has a classic New York City dance pedigree. Born in Brooklyn, Pitts began his dance training at LaGuardia High School for Music & Art and the Performing Arts and continued on to Juilliard. After graduating, he danced professionally with Les Ballets Jazz De

Montreal and Mikhail Baryshnikov's Hell's Kitchen Dance. However in 2009, Pitts, smitten by Ohad Naharin's work, teaching method, and ideas about dance, left for Israel to join the Batsheva Dance Company. He performed with Batsheva, touring worldwide, and taught Gaga classes for the company and the junior ensemble until leaving in 2016 to pursue a solo career.

Equipped with the Gaga toolbox, Pitts has been touring internationally, teaching Gaga classes and developing and performing his three-part "Black Series" – *Black Box: Little Black Book of Red, Black Velvet: Architectures and Archetypes*, and *BLACK HOLE: Trilogy and Triathlon*.

I saw *Black Box* a year ago at the Theater at Gibney, intrigued by the notion of how Gaga might be employed to express an experience of being black. I had tried to imagine what it must be like to be the only black man in an Israeli dance company both in Israel and touring abroad. *Black Box* is a dance solo with multimedia, performed by Pitts in a confined space in nearly pitch-black darkness to a recording of Pitts speaking his poetry – ruminations on existential purpose and identity written during his travels with Batsheva.

My reaction to the piece was that Pitts is such an exquisitely expressive mover, why must he smother it with so many words. It felt as if he needed to prove that he could write and speak to be taken seriously as an artist. Pitts has talked about Ohad Naharin wanting dancers to work with just 30 percent because with 30 percent, one can find more suppleness, delicacy, agility, and even explosiveness. I would say the same holds true with words – just 30 percent.

With *Black Velvet* Pitts achieved that spare and beautiful expression. Performed by Pitts and Mirelle Martins at the BAM Fisher in May 2019, *Black Velvet* is a work of stark beauty and exploratory depth and intensity. Having found my seat in the front row of the theater, I turned around to sit and suddenly perceived a towering figure hovering above and right in front of me. A beautiful, shaven-headed, topless

black woman was elevated on some device that was concealed by her floor-length, A-line black skirt. She was more architecture than dancer, although she continuously rocked her clasped arms soothingly as three descending electronic tones sounded over and over. Behind her, far upstage and barely visible against the black backdrop, stood a black figure of regular height performing the same rocking gesture in a shadowy glow. They formed a canvas of blackness – a beautiful and varied blackness – full of depth, texture, and shading.

The woman floated backwards as rods of light danced up her triangular shape, part of the wizardry of Brazilian multimedia artist Lucca del Carlo's stage and lighting design. She held simple sculptural poses with her upper torso and arms while her base revolved. As her profile came into view, it became apparent that her tall image was pushed from behind by a man in a mud-color loincloth. Suddenly, she shook off her long skirt and the fabric enveloped the man. Immediately bathed in currents of light, the cast off skirt became an encasement from which the man struggled to free himself. The woman, Mirelle Martins, was sitting atop a high ladder on wheels wearing a loincloth to match that of the shaven-headed man, Shamel Pitts.

The earthbound and human-size Pitts danced repetitive gestures and frantic stepping in precise directions to oppressive electronic sounds that created a sense of being overwhelmed and uneasy. In stark contrast, Martins calmly gazed outward as she descended from her perch with extreme slowness. Once she was standing on the ground, the two engaged. They moved together while leaning against each other in a most effortful



Mirelle Martins and Shamel Pitts in *Black Velvet*. (Photo: Itai Zwecker)

exploration of mutual support. They introduced a new pattern of fast steps with pumping arms and frightened, staring eyes straining with intensity to the throbbing sound. Eventually, they just stood in place pumping their arms ever faster with eyes bulging with fear as if in a run for their lives – until, still connected in an embrace, they collapsed on the floor.

Their two shimmering bodies painted in bronze moved through a series of simple gestures that built into emotional cataclysms. They followed a process of soothing, connecting, pulling apart (counterbalancing), overtaking, and collapse. This pattern repeated in a variety of ways until finally the man and woman stood together and connected their bodies part by part until they were fused together in a seated embrace.

