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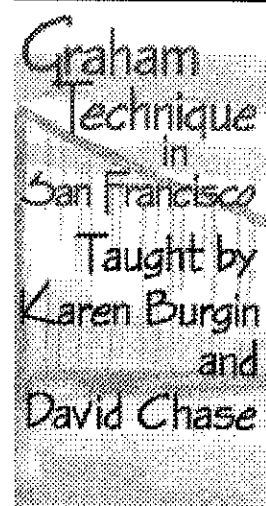
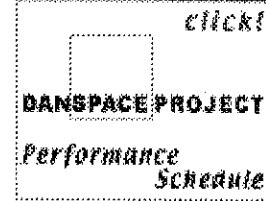
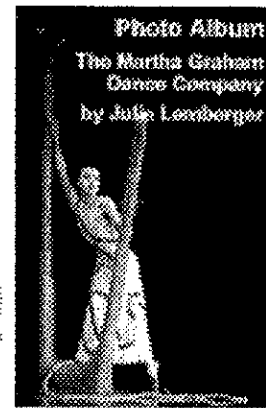
Out of the Fog, 11-10: ...& into the Gaga
Unlocking Naharin's System

By Aimee Ts'ao
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SAN FRANCISCO -- Sometimes it is not just the performance of a choreographic piece that has an impact, but also the serendipitous events surrounding that performance that covertly conspire to reshape one's perceptions of that first viewing. And so my recent experience with the Tel-Aviv-based Batsheva Dance Company turned out to be far richer than I could have imagined before I walked into the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts Theater for the Thursday, October 26 performance of artistic director Ohad Naharin's "Three." The next day, both interviewing Naharin and participating in a company warmup gave me further insight into the performance and deepened my appreciation of these exceptional artists.

Granted, I had already been to YBCA the previous Tuesday night to see two films, "Israel Dancing," a documentary by Czech television and "Boobies," a dance choreographed by Inbal Pinto and performed by her company. The latter was so long and eclectic, or derivative, that you could use it as the sole visual aid to teach a course on the influence of every dance and theater style of the 20th century on current work. The former featured some interesting footage of various Israeli dance companies as well as interviews with choreographers. The one moment that lodged in my mind was Naharin saying, "Everybody should dance every day, for a few minutes at least."

Now it's Thursday night, as I take my seat after conversing with

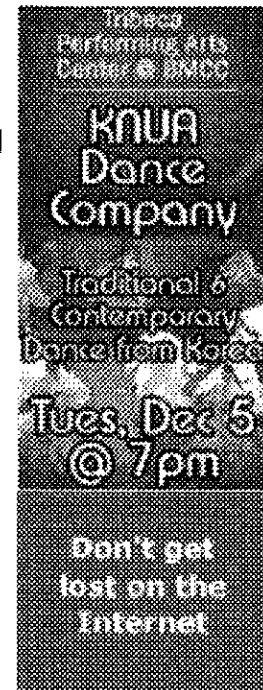


other critics, dancers, and a couple of my teachers in the lobby. It's quite gratifying to see so many from the local dance community in attendance. "Three" runs 70 minutes, with no intermission. There are three sections (hence the name), which I later learn by searching online are called Bellus (beauty), Humus (earth) and Secus ('otherwise' or 'to the contrary' in the Latin legal definition; "this...not this" in Naharin's more poetic rendering). They can be performed separately as well as together, I also read.



Batsheva Dance Company in Ohad Naharin's "Three." Gadi Dagon photo copyright Gadi Dagon and courtesy San Francisco Performances.

The opener, Bellus, is danced to a number of Bach's "Goldberg Variations," recorded by Glenn Gould. (I confess that I am a serious admirer of the late Canadian pianist.) Basically the dance begins with a solo section, then a second dancer enters and stands to the side. As the first dancer exits, the second continues with some of the same choreographic material as well as new phrases, while a third enters, then the second dancer exits and the third begins, and so on. There is a pas de deux and a section of ten dancers running and jumping in what I would call an imaginary primitive folk dance. In the final section the movement is both new and recycled from previous sections, but seamlessly woven together, befitting the nature of musical variations. For me, there is one exquisite section in which the dancers stand in a line across the stage facing the audience. Each performer gently raises his/her arms straight up, sometimes from the shoulder, sometimes only from the elbow, at varying times and at varying speeds. There is no readily obvious pattern, though the complexity increases; then they shift into new material that includes different gestures and epaulement (angling the shoulders), executed while they're still in line. It is so utterly simple yet so profoundly deep and resonates with the spirit of Bach's music in a mysterious way, visually reflecting its essence without being a slave to the notes,



motifs or compositional form.

