

Neta Pulvermacher

Phone rings. The editor, Ruth Eshel is on the line: "Neta, can you write about International Exposure 2021 in English, for Dance Now?" I hesitated, then hesitated some more...and agreed. This year, due to the continued waves of Covid-19, International Exposure (IE) was again offered via an on-line platform, after hopes of going back to a live edition disappeared due to the global pandemic.

But first, perhaps some context is due: IE is the brainchild of Mr. Yair Vardi, the founding director of the Suzanne Dellal Centre. In IE Mr. Vardi has created an annual showcase and marketplace introducing invited, international presenters and festivals to what is billed each year as a showcase of the best crop of original dance works by emerging and established Israeli choreographers and companies. Over the years since its first edition, IE has created a mechanism that paved the way for numerous Israeli artists and companies to reach global audiences in all corners of the world. This innovative gathering format proved highly effective in generating worldwide interest in

alongside newcomers. The selected works represented a diverse array of movement styles, subjects and aesthetics that are all part of the contemporary dance scene in Israel. The IE digital program featured video documentations of large-scale productions such as *Summer Snow*, the new fascinating work by Ella Rothchild commissioned and performed by the Bat-Sheva Dance Company and Vertigo Dance Company's newest impressive creation *Pardes* (created by Noa Wertheim during the pandemic), alongside more intimate works such as *Practicing Empathy # 3*, the moving solo created and performed by Yasmeen Godder. The program also included the riveting solo work by Palestinian choreographer Sahar Damoni, titled, *Eat Banana and Drink Pills*. Sahar's work embodies the trauma and rage in the experience of abortion in Arab society. I had the opportunity to see it live in a dress rehearsal. That was lucky for me, because the video version of the work does not do it justice. Somehow it was not possible to translate the power of this deeply personal work to the screen. But, when performed live, the intensity of Sahar's presence, movement, images of pain and anguish permeates our skins. The proximity of her actions is part of the work's raw power. One cannot just watch

International Exposure 2021 On-Line Edition

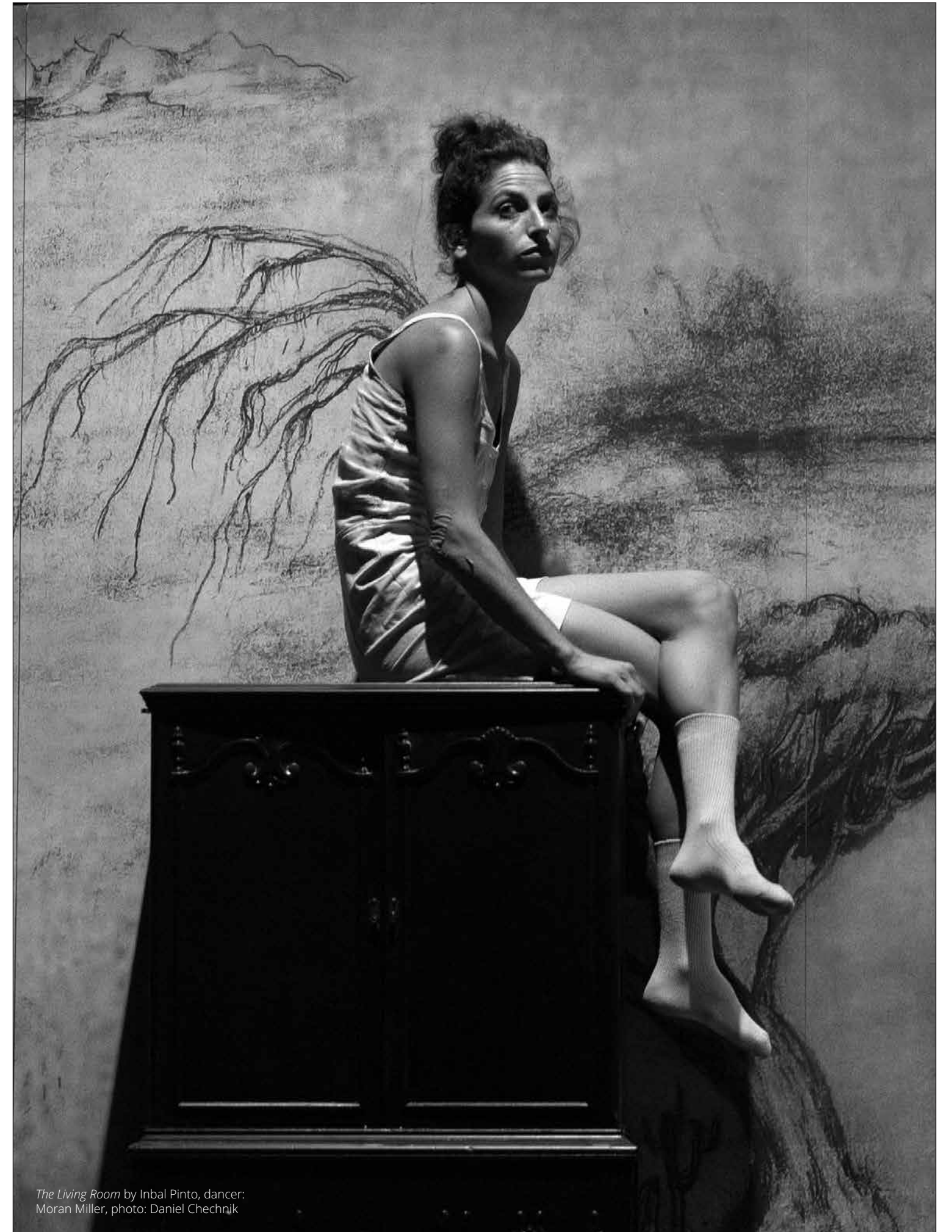
Israeli contemporary dance and contributed greatly to the increased global demand for Israeli Contemporary Dance. It is important to commend the continuous support of the Israeli Foreign Ministry, and the commitment of Suzanne Dellal Centre's current directors, Artistic Director: Naomi Perlov, CEO, Anat Fischer Leventon and Director of Programs, Sarah Holcman for continuing this important project despite the setbacks of the past two years.

