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# 24<sup>th</sup> International Exposure Festival of Israeli Dance at the Suzanne Dellal Centre for Dance, December 5-9, 2018

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## Judith Brin Ingber

There were 189 international presenters from 47 countries, from China to Brazil, who came to see a striking corpus of Israeli dance performances last Hanukkah, guests of the Israeli government and the Suzanne Dellal Center for Dance. They watched over 35 dances ranging from solo to large - scale company productions, showing enormous imaginations at work, some with dystopian views of the world, others evolving from Israel's differing ethnic backgrounds and others with unexpected views of aging or sensuality. Most were danced by fabulous performers often unfortunately unacknowledged by name in the programs, all to impart something of Israel for the guests' various home country audiences. This year's 24<sup>th</sup> International Exposure Dance Festival was again under the admirable direction of Yair Vardi and his fine staff including Sarah Holcman, Director of Programs and International Relations, and Claudio Kogon, Deputy Director.

They shepherded the guests morning, noon and night throughout the Suzanne Dellal campus of buildings from studio showings to main-stage performances, the offerings a bit like the unpredictable weather—one moment so stormy, mercilessly lashing us like the winter rain, and then dramatically changing to lightness and sunshine even with sounds of birds singing in one of the scores or many with wonderful live music as well as constructed sound scores.

New this year were two panels providing a framework to help explain the development of dance in Israel and the censorship challenges facing Israeli performance. The panels also gave a rare chance for the guests to interact with each other. "Contextualizing Israeli Dance" ably facilitated by Ran Brown began with a lively talk by dancer/editor/critic/historian, Ruth Eshel who peppered her remarks about the important companies and Israeli choreographers since the 1930s with wonderful clips of historical film footage showing the changes as Expressionist European dance influences gave way to the effect of American choreographers before Israelis found their own voices. Iris Lana, director of the dance collection of the National Library of Israel's Visual Culture and Performance Art Project, described the challenging hunt to find and to preserve film, memorabilia, photos in private hands revealing Israel's dance history. Amongst her finds she showed us film of the prolific folk

dance creator Rivka Sturman and Lea Bergstein's Omer Festival of 1946 at Kibbutz Ramat Yohanan. Panelist/choreographer/teacher Anat Danieli plotted for us her perspective of the changing views of women in Israeli dance. Panelist/researcher/teacher Yali Nativ described political, social and artistic implications over the last 70 years in Israel of the changing maps of the country, and names of those in the Israeli population. These included Nativ's explanations of terms such as Ashkenazi, Sephardi, Mizrahi Jews and Arab, Muslim and Palestinian, showing how the names could affect a presence or a void in Israeli dance.

The second panel, "Between Censorship and Boycott," highlighted the result of censorship on dance both internally within Israel and abroad, especially regarding the effect of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions Movement (BDS) — a 17 year old international political movement against Israel. Choreographers Adi Shildan, Hillel Kogan and Renana Raz were panel participants as well as Dina Aldor, executive director of the Batsheva Dance Company (on tour during the Festival, which meant there were no performances of Batsheva to be seen this year, an unusual occurrence). Aldor spoke to the challenges Batsheva Dance Co. has encountered, such as the government asking costumes be changed before the company performance for Israel's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary internationally televised celebration (the dancers wouldn't abide by a compromise and refused to perform), different than the problems the company has faced in its extensive international touring. Because the company is perceived as representing Israel even if its house choreographer, Ohad Naharin, often disagrees with much in the government, performances can be a flashpoint for anti-Israeli sentiments. BDS demonstrations have even led to disruptions during Batsheva performances. To deal with this, the company has training for the dancers and tactics of what to do. Important personally to Aldor to counteract this is to work to build relationships in Israel no matter how small the encounter, especially between Palestinians and Jews. Hillel Kogan spoke about his duet "We Love Arabs" which he has presented in Israel and on international stages, despite facing BDS boycotts and other political demonstrations. Renana Raz felt her situation is different because she refuses Israeli government

grants altogether, thereby freeing her to be an outspoken critic of the government. Shildan spoke as a new-comer compared to the others, speaking to the negative impact on her young career when she was censored by the Israeli Ministry of Culture and Sport. She had used nudity in one of her works, disqualifying her from Ministry support which in turn prevented her from performing in festivals abroad including one in Norway.

