
Nationalism and Dance: at the 2019 International Dance Exposure

Judith Brin Ingber

In this anniversary year, Suzanne Dellal Centre for Dance director Yair Vardi was acclaimed for his foresight and perseverance in creating the Centre 30 years ago and for inventing and continuing to direct the International Dance Exposure Festival over the last 25. In his honor, a special program acclaimed him for making Israeli contemporary dance a vital and seminal force in dance internationally. The 200 guests who were mostly international presenters and producers from 42 different countries attending the 25th annual Suzanne Dellal Centre's (SDCD) Festival, watched choreographic works that were inordinately varied in their approaches and ideas.

O.S.L.O was the opening production—we entered a big studio to see four performers in winter hooded jackets as if in a field of snow.¹ Incongruously, we had come in from a sunny, warm day to this unexpected winter landscape. Handed printed material with the instruction to open “When the Bell Rings”, we took our seats on three sides of the space. Big fans and other kinds of equipment stood on the 4th side. A lone dancer with her arm raised straight from her shoulder, begins and then others gesture, perhaps a hopeful signal core, trying to work out messages. The dancers stand and move in rigid combos, sometimes in a diamond shape, or in lines, traversing on their set paths in the “snow”. Sometimes flakes and then a deluge of “snow” dropped on the dancers and on some

of the audience, too. Oslo, the city site that started as a hopeful place for negotiations with Israeli and Palestinian, apparently has become the field of relentless snow (created from countless pieces of teeny white oblong shaped paper).

I read the instruction pages: Odin, the God of Wisdom and of War is listed along with many dates including 1978 when the Nobel Peace Prize was given to Begin and Sadat in Oslo; or in 1981 Sadat was assassinated; in 1987 the “Intifada” began; in 1992 Rabin formed a “Left Wing Coalition”; in 1993 Ron Punda and Ariel Hirschfeld led secret negotiations in Oslo. Other magical dates are listed yet to happen along with events yet to occur while winter sounds of ice breaking up, of wolves and footsteps in the snow, of wind and thunder mix with orchestral music. A dancer packs his parka hood with “snow” leaving us to shudder empathetically; futilely we watch as they lie on their backs, jumping in a legless way, never progressing. Classical music sounds as the dancers ramp up their energy, leaping across the snow, then traveling in balances and arabesques incongruously in ballet style, with a bow, too, but why, when there is no ending because the dancers resume their positions and shapes. *O.S.L.O*, remembered here as a frozen, unyielding winter scape, shows the signal arms of the dancers apparently undecipherable and inconclusive in non-ending communication from different national points.



אוסלו מאת תמי לייבוביץ, רקדנים (משמאל לימין) טל אדלר, תמר קיש, אור אשכנזי ושולי אנוש, צילום: יאיר מייזחס
O.S.L.O by Tami Leibovitz, Dancers: Tal Adler and Tamar Kish (front line) and Or Ahshkenazi and Shuli Enosh (back line), Photo: Yair Meyuhas

Nationalism was the subject of the Festival panel “Navigating Resistance and Complicity: National Dance Platforms in a Globalized World.”² For some in the audience it was too academic and theoretical; nonetheless, it set forth issues and implications seen in the Festival performances – fascinating issues of what governments support and present in their home countries and abroad. What is it that could be representative, as if dancing is a kind of branding of its country? The panelists – diplomat; arts presenter; artist-writer and theoretician – framed their outlooks through examples of national support from countries of the Far East, Mid-East and Europe. Contemporary dance, it was argued, seems to be at times both a result and an agent of globalization. The moderator explained that since the 1990s, there has been special emphasis on the promotion of a national industry known as dance platforms (called NaDaP). Even in the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs there is a section known as cultural diplomacy, dance an important component. The Ministry has long supported the International Dance Exposure Festival.

One of the guests from a Former Soviet Union country responded to the panel, saying much of what he’d seen was gratuitously violent. To end violence in “our toxic world” he said, “We should stop watching dancers crashing their bodies against each other or against the floor, as directed by choreographers, or the violence continues.”

