

OHAD

NAHARIN

T A L K S T O G A B I E L D O R

***Dance critic Gabi Eldor met with Ohad Naharin, the artistic director and chief choreographer of Batsheva Dance Company, to discuss his attitudes towards dance and the sources of his inspiration as a dance creator***

My talk with Ohad Naharin was rather a private one, one not meant to be definitive or to sum things up. We sat in a restaurant, not far from his Tel Aviv flat, after the company's performance in a public park. The amphitheatre at the Hayarkon Park is a beautiful place to dance at. The stage is surrounded by large trees, but the dew, wetting the stage floor, makes things difficult for the dancers. A pale fog hovers over the dark lawns surrounding the theatre.

I began by asking Ohad what he loves most, hates most, and so on. He said: "I don't think in terms of 'most' anything. Not because I am cautious, I really don't know what is 'most' for me." Adding "I lay on the slightly damp grass in the park reading a book, ants crawled all over me, I feel 'high' and wonder why I don't do this more often?"

During performances in the park, Ohad is always in attendance; observing, watching, working. Every detail is his concern. Behind the scenes there is a good, practical and quiet atmosphere. The dancers life - more than that of other artists - is modest, hard and demanding. Small, sweating figures disappearing after the final blackout into the dressing-rooms. Looking even leaner, they finally emerge into the dark night to get home. One may perceive in them a certain unassuming earnestness.

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Ohad holds his back very straight, which gives the impression of pride. But this is a wrong interpretation of his erect posture, which is really due to a back injury. Perhaps there is another aspect to his resolute uprightness: that of loneliness, of separateness, of being apart, for better or for worse.

It took some time until I found the right way to tune my voice to Ohad's wavelength, to talk without the usual commonplaces and the obvious, to reach a level of communication untrammelled by all that 'culture' junk. "When I talk about anything, not specifically about myself, it still is about me." - Ohad said. So we spoke about the performance we just

saw, about the dancers, about how he loves and appreciates them and about their special qualities. He perceives each of them as an individual, a whole human being with his own advantages and drawbacks which all add up to his personality as a dancer.

About Yossi Jungman, a marvellous dancer, Ohad said: "One of his qualities is that he isn't musical at all. "After I raised my eyebrows in astonishment, Ohad adds: "He is so honest." And I explain this statement to myself as meaning that even music does not entice or influence him. He has found ways to overcome his deficiency.

Ohad is about to embark on a journey to Finland, to stage his "Perpetuum", a dance which has been shown only a few times in Israel. It is early summer now and in Finland, endless daylight with just an hour of twilight. The company managers are searching for a hotel with special blinds, so that they will be able to make the rooms dark enough for sleeping. It seems that the Finns have a very special relationship between darkness and brightness which posing a challenge to Ohad.

The Finnish company is trained in classical ballet. Ohad: "To dance ballet is a physical pleasure for the dancer, which includes a sense of victory over obstacles. To tell classical ballet dancers to dance 'the wrong way', to make them move, opens something new for them in themselves."

"But how does one overcome the problem of a classical dancer having to move in a new way?" - I asked.

"I try to connect them to the present after leaving the rehearsal hall, after finishing classes, when they are wearing blue jeans. This approach makes things easier and the transition takes a week instead of two years. And they love to Tango..."

Ohad says he is lucky in being free to decide his own ways, to change his decisions at will and then take the opposite approach. "Wisdom is beyond knowledge" - he says and again talks about insight, but this time in another context, that of the music of Arvo Part, which he often uses. "When I learn something new, I don't cling to the previous point of view. It's all a matter of improvement."

Just now he is reading a book of poems by Joseph Brodsky and in one of the poems it says: "Any decision is a sort of blow to freedom."

When I asked Ohad what he likes most, he again says, there is no 'most' of anything for him, perhaps because he doesn't have a good memory. And he told me a funny story about a friend of his, a painter, who most of all likes to draw cows. For nearly forty years he has been traveling from country to country drawing English, Spanish or Swedish cows.

But when I asked him what he hates, Ohad said "I despise evil, even that which is inside myself". He proceeded to point out, what in his view is devilish evil; one's identification with ideologies, the identity of masses of people, militants, doctrines and obeying. "Evil is

something frightening because it is often triumphant and all these things are the very opposite of creative thinking".