The subject of censorship resulted in a rare, lively and welcome discussion between panelists and the audience of foreign presenters. Many shared their experiences facing their own governments which have threatened or imposed censorship (including a Hungarian impresario who defended his choices to maintain the works of artists with different outlooks appearing in Hungary). A Berliner said if we lose freedom for the arts, "we have lost freedom of speech and then we are finished." An Australian said he'd just finished a week with West Bank Palestinians on programming their arts but when they heard he was coming to this festival, their enthusiasm for him cooled dramatically; they told him they didn't want to work with him and be perceived as working with their oppressors.

What follows are some of my own impressions of Festival performances.

*GO*, astonishing and pleasing at every turn, featured 19 women aged 60 to 83 in choreographer **Galit Liss's** ingenious staging. The dancers told their stories of why they danced and what they'd done in their lives (one a pilot, another a professional performer) interspersing the words with unexpected and even daring dance moves. Some told of returning to the dance they had loved as children, disregarding their disparaging fathers, the Holocaust, or physical infirmities. Suddenly terrifying air-raid sirens sounded, and we wondered where was the nearest bomb shelter? However, the grandmothers kept dancing and we grasped the sirens were part of Avi Belleli's sound score. We saw how perseverance was a key part of the performers' outlook. Another time they came on stage carrying khaki packets, when unfolded, turned out to be flight overalls. The dancers helped each other to climb into them and then as they paired up, one grasped the thighs of the other, stabilizing the lead to lean far forward, as if taking flight, arms soaring aloft. These dancers talked about the challenges of aches and pains as they demonstrated exercises to help them strengthen their bodies as well as keeping up with their responsibilities. We applauded their grace, their comradeship and their dancing joys.

**Lior Tavori's** *And Over Again* was the foil to *GO*. Inspired by the poetry of his grandmother, grief-stricken over the loss of her soldier son, Tavori presented a poignant and very strong duet. A robotic little vacuum appears, going back and forth across the stage, as if sweeping the living room rug. Tavori unexpectedly emerged from a huge pile of boxing gloves, mysteriously placed in an imaginary house. He lived there with his partner Shahar Brener. Like the Elephant in the Room no one wants to discuss, boxing gloves intruded more and more on their domestic life even ingeniously representing pregnancy. The husband handed his wife another and another and another glove which she put under her nightgown until she became grotesquely huge. Though she tried to protect her unborn, the gloves all dropped out. In a close embrace, they danced a slow dance, blinded by a glove held between their heads. The woman reached under the shirt of her man, touching him, and desperately trying to protect him from

battle, she put her hands over his eyes as if to shield him. In a quirk of movement, they exchanged places and she stands wearing the boxing gloves, trying to walk forward and then collapses, while the vacuum reappears, automatically continuing its domestic chores as if everything could somehow be cleaned up.

The dancing grandmothers voiced such different views of their bodies than aging solo dancers, pained by what has slipped by. **Noa Dar** in *NoaNoa* seemed puzzled the duration of her solo, looking at the back wall as if there were answers to what she could do in the space which had seemingly changed and she too had changed over time. She gently and then fiercely probed her being and her habits, in the end just leaving the space with no *adieu*.

Talia Paz, a highly accomplished performer, was seen in **Michael Getman's** *AM I* at first pacing the space round and round like the imprisoned panther in Rainer Rilke's poem. She showed us a hideous fall, her leg in an untoward turned-in position awkwardly anchoring her as she tried to slink backwards on the ground, pulling herself with all her might as she related her story. She had broken her leg during a performance, and we were privy to all her machinations wondering how to get off-stage, how to regain her dance, how to cope with all that would befall her dancing body?

Whimsy and surprise filled the duet *IMO, the Mouth is Redundant*, An Encounter between Musician **Gershon Waiserfirer** and Choreographer/Dancer **Ella Rothschild**. At first they seemed so plain, especially Waiserfirer whom no one expected to move with his horn or other instruments or to animate his low portable sound board on little wheels complete with woofers and enhancements. Our expectations were dashed and they became enchanting to watch, their rapport deepening. There were such unexpected combinations of movement with the live music as Rothschild stretched, flicked and cavorted, driving all body parts with all manner of emotion in the most energetic of wordless conversations. It became comical how they hung or held each other with the horns or guitar or masks with instruments. Perhaps the most enchanting was an upended stool which Waiserfirer played on, as if one of the legs were a flute.

