

The World is going Gaga

A comparative analysis of Israeli choreographers and their successes in the world of contemporary dance



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1. Abstract

The world we live in today finds itself in a period of rapid change, development and innovation. As technology advances, knowledge and information become more accessible and possibilities to connect with others around the world become more frequent. Dance, being a lesser affected art-form to this change, has also developed and found new ways to advance in skill, performance and publication; more styles are developing, more choreographers are appearing, more choreographic competitions and more projects are being developed, choreographers are breaking boundaries between art forms and most importantly, we are still finding a great desire to perform and watch this concrete art form. Eye-catching and inspiring works on stages, sites and on camera are flying through the contemporary dance world, each one designing and developing powerful and memorable movement language and choreography.

Contemporary dance found its very beginnings in classical ballet and modern dance, which started emerging in the early 1900s. Contemporary dance is proud to hold hundreds of styles and backgrounds, spanning from classical ballet to hip-hop to martial arts. This paper introduces a specific form of contemporary dance emerging from Israel. Over many decades, the Israeli dance scene has continuously grown and become a mecca for contemporary dance. This paper is written with the intention of exploring what lies beneath the success of this hub for contemporary dance. Through looking at the specialities of four Israeli choreographers it aims to identify their common trends and examines how these have popularized the contemporary dance scene and elevated its place in the non-dance community.

2. Motivation and Inspiration

My first exposure to the Israeli dance scene came when I watched *Zürich Ballet* perform the famous 'Echad Mi Yodea' by choreographer Ohad Naharin in 2016. I was blown away by the sheer intensity of movement, music, and imagery I was witnessing on stage. The dancers threw themselves on and off chairs and chanted the Jewish folk song. I was transfixed by Naharin's creation, which managed to simulate a multitude of emotions, memories and images all at the same time.

In 2017 and 2018 I had the pleasure of watching the *Bachelor Contemporary Dance* students of the *Zürcher Hochschule der Künste* perform choreographies by Israeli choreographers Barak Marshall and Itzik Galili. These pieces, though completely different, produced the same depth of movement and evoked the same ecstatic energy in the room.

More interest was sparked as I explored works by Israeli choreographer Sharon Eyal, whose piece 'Killer Pig' caught my eye and became an inspiration for a solo I created in 2019. In 2019 I also had the great pleasure of being part of a creation by Israeli choreographer Nadav Zelner. Once again I experienced, first-hand this time, an intensity of movement I hadn't yet discovered in choreography or in myself. Through experiencing this imperative and immaculate use of subtext in each movement I became aware of how important subtext is to me in order to connect with a movement and understand it fully.

These experiences continued when I had the opportunity to take part in a workshop on the famous Israeli anti-technique and training form '*Gaga*'. I recently had the pleasure of working with another Israeli choreographer, Ella Rothschild, on a piece she created with *Tanz Luzerner Theater*, each rehearsal preceded by her inspirational *Gaga* training. Once again I found an easy connection to her style; it was something I could grasp, understand and explore.

Further opportunities to dive into this specific world of dance have presented themselves through various auditions I have been to; opportunities to learn repertory from Israeli choreographers such as Hofesh Shechter, Ohad Naharin, Sharon Eyal and Eyal Dadon were treasured, and I was compelled to find out why I was attracted to them all to such an extent.

3. Acknowledgements

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Thank you to my family for supporting me in all aspects of this career I am venturing into, through watching my choreographies and multiple performances, reading my research papers and being my most honest and valued critics.

4. Introduction

4.1 Scope

In this paper I will look at the different aspects of four well-known and up-and-coming Israeli choreographers and the different underlying bases of the Israeli dance scene to gain a greater understanding in their success in capturing the world with their artistry. I am intrigued by what aspects have led to Israel becoming one of the international meccas for contemporary dance and how this has spread into a much wider community around the world.

4.2 Thesis question: What are the characteristics of Israeli choreographers that drive their success?

5. Theory

5.1 A brief history of dance in Israel

Israel holds a strong culture in various dance forms. Contemporary dance, alongside classical ballet, Israeli folk dance and flamenco, is one of the most popular. Contemporary dance in Israel finds its roots in the early to mid- 20th century, when Gertrud Kraus (pioneer of modern dance in Israel) formed the Modern Dance Theatre and subsequently the Israel Ballet Theatre in 1950. Since then, contemporary dance has continued to grow and today, Israel is home to several individual, internationally acclaimed companies: *The Batsheva Dance Company*, *The Inbal Dance Company*, *Kibbutz Contemporary Dance Company*, *Vertigo Dance Company*, *The Bat-Dor Company* and the *Inbal Pinto and the Avshalom Pollak Dance Company*. This paper does not focus on the companies themselves but rather the artistry found originating from within them, analysing how specific individuals have developed into such fashionable and well-respected choreographers and how the Israeli dance scene has been supported by and supported this development.

5.2 Ohad Naharin, Gaga and the Batsheva Dance Company

Perhaps the most famous of the companies mentioned above is the *Batsheva Dance Company*. The *Batsheva Dance Company* was originally formed in 1964 by Martha Graham (major pioneer of modern dance in the 20th century) and Baroness Batsheva de Rothschild (philanthropist and dance patron, funding a large portion of the company). In its early years the company assumed a Graham-based form of training and choreography. After some decades of the company successfully evolving, Baroness Batsheva removed her funding from the company. As a result, the *Batsheva Dance Company* was no longer able to invite overseas choreographers and started to employ local Israeli choreographers. The Baroness diverted her financial investments into a new modern dance company, the *Bat-Dor Company*. This led to healthy competition and the promotion of contemporary dance in Israel.

In 1990, Ohad Naharin was appointed director of the Batsheva Dance Company. Naharin was born and raised in Tel Aviv and started dancing at the late age of 22. His dancing quickly took him across the Atlantic to New York, where he joined *The Martha Graham Dance Company*, *The Julliard School* and the *School of American Ballet*.



