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# Suzanne Dellal Centre International Exposure for Dance 2020

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Judith Brin Ingber

Because of COVID-19, this year's 26<sup>th</sup> annual International Exposure for Dance, usually held live at Suzanne Dellal Centre for Dance (SDC), like so much else, was entirely different. Typically, the festival literally exposes world-wide presenters to a variety of contemporary Israeli dance from solo to company performances. Usually, the performances are compressed into a few intense days from morning until midnight. Instead, (Last year's festival showcased 43 works for 200 guests who were mostly international presenters from approximately 42 different countries). Instead, this year, to protect everyone's health, like so much in the arts—the festival was presented online featuring 23 performances.

The “guests,” presenters with venues in major international cities and dance professionals, could plan their viewing over many days in one's own space. Many of the dances were filmed on SDC's large proscenium stage and each choreographer was also filmed speaking about their work. Sometimes we met their collaborators, or sometimes we heard them interviewed as part of a panel with other creators; their bios were also on the festival site. Potential presenters could see a new work plus get a real feel for its creator well beyond cryptic program notes.

Given the online format (dances were streamed through vimeo and panel discussions held live on zoom and made available for viewing afterward) and the rare opportunity for return viewing, perhaps it will be a disappointment this year's coverage in *Dance Today* delves into only a few works: Inbal Pinto's collaboration with writer Etgar Keret *Outside*; Shira Eviatar and Hadar Ahuvia's duet *Possessing*; Galit Liss's *Blue Zone*; Sahar Damon's *Do Not Title Me*; Shaden Abu Elasal's *Triology*; Ella Rothschild's *Pigulim* and Nina Traub's *Waterfalls*. Online viewing instills a lonely watching, and providing an overview was too illusive other than to say that Israeli contemporary dance clearly maintains its versatility, originality and dramatic appeal to a truly wide range of viewers.

The stunning dance that opened the festival was choreographer Inbal Pinto's *Outside* based on a story by writer Etgar Keret.<sup>1</sup> He asks how will we fare when all the isolation and sequestered living because of Covid-19 comes to an end? We see the remarkable dancer Moran Muller, flopping down on her couch, but so despondent, and frantic she barely sits. Instead, she goes onto her head, her legs in the air, or throws herself down, contorting again into

some other unbelievable shape. In the dance, filmed by Daniel Reeb, he gives her a surreal way to step above the ground, as if her very socks allowed her to float by her kitchen table. In her COVID isolation, she's making bread, but flour spews into a big cloud above the messy table. A television hangs on the wall, and our homemaker listens to a news cast but the whole situation is incomprehensible. Broadcast in Japanese, we see subtitles running along the bottom of the television interpreting: soon it will be time to leave. Isolation is coming to an end. But after so long in-



*Pigulim* by Ella Rothschild, photo: Rose Shalti

פִּיגוּלִים נִמְאֵת אֵלֶּה רוֹטְשִׁילְד, צִילּוּם: רוֹז שְׁלַטִּי

side, our homemaker doesn't want to go outside. She looks up at her television. The broadcaster (played so effectively by Mirai Moriyama) starts out calmly, commandeering the situation, but the news begins to overwhelm him. The walls of the broadcaster's tv studio begin contracting, pushing him, distorting him, shoulders one way, legs upended, face squished against the screen as he continues to report. The apartment walls also begin to close in on our apartment dweller. Pinto's dream-like works—in this dance, a nightmare—exacerbate the feelings of isolation compounded by the literal shrinking of the small room through a remarkable set change which precisely fit Pinto's imagery. The police command our apartment dweller to leave. One can see her reluctance and fear of departing the sanctity of her apartment, even as the space is totally contorting. Finally, we are told in Keret's story that she leaves and goes to a bank's Automatic Teller Machine (ATM). A homeless person is discovered slouching by the ATM. At first our lonely apartment dweller has an open heart, but then, she remembers, what was life before Covid-19. She turns, going on her way.

*Possessing* is a duet with humor, created by Shira Eviatar and Hadar Ahuvia. The two young women introduce themselves in a friendly, nonchalant manner, the copper hair-colored dancer says "I'm Hadar", the black-haired dancer, "I'm Shira". They are stark naked but what is clothed are their faces, oddly obscured by their curly, big hair covering all parts of their heads. They're co-joined, in an imposed Siamese Twin connection, leaving them glued together for a goodly part of the dance.

In Jewish conversational style, punctuating each phrase with their hands, and arms, too, "We met at a conference"<sup>2</sup>

"at Arizona State University"...

"called 'Jews and Jewishness in the Dance World'."

"What does that mean?" With comic timing they shrug their naked shoulders. "We realized we didn't know what that means, and anyway, it's so different because I live in Israel," says Shira, "and I live in Brooklyn, the *Gola*. (The Diaspora)", says Hadar.

