

12 | WEEKEND | FRIDAY, JANUARY 30, 2009
N | CHICAGO SUN-TIMES

onstage

GOING 'GAGA' OVER DANCE

Batsheva Dance artistic director Ohad Naharin speaks his own language of dance

**BY HEDY WEISS**

Dance Critic/hweiss@suntimes.com

BATSHEVA DANCE COMPANY

- ◆ 7:30 p.m. Feb 7; 2 p.m. Feb. 8
- ◆ Auditorium Theatre, 50 E. Congress
- ◆ Tickets, \$30-\$89
- ◆ (312) 902-1500



Ohad Naharin's "Deca Dance," an "anthology" drawn from the choreographer's work, will be presented by Batsheva Dance next weekend at the Auditorium Theatre.

- coverage continues on next page -

Although the Batsheva Dance Company of Israel has not performed in Chicago for more than 35 years, audiences here have become fully familiar with the hypnotic work of its artistic director and resident choreographer, Ohad Naharin. His phenomenal piece, "Minus 16," has long been a crucial part of Hubbard Street Dance Chicago's repertoire, and that company also has danced his duet, "Pas-somezzo," as well as "Tabula Rasa" and the two-part "Queens/Black Milk."

But next weekend's brief visit to the Auditorium Theatre by the Tel Aviv-based company, which will feature two performances of Naharin's "Deca Dance," will give dance-lovers the opportunity to see the choreographer's work directly from its source.

"These days, there is a lot more in common among the companies that dance my work than there are differences," said Naharin, who has served as Batsheva's artistic director since 1990. "Sure, my dancers have gotten a longer and more profound training in 'gaga' [the dance language he has developed and named after the sound of baby talk]. But I have met dancers who have never done 'gaga' and fallen in love with their beautiful interpretations of my work."

And just what is gaga? "It's about being able to give people keys to the weaknesses in their movement habits, and about tapping into the effort and pleasure and power and efficiency of movement. It's about creating the relationship between you and other people, about going beyond your physical limitations and working with form, as well as understatement and exaggeration. It's about being sensitive to our sensations, and finding the way to sublimate our emotions into movement."

That intense and quirky style infuses the various sections of "Deca Dance," a constantly changing anthology of segments drawn from larger works by Naharin.

"I create new works for my company every year," said Naharin, who was born in 1952 on an Israeli kibbutz, began his training at Batsheva (a company founded in 1964 by Martha Graham and Baroness Batsheva De Rothschild), spent one year at the Juilliard School in New York, and danced briefly with Graham and Brussels-based Maurice Bejart before returning to Israel.

"But often I have the desire to revisit older pieces that have been out of the repertoire for some time. Everything we do is so ephemeral, but by lifting excerpts from those old works, and juxtaposing them in new ways, I have the chance to see them differently and even improve on them. Also, I don't have the time to create new works for other companies, so this recombination process gives me a way to recycle existing pieces while also making them fresh."

At press time (and still subject to change), the version of "Deca Dance" headed to Chicago will include a section from the two-year-old piece "George and Zelman," a work for five women whose title harks back to Naharin's youth, when he rode horses and was kicked in the chin by one of them (he still has the scar). "B/olero" is a nine-minute duet from a recent work created for Batsheva's junior company. "Max," a hugely challenging ensemble piece, explores the extremes of pain and happiness. And a handful of other excerpts will join the lineup, to be performed by a company of 18.

Asked why modern dance, far more than ballet, has become a predominant art form in Israel, Naharin observed: "Israel is an old land, but also a very new country comprised of many different cultures and backgrounds. There is no strong opera or ballet tradition. But there is a vast sense of new possibilities in the country, and I think that helps the creative forces in dance and beyond."

Comment at suntimes.com/entertainment.