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ARTS

The Hot Seat: Ohad Naharin, choreographer



Going gaga ... a scene from Batsheva Dance Company's Telophaza, coming to Sydney in January.

A good dancer watches just as much as he is watched.

When Ohad Naharin walks into the Cedar Lake Contemporary Dance Centre in Manhattan's Chelsea district, he looks more like a bedraggled swimmer than the artistic director of one of the world's most celebrated dance companies.

New York has been in the grip of a late autumn deluge and the narrow cobbled streets in this still heavily industrial part of town have become miniature watercourses that require some degree of athletic prowess to traverse.

Naharin, the 54-year-old head of the acclaimed Batsheva Dance Company, carries no umbrella and is soaked to the skin, water streaming in rivulets down his close-cropped head, slowing momentarily as they encounter forbiddingly stern eyebrows, before picking up pace down the collar of his rumpled parka. He leaves a trail of water across the lobby, his shoes squishing noisily and extravagantly in the otherwise quiet space, but the man himself looks quite unconcerned. He blinks at me with watery dark eyes, not even bothering to attempt to swipe his wet brow as he shakes my hand. Very cool, I think. If there's such a thing as mastering the art of remaining unflappable in a rainstorm, Naharin has achieved it.

The veteran artistic director of Israel's premier dance company has been hailed for pioneering some of the most innovative work - and intriguing movement language - in contemporary dance during the past 20 years. He has battled all manner of inclement weather since taking over the helm of Batsheva in Tel Aviv in 1990.

Forget the usual battles faced by dance company managers - funding tussles with governments, dancer injuries and resignations, poisonous critics. Naharin's challenges go far beyond the normal purview of an artistic director. Security, for one. The Israeli company travels the world with its own security team at all times, for obvious reasons, and he pulls a pained face as he describes the effect of having bodyguards in 24-hour proximity ("very frustrating").

Or the fact that he has been at loggerheads with his own government for years over his outspoken views on the Arab-Israeli conflict and the US-led incursion into Iraq ("absurd" is one adjective that pops up regularly). Or that he has to create work against a backdrop of competing - often antagonistic - cultures, religious mores and histories.

In 1998, he pulled one of his most acclaimed dance pieces, Anaphaza, from the bill of events marking Israel's 50th anniversary after the then president of Israel, Ezer Weizman, asked Batsheva dancers to censor a scene that the orthodox Jewish community in Israel deemed offensive. It still raises blood pressure. "Recently, at a performance of it, I saw a woman get up and leave, and before she did, she spat in the air." He shrugs.

Naharin sits down to a cup of coffee and slowly dries off under the high vaulted ceilings of Cedar Lake's newly renovated dance complex. He looks a good 10 years younger than his age: lithe, slim and cat-footed. He grins when I mention this: "Aah, it must be the gaga" - gaga being the unique movement language he invented; based on natural biodynamics and efficient movement, it is now a company trademark.

In January, Naharin will bring Batsheva to Sydney to open the Sydney Festival with a three-bill dance program. It will be the company's Sydney debut after two previous Australian appearances: the Adelaide Festival in 1996, under Barrie Kosky, and the Melbourne Festival in 2000.

There is nothing remotely orthodox about Naharin, either privately or professionally. Born in Israel in 1952 to a psychologist father and a dance-teacher mother, he was raised on a kibbutz until the age of five. He was, he says, always a naturally good mover - keen on sports and gymnastics - but didn't start dancing professionally until the ripe old age of 22. His talent was spotted and nurtured by American dance legend Martha Graham, who co-founded Batsheva in 1964 with Baroness Batsheva de Rothschild. He started dancing with the company in the 1970s before going to New York, on Graham's invitation, to perform with the acclaimed Martha Graham Company.

