

ENTERTAINMENT



Darrell Hoemann/The News-Gazette

Members of the Batsheva Dance Company perform 'Deca Dance' by Ohad Naharin at the Krannert Center for the Performing Arts on Saturday evening.

PHILIP JOHNSTON: REVIEW

Choreography of 25 years in 'Deca Dance'

URBANA — On Saturday evening at Krannert Center for the Performing Arts, the Batsheva Dance Company of Israel performed "Deca Dance," a compilation of choreographic works spanning 25 years by the company's former artistic director Ohad Naharin.

In the first of seven works, done to music by Vivaldi, Carl Orff, Brian Eno and Steve Reich and Israeli music by Habib Alla Jamal and Shama Khader, 11 dancers lined up across the front of the stage looking like Edwardian bathers. They moved individually and alternately, each with striking liquidity punctuated by the entire company facing stage left, shaking hands and fists in wild, gesticulating, humorous movements as they pulsed through the air.

As they retreated to the back of the stage they shouted a deep, sonorously projected "Hey Ho" to the audience. The stark and visceral work segued into a quiet duet to music by Vivaldi as the 11 dancers quietly dissolved into the wings. There was pain in this duet as the woman clung to her partner and then embraced him. The dancers were corseted in Baroque-inspired black undergarments as the movement folded into lifts that plummeted to the floor.

The third work, a male quintet, involved each of the dancers delving into a silver pail and taking black paint which they smeared from their forehead down to their naked torsos. Butoh was evident in this work as bodies shook and trembled, but unlike butoh, the dancers moved with a ferocity and athleticism more akin to capoeira. Soaring leaps and body twists in midflight resolved into quiet moments when one dancer would rest his head gently on the other's chest.

Toward the end, the dancers took water from the silver pail and washed the paint from their bodies. A dancer on red point shoe stilted broke the pensive atmosphere by strutting vampishly across the stage toward a tall microphone into which she sang, "Dahling, I love you so much." This was pure vaudeville, a brilliant moment of humor and a stark contrast to the darkness of the previous work.

Then seven other women in black suits and hats came down to the footlights to join her. Seven men, also in black suits and hats, joined them. This turned into a wonderful coup de theatre as a remix of "Somewhere Over The Rainbow" was heard as the house lights came up, and the dancers entered the auditorium to bring unsuspecting audience members onto the stage.

The ensuing rumba had the dancers and audience dancing together, augmenting the ensemble on stage to 28. Slowly the audience left the stage leaving one woman, entangled with her partner, long after the others had collapsed on the

floor. He then collapsed, too, leaving her dancing alone as she quietly returned to the auditorium.

A trio in the Baroque undergarments returned to the stage with intricate lifts and partnering. They were interrupted by a dancer in denim jeans and T-shirt followed by seven other women similarly costumed.

This was the most recently choreographed work (2005) by Naharin; it showed signs of departure in its cool reserve and stillness. The eight women moved silkily on the floor and across it in unison as they articulated each movement and gesture in ever unfolding and often repeating phrases.

The seventh work began with the black corseted dancer followed by the company uniformly costumed in black pants and white shirts. Two dancers engaged in a duet accompanied by innocuous jazz music in which the woman had her legs and feet adored by her male partner. The work ended as the company began to make a group body sculpture like acrobats in a circus.

Batsheva's intrepidity and innovation have earned the company a reputation as one of the most inspirational and sought-after modern-dance companies. Batsheva was founded in 1964 by Martha Graham and Baroness Batsheva De Rothschild. In 1990, it was taken over by the Israeli-born Naharin, who was raised on a kibbutz but received most of his dance training in New York. Batsheva is Israel's foremost dance company, with 40 dancers and two companies that tour around the world with 250 performances annually.

The work Naharin has created over the last 25 years is far removed from Batsheva's Graham connection. Absolutely nothing remains of the original company except for its name. Naharin's work is at the forefront of modern dance; it is kinetic, vital and performed superbly by his company of 17 dancers. Batsheva also has in its repertory works created by other modern choreographers: Kylian, Vandekeybus, Preljocaj and Forsythe.

The Batsheva performance was part of the Krannert Center's "Dance Immersion," a yearlong celebration of movement and music. Batsheva's appearance included a workshop at the Mettler Center, led by member Matan David on Sunday morning, as part of Krannert Center's "Creative Intersections" program. He explained the somatically based technique Naharin has developed for training his dancers. It is an intelligent way of moving the body as the dancer feels the movement not only of the muscles but also how the body is connected through fluidity and energy. From that, truly luscious dancing emerges.

Philip Johnston is a professor of dance and theater at the University of Illinois.