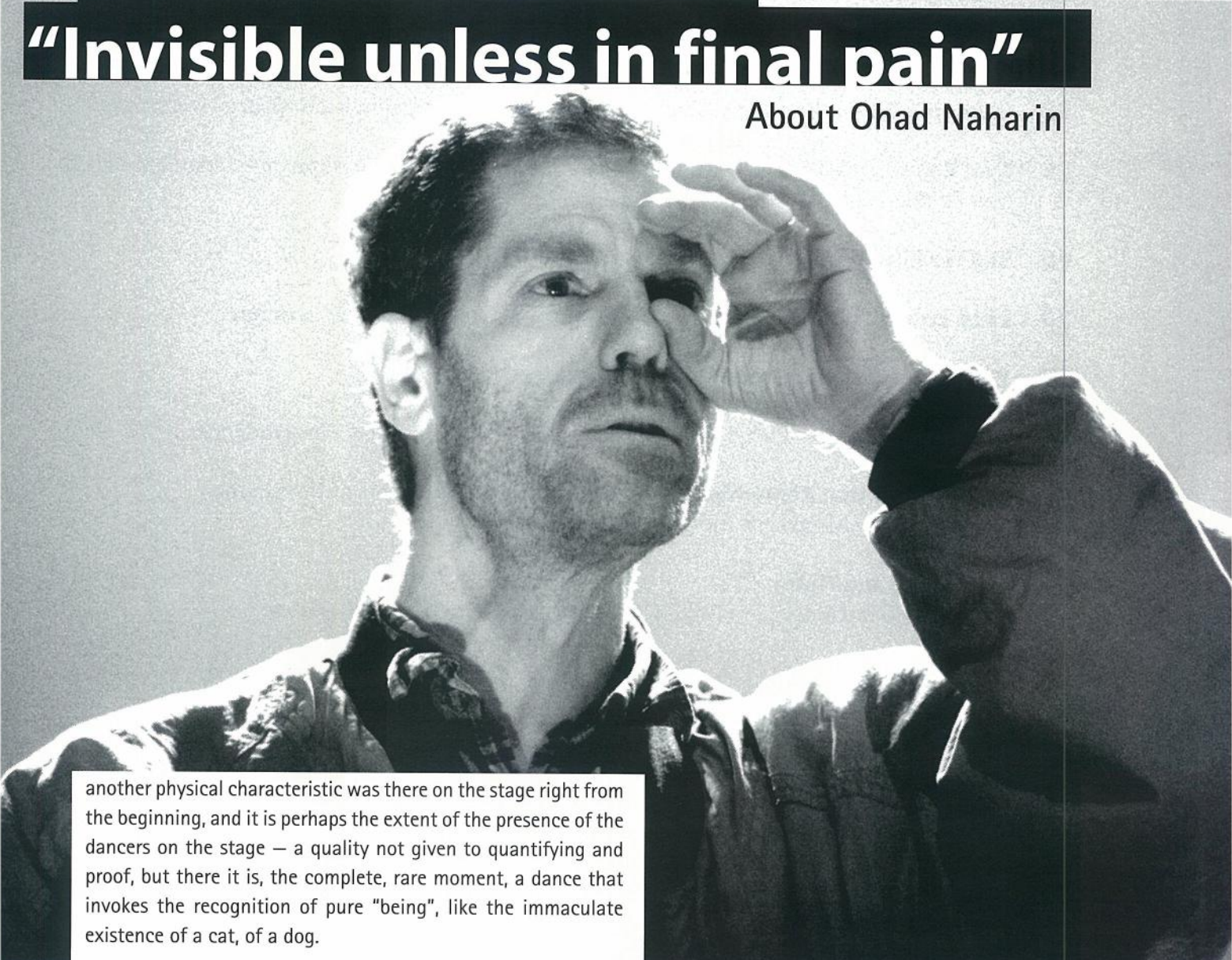


On being selected as the artistic manager of the group in 1990, the first two productions that Ohad Naharin put on with the Batsheva Dance Company, were "Tabula Rasa" and "The Sinking of the Titanic," productions that were originally created for other ensembles — the former for the Pittsburgh Ballet, and the latter for Naharin's dance company in New York. "Tabula Rasa" already outlined the theme, which later continued to develop in other works — that of the individual, the "other," versus the group. Something that isn't precisely a style of movement and isn't

Gaby Aldor

"Invisible unless in final pain"

About Ohad Naharin



another physical characteristic was there on the stage right from the beginning, and it is perhaps the extent of the presence of the dancers on the stage — a quality not given to quantifying and proof, but there it is, the complete, rare moment, a dance that invokes the recognition of pure "being", like the immaculate existence of a cat, of a dog.

