

Arts & Entertainment

A moving experience from Israel

Dance company makes a rare Chicago visit

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Managing Editor

The Batsheva Dance Company has been around since 1964, when it was founded by Martha Graham and Baroness Batsheva de Rothschild, and is one of Israel's most revered cultural institutions. But most Chicagoans haven't gotten a glimpse of it, at least in their home city.

Now the troupe is arriving, after an absence of 35 years, for two performances only, on Saturday and Sunday, Feb. 7 and 8, at Chicago's Auditorium Theatre.

They'll be performing "Deca Dance," a signature piece that highlights the work of Ohad Naharin, who has been the company's artistic director and choreographer since 1990.

The Feb. 7 opening night will include a post-performance discussion with Naharin, moderated by local dance critic Lucia Mauro. A post-performance chat with company dancers takes place after the Feb. 8 Sunday matinee.

"Deca" includes excerpts from various pieces by Naharin, and is constantly changing as he rearranges them and adds or subtracts, says Douglas Letheren, one of 17 company dancers who will perform in Chicago.

He's an American and a 2007 graduate of Juilliard, but joined Batsheva because he was so struck by the company's style of dance and Naharin's choreography, he said in a recent phone

interview from Israel, where he had just come off a countrywide tour with the rest of the troupe. He spent a year performing with the junior company, then joined the main troupe in August. In 2007 he was chosen by Mikhail Baryshnikov to receive the Movado Future Legends Award.

The 24-year-old Letheren first worked with Naharin when, as a student at Juilliard, he performed a piece of his there and "fell in love with his way of working," he says. "Then I saw the company perform for the first time at Jacob's Pillow (dance festival) and was really taken by them. They are unique, totally not related to any form that came before."

In fact Naharin has devised his own style and "movement language," which he calls "gaga," referencing both inspired madness and a childlike quality. It bears little resemblance to the

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Martha Graham style and technique that Batsheva originally brought to Israel.

"It is uninhibited, intelligent. This was the first company I ever saw that I really was curious as to what was going on — how they were training, what was behind what they were doing," Letheren says. "It's really its own style. That's what's special about Ohad's work. He invented a movement language and the company is trained in this technique every day. It's the only thing the company is trained in."

Naharin has said that he invented the new "language" after he suffered a serious back injury and began relating to his body differently than ever before. The technique "produces a really new way of moving that is uninhibited, creative, like the true intelligence of the body that I don't



Batsheva Dance Company.

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think you find anywhere else," Letheren says. "It's what you would call generally contemporary dance but it's really its own style; it's really not like anything else."

A New York Times review described Naharin's style as "fluid, hyperathletic, gestural ... Mr. Naharin doesn't squelch his dancers' creativity; rather their individual styles fold comfortably into his," the reviewer wrote.

As for "Deca Dance," it includes both original music composed and performed by Maxim Waratt and selections from works by Ravel, Bach ("Goldberg Variations" played by Glenn Gould), the Beach Boys and several contemporary composers, including Naharin himself. At one point Dean Martin can be heard singing "Cha-Cha De Amor."

"It has excerpts from 10 years of Ohad's pieces," Letheren explains. "He continually expands it and includes excerpts from pieces and puts them together in a fresh way. Every time we perform it, it's different. He enjoys seeing how each piece, how different movements relate to each other. He likes to play with the idea of these different pieces, what they can create together that he didn't originally create. It's fresh each time he puts it together."

Letheren performed with the junior company last year at several American venues, including a Jewish Community Center in New York, and found that "people really took to it. On all levels, people take to it. Dance audiences really take in the uniqueness of the whole thing. The way the dancers are moving, it's so beautiful, so unique." But when asked what specific style the company performs in, he only says "people have to come and see for themselves."

Batsheva Dance Company performs as part of the Auditorium Theatre of Roosevelt University's International Dance Series, 7:30 p.m. Saturday, Feb. 7 and 2 p.m. Sunday, Feb. 8 at the Auditorium, 50 E. Congress Parkway, Chicago. For tickets, ranging from \$30-\$89, call (312) 902-1500 or visit ticketmaster.com or the theater box office.