In *Humus*, to music by Brian Eno, nine women explore weight, balance and gravity, first in a very slow and purposeful manner then gaining momentum as they walk or run around the stage to another location for another exploration of the possibilities of their bodies.



Batsheva Dance Company in Ohad Naharin's "Three." Gadi Dagon photo copyright Gadi Dagon and courtesy San Francisco Performances.

It is the last part, *Secus*, that is the most substantial, both in length and choreography. Over the course of 35 minutes, to Ohad Fishof's compilation of music (Chan Chan, Kid 606 and Rayon [mix: Stephan Ferry], AGF, Fennesz, Kaho Naa Pyar Hai, Seefeel, and The Beach Boys), the dancers go ever so gradually from the chaos of everyone doing something different to the entire ensemble moving in unison. One section has the performers in three groups. One dancer from each articulates a brief phrase or action, then goes to the end of the line while the next dancer does the step in his/her own personal way. Usually there are only two or three repetitions before the dancers move on to new movement phrases. At one point the women on the right turn their backs one at a time to the audience, jump straight up in the air and quickly pull their pants down and up, flashing ever so briefly their derrieres. The men in the middle also pull their pants down, again one by one, but facing the crowd while concealing their private parts between their legs, a la emasculated Ken dolls. In general, the choreography for *Secus* is brilliantly crafted, from the use of space, to the permutations and combinations of movement phrases and finally to the ominous ensemble marching around the stage, hunched over, grabbing the air and chanting the word "welcome" as the lights dim.

Rarely do I see such emotionally powerful dancers. They are not

mere automatons replicating steps. They touch us in a profoundly human way because their movement is born from intensely personal depths.

The next morning I meet Naharin at his hotel for an interview. We find a quiet corner in the atrium on the mezzanine and settle in. As we talk for more than half an hour, what follows are only a few main points of our conversation:

Aimee Ts'ao: You seem to resist being called an Israeli choreographer.

Ohad Naharin: It's trivial information in terms of what I really do. Because [then] you put all the Israeli choreographers in one box. I think the community of choreographers shouldn't have national, ethnic or religious connotations. I'm also an American citizen, by the way. So you can call me an American-Israeli choreographer. My grandparents were from Russia and Poland, so maybe you can call me a Russian-Polish-Israeli-American choreographer. Being Israeli is not even a race; being Israeli describes geographically where I'm from. It doesn't tell anything about who I am or what I am.

AT: I'm reading a biography of Gertrude Bell called "Desert Queen." She was a British woman who lived and worked in the Middle East from the 1890s through the 1920s. It's all the same problems we still have today. Nothing has changed. It really reinforces for me that the world doesn't really change that much in a very fundamental way.

ON: That's reassuring too.

AT: But it's sad on the other hand.

ON: Very sad, I agree.

(Later, responding to a follow-up question in which I ask his opinion on the Israeli occupation, the wall and Israel's recent actions in Lebanon, he offers: "The current situation is not new, it shows ignorance on the part of our leaders and many people, and it is distorting the desire for peace. It is the same as what is going on with the current government in the USA. It is not stupidity, this ignorance is intelligent but a one-way one, in which our leaders react only to their own reflections while totally blind to what is really in front of them. It means that they are not in touch with reality – while possessing so much power they create innocent victims, unnecessary suffering, and a much less secure world.")

AT: What made you start to dance?

ON: I don't know exactly what you mean, but when I think of starting to dance, it's starting to live. As long as I can remember I'm dancing. Not dancing in a classroom, but being very aware of my body, my weight, being aware of the pleasure and joy I got out of movement, of the extreme physicality and effort. I think a lot of how we dance today has to do not with just our training, it has a lot to do with how we grew up, our genes, and what we did since we were born, with our body development. Our weaknesses, our strengths, our sexuality, our intelligence, our awareness of the universe has a lot to do with how we dance.

AT: How did you arrive at developing Gaga [as Naharin calls the movement language he uses in daily company training]?

