

Fall-Winter 2019

Ballet Review



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today's teenagers rise to meet the varied worldviews of these four choreographers, most of which they comprehended to the point of informing their interpretations. It is hard to be expert in conveying lost love, or steamy eros, when you are fifteen. The addition of Randy Duncan's piece, *Initiation*, to the Athenaeum program insures that a piece for the male students will push them precisely to their limits and showcase their unique talents.

These four ballets are a meaty lesson in dance history and challenge even the seasoned dance scholar to wrap their head around the divergence of aesthetics from Graham to Ailey to Arpino to Brooks. In my mind, as I review these pieces that I have seen over the decades of my life, I realize anew that most dance students today would encounter them as subjects in a dance history course, perhaps see a video, or in rare cases see the actual ballet performed.

These academy dancers get to learn these ballets by dancing them, and in doing that, gain unequalled insights into the choreographers, the societies from which the ballets came, and the ability of dance to hold lasting form, personal interpretation, and period sensibility. They will learn their own importance as dancers.

I felt I was being given a gift watching the rehearsal. Indeed, what a gift to these young artists. It is refreshing to see with fresh eyes what meaning, power, and artistry these choreographers have to share with us now. The two performances on May 4 promised to be uncommon and exciting opportunities for seeing historical ballets in the bodies of today's teens.

Having seen the ongoing power of the gift of these ballets to these students, in the hands of these teachers, I suggest this performance bill make a tour of dance academies. Anyone who loves twentieth-century dance, or who is learning about it, would thrill to witness this performance of iconic works, so beautifully performed. The future of dance is in good hands.

New York

Karen Greenspan

How does one live to the fullest as an individual and as a relational member of a couple, family, society, and the greater cosmos? These are just a few of the questions that keep life, love, and art moving into new territory at a dizzying angle for the Vertigo Dance Company's founding partners Noa Wertheim and Adi Sha'al.

In early 2019 they came to the Baryshnikov Arts Center and brought their luminous energy along with Israel's fourth-largest dance company to perform *One. One & One*, a work choreographed by Wertheim in 2017 and performed by nine dancers. The work uses a combination of elements to draw a rich and layered investigation of the individual's desire for wholeness, human connection, and ultimately, spiritual connection. Wertheim harnesses the raw, powerful physicality of Vertigo's youthful, yet mature, dance artists. Together, in collaboration, they generate a varied palette of movement material from which she creates an intensely evocative glimpse into the relational nature of the human condition.

The absorbing original score by Avi Belleli integrates rainstorms, spoken words, percussion, droning strings, pulsating Arabic music, and more to amplify the choreography. However, the ingenious use of 100 kilos of earth on a white floor is what catapults the creation into the visible and visceral realm and also underscores the ephemeral and transcendent nature of the dance medium.

The soil component is first and foremost as the piece opens with a dancer carefully pouring dirt from a pail in a neat row along the front of the stage. Meanwhile, Shani Licht dances an expansive solo – slowly arching backward and lunging in wide stances as she travels across the width of the stage. She moves as if trying to expand beyond the limits of her skin and the audience is wholly absorbed in her experience.

Three men enter; they catch her as she re-

peatedly falls into their arms and they carry her to various parts of the stage. Finally, they place her on her feet and follow her along a diagonal path pulling her long, silky strands of hair backward as she presses forward. Then, in a most striking development, she keeps walking onward as they slowly braid her hair into a single, long plait all the while braiding their positions behind her.

Strong rhythmic music initiates a unison group sequence of assertive movements spiced with a sexy hip swivel that alternates with pedestrian walking in grid-like traffic patterns. They morph into a simulated *dabke* (Arabic line dance) while a soloist, who is separate from the line and faces the group, takes to the floor for an energetic round of floor stunts. The *dabke* folk form is a ready-made metaphor for the juxtaposition of the individual in relationship to the connected, but conforming, group.

The sound of droning strings draws attention to an exquisite duet for two women. Shani Licht and Hagar Shachal dance an intimate, mirroring sequence with a mere six inches of personal space between them. Suddenly, face-to-face, their heads peck out a conversation; then, like courting birds, they *bourrée* on tip-toe switching positions in their private partner dance. The duet completely captured a statement Wertheim made to me during our conversation the following day, "Identity is relational. We define ourselves through the other – so let's really *see* the other."

