

The Oregonian

Batsheva pushes edges of expectation

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Ask a random sampling of audience members what impressions they took away from Batsheva Dance Company's Portland debut Tuesday evening, and it's unlikely you'll hear the same answer twice.

Of course, some of those audience members may have been among the group enticed onstage at Arlene Schnitzer Concert Hall by choreographer Ohad Naharin's astonishing troupe of 16 dancers, who hurled themselves into his extreme choreography as if they'd willingly succumbed to a riptide. Naharin's dancers rode a flood of manic movement ideas, from zealous ritual to giddy delirium.

Subverting audience expectations seems to be Naharin's credo. Even the program for "Deca Dance" is a cipher, simply listing the titles of nine ballets Naharin crafted over the same number of years.

And so "Black Milk," an intense ceremony of five monklike dancers who smear their bodies with black paint and grapple in a stark display of acrobatic ritual, eroticism and warrior attack, is interrupted by an excerpt from "Sabotage Baby," an aria-singing, boa-wearing dancer on stilts.

If there's a current running through these surreal fragments, it's that in Naharin's vision of the human condition, the elegant and the profane waltz arm in arm. Violence and camp stud the program in equal measures. The moving sculpture that opens "Deca Dance" -- a large white tube-with-arms that buckles and flails with blasts of air -- segues to an ensemble scene rife with aggression. A cadre of dancers skirts the edge of the stage, lunging and shaking fists in unison, breaking off into frenzied solos.

Naharin has insisted his dances don't carry a political message, but a subtext of protest is hard to escape. For all their unison beauty, Naharin's compositions favor the odd duck, out of step with the ensemble.

Even the audience-participation dance -- an ode to inclusion -- leaves some as outsiders, standing perplexed and unsure as the company swirls around them or drops to the floor en masse.

Revolt against the social order infuses Naharin's dances, and nowhere is that tension more searingly embodied than in "Anaphaza," a work that builds to an almost unbearably high-pressure pitch from a simple movement repetition. Hunched on folding chairs arrayed in a semicircle, 16 dancers in fedoras and suits lash their bodies backward in waves as if raked by gunfire. With each revolution, one dancer sprawls face-first to the floor while another springs to his chair. The tension increases with each repetition, and Naharin's dancers inhabit each round with vehemence, finally shedding their clothes in the dance's climax as if wracked by a bodily cry. The sharpness of their attack reverberates, even through the camp.