

VOICE OF DANCE

Dance Review: Batsheva Dance Company, *Deca Dance*

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By

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Batsheva Dance Company Ohad Naharin's *Anaphaza*. Photo by Gadi Dagon.

The Bay Area has not always been fitted into every international dance company's American touring itinerary; and the Bay Area is paying the price - which is pumped-up incomprehension - this week. Israel's **Batsheva Dance Company** is making its debut visit to San Francisco in a five-day engagement that opened at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts Theater Wednesday (March 10). The bill of fare throughout the week is *Deca Dance*, a survey of 16 years of choreography by Ohad Naharin, who last year vacated the post of Batsheva's artistic director, which he has held since 1990.

It is something of an understatement to observe that Naharin altered the direction of the organization. For the first 25 years of its history, Tel Aviv-based Batsheva was a Martha Graham-oriented company, having secured exclusive rights, outside the Graham troupe itself, to dance that priceless legacy. Naharin's work owes little to Graham and a lot to the confrontational, conceptual character of much contemporary European dance theater. Alert dancegoers might have previously caught a few of his works (or parts of them) in this area, imported by Hubbard Street Dance Chicago, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater and Lyon Opera Ballet.

What Naharin has done in *Deca Dance* is to juxtapose episodes from nine of his works, evidently rearranging the sequence from performance to performance and even repeating a few of these excerpts within a single evening. This is fare both for people familiar with his work and passionate about it. Going for a highlights evening yields a string of striking moments, all of which reveal Naharin's strengths and weaknesses. But it is the other episodes, the ones we don't witness, that might have provided a more reliable indication of his artistry.

Robbed of context, audiences have no choice but to respond only to what they see before them. Yet, after Wednesday's opening, we do not know how all these bits fit into a unity and some of us do care about such matters. *Deca Dance* cannot be compared to a Merce Cunningham Event, because Cunningham's genius resides in non-sequential movement phrases; and it also cannot be compared to the "Ailey Classics" program currently in the Ailey company's repertoire at UC-Berkeley.

What Naharin does well, he does exceptionally well. He is a master of spacing large groups (Batsheva's dancers number 16), an expert at emotionally charged unisons and an adept at tortured, athletic duets that have virtually nothing to do with the recorded music, which is often amplified at ear-splitting volume. Naharin also loves those accusatory stares, talking dancers and the stark black and white color scheme and transgender corsets familiar from European dance theater. The deployment of music is promiscuous; 20 credits are listed in the program, everything from Beethoven's "Kreutzer" Sonata to "Over the Rainbow." For the record, *Deca Dance* includes parts of *Black Milk*, *Passomezzo*, *Queens of Golub*, *Mabul*, *Anaphaza*, *Sabotage Baby*, *Zachacha*, *Moshe* and *Naharin's Virus*.

On the basis of Wednesday's two-hour serving, which began with an empty stage and a breeze blowing through a windsock, coherence is a sometime quality. To an incendiary Arabic pop score by Habib Alla Jamal, the dancers line up at the stage apron, stare you down and occasionally twitch. You've probably seen that before under another name. A duet (from *Mabul*) yields a pair of earthy bodies flipping and wrestling to a countertenor singing a Vivaldi aria. You've probably encountered that one, too. Absurdist non-sequiturs fall flat: an extract from *Sabotage Baby* offers a chanteuse on stilts toting a giant pitchfork and crooning into a microphone; and it scarcely registers. An audience participation number, in which patrons are invited to join the dancers on stage in a cha-cha (to the theme song from television's Hawaii Five-O), might have made more of an effect, if it had ended the evening. The familiar chairs number from *Anaphaza* features dancers seated in a semi-circle singing a patriotic Israeli anthem, while arching and crumpling like dominoes, then executing a partial striptease. At the end, they all jump into the pile of clothes. Eventually, all this bravura display is enervating.

The more intimate sequences are more persuasive. *Black Milk* (1985) is an absorbing initiation ceremony for five men, for whom unquestioning conformity to the group (symbolized by smearing their breasts and faces with a black substance) is the key to survival (Naharin has frequently been at odds with the Israeli political establishment). Batsheva's men dispatched the piece with muted eloquence Wednesday, but last year, when the men from Ailey attempted *Black Milk*, it resonated even more. *Queens of Golub* offered a sinewy quintet for five women, clad in red (one of the few moments when Naharin allows a bit of color to seep onto the stage). In all, however, *Deca Dance* is an occasionally thrilling, but generally bewildering experience. There's nothing wrong with Naharin's saying goodbye in a grand manner. I only wish he had said hello first.

Batsheva Dance Company performs at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts Theater, San Francisco, through Sunday at 2 p.m. For tickets, call (415) 398-6449 or online www.performances.org.