Our conversation turns again to freedom, the poet Brodsky and the endless movement of learning and change. Suddenly Ohad says that what really matters to him is the ability to forgive and to give up. "That is what one finds in poetry." - he states. "Poetry is a little like a prayer, and prayer belongs to the family of forgiveness and that is the true position of prayer, to offer the other cheek".

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I asked him about his dance "Arbos", with music by Arvo Part, a work which to me seems religious, with music like an unfinished cathedral. Ohad answered: "In 'Arbos' I felt rather humanistic and I see the music as a thin thread which connects things rather than as a large building. A thread which leads to places larger than I am able to provide an answer for, a place where wisdom is god, something compared to which I am nothing."

We talked about the section of "Arbos" in which Yossi Jungman dances with a hamster, a scene of the mortification of the flesh. "The movement is initiated by the animal. I would like the dancers to acquire virtuosity which becomes an integral part of their behaviour and that is the connection to the hamster. I experimented with animals, letting them crawl all over my body and so I finally arrived at the hamster." - Ohad explains.

Naharin's dances are in constant flux; everytime "Black Milk", "Kyr" or "Queens of Golub" are performed there is a shift of emphasis, another improvement. "That is one of the advantages of working in this medium." - says Ohad. "The dynamics, the possibilities of change. Movement is remembrance, there is no dance without memory. Dance ceases to exist the instant its execution is completed. So I never cease to change it, because I am never really satisfied."

And he adds, suddenly smiling: "Kyr' is growing old you know. But that's nice. Someone wrote about it once calling it 'Kyr [wall in Hebrew] with crevices', perhaps without meaning it, by now it suits the situation, and that's good. Work tends to become better with time, like wine."

We spoke about sources of inspiration. "Poetry, the way people move, how they exist, paintings by Miro. My dances are like poems, there are choreographers whose dances are prose. I love poetry, because a poet has to distil and concentrate his materials to an essence."

Ohad tells a story about a child he once saw at a reception being held on a lawn. The kid was holding two wine glasses in his hands, probably carrying them to his parents. One glass was fuller than the other, and the child kept pouring from one to the other, to make them equal.

Pouring a little, checking the results and pouring some wine back until he was satisfied.

The many lines in Ohad's face changes shape all the time. Giacometti wrote once: "It is an adventure, a great adventure to be able to watch how every day something unexpected appears in a face. That is better than all the voyages around the world."

Late that evening, when the waiters were sitting quietly around their table in a corner, Ohad suddenly said that he likes to be connected with coldness, human coolness. That he really is more inventive and creative when immersed in a lukewarm bathtub. Just floating in the water without moving about, ideas just come to him, pass through him, as if he were a medium.

I asked him: "Are you sad?" He laughed and said: "Yes, totally sad." "Arbos" is the place between heaven and hell, a sort of passage. "Black Milk" is the result of Ohad once seeing a street sign at the "Festival of Two Worlds" in Spoleto, Italy, which to him looked like "Latte nero", black milk, which he thought was a good title. It turned out, that the sign meant something quite different.



OHAD NAHARIN. PHOTO BY MARI KAJIWARA

"Queens of Golub" began as a solo for Ohad himself called "King of Golub". The name being an intimate sobriquet for someone dear. Hence, it is a title that holds a secret. Ohad doodles in my notebook, to see how the word "vitur" (in Hebrew: giving something up) looks on the page, in Hebrew as well as in Latin characters. He likes the sound and the look of it, so who knows, it may become the title of his next work. "Giving up", a term not much in use in our angry times. As if suddenly one is able to breathe freely.

The next day we took a walk through the many little streets around the Suzanne Dellal Centre. We went to see a dilapidated building, which once housed an elegant coffee house, with music and dancing, awaiting renovation. It was supposed to serve Batsheva as a rehearsal space. But the funds for rebuilding the place are not forthcoming. "I need a space to dance in", Ohad

says, "Never-mind what materials the space is built of." We stand opposite the Army Museum, a vast area, where we see rusty old tanks from the War of Independence and several large locked buildings. There are 40 dunams of land there, someone tells us. "All I need for the company is two dunams of floor space." - says Ohad.

There are people, who when they stop somewhere or have said something, a sort of after-image lingers there. The body goes on but it seems the head still looks in the old direction. Ohad crosses from one location to another, from one sentence to the next without pausing, as a whole, all of him at once. In a Giacometti portrait, there are many lines crisscrossing each other, but they are unique. Every time one looks at them, they seem fresh, seen for the first time. That what came to my mind as we took leave of each other and Ohad left abruptly, all of him, without leaving a trace behind.