FIGURE 2: OHAD NAHARIN, OPERA DE PARIS

The *Batsheva Dance Company* saw major change with Naharin as director; he opened a young company '*Batsheva – The Young Ensemble*', introduced higher pay, more work and a new flood of both Israeli and foreign choreographers. Ohad Naharin is now a leading figure in contemporary dance, persistently creating masterpieces of choreography that are travelling around the world to some prestigious companies and theatres.

Alongside choreographing and directing the company, Naharin started to develop his own movement language, hoping to provide a new framework of training to dancers: one that would help to avoid frequent injuries, develop higher levels of body awareness and strengthen the dancers. So-called ‘Gaga’ brought the company to exquisite levels of body-usage, mental strength and prominence. The company now consists of 34 dancers and takes residence at the *Suzanne Dellal Center* in Tel Aviv. The Batsheva repertory is constantly growing, mostly consisting of new creations by Ohad Naharin and performances created by the company dancers themselves. Naharin stepped down from his role of director in 2018 and is now house choreographer. The company is currently directed by Gili Navot, who prior to this was a company dancer for nine years, a choreographer and Gaga-teacher.



FIGURE 3: WACHHOLDER

5.3 A brief background on four Israeli choreographers



FIGURE 4: SHARON EYAL ,
TANZ KÖLN

Sharon Eyal is one of today’s most famous contemporary dance choreographers. Eyal was born and raised in Israel. Her talents quickly took her to the *Batsheva Dance Company*, where she danced for 18 years as well as becoming the associate artistic director and house choreographer for seven years. Ten years ago, Sharon Eyal began choreographing for other companies around the world and in 2013, launched her own company ‘*L-E-V*’ with Gai Bahar, her long-term collaborator. The company repertory currently consists of seven creations, performed by her company and other companies around the world, both classical and contemporary. Each piece has its own live music created by musician and DJ, Ori Lichtik. *L-E-V* has also created pieces for other companies such as *Hubbard Street Dance Chicago*, *Nederlans Dans Theater*, *Rambert*, *Batsheva* and *Goeteborgsoperans Danskompani*.

Sharon Eyal has a very particular dance style. The first image that comes to mind is leotards, long socks and repetitive, almost balletic, yet animalistic movements. This ballet characteristic is supported by the use of ‘demi-pointe’ in her pieces, but unlike classical ballet, this stance is parallel and used for walking, standing, or stomping. She will often combine this with an unusual but precise coordination in the upper body.

She focuses on the quality of different movements, the athleticism of the dancers and the primal-like instinct of the human body and the brain. Her fashionable, perhaps feminine, trance-like movements will often develop their way through the piece as details are added, directions changed and new levels of complex coordination are created. Her infectious movement patterns coincide with compelling bass-led music, dragging the audience into what may feel like a club or party.

“The system, the mathematics of it and the graphic of ballet attracted me a lot, always”. (Sharon Eyal) This is her approach to dance — to mix it all up together, pick out what she likes, and distil it into some of the most innovative contemporary dance seen today. So when I ask about her influences and she refers to a “primitive” thread running through “animals, tribes... happiness, everything.” (ROBBIE SMITH, 2019)



FIGURE 5: HOFESH SHECHTER,
HOFESH SHECHTER COMPANY

Hofesh Shechter OBE is another Israeli born choreographer who has rapidly risen in the evolving world of contemporary dance. Shechter, like Eyal, joined the *Batsheva Dance Company* and danced there for three years before leaving to work with other, amongst them Israeli, choreographers. Soon after, he began creating his own work, starting off with a commission by the *Place Prize* in London in 2004.

He founded the *Hofesh Shechter Company* in 2008. Most of his work was originally created for his own company but he has also created pieces for other companies like the *Batsheva Ensemble*, *Nederlands Dans Theater* and *The Royal Ballet*. Like Eyal, Shechter's pieces have taken the

world by storm and are infectiously spreading to more companies and more venues.

Hofesh Shechter is famous for his grounded, folk-like style. His famous curved lower-back stance supports flowing, circular movement and the aim to continuously recycle energy. His dancers often talk about movements never fully leaving the body but hitting the edge of an imaginary sphere around them and bouncing back again to evolve into the next. Shechter lets his hands be shaped by this same feeling, which reinforces whole-body movement and energy. The dancers will let the circular movement spiral them down to the floor and back up onto their feet multiple times throughout sections of movement, allowing the flow to find no limitation. Shechter combines his passion for dance and his love for music in his choreographies, being the creator of both elements. His combination of compelling, percussive music and a slung-back movement style may seem a little dark and heavy at a glance, but ultimately he is successful in conveying humorous images and producing a constant flow of compelling, irresistible movement.

“(...) Shechter II's eight dancers as jesters and fools in a disquieting, atmospheric circus. A ringmaster presides over the action, which is full of Shechter-isms: the bouncy, folkloric stomping, the hunched shoulders, the primal-looking response to a heavy beat. The choreographer also composed the percussive score, a throwback to his Israeli folk influences.” (UNKNOWN AUTHOR from THE FINANCIAL TIMES, 2018)



FIGURE 6: ELLA ROTHSCHILD,
WRIGHT

A younger, up-and-coming Israeli choreographer included in this paper is Ella Rothschild. Ella Rothschild was born in Israel in 1984. She danced with the *Batsheva Dance Company*, with the *Inbal Pinto and Avshalom Pollak Dance Company*, and is currently still dancing for famous (Canadian) choreographer Crystal Pite and her company '*Kidd Pivot*'. Rothschild is also a Gaga-teacher and holds residencies around the world to develop her own creations. Ella Rothschild collaborates with different musicians, who sometimes play live music for her performances.

