

# Contemporary Belly Dancing - Creation Processes

## Orly Portal

dancer, the Arabic music was replaced by classical Western music.

### Internal Gushing out of Intuitive Movement. A Frameless Framework

Having completed my high school studies at the Jerusalem Academy of Music and Dance I joined the Kol Demama (Voice Silence) Company (1997-1990), directed by the choreographer Moshe Efrati. Efrati, a creator of Sepharadi origin (Jew of Spanish origin), created works combined of classical ballet and modern dancing, using Spanish music in some of his works. Already at that time I felt a strong connection to the oriental musical motifs and I connected well to the intensity and sensuality in the special movement of his works. At the end of three years I joined the Bat Sheva Ensemble, directed by Ohad Naharin (1990-1992).

My connection to the world of improvisation and contact began when the choreographer Aryeh Burshtein came to work with the Bat Sheva Ensemble and selected me for the solo work he created. Following the work with Burshtein I decided to take

a courageous step; I left the Bat Sheva Ensemble and stopped practicing classical and modern technique in favor of investigating natural movement and intuitive flow stemming from being attentive to what occurs to the body from within. I was unable to take apart what I was dancing or fully understand the movements, but I could sense the internal gushing out of intensive and satisfying intuitive movement, in levels I could not feel before. My soul went free, sometime in a beastly wildness and sometimes with tenderness and pleasure as even with an accuracy experience similar to the one characterizing war arts and ancient movement.

The shift was very challenging. From a very demanding daily work at a troupe – The Bat Sheva Ensemble and KolDemama – following five consecutive years of performances, enhancing the physical fitness and strengthening the muscles, I moved to a frameless framework. I was afraid to lose the technique I had built along the years, I feared to give up the classical physical knowledge I had acquired, I feared the unknown. Thus I had to create for myself a different working framework of daily practice and I built a set of exercises to support the dance

and maintain the body. My body began changing, its muscles softened and its shape modified. For three intriguing years I moved along Arie, learning from him and together with him. Once a month we staged, together, contact-improvisation performances at Suzanne Dellal Center. This is how I studied the art of improvisation on the sate at its full intensity.

Upon the end of the third year of our common mutual work we went together to an improvisation get-together in Toscana, Italy. With additional twenty other movement-lovers we explored improvisation in movement at the studio and the city alleys. Of all places it was there, at Roccatederighi Village, that my strong passion emerged within me to dance and investigate belly-dancing. While everybody was improvising in the streets I found myself secluded in the studio, putting on classical Arabic music and dancing lying down, shaking the water in my body and particularly the water in my pelvis. Thus I understood I had a great passion in me to explore belly-dancing. I felt that I returned home.

On the way back home I told Arie that I had a vision of combining between the



כל הריקודים של אורלי פורטל ולהקתה, כל הצילומים: דפנה טלמון  
All pictures of Orly Potral Dance Company, all photos: Dafna Talmon

Since childhood I have been exposed to the Arabic culture. I lived and breathed its music, voices, reminiscences and dances. Since then, I have walked away and returned, responded and retreated, moving back and forth into this culture and away from it to the point where I learnt how to blend within me the Orient and the West and how to combine into the body and the soul what I learnt with what I had already known. The amalgamation has generated an entire dance show, comprised of three works of art. The performance was created for a dance troupe established particularly for this project: "Portal Company: Between the Worlds of Dance". In this article I chose to relate and to recall, together with you, the path I went through and the major stations I visited on the way to creating the show and establishing the dance company.

### Sounds of Childhood

I grew up in a neighborhood whose entire residents were of North-African origin. I experienced the place as if it were a Moroccan village where time had stopped, surrounded by simple people, family people living according to the customs and culture they had

brought with them from the remote Atlas Mountains.

My love for dance and music I absorbed there, at my parents' home. I remember the Haflas (traditional Moroccan festive meals) my father held at home. He was a music-lover and though he led a simple and modest life he never relinquished qualitative music. My childhood memories are accompanied by the sounds of musician bands my father invited to the festivities he held. They played traditional Moroccan music and classical Egyptian music, obviously with special emphasis on the

songs of Umm Kulthum. Sometimes, I would join my father and sing duets in Arabic, in a question-answer form, or watch the women dance. This is how I grew up, in an environment abounding in contradictions between life laden with daily hardships and rising of the soul when listening to the sounds of the Arabic Music.

In my youth I decided to leave this cultural world behind me. I left "the village" and moved alone to the big city to study at the Jerusalem Academy of Music and Dance. While I was being trained as a classical ballet and modern

two worlds of dance: contemporary western dance and oriental dance. His reply was most significant for me, "Orly, if there is anyone who can combine between these worlds – it is you".

