

WEEKEND

‘Together we’ve lost’

A renewed version of the work '2019' by Batsheva Dance Company choreographer Ohad Naharin – a sharp critic of the war in Gaza – is striking a particularly painful chord among its audiences

Gili Izikovich

During the past few weeks the Batsheva Dance Company underwent an unprecedented experience – one that recurred every time they performed their work “2019.” As its title suggests, “2019” premiered some four years ago, and it was not even scheduled to be reprised now. Putting it on was a spontaneous move, an instantaneous decision that turned out to be just right for this moment. And like other things that are happening at this moment, it sparked side effects never seen in the past. Like the audience sobbing in response to it.

Nothing these days looks like it is supposed to, and art is generating even more unusual reactions than it normally does. For its part, “2019,” which is staged in the troupe’s small Tel Aviv studio rather than in its other venues, was conceived to be a demanding, intense work. The audience is small and seated in physical proximity to the dancers in a work that leaves no stone of the Israeli ethos unturned.

The narrow, runway-like stage is in constant flux. One moment it’s a ballroom, then a military parade, a gladiatorial arena and a party. In another instant the studio morphs into a venue for a sing-along, a nightclub, then a funeral. It’s a fetishistic, campy, quasi-militaristic work, pulsing with a sense of urgency and danger, and an anti-violence vibe – and also nothing less than heartbreaking.

‘People talk about the Arabs, the Muslims, the Gazans as the “other side.” There are people in Israel who are more on the “other side” than many people who live in Gaza. The other side is not in Gaza, it’s here.’

It’s a piece that was created as a swift, well-aimed kick to the belly, but as we watch it now, with the bellyful of things we’ve been experiencing, it becomes a historic moment in itself. It’s a moment at which this nearly 75-minute piece, unquestionably the most critical work veteran Batsheva choreographer Ohad Naharin has created, confronts reality in its current, post-October 7 version. And not only are the performers infusing it with new meanings and heft; its target audience is also different now.

“There is a dialogue here with the present,” Naharin observes. “I didn’t revise the choreography or the music, other than making some changes because there are a few new dancers in the performance [with different abilities than the original cast]. We also worked on interpretation and on the dance language. Its range has grown. About two months ago, we realized that the tours scheduled for Batsheva would not be happening, and we thought that ‘2019,’ even though it touches painful places, has the quality of untangling things – of untangling all those places simultaneously. The decision to stage it was made by the company’s artistic director, Lior Avitzur, and it was an idea that we are making good on now.

“Dance – and not just ‘2019’ – is consolation within the horror,” Naharin continues. “That doesn’t apply to every type of dance, but within the intentionality of what we’re doing, the soul that is imprisoned in its own self-image finds freedom through movement. There is beauty and a direct connection to the body, under the clothes. A connection to the essence of existence that doesn’t need any mediation. Anyone who sees and feels that body is able to communicate directly with the realms of imagination, thoughts, senses. There is no other art that can do it this way, with the aid of the body that was your prison and is now what releases you to freedom with its movement.”

The company’s international tours have been canceled?

“Batsheva’s schedule has changed radically. All our tours were canceled or postponed – Japan, Germany, Italy. There are no tours until June, and this was supposed to be a year of performances overseas. In June we’ll be performing in France. We were supposed to do ‘Anafaza’ there, but after October 7, I said we would only go on the condition

that we will be able to perform ‘2019’ instead, and they picked up the gauntlet.

“We are performing here in Israel, renewing pieces we hadn’t thought of renewing, and canceling other things. Some dancers [not Israelis] have also left us because of what’s going on here: four of the troupe’s 18 members, and one or two from the [youth] ensemble. They wouldn’t have left, not at this time, at least, if war hadn’t broken out.”

What reasons are your partners abroad giving you for the cancellations?

“The main reason is that our hosts can’t take responsibility for our security. Batsheva is also afraid to take responsibility for its dancers’ security. In France, for some reason, they’re still onboard at the moment. I was surprised about the decision in Japan. I’m sure it wasn’t an anti-Israeli, anti-Batsheva, move. They all love the company and are actually talking not about cancellation but postponement. In Japan it’s the third time: The first two postponements were because of COVID. The tour that had been set for the United States this March has been postponed until next March.”

Is anyone talking to you about an anti-Israel atmosphere? About the possibility that your potential audience won’t want to come because of it?

“We are so not in the center of things. There are so many grave and upsetting things happening but that’s not part of the discussion. It’s like talking about a mosquito bite while the house is going up in flames. We don’t talk about the mosquito bite, and we do talk about the house being on fire. The story is not Batsheva.”

But Batsheva suffered, and has suffered for many years, from protests and from boycotts against it, which are sometimes vocal and thuggish.

“That is exactly the mosquito bite. When BDS [boycott, divestment and sanctions] people demonstrate, it doesn’t help the Palestinians, unfortunately, but it does add drama. Discussing how much we at Batsheva are affected is not important. We try to navigate amid the changes, but we are not a victim.