She started choreographing in 2010, collaborating with people from varied art disciplines. She has won many awards over recent years and has created works for companies such as *Balletto Teatro di Torino Dance Company*, *Cia Eliane Fetzner de Danca Contemporanea* (Curitiba, Brazil) and most recently for *Tanz Luzerner Theater*.

Ella Rothschild is as a multi-talented and multi-faceted choreographer. Her choreographies involve an array of art forms ranging from acting to singing, poetry, architecture and movement. Her movement language is clear and holds strong imagery and varied qualities, which will often erratically change from step to step. Ella Rothschild focuses on timing within the dancers' actions and their connection to the music and rhythm. Rothschild explores the behavior of human beings and their relationships, resulting in humorous scenes like family dinners or discussions between couples.

"The piece she is currently developing interrogates the space between the physical world and the subconscious mind, and manifests as individual and collective characters gathering around the multi-sensory site of a dinner table." (MELISSA LEVIN, 2019)

The last Israeli choreographer included in this paper is 28-year old Nadav Zelner. Zelner graduated from the *Thelma Yellin High School of the Arts* in Tel Aviv in 2010 and continued on to join the *Kibbutz Contemporary Dance Company*. He was also



FIGURE 7: NADAV ZELNER,
BROECKE

part of projects with the *Batsheva Dance Company* and *Spellbound Dance Company* in Rome. He stayed in the *Kibbutz Contemporary Dance Company* for just one year before deciding to become a choreographer. His first works consisted of musicals, music videos and numerous personal projects. As his popularity grew, he began to create choreographies for dance companies and schools such as *Gauthier Dance Company*, *Stadtheater Bremerhaven*, *Theater Augsburg* and most lately for the *Batsheva Ensemble*, *Zürich Arts University* and the *Maslool Professional Dance Program* in Tel Aviv.

Nadav Zelner's work has strong similarities with that of Ella Rothschild. Each movement he produces is a relatable feeling or an image. This sensation will explode and result in humorous images such as an aged ballerina, or a gangster in the midst of biting into a sour lemon. Each of these movements rapidly follows the next, as transitions between them seem to disappear. These instantaneous, high-speed movements are distributed over complicated counts, finding intriguing rhythms within the rhythm of the music. As each movement strings on after the next, he fabricates an effect of wild but organized, almost schizophrenic movement sequences; a weird, imaginative world on stage is produced.



FIGURE 8: WOODSTOCK, BOCIANI

"The movements are often close to the ground, then feet and hands stomp on, hips circle loosely, faces curl up like masks. In addition, the young choreographer, who has previously made a name for himself mainly through short video clips, shows flourishes of Indian temple dancers, pulsating street dance, kitschy ballet-themes, - appropriately musically colored." (ANDREA KACHELRIESS, Nadav Zelner's 'Bullshit', 2018, translated by Phoebe Jewitt, 02.02.2020)

5.4 An introduction to Gaga movement language

Gaga is perhaps most simply understood as 'listening to your body'. Gaga's main aim is to raise awareness of the body, letting the body direct movement, discover new possibilities and to find pleasure in these spaces.

A Gaga training takes no fixed structure. The lack of mirrors and viewers in a Gaga class enables the dancers to fully embody movements and visualize them from within the body, whilst being certain to keep their eyes open in order to connect with other dancers and the space they find themselves in. The dancers train barefoot and are led through a one to one and a half hour class based on improvisation, often without music. The dancers follow a constant flow of instructions from their teacher, which come in the form of metaphors and images, such as 'floating', 'falling upwards' or 'moving the spine like seaweed'. These metaphors have become so important that Gaga has developed its own evolving language to describe them. Words such as '*lena*' (the space between your navel and groin) and '*mika*' ('pulling bones out of soft flesh') help the dancers visualize particular parts of their body and discover ways to experience movement within them.

"If you look at an animal, how they move, shifting their weight, there is a letting go," Naharin explains. "To be explosive and quick, you must let go, you must collapse." (OHAD NAHARIN, 2015, cited by DELLA SUBIN, 2015)

Vital images recur in Gaga movement: 'to move through honey', 'to find your silly feet', 'to find your inner ballerina', 'to grab the flesh', 'to pull the bones', 'to find that groove'. These images help the dancers find qualities of movement in the body, such as the physical difference between moving the bones or the muscles. In Gaga, dancers aim to find these qualities initiating in different areas of the body, often by using their weight to push into the floor and by letting this impulse flow into the pelvis to be redirected into the spine, chest, limbs and head. This develops clarity of movement

and a solid awareness of the body. In Gaga, dancers are encouraged to find rhythm in their bodies through this awareness, aiming to differentiate in speed and intensity to create different movement textures. The lack of music can be a great help here. Dancers are also specifically reminded to not let their bodies be defined by gravity. They aim to use the speed of gravity to fall into movement – not down, like gravity, but to let movements fall into each other in every direction: up and to all sides. This is how Gaga enables movements to flow without a detectable difference between movement and transition, developing bodies that appear to be moved by internal and external forces rather than merely bodies moving.



“Such terms are embraced as part of the philosophy behind Gaga; for instance, not being defined by gravity has both the literal meaning of not letting your body feel weighed down, and also the figurative meaning of not letting bad habits or thoughts weigh down your mind.” (HARVARD GAZETTE, 2019)

FIGURE 9: A GAGA CLASS, GAGA PEOPLE

Although each class will vary from the next, recurrent exercises to help the dancers find these movements will return frequently. Common elements include finding curves of the spine and the pelvis, floating with the arms, deep ‘grand-pliés’, long ‘tendues’ and twists. A teacher will often signal the intensity of a movement by giving the percentage of effort, where 5% would represent minimal visible movement and 100% maximum movement. When a movement is at its maximum, the dancers will count together, from ten down to one. This helps to maintain movement at a vigorous and somewhat uncomfortable pace, whilst the inclusion of the voice opens the throat, adding yet another layer to the loosening of the body. Gaga in the end, aims for loose, flowing movement and the availability to switch between different, powerful energies.

