

Review: Batsheva Dance Company at Royce Hall

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Speaking of his latest work for Israel's [Batsheva Dance Company](#), "Max," Ohad Naharin has poetically referenced the universality of gesture and the essence of being -- the usual sorts of statements made about the art of dance that don't really say much of anything. In performance at UCLA's Royce Hall on Saturday evening, the piece was -- gratifyingly -- at once more particular and abstruse, relying as it did on a lexicon of physical gestures that, despite their specificity, added up to gibberish.

Indeed, the capacity to communicate lay at the heart of Naharin's metaphysical inquiry, which propelled his 10-member ensemble through an endless roundelay of groupings and gropings with an urgency that underscored failure rather than achievement.

The troupe has grown only more sophisticated in its movement invention over the last decade with the institution of Naharin's creative training technique, aptly named Gaga; and of the many reasons that audiences line up to see Batsheva, the most prominent remains the indulgent pleasure of watching highly intelligent, superbly articulate dancers at play in the fields of its artistic director's kinetic imagination.

Though some have assessed "Max" as Naharin's quietest dance yet, the dance was neither sparse nor contemplative. Instead, dense movement phrases demanded lightning-quick shifts in direction, momentum or intention of the dancers, who, in turn, sashayed, stumbled or soared across the stage in response to erratically jerking body parts catapulting them this way and that. A shoulder roll might send one falling backward while a protruding hipbone hiccuped into a balletic rond de jambe. As if Naharin had set out to use every possible bone or joint to initiate movement, at one point it looked as if the dancers were being pulled by their belly buttons.

The choreographer's hallmark humor and aggressive -- what might once have been called punk -- aesthetic were also on display, cropping up in the spectrum of sources from which he extracted and adapted gestures -- with Irish jigs, metal headbanging and hand signs.

Naharin used well the relative abilities of individual dancers -- notably Yaniv Abraham and Tom Weinberger's buoyant elasticity, Guy Shomroni's nerdy awkwardness, Rachael Osborne and Caroline Boussard's intricate delicacy, Iyar Elezra's almost animalistic fluidity. But the entire troupe, which also featured Nir Benita, Matan David, Bosmat Nossan and Bobbi Smith, excelled at combining speed and grace, strength and precision in his amalgam of big, juicy moves and tiny, quirky fillips.

The dance accrued meaning, or not, over a series of brief, continually shifting sections. Just as the movement vocabulary afforded the dancers little stable ground, these flickered like light and shadow moving swiftly across the surface of water. Some segments thematically united within the rhythms established in Maxim Warratt's dynamic score, with dancers embodying the peripatetic whirl of pneumatic drills and high-pitched whine of chain saws in one, the evocative amorphousness of what might've been the sound of a heartbeat in utero in another.

Much of the idiosyncratic movement language in "Max," however, exploited decay and collapse, whether it was a knee giving out, a pose crumbling, a gesture fading, an image coming into focus or a group aggregating only to immediately disperse.

The piece ended with the company shouting out a song at the top of their lungs. That it, like several of the texts recited in Warratt's score, was in a concocted language only underscored Naharin's dystopic outlook.

-- Sara Wolf

Photo: Members of the Batsheva Dance Company performing "Max" in their UCLA Live appearance at Royce Hall. Credit: Stefano Paltera / For The Times