He lasted a year before moving to the Juilliard School of Music. He flourished in New York, studying with noted choreographers and dance figures before forming his own company and creating work that has been shown around the world. In 1990, homesick, he returned to Israel and was appointed artistic director of Batsheva, continuing his choreographic innovation with works such as Anaphaza, Axioma 7, Naharin's Virus, Minus 16, Black Milk and Sabotage Baby.

I ask him why he left Martha Graham's company so quickly - I can't imagine opportunities like that would often fall into the lap of a rawboned, relatively older dancer. "You know, I have a lot of respect and love and admiration for what she did, but it's not her movement vocabulary or aesthetic that inspires me. I'm more attracted to minimalist dance, and Martha, she was completely different. She also separated women from men in dance, she had these roles, and" - he shakes his head - "there was a lot of presence of ego." He smiles ruefully. "But she was really a genius, amazing. Her influence on me [choreographically] is limited - I mean, it was only for one year of my life - but what I learnt from her was her spirit and her love of dance."

In Sydney, Batsheva will perform three dance pieces - Telophaza, Mamootot and Kamuyot - set against a wildly eclectic musical background, from Japanese pop and Israeli rock to Beethoven and Brian Eno. Telophaza is a joyful, exuberant work featuring 40 performers interacting with four giant screens. It's a way of blurring the lines between the audience and performers, part of a performance philosophy that often defines his work. "As a spectator, when I watch a performance, I don't think there is a barrier or wall. We all share one space, just different roles."

Naharin brings the audience in - literally, in this case - in the second piece in the festival bill, Mamootot ("mammoth" in Hebrew), by putting them on all four sides of a stage holding an ensemble of only nine dancers. With this intimate placement, everyone is watching everyone else. "When you watch Mamootot, you are being watched. And a good dancer is someone who watches just as much as he is watched."

There is a raw sexual energy to the piece and also a darker intensity - it was the first work he produced after the death of his wife, the long-time Batsheva dancer and collaborator Mari Kajiwara,

in 2001. Her death at 50, from cancer, devastated Naharin. He left the company to mourn in private. After an 18-month hiatus, he decided to return.

I broach this subject with some trepidation, asking him how grief and loss affected his creativity. You can almost see him physically withdrawing, his face folding in on itself. "It's difficult," he says finally. "With this being so close to Mari's death, it affected me a lot, it affected the intimacy of the work, how I was with my dancers, how I was with the process of creating the work, how I grew from the experiences, all of it."

Any exploration of his art invariably takes in his politics and I ask him if it's frustrating being seen as some kind of globetrotting, de facto spokesman for the Arab-Israeli conflict. He pulls a droll face, grinning. "I don't think the Israeli Government would want me to be seen as any kind of spokesman."

But perhaps dance is the ideal medium to comment on real-world conflicts; it's a debate that has been given impetus by the recent London debut of William Forsythe's new work, *Three Atmospheric Studies*, which provides a direct commentary on the Iraq war, right down to depictions of suicide bombers. Naharin says it's fine if "Billy" wants to explore it, but he himself isn't keen. All art comes from passion and he's not passionate enough about politics, he says. "For me, it would be very boring to create a piece directly commenting on political situations. But I'm happy to talk about it. People in Israel know my views."

Is he optimistic about the future? He smiles and nods. "Yes, [Israel's] a pressure cooker, but the people of Batsheva - what unites, the love of what we do, the work that we create - shows that there is beauty that comes out of the country."

There's plenty apart from politics to keep those creative juices flowing. Recent works include a triple bill called *Shalosh* (Three), which aired on the company's recent tour of the United States, and a smaller work, *Furo* ("bathtub" in Japanese).

He'll take a short break home in Israel before starting on a new work called *Max*. I'm curious to know what he does to relax. He grins. "I like to watch trees grow." Really? He nods, smiling. "I meditate all the time. You know, I don't sleep much - it's a known fact that sleep is required more for the brain than the body because the brain needs sleep to dream. But I dream all the time. I dream when I'm awake, when I create work, with my eyes open. So who needs sleep?"