"The Sinking of the Titanic" had in it hints and sketches of what later became more articulate — the changing perspectives of view, the ability to move from rapid, sweeping movement to moments of silence and time for minuscule objects, and a type of plot, almost a literary background, an outline of a narrative.

"Kyr" (the Hebrew for wall) was already a production created for the Batsheva group and it used "local material." Like leafing through a youngster's diary, it had the army and the family and the Kibbutz reshaped in the language of rapid explosive movement such as a body shaken by an intrinsic

אוהד נהרין, צילום: גדי דגון
Ohad Naharin, Photo: Gadi Dagon

or extrinsic force, as if limbs are being torn off it, with unraveled ends, not elegant, rather with palms and feet like the end of a ribbon of cloth thrown in the air, without the acuteness of ballet but with another type of virtuosity.

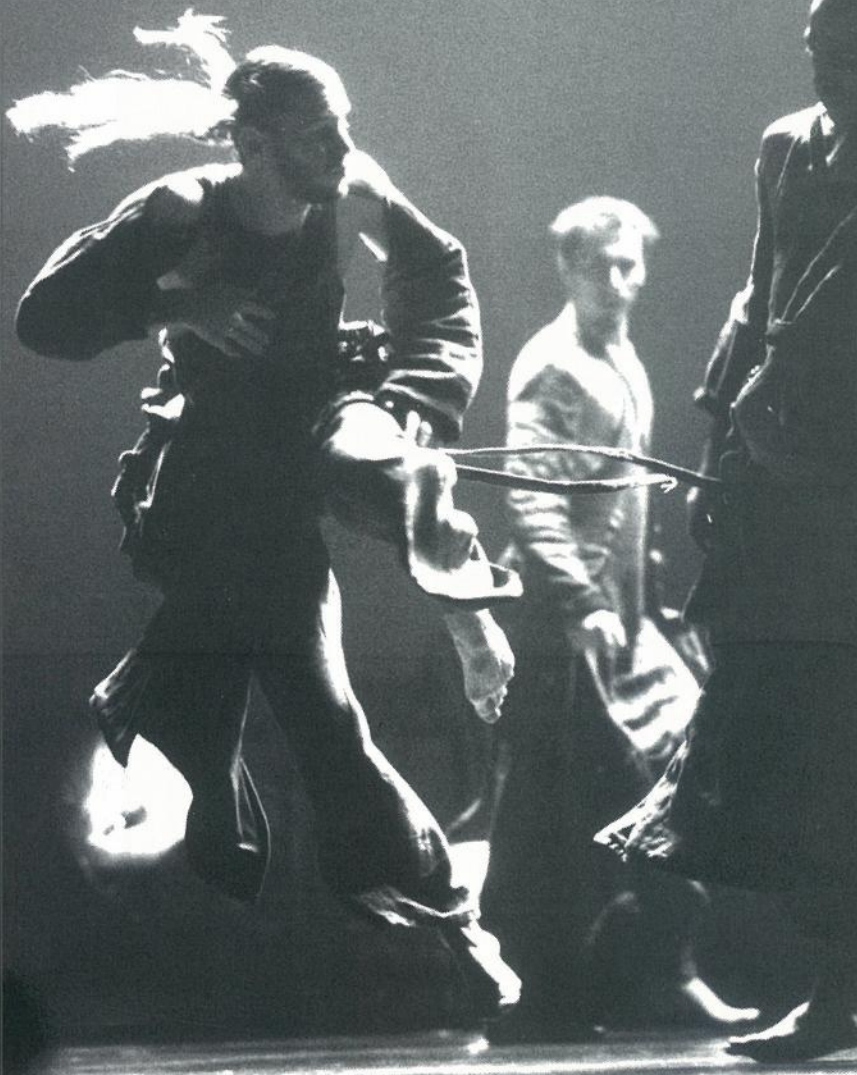
In "Kyr," for the first time, Ohad introduces an Israeli rock group onto the stage and dictates new intensities of sound, speed and lighting. Is "Kyr" the issue towards which the body bursts out, on which one bang's one's head? Is the wall the past, the obstacle that can only be penetrated using the reversed power of sound against the muteness of the wall, in monumental quantities of movement against its silence?

