

Dance

Ohad Naharin Brings the Gaga to BAM in *Max*

By **Deborah Jowitz**

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When Ohad Naharin, the artistic director of Israel's Batsheva Dance Company, developed a technique for training dancers and named it Gaga, I'm pretty sure he wasn't taking into account the word's meaning in English slang. Watching the group's members in action, you wouldn't think, "They're out of their minds." They look more fully cognizant of what they're doing than many dancers; if they've heard of the hoary concept of a mind-body split, they don't show it. They're aware of both the space around them and the space within—the way impulses flow along neural pathways and muscles anticipate motion. From absolute stillness, they can explode into full-force, yet precise action.

Max takes its title from the composer of the accompanying score, Maxim Warratt. The name is a pseudonym for Naharin, which explains the close tailoring of sound to movement and atmosphere. We're looking into a forthright, yet enigmatic world. The ten performers don't make close contact with the audience as did those in Naharin's earlier *Anaphaza* and *Telophaza*, nor are they as quite individualized as the cast of his more intimate *Mamootot*, which was performed here in 2005 for spectators seated on four sides of a studio at the Mark Morris Dance Center.

When the curtain rises on *Max*, five men are standing at the rear of the stage, their backs to us. Closer to us, also facing away, five women wait in deep, first-position plié, their knees angled to either side like wings. The lighting by Avi Yona Bueno (Bambi) colors them pink on one side, green on the other. Silence. Suddenly, in immaculate unison, the women tilt to one side, without changing their positions. Clunk; their left knees hit the floor. Pause. Then they make a quarter turn into profile, kneel, and bend over. When the men come to them and lift them to their feet, each couple moves into a ballroom stance and seesaw in and out of plié: You up, me down; now you down, me up. A single, swift maneuver, and each woman is sitting on her partner's knee. Equality, however, has been established. That the women utter precise, gestural moves in place while the men walk slowly, contemplatively around them makes no overt statement about gender differences or assigned power.

These people are very aware of one another. They join in unison unquestioningly. They watch while various of them perform solos. Yet they rarely touch. Although almost every move they make is strong and exact, they're also super-flexible. In one solo, a woman (Iyar Elezra, I believe) pulls her body into fluid extremes. The scattered solos (the dancers collaborate on these with Naharin) are rife with usual moves or coordinations. A woman crosses one lifted leg over the other so acutely that you imagine she'll pull herself off-balance. Another suddenly adopts an awkward, spraddle-legged walk. A man (Tom Weinberger) ripples his torso as if priming a weapon.

It interests me that no matter how unusual the movements, the performers never look bipolar or neurotic or wacky. Nor do they call attention to their prowess. Unlike those executing the trendy, willfully peculiar, yet overtly virtuosic steps in a work by, say, Jorma Elo, Naharin's dancers look as if everything they do is an extension of who they are.

You wonder about them. What is it that makes them stand and flinch while a rumbling sound is heard, then all race toward one side of the stage, but turn back and run to their places and twitch some more? Why do the lights go off so frequently and almost immediately come back on? Several times the dancers group themselves in a tightly packed triangle, like billiard balls, but in rows that progress from kneeling to standing. While in those positions, they put their hands together as if in prayer, while a deep voice says words I don't understand. They also grin or roll their heads in a strangely detached way or burst into instant, loud-voiced song, like well-drilled school children.

The school image isn't that far-fetched, nor are moments that have a fleeting kinship with military exercises. In one sequence, the recorded male voice recites what could be an alphabet. At another time, it counts in a made-up language, gradually accumulating numbers from one to ten, while the dancers accumulate gestures. Powerful as these people are, when they deploy themselves in lines for three-part counterpoint, you imagine that some higher authority (and I don't mean just the choreographer) has commissioned this.

Max has moments of humor, but the overall atmosphere of this brilliantly designed, hour-long piece bristles here and there with the imminence of something darker and more lurid (the lighting brings out this possibility). Whatever it means, you can't take your eyes off the stage and the arresting scenes that crop up—whether you're watching two contentious women or three suddenly united men or a migrating squadron as airborne as birds. These people in their casual, workaday dancer clothes (by Rakafet Levy) seem to be calmly holding something together that could be blasted apart.

In addition to Elezra and Weinberger, they are Yaniv Abraham, Nir Benita, Caroline Boussard, Matan David, Rachel Osborne, Mami Shimazaki, Guy Shomroni, and Bobbi Smith.

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