Many moments of surprise also occurred in Renana Raz's *16 Strings and One Body* to the luscious, live music of the Toscanini String Quartet. Raz was sometimes a fifth, her solo body beating out such complex rhythms with her hips. She became a conductor as if directing the musicians with her pelvis, even flicking her hair in time. Sometimes she sat on a chair as if another musician, but she melted into the chair, and might slip downward as if abandoning her whole self to the floor, and then suddenly putting herself back together, arranging her blouse exactly on the count. She was amusing, too, when she went up to an audience member, pulling him on stage, but it turned out he really could dance, and they did beautifully until, they abruptly left each other, going off stage in opposite directions, Raz unexpectedly re-entering the hall from a door one hadn't anticipated. The stage became dappled in light and the whole experience watching and listening was changed yet again, in delight.

*Jalo*, **Dege Feder's** solo performance was also accompanied by live musicians Yarden Erez and Elad Neeman, but they played traditional ethnic instruments accompanying Feder's movement memories of her childhood voyage from Ethiopia to Israel. We saw her both driven and adrift, which was both poignant and eerie.

Myriad micro rhythms in her torso worked to push and pull her through her journey. Her head too, could turn abruptly as her directions turned, her shoulders heaving yet delicate somehow independent and detached from Feder's ribs and clavicles. Beneath her simple brown dress her footwear caught the eye, as if traversing the sands in silvery cobwebs. "Jalo," a traditional battle cry of Ethiopian warriors, apparently echoed in Feder's memory, helping as she traversed to new spaces, though her impenetrable sadness permeated everything.

**Tamar Borer's** duet *Meta*, created with able bodied Noa Shavit, was unsettling in a totally different way, showing a different kind of body born from an unidentifiable junk pile made of heaving, breathing, metal scraps. Borer eluded the need to ever stand, rolling and scrabbling across the floor, evolving into an amazingly eerie and unlikely being. Improbably, in the end, she arrived upstage seated herself upright inside a small white bowl.

**Niv Sheinfeld and Oren Laor's** *Third Dance* (inspired once again by works of their mentors Liat Dror and Nir Ben Gal) reveals them showing intense questioning in actual words. "Do you love me?" one asks the other, pushing, demanding and then pleading "Just say ?!" Lyrics heard from 45 records played on a little phonograph perhaps provided the answers. Then the questions and song morph into unabashed anger. As their time together wears on more props enter the space including a huge basket of flowers, Laor stuffs his head into the vibrant blooms, then compulsively empties the basket, methodically laying out each flower on the floor; unexpectedly whipping and bashing each bloom against the floor. All smashed, the very foundation of their lives seemingly becomes a sorry field of destruction. In the end we see them wearing old men masks, aged, wrinkled, bald and naked. Their relationship has been repaired, and they too are touching in their slow dance, a very real embrace.

**Yasmeen Godder's** *Demonstrate Restraint* actually showed the opposite — everything seemed unrestrained, whether stomping about the stage in her boots or climbing in and out of a window hauling out random props. So, too, it was with Godder's visuals and sound. A big smoke machine ran amok, making such clouds of smoke Godder's antics were obscured while excessive screeching and screaming were amplified and multiplied through recording devices big and small set about the stage by Godder and her musician Tomer Damsky; their voices and drumming blared into chaos. Goddard disarmed the audience, though, hopping down off the stage, going from one to the other, asking in such a sweet voice "Do you have questions about what I'm doing? What do you recall what you saw?" This dialogue was followed by such a nonsequitur, returning to the stage as she strapped two menacing sticks to her bosom, intersecting them like a cross. It was as if she were a kind of felled Joan of Arc, manipulating the cross as she dropped to the ground and crawled away.

Was it spurned love that made **Orly Portal** defiantly turn into a much stronger being in her *The Rite of Spring of Farid El-Atrache* accompanied by Arabic song? Portal led three women dancers downstage — she and Snunit Baraban, Moran Zilberberg, and Alexandra Shmurak --all wore long lace dresses that outlined their bodies, though the full skirts could be flung and wound round their suggestive hips. Facing us, they danced a spellbinding ritual, at first gently showing off their womanly curves in suggestive movements

of the Levant. But their cumulative vibrations of their hips increased in power and aggression, shown off by eerie lights rigged atop their stool seats. We watched amazed as they lifted their lace skirts crotch-high, the song wailing, their magnetism enwrapped in an endless endurance. When the dancers finally left their perches to go off stage, and return, carrying large baskets of flowers, romance returned, too. Unlike Laor's flower-laying-ceremony of destruction (in "Third Dance,") we see renewal and rebirth in Portal's quartet. Each flower is lovingly pulled from the basket, and laid down, a florid field of color blooming before our eyes, brought about through the dancers' sheer relentless, womanly movements. We applaud Portal for what she brought forth on stage and for the announcement that she has recently won the Yitzhak Navon prize for her contribution to Israeli culture.