In "Kyr" the Passover song "Echad mi yodea" first appears as a sort of secular ceremony, a recognition of the tribal belonging, in the awful reference that the more it is kicked, the more it continues to grasp you. The symmetry of the chairs in a semi-circle, the blatant lighting, the elevated percussion

stage, all were like the framework for movement turbulence, however, this too was framed within the space of the chair on which the dancers sat, each as if confined to that limited place that even if you fell from it, you have to get up again and continue the ritual from which there is no escape, except by breaking away from it all, and so, ultimately, the dancers throw off their shoes and shirts and trousers as if trying to escape their own skin.

"Kyr" created a different standard regarding a "dance evening," its quality, the audience that it addresses, its scope, and its intensity. Were we to examine each quality on its own – surely in the past, there already were musical collages and impressive stage lighting. "Kyr," however, was a breakthrough, a new direction, a sense of something essential – not contrived, without overt political proclamations, a dance that doesn't "present" a problem but is itself "the problem," it is the world, within it are revealed the pain and solace and everything that is personal despite the fact that it lacks a name.

*Soft is the flesh
The elbow distances itself from the body
The bone is drawn out
Between the joints
Pleasure finds a place
Let's make
A small circle
And a thousand others*
("Quotations for Businessmen")



"סאבוטז' בייבי", מאת אוהד נהרין,
להקת בת שבע, צילום: גדי דגון
"Sabotage Baby", By Ohad Naharin,
Batsheva Dance Company. Photo:
Gadi Dagon

Later, more modest works in their scope, such as "The Queen of Golub," "King Wara," "Passomezzo" appeared. "Black Milk," which was first created in 1983 for the Kibbutz Dance Ensemble, for a group of female dancers, was to be restaged with different dancers until, finally, achieving the ultimate interpretation with an all-male cast. In this dance there is a clear development of the issue of the individual and the group, however, the movement has become more complex with each new production, and the images of turbulence, the long sentences of swift, swinging movements that sink one into the next, have made the dance – with all the clarity of the narrative – to being impossible to decipher in the viewer's perception, like a musical piece that you hear again and again but remains full of secrets, as if, despite the familiarity, you didn't succeed in finding the edge of the thread, the beginning of a sentence and the moment in which it becomes another musical or a movement sentence.

Sometimes it seems to me that this is the most characteristic of "the beautiful" – that which remains complete even after the deciphering and the explanation, since it has a combination impossible to deconstruct and that doesn't wear out with use, like a Schubert "lied" or a Bach suite or a Leonardo De Vinci painting.

In "Arbos," Rakefet Levy, the costume designer's presence becomes even more significant. A prolific, daring stage artist, her work is an additional layer, a creative interpretation of the movement idiom and Naharin's imaginary world. While Arvo Prat's music suggests the structure of an endless cathedral, Levy's costumes added volume to the musical structures that arch higher and higher. The entire group, men and women donned broad skirts and over them rolled up coats so that the big, wide movements, the jumps and the elevations were multiplied, marking new scopes, limitless in the air. The earthy colors of the dresses and gowns, the sense of heaviness and abundance, created the image of a desert clan experiencing, or about to experience an epiphany. In the background the group galloped while at the front of the stage a small group moved at a different pace, crossing the platform from left to right, while carrying its people, rolling green carpet in front of the chosen, unfurling and rolling cloth, bodies and limbs. The images of religious ceremonies, of compassion and the torment of passion are intensified by the original lighting of Bambi (Avi – yona Boenu) a creative lightening designer who is also an interpreter of Naharins' works and whose lighting adds an important quality in all the productions. Bambi illuminated the dance in an a-symmetrical design, by adding a huge powerful spot that made the stage seem larger then its real dimensions and creating a space in which the journey seems to mark time, but also to move forward.

"Mabul," which was first produced in 1992, was also, like "Kyr," a full length evening and already had the taste of what will return and appear in forthcoming productions – a type of "distancing

"Invisible unless in final pain"

"אנאפאזה" מאת אוהד נהרין, להקת
מחול בת-שבע, צילום: גדי דגון
"Anaphasa" by Ohad Naharin,
Batsheva Dance Company, photo:
Gadi Dagon

of the evidence," a creation of an imaginary world, seemingly cut off from physical reality, not blatantly "indigenous." In "Mabul," the dancers sing vocal Baroque music and the costumes are a violent version of refined clothing from other periods — once again Rakefet Levy cuts the parts that are relevant to her, out of the complete image of an ornate period dress — and the dancers wear clothes of hazy gold, but the long heavy skirts are as if cut, and the feet exposed in low cut black boots, the sleeves aren't actually adjoined to the clothes, and this cut is harsh to the eye that wishes to complete it as is familiar and it is an exact metaphor of this dance in which, under its beautiful cover, from time to time, the pain, horror and madness are revealed.