In their patter, we learn they'll explore folk dance, but for Hadar that means the Zionist Israeli folk dance she learned growing up. Shira's is from her Moroccan grandmother, Savta Esther. They're researching the embodiment of their inheritance. Shira begins upstage, snaking her arms and hands, then windmilling them ferociously, toning down, into a little shimmy. She turns to face us, then with more intensity, her breasts possessed, moving more and more athletically. Turning again, she lowered the movement volume into gentle swaying, one hip and then the other rising in that familiar belly-dance style. She picks a final teasing, jaded stance, fingers to forehead, hip askance, a stereotypic embodiment of her Moroccan Sephardic heritage.

Hadar Ahuvia rises from the floor, flouncing across the width of the stage. In her folk dance exploration she joins hands with many imaginary dancers. She skips, jumps and stamps her way around Eviatar. We recognize *Hora Medura* and other Israeli folk dances, their steps almost violent in her vigor and repetition. Ahuvia pushes Eviatar to the side, and then Eviatar corrals Ahuvia, each in their respective folk styles. Will one dominate, pushing the other with an implicit social commentary about Sephardi and Ashkenazi cultures?

With no choreographic denouement, a sudden black out ends it all. Galit Liss in her *Blue Zone* makes obvious what she said in her interview: she loves working with the older woman's body. Last year we watched Liss choreograph for elderly women, one once a pilot, setting the theme as they donned uniforms, and then leaned out into space, soaring upward in flying shapes as their legs were grounded, held by seated partners. In this year's festival presentation, we learn that *Blue Zone* refers to areas of the world where elderly thrive - and here we see women of all shapes in blue dresses, thriving in full movement, rolling everywhere, sometimes menacing, stamping, standing. They carry on with chores like vacuuming or hammering which goes awry, banging the floor, and then the hammers held on their shoulders as if they had a mind of their own, threatening to become weapons. But hammer and vacuum chores are usurped by something else: a woman moves one of the huge silvery blue balls on stage. Is it play that we watch, as the orbs are stacked and rolled, the idea that play never leaves us; no effort looks belabored. We watch the movers from all different angles, the camera sometimes moving overhead to show the figures lying on the floor, spritely joining their arms and legs, creating flower-like shapes, or standing, present together, enjoying their camaraderie in movement, uninhibited in their vitality.

Sahar Damoni, a new choreographer to the Exposure, hails from the Galilee. It is a welcome addition that the festival keeps adding to its roster geographically and with more diversity. In *Do Not Title Me*, Damoni begins wearing the accoutrement of a sexy woman ensconced in lacey leggings, her feet in red high heels. Her back is bare, facing away from us, and we watch as she steps out of her heels. She kneels, and slowly she pushes a coil of red carpet which unrolls from the force of her knees as she moves upstage. Through theatrical tricks, her red high heels follow her. The whole while, maneuvering from one knee to the other, she's dipping and lifting one hip and then the other, in constantly slow, sensual, figure eights. A *tour de force* of riveting, traditional belly dance movement, Damoni also projects a smoldering anger. In the end, she rises, puts on her shoes and disappears through the curtains at the back. In her interview, we hear she feels isolated and indignant, not wanting to be labeled as a dancer with only a certain style. Though she's a Palestinian woman from traditional small village life, she's searching to express herself beyond the expected, no matter how lonely or how challenging.

Shaden Dance Co. performed a part of *Trilogy* created by Shaden Abu Elasal. I remembered the group from last year when the dancers performed outside at SDC, well rehearsed in their unison, abstract movement. This time, there was a narrative, and through their film (parts by Issa Freij, and produced by Suzanne Dellal Centre), there was a change in locale, beginning outside at SDC to an area of closed shops in the Old City market of Nazareth. We learned from the choreographer's interview that she grew up in Nazareth, (trained at Jerusalem's Academy of Music and Dance, and later performed with Inbal Dance Theatre before creating her own company). For this dance she was drawing on pain as if located not in a limb or the heart, but held at the actual site of Suzanne Dellal Centre, with a fraught history of conflict between Arab and Jew that Shaden had researched. The ancient open well at SDC

was the beginning site, dancers in black indicated here was “our” house. They pulled movement up from the well, lamenting with fright and pain, embedded in their actions. Music by Said Murad accompanied the four dancers outside at SDC, and then, we jump to narrow alleyways, youthfully dressed young women are seen on stone steps. Sometimes lying, sometimes rolling over the stairs, the dancers press up against the walls, showing a private lexicon of movements that nonetheless capture the eye. Effectively taking over the site, the group becomes seven, moving from doorway to doorway, then running up the stairways. An old woman traditionally dressed in a long, dark gown, passes by, looking puzzled, or maybe judgmental. The young women have become so much more open in their demeanor, showing in their movement they’re much freer also perhaps from tradition and their history.

