

Movement language - Alvin Ailey performs Israeli work at Kennedy Center

By Lisa Traiger
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Photo by Paul Kolnik



Audiences and dancers alike are going gaga over Israeli modern and contemporary dance. And we're not talking about the lady singer with the strange hats, sky-high platform shoes and one pungent meat dress. Rather, Gaga is a movement language, or better, a new way to think about moving, and it's taking the professional dance world by storm. Proponents and practitioners of the method, which was created and refined about a decade ago by Ohad Naharin, artistic director of Batsheva Dance Company, Israel's foremost dance company, swear by it.

They call it a way to build better dancers who are not wedded to a single style or codified technique - ballet, jazz, or the techniques of modern dance as espoused by Martha Graham or Merce Cunningham, for example.

"To talk about Gaga is very hard," says Danielle Agami, a former Batsheva dancer who is now serving as Gaga manager in the U.S., "but it's really dealing with strengthening, giving a healthy workout, developing the body in relation to its physical needs with [attention to] the smallest spots - joints, ligaments, muscles - where we really need to take care."

As an approach to moving, Gaga doesn't teach specific steps but it attunes dancers - and everyone else who studies it - to their bodies. "It's not only getting stronger," she notes, "but it allows us to know how to move different parts [of the body] in different textures. It's very much about listening and using your instincts, your sensations, connecting your sensations to how you move, why you move, when you move."

Gaga has, in effect, made Israel's contemporary dancers and choreographers among the most acclaimed and sought-after worldwide. The childish name, Naharin is on record saying, is better than "kaka"; he chose the nonsense syllables (well before Lady Gaga) because he felt he had to call his invention something other than Ohad Naharin's technique, and he liked the way gaga sounded.

American dance companies are just catching the Gaga train. Next week, when Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater makes its annual weeklong visit to the Kennedy Center Opera House, beginning Tuesday, a Gaga-influenced work by Naharin will grace the program, joining favorites including company founder Ailey's iconic paean to the African American experience, "Revelations," along with a new work by hip hop master Rennie Harris, and other American classics from Ailey and living modern dance master Paul Taylor.

"Oh my goodness," enthuses Robert Battle, the Ailey company's new artistic director, about the first time he saw Minus 16, the Naharin work the company performs Wednesday and Thursday. "It is so brilliant in its unexpectedness ... because of the statement it makes. It really left an impression on me." So much so, he adds, that it was the first new work he brought into the legendary company's repertory after taking the helm this past July.

The company was in tour in Israel last year when Battle stopped in at Suzanne Dellal Centre for Dance in Yaffo to see Batsheva. Backstage after the performance, he reports that he just blurted out to Naharin that he wanted that piece in the Ailey company repertory. "I didn't mean to ask him right there, like that," Battle admits, "but I just couldn't help myself. I love it so much."

Agami, now based in Seattle after an eight-year stint with Batsheva, came to New York in the fall to teach not just the choreography for Minus 16, but also the Gaga technique to the Ailey company dancers. Typically, choreographers come in to teach their work and leave. But for Naharin's piece, Battle realized that even dancers as adept as those in the Ailey troupe needed a deeper understanding of the work's foundation, and he added Gaga classes to the company schedule to better prepare them for the work.

Minus 16, like many Naharin works, draws from various parts of many dances he has created over the past two decades. Like a collagist, he reconfigures them into new, unique works. The title, reports Agami, is more akin to that of an abstract painting in a series - there are other "Minuses" - than to any inherent meaning in the piece for 18 dancers.

With its unbridled physicality, Minus 16 contains moments of surprise and poignant repose as well as a once-controversial section from Naharin's earliest piece for the Batsheva company, 1990's Kyr (Wall). Using a version of "Echad Mi Yodea?" the popular end-of-the Passover-seder song in a pulsating rock version by Tractor's Revenge, the dancers clad in black men's suits line up before a semicircle of chairs, rise and collapse as if before a firing squad. At each verse in the song accumulation, they strip off a layer of clothing, down to their underwear.

In 1998, on the occasion of Israel's 50th anniversary, Orthodox politicians denounced the work demanding that the dancers strip to long-johns instead of shorts at a Jerusalem Festival performance. Naharin scoffed, declined and resigned his post; the company dancers refused to perform in solidarity. Ultimately, Batsheva and Naharin survived the attempt at artistic censorship and that sequence has become a Batsheva signature, recurring in many of Naharin's subsequent compositions.

"It actually doesn't mean to offend anybody. It's a piece with a very timed composition that follows the structure of the song," Naharin told WJW in 2004. "Being offended by it is

ridiculous." Agami explains that one of the greatest challenges the Ailey dancers had to overcome in learning Minus 16 was to not always be perfect. Gaga, unlike other dance styles or techniques, is taught without mirrors: dancers must feel their bodies, not worry about how they look, "They had to switch from the fantasy of how they move and understand that it's okay to look horrible. It's okay to feel human. It's okay to dance in a duet like [regular] people who live outside of the studio," says Agami, who is currently developing her own choreographic projects as well as teaching Gaga at studios and universities around the U.S. "It was a shock," she adds, "but the Ailey dancers were so genuine, thirsty, happy and welcoming. I felt it was significantly meaningful for them. I know it will take more time but ultimately it will affect everything they do in their lives."

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater will perform Minus 16 and other repertory, Feb. 8-9 (other programs Feb. 7-12), Opera House, John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, Tickets, \$30-\$99, are available by calling 202-467-4600 or at www.kennedy-center.org. Gaga Master Class for advanced dancers, Feb. 12, 5:00 p.m. at Joy of Motion, free, sponsored by Washington Performing Arts Society and Company E. For information, visit www.joyofmotion.org.