In a curious interaction, a man and a woman face each other at a distance, slapping themselves and gesticulating aggressively. On closer inspection, they are actually performing gestures of beckoning, but the emotional overlay is not at all inviting. The woman runs across, violently jumps into the man's arms to connect, slowly melts down to the floor, and rolls away only to repeat this desperate ritual with another who is signaling the same bizarre invitation. This startling interplay is repeated multiple times. Later, reprised with greater urgency in a larger group – a row of men on one side of the stage opposite a row of

women on the other side – they slap their bodies, run across, and hurl themselves into one another's arms only to slip away and retry.

In the meantime, two more parallel rows of earth have been laid down. But this neat orderliness is about to change. The group of body-slapping dancers spreads out among the rows of dirt – slicing through it with circling steps, jumps, and descending spirals that roll and swivel over the floor. Suddenly everyone is pouring out large buckets of dirt in a free-for-all – running through the space and joyously creating a total merging of bodies, earth, and motion.

The strong rhythms and earthy melodies of the accompanying Arabic music inspire a round of earth-stomping and foot-slapping dance patterns with yips and hollers as the dancers coalesce to move in unison as a connected group. They form a line with their backs to the audience and arms linked at the shoulders. The dancers break away with energetic crawling, rolling, slithering, and jumping – all seemingly designed to spread the earth about the stage. It flies through the air coating the dancers' sweat-drenched skin, hair, and handsome brown slacks and beige, button-down shirts designed by Sasson Kedem. At this point a magical aspect of the dance reveals itself – the dancers' movements leave ever-changing patterns on the earth-covered floor like a cipher, a map, or maybe a love poem.

Receding to the sidelines, the dancers sit on two opposing, sleek, white benches – part of the stage design by Roy Vatury – from where they observe the action while not dancing. Korina Fraiman and Daniel Costa come together for a duet. Their bodies connect and reconnect in different ways – always with one body part entwined around the partner and another body part extended freely in space. They take turns: she tenderly lifts him, he lifts her, and they do a little ballroom dance step.

Then, in a complete merging of bodies (and, presumably, souls), they embrace and commence a sustained spinning sequence together as one. Counterbalancing in this embrace, Costa keeps Fraiman's legs suspended off the

floor in a swirl of sublime union. Maintaining a trance-like spin, he lowers her so that her feet barely graze the floor. Her feet trace and leave the universal design of no beginning and no end – a perfect circle.

Etai Peri, with his ultra-long arms and hands, performs a mesmerizing solo. His limbs extend outward so that he seems to reach out and touch the entire universe. From his encompassing movements, all the other dancers emerge to stand in fixed places on the floor and float their arms out to the sides and gracefully pump their arms and legs down and up. The dreamy music heightens the image of soaring birds.

One male dancer rolls through the dirt from dancer to dancer desperately trying to connect with each one – anyone. He clutches at one dancer's feet and appears to kiss them, rolls away and hugs another, and then stands and partners another dancer. He finally returns to the floor and remains huddled and sitting alone, in contrast to the others, who continue their birdlike flight to transcendence.

Wertheim drew the title for the piece from a tractate recited on *Yom Kippur* (The Day of Atonement) describing the ancient sacrificial rituals that were performed at the temple in Jerusalem (until 70 C.E.). Raised in an observant Jewish family, Wertheim had a strong recollection of this annual recitation on the holiest day of the Jewish calendar: "And thus would he count: one, one and one, one and two, one and three." The initial words, although not in the context of the recitation, suggest that completeness is attained through union.

Jewish thinkers have long pondered the human condition and the deep-seated yearning for true unity with the entire world and with God. The twentieth-century Jewish philosopher Martin Buber (1878-1965) authored his renowned book *I and Thou*, in which he presented his ideas that there are two ways of engaging with the world: in one mode we treat people as "It" – objects or things to be used; in the other mode we actually have an encounter and relate to another as the divine "Thou."

Buber was also fascinated with Hasidism, a Jewish spiritual revival movement that spread through Eastern Europe during the eighteenth century. This mystical community espoused that community is the embodiment of the individual's relationship to God. Through participation in community the mundane becomes sacred. Understanding this philosophy helps to explain the essence of the Vertigo Dance Company and this groundbreaking dance work. Vertigo is not just a dance company; it is a moment-by-moment encounter with life.