Another totally disagreed, saying “Expressing violence is part of the daily life and death situation Israel faces.” One of the NY dance presenters says she doesn’t shy away from dancers who get slammed around because she trusts dancers know how to take care of themselves, how to fall, and how to take on the physical aggression. “It’s important to express violence,” she said, “as an experience of current times, essential to what we see, especially in this nation.”

Over the days and nights of the Festival there were some 52 excerpts and full performance pieces presented outside, on stage, in studios. Stimulated by the panel, I reflect on what some of the works examined with nationalism in mind.

Concrete by Ofir Yudilevitch³ I consider as a political piece in the way that b-boys and b-girls performing on the streets are anti-establishment, against beauty and the refined and the usual order of things. The ad hoc activity in outdoor places, with Yudilevitch’s brand of Capoeira-gymnastic-infused moves continued his cheeky Israeliness against the usual order of dance on stage or with conventional choreographed technique in favor of his bevy of movement on the streets, on the concrete and on walls of the SDCD neighborhood. As we came across the movers who’d seemingly crashed their skateboards, lying scattered beneath

beautifully renovated buildings we could wonder with new eyes about the politics of urban renewal. The 6 movers spray painted their company logo atop other wall graffiti, scaling the wall only to fall backwards into a kind of existential abyss or they climbed over tables in an outdoor café, surprising the usually unflappable Israeli, drinking his or her coffee. The movers, revived on their skateboards, guided us inside SDCD, careening across the tiered courtyard of the grand flagship institution that had revived the once grimy, blighted southern Tel Aviv neighborhood, now showcase to Israeli dance.

Talos by Arkadi Zaides (also appearing as performer, incongruously clothed in a suit, aided with a team of 11) featured him as the only character, in what at first seemed to be a cold lecture. He explained “Talos” was an ancient Greek bronze robot created to defend Europe from intruders as his comments (with subtitles in English) were projected on the back wall as we also watched an animated film of blue and black dots and lines. Much random movement in the different dots coalesce as we realize his unimpassioned “lecture” is a disguised dance. The movers include the clumping dots as symbols for people at a border, and then the animation morphed into actual videos of humans at border sites. We see desperate refugees, some injured, trying to get help, trying to reach sanctuary. They give way to a video of robots tested

in workshops designed by military. Mechanics try to damage and vanquish the anthropomorphic robots which persevere whether attacked or battered, kneeling on one ‘knee’, or “running” over various terrains to maintain their balance on robot “legs”. It is no sci-fi movie, but videos of real experiments, sponsored by actual governments. Zaides’s performance, whether speaking in an almost robotic recitation, has no claim to morality or emotion but he paces more and more and then encircles the stage as if to corral all we have been watching. I think of the more than 70 million refugees today as Zaides reveals more and more about what drives nations to protect themselves from ancient time until today. I was asked if I thought this “lecture” was a dance? If dance is movement in space, organized purposely, then yes, for sure, this terrifying look of space by Zaides, filled with random and then herded movement, matched even with music, is a dance. As I finish watching, I am driven to wonder where do we stand, where is humanity? Yes, I thought it a brilliant dance, depicting nationalism against the greater urgency of peoples, rarely sanctioned, acknowledged or helped in our time.

A Good Citizen, choreographed by Rami Be’er, (also credited as lighting designer, stage and costume designer, performed by 18 dancers of the Kibbutz Contemporary Dance Company) introduces



אורח טוב מאת רמי באר, להקת המחול הקיבוצית, במרכז הרקדנית שני כהן ומאחוריה טריסטיאן קרטר, צילום: אייל הירש

A Good Citizen by Rami Be’er, Kibbutz Contemporary Dance Company, Dancers: Shai Cohen (center) and Tristan Carter (behind her), Photo: Eyal Hirsch



2-0-1-9 by Ohad Naharin, Batseva Dance Company, dancer: Hani Sirkis, Photo: Ascaf

