

Search Engine

Her work has the feel of a particular and concrete situation happening right here and now, yet it consistently questions the conventions of performance and the notions of authenticity and the real. “The stage is potentially anything,” says Yasmeen Godder, one of the most celebrated choreographers in Israel today — MICHAL SAPIR

If you sat in the front row of Yasmeen Godder’s performances of “Singular Sensation” at last year’s Montpellier Dance Festival, you were in danger of getting the sour-smelling juice of overripe oranges sprayed all over your clothes. This is nothing compared to the laundry-related problems faced by the piece’s actual dancers who, by the end of the evening, found themselves covered with shreds of stockings, cling-film, glitter and confetti, and smeared with gooey substances and sticky industrial paint. Yet the powerful impact of Godder’s choreography rests precisely on this fault line, between the artifice involved in performance and the very real physical consequences it can have.

Why Move?

Godder was born in Jerusalem in 1973, and at the age of 11 moved with her family to New York. There she studied dance at the High School of Performing Arts in Manhattan, and later continued her studies at New York University’s Tisch School of the Arts, where she received her B.A. During that time, Godder also studied extensively at the Movement Research dance “laboratory” in New York. Choreographing since 1997, her conceptual and aesthetic framework has gradually taken shape as a mix, combining four sources of inspiration: The technical and anatomical concerns of her NYC dance background; the interplay between characters and relationships and their cultural-historical

contexts, which is typical of European dance; the rigorous experiments in pedestrian movement and the limits of endurance and representation undertaken by artists such as Bruce Nauman, Marina Abramovic and Trisha Brown; and the almost nauseating kaleidoscopes of materials, fabrics and fluids, infused with irony and desire, characteristic of work by artists like Paul McCarthy and John Bock. Godder’s pieces always have the feel of a particular concrete situation happening in the moment, with actual bodies and personalities on the line, yet they consistently question the conventions of performance and the notions of authenticity and the real. While a formal, even classic compositional rigor runs through Godder’s pieces, her





dance occurs not only on a pictorial grand scale, but also on the outermost edges of porous, overstretched bodies, whose extreme states are configured through highly detailed physical articulations: Eyelids are pinched shut by foreign fingertips, facial features are poked and distorted, a voice spills out of a violently shaken body. The choreography constantly changes pace, from tense tableaux through viscous, stuttering and repetitive emotional timescapes, from swirling, snowballing accelerations to messy and orgiastic frayed knots. The world depicted on stage is a slippery one in which the seductive exposure of a vulnerable spot on the body can slide into a harrowing scene of humiliation, and the panting of coming can suddenly seem more like a panic attack. It is as if the movement is built from only partially successful attempts to hold on to something – one's body and self, tenuous relationships, meaning, the narrative, the logic of the show itself. It all makes for a disturbing and compelling watching experience.

How do you see your role as a choreographer in relation to the audience? What kind of experience do you try to create for them?

I see myself as creating a dialogue with an audience, presenting a set of ideas and thoughts, and even some of the questions that I have with regard to what I do, and sharing it with the audience for about an hour-long period. I am interested in having people go through an experience as they watch my work – that they could dream, fantasize, have reflections with regard to themselves, be drawn to it and be repulsed at the same time. I guess having a rich experience as much as possible, and definitely not leaving the theater as though nothing has happened. With time, I am also more aware of and concerned with the idea of the audience's expectation of a

'show' and with finding out how I play into that or disregard it.

How do you think your work has changed through the years? What are your current concerns or directions of development?

If I look back, I can kind of try to analyze some of the shifts and turns that I have taken. When I started 12 years ago, I was concerned with the process of the performer on stage, but it came across mostly through what I felt was 'character study,' which developed through movement research. With time, the perception of 'character' has become something that I like to challenge and explore on stage in the process of the works themselves.

Some of the processes involved taking on exterior characteristics, whether from images, stereotypes or imagination, and playing with them, trying to see whether they would be gateways to finding new and surprising forms of expression – using characteristics and experiences which we feel are far from us or involve subtle aspects of ourselves, and taking them to the extreme. Trying to embody these 'expressions' becomes part of the structure of the works and the processes on stage. With time, I find that I like to present these dilemmas or challenges both in the score of the works and in the processing of the work, as it is being watched by the audience, so that there is a dual questioning process happening with the performance of the works. And this brings about a dialogue with the notion of 'authenticity,' both in the aesthetics of the work and in the themes.

Why make dance? Has this changed for you during the years, and, if so, how?