“I have never been so disturbed, worried, anxious as I have been in these past 90 days. These are not new fears, but the volume has changed. I am not one of those who are saying ‘I’ve sobered up now.’ I think that immediately, right after October 7, I felt the potential of what is happening now. I am against the actions being taken now [in the Gaza Strip]. People can claim they have empathy, but how is it possible to cut into the flesh and feel empathy at the same time? And if you have no empathy – heaven help you. The talk at the moment is between bad and worse. There is no clear distinction between good and bad, so everything is bad, everything is different shades of bad. I am helpless and I have no influence over anything.”

Comfort through Gaga

Ohad Naharin has always been a political person, and that has certainly not changed. The situation that’s evolved since October 7 is causing him such acute torment that for the first time in years he agreed to give an interview to a media outlet. The impact of current events is also reflected in his social activity. Earlier this month he gave a two-day mass class in Tel Aviv in Gaza, the unique language of movement that he created, whose proceeds went to the Association for Civil Rights in Israel. Thousands of people, dancers and non-dancers alike, take Gaga lessons with him or other teachers around the world, in person or online. For the past decade, Naharin has held a mass class in Gaga



The Batsheva Dance Company performing Naharin’s latest work, MOMO.

Ascaf



Naharin. “If we want to change something in our story after what happened on October 7, to honor our dead, act in their name and be able to emerge from the horror that is being fomented on us, we first have to stop living in the huge rift between self-perception and actual reality.”

Ella Barak

every year, benefitting ACRI. Since October 7, he has held four such events, and there are more to come.

He’s obviously troubled and frustrated. It’s clear, on one hand, that he wants to avoid militant speech – that he is hurting and speaking with a palpable feeling of devotion for and love of his homeland. This is evident from the slow, measured tone with which he articulates his thoughts in an interview conducted in his Tel Aviv home and innumerable phone conversations. Yet it’s equally clear that the general public would categorize him, based on what he is saying, as someone who is maligning the country. Indeed, two or three days after Hamas’ massacre in the south, he came up with a new WhatsApp profile picture in blue and white, with the words “Together we’ve lost” – a counterweight to the popular motto “Together we will win.” He observes recent events with growing discomfort and dread.

Something terrible happened and there was no choice but to take action. What should have been done differently?

“A horrific thing happened. On a scale we have never known. Hamas is the enemy of humanity. But what’s going on is part of a cycle of violence that didn’t begin on October 7. There is a cycle of suffering of Jews, Israelis, Palestinians. The Israel Defense Forces has a whole list of operations that it’s carried out in the past 40 years, in Gaza and in the West Bank.

“When I say that the cycle of violence didn’t begin on October 7, people call me a maligner of Israel. It’s clear to me who the people are who are maligning Israel. They constitute a majority, if not all, of our government. Those who malign Israel are the settler-messianic right wing. They are the people who think that the IDF’s campaign should continue and who justify it; who maintain that one must not criticize IDF soldiers. They are the people who think that dead soldiers and dead hostages are an ‘understand-

able’ price [to pay] for enabling achievements in the fighting. They are those who are turning the war into a goal in and of itself.”

But how is it possible not to fight when such murderous ideology threatens you, just a few kilometers away?

“[We could come up with] a political solution. It was possible to stop on October 10, a few days after the massacre, when Israel seemed to be no longer in immediate existential danger. To try to bring back the captives and the hostages – that takes precedence over everything. When will the number of dead be reached that is supposed to let you feel you have won? After all, we’ve lost. If on October 10 we had said, ‘Together we’ve lost,’ not ‘Together we will win’ – what would have happened?

“We need to see to a decent present so that the future will be better. To stop, lick our wounds, look for an international community that will support a solution, liberate the prisoners and the captives, help the 1,300 grieving families, the thousands of wounded and the tens of thousands of evacuees. By doing that you already paralyze Hamas. You don’t fight. How could you not examine that mode of action before doing what you have done? I don’t know what will happen, but I do know that whatever’s happening now is in our hands.

“Stop fighting today – save those who will die tomorrow. We are being promised many months of fighting. In simple arithmetic: Let’s say six months, with two to three [Israeli] losses per day? That’s more than 500 dead.”

Naharin’s monologue will no doubt resonate among those attending performances of “2019,” simply because the work unfolds like a ravishing, tragic, kinetic version of his grim words. At the peak of the show, Naharin himself sings the late playwright Hanoch Levin’s ditty, “You and Me and the Next War,” from the 1968 cabaret show of that name – in a scene that virtually encompasses within it decades of mounting violence.

A few days later, in our second conversation, Naharin sounds even more agitated. It isn’t only a matter of the tragedy of what is going on, he says, it’s amazement at the still-evolving situation. “It seems so clear that everything that has happened since then [October 7] has not moved us forward – on the contrary – and that should have been already apparent back then, before plunging deeply into this mistake, whose resolution is not at all clear now. You don’t need to be an expert in history in order to exercise healthy logic and also be humane along the way.

“I stopped watching the news channels more than a month ago,” he continues. “I couldn’t take the insensitivity anymore, the arrogance, the lies, all the ostensibly tear-jerking broadcasts. I remember the moment when I said to myself: This is it. By that stage, a quarter of Gaza was already demolished, a million people were homeless and thousands had been killed. Gazans were without electricity and water.