6. Research

6.1 Movement Intention

Movement intention could be understood as the reason for a movement as well as the goal behind it. Vital in contemporary dance, movement intention serves the choreographers and dancers with inspiration and purpose for their movement and will aid them in finding certain sensations in their bodies. As we find in Gaga exercises, intention in choreography can be understood in different ways, such as an idea, an image, or a feeling.

Let us now take a look at what lies behind the varied intentions of the Israeli choreographers mentioned above, and how this can transfer to recurring themes in their choreographies.

Our first example, Sharon Eyal, focuses on different images and feelings. Each image she uses will be clear, detailed, and will originate from inside the body. A sequence of

sensation-based movements will evolve, becoming animalistic and repetitive. These varied images will then be combined, either by the dancers performing the different movements simultaneously or by the dancers executing each movement together in a consecutive sequence. The audience and dancers thus find themselves in a paradox: we recognize each singular portrayal but our understanding for the whole image fades as they combine.

“She told me (...) she wanted me to be this big guy shaking but she had this really clear image of sweat dropping from my chin and that was a really, clear image to me (that was relatable)”. (JOHN WANNEHAG, as stated in SHARON EYAL AND THE BALLET OF THE BEATS, 2018)



FIGURE 10: SOUL CHAIN, MORELL

Our next example, Hofesh Shechter, will mostly connect to energy and action in his movement, relying on how the movement feels. His circular style evolves from sensations inside a loose body, enabling the movement to flow and be redirected into the next.

“For me it is important that a dancer understands how a movement feels, from the inside. For this, many times I find it useful to use imagery from ‘life’ - simple actions or emotions that the dancer can draw on from their lives in order to ‘fill’ the movement...” (HOFESH SHECHTER, 2018)

In Ella Rothschild’s work, movement origin and intention are also clear. During her creations with her dancers, Ella Rothschild will verbally express each movement with an image, such as the feeling of someone punching you in the stomach, or the urgency to catch a glass just before it lands and breaks on the floor. *“We have to find it”*, she will repeatedly say to the dancers.



FIGURE 11: DEMONS, NATAN

Nadav Zelner works in a very similar way, also giving an image or an idea for each movement. On top of this he will incorporate more detail in the form of facial expression, allowing the combination to strengthen his imagery. His movement will typically take energy from the floor up, transferring to his pelvis or sternum and exploding into his limbs.

6.2 Choreographic Constellations

We find recurring constellations in all of these choreographer’s works. We find that group formations play a big role, mostly appearing in the form of tight clumps of dancers moving together. We will frequently see the group scatter into singular

dancers or smaller clusters but also notice that the group will keep reassembling throughout the piece.

When the dancers move together with the same rhythm, the same movement and the same intention we become aware of a specifically intense atmosphere developing. Some examples: in Shechter's *'Political Mother'* the group will run in a circle throwing their arms up, in Sharon Eyal's *'Killer Pig'*, the dancers will stand in lines, perfectly synchronising the shifting of their shoulders backwards and forwards. In Zelner's *'Bullshit'* the massive gathering stands together and moves as one.

"Repetitive movements fill the stage, highlighted by the sudden shifts in Lee Curran's lighting that work like jump cuts in a movie, spotlighting a group crouched low shuffling forward, or a couple grappling with each other, or a lonely individual reaching for the sky." (SARAH CROMPTON, Hofesh Shechter *'Grand Finale'* 2019)

6.3 Movement Development

Another similarity we find in these choreographer's pieces is repetition. We will find that movements repeat or recur in successive episodes throughout the piece. These repetitions of movement will often appear with a slight development. For example, in Sharon Eyal's choreographies we will frequently notice dancers executing the same stomping movement in their legs, but discover that each dancer will generate a slightly different arm movement. In Schechter's work we are dragged in and out of the recurring movement patterns and themes executed by the group of dancers.



FIGURE 12: LOVE CHAPTER 2, LE CORRE

"The dancers do not stop their precision work of synchronized movements even once during the 50 minute staging. They are a continuously on-going, smoothly working machinery of continuously marching and moving dancers." (NINA BAYNE, ABOUT SHARON EYAL'S LOVE CHAPTER 2, 2020)

These repetitive movements will also frequently develop in timing or in rhythm, becoming faster, more intense or by developing into a canon.

In Ella Rothschild's most recent piece, *'I am who I am who I am'* for *Tanz Luzerner Theater*, the group of dancers rhythmically shifts from one foot to the other in a waltz-like stomp, gesturing identical movements in their upper bodies. The movement increases as different gestures become more intense and more frequent. Meanwhile, two dancers lie on the floor and another sits at a table, unmoved by this happening.

Comparably, in Zelner's *'Woodstock'*, the dancers shrug their shoulders and tap their feet in unison as they gesture different signs with their hands, gradually changing in rhythm and intensity. One dancer falls out of the group onto the floor and crawls away at a painfully slow pace.



FIGURE 13: WOODSTOCK, BOCIANI

“Shechter’s choreography seduces and bewitches us, not so much lulling as hypnotising the audience with its flow and rhythm. Most of the movement originates in the torso, the feet firm and the heads bent low; the effect is of something bullish and determined driving these hordes, something that might not lead them in safety. But then individual accents begin to assert themselves, people emerge from the blob of solidarity.” (TIM BYRNE, Hofesh Shechter’s ‘Grand Finale’, 2019)

6.4 Music, Rhythm and Musicality

Repetition, groove and rhythm are a common denominator in the music used by these four choreographers.