**Hillel Kogan's** *The Swan and the Pimp* belied our thoughts of beauty from "Swan Lake" or even "The Dying Swan," emphasizing the abstract beauty of a chaste young woman's body. The title should have warned us that in the hands of Hillel Kogan, performer and choreographer, the image of the swan and the woman would become twisted, akin to the Greek myth of Leda raped by the Swan or the story in "Lolita." Here, too in the dance, an aging man is attracted to a younger woman, their physical connections worked through so thoroughly between Kogan and his young dance partner Carmel Ben-Ashe that we are in disbelief. Ben-Ashe was capable of bending in any direction, her thin body able to catch herself, too, on a one-legged balance, the other lifted on high, as befitting a ballerina. She endured the lecherous Hieronymus Bosch type character, his obsession with her becoming more and more disturbing. The dance, a tour de force for Ben Ashe, was nonetheless a challenge to watch.

Rage and horror were also difficult as revealed in **Rami Be'er's** *Assylum*, an unforgiving view of humanity, especially as we learn more and more about asylum seekers world-wide, hoping against hope they could find safe homes and some kind of security. The 18 technically brilliant dancers of the Kibbutz Contemporary Dance Company showed the tortured and the torturer in high relief, individually arresting or swelling and subsiding in mounds of agony. All were dressed in black, and at first it was difficult to differentiate between the damned and the megaphone-carrying interrogator. We heard endless numbers being yelled, no one with a name, no one shown any speck of kindness. Heads ducked as the numbers came forth from four police speakers aimed at the crowd; threatened families or couples cowered. No one could help each other, with their very support giving way to collapsed agony. But then, the pained became the suppressor. A pathetic ditty was heard over and over in a child's voice singing out over all the recited numbers, the simple Hebrew children's song, an ode to delicious cake *Uga,Uga,Uga,—[Cake,Cake,Cake]*, we heard a child exclaiming innocently, 'Let's go round and round until we find where to sit and stand.' It was a terrible twist between the child's voice and the stage picture, implying it is no longer possible to find a safe place to even sit or stand. As Be'er's movement washed over us, whether in a desperate woman's solo, or a shirtless man arising from a pile of bodies, or a despairing couple running all across the stage, it was Be'er's sound editing, his stage design and lighting, plus his costume design (aided by Lilach Hatzbani) that all added to the defeat, giving us a bleak but brilliant work of art.

Ophir Yudilevitch's *The Relief* was indeed a cleansing of the palate from the heady search for relevance. Yudilevitch displayed a happy-go-lucky-work with no plot for five dancers. But still he pushed them all to the edge of endurance, and the over all affect was akin to watching an amazing circus act. An upside-down dancer, his elbows buttressed above the floor made perfect steps for another to step up and find her new balance. Each dazzling balance flip became more improbable than the next as the dance evolved into total delight.

Adi Boutrous's *Submission* appeared to have no plot either, and no real conclusion, as a couple of men, in ordinary jeans and a t-shirt rolled front and backwards, catching themselves in dramatic head stands or hand stands, sometimes facing each other and other times more passive as they leaned on each other. As they struggled and jostled, it was asexual, and the men seemed only to be robotic exercisers. They were followed by another couple, this time two women, showing they could do whatever the men did. Both couples apparently accomplished their moves in a genderless, non-sensual, non-hierarchical non-emotional way. It was a new kind of manifesto of equality and demonstrative efficiency of movement.

Mor Shani's *While the Fireflies Disappear* for Inbal Dance Company was clothed in attractive Maskit designed multi-colored variations of the traditional cloaks worn by Yemenite Jewish men. There were reminiscences of an old Inbal look when three men in unison each lifted one knee with a cocked ankle. A woman in white appeared, grabbing a long stick, like a shepherd's staff in the old company, but why did she take it to her mouth? And why do we hear Lea Avraham's singing like a fleeting Inbal memory? Compulsive grinning became smirks, and what was a stereotypic portrayal of a man gave way to a non-folkloric image. All the dancers pulled out reflective sunglasses, and put them on defiantly, completely obscuring their eyes of any expression. Forget modesty or tradition when a girl returns in a bikini top and sunglasses, the stage seemed to be hip with young *millennials*.