2-0-1-9 מאת אוהד נהרין, להקת בת-שבע, רקדנית: חני סירקיס, צילום: אסקף

each of the dancers under a spot light, entering and stating their name. They turn from individuals into a group that falls, creeps, weeps, morphing from benign to suffering. A duet of two Asian dancers crawl in exhaustion as others become bellicose. How intentional was it that we watch, distanced from them because we see them as foreigners, despite their dancerly brilliance? We hear undecipherable recorded, shouted and angry syllables, and then conversation from the dancers about what it is to be a so-called good citizen, apparently complying with some unspoken social agreement: "I don't think much," or "a good citizen eats his food and that's all," or "I don't strain my wits." A dancer's face juts backwards, and "the good citizens" try to revolt where there is no personal choice in the rush of movement; everyone backs away from a single dancer who's trying to reach something, while another seems to be helping or is it struggling in a strangle hold? Onto the floor, one man rises while another tries to wake others despite robotic unison movements that have taken over. The question arises are we the complacent or the rulers, but before we come to any conclusion, those we are watching have bowed their heads, cowering under the lights. Then shockingly, the lights are turned on us, piercing the anonymity of the audience with the shock of clarity. Are we the cause of this dystopian state?

L'état des choses, choreography and performance by Avi Kaiser and Sergio Antonino showed them dancing and talking in their sports coats as if we happened in on them. I mention them because we heard a "conversation" in their duet I considered a sudden tour de force. They spewed out an unintelligible dialogue because their words came from countless languages, delivered with total emotion. Their incoherent jumble embodied an entire Tower of Babel. They seemed to say we are doomed, whether just two, or entire nations, uncomprehending, leading to hopeless division, and worse.

2-0-1-9, called "an Open Rehearsal", is the newest work by Ohad Naharin.⁴ I could not get Naharin's images of brutality out of my mind, of lethal weapons and attack, of war, perhaps, when everything falls apart. The beginning was a surprise and before we had recovered from that, others took their place. We had been ushered around the back of the building used by Batsheva, and up back stairs even though we saw many used the main front stairs, but what was the plan? We reached the upstairs studio and found seats in several rows facing a big curtain. A lone guy wearing unnervingly high black boots with almost needle thin heels was moving in front of the curtain. Suddenly it opened and we were looking at a runway set between other rows of seats facing us across the runway, filled with people peering out at us.



Sharon Zuckermann and Hillel Kogan perform their work *What Now*, Photo: Tamar Lam

שרון צוקרמן והלל קוגן ביצירתם *מה עכשיו*, צילום: תמר לם

A maniacal fashion-show-of dancers strode out onto that run-way, from one side and other times from the other side. It could get crowded with sensational costumes – all manner of dresses, some slit at back, others on the side, in a long tulle skirt and another in a Bordeaux colored dress with such minimal pants, black panties barely cover; another in a stunning forest green dress and a different dancer in turquoise pants, and someone else in a beige skirt with long hair bound together with no regard for what one might expect a certain gender to wear; sometimes those sauntering down the runway were barefoot and other times all wore black boots with needle point heels. Scuttling on the run-way or striding out, like kick boxers, the dancers hardly had elbow room, their boots daggers and knives, like weapons that almost glanced their opponents. It seemed we were drawn into the fray, such kinesthetic response was elicited that it felt like the heels barely missed hitting us, too. A stamping rhythm to accompany a kind of Mid-East dabke line dance evolves but sudden lunging, with kicks and sudden drops, are dangerously terrifying.

I spoke to one of the male dancers yesterday and asked him if the boots felt like weapons to him? He was part of the singing of children's folk songs peppered throughout the work, "How good and pleasant it is to dwell in brotherhood together in unity" or "next year it will be so good, we'll sit on the balcony..." or the children's

