

Serious Play

By Lisa Traiger
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Batsheva Dance Company in "Hora," photos by Gadi Dagon



Ohad Naharin takes playfulness seriously. The white-hot Israeli choreographer and artistic director of Tel Aviv's Batsheva Dance Company creates dances that are like complex games with no winners or losers. Instead Naharin unleashes his dancers onto his playground, where they bound around like playing pieces in a board game, following his ingrained and rigorous instruction manual. Indeed, through the intelligent

beauty of his self-invented movement language, Gaga, his artist's eye tricks us into seeing his dancers as individuals. For adept movers, Gaga synthesizes the purely physical world into a realm of metaphorical poetry, heightened by movement, which allows dancers tremendous freedom to project to audiences their sensory experiences.

"Hora," the 2009 work Batsheva brought on its current North American tour captures these idiosyncratic elements in its brash hour for its U.S. debut at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. The audience was captivated by its studied sense of gamesmanship and dancing fully imbued with preternatural alertness.

Structured like a series of vignettes or episodes, "Hora" unspools in a spare environment: a vivid chartreuse half wall boxes the 11 dancers in on both sides and the back of the stage – or playing area – like a Joseph Cornell box assemblage in which the dancers become the found objects in a collected collage. Across the back wall a bare wooden bench invites the dancers to rest and observe when they are not part of the action on stage. This structure recalls – for me at least — Merce Cunningham's "Squaregame" in the way dancers – players? – remain on stage for the entire piece, sometimes dancing, sometimes seated at the edges of the stage observing, but never removed from the work entirely. Also like Cunningham, Naharin eschews a narrative arc, instead offering up sequences that build to a series of climaxes and then subside into denouements, as the dancers smolder and peter out over and over during the course of 60 minutes.

To accompany the dancers in their advances and recapitulations, Naharin selected pioneering Japanese electronic composer Isao Tomita, known for his synthesized arrangements of best-known Western classics. From the bombastic Wagner overture to “Die Walkure,” to John Williams’s equally over-the-top “Star Wars” theme, to Debussy’s sensual “Afternoon of a Faun,” Tomita’s music sounds oddly spacey and unexpected. By the way, was that whistling tune the theme from the old “Colombo” detective show?

Music isn’t a supportive floor in Naharin’s hands, it’s a tool to propel the dancers into anomalous, quirky riffs and physical phrases that seem drawn from an imaginative and uninhibited world where any and all movement is equally valued. No steps or positions are glorified, or vilified. A monkey-like squat projects as much beauty as a finely stretched leg. A swayed back and jutting chin is no more offensive than a prettily parsed out pas de bourree. So dancers turn in, turn out, twist, wriggle, tremble, squat, scoot, flex, point and teeter on the very tips of their toes. Moments of silence and stillness feel heavily freighted in this world where a languid dancer stretching into arabesque vies with a silly slap battle between a pair of men. After a sequence on the floor where dancers spin and balance seesaw-like on their bottoms, the group in succession rises to an exaggerated runner’s lunge, one knee cocked, the other straight – like an ancient heroic bronze of a bowed discus thrower. These eye catching moments with their unruly vocabulary tickle the edges of memory to place a sound, a phrase of music, a pose or a moving sequence before it disappears again back into the ether.



“Hora” challenges as it satisfies with its ever-evolving choreographic palette. The dancers begin sitting, their backs against that glowing green wall, before walking forward en masse to confront the audience at the edge of the stage – a favored moment in Naharin’s body of choreography – staring us down with piercing eyes and hardened faces. They turn and

dole out a sequence in silhouette, chic in their trim black dancewear – some in dresses, others, shorts. We study their bodies outlined in high relief, each distinct against the glowing green scrim. One dancer’s chin juts forward, another’s back sways, while a third drops back in the shoulders. This is no *corps de ballet* unit dancing as one.

These dancers imbue the idiosyncratic choreography with myriad meanings that we outsiders can only guess at. Watching their hyper-intuitive control becomes easily mesmerizes. At times they’re hard-edged, tough, even prickly, like the native Israeli fruit of an indigenous cactus, the sabra. But sabras, like Israelis, the old saying goes, are prickly on the outside, sweet under the skin. That’s the gift Naharin gives the dance world, how to dance below the skin’s surface and still project an aura, a life force, in the process. These dancers have acquired, it seems, some secret wordless access to textures and senses that feels superhuman. Taking it in, you can smell

what they smell, taste what they taste, breathe in the same breaths they take. It's a kinesthesia for all five senses, not just the body.

And yet, "Hora," for those uninitiated into the sometimes arcane and quixotic worlds Naharin creates, contains nothing expectantly like a hora, the communal circular folk dance with its weaving grapevine steps and held hands. In fact, Batsheva dancers have gone on record as saying that the work's title is not meant to suggest the popular European Jewish folk dance and that the word has other meanings in other languages, including "hour" in Spanish. Instead, the choreographer eschews circles, a structure he's favored in some of his other works, including the popular "Minus 16," and returns to another form he likes: the full line of dancers across the stage moving in unison to confront the audience. It's an in-your-face way to get the audience on your side, and these dancers have no qualms about possessing a straightforward staredown for as long as it takes. The reality, though, is that when a major Israeli dance company with Batsheva's renown tours a work called "Hora," it unquestionably carries a freighted meaning. Denying in the name that root connection simply feels disingenuous.