Shira Eviatar in her solo *Eviatar/Said* for Eviatar Said did the opposite, exploring the humanity behind the frozen stereotypic grin captured from folklore or staged dances when a Yemenite Jewish dancer landed from a high leap, cocking his head, his face an exaggerated smile, with one hand held near the chin. Playing between a mask of happiness obscuring real emotion and devotion, the choreographer called on the internalized respect in Said's traditional training passed on to him through his pious Yemenite grandfather. Interspersed with Said's own singing in the Yemenite Jewish chanting style, jabbing with his finger, kneeling or pushed to the limits of his endurance, Said's movements took himself far in a dance of supplication with pointed self-examination.

Oddly smoky atmospheres, relentlessness, black costuming and a lack of resolution appeared in many dances but these elements were masterfully put to use in Sharon Eyal's *Nova Carmen* for the Israel Ballet. Usually eschewing narrative, she turned to the well-known story of Carmen, the faithless and seductive flirt. Eyal, with her usual co-creator and sound man Gai Behar, gave us an entirely new portrait of Carmen, this time played by an astounding male dancer named Omri Mishael whose name we wish had appeared in the program. He enticed each lover into a kind of boxing ring,

Eyal's corps often surrounding them. The dancers were all clothed in black, the women in low-backed leotards, the men just in black briefs. All had bare thighs, no toe shoes for the women but all clad in tall black sox. Their stance was a very high half-point, stalking and strutting around Carmen and his prey. Instead of a long balletic line, the black made a stunted look, like Carmen's love, portrayed in an exhausting and yet exhilarating, remarkable dance.

*White Noise* by Noa Wertheim also showed dancers in black. Her eleven wore costumes designed by Sasson Kedem revealing large black bar codes on their bare backs. The highly accomplished dancers were pushed and shoved, leaping and imperiled, apparently as expendable as products. Countless figurations never gave way to any calm, the daring and dramatic movements were emboldened by the percussion and strings of the Revolution Orchestra by Ran Bagn, set upstage of the dancers. The live music was a terrific way to enhance the moments, but the subject and objectives were very austere and dismal.

I conclude my descriptions with Inbal Pinto's *Fugue*, which actually began the festival. A gauzy scrim painted like a park could be pulled across the stage, and a man might walk by. Suddenly he's caught in a gust of wind and his hat blows off, to the delight of the audience. Birds chirp, and then the peaceful scene gives way to a bare stage except for an upright piano placed upstage. An ingénue in a red dress, sitting with her back to the audience plays the piano. She's barefoot, gets up and does the half-point little run of the ballet dancer. We hear Romantic music (sometimes Chopin's, or Tchaikovsky's) plus new music by Maya Belsitzman. The park scrim is pulled again across the stage, we meet whimsical men inserting their own arms into the arms of the coat on our original park visitor. Mysterious and ingenious happenings occur when the scrim is pulled away again to reveal not one but many young women in red dresses complete with red high heels on the feet of the dancers, and many disembodied pairs appearing on the piano top, men complicating the space and then appearances and disappearances between the women. In addition to the choreography, Pinto designed the set and the costumes.

The dances at the Festival brought something familiar even to the foreigners: identification with components of ourselves that could be lovable, and sometimes unflattering and regrettable. Not all the dances had clear resolutions, but they were convincing for their bravery, honesty, thoroughly strong, and complex expressive of what's true and valid for Israel. Judging from the attention amongst the foreign presenters, the dances will be of interest to audiences throughout the world.

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**Judith Brin Ingber** graduated from Sarah Lawrence College in NYC, performed with Meredith Monk and also worked at *Dance Magazine*. In Tel Aviv, she taught apprentices for Batsheva; assisted Sara Levi-Tanai at Inbal, and also with Giora Manor, co-founded Israel's first dance magazine (pre-cursor to *Mahol Achshav*). In 1985, her biography of Fred Berk, *Victory Dances*, was published by the Dance Library of Israel. Her second, *Seeing Israeli and Jewish Dance* appeared in 2011.