"Mabul" begins with the ensemble standing in profile and moving backwards slowly from the left stage to the right. Following, a long line is formed, from which, from time to time; one of the dancers breaks away for a short and intensive solo, like a disturbance of the order, or an expression of distress that cannot be uttered. What is said orally is a story narrated in continuous episodes, while one female dancer after another sits on a male dancer's knees and relates a section that



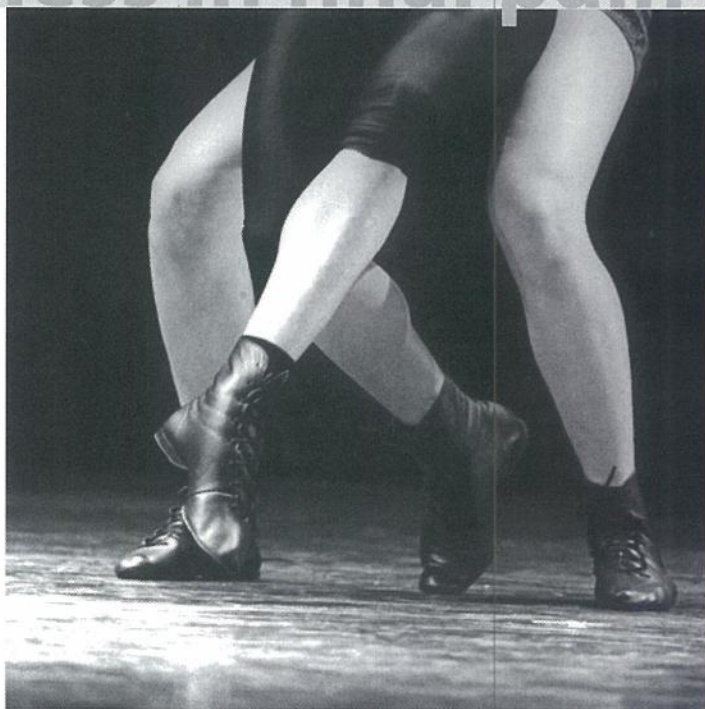
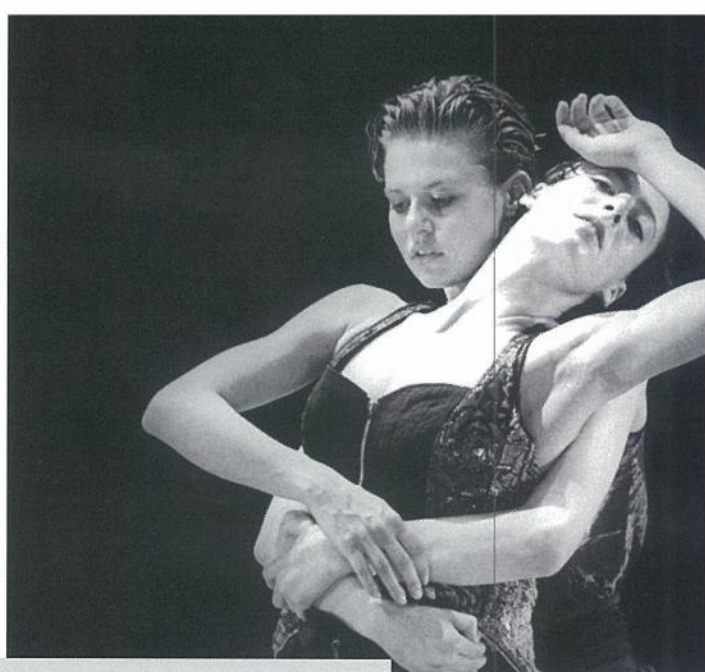
sounds like a nightmare or a bad dream, a story of loneliness and fear. Amos Hetz maintains that a text within a dance enables an additional focusing of attention so that some place is available for perceiving the movement directly, not literary. The story is indeed blatant in its images, but there is no connection between what is narrated and danced. While the women relate the story, on the other side of the stage, three male dancers dance a trio full of lifting and jumping. It ostensibly occurs on the edges of the stage, at the margin of the story, so to speak. And at the edge of the illuminated era, but yet it is something with power, agility and virtuosity, as the contact between the three dancers is simultaneously used as another possibility for existence, an alternate extremity in contrast to the loneliness and aggressiveness, a suggestion of salvation in the face of the evil that appears simultaneously with it.