Ella Rothschild’s *Pigulim* shows three incredibly annoyed young women in pastel dresses and matching socks gathered around a table, arguing. Their yelling, though entirely silent, nonetheless penetrates the viewer through slow motion and distorted shapes. One woman tries to comfort another, fixing her hair, soothing her, but nothing works; they grab at each other, and as happens when arguments get out of hand, the anger travels between the trio. One creeps away to ignore the others, reading a book that magically appeared. Another prop, a table cloth, materializes, and one of the dancers tries to fling it over the table, while another begins weeping, the cloth becomes a kerchief to wipe the eyes and then a cummerbund. She leaves the table, taking the cloth with her, the other two engaging in an angry tango. Their exaggerated facial gestures add to the violent argument we never hear, but see so effectively as chairs are angrily moved. The three join hands, moving into a circle dance totally off kilter when one is pulled to the ground. Oddly the trio gives way to a big family. Many items are added to the table, including a candelabra, a pitcher, table settings, and we see a greedy family, licking their plates, consuming their food like locusts. The pain of the three morphs as we watch a unison of all the others in movements that threaten the women. All eloquently rendered, we see a tableau of bleak unhappiness. The accomplished trio of dancers included Ariel Freedman, Adi Zlatin, and Keren Luria Pardes, the family was represented by dancers from the “Maslool - Professional Dance Program” with the noteworthy accompaniment composed by Gershon Waiserfirer.

In Nina Traub’s *Waterfalls* we see a solo figure in black, her face obscured, scuffing towards us in big black boots over a white floor, laid with dark shimmering material. Two other dancers identically dressed join in what proves to be a most alluring and surprising trio. Whistling bird calls are heard. What seems to have been darkness on the floor, gives way to foil shimmering and splitting in two, peeling off the floor, the ends rolling, pulled upward to either side of the stage, reaching high above the dancers, suspended overhead in a surprise, reverse waterfall. The trio lie on their sides, batting their knees together and opening them as if they have sprouted odd mermaid tails beneath the waterfall. Their arms propellor-like, move round. The air is quiet, broken unexpectedly by

the snapping of the trio’s fingers. The mermaids rise, now standing in a huge wide stance, as if their boots anchored them, allowing them freedom to swivel this way and that. Slowly, they turn into deep backbends, luxuriating in the most original landscape. Traub, trained in sculpture and at Jerusalem’s School of Visual Theatre, is also one of the dancers, joined by Mesh Olinky and Carmel Ben-Asher. Hanni Vardi and Yair Vardi (not related) created the lighting, especially effective on the waterfall of foil.

Congratulations to Suzanne Dellal Centre for continuing with this year’s International Exposure despite the international pandemic. Choosing and presenting the dance works meant adapting to the online format, with choreographers, filmmakers and the Centre making creative and fitting changes for its audiences. This reviewer watched big productions as well as solos, duets and trios but chose not to meet the challenges of covering large productions of the bigger Israeli companies. For a complete listing of the 23 productions that were presented in the 2020 Festival contact Sara Holcman, Director of Programs at [sarah@sdc.org.il](mailto:sarah@sdc.org.il).

We look forward to the chance to return to Suzanne Dellal Centre to partake in live performance, hungering for the charisma of performers and the uniqueness of fully realized production with the unparalleled full dimensions of dance. May choreographers, their dancers, their viewers, their sponsors, their venues and presenters everywhere all persevere in this difficult time so dance can continue to survive until better times.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>For further information about Etgar and Pinto’s Japanese connection and production see link: <https://www.zaz10ts.com/outside#:~:text=The%20dance%20film%20%E2%80%9COutside%E2%80%9D%20is%20the%20first%20artistic,he%20wrote%20during%20the%20Covid-19%20lockdown%20in%20Israel>. Accessed Jan. 26, 2021.

<sup>2</sup>*Dance Today (Mahol Akhshav)* no. 36, September, 2019 includes 15 essays in English by writers/dancers/performers who presented at the “Jews and Jewishness in the Dance World” international conference at Arizona State University, USA, in 2018. For the complete issue, co-edited by Ruth Eshel and Judith Brin Ingber, see [www.israeldance-diaries.co.il](http://www.israeldance-diaries.co.il).

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**Judith Brin Ingber**, dancer and independent scholar, was a dance composition student of Bessie Schoenberg’s at Sarah Lawrence College. In the 1970s she lived in Israel teaching for Batsheva and Bat Dor and assisting Sara Levi-Tanai at Inbal Dance Theatre. In the bio-pic *Mr. Gaga*, she speaks about Ohad Naharin’s student days. She also co-founded the *Israeli Dance Annual* with Giora Manor, precursor to *Dance Today*. In the US she taught in the Dept. of Theatre Arts and Dance, University of Minnesota; co-founded the chamber performing group Voices of Sepharad; continues writing and lecturing (especially at the Conney Conference for Jewish Arts (<https://conneyproject.wisc.edu/>)).