

DANCE REVIEW

Batsheva technique is ample reason to go Gaga

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Modern dance is modern again. Israeli choreographer and company leader Ohad Naharin has developed a millennial training system for his Batsheva Dance Company that frees dancers to move any which way with unprecedented control. He calls that system Gaga, and it's rooted in unblocking the body, releasing untapped reserves of agility and metaphysical connection.

At Royce Hall on Saturday, you gaped as if you'd never seen contemporary dance when Batsheva presented "Three" on the UCLA Live series, even though the 70-minute work often seemed as much an infomercial for Naharin's futuristic system as a conventional piece of plotless showpiece choreography.

After a company lineup in street clothes, a solo for Matan David displayed many of the new freedoms and possibilities. Any point on his body could initiate movement, and that body could also collapse into itself at any point. Complete relaxation could instantly change to extreme tension. Balance issues were in a constant process of renegotiation. And as David's dancing effortlessly grew elegant or contorted, delicate or forceful, supple or disjointed, intricate or bold — but always unpredictable — you assumed that he was some yogic phenomenon, fabulously in tune but way above the crowd.

Nope. All 10 dancers in the opening section moved that way, and by setting it to a Glenn Gould recording of music by Bach, Naharin suggested that we were looking at the culmination of a whole epoch in Western culture. Certainly Gould and the Batsheva dancers shared the same ultimate refinement of technical capabilities, the same state-of-the-art mastery, in their disciplines. And as this section (titled "Bellus") continued, Naharin introduced more wonders, including a high-speed duet for Gabriel Spitzer and Noa Zouk that provided a dazzling array of lifts and other sudden, in-and-out displacements of weight.

If "Bellus" offered a string of surprises, "Humus" used music by Brian Eno to underscore tightly structured group activities for the company women. Marching in formation — slapping their chests every five steps — or running in place at fearsome velocity or executing tiny shoulder articulations, they showed how individual bodies trained in Naharin's system could make powerful unison statements: corps effects, though nobody would mistake these Israeli valkyries for swans.

Structuralism turned whimsical in "Secus," with passages of follow-the-leader nudity for the 17 dancers along with sudden bursts of Slavic squat kicks, martial-arts maneuvers and enough unisex muscle flexing to make you assume that Naharin intended to satirize what people want from dance à la Pina Bausch. He's played that game before, adapting for dance the accusatory "Offending the Audience" by Austrian playwright Peter Handke. "Three" even featured supercilious program notes delivered via a hand-held TV monitor.

But "Secus" didn't stay satiric for long, instead exploring a number of gambits to a range of accompaniments, some merely fragments. Punctuated with blackouts, a duet for Guy Shomroni and Sharon Eyal ended in aggression, but when David and Spitzer teamed up, their fusion of folk and ballroom steps — plus wild gymnastic eruptions — not only went beyond the comprehensive amalgamation of disciplines on which Twyla Tharp founded her groundbreaking style but had a deep tenderness otherwise absent in the evening.

You don't go to a piece by Ohad Naharin anticipating thematic consistency, but you do expect that he will use one of the world's great modern dance ensembles to the fullest. "Three" trumped those expectations by reconceiving Batsheva technique, not lessening the company's justly celebrated hunger for movement but making the company's style supremely articulate.

If this particular work amounted to little more than a test drive, the sense of witnessing an advance in artistic potential was reason enough to drive the Royce Hall audience completely gaga.