

Fall 2017

# Ballet Review



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Fall 2017

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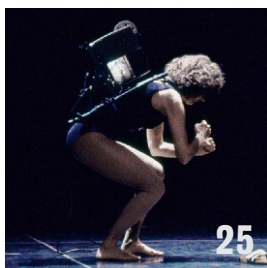
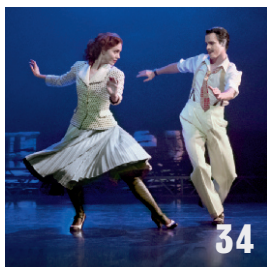
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Teresa Reichlen and Russell Janzen in *Diamonds*.





Zina Zinchenco and Bret Easterling in *Last Work*. (Photo: Julieta Cervantes, Brooklyn Academy of Music)

# Mr. Gaga

Karen Greenspan

The Batsheva Dance Company of Israel has come to town and delivered an extraordinary dance work titled *Last Work*, choreographed by Ohad Naharin, the company's artistic director as well as innovator of Gaga movement exploration. The system, which Naharin began to develop while rehabilitating from a serious back injury and surgery, is a deeply investigative process for availing the body's instinctive, efficient movement potential. *Last Work* is filled with the richness of invention that this system has to offer, as well as a clarification political message.

As Batsheva's eighteen dancers wowed audiences at the sold-out BAM Howard Gilman Opera House, the new documentary film *Mr. Gaga: A True Story of Love and Dance* by Tomer and Barak Heymann was also released in New York City theaters. It offers an intimate portrait of Naharin's artistic evolution. His development as a distinctive choreographic force has transformed Batsheva into one of the foremost contemporary dance companies in the international arena and jolted the modern dance world into an era of new, unpredictable vocabularies and endless possibility.

*Last Work* was developed by Naharin and his dancers during a ten-week process, and it premiered in Tel Aviv in 2015. It opens with a lone runner, seen in profile, on an invisible treadmill placed upstage. She wears a below-the-knee, royal-blue dress and sneakers (typical exercise attire for observant Jewish women) as she maintains a constant, brisk pace through the entire sixty-five-minute piece. The steady pounding of her steps is audible during periods when the mood-provoking soundtrack, which incorporates a newly composed electronic score by Grischa Lichtenberger and adapted Romanian lullabies, quiets down.

The cool lighting and deep electronic drone promote a sense of unease as a dancer slowly crosses the stage in a hunched, low, crouch. He stops, rotates his legs outward into a grand plié, uprights himself, and begins to float one leg off the floor, rotating it inward and outward with a sinuous fluidity. The movement grows faster and faster and the rotation of the leg ricochets sensuously throughout his body in stark contrast to the mundane movement of the runner on the treadmill. He stops the flowing movement suddenly in a precise balance.

Another dancer enters continuing the brittle, precarious balances in relevé established by the previous solo. He contrasts this quality with explosive jumps and animal-like lunges. A female dancer exhibits extraordinary control as she moves through impossibly wide lunges and pliés traversing the stage. The parade of otherworldly qualities and movement fills the stage with wonder until the entire group congregates into a tight mass that moves forward in a militaristic lock-step with a strange, one-armed, overhead salute repeated in the same staccato rhythm as the audible footfalls.

The marching mass morphs into an intertwined human heap connected by linked bodies and grasping hands. Two dancers escape the clutches of the group to perform a duet. The encounter has all the ingredients of couple dynamics – push/pull, support/reliance, competition for power, imitation, complementation – but, in an alien dialect. All of the evocative images and strange but compelling physical movements are the fruits of Gaga, which Naharin explains in the documentary film, is unique in that you go beyond the familiar limits on a daily basis.

There is a defining, onstage costume change – men in long, loose, dark robes (like monks or priests) and women in white silky shorts or tank tops. Though the costumes allude to celibate austerity and fragile purity, the dancers break off into couples and trios incorporating gestures and postures that imply sexual proclivity. At other times, they assume





(Photos: Julieta Cervantes, BAM)

explicit, coupled postures and engage in intense vibrating, scratching, and trembling motions that convey frenetic sexual release. This creates a provocative visual contradiction.

The men shed their robes to reveal a new costume of white shorts and tops. In addition, the dancers don white, bonnet-like masks that completely cover their faces. The entire stage is filled with faceless bodies dressed in white save for the runner in blue. Eventually the dancers remove their masks and form a blob from which each dancer breaks off to perform a repeated signature movement or phrase. Each has a unique texture, rhythm, and tempo creating a stunning composition of movement polyphony.

Suddenly the music revs up to become driving electronic disco and the lights brighten to the point of harsh visibility. An encoded message is boldly embodied across the back of the stage. On the far left, a white-masked dancer wields a heavy flagpole and waves its large, white flag back and forth. Is it a flag of victory, protest, or surrender? Next is the runner in the blue dress. Does she represent the government of Israel that appears to want to maintain the status quo (running in place on a treadmill) with its Palestinian neighbors rather than actually advance the situation forward? To the right of the runner is a dancer brandishing an enormous ratchet noisemaker. Next to the noisemaker is a dancer seated on a low stool with his back to the audience. I imagine he is masturbating given the intensely agitated, repetitive motion reflected in his back. On the far right a dancer mimes screaming into an upright microphone supported by a tripod. He whips out a roll of gaffer's tape and maniacally encircles the tripod with reams of tape, thereby creating a tent-like shape. The image and actions evoke hastily erected temporary housing (i.e., illegal settlements).

While the five upstage messengers contin-

ue their actions, a raucous rave is unfolding center stage. Partying at full throttle to the throbbing beat, the majority of the dancers are romping in an infectiously inviting circle as a burst of multicolored confetti showers everyone onstage.

A loud volley of shots is fired. The masturbator swivels around to reveal that he is actually polishing an automatic weapon (an image Naharin has used before in his choreography). The flag-waver hands the flag over to the treadmill runner so that she runs carrying the pole. He stands behind her holding the flag so that it remains unfurled. The circle has broken up and the dancers are scattered about the entire stage. The tent builder extends the tape and painstakingly wraps it around each and every dancer binding everyone to one another and to the tent. He finally wraps the tape around the woman on the treadmill as she continues to run. The piece ends as the connected dancers descend to the floor in a seated prayer or meditation.

The ending of *Last Work* goes beyond political commentary; it is a scream. In the past, Naharin has taken a strong stand demanding artistic freedom in the face of government and religious censorship. (Batsheva refused to perform for Israel's jubilee event celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the state after the president phoned Naharin requesting a costume modification so as not to offend the orthodox.)

In *Last Work*, Naharin found his megaphone. In the film documentary, he speaks soberly about the work's title: "When I am asked why did I call my last creation *Last Work*, one of the answers that I give is, 'Maybe it is my last work, since we live in a country that is infested with racists, bullies, lots of ignorance, lots of abuse of power, fanatics . . . and it reflects on how people choose our government. This government puts in danger not just my work as a creator. It puts in danger the existence of all of us here in this country [Israel] that I love so much.'"