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DANCE REVIEW; When Childlike Wonder Meets Eroticism

By JOHN ROCKWELL
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Ohad Naharin is 53 now, and long since established as Israel's leading choreographer. But he's been through a lot lately, and his new piece, "Mamootot," in its spare, reserved, sexual and literally touching way, reflects all that.

"Mamootot" (pronounced mah-MOO-tote) means mammoth in Hebrew, but Mr. Naharin has said he just likes the sound of the word. The 2003 piece is the first he did after his wife died in 2001; he thanks her in the program. After that he took a year and a half off from his post as artistic director of the Batsheva Dance Company, Israel's finest. Now he's back, apparently rejuvenated, and showing us this hourlong work. It's pretty thrilling.

Mr. Naharin's pieces have often involved large-scale spectacle. "Mamootot," presented by the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Next Wave Festival in the top-floor studio of the nearby Mark Morris Dance Center, is for nine dancers in a small space with the audience of about 100 seated on all four sides. The light is overhead, unchanging and bright. (After a power failure as the audience was seating itself on Tuesday, it became more muted, but the fixed idea remained.)

So what, one might wonder. In New York we're used to spare abstraction and intimate surroundings. But for Mr. Naharin, this way of working was apparently a revelation in its restrictiveness. And it's not quite so abstract as you might first think.

Some choreographers have a way of winning your complicity right away: you're gripped, drawn in, and then most anything takes on a charge of added meaning. So it is, or at least so it was for me, with "Mamootot."

What's unchanged about Mr. Naharin's way of working is his fascination with ritual, sensuality, repetition and mystery. His nine Batsheva dancers, mostly in their mid-20's but looking almost brazenly young, are all superb, and what Mr. Naharin asks of them brings out their inner, individual gifts. But those gifts remain focused by a seductive overall vision.

A lone woman emerges at the outset in a pastel jump suit, cut off at the knees and elbows, with white trim along the bottoms of the legs and arms and around the neck. They're all dressed like that. Along with pale body makeup on the lower legs and arms and neck, the costuming (Rakefet Levy) makes them look like they're lost in a fairy tale, Pierrots or puppets, with arched backs and splayed fingers and twisting falls.

For the first three-quarters of an hour they dance in their own spaces, in strict patterns or solo. When that spell is broken, when they appear in duos and actually touch, the contrast is shocking. One man zips off his jump suit and, naked, performs a lascivious non-touching duet with a woman who suddenly leaps onto his side as he turns, leering. Two women do a sensuous slow dance, their contact seeming to trigger sparky electronic sounds.

What's fascinating -- actually, it's all pretty fascinating -- is the blend of childlike wonder and eroticism (a writhing traversal of the diagonal by one woman on her back, stretching and arching, for instance), formality and quirky personality. At the end, all nine walk around the perimeter of the space, right next to the audience, holding strangers' hands and staring into their eyes with an inexplicable cocktail of emotions.

This is all augmented by the peculiar, and quite wonderful, soundtrack, consisting of hushed ambient sounds and cheesy loud punk-pop, all from records purchased almost at random by Mr. Naharin on shopping sprees in Japan; he chose them, he says, because he liked their covers.

Go if you can, though you probably can't. All 13 performances were sold out before the run began. But you can always hope for returns.

Mamootot

Batsheva Dance Company

"Mamootot" runs through Nov. 27 at the Mark Morris Dance Center, 3 Lafayette Avenue, Fort Greene; (718) 636-4100 or www.bam.org.