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DANCE REVIEW | OHAD NAHARIN

Conjuring Up a World Where Images Abound

By GIA KOURLAS

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“Max,” a new production by Ohad Naharin, opens in silence on a darkened stage as 10 dancers, five men and five women, are poised with their backs to the audience. The men stand; the women bend in deep pliés, tip over — by dropping a knee to the floor — and turn in profile, their heads bowed as if in prayer. In this tremendously potent work, there are few obvious displays of emotion, yet “Max” is full of imagery that slips between real life and dance in fleeting flashes.

Performed by the Batsheva Dance Company at the [Brooklyn Academy of Music](#) on Wednesday night, “Max” produces a formal structure full of breath, as if the air around the dancers and not just the movement, is responsible for shifting the dynamic from mischievous to ominous. At times it’s balmy; in other moments it’s ice cold. Succinctly and mysteriously, “Max” zeros in, just as its press notes say, on the pleasure and pain of being alive.

Mr. Naharin’s theatrical ingredients are space, movement and light. The costumes, by Rakefet Levy, are free of embellishment — dancers wear simple tanks and high-cut black shorts, which accentuate the push and pull of their skin.

While sound is credited to Moshe Shasho, the work’s composer is Maxim Waratt, Mr. Naharin’s musical pseudonym.

Throughout the piece, his resonant voice encloses the dancers in a state both trancelike and controlled. His tone is palpable — a droning chant becomes increasingly more feverish — but what may sound like a word in a foreign language or, later in the dance, a recitation of numbers paired with a series of movement accumulations is, in actuality, meaningless. Mr. Naharin’s lyrics are gibberish.

But in many ways, his musical composition is not limited to sound: in “Max,” the body dictates cadence, too, and Mr. Naharin contrasts speed and stillness to devise the work’s pulse. In one repeated image, the dancers are arranged in triangle. It’s a thrilling high-speed sequence, but there is also a soft, yielding approach as they pull their arms into their chests and thrust them out; raise their elbows and jiggle their heads; cross their palms on their chests; and raise their faces to smile. This marks the only time they give in to such an ordinary expression, but their grins are almost maniacal.

The scene is followed by a blackout, a technique used frequently and with rigor throughout “Max.” The lighting designer Avi Yona Bueno casts the stage in hues of greens, pinks and reds, and within this shimmering atmosphere the dancers’ sensual poses are frequently distorted into something else by the nature of Mr. Naharin’s clipped choreographic rhythm.

An arched back or a leg thrust to the side is just a step, nothing more and nothing less. Even though “Max” is stripped of artifice, Mr. Naharin accomplishes a great feat — this is as max as it gets.

Batsheva Dance Company performs “Max” through Saturday at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, Howard Gilman Opera House, 30 Lafayette Avenue, Fort Greene, Brooklyn; (718) 636-4100, bam.org.