

The Inside Outsider

By Ori J. Lenkinski

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Batsheva premieres two flamboyant new works.

If you didn't know it was the Batsheva Dance Company, you could mistake the five dancers of *The Toxic Exotic Disappearing Act* for a budding young experimental dance troupe. On the flip side, if you didn't know that it was Yasmeen Godder's handiwork, the piece could be mistaken for a new aesthetic being tested out on his company by Ohad Naharin. In either case, there is something clearly different and yet so right about the piece, which will premiere next weekend at the Suzanne Dellal Center by the Batsheva Dance Company.

The evening will feature two new works. One is the abovementioned piece by Godder and Itzik Giuli; the other is *The Work of Freedom* by house choreographer and power girl Sharon Eyal and partner Guy Behar. The program, which initially was meant to include a work by London-based choreographer and former Batsheva dancer Hofesh Shechter, is a new model for the very insular ensemble. For years, the company has been a vehicle for Naharin's musings, with a number of pieces contributed by Eyal. It has been a long time since Batsheva opened its door to an outside choreographer.

Godder, whose work has garnered great praise around the world in recent years, is a strong voice in the local community. Her style, which is drastically different from the Batsheva repertoire, is theatrical and gutsy. At the end of last season, she arrived at the Batsheva studios to select her cast of five from the 17 dancers of the company.

For Shamel Pitts, who just began his third season with the company, this turn of events so close to his summer break was somewhat disheartening.

"It was the worst timing," he says. "We were exhausted, and then Yasmeen walked in to do this workshop. It was a lot of improvisation and acting. I was so tired, I just started really playing around. I was doing a lot of hiding and showing, ducking my head into my shirt and then reappearing," says Pitts, demonstrating a kind of rabbit-in-a-hat reveal.

Though he didn't know it at the time, he and Godder share a special connection. With a gap of about 10 years between them, the same teachers in New York City trained the two Pitts in the same schools.

Godder drew inspiration for her latest work from Viviane Sassen's photography book *Flamboyant*, which features vibrant images taken across Africa.

"There is an idea of disappearing into nature in the book and in the piece," explains Pitts.

To enhance the outdoor feeling of the work, Godder called on set designer Alona Roda, who brought in a large wooden wall and a variety of props. Costumes by Eran Shanny, a former dancer of Yasmeen's, also add to the overall aesthetic of the piece, bringing welcome splashes of color to the stage. "The piece is about visibility and invisibility. It's amazing how much that playing around was actually close to the heart of the work," says Pitts.

"My character in the piece is kind of the emcee or wizard," he says. "I begin by tantalizing the audience with a kind of black magic. I finish almost completely covered by the trees we have on stage. My character is seeking this place that is the most serene, the most disguised and the most myself. Actually, we spoke a lot about how when you wear a mask, you can be more yourself."

For Godder, demonstrating movement during this process was challenging, as she was in the late stages of pregnancy with her first child, who was born just three weeks ago. That said, Godder was a staple in the studio until less than a week before giving birth and hopped back into the process a few days after, with the baby in her arms.

The experience of working with Godder, Giuli and the five dancers they brought in to teach the Batsheva cast was a break from Pitts's daily routine in the company.

"They work so differently from Ohad," says Pitts. "They have so much to say. Itzik and Yasmeen were both the dramaturges for the piece; they both moved around the studio, finishing each other's sentences. I was shocked and surprised to work with them and ended up falling in love with them because of the piece."

The Toxic Exotic Disappearing Act and The Work of Freedom will premiere at the Suzanne Dellal Center on December 30 and 31, January 2, 4, 5, 6, and 7. For tickets and information, visit www.batsheva.co.il or www.suzannedellal.org.il.