“So there’s this military commentator, I don’t remember his name, dressed in black, no tie, on Channel 12, speaking in a quiet voice and saying, ‘At this stage there isn’t a humanitarian crisis yet in the Strip...’ With just a few words he succeeded in articulating the pure evil that has infiltrated our souls and has turned so many of us into human monsters.

“If we want to change something in our story after what happened on October 7, to honor our dead, act in their name and be able to emerge from the horror that is being taking place, the first thing we need to do is to stop living in the huge rift between self-perception and actual reality. If we don’t reduce this huge disparity, things will get a lot worse. People think their opinions are facts. Those who view themselves as great experts – especially people like them – are denying reality.

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“People talk about the Arabs, the Muslims, the Gazans as the ‘other side.’ What is the other side? There are people in Israel who are more on the ‘other side’ than many people who live in Gaza. The other side is not in Gaza, it is here among us. We must recognize that all human beings have much in common. Even if there is no agreement between them, there is no such thing as not being able to find love, a desire to give or genuine concern, in someone – unless he is truly a psychopath, one in a thousand. We need to believe that this potential can be discovered in everyone.

“We have 40 dancers from 10 countries in Batsheva. We don’t share a similar history and we don’t share the same citizenship, we have diverse and different preferences and opinions. We are involved in ongoing processes together, during which we are enlarging the circles of our awareness. I expect of myself and of them to learn from our mistakes. We are learning how to shed old ideas in favor of new and better ones. We are learning that when we do good, good will come of it. We admit that we will always be far from perfect, yet we will still be capable of creating moments of transcendence.

“When I teach Gaga online, I meet hundreds of people. Not long ago I gave a class in which there were 700 participants from 50 countries, including Iran, Russia, Hungary – countries that represent benighted regimes. They are people whose basis resembles your own, with the same realms of the imagination, a common scale of values and shared universal ethics.

“The problem is, that in order to destroy, no talent is needed, no prior experience, no skills. It’s very easy to destroy. There are many builders in Israel, people who know and want and are capable of that. They are also the ones who will build and bring about the change that seems to have no chance of coming about. It’s harder for us builders, because the destroyers operate with ease. I say ‘for us builders,’ because I think I am part of those builders. There are many builders in this land. Maybe even more than there are destroyers – it’s just so terribly easy to destroy.

“There are builders, people like that, in key positions as well, even in the [political] leadership. They are in that category even if they make mistakes. Even if they don’t represent the way I would like things to be managed. Their hearts are in the right place.”

Defining Israeli dance

At age 71 Ohad Naharin enjoys a status shared by only a few people in the world of culture and art, in Israel and internationally. Under his stewardship, Batsheva has become one of the most important and mesmerizing contemporary dance troupes on the planet. There’s not a moment, it seems, when a work by him isn’t being performed on a stage somewhere.

Naharin was born on Kibbutz Mizra, near Nazareth. His father, Eliav Naharin, was an actor and a psychologist; his mother, Tzofia, was a dancer who taught movement. He was 5 when his family left the kibbutz, but that specific form of Israeliness – of kibbutz, of the earth – has always been discernible in his dancing and choreography. He had always danced and was always in motion, but didn’t become a dancer per se until the ripe old age of 22. He was accepted to the Batsheva company, but not long afterward, after meeting the world-famous choreographer Martha Graham, he moved to New York to dance in her company. Concurrently, he attended the Juilliard performing arts conservatory, then danced briefly in Maurice Béjart’s troupe before gathering a group of dancers around him and becoming a creator himself.

After assuming the role of artistic director of Batsheva in 1990, he created revolutionary works, connections that seemed impossible, and brought a new audience and a surging libido to modern dance. A series of works choreographed by him redefined the world of Israeli dance: “Kyr,” in which he collaborated for the first time with the Israeli rock band Nikmat Hatraktor, “Anafaza,” “Deca Dance.” In 1995, The New York Times called him one of the five most important choreographers in the world. In 1998, he was awarded the French government’s Chevalier de l’Ordre des Arts et des Lettres (Knight of the Order of Arts and Letters).

In 1998, a furor erupted in the government over a controversial Batsheva piece – the now-iconic “Echad Mi Yodea” (“Who Knows One”) that Naharin created as part of “Kyr” and which is also featured in “Anafaza.” Based on the eponymous Passover song, “Echad Mi Yodea” was supposed to be inserted into the “Jubilee Bells” event, the centerpiece of the state’s official 50th anniversary celebrations. However, religious groups, among them the ultra-Orthodox, threatened to disrupt the proceedings if the dancers, who in the course of the work shed their black suits and white nightshirts and remained in their underwear, did not promise to cover their bodies. Naharin refused – and the performance was canceled.

A few years later, passions had abated. In 2005, Naharin was awarded the Israel Prize, the country’s highest honor, and over the years has won virtually every other possible honor, local and international, in his field. In 2015 he was the subject of what was arguably the most successful Israeli documentary film of all time, “Mr. Gaga,” directed by Tomer Heymann.

Throughout, he never slowed down