#### Like water permeating a rock

This is what Aryeh said and I went off equipped with knowledge and many experiences of intuitive movement. As of that moment I have stopped any other movement activity and devoted myself to the world of belly-dancing. My days were filled with self-practice, ceaseless study and exploration. I investigated the movement options at the pelvis joints, the connection between movement and breathing and the body weight and the pelvis. It turned out that materializing the option of putting the entire body weight on the floor is not that simple at all. Each organ has its story. At first I lay down on the floor for hour, allowing the weight of the hands, shoulders, head and pelvis rest on it. Then I began searching the quality of endless relaxation during movement. Gradually series of exercises and positions were formed and developed, implemented on the floor, while sitting or lying on the back. A series of repetitive movements, of a cyclic nature, was created, increasingly becoming smaller and more accurate with practice.

I began investigating and discovering the body water quality. In the course of practice, the body began being experienced as a large water container. Water is considered an emotional element: it is flowing, permeating, sweeping away, deep, adaptable, flooding and changing. Relaxation, the water's deep permeation into the floor and the ground, as well as the water's fluctuation during movement led me to deep physical and emotional experiences which evoked repressed memories and ancient emotions. The emotional dismantling and the flooding I experienced during this period led to

my coming to terms with myself and my body and ultimately to a great joy – to big moments of happiness from experiencing movement and full presence in the body.

#### A vivid and varying Treasure. The creative potential of the pelvis

After two years of introversion and a delightful exploration I met the father of my son; I became pregnant and continued that same movement exploration in a new and daily varying condition. Practice in the course of the pregnancy was a fascinating, deep and meditative process. I realized that the womb contains in it a vivid and varying treasure and I experienced the creative potential laying within our, the women's, pelvis.

My movement practice was affected and varied following the physical changes I had experienced and the insights I had acquired. I understood that the movement had to support and protect the abdomen and lower back area. These insights accompany me to date in and outside dancing: the ability to connect to creativity and fullness via the pelvis; the feeling that the belly is round and multi-dimensional (and not



flat) and the need to keep it soft and protected.

I also learnt to be mother to my son and to contain his feelings. I had to learn how to combine my practice in my new life – all that forced me to be more concentrated during practice and the lessons I took. Motherhood has been, and still is a significant stage in my life. The internal change I underwent affected significantly the manner of my work and the way I related to my body.

#### From the internal to the external

The experience that commenced on the most intimate lever, on the carpet in my living room, sought to emerge. I began performing and exposing what I had discovered about myself and belly-dancing. I performed solo parts "From the Belly" I created for the Gevanim Bemakhol Festival, (1997), and Acco Festival (1996), together with some senior musicians in Israel. I also performed in Israel Festival with the distinguished musician Omar Faruk and "Bustan Avraham" band. These experiences, the encounter with talented musicians, creating choreographies and improvisation on live shows were a big and exciting



achievement. The entire culture I had absorbed and the movement experiences I investigated received a different, accurate expression. The work with these rare musicians allowed me to demonstrate virtuosity on the stage and feel as if my body were a musical instrument.

Along with these empowering experiences, I had some confusing and uncomfortable experiences at a few private events performances. These experiences evoked in me repulsion and resistance to belly-dance and there were times I felt despicable and impure after a performance. At that time I felt that the viewers were demanding and they expected me as a belly-dancer to grant them satisfaction and entertainment. I did not always connect to the message conveyed by a belly-dancer, who dances in order to please the audience, both men and women, who desires to be the best, sexier than all her friends and desired by all men. These performances, which have been held on a non-professional

stage where there is no clear line between the dancer and the audience, were harsh experiences. I felt as if I were confined in sweet sticky honey in front of the viewers' desiring eyes.

These experiences evoked many questions regarding the essence of my being a belly dancer. I asked myself whether I was in the right field. Coping was not simple since I was attracted to the dance itself and the vibration in my body. However, I did not connect to what came along with the performance before an audience. I did not connect to the provoking costumes and the physical exposure common in this area. I felt a big gap between the empowering experience I had through the intimate movement of belly-dance and the sense of humiliation I felt after performances of this sort. I wanted to bring to the audience the physical and emotional depth I experience while dancing, however I felt that I did not always know how to protect myself against the exigent audience. The concept according to which a belly-

dancer should please the audience observing her confronted me with a painful situation rooted in our society on a much wider level – women are required to please men and satiate their caprices.

Confused and puzzled in view of the conflict that evoked within me I continued learning and exploring, deepening the movement and understanding its physical and emotional, feminine and sensual source. I hardly performed as a belly-dancer, and when I gave a performance on a stage, far away from the audience's desiring eyes. The more I deepened my investigation and understanding of what was occurring within my body, the confusion and embarrassment blurred till they disappeared. Furthermore, the moment I could see myself as part of these women to whom social conditions caused pain and I began feeling compassion towards them and identifying with them, I was able to break the frameworks and become a free, sensual and rooted person related to culture and depths

that are not dependant on social commands. Thus I could embark on my way in the area of Oriental Dance, with deep understanding of the women's oppression roots in society. Then the true celebration began. I set out on my way in the belly-dance world and found wonderful women dancing like Goddesses, who became my voyage companions. I gave lessons in big festivals in the country that exposed me as a dancer raising the consciousness to my work as a teacher and I became an important and welcomed part of this world.