Schechter supports his grounded, tribal-like style with powerful percussion arrangements. He often combines these with cultural, often middle-eastern melodies, but will also dip into snippets of well-known works or songs, ranging from Bach to Joni Mitchell. His movements will progress with the music, each complementing the other in intensity and emotion.

“The music is extraordinary, the deep bass of the percussion thumping its way into the bodies of the audience as much as the dancers. It’s loud and insistent but also thrillingly effective, even when it takes an abrupt turn into the famous waltz from The Merry Widow.” (TIM BYRNE, Hofesh Shechter’s ‘Grand Finale’, 2019)

Eyal, whose music is created by her collaborator, DJ Ori Lichtik, finds similarly intriguing patterns. Lichtik’s trance-like, repetitive and groovy beats create a club-like, hypnotic atmosphere. Each movement will closely correspond to the rhythm of the music but will aim to find less obvious rhythms than the strong beat we easily hear.

“Eyal’s choreography is characterised by extreme technical precision and subtle, stringent musicality. As her choreography melds with Lichtik’s reverberant beats, we are led into an imaginative landscape of haunting vastness.” (LUKE JENNINGS, 2018)

Ella Rothschild also creates her own music with the help of different collaborators. During the creation process with Ella Rothschild in *Tanz Luzerner Theater* for ‘I am who I am who I am’, we experienced hours in the studio with one track on repeat. It was a low, continuous rhythm with a subtle melody. Here and there, Rothschild attached movements to exact rhythms in the music, but would often let it run alongside the different occurrences on stage, creating an atmosphere in the



FIGURE 14: POSTDATED CHECKS, ELLA ROTHSCHILD, DAGON

room that inevitably became a crucial feature in the piece.

“Horns, strings, and a fast-beating drum comprise the soundtrack. The two women make big, determined gestures. Slow and then fast. In unison and then isolated. They appear to be exorcising demons from their bodies or letting themselves be occupied completely. The music shifts and becomes a little more melodic though still with a pulsing beat.” (MELISSA LEVIN, about Ella Rothschild’s ‘Postdated Checks’, 2019)

In his piece ‘Woodstock’, created for the *Zürcher Hochschule der Künste*, Nadav Zelner used a four-minute Flamenco track on repeat. He played this piece during every rehearsal, four hours a day for four weeks. Although somewhat repetitive and unsurprising, this insistent music became part of our bodies and I was finding that my body was discovering new rhythms subconsciously. Zelner aimed to find an interesting rhythm in each movement, corrupting and contorting the strict 12-beat ‘Bulerias’ rhythm of the music.

6.5 Creative process

A fascinating part of these creations is how the choreographers convey their idea to the dancers. How do they get them to do what they want without just telling them – and why don’t they tell them?

These choreographers use strict boundaries by representing a strong and defined style. Although the choreographers define clear structures and images, the dancers are encouraged to find freedom to develop a sensation or an image within them.

“Layer one comes from her but layer two comes because she’s working with the people in the studio. If others were in the studio it would be a different piece.”
(DANCER FROM TANZ MAINZ, 2018, as stated in SHARON EYAL AND THE BALLET OF THE BEATS, 2018)



FIGURE 15: ‘CLOWNS’, HOFESH SHECHTER, MCDONALD

After giving a clear sensation and image of what they want, the choreographers will analyze the dancer’s execution and adapt the movement to the character of that person. Through allowing the dancer to develop and interpret movement, the choreographer can form individual, abstract characters without specifying a particular role (as we may see in classical ballets for example). With this, all elements of the group will appear with slight disparity, and despite many movements being repetitive or similar, will remain interesting.

“She (Ella Rothschild) comes and stands right by you, looks you up and down in silence, waits a little and then tells you what to do.” (DANCER FROM TANZ LUZERNER THEATER, 2019)

“And that’s the beauty of it...for me it’s boring to see my choreography, I like to see the soul and that’s above what I did.” (SHARON EYAL, 2018, as stated in SHARON EYAL AND THE BALLET OF THE BEATS, 2018)

In Shechter’s work ‘*Clowns*’, a film created in 2018, we find single dancers come together and share the same movement, but little by little, we discover that each one has found their own personality and expression within it and is executing it slightly differently, eventually enabling the audience to create their own imaginative story.

“Though the eight dancers show strong personalities, they’re not individualised as characters. These murders have no personal motive. In works such as Political Mother, Shechter dug into ideas of authoritarianism and obedience, but the clowns of Show aren’t inspired by dictators or struggling with fear. They’re simply performing a pattern of refined violence.” (ZOE ANDERSON, 2018)

During the process for ‘*Woodstock*’, Nadav Zelner would propose a movement and repeat it over and over again. If he felt that a movement didn’t work with the dancers, he would bravely cut it and replace with a new image, feeling or intention to fill that hole - he would exchange a joker style jump for a flamenco step with ease.

6.6 Costumes

When we analyze the use of costumes, we find both similarities and differences between the choreographers. Sharon Eyal uses different styles of leotards and socks. Hofesh Shechter on the other hand, tends to prefer loose, gloomy, almost old-fashioned clothes. Ella Rothschild will often find strange combinations of street-wear items, such as a swimming cap with an over-sized dress. Nadav Zelner differs again, ranging from over-sized suits in ‘*Woodstock*’ to tight, pink bodysuits in ‘*Bullshit*’. However, in almost all of Zelner’s and Eyal’s pieces, the dancers will all wear the same costume, which supports the hunt to find identity within the boundaries set by the choreographer. Hofesh Shechter and Ella Rothschild will occasionally alter details in each costume, but will also offer little differentiation between characters, leaving room for interpretation by the dancers and the audience. The unifying factor is the deliberate anonymity of the costume.