Martins is new to dance performance. She and Pitts met in 2013 when she attended a Gaga workshop that Pitts led in Brazil. They immediately felt a deep and personal connection that evolved into a partnership in the creation and performance of *Black Velvet*. She is a remarkable presence onstage with unquestionable capability.

BLACK HOLE, the final installment in Pitts's "Black Series" has been performed in Ger-

many, Bulgaria, and Israel. It premiered in the United States in April 2019 at Atlanta's innovative arts and culture platform, gloATL.

Bobbi Jene Smith

Bobbi Jene Smith, originally from Centerville, Iowa, left the Juilliard School before graduating to follow guest artist and teacher Ohad Naharin to Israel to join Batsheva. After three years of dancing with the junior ensemble, Smith joined the main company in 2008. She became one of Naharin's muses recognizable for her sustained strength and eloquent vulnerability. Smith is also certified as a Gaga teacher and has taught Gaga classes for more than thirteen years in schools and universities around the world. After nine-and-a-half years of dancing with Batsheva, Smith decided to leave the company in 2014 to return to the United States and pursue her own creative work. Along with her teaching, choreographing, and performing schedule; she has also starred in several feature films.

I haven't yet caught my breath from following Smith's spring 2019 season. It began with *Deo*, a collaboration with Maxine Doyle, commissioned by the Martha Graham Dance Company for the EVE Project, an initiative to connect audiences with historical and contemporary ideas of the feminine. *Deo* takes its inspiration from the Greek myth of Demeter, goddess of fertility and food, and her daughter Persephone, who was abducted by Hades and forced to live in the underworld for six months of each year.

The piece began with a lone woman standing in the dim glow cast over the dark stage by Yi-Chung Chen's otherworldly lighting. The dancer's body folded and crumpled as if being punched – over and over – as Demeter might have experienced spasms of grief after learning that her daughter had been stolen away to the land of death. After a blackout, eight female dancers lying on the floor floated upward in contraction. These bodies, not at rest, seemed to be called by the vibrating voices sus-



Deo. (Photo: Brian Pollock)

pendent in harmonic chant, an evocative moment in the commissioned score by experimental musician Lesley Flanigan.

The wispy, mid-calf, sheaths designed by Karen Young and the repeated blackouts and lights up on different configurations of bodies created a dreamlike atmosphere. This heightened the unsettled quality evoked by the movements, in which various body parts hovered above the floor and refused to settle their corporeal weight into gravity's pull. Periodically, solos and duos peeled away from the chorus of bodies to develop various movement themes and were then reabsorbed into the group. The piece concluded with the women in a circular formation uncoiling and departing as the original lone woman remained sitting and writhing on the floor.

Two weeks later, Smith premiered another work, *Francesca and Connie*, for the Gibney Dance Company's EMERGE program, a platform for emerging choreographers to create and present new work on the Gibney Dance Company in their theater space. Inspired by the lives and work of photographer Francesca Woodman and musician Connie Converse, Smith endeavored to exhume, as she put it, "hidden voices that were never heard." Woodman committed suicide at age twenty-two and Converse simply disappeared at age fifty. In a posted Gibney video, Smith described her process in this way, "I just try to listen as much as I can to what is already there." It's as if a dance already exists and she is merely revealing it.

Gibney dancers Zui Gomez and Leal Zielińska gave multifaceted, emotionally stirring performances. The two dancers inhabited the space together for just a brief period, walking toward the audience on opposite sides of the carpeted floor between the rows of columns that bordered the sides of the performance space. Eventually, one sat down on the floor; the other receded off to the side and leaned against a column. The haunting piano score by Eliane Radigue filled the sonic space with an uneasy, edgy energy as Zui Gomez rose to bourrée from side to side with a quickening

pace until she stopped suddenly and circled her hips in a most sensual exploration of their range. She moved from squatting in a primal birthing position to jumping in place with clenched feet, all the while possessed by trembling, nervous gestures. The clingy sheath she wore, designed by Victoria Bek, not only revealed Gomez's angular body but also her character's tortured soul.