### Between the Worlds of Dance

Along with my increasing deepening in the field of belly-dance, I returned to improvisation. I made contact with a group of friends and together we explored improvisation in movement, live music on stage and in the studio. Returning to the world of contemporary dance and improvisation was filled with a wider recognition of my body and my internal self together with an ability to take apart large movement into small movement and the understanding of more delicate components in movement. The worlds of belly-dance and contemporary dance, of the natural movement and improvisation began connecting within me and permeating into each other. I discovered that the floor exercises were suitable also for improvisation whereas the belly-dance lessons received an additional volume of movement exploration stemming from the world of contemporary dance and improvisation. The dance has become full of complex details and relationships between the various body parts. The more I delved in what was happening in the body movement in its various components, I felt satisfaction with a simple organic movement and I had no need for demonstrating extroverted physical technique.

During my common work with the Improvisation Ensemble I met Shay Dayan, a gifted researcher and musician. Together we gave mutual courses of movement and music. In the seminars, which we named "On the Way Home", we investigated the

complexity and difficulty of being at the same moment present and alert. With his encouragement my voice opened-up and I began singing. I sang from the same places I dance: from being attentive to the movement of the voice within the body. The vocal channel was opened to me, connecting me to the deep worlds of the sub-consciousness.

The studying continued and the attention to breathing, to the internal space, the search for effortless movement received a particular reverberation and deepening in the Vipassana course I attended. Following it I was captured by the charms of Vipassana Meditation which I practice each morning and night to date. Following this course I felt that I was able to implement the physical insights relating to flow and effortless movement also in my private life. The dance and movement insights permeated also to my everyday life, to my relationship with myself and my surroundings. I deepened also the study about the body movement and its intelligent in the framework of the Feldenkreis Instruction course, where I found my movement mentor and where I received a scientific confirmation to the many physical experiences I have been exposed to along the years.

Crammed full with the knowledge I had acquired in my studies and the many hours of self-practice and a sense of inner peace I felt I was ready to create a work reflecting and combining the various world I had visited. The moment has come when I felt that the youth mission I had embarked with Arie Burshtein's blessing has reached its peak. The various world of dance I had been exposed to blended within me in a deep and complete manner. I felt ready to create the first dance creation reflecting it.

### Three creations (2010) – The Portal Company Premiere

The Portal Company was established from experienced loyal dancers who had accompanied me in my work for

years. They were joined by additional dancers of various dance-field backgrounds. Thus began our mutual journey to the world of choreography and creation, which was good and significant as far as I was concerned. I created what was natural for me, the simple movements connected to ancient, rooted and tribal experiences that had dwelled within my body for years. I transferred them to the dancers by means of many rehearsals, as customary in the world of folklore, where movement internalization is via repetition. Repetition enables creating the magic through simplicity of movement, efficiency and accuracy.

The work with the dancers lasted a year, in which they underwent together a deep process of casting old habits and acquiring new ones. The learnt how to work as a group, as a tribe, when the dance serves not only the individual but also the entire group and what exists beyond it – that big movement that passes on to the viewer and feeds it with joy, vitality and significance. The show was first staged at the "Maholohet Festival" (Summer Dance) at Suzanne Dellal Center.

The company is currently working on staging a new creation, in the forthcoming summer, in which we will continue investigating the connection between the worlds of dance, the dance performance from a place of thanking and not pleasing, the possibility of dancing sensual belly-dancing from a place of internal freedom and joy, the effortless movement from a place of simplicity and accuracy and the extent of folklore relevance to our contemporary life.

Orly Portal choreographer, creator and dancer with 20 years of experience. Danced in Efrati's Kol Demama, in the Bat Sheva Ensemble and in Improvisation Ensemble, of which she is a member, that investigates the art of improvisation. Nowadays she is investigating Dr. Moshe Feldenkreis' theory, creates and dances between the worlds of dance.