ditty "My hat, it has three corners".... But it seemed Naharin was deriding the songs of childhood, making fun of hope and solidarity and the good of Zionism. What was meant to express commonality, it seemed the choreographer was decrying the very idea of solidarity which has given way to such political and societal divisiveness in 2019. But the dancer, an Israeli young man who had spent 4 years in the Batsheva Ensemble and has been a part of the company for 3 years, a seasoned Ohadist for sure, said what every performer understands – when involved in the choreographic process one can't explain what is being done, one simply does it. He said that Ohad never says Why or What is something about to the dancers, he just keeps making the piece. But Etay has heard all sides of the question and what is Naharin's view. "Some," he said, "are charmed by the songs they hear and remember good things from their childhood and some (this is the side I come down on) feel Naharin's being satirical and damning of where nationalism and Zionism gets us." Etay said "Ohad's brilliance is allowing for it all." The score is a mélange of words and song including *Psalm 133:1*, parts of drama by Hanoch Levine, Yermi Kadoshi's *Card Games* to music that is a very Mizrahi version by Moshe Cohen. How depressing to feel the randomness of someone flexing their muscles, hanging from the door jam or strutting in loneliness as the words repeat "we lost our way, far from our relatives; we are called children of bitterness, because father played cards."

The 18 dancers weave down the run-way in pairs, and reverse their direction so at first no one exits. They are all waving past each other on the run-way march, peeling off as two by twos, yet in what seemed like an endless parade. A surprising walk into the audience, and blankets are pulled out from random hiding places under various seats. The dancers spread them out on the laps of audience members, and they become cocoons or sleeping bags to shelter the dancers as they climb up onto the laps, resting in fetal positions. They seem to sleep while we hear “you and I, and the coming war...” belying any possible calm. Eventually the dancers quietly fold up their blankets, come back quietly to the run-way, but that’s not how it ends. Much coming and going, back in their boots, black outs and then we see them falling to their knees. Relentless and perturbing, the images of the boots flashing and it is the end of childhood, in jarring and terrifying ways. Division is here and war seems to be coming.

There were other note-worthy works I mention briefly:

On the Way: I applauded this choreography by Shaden Abu Elasal with 7 dancers from Nazareth,⁵ showing their earnest work outdoors in the SDCD courtyard. One can’t know the political challenges of young women from a wholly different ethnic and religious community coming to SDCD, but it felt hopeful and successful.

Haramot, choreographed with set design by Lior Tavori, for the Lior Tavori Dance Group⁶ shows how we are perpetually auditioning, showing the effort to be noticed and successful at first humorously. Tavori had just the right recipe of camp, humor and skill to pull off his question: Are we a sellout because the adjudicators and those in power have their own criteria that we can’t necessarily intuit?

What Now, with performers Sharon Zuckermann Weiser and Hillel Kogan, seemed to be a very open, with-it couple who are talking to each other as they try to work out the choreography for their newest duet. They seem considerate and non-judgmental as the man changes the music on his computer, pushing himself to dance and find solutions to moving throughout the space. The woman also experiments and then sits dead center stage on a folding chair, revealing her concerns about working together, the daily stress of continuing. As their studio time progresses, we watch the carefully worked out parameters of choreographing together fall apart. The politics of a man working with a woman, not a muse but a partner, just cannot overcome what the woman perceives as patriarchal hierarchy. If two can’t make it as an equal partnership, how can we extrapolate that to politics of community and country?

60,000 Gra(h)m: choreographed by Danal Ruttenberg, performed by Ruttenberg and Shmuel Halfon morphed from one Martha Graham inspired lift to another, a kind of index of female adoration. The reminders of what Graham had wrought in her work about female heroines but devoid of Graham’s long dramas and context were sometimes odd – some of the lifts looked almost ludicrous, and at other times they were simply astounding and daring. But how truly freed were these characters in Graham’s retelling from Greek myth, the Bible or American history? Were they precursors to feminism and freedom or some new kind of stereotypes politically?

Both Place to Be, a duet,⁷ and *When Love Walked In*, a trio,⁸ tested dancers and audience beyond normal endurance making the point that searching for lovers and friends and providing support seems doomed to suffering, physically and metaphorically. Could we agree to watch as dancers became more and more exhausted, more and more misused? We did, though, sometimes wishing we could stop them even as we were astounded as we watched their prowess. Are we left with these endless attempts and what it means to search for intimacy and love – is this what we are left with as our humanity?

Endnotes

¹ For *O.S.L.O*, writing and direction by Guy Gutman, choreography by Tami Lebovitz, scenography by Gabi Karichli, performed by dancers Tal Adler, Or Ashkenazi, Tamar Kish and Shuli Enosh; produced by HAZIRA.