Gomez walked away and Leal Zielińska moved from her column of repose to sit on the floor and arise in the same way as Gomez had. The romantic *Pavane pour une infante défunte* by Maurice Ravel framed her interpretation with softer shading as she approached many of the same movements from the previous solo with a more languorous quality. She transitioned remarkably from an aching slow backbend to a spritely jump, kicking her legs behind her in a flutter. This contrast of earthy sensuality and airborne ethereality created an intensity that built to the ending, in which Zielińska jumped and fell, over and over and over again in a most astounding performance. The piece felt unfinished – perhaps an apt reflection of these two lives cut short of fulfillment.

What was obvious from viewing Smith's works on two different dance companies is her acute ability to draw out phenomenal physical and emotional range and expression from her dancers. In the Martha Graham Company's performance of *Deo*, Anne Souder emerged in a solo of liquid agility and explosive abandon that one would not imagine coming from a dancer who also perfectly inhabits the formal and precise Graham idiom. The performances given by Zui Gomez and Leal Zielińska were immensely affecting.

But these performances did not prepare me for the integrated totality of *Lost Mountain*, a dance-theater work commissioned for the La Mama Moves! Dance Festival. In addition, *Lost Mountain* had the added power of Smith's dancing and presence. This entirely danced theater work, complete with interactive musicians who move among the dancers, deserves an exalted place in contemporary choreogra-

phy. Set in a cavernous family living room furnished with a red carpet, velvet sofa, upright piano, and a long wooden table and chairs, a cast of eleven – three musicians and eight dancers including Smith – interrelate in a series of vignettes. The barometric pressure rises in this Petri dish of strained togetherness, a product of the unrelenting torrential rains outside. Punctuated by periodic local weather reports delivered by a self-serious weatherman, the dramatic pressure builds as the sound of showers and occasional claps of distant thunder remain a constant audio backdrop.

Lost Mountain sizzles with the sexual tension of a Tennessee Williams play. The dancers, all of whom are at the apex of today's expressive, extreme, and fearless movers, expose innermost emotions in riveting solos, touching duets, and brilliant group dynamics. The three roving musicians bring powerfully sensitive interpretations of varied music from Bach to blues to folk ballads providing an emotional matrix for the dancing and drama to inhabit.

Smith met Bach on equal footing in her formidable interpretation of the Bach Chaconne from Partita in D minor (played movingly by violinist Keir GoGwilt). Wearing a red-and-black patterned dress with her long, straight hair loose, Smith began dancing in angular gestures toward the three other dancers who formed a human square in an upstage area of the stage. The gestures repeated and grew into two-way and four-way movement conversations that spoke the same language of unedited human emotion contained in the plaintive violin solo.

Later, seated on the sofa, Smith initiated a

solo of boredom and yearning – her bare legs and toes caressing the air. Or Schraiber (Smith's husband and also a former dancer with Batsheva) then joined her for a priceless duet in which they danced out the lifespan of a very long relationship – from first glance to old age and the steamy moments in-between. The antics of a couple wooing, bickering, consoling, and supporting one another through the stages of life were bittersweet and touchingly real.

The group choreography at the long table deserves three Michelin stars for an extraordinary creation using every ingredient but the kitchen sink. Singer-songwriter Asaf Avidan crooned a soulful blues number while Smith, standing on the balcony above, threw an endless supply of white cloth napkins one by one at the table below. The dancers sat around the table catching and folding dinner napkins, occasionally breaking out into dance phrase, and performing a gesture dance refrain in unison.

Coleman Itzkoff astounded one and all with a cello solo that contained more sounds and textures than a full symphony orchestra. Ariel Freedman stood up to lean against the front of the table and hike up her long, rose-colored dress just enough to perform a sexy foot dance – her toes sensuously caressing and grazing the soft carpet.

The scene included an all-out table-top solo, an aggressive napkin-throwing fight, funeral proceedings, a walk-on appearance by someone in a bear costume, and poignantly danced farewells. Miraculously, all the disparate elements came together and made some kind of sense. And the result was sublime.