In an interview following their opening night performance, Wertheim and Sha'al explained how they both came late to dance training at age twenty-one after completing their mandatory army service. Although Wertheim did take dance lessons as a young child, she did not pursue dance again until much later because she believed it could hold no future for her due to her family's Orthodox religious observance. Sha'al, meanwhile, toured internationally with a performing Israeli folk dance troupe during high school.

When asked how they met, Sha'al reminisced, "We met working with a dance company in Jerusalem. We were just beginners and the choreographer showed us a complicated move. We looked at each other and our eyes said, 'I will jump. Will you catch me?' And the rest is history! The first duet we created was a ten-minute piece called *Vertigo*. It came from my personal experience serving as a pilot in the Israeli Air Force – about airplanes, dizziness, and loss of control. Suddenly we shifted from flying and pilots to a relationship."

Wertheim interjected, "Even today this is our relationship." Sha'al continued, "When I met Noa, I felt this [pause] vertigo again." "He means danger," Wertheim piped in jokingly. Without acknowledging the loving jab, Sha'al continued, "So we took Vertigo as the company's name and as our concept for life."

The two started the company in 1992 in Jerusalem. Wertheim preferred Jerusalem and its quiet arts scene as opposed to the bustle of Tel Aviv. "We began working in the studio to-

gether doing contact improv, thinking we were inventing something. Then I saw my first modern dance performance at age twenty-three and realized that this thing [modern dance] already existed!" she laughed.

The company originally worked out of their headquarters in Jerusalem. However when Wertheim and Sha'al started a family (they have three sons), they confronted issues of how to balance family life with a hectic touring schedule. "We decided to look for a rural community where we could raise our family, grow our food, and create a laboratory – a hub for artists," said Sha'al.

They came upon the solution that the early founders of the state of Israel pioneered to meet the demands of forming a new nation – the kibbutz (a rural collective based on collective labor, childcare, dining, administration, and pooled earnings). Twelve years ago the couple, along with Wertheim's three sisters, their husbands, and all of their children (Sha'al calls them "the tribe"), moved to Kibbutz Netiv Halamed-Heh. The kibbutz, founded in 1949, is located between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv in the Valley of Elah – where David fought Goliath in Biblical times.

They converted the deserted kibbutz chicken coops into large, windowed dance studios made from adobe. The company dancers, however, mostly live in Tel Aviv as they are much younger and desire a more active social scene. They commute to the Vertigo studios in Jerusalem or at the kibbutz for daily rehearsals.

The company trains in the "Vertigo language," which combines contact improvisation, martial arts (specifically Tai Chi and Qi Gong), release technique, and classical ballet. Wertheim's movement method originates from sensing the body's weight and how it connects to space. "I don't do moves that are not connected to weight and gravity," stated Wertheim resolutely. She continued, "I am interested in generating movement from the inside. The movement we do is grounded – it's not decorated. [She stands up from the restaurant table to demonstrate.] It's not about shapes or architecture. And it must be ex-

pressive of something. It must have meaning."

In 2007, within Kibbutz Netiv Halamed-Heh, Wertheim and Sha'al initiated the Vertigo Eco-Art Village – an intentional community and model for sustainable living, social involvement, and creative arts. "We were interested in finding a connection between the creative arts and practical ecology. So we hired environmental design experts," explained Sha'al. "We now have fifty employees in the eco-village!" Wertheim chimed in with pride tinged with disbelief.

I am curious as to why an established kibbutz would be so receptive to the ideas of a few newcomers. Sha'al reminded me, "The kibbutz model of communal living has been declining since the 1980s due to economic and ideological changes. The kibbutzim [plural] have been looking for ways to revitalize themselves. Many have privatized. Most of the members work outside the kibbutz." Wertheim interjected, "The truth is they were very happy that nice people came, paid rent, and invested capital to renovate the facilities." "And we are offering a new vision – a new way to explore life," added Sha'al.

