

San Diego Arts

Batsheva Dance Company: 'Max' at Mandeville

Israeli troupe is rooted in Graham but grown from Gaga

By Kris Eitland

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The Israeli troupe Batsheva needed little introduction for its debut at UC San Diego's Mandeville Thursday night. Many in the audience were dancers and dance educators, as well as devotees from the Jewish community, who have followed the company's rich history and repertory since its inception in 1964.

The company's program "Max" (2007) showcased ten exquisite dancers and the innovative choreography of artistic director Ohad Naharin, whose unique movement vocabulary is gleaned from his training method known as Gaga.

To fully appreciate "Max," you must first understand Gaga, with a name inspired by a baby's first sounds. Through Gaga, dancers learn to free their body and discover the connection between effort and pleasure. In workshops, dancers writhe on the ground and sense the weight of their body parts. They noodle about in awkward, strange ways, and they learn to love their sweat. Naharin says the idea is to "change movement habits by finding new ones," and "to be calm and alert at once."

The Gaga influence is compelling in "Max," a stark piece that thrills with the phenomenal technique and strength of the men and women, who balance in deep plies and extensions to infinity, but also fidget and contort their bodies in unfamiliar ways. The dancers don't tell a linear story; the homogenous tribe of dancers maintains an internal focus that is especially intimate in solos. Several sequences evoke flashbacks from beginning dance classes, but with a Gaga twist.

In the opening, five couples rise and fall like human teeter-totters in ballroom formation. A brief yet memorable section feels like contact improvisation with two women pushing and pulling and sharing weight belly-to-belly. One of the most interesting sections in the work conjures images of a ballet class where prim dancers practice port de bras and change direction on the diagonal. But this ensemble pushes every move off center and scoops their arms in a circular horizontal locomotion that is mesmerizing.

Equally impressive are smooth unison turns led with tilted heads. So too are sections where the ensemble clumps together as if in an old family photo before breaking into frenzied gestures or a big final song.

The tempo and tone of the movement continually changes. From deep stillness and aching slow explorations that border on Butoh, the dance shifts in a blink to jointless, muscled bodies cruising on half-toe or galloping with loud feet at warp speed. Naharin's Batsheva juxtaposes a range of styles that often test the laws of physics and blur the lines of dance genres.

It is a contemporary troupe, but there are moments in "Max" when the ensemble becomes a sweeping classical corps with rounded arms and beautiful feet in fifth position, sliding out into deep second, and returning to fifth. Still, the quirky company mostly remains grounded, and their solid cores and contractions would please its founders, Martha Graham and Baroness Batsheva de Rothschild.

The evolution of the Batsheva Dance Company could fill college courses in history, geography and the arts. The Baroness Batsheva de Rothschild, a globetrotting biologist and heiress to the French branch of the Rothschild banking family, came to the United States at the start of World War II. She worked for the Free French Movement in New York and London. She enlisted in the French Army and landed in Normandy after the Allied invasion.

In the 1940s, the Baroness attended Graham's productions in New York and was hooked. She founded dance festivals and sponsored and supervised Graham's tours. When she moved to Tel Aviv in the early 60s, she set about creating a professional modern dance company. She sent dancers to New York, and Graham sent dancers to Israel to start the Graham-based Batsheva Dance Company in Tel Aviv.

For years, Batsheva relied on the repertory of American and European choreographers, but since his arrival in 1990, Naharin's dances have garnered international attention. Many respected companies have performed his works, such as Lyon Opera Ballet and Chicago's Hubbard Street Dance. They are rooted in Graham and modern technique, but his vocabulary and sound choices have moved far beyond their origins. And while there

is a sense of an ancient world colliding with a high-tech city in the middle of the desert, there is nothing in "Max" to suggest religion, war, or joyful folk dancing.

An original sound score by Maxim Waratt (Naharin's musical pseudonym) mixes deep baritone voices, curious crunching (imagine a breathy giant caterpillar devouring celery) industrial hums, and metal on metal grinds. Like the movement, it is fragmented and unpredictable.

The most engaging dance sequences mirror sounds that tickle the ear with syncopation, such as dancers who embody separate clanging sounds as part of a human rhythm machine, or the short belly-bucking duet. Another is the repetitive guttural counting, "Uno. Uno. Uno-due-tre..." that has you tapping your feet and chanting along. As in other Batsheva works, the dancers in this section repeat phrases, and each time the voice starts to count a gain, they add another movement, to expand the visually hypnotic rhythm.

The lighting by Avi Yona Bueno is schizophrenic, washing the dancers in shades of red and green and golden sepia, then suddenly going in and out of inky black, chopping each section and shocking the senses. Stripped of scenery and devoid of multi-media film to distract you, the focus remains on dancers, who pop out of dark panels along the wings and from two simple openings along the back wall.

"Max" transports and confounds, confuses and elucidates. Its hypnotic universe reflects a modern apprehension that moves beyond the world of its founders. And we are moved along with it.