FIGURE 16: ‘BULLSHIT’, NADAV ZELNER, BROCKE

“The performers’ costumes are ruffled and frilled like Jacobean nightshirts, while their deranged faces and obsessive capering are reminiscent of those of the inmates of the Bedlam asylum (...).” (LUKE JENNINGS, Hofesh Shechter’s ‘Clowns’, 2018)

6.7 The Gaga Background in Dancers: links to Ohad Naharin

The similarities mentioned above and resulting successes of these four choreographers come as no surprise when we compare their backgrounds. Eyal, Schechter, Rothschild and Zelner all danced with the Batsheva Company, all trained in Gaga and all performed Naharin’s works.¹ Links between their work and the work of long-term Batsheva director, Ohad Naharin, are plentiful.

The importance of intention of movement is vital in Naharin’s work. Each movement comes from an inner motor, be it energy, an image or an idea. Naharin brings his dancers and choreographies to new levels of animation as he pushes his dancers to find more intensity, more length, more explosion and more contradiction in movement and movement sequences. Ohad Naharin will also use facial expression where necessary, helping to pinpoint exact intentions of movement.

“As they sat, knelt and stood in a wedge arrangement, it was as if they were a band — all in it together. Keeping their lower bodies still, they bobbed their heads. Their faces wore manic smiles, and their arms, making angular, jagged shapes, moved in tandem while their lower halves remained stuck in place.” (GIA KOURLAS, Ohad Naharin’s choreography ‘Decadance’ 2019)

Like the four choreographers analysed above, we can also find an importance of the use of group constellations on Naharin’s stages. We witness recurring lines, clusters and circles. We also find singular dancers splitting from the group, initiating unrelated movement.

“In one section, the stage fills with activity that seems unrelated but is all flowing slowly in the same direction. In another, dancers in a diagonal line seem organized by pairs, but as they shift and turn, the groupings keep changing.” (BRIAN SEIBERT, 2014)

In Naharin’s work we can also detect a constant flow of contrasting images, noticing how movements can develop and change slightly by dancers loosely disclosing their habits, characters and personalities through them.

“The 75-minute work begins and ends with solos, a structural device that establishes and re-establishes the amazingness of every single dancer.” (BRIAN SEIBERT, 2014)

Ohad Naharin often finds his music close to home. In his newest piece ‘Last Work’ he uses six lullabies, originally inspired by his six-year old daughter. In ‘Echad Mi Yodea’ the dancers chant the words from this Passover folk song, as powerful drumming pounds through the room. Recreated and edited folk music can also be found in Naharin’s choreography ‘Virus’.

Musician Ohad Fishof works closely with Naharin to create soundtracks and new music designs, ranging from combinations of well-known pop songs to classical

music. Naharin's dancers will dip in and out of the varied rhythms his music presents, focusing on the rhythm of their bodies and movement.

"The dancers slumped down or crashed brutally onto the floor and then bounced straight upright again, their legs extended before dropping back to a crouching position, all seemingly within a fraction of a second. Lurching backwards, their extreme movements merged with crashing sounds from the score and temporary blackouts from the lighting." (PATRICIA BOCCADORO, 2016)

Naharin similarly clothes his dancers in uniform costume – will often find plain shorts with tank tops and occasionally identical suits or leotards.



FIGURE 17: 'VIRUS', OHAD NAHARIN, DAGON

"But the 80-minute piece is also sleeker than the Naharin norm – the dancers adorned in formal all-black rather than the usual riffs on street clothes – and more impersonal, with signifying gesture in place of eccentric outpouring." (APOLLINAIRE, SCHERR, 2019)

Gaga movement forms the crucial basis of Naharin's choreographies. His continuous, ever-changing and powerful movements result in the stage becoming an ecstatic scene, with profound focus on the here-and-now happening.

"These sequences, sometimes flowing and sometimes highly structured, are the product of Gaga, the movement language developed by Naharin, which draws upon the dancer's internal physical drives, rather than a set of external instructions." (BRIAN SEIBERT, 2014)

6.8 Gaga outside the dance world: Gaga-people

Gaga has not only found its popularity within dance companies. Non-dance workers on the Batsheva faculty soon took interest in this training form and told Naharin that they would also like to join Gaga classes. The company thus introduced classes for non-dancers, so-called 'Gaga/People'.

Both Gaga/people and Gaga/dancers classes are now held daily at the Suzanne-Dellal Center in Tel Aviv and at other locations around the world. The center also offers teacher-training courses, which take twelve months of rigorous active and theoretical participation to complete. Gaga dancers and teachers have spread around the world, teaching and leading Gaga-labs.

During the isolation phase of Covid-19, Batsheva dancers and Gaga-trained teachers were quick to set up free (or by donation) online Gaga/people and Gaga/dancers lessons. They now hold eight sessions a day, live streamed from either Tel Aviv or New York. These lessons are not only a great support to dancers and non-dancers, but have raised money and awareness for Gaga. Gaga jumped on the bandwagon quickly,

and with almost 1000 attendees at each of its online courses is rapidly advancing its popularity.

6.9 New Dimensions for the Israeli Dance Scene

The Israeli dance world is not only expanding as far as the internet. Plans are up-and-running to build a new arts centre in Tel Aviv by 2022. It will become the new home to the Batsheva Dance Company and aims to host shows, performances and exhibitions for all kinds of visual and performing arts.

“In creating a space for artists, Batsheva is not just building a new home, but also stepping up to become a steward of Tel Aviv cultural life.” (BRIAN SCHAEFER, 2019)

In 2019, Sharon Eyal choreographed a performance for Dior’s spring-summer show. Her dancers were an integral part of the fashion show, in which Maria Grazia Churi’s designs, inspired by dance pioneers such as Martha Graham, floated their way across the stage. Sharon Eyal has shown us how borders between different art forms can be broken, and how a fusion can enhance all.