New this year was the format of "*Pitching*", which was also presented on-line. In *Pitching* twelve dance artists were selected via an open call to pitch their future projects to presenters, companies, schools and festival directors in order to secure co-commissioning partners for the creation of their future works. This is a welcome and important addition to the IE program that will assist Israeli choreographers in gathering international resources for their new creations.

The 2021 IE screening program featured more than 22 new original dance works by established companies and choreographers

the work in an emotionally detached fashion. It felt as though we - the audience must take an active role here. The work asks its viewers to bear witness to the unhinging, and deep pain resulting from the trauma of abortion within the closed Palestinian society. But, even more so, to me this violation was also a metaphorical one: Here she was, the only Palestinian in the room, expressing her pain - for us, Israeli audience seated in a perfect circle around her, close enough to feel her sobs and quickening breath. I thought of another kind of rape: that of a Palestinian woman without a right to her land, body and culture. At the end of the work, Sahar walked around inside the circle, making eye contact with each audience member. Her rage and pain is still fresh in my mind.

Having the opportunity to experience Sahar Damoni's work live and on screen sharpened my perspective about the pitfalls of translating staged works to the screen. Watching the more than 21 works on screen was not easy, especially when the great majority of the works on the IE program were created for the stage and meant to be viewed



The Living Room by Inbal Pinto, dancer: Moran Miller, photo: Daniel Chechnik

as live performances and not as dances for the screen. This year's screening program also included video interviews with each artist about his/her work. Strangely, the interviews held up on the video format, while sometimes the work itself did not. Perhaps, this has less to do with the quality of the dance works presented than with the difficulty of translating dances from stage to screen.

The experience of watching so much screen-dance, raised many interesting and some troubling questions around the issue of dances and screens. For example: What happens to our bodies when we are viewing mediated images of a moving body or bodies? How can we cultivate kinesthetic empathy through performing agents on screen? What type(s) of somatic awareness do we cultivate with increased screen use? Are we feeling and sensing another type of "body" after so much screen time? What is gained and what is lost in this format of screen- dances? What new opportunities do the practicing, creating, teaching, performing and sharing dance via screens open? And finally what cinematic skills are required in order for contemporary dance to become effective on screen?

It is interesting to note that *The International Journal of Screendance*, titled its Spring 2021 volume #12, "This Is Where We Dance Now: Covid-19 and the New and Next in Dance **Onscreen.**" Is it true that the screens are where we dance now? In some ways, yes and in some ways - no. I believe that it is important for us in Israel and in the dance world et al, to think, explore and converse about the mediation of dance via screens in the digital age and the role of the living and moving body in this digitized world. After two years of restrictions due to the pandemic including long periods of complete shutdown of studios, theaters and live performances, we all had to ponder deep questions about our lives, our art, its meaning(s) and relevance. How and why do we keep dancing and making dances? Who are we making our works for? What role does the body play when there is so much screen time in our daily lives and functions? What happens when social media and digital platforms become the "real" place of being? Is



Yasmin Godder performs her dance *Practicing Empathy # 3*, photo: Tamar Lamm

there a body in this being? What is the relevance of our work as artists during these tumultuous times (political, social, economic, racial) and in the face of disease and continued uncertainty?

I don't have answers to these questions. But at-least for me, the desire to "go back" or rather "go forward" to live theater (viewing and performing) and the invitation to be fully present in a public space where we can experience with others live performances, never waned and even got stronger. I think that we all recognize now that despite the digital alternatives available, there is something irreplaceable in the liveness and immediacy of live performance and in the contagious energy and heat emanating from unmediated moving bodies in real time and space right in front of our eyes.

Cultural relevance is another issue that perked up for me while watching the works of IE. I had to ask myself what is urgent about this or that work? Why was it created during this time? Here we are in January 2022 with a new government and a new prime minister, after 12 years of Netanyahu. This is a welcomed change that many of us yearned for and actively worked to bring about, and yet, none of the works presented explored the political under-currents of Israel. Nor was there any palpable reference to the latest Israeli/Palestinian flare up that nearly tore us apart this past May. This is not criticism, but an observation. Can Israeli contemporary dance participate in the construction of current Israeli discourse and culture?