I guess I don't concern myself with this question in the broader way, as far as 'dance' as a title. I do ask the question in the studio: Why move? Why dance? And that is definitely challenging. But, at the same time, sometimes

Images

"I'm Mean, I Am"

Photograph by Tamar Lamm

Previous page:

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Opposite page:

"Strawberry Cream and Gunpowder"

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I find myself returning to dance as a form of relief, commitment and, lately, even as a form of ritual. Over the years, I have taken certain rules, which I have set to myself originally, and loosened them to play with my understanding of 'dance' or this form. But I must admit that I feel that the stage is potentially anything and so – not necessarily 'dance,' but can be also 'dance.' So the possible rejection of it is also the possible accepting of it.

Power Plays

When questioned during a recent panel discussion about a defining moment in her thought about dance-making, Godder mentioned a workshop she had participated in with the Portuguese choreographer Vera Mantero. Before making any movement material, Mantero asked the participants to answer a lengthy list of written questions about their personal histories, preferences and interests. Godder left the workshop with the insight that all these things – and not just the formal practices taking place in the bare studio – can go into the creative process and be part of the performance. She then went on to develop an inventive and distinct movement language, at once steeped in social, cultural and psychological contexts and pinned down to concrete individual gestures, tics and facial nuances.

Godder explores what it means to be and move in a body inhabiting a world that is not only populated by other bodies and teeming with tangible materials, but is also driven by figments of meditation and fantasy. In our performance of these cultural, historical and social mythologies, she asks, as we let them resonate through us in images and physicality, how do we identify with them, reject them or modify them? How do these representations of ourselves, which, either

wishful or alienating, seem distant from our own interiors, nevertheless play a deeper role in our most intimate communications? Each of her works is an opportunity to examine a different aspect or tonal range of such collective, iconic structures – “Two Playful Pink” (2003), for instance, focuses on perceptions of the female body; “Strawberry Cream and Gunpowder” (2004) deals with Israeli mythologies of power, exclusion and violence; “Karioki Waltzing” (2005) pits personal instincts against the legacy of recognized, stylized and beautified classical waltzes; and “I’m Mean, I Am” (2006) tackles formations of authority, ambition and collaboration in the creative process. Yet the pulsating heart of these pieces is the point where these structures touch and have an impact on the individuals, who, both embedded in them and knocking against their textures and rules in constant friction, are at once battered, erased, articulated and empowered by them.

Can you talk about your choreographic process: Do works form around ideas or images or formal questions? What kinds of things guide you in composing a piece from what has been created with the dancers in rehearsal?

Every process is very different for me. It depends on the period of time in which I do it. It depends on with whom I am working. It depends on what I feel is the best way to approach the process. I do start with particular questions and issues that interest me and translate them into improvisational tasks and different explorations, which I do with the performers. In ‘Singular Sensation,’ we worked on creating installations on our bodies, using materials found at home, which expose a certain sensation that we feel. I also collect images, which strike me and touch me, and I have a dialogue with them in the process

of the work. In ‘Strawberry Cream and Gunpowder,’ I began the process by bringing into the studio images of the occupied territories and roadblocks. The images were difficult – some even terrifying and scary – and were representative of that period as it was reflected through the media. My interest was to challenge the numbness that I felt was present with regard to these newspaper images. By bringing these materials into the studio, it brought about a set of questions as to how to deal with them, whether we have the right to use them as materials, what is the connection of our reality to the photographs. Eventually, ‘Strawberry Cream and Gunpowder’ became about this process. In ‘I’m Mean, I Am,’ I brought in images of ecstatic sports moments, mainly of male football players, and used these as a way to explore my understanding of ambition, the desire and need to win and for finding a connection to a male physicality in my own body. So materials arise from bringing in different ideas and questions, sometimes in the form of images, sometimes in the form of questions and, slowly, as materials form, I start connecting them in different ways, contextualizing them in the structure. I am very interested in the specificity of the movement and performance language that is created in each work and I try to commit to it. This way, a laying process happens that has both my original intention, the connection of the performer and the commitment to a particular form and aesthetic.

A lot of your work seems to deal with questions of authority, power relations and the limits and possibilities of interpersonal communication. Are these issues also relevant to your situation of working with dancers and other collaborators?

In ‘I’m Mean, I Am,’ I was interested in taking the question of the authority of the



Image

Yasmeeen Godder

Photograph by Marco Caselli

choreographer and playing with this as a central theme in the work. I pushed this by bringing this theme to the extreme: playing with the stereotype of a choreographer/director, who manipulates and tests the dancers in order to arrive at a strong creation, but ultimately hurts herself in the process. And through this, exposing how this stereotype brings out different 'truths' about making work, the creative process, and its complexity. In general, I believe in taking what is there in the studio and using it as information that can enter the work. It could be power relations, as I am in the role of the choreographer, but it also could be a certain personal connection that is based on a certain intimacy or a particular dynamic between individuals. I use the creation process, among other things, as a documenting process, which reveals a period in life. So even though the work's narratives are completely fictional and mostly completely over the top, I want it to resonate on a very personal level.