“Modelling is very physical. They weren’t just costumes, it was almost dancing. I felt sometimes as if she [Grazia Chiuri] was sewing my dancing.” (SHARON EYAL)
A success, then. The show was well received and earlier this year Eyal’s mesmeric dancing in American rock band The National’s Hairpin Turns music video helped spread her name further.” (ROBBIE SMITH, 2019)

We find another example for expansion beyond the dance-world with Nadav Zelner’s numerous music videos and choreographies for musicals. He also choreographed and danced in Jerusalem’s promotional video. The video was produced by Israel’s Foreign Ministry with an aim to promoting tourism in Jerusalem.

7. Analysis and Discussion

7.1 Discussion of Thesis questions

***Thesis question:** What are the characteristics of Israeli choreographers that drive their success?*

Having taken a closer look at each choreographer, each style and the important elements in their work, we can find recurring similarities throughout and realize the depth of connection.

One of the most vital aspects of a choreographer’s or a dancer’s artistry is training. We can find a background of Gaga training and Batsheva stage experience in all of the choreographers mentioned. Naharin and his colleagues find strong affinity in the sense of movement: We have repeatedly found the importance of the ability to rapidly change between ideas and qualities, the ability to vary in speed, texture and intention and the significance of mental strength and body awareness. These sporadic movements and flippant changes of mind-set concentrate to form sequences of flowing movement, forcing the dancers and the audience to ‘live’ the performance with each other in-the-moment. This mentality forces the dancers to continuously

research and break new boundaries in movement and intensity, which is explicitly trained in Gaga. This ‘anti-technique’ brings its dancers to deep levels of creativity, physicality and detail, attempting to unlock unfamiliar situations in the body. A high level of active mindfulness helps build the ability to act and react to varied impulses. Gaga also pushes its dancers to recognize and work on both strength and weakness, helping dancers to find contradiction and opposition in movement, resulting in the whirls of intriguing motion we perceive on stage.

“To mourn a big loss, and to dance...they don’t contradict each other” (OHAD NAHARIN, as stated in MR. GAGA, 2015)

The choreographer’s rich imagination and the dancer’s extensive research help find specific and detailed movements, producing a constant flow of energies and sensations. This well-trained use of detail and repetition captivates the audience as it develops, allowing them to enter into the world on stage rather than observe the experience.

“Part club, part catwalk, there’s spikiness and sass. Eyal’s choreography accentuates bodies at shoulders, elbows and hips, somewhere on the spectrum between Egon Schiele and RuPaul. She’s not afraid of repetition, riffing on one idea rather than the erratic stream of consciousness so common in contemporary dance. It means her audience can get into her groove before she swallows them into either some kind of drug nightmare or the best night ever, depending on your point of view.” (LINDSEY WINSHIP, 2018)

These emotions are enhanced by the use of group constellations such as clusters. These clusters create condensed group awareness, a feeling of moving and dancing together and in a broader sense, the idea of community. Individual dancers may pop out of the groups here and there, exhibiting more identity and individuality. As the dancers cleverly use personality to depict scenes of daily life in a range of emotions and images, we find the connection with the audience intensifies. The desired effect is that the audience becomes part of the experience. Parallels to a Gaga class can be drawn, where the dancers are trained to directly connect with all active participants on an emotional level. In performance, this trained intensity is tangible to a receptive audience.

We have found that the combinations of music used by these choreographers (strong rhythms, melodies and percussive lines) form an enclosed and entrancing atmosphere in their theatres, mesmerizing the audience as well as the dancers. Due to the choreographers allowing their movements to drift in and out of a clear rhythmical structure, we find that the executed movements can occur in irregular patterns. For example: a jump or turn may take a split second to accomplish but a simple lift of the arm could take a whole minute. These unusual rhythms in the body are much supported in Gaga classes, where dancers are encouraged to find rhythm in their bodies rather than latching onto the rhythm in the music. These layered rhythms evoke an addictive, trance-like spiritual power, captivating the audience.

“What today is very fundamental to Gaga is the ability to articulate the scope of sensations and the small details, the small gestures, the attention to details.” (OHAD NAHARIN, as cited by ZACHARY WHITTENBURG)

The sensitivity of choreographers to embrace each dancer's habits and personality forms a vital base for the creation of a coherent choreography. This trust and 'team-work' creates believable movement invention and execution and thus a persuasive choreography. The good name these choreographers have earned hasn't just come from the stage, but also from their way of working with their dancers. They use clear boundaries and instruction to develop movement with the dancers but give them freedom to improvise and generate further layers of detail, such as identity, mannerisms and 'groove'. Naharin's idea to create a training purely based on guided improvisation is something we can connect to here, as he lends the power to his dancers to recognize and focus on their specific needs during each Gaga training to ensure efficient rehearsals and effective performances. This acceptance of individuality and demand for unique personalities helps to compose relatable images on stage that loosely depict our society and its affairs. The fusion of these images drags the audience into an excitingly distorted spectacle.



FIGURE 18: 'GRAND FINALE', HOFESH SHECHTER, REZVANI

The use of costumes will vary between the choreographers more than other aspects we have looked at, however, the uniform style of costume used forces the dancers to find individuality independent from the costume and allows the audience to use their imagination to build further layers and depth.

The popularity of Gaga and the success of these choreographers go hand in hand, each bringing attention to the other. As Gaga training diversifies and expands its popularity, these choreographers become more and more fashionable, and as these choreographers progress in building their respect and audiences, we find the demand for Gaga training is increasing. Choreographers like Sharon Eyal and Nadav Zelner have successfully expanded the popularity of their choreographic styles by collaborating with other artists and communities, promoting both their images and that of Gaga.

Gaga has not only sparked great interest in the dance community. A gaga training offers space to improve on fitness, imagination and awareness all in one. Even non-dancers will call Gaga 'active meditation'. Online Gaga classes prove this popularity with skyrocketing numbers, where we are seeing almost 8000 people join the classes daily. Gaga has become an accessible dance form for everybody: Gaga welcomes all ages and abilities, putting no importance on how movements look and creates a positive optimistic mindset.

