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Subtle start, then full steam ahead

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Gadi Dagon

The Batsheva Dance Company of Israel performs "Max" at Novellus Theater in S.F. Left: Batsheva's Gavriel Shpizer in the striking "Max."

The Batsheva Dance Company takes a while to get started with "Max" at Yerba Buena Center, but when the piece finally picks up steam, one gets a palpable satisfaction from watching the precise execution of striking movement.

San Francisco Performances has brought this remarkable modern dance troupe over from Israel for several seasons, and it's a happy thing to say that with Batsheva, one never quite knows what to expect. "Max" is one of Ohad Naharin's most stripped-down and unadorned works, and if one has seen other more elaborate pieces, it might feel surprisingly tame. The opening sections particularly are striking but can be slow moving and subtle - not for those with short attention spans.

Composer and alias

The "Max" of the title is Maxim Waratt, the composer of the evening's score and an alias for the choreographer himself. The music is of the breathy, rumbling "plinky-plonky" bed-of-sound variety, and unfortunately doesn't add much to the substance of the piece. On the upside, it puts the focus squarely on the five men and five women.

As the curtain rises, the women are in deep plies beside the men, and all is motionless onstage. Suddenly they fall to one knee with unnatural simultaneity and in total silence. It's a bit unnerving unless you realize that their preternatural unison is managed via cues coming to them over small earpieces. The idea has merit, but it also creates an us-them divide that only emphasizes the theatrical barrier of the proscenium. "Max" initially feels like a movement study, a series of combinations and exercises, and as focused and as fascinating as the dancing might be, it's hard to feel convinced that this is going anywhere. After all, the audience isn't listening to the same thing they are.

Compelling execution

The movement itself, however, holds "Max" together; and fortunately, the execution is compelling enough on its own. Possibly the most convincing argument for Gaga - the movement language Naharin uses as a daily method for his company's work - is that it seems to inject a keen sensitivity to line and energy both in the body and in the space between the bodies.

Throwing caution to the wind, the dancers pulse from elbows, shoulder, hips. They curve their spines into arcs and crouches, and strange polyrhythmic blurs take possession of their wrists and feet. And they look as if they fear nothing - whether asked to prance wide-eyed across the stage in a "crazy chicken" dance, hobble in small circles, or simply lift their heads to smile creepily at the audience, they give the full measure of commitment to every moment without the least embarrassment.

Even after some of the dancers abandon the earpieces midway through "Max," the group as a whole achieves a kind of gestalt. A duet and solos attacked with gusto by Chen-Wei Lee, Bobbi Smith and Rachael Osborne herald a fresh energy.

At last, "Max" feels like a freight train under way. As a voice monotonously repeats what sounds like numbers in some Indo-European tongue, the dancers unleash the full capabilities of brawn and brain. As Shachar Binyamini rockets compactly across the stage and the whole group joins in a ritualistic, mechanized, joint-popping sequence, there is a sense that audience and performers are finally on the same page.

Batsheva Dance Company: "Max." 8 tonight. Novellus Theater at YBCA, 700 Howard St., S.F. \$35-\$60. (415) 329-2545 www.sfperformances.org.