

## Batsheva Dance Company Dance review

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March 19, 2012

Photo: Gadi Dagon



“I cannot teach you to see,” Ohad Naharin has said, but the Israeli choreographer certainly trusts that you can. About halfway into his work *Max* (2007), to a score he composed himself under a pseudonym, three men sitting down look straight ahead at the audience. They move their heads about a dozen times from side to side, departing from symmetry by only about half an inch, max. From where they sit to the rear of the house of the Auditorium Theatre is about 200 feet.

Much of Naharin’s voice as an artist is left unaccounted for by *Max* and duet *B/olero* (2008), performed by Batsheva Dance Company March 17 and 18. His sense of humor is only hinted at and comes across as funny-strange, rather than the funny-ha-ha that Naharin can also do well. Despite a lighting scheme by Avi Yona Bueno that bathes the dancers’ skin in jewel tones, and costumes for *Max* by Rakefet Levi that include rich burgundies and navies, the show’s look is generally severe and dark. Naharin does sunny and joyous easily but you certainly wouldn’t think so based on this double feature. He can make visual a melody with the best of them but *Max* focuses mostly on building atmosphere and rhythmic relationships. The Ravel piece on which Isao Tomita’s synthesizer music is based famously repeats the same phrase from start to finish; *B/olero* is likewise about variation within repetition, its two dancers (Iyar Elezra and Bobbi Smith) regularly returning to mechanical, tick-tocking tasks. But as an opportunity to look closely at Naharin’s compositional skill, this double bill is unbeatable. The two LBD-wearing women in *B/olero* dance in unison, mirror image, echo and complement, as well as go off on individual journeys. Passages between these categories are handled deftly; many are cross-fades, with one dancer peeling away from or joining her partner’s actions such that you can’t see the seam.

From its beginning in silence except for a whistle, like a teakettle warning of imminent boil, to the literally full-throated finish its cast of ten delivers in song from a tight cluster that becomes a key motif during the piece, *Max* throws curveballs as often as it references itself. Some of its best moments come when both happen at once, when internal links are created between things that on first sight you wouldn’t have guessed would turn out to be nodes.

Full blackouts divide *Max* into its dozenish sections. Total darkness is often in dance a cheap trick, or a crutch or cheat for choreographers who don’t want to or can’t build good transitions. Not so here for a couple of reasons, foremost being that a major part of the work’s architecture is

stillness, a blackout's correlate in movement. Like the silences before Mike Daisey answered some of Ira Glass's questions during Friday's episode of *This American Life*, stillness in *Max* is fraught with tension and implications. These "pauses" in the choreography also hold the residue of previous moments, either in our memories as viewers or literally in the bodies of the dancers. One thing Naharin seems most to love showing an audience is how an action exits a moment via human anatomy. Choreography is often about exploring what the body can do; Naharin's does that in spades but, in addition, explores what the body *just does*. As Deborah Jowitt put it last weekend in her review of Batsheva, Naharin's technique allows adults the sensory immediacy of infancy.

"His choreography tends to express a tension between control and prescribed rituals on one hand and individual expression and freedom on the other," Jowitt continues. A solo left behind by *Max*'s women's quintet ends with the dancer walking around center stage with two handfuls of her own inner thighs, grabbed way up near her crotch. (The score here, a deep rumble of bass sounds like faraway thunder that never claps, over which there are murmurs and occasional small splashes, could be the sound of someone cooking or crafting during a storm. It might also suggest some unspeakably horrific surgical procedure being executed in a dank basement without consent.) The next section, danced by the ensemble in unbroken unison, includes phrases whose impetuses are a tipping away from vertical to fall. A deep male voice chants loudly in convincing but nonsense words; a second voice whispers in between these meaningless instructions like Cyrano feeding Christian his lines. Some of the soundtrack is kept secret: The dancers wear small packages on their lower backs probably related to in-ear phones that catch the light.

Another big ensemble section, like many parts of *Max*, is to a new sound introduced as the prior scene ends (which, in this particular case, means unison headbanging and horns thrown by a group of bodies evenly distributed, their backs to us. Rebellion homogenized and faceless, or organized and leading the way? As usual with Naharin, it's more likely both/and than either/or.). This sound is a rapid, trainlike *chugga-chugga-chugga-chugga* that plays while the dancers unleash for the first time in *Max* their undiluted vigor. For a gripping three-ish minutes, each performer does his or her own thing; only fleeting alignments and floating lightnesses say this tempest is tempered.

There are many more creative constructions to note than room here to describe them. Men in a trio and earlier quintet shift instantly and often from mighty to fey, from dainty to virile. Two women in a duet enact a dance party of silly abandon, finishing face-to-face in counterbalance, their bellies touching and four bare feet spread far apart on the floor. (The lights go out on these women pecking competitively at the short space between their faces, their upstage arms raised and the backs of their hands pressed together.) While everyone else walks slowly as if entranced, one dancer at a time moves in perfect synchronicity with percussive factory racket. A trio that introduces a sequence of twelve cumulative dances sketches sibling intimacy and is a world unto itself within *Max*. *Max* requires the dancers' presence and interpretive abilities in full, yet at the same time complete subservience to its structure. This contradiction is of course common to choreography, as well as to choirs, armies and sundry other human endeavors. Only rarely do you get the chance to consider this contradiction's inner workings, laid bare and expressed solely through the organization of action. Doing so is a good way to learn how to see better.