

The phenomenon of Israeli contemporary dance

The origins of dance as an art form in present-day Israel date back to the early 20th century and the arrival of Jewish immigrants from Europe, including teachers and artists. Since the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, dance has also functioned as a propagandist means to build a new state and its new musical and dance culture. Although in principle the new Israeli culture was supposed to differ from that of the Jewish Diaspora, but it was patently based on the elements of the cultures brought in by “new Jews” who migrated to Israel from all over Europe and the Arab Peninsula. Israeli dance developed along two tracks: Israeli folklore (e.g. the kibbutz *hora* dance), on the one hand, and artistic dance, developed by independent choreographers and dance companies.

The first actual leap of Israeli dance into “contemporary times” can be situated in the early 1960s and the immigration of baroness Batsheva (Bethsabée) de Rothschild, who together with Martha Graham founded the Batsheva Dance Company in 1964. Soon after that, a number of other dance schools and companies were established, including the defunct Bat-Dor Company or the Kibbutz Contemporary Dance Company (1970). The founding of these several dance companies and schools helped educate a whole generation of dancers and choreographers, many of whom emigrated to the USA and Western Europe, returning to Israel in the late 1980s and early 90s, and laying foundations for another “leap,” which is currently referred to as “contemporary dance” in Israel.

Contemporary dance became one of the crucial branches of contemporary culture in Israel, and likely one of the most recognizable products of Israeli culture worldwide. Is there a particular factor that has contributed to its popularity and the fact that so many people (for such a small country) deal with, and wish to take up, dance? While the choices of every person—be it a future dancer or choreographer—are an individual matter, one may outline several factors specific to Israel. One of them is the weather, which prompts people (especially children and the youth) to spend much of their life outside, cultivating physical activity. Another factor is the vital role of informal (out-of-school) education, often organized by animators active in the cultural sector, in particular dance, who often instil young people with an affinity for dance. One should also bear in mind the social and political reality of Israel, conducive to a specific (tense) social energy, which dance helps discharge, and which also acts as an element of narratives developed by numerous artists.

In the past few years, Israeli dance has mainly been associated with the GaGa style created by the brilliant Ohad Naharin, a long-standing artistic director of the Batsheva Dance Company. Without taking anything away from Naharin, one must stress that GaGa has not been the sole showcase of the Israeli contemporary dance scene. It is precisely that other, less-known facet of Israeli dance that we focus on in the “Dance From Israel” review at Nowy Teatr. In order to expose our audience to the diversity of the contemporary dance scene in Israel, we have invited its two diverse representatives: independent choreographer Michael Getman and the SOL company.

Michael Getman, born in Israel to Russian-born parents who settled in Israel in the 1970s, may be one of the most “non-Israeli” contemporary choreographers. His difference results

both from the stigma of his background and his early debut at home and abroad. For the most part of the year, Getman works outside of Israel (mostly in Australia and Canada), but he also pursues some projects at home. His choreographies are characterised with a particularly strong and universal style. During his visit to Warsaw, Getman will present two pieces, the duo *Face to Face* (starring Getman himself) and the solo *Am I.Dancer*.

The starting point in *Face to Face* are the situations of tension and conflict between individuals, organizations, and universals. The piece offers a benevolent story of aggression and ways to deal with conflict, in which opposing values clash against one another, including love and hatred, war and peace, etc. Getman's duo with Eldad Ben-Sason resounds with the Biblical story of Cain and Abel and their ambiguous relationship, although luckily to us Getman's story does not lead to the greatest of tragedy. Still, Getman does not leave the audience in Biblical times, but rather uses the political manifesto of the Israeli artist and composer Harold Rubin, and advocate of the peace movement, and catapults the viewer to present-day Israel. While not abstaining from the decisively universal message of his piece, Getman also ventures to unmask Israel's uglier face.

The solo *Am I. Dancer* is a completely different story. Developed especially for the dancer Talia Paz, the solo is a perverse creation tailored to the needs of the commissioning party. An established dancer with a years of experience in Israel and abroad, of which many young dancers can only dream, Paz has been faced with the questions spurred by the natural flow of time: is this all there is? What are the boundaries of my body and my creation? Am I still a dancer at my age? Getman's choreography outlines an image of an artist who is fully aware of her body, psyche, age, and the related challenges and constraints. She transgresses some of them while succumbing to, or laughing at, the other limits, but she persists in contemplating the eponymous question and tries to answer it. Still, since it was Paz (the dancer) who invited Getman (the choreographer) to work with her (not the other way round), one may ask if it is only the dancer that is the instrument in the choreographer's hands?

The second of the invited guests, the SOL Dance Company, represents a different choreographic language, while also showcasing the best of Israeli ensemble dance. The SOL is a relatively young company, established in 2016 and comprised of eight dancers who grew up in the 1990s and later on, at a time when Israeli contemporary dance was gaining its global renown. The SOL dancers have been successful in maintaining that reputation, since they possess all attributes of "stereotypical Israeli" dancers: physical diversity, corporeality, agility, and transgressiveness. The presented choreography, developed by the founder and artistic director of the company, Eyal Dadon, intertwines refined and meticulous dance sequences with occasional humour verging on subtle wildness. Tellingly titled, *Sale* playfully criticizes our daily consumerism, teasing everything that is a challenge in life, in society, in games and rules, in Capitalism and in the results of our actions.

Tadeusz Woleński