² The panel was created by Sarah Holcman, Director of Programs and International Relations for SDCD with experience dance curating in the US and Is. along with Gustavo Fljalkow, a curator and dance scholar, working on his doctoral thesis on National Dance Platforms for Coventry University in England. He also moderated the panel of three. Ken Takiguchi is a dramaturg and researcher with a PhD from National University of Singapore who has published many articles on curating the nation, currently working at Setagaya Public Theatre in Tokyo. Ziv Nevo Kulman, an Israeli diplomat who worked as cultural attaché in Paris and Tokyo, holds a MA from Tel Aviv University focusing on dance as diplomacy. He was head of Israel’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs Performing Arts Section, nominated Head of the Bureau for Cultural Diplomacy in Dec. 2017. Gaby Aldor is a dance critic and performance artist who co-founded the Arab-Hebrew Theatre of Jaffa (where she often performs). She also has published dance articles in French, English, German and Hebrew; her most recent book is entitled *Naharin*.

³ For *Concrete*: choreography by Ofir Yudilevitch performed by Kerem Shemi, Yasmin Weiss, Hagar Dromi, Eshed Avraham, Ben Ish Revivo, Ofir Yudilevitch with dramaturgy by Yael Biegon-Citro.

⁴ *2-0-1-9* was danced by 18 dancers of the Batsheva Dance company, with lighting by Avi Yona Bueno (Bambi), costume design by Eri Nakamura and music a listing of Maxim Vart with listing by Neurosis; Nurit Hirsh; V.F>M. Style; ‘Mishakei Klafim’ or the poem ‘Playing Cards’ set to music by Moshe Cohen, Hako Yamasaki, and singing of children’s songs by the Batsheva dancers with projected words that made for a kind of public singing for those who could read Hebrew in the audience.

⁵ *On the Way*, choreographed by Shaden Abu Elasal, performed by Marya Elqeesh; Adan Azzam; Nada Srouji; Yara Zuabgi; Jojo Ayoub; Shahed Jabarin; Layan Mabweesh, music by Said Murad.

⁶ *Haramot*, choreographed by Lior Tavori; 5 dancers/collaborators: Shira Ben Uriel, Amnon Peled, Yael Averbuch, Nir Even Shoam, Niv Elbaz; costume design Idan Lwederman, Sound design Guy Moses.

⁷ *Place to Be*, choreography by Dor Mamalia and Dariusz Nowak, performance by them and Jin Young Won.

⁸ *When Love Walked In*, Concept and Choreography by Yossi Berg and Oded Graf; creating performers were Ofri Mantell, Tal Adler Arieli, Yossi Berg; Musical advice and original score: Nadav Barnea.

Judith Brin Ingber is a dancer and independent scholar. She was a dance composition student of Bessie Schoenberg's and graduated from Sarah Lawrence College in New York. In the 1970s she lived in Israel where she taught for Batsheva and Bat Dor and assisted Sara Levi-Tanai at Inbal Dance Theatre. Judith appears in the biopic *Mr. Gaga* speaking about Ohad Naharin's student days. She also co-founded the *Israeli Dance Annual* with Giora Manor in 1975 which has morphed into *Dance Today*, edited by Ruth Eshel. Brin Ingber was Guest Editor for *Dance Today's* Issue #36, the special issue of articles based on the International Conference "Jews and

Jewishness in the Dance World." In the US, Brin Ingber taught for 25 years in the Dept. of Theatre Arts and Dance at the University of Minnesota, co-founded the chamber performing group Voices of Sepharad and continues to return often to Israel to research and to teach, most recently at the Seminar HaKibbutzim for Henia Rottenberg's class. She presents programs and papers about Jewish dance (especially at the Conney Conference for Jewish Arts <https://conneyproject.wisc.edu/>) and writes about topics in Jewish dance studies. www.jbriningber.com. briningber@gmail.com.



Avi Kaiser and Sergio Antonio perform their work *L'état des choses*, Photo: Eli Katz

L'état des choses מאת אבי קייזר וסרגיו אנטוניו, צילום: אלי כץ