ON: In order to be able to talk about it, I have to decide to make it more systematic than it really is. I've decided to talk about two important points, or maybe three. The first point will be my back injury. More than 20 years ago I had a very serious back injury, where I shattered a disc and I was paralyzed in my left leg and I didn't think I'd be able to dance. I had a serious operation, but I was already choreographing, so coming back from the injury I needed two things: to get my body to move a little bit and also to be able to give other people the keys to the way to move in my work. This process of finding keys for me and for my dancers brought me to deal with my weaknesses and efficiency of movement. I needed to be so efficient because I was so limited. I developed an awareness that had to do with finding where in my body I'm not hurting and where in my body I have unused muscles, unused movement. I discovered my explosive power, the efficiency of movement. I started to really be able to connect between pleasure and pain, and between effort and joy. At the same time I needed to articulate it because I needed to give it to myself and others. So it became a language and a method. That was one, then about ten years ago, almost as a joke I started meeting [with] a group of non-dancers, workers of Batsheva company who are not dancers [but] who wanted to dance. So I started meeting [with] a group of five people twice a week in the morning. Very quickly I realized in these meetings with non-dancers, I learned a lot about movement, movement habits, all the things I described before but in a new light because none of them had the ambition to be on stage. They just wanted to feel better, and to move better and to get stronger. So then Gaga became something that had nothing to do with performing arts, just had to do with the maintenance of your body. Healing your body, finding pleasure and joy in movement and nothing to do with ambitions to be on stage. That became a very serious thing

in my life -- working with non-dancers. Today we have a venue with hundreds of non-dancers who come to take Gaga classes.

AT: Is it possible for someone to start as a child and be completely trained as a dancer? Or do you need to supplement with other forms?

ON: Right now I think of Gaga as the higher education of dance. You do elementary school, high school and go to college. So Gaga is this part of your education. We do have schools which approach us to teach kids. I'm more interested [in working] with adults. This year we allowed Gaga to be in the curriculum of the performing arts school in Jerusalem. But that is for 17-year-olds and over, not for kids. All the people already have [dance] training. The important idea is to make people excel in the method they already know. It's not to abolish or cancel or change their techniques. If someone wants to be a ballerina, then Gaga can help her to be a ballerina. You should come and take Gaga class with us. We do it before the show as a warmup.

AT: I wanted to ask you about your choreographic process. Is it something that evolved, that you started in one spot and then the more you did it, you got more ideas of how you work? Not the actual choreography, but your whole way of thinking about it.

ON: Evolved is the key word. It's evolving. It's a process that takes me to places I've never been before. Otherwise I would be bored with it. The sense of discovery is always there. I think it has a lot to do with how my relationship with my dancers evolved, too. They [have] become more and more meaningful contributors to the process, especially since we started doing Gaga as our training about four years ago.

AT: I wanted to ask about music, because it is obvious that it's an important element for you.

ON: Yes, yes. There's something about music and structure and order and mathematics. There is something particular about this Bach piece ["Goldberg Variations"] and the way that Glenn Gould is playing it that the beauty of it really comes from making the music very bare. It's so beautiful without any decoration. You really feel how the structure of the piece and the rhythm and the logic of it actually can create all the emotions and transport you into this landscape. This music is also almost like the sound of a metronome. Something so clean and minimalistic about it. Somehow meditating with it brought me to create the system of lifting the arms [in the Bellus section], which is really different from the system of the music. But I still feel loyal to it somehow.

AT: You also have a sense of space.

ON: It's space that gives me the reason I can dance. I consider the importance of space in my existence more than time. I feel time passes anyway. I have no control over time, but I have control over space. I can really change the space and create the space, but I cannot change time and I cannot create time. I'm aware of time, how long it takes to do something, and I make a decision how long I want to do something, but it's more about how long it takes to go from one place to another and that has more to do with space than with time.

AT: Is there anything else you'd like to say?

ON: Every interviewer asks me that. Yes. Cover your mirrors or break them. Don't use mirrors when you dance. Don't use mirrors when you live. They are very limiting, they are an illusion. They have really stopped dance from developing as far as it could go without [them]. That's for sure. Every time I come to a ballet company to choreograph, I cover the mirrors. At the beginning it is so difficult, but at the end of the process, the dancers are so grateful.

Much later the same day I arrive at the stage door of YBCA, wondering if trying to do the Gaga warmup is really such a good idea. Nearly two years ago, I was hit by a car while walking across a street. The whiplash from being thrown at least eight to ten feet still plagues me and I have had major setbacks from such minor events as picking up a flowerpot. The ballet classes I do every day are at least a known quantity and quality, but what am I really signing on for now?

On stage the company is getting notes from Naharin, and I watch the dancers run through several sections of "Three," which I saw last night. Finally they get a 15-minute break before warmup and I continue my stretching even more as a prophylactic against re-injuring myself. I need not have worried. Gaga turns out to be very liberating. I can just tune into what my body is feeling and then figure out what it needs. I am listening deeply to what it is telling me about its limits, but it reminds me, too, that there are strengths. Watching Batsheva's members doing Gaga also shows me why they are so powerful on stage, individually and as an ensemble. By the end of the warmup, my body feels looser and more fluid than it has for a long time. I am positively exhilarated. I'm a convert; I'm thinking about incorporating some of it into my daily routine. You might even say -- I'm going ga-ga over Gaga.