"Invisible unless in final pain"

The same duplicity and polarity also appears in the by now well-known section in which a single dancer on his knees drums on himself rapidly and with force. He indeed creates a type of bodily music, but the association is of self-flagellation, scourging and supplication. He drums on his bare chest, his face turned towards the group of dancers that is standing and singing a pre-classical religious song. Later in this rich dance, there is a refined love duet and a humorous erotic trio. The Baroque motive is repeated as a type of refrain, the group performing a version of a semi-stylized court-dance that eventually becomes wilder and wilder.

The theatrical abundance, rich imagination, the surprises and jokes, the speech and song and the text were always present as a wondrous mask, disguising pain. "Kaamus," which was created separately for the Finnish Dance Company, before becoming the opening scene of "Z/Na," is a silent dance for five dancers dressed as ancient warriors, while in the background people dressed in black sit on chairs and observe them sternly. Later the image of a "courtroom" develops, enigmatic images are deciphered and the text, heard softly at first, "Invisible unless in final pain," suddenly materializes in the appearance of the dancer, arms and legs tied with a rope, the noose around his neck. Yet the violence on the stage is never "real;" — there is the sad humor of the female dancer who swings the rope as in a game while its edge tosses and lifts up her short dress each time, the men seen from their backs who seem to be occupied with vigorous masturbation that post factum is discovered to be cleaning their weapons, the sudden shot that grotesquely and in feigned innocence fells a whole cow from the sky, in all these there is no use of real force. Only the moving body seems as if to be torn to pieces, only the sound beats the membrane of the eardrum, only the recollections cause pain.

And there was the wealth and colorful abundance of "Anaphasa" that opened the Israel Festival in 1993, subversive and deconstructing pompous "good manners, but festive and provoking excitement and joy with thousand of spectators. The directive of the word "Anaphasa" is the stage in which the parts of the atom undergo a splitting process and movement to opposite poles prior to the



rebuilding of the cell. And this process, indeed, is at the basis of the Naharinian creation, and, in "Anaphasa," it has attained complete expression.

And after the parades and laments, it is the turn of the quieter works like after screaming. "Yag" and "Quotations for Businessmen" and "Moshe" are quieter, the dance phrases are long and they have less acute transitions from one situation or mood to the next. There are fewer additional elements such as video projections, and the costumes don't add a layer of meaning, but rather become simpler, shedding the dance of all that is superfluous. The text becomes more ironic, flowing parallel to the dance, distant and funny like the story of Hannan Ashrawi and Dado, or relates directly to the body in an attempt to arrive, once again through a peeling process, at some or other essence of the "moving body."

One can attempt to describe movements that could be termed as Ohad's language of dance. However, his language of dance isn't only the body that has certain characteristic traits, but rather everything

that is happening on the stage, those same compositions of a position in space, sound, word, puissance and color. And there is always an intrinsic refusal to surrender to what could lead to emotional or dynamic "perfection," a sort of intentional impairment, pulling at the last moment in the opposite direction, the sudden opening of a road, only the beginning of which is visible; a hurried but not incidental registering of an additional option. Ohad's circle is never closed, but continues, leaving an enigma in its wake. Whether it is a humorous story like the one about "The Child who Loved Sour" at the sad ending of "Yag," whether it is the cannon shot immediately at the end of a refined love duet, or the pyramid at the end of "Moshe." There is no sentimentality of satisfaction, only an additional question, a hint at all the unrealized possibilities that are the world.

"מבול", מאת אוהד נהרין, להקת בת שבע, צילום: גדי דגון
"Mabul", By Ohad Naharin, Batsheva Dance Company. Photo: Gadi Dagon

The polarity in Naharin's world isn't between what "amuses" and what "saddens," but what is visible to the eye and what remains concealed. Like Giacometti or Calvino, the individual could be absolutely everything and absolutely everything is symbolized by absence. Similarly to Fellini, the clowns are the most humanistic form of sadness and the texts ostensibly nonsensical such as, "Why do religious children fear dogs?" are a distraction and a simultaneous declaration of faith.

What Naharin has given to the Israeli world of dance, apart from his creations, is the permission to prod the known limits, to pass them and to examine the essence of the concept "limit."