
Batsheva dancers are fluid, frisky and, against all odds, human

Janice Berman, Special to The Chronicle
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You know how it is. You're driving home from a dance concert, listening to rock on the radio, and your body starts bopping to the beat. Shoulders lift, arms flail, neck stretches, foot taps. It's a waker-upper, a refresher and, best of all, a self-expresser.



Or at least, that's how it used to be. After seeing Batsheva Dance Company's show, "Three," at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, your correspondent and once intrepid car-dancer felt utterly inadequate, physically inarticulate. Choreographer and artistic director Ohad Naharin's Israel-based crew were Fred and Ginger, Fred and Fred, Martha Graham acolytes (like Naharin himself), acrobats of God. They shrugged shoulders, retracted legs, flailed arms, stretched necks. They shimmied, did tangos and splits, made odd noises deep in their throats, poked their faces with their fingers, navigated the stage on their butts, quivered hands and extended tongues. Oh yeah, and dropped trou. A few did, anyway.

What Naharin creates for Batsheva goes way beyond obeying an impulse generated by a beat. In fact, rarely if ever did the casually clad, barefoot troupe of 17 dance on the beat of the music, which ranged from Bach to Eno to a pop collage mixed by Batsheva dancer Stefan Ferry. And though the program notes were notably unenlightening -- with a line about the three dances exploring beauty, nature and existence, and that was it -- the subject, in truth, was human-ness. Whether individually or in duets, this topic went forward most unpretentiously, if you can call such virtuosity, off-center elegance, physical daring and trust unpretentious.

The first piece threw the dancers onto their backs, legs splayed toward the audience as if to show that when they're not in motion they're just like the rest of us. Hah. One dancer struck impeccable balances, extremities a-ripple. Having finished, though, she walked flat-footed off the stage, a mere mortal again. In rhythmic chorales and in frisky circle dances, the dancers seemed as low-key and flourish-free as their clothing. The choreography was the star. The final dance provided the lone opportunity for each dancer to face the audience and do something unique, whether it was presenting his or her hands, doing something weird with the face, balancing improbably through a plie, or showing some skin.

Between the dances, a deadpan dancer toted out a video monitor and held it up so the audience could see Naharin's talking head on it, explaining what to watch for. But Naharin's cuing was unnecessary, for the dancers' understated splendor made it impossible to look away.

Three: Batsheva Dance Company. 8 p.m. today, 2 p.m. Sunday. Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, 700 Howard St., San Francisco. Tickets: \$27 and \$44. www.ybca.org or (415) 978-2787.