Visionary indeed! Advocating that all people can benefit from the practice of dance, the Vertigo Eco-Art Village hosts comprehensive integrated dance activities for able and disabled participants. They hold international workshops and master classes. As an educational center drawing both Israeli and foreign visitors, the eco-village offers tours introducing features of their eco-lifestyle that include water recycling, rainwater harvesting, natural building materials (like adobe), alternative energy, and organic-waste recycling and composting.

When I broached the concept of dancing on a stage full of dirt, Sha'al clarified, "It is not just dirt. The peat moss, or earth, that we dance upon in this piece is the rich, organic material that we make through composting. It is a basic element of life in our village."

Recalling the use of earth in the dance as it was first laid out – in separate, distinct rows and later spread about completely with all

boundaries obliterated – it becomes clear that Wertheim uses it as a metaphor for the tension between the ego’s sense of separate self and the human desire for connectedness.

She informs me, “In Hebrew, the words for ‘oneness’ and ‘togetherness’ come from the same root.” And I remind Wertheim that, in Hebrew, the words for “earth,” “man,” and “humanity” are derived from the same root. Her eyes twinkle acknowledgment as she adds, “And so is the word for ‘blood.’ So you see why I am so attracted to earth. The earth and we are part of nature. We come from the earth; we return to the earth. The earth is the essence of the human experience.”

Baryshnikov has invited Vertigo to return with another Wertheim creation. She recalls that Baryshnikov came to the studio to greet the company and observe the rehearsal. He remarked to her, “How is it that Israelis are making so much strong, compelling art?” Wertheim responded with her characteristic effervescence, “We have what to talk about, don’t you think?”

New York

Susanna Sloat

In mixed all Taylor programs at its second Lincoln Center season in March 2013, the Paul Taylor Dance Company performed all six dances that Taylor had made to J. S. Bach. In June 2019 they danced these six again at Manhattan School of Music as part of a Bach Festival produced by the Orchestra of St. Luke’s, conducted by Donald York, the Taylor company’s music director. Because much had changed in the interval, they added two premieres to Bach by Pam Tanowitz and by Margie Gillis.

Taylor announced in 2014 that henceforth Lincoln Center seasons would be by the Paul Taylor American Modern Dance, adding a modern dance component to the arts center. Live music would return. Other choreographers’ classic dances, often danced by other companies, would join Taylor’s. And new pieces by others would be commissioned for the Taylor dancers. In 2015 this began, with

Orchestra of St. Luke’s providing vibrant live music. Each March since then, for four seasons, old and new choreographies joined with Taylor’s. In 2018 the company said the next season at Lincoln Center would not be in March 2019, but in November.

In the spring of 2018 Taylor chose one of his dancers, Michael Novak, to be the next artistic director of the company. Thus Paul Taylor died in August, 2018, aged 88, with a successor in place. And thanks to Orchestra of St. Luke’s, the June 2019 New York season offered thirteen concerts of three different bills, with some of Taylor’s greatest works and the novelty of two new pieces, months before the company’s regular Lincoln Center season.

In this time of transition Novak seems devoted to both the Taylor repertory and new possibilities, but the company is metamorphosing. By the end of 2019 six Taylor veterans, Michael Trusnovec, Laura Halzack, Michelle Fleet, Parisa Khobdeh, Jamie Rae Walker, and Sean Mahoney, most over 40, will have retired. They were still in fine form in June (Fleet and Khobdeh did not dance) and much appreciated, but so were three relatively new dancers, Kristin Draucker, Lee Duveneck, and Alex Clayton, who have taken their places. Three even newer dancers, Devon Louis, John Harnage, and Maria Ambrose seemed to fit right in. Veterans Robert Kleinendorst, Eran Bugge, Michael Apuzzo, Heather McGinley, George Smallwood, Christina Lynch Markham, and Madelyn Ho, M.D., steeped in Taylor style and taking on new roles, were invaluable.

With its bright colors and moments of tenderness amid tensions and acrobatic angularities, the rarely performed early piece *Junction* (from 1961, last seen in 2013) led off the Bach season. To solo cello, it is abstract, but varied. Set to Bach’s Violin Concerto in A Minor and Oboe Sonata in G Minor, Pam Tanowitz’s new *all at once* for seventeen dancers followed *Junction*.

All at once started off well, with quick Taylorian steps, leaps, and turns amid Tanowitz moves and strategies that stem more from