ובתנועה. שכטר פועל עדיין במסגרת המחול העכשווי, אבל מארן ויתרה על המחול כפי שהוא מוכר לנו והיא עסוקה בתנועה שמשרתת אג'נדה אמנותית מושגית. שבעת רקדניה פועלים כנמלים עמלניות, באים ונעלמים בחטף לפני שהצופה מספיק למצמץ. חלקי סט מוסטים, משתנים, מוזזים ונגררים החוצה, עשרות פריטי ריהוט, לבוש ומזון מובלים ומוצאים באותה נחישות. כלים נשברים, כלים עוברים ניסיונות רפאות עקרים. אנשים נמלטים מפני מלחמה קרבה, נחבאים מסיוטים. הבמה רוחשת התנהלות תזזיתית וסצינות שלמות מתחלפות בתוך שניות. לאט לאט כל הפעילות הפכת מאיום קיומי גדוש אימה למין קומדיית מצבים, שבסופה שולחן עמוס במאכלים שהפכו לחיזיון כאוטי רווי חומרים, טעמים וצבעים, שכמו עוגות קרם נמרחים על גופות הרקדנים ועל הבמה כולה. הכל נגמר בקרשנדו, ורק משיירי המסך אפשר לנשום.

מארן מרבה לדבר באופן שוטף ומרשים על מקורות היצירה שלה. נושאים חברתיים תמיד העסיקו אותה – סוגיות כמו הגדרות תרבות, חמלה, קולוניאליזם ושימור זכר הנופלים והמושגים במחנות הנאציים. היא לא נזקקת למלים, כי האינטנסיביות עולה ופורצת מבפנים. מארן היא אשה מרשימה ביותר, נבונה ורגישה כמימוזה. יש בה צניעות מאוד לא מצויה, במיוחד בקרב יוצרי מחול. האוטנטיות שלה ניכרת עד לצמה המדובללת ששמוטה על כתפה ובכל הדרך האמנותית שעשתה בעשורים האחרונים.

מארן נחשבה מאז ומתמיד יוצרת רצינית ואף זכתה להוקרה מכל המובנים, אבל מעטים היוצרים שמצאו דרכים חדשות בעלות תוקף אמנותי פורץ גבולות לבטא את עצמם, במיוחד בשלב מתקדם של הקריירה שלהם. האשה הקטנה-גדולה הזו היתה האבן הנוצצת בכתר תוכנית הביאנלה שרקח דארמה לפני פרישתו.

יש לקוות כי בביקורה הבא בישראל נראה מהעבודות היותר מאתגרות שלה, אולי אחת מארבע האחרונות: *אומולד, טורבה, הא הא וסלבה*. עד עכשיו הועלו בישראל עבודות שמרניות יותר שלה, אולי מתוך ההנחה הפטריונית שהקהל הישראלי לא יבין יצירות מסוימות או שאינו בשל לכך. כל עוד יימנע מהקהל להיחשף לזרמים החדשים הללו, לא תהיה לו הזדמנות להכיר אותם ואולי גם לרחוש להם הוקרה.

**אורה ברפמן** עיתונאית ומבקרת מחול. החל מ-1982 היתה מבקרת המחול של העיתונים *כלבו* ו*דבר*. בתשע השנים האחרונות היא מבקרת המחול של *הירוסלם פוסט*. יצרה וביימה את הסרט *ברגליים יחפות* (1993), סרט דוקומנטרי על עבודתה של שרה לוי-תנאי. יו"ר ועדת פרטואר מחול של סל תרבות. מייסדת ועורכת של האתר "ריקוד דיבור".



Les Indes Dansantes, photo: Manon Milley

ההודים הרוקדים, צילום: מאנון מיליי

שיצר. כמו בקירשל אוהד נהרין בזמנו, גם כאן חולקו לקהל אטמי אוזניים. על הבמה היו עשרות רקדנים ושמונה נגנים, חמישה מהם עם גיטרות חשמליות. רמת הרעש היתה נסבלת בקושי, גם למי שהשתמש באטמי אוזניים, ורמת האדרנלין היתה בהתאם. העבודה מורכבת מפרגמנטים, פיסות קצרות בעלות גוון פוליטי. התנועה עכשווית מאוד ולא אחת היא קרובה מאוד לזו של נהרין, בעיקר באנרגיות הרפטיביות והרוקיסטיות. הרקדנים חזקים ותנועתם סוחפת, אם כי נדמה שהערב פחות מהודק מ-Uprising ששכטר העלה במשכן לאמנויות הבמה בתל אביב. בניגוד לשכטר, יצירתה של מארן עוסקת בגודש

שרקד באנסמבל בת שבע וקצת בבת שבע עצמה והפך לא מכבר לילד הפלא של המחול באנגליה ובעולם כולו. יצירתו של שכטר *אמא פוליטית* (Political Mother) עוררה באזז וכך גם הפרמיירה של *Salves* מאת מאגי מארן (Maguy Marin), הכוריאוגרפית החשובה ביותר הפועלת כיום בצרפת. אורחים רבים, חלקם בעלי שם בתחום, באו לליון במיוחד כדי לראות את שתי העבודות האלה.

שכטר הוא היום כוכב על במת התיאטר דה לה ויל – המכה של פריז – *אמא פוליטית*, שהושקה לאחרונה, היא העבודה הראשונה באורך מלא