8. Conclusion

In this paper I have analysed different aspects of four Israeli choreographers, compared them to each other and taken connections to the work of Ohad Naharin and his invention of Gaga. Aspects holding the choreographers together are similarities in the following fields: movement intention, movement development, choreographic constellations, use of music and rhythm, search for identity within a costume and the process of working with the dancers. These six aspects come together as we discover their connection to the training form 'Gaga', which greatly supports both the choreographers and the dancers in all mentioned aspects. Gaga encourages choreographers and dancers to be creative, innovative and available and helps them explore rhythms, sensations and qualities. These highly skilled artists use these talents to transfix the audience by simulating a multitude of emotions, memories and images all at the same time. The paradox layering of texture, personality, musicality and imagery fills the stage and entralls its onlookers.

This specific part of the dance community is further expanding its popularity online, in Tel Aviv and around the world. Gaga is beginning to attract all kinds of people, welcoming varied personalities and backgrounds and promoting positive body and mind experiences. It is supporting the growth of all arts in Tel Aviv, the training of dancers to become teachers and is inspiring young and 'older' dancers around the world.

As our world evolves, we find ourselves only just managing to keep up with it. The vast development and innovation evolving from the Israeli dance scene is helping to validate dance as a respected art form that can not only keep pace with this change, but be part of the ongoing evolution.

9. Final Remarks

Over the past half year I have increasingly immersed myself in the world of Gaga and the work of these talented choreographers. Taking daily Gaga classes (both with Ella Rothschild and online during the isolation phase of Covid-19), has helped me gain a much greater understanding of Gaga, both for this paper and in the form of active research. I have become more adept at responding to physical signals, in my awareness of movement (or absence of), I am finding the ability to push past some simple habits and I am reaching new levels of detail in texture and imagination. Most importantly, I believe that this form of research and discovery can become constant and infinite.

These four choreographers inspire me greatly. Working with Nadav Zelner and Ella Rothschild were experiences I will treasure and carry to further endeavors. The idea of working with Sharon Eyal or Hofesh Shechter would be a dream come true. I think I can speak for a great majority of the dance world when I express my respect towards these artists who will not cease to produce entertainment of the highest level!

Perhaps the reason Gaga has influenced me so much is because it allows physical and mental research to occur simultaneously. Gaga, like the mentioned choreographers, encourages dancers to recognize and utilize all aspects of themselves: their personality, their goofiness, their strengths and their weaknesses. Most importantly

Gaga allows people to be individuals, which in today's frantic and evolving world is incredibly valuable.

This explorative investigation and analysis has been an adventure involving the discovery of extensive information, articles and associations to personal experience. Connections and similarities between all elements come in varied forms and I was thrilled to find common threads through each of the different choreographic styles. Over recent years and throughout the writing of this paper I have immersed myself in this branch of contemporary dance and have become fascinated and energized by its depth of creativity and its ability to impact mind, body and soul. I look forward to the next chapters in the growth and development of these choreographers and the Gaga world and hope they can continue to challenge the restrictions of the world of dance, pushing into new spaces and enticing greater reception.

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12. Appendix

12.1 Glossary

Bulerias: A fast, 12-beat flamenco rhythm

Canon: When cycles of music or movement occur in separate groups in close succession: the first dancer starts on count one, the second on count two and the third on count three for example.

Classical ballet: A traditional, formal dance style, which aims to create graceful movements and requires intense training. (THOMAS, SMITH, 1987)

Constellation: A group formation of people or things

Contemporary dance: A newer genre of modern dance, which is based on modern dance techniques but varies from style to style

Covid-19: World pandemic in 2020 resulting in the isolation of the majority of communities around the world

Demi-pointe: Typical position in classical ballet, where the dancer stands on the front part of the feet

Flamenco: Art form originating in Spanish folklore

Folk dance: The popular dance originating from certain cultures

Gaga-labs: Workshops consisting of Gaga classes and the application of these tools in repertory sessions.

Gaga: Movement language developed by Ohad Naharin

Gaga/dancers: Term expressing the Gaga training class designed for professional dancers

Gaga/people: Term expressing the Gaga training class designed for non-dancers

Graham: Dance technique developed by Martha Graham in the mid 1900s

Grand-plié: Movement originating in ballet where the knees bend and the pelvis moves closer to the floor

Hip-hop: Cultural movement that developed in the Bronx in New York City.

House choreographer: A choreographer who has a contract to create pieces for a certain company or theatre

Impulse: ‘something that causes something to happen or happen more quickly’ (OXFORD DICTIONARY)

Modern dance: a style of dance evolving from classical ballet, allowing more free movement and expression

Passover: A Jewish holiday which ‘commemorates the exodus of the Jews from slavery in Egypt’ (AVEY)

Philanthropist: A person who devotes their time to helping others, often in the form of donating money

Repertory: A collection of choreographies that a company or performer knows and is able to perform

Residency: A space for artists to research and collaborate with each other

Sternum: ‘Breastbone’ at the front and centre of the chest, connecting the ribs

Subtext: Thought or idea behind a movement

Tendu: Pulling movement originating in ballet where the leg extends away from the other, with the foot remaining on the floor

Twist: Movement where the typically the upper body will twist away from the pelvis, frequently found in modern or contemporary dance

Waltz: Music and dance that uses three beats per bar

12.2 Declaration

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work, which I have completed on my own and without the assistance of any third party. In accordance with the principles of scientific integrity, I have indicated all passages that I have either cited verbatim or paraphrased from published or unpublished sources.

Zürich, 15.04.2020

Signature

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Ph. J. H. H.', is written over a light blue rectangular background.