

San Francisco Chronicle

NORTHERN CALIFORNIA'S LARGEST NEWSPAPER

Extravagant fun with Batsheva, from surf-guitar hora to politics Israeli troupe makes first S.F. visit in Naharin's 'Deca Dance'

Janice Berman, Special to The Chronicle

"I'm glad I'm learning Hebrew," my friend Dana Dubinsky said. She'd just come back to her seat after being kidnapped by a Batsheva dancer and hustled onto the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts Theater stage, where she and another dozen or so audience members spent 10 minutes in "Zachacha," one of artistic director Ohad Naharin's best works for the Israeli dance troupe. Dubinsky, from Berkeley, didn't need to know Hebrew to take part in "Zachacha," set to wonderfully seedy lounge-lizard music. Far better that she wasn't afraid when her partner -- she didn't catch his name -- picked her up and whirled her around, and didn't collapse with laughter when the men collapsed swooningly. "Zachacha" was one of eight dance excerpts in the San Francisco Performances program Wednesday night that Naharin titled "Deca Dance," a survey of his last 10 years at Batsheva's helm. The company, founded in 1964 by Baroness Batsheva de Rothschild and Martha Graham, has been directed by Naharin since 1990 and is making its first visit to San Francisco as part of a national tour. Naharin knocks the pins out from under Serious Modern Dance, at least of the type that you might think a major Graham disciple would espouse. Naharin, Israel-born and a U.S. citizen, draws his material from a wide and not untroubled world. You can trace Pina Bausch's German expressionism in the glittery black cocktail dresses, bare feet and lashing extremities of one fragment, Dick Dale's California surfing guitars underscoring the Israeli hora dance in another, and the music of Palestinian composer Habib Alla Jamal in the opener, "Naharin's Virus." Politically, Naharin is a dove on the Mideast, but the virus relates to movement more than politics. Naharin has a contagious affection for strange, extravagant choreography in motion and at rest. The excerpt titled "Queens of Golub," a series of solos for goddesses in weirdly elaborate bathing suits, puts them on tiptoe as if on some imaginary balance beam, then sets them into poses and movements demanding uncommon

strength from a feminine ideal, and agility and grace for all to admire.

"Sabotage Baby" is a goof on dominatrixes and ballerinas; red boots come to a point for a screeching soloist on stilts, lip-synching Yma Sumac into a microphone.

"Black Milk" is a marvelously strong men-in-skirts piece for five, who dip into a bucket to daub faces and bare chests with mud, then launch into glorious space-devouring movement. Another fragment of "Zachacha" uses a traditional Passover counting song as the basis for a group dance that begins with everyone seated on chairs, in black suits and hats and white shirts. It feels a little rabbinical and a little bit like a seder, and one dancer keeps standing on his chair and sitting again. He might be the One, the Mighty God. Or it might be the only dancer who keeps his jacket on, a figure who falls to the floor after every verse. The movement is intense and rhythmic, the dancers swerving from side to side in something that's part folk, part folks and solidly Naharin.

The company members, from all over the world, are superb dancers. The intensity of the dancers' devotion is particularly evident in the closer, "Anaphaza," which combines weird narrative and post-punk costuming with hard-charging movement.

Excerpt shows are a tricky business. People who have never seen the artist's work whole have no idea what's missing -- if they like it, it's a great coming attraction, but if they don't, it may be that they haven't seen the part that would make them want to return. Fans sometimes feel shortchanged on favorite works.

Naharin's pieces were not intended to be seen as fragments nor to be assembled randomly, unlike the work of another former Graham dancer, Merce Cunningham, whose events have become a major part of his company's repertory. The next time Batsheva comes to town -- hopefully soon -- it would be good to see Naharin's pieces as he imagined them, for clearly, his imagination is unstoppable.