

# The Berkshire Eagle

## LeeSaar The Company: 'grass and jackals'

By Jeremy D. Goodwin, Special to The Eagle

February 8, 2013

NORTH ADAMS -- From its somewhat self-conscious name to the movement language at the core of its work, LeeSaar The Company is not a particularly conventional dance troupe.

Its latest work, called "grass and jackals," will be presented tonight at Mass MoCA in a workshop performance. It follows a two-week residency at the museum, where the troupe worked on lighting effects and other technical aspects.



LeeSaar The Company offers a workshop presentation of 'grass and jackals' (Photo courtesy Mass MoCA)

Formed in Israel in 2000 by Saar Harari and Lee Sher, who are a couple, the company relies on a core group of dancers trained in and proficient with a dance vocabulary tracing back to Gaga, a style pioneered by Israeli choreographer Ohad Naharin at the Batsheva Dance Company in Tel Aviv.

It involves unconventional movements meant to draw out an inherent flow and fluidity, and a metaphorical understanding of the body and the relationship among its parts that sounds similar to the approaches of certain forms of actor training.

"I think that we invested a lot of time in developing the language between us," Harari says of the work between himself, Sher, and the company's resident dancers, "and it's really important for us to make them artists that are not just executing, but dancers and performers that can really translate something and create something through their life and their body. And it takes time."

The composition process is a collaborative one, he says.

"We give them a task of how we want them to build and what we want them to build, and it's usually connected to the language of Gaga. And so they build the material and then it's a lot about listening to what they bring, to what's happening in the studio, to our instincts, to the music. It's a lot about listening and then making decisions and making choices and listening again."

Continuing the thought, Sher says, "We listen to what's in front of us."

The new piece is the troupe's most ambitious to date, they say, particularly in terms of the lighting design, courtesy of designer Bambi, with whom the company has worked before. Tonight's workshop culminates a year of work on the piece, with a formal premiere expected later this year.

In keeping with that nation's policy of compulsory military service, Harari and Sher each spent time in the Israeli military -- Harari in the Special Forces, and Sher with the paratroopers. Harari grew up dancing, while Sher later pursued playwriting and acting before moving into professional dance. The company they formed has received a series of fellowships and grants, and spent two years in Tel Aviv and another in residence in Sydney, Australia before relocating to New York in 2004.

The thematic inspiration behind some of LeeSaar's work, like the 2012 piece "FAME," can be divined from its title, but the concerns of "grass and jackals" are harder to discern at first.

Though a press release for tonight's performance is titled "LeeSaar The Company's athletic dance work explores emotional toll of militarization," and notes that it is based on "four years of research exploring how to translate the extreme conditions of the military to the stage," both Harari and Sher say, in a telephone interview from MoCA, that their experiences in the Israeli military play no particular role in the new work.

"We didn't aim to tell any story about the specific experience from the army. We served in the army; it has an effect -- it's just there." Sher explains.

"In the process of 'grass and jackals,' " she continues, reading from a statement written just this week, "we saw a landscape of powerful womanhood reach with shame and pride, daydreaming and illusion, grief and pain, sexuality and hope."

That may not narrow things down too much. But this emotional content is likely to be expressed through a whole lot of compelling movement -- and that's the point.