Creating Collaborators

You've worked with an architect on the stage design in “Singular Sensation” and “I’m Mean, I Am” and with a visual artist on the scenery in “Strawberry Cream and Gunpowder.” Can you say something about these collaborations in particular and, more generally, about whether your work is influenced by what's happening in contemporary art?

Since I started making work I have found a strong connection to visual arts, sometimes even stronger than to dance. I feel that the kind of dialogues that exist in the visual arts world interest me and give me new ways of thinking about what I do. It is true that I am not working with 'materials,' and yet someone like Paul McCarthy who is a visual artist and does performance has had a strong



impact on what I do and how I think about making work. I think that the influence from the visual arts comes mainly from being an art consumer myself – wanting to be excited, drawn, challenged. This is true regarding film and music, too.

In my creation process, I try to work with people with whom the dialogue would be interesting to me. So it is not only about getting a product that I am searching for as far as costumes or scenery, but, rather, finding a partner for working and discussing the ideas. Oren Sagiv, who is an architect, created the scenery for both 'I'm Mean, I Am' and 'Singular Sensation.' Oren has brought in his perception of the work, both spatially and structurally, influenced by his experience as an architect, but also by his sensibility and curiosity, through literary references and associations. Re-creating exactly a small indoor garden/patio, which exists in every Lottery-funded studio in Israel, and placing it on stage, was a real reference to the theme in 'I'm Mean, I Am,' around the horrors of the process in the studio: taking the obvious aspects of this process and finding what is terrifying about it, including this 'escape garden' meant for relief. Dislocating a very common image from most public dance studios in Israel and creating a completely different function to this architectural structure – this has influenced the work both conceptually and dramaturgically.

Gal Weinstein, who is a visual artist, created the scenery for 'Strawberry Cream and Gunpowder.' He came to the design after seeing a rehearsal in a studio with wooden floors, and he created the scenery based on his take on a dance studio/desert/roadblocks. He did it by loosely laying fake wood linoleum, which appears like sand dunes, and by using a commercial parking barrier – or *machsom*, the

same word for 'roadblock' in Hebrew. So Gal's interest in using non-organic factory-made materials and playing with our perception of found images related to the work not only aesthetically, but also with regard to the interests that I had in bringing the found photographs to the stage and using the body to copy and take on two-dimensional images. The dialogue with Gal regarding his processes and way of thinking had a strong influence on the process that led to 'Strawberry Cream and Gunpowder.' In general, I search for a team of people with whom the dialogue challenges and expands my way of thinking about what I do.

Godder's dialogic relationships with her collaborators are even more pronounced in pieces that feature live musicians, as in the case of Karni Postel, who plays the electric cello in "Sudden Birds" (2002) and Avi Belleli, who plays the electric guitar in "Strawberry Cream and Gunpowder." Both have created open-ended original music in unconventional, experimental and expansive ways, their presence on stage interacting with the performance and enhancing its affective charge. But even when the music is pre-recorded, such electricity is amply provided by the dancers, who are credited by Godder as "creating performers," and whose personalities and charisma permeate the work, often creating sparks by rubbing against Godder's own feisty and uncompromising presence as a powerful performer. Such strong, sometimes explosive qualities put Godder's work in line with the work of other Israeli choreographers, such as Ohad Naharin, Inbal Pinto and the London-based choreographer Hofesh Shechter, though her experimental and critical concerns are somewhat at odds with these choreographers' often more spectacular, formally dance-oriented and less subtle crowd-sweeping tendencies.

Do you feel embedded in Israeli culture?

I am not sure about being 'embedded.' I do feel a certain familiarity with Israeli culture, being that I live and work here, and it has depth and complexity. I find myself having a familiarity also with American and different European cultures, but I guess in Israel this familiarity is more of an intimate one, but at the same time it allows me to look at it from an exterior point of view which interests me very much.

You have been living and working in Israel for the past ten years. You show work, you teach at Search Engine, the school for actors/creators and some of your dancers have been developing their own independent artistic lives. How would you assess your influence on the local scene?

This is a difficult question to answer. I don't know if I could assess my influence on the scene. As you mentioned, some of my former dancers are making their own work, and there is a natural influence both of the movement language and the working with an emotionally connected and questioning presence, which they have taken into their own personal research. It is harder to answer this question on the broader level of the local 'scene.' In the work of Search Engine, Itzik Giuli, my partner and director of the school, and I have placed an emphasis on the things which concern us in performance: personal and daring work, a sensitivity for and interest in the visual world and a need to think of performance through different mediums. All of these have been brought into the teaching structure of Search Engine, which has its impact on the students. Lastly, I have been teaching since arriving here in Israel, bringing some of my New York influences of release techniques mixed with yoga and anatomical awareness, which has had its direct influence on the students. —



Images

"Singular Sensation"

Photograph by Tamar Lamm

Opposite page:

"Strawberry Cream and Gunpowder"

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