"Yair Assulin of *Haaretz* addressed this issue of cultural relevance in his April 2021 opinion piece titled: «Without Culture, There Is No Israeli Independence». He wrote: "it seems that one of the most important tasks that responsible Israelis must take on themselves is leading a true revolution in Israeli culture. Again, not just another minor repair of the existing institutions, not another allocation of funds for the bottomless pits of the corrupt machines, but the creation of new cultural infrastructure, relevant and

flowing from the new era and the revolutions inherent in it....one that knows how to communicate with the younger generation, that allows as many voices as possible to be heard, and to deeply explore their existential experiences, their emotions, as part of the Israeli discourse... Culture that challenges reality, that investigates it and is not afraid of subverting it, either, is the sole protection that society can nurture for itself in these fragile times of change and disintegration. A direct correlation exists between the power of human societies and the relevancy of their cultures. Only culture knows how to mark the directions in which humanity is marching."

Looking at some of the works presented through the cultural relevance lens, choreographer Iris Erez and her two partners, created *Missing Faces*, which was one of the few works that speak directly and are of this time. Its integration or shall I say disintegration of media, sound, split screens and bodies, the blurring boundaries between private and public spaces, cameras, phones, and mediated intimate conversations, filmed from various angles, create a flow that is possible and interesting to follow - even on video. In this work, the choreographer and her collaborators manage to create a visual and movement language that together create a complete mini world for its three engaging performers, while providing us with doors to enter their world as it unfolds. Here, the quick shifts of the camera zooming in and out succeeds in creating a flow of images, sounds and movement that in this case contribute to the effectiveness of the work. I did not see the work live but viewing the video version of the work gave me a sense of the actual work without feeling that the liveness of the performance was missing, whatever that means.

Inbal Pinto's new work, *Living Room*, grabs the viewer from its first moment. It feels like we are entering the soul and mind of its central character, a young woman who is alone in her desolate and bare living room. The work asks us: what is real and what is imagined? Has the young woman lost her grasp on reality? What can be considered reality in these strange times when we find ourselves confined to our apartments and homes? At times, *Living Room* feels like the insides of the character's mind. The visual stage design, costumes, lighting, and objects are all part of the universe that Pinto conjures. Her wonderful performer, Moran Miller, is a lonesome character - stuck in a room, wearing a dress that matches the wallpapers (both designed by Pinto). I could recognize myself in her: the loneliness and weight of social distancing, the heavily regulated public and private spaces and the need to escape it all into the imagination. She must be seeing things... I thought. The Cellist Maya Belsizman provided the original score, a hauntingly beautiful, and gentle, soundtrack that adds another layer to what takes place on stage and is integral to the works' theatrical language. *Living Room* is a remarkable, poetic work that is not playing by the rules of current trends or fashions. It is concerned with its own internal rules. The work employs cinematic ideas and speaks with an original voice creating a complete theatrical language and world. In this case, I am eager to see the live staged version of the work, although the video version worked extremely well.

Lior Tavori's *Mars* is another engaging work that is well constructed and paced, providing a great vehicle for its four wonderful male dancers. I am interested in the physicality of Tavori's work as well as in his use of space and choreographic devices that move the work forward. After watching this work, I feel as though I know something about each of the performers that I did not know prior to watching the work. We sense a journey - as we follow the four dancers from beginning to end. Even on screen one can sense an underlying sexual tension, a coming out of sort. This self-discovery and acceptance rings authentic and vulnerable without being contrived, and the four men move beautifully inside the square space marked by neon lights.

I am full of admiration for all the artists and organizers that took on participating in creating an alternative digital format for the 2021 International Exposure festival, with all the previously stated challenges. However, I sincerely hope that the stars will realign, and that next edition of IE will be a live gathering that will celebrate new Israeli dance in the theaters with the presence of international guests and live audiences.



Sahar Damoni performs her work *Eat Banana and Drink Pills*, photo: Asya Skorik

Professor Neta Pulvermacher was born and raised in Kibbutz Lehavot Habashan, Israel. After serving in the Israeli army, she moved to NYC to study at the Juilliard School (1982-85). Holds M.A./Teachers College and an MFA/Hollins University. In 2013 after 31 years in NYC she moved back Israel when she was invited to become the Dean of Dance at the Jerusalem Academy of Music and Dance. Currently she is a professor at the JAMD and the artistic director of the Dance Ensemble. Prior to her return to Israel, she was a professor of Dance and Choreography at the University of Florida and has also taught at Barnard College and Princeton University among others. She has choreographed over 90 original dance works and collaborates with musicians and artists. Awards include NEA, NYFA and a special honor from the White House in 2006.



Mars by Lior Tavori, dancers: Uri Moshe Ofri, Amit Marciano, Rehes Izhaki, Tomer Levi, photo: Rom Barnea