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Dance sampler

Choreographer Ohad Naharin and Tel Aviv's Batsheva Dance Company are returning to Chicago. **PAGE 14**

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Naharin presents greatest hits with 'Deca'

By Sid Smith

SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE



"Minus 16," choreographed by the renowned Ohad Naharin, returns Saturday and Feb. 8 to the Auditorium Theatre for its first visit in many years.

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His name is wondrously exotic: Ohad Naharin. So are whole stretches of his choreography. Just think of that semicircle of solemnly clad dancers moving in ritualistic wave at the start of "Minus 16."

But the renowned Israeli dancemaker can be impish, boldly witty, too, even something of a prankster: Before "Minus 16" begins, a lone dancer entertains the crowd with an elfin, wriggly solo, while later, audience members are brought up on stage for an impromptu hoedown. Another piece, "Mabul," includes images of a funereal procession and a duet with a hamster.

When asked how he became a dancer, Naharin says, "I think I was born one. Dancing is a lot about groove, about pleasure, about curiosity about your body and other things that move and travel. It's about attraction to structure. All of this I had before any training."

"What always draws me to his work, even as a dancer, is the humanity," says Jim Vincent, Hubbard Street Dance Chicago artistic director. "No matter how you experience it, no matter which side of the proscenium you're on, you're drawn in the same way. You can't walk away without being moved to the core."

Tel Aviv's Batsheva Dance Company, where Naharin is artistic director, returns Saturday and Feb. 8 to the Auditorium Theatre for its first visit in many years. Born in 1952 on a kibbutz, Naharin first joined Batsheva as a dancer, subsequently lured to New York by Martha Graham. He danced with her troupe, founded one of his own and worked with other 20th Century greats in the U.S. and in Europe, including Maurice Bejart. His own creations eventually led him back to Batsheva, where he has been at the helm since 1990.

But his work is regularly performed all over the world, by major companies, including Hubbard Street, where "Minus 16" is a popular mainstay and other works include "Pas-somezzo," his odd, testy duet to the melody of "Greensleeves."

"He likes to keep his audience in limbo," says Joffrey Ballet artistic director Ashley Wheater. "You're not quite sure what's going on or why. But he has a clear understanding of what he's doing, and he doesn't want to give it all away. He wants you to ask your own questions."

At the Auditorium, Chicago audiences will get a look at a broad sample of his choreography. The program, "Deca Dance," is a compendium of excerpts from eight or so Naharin works spanning the past 16 years, a best-hits approach some choreographers might disdain.

"Even when I do a full-evening work in a short period of time, it's always about a sense of unfinished stories put together," Naharin says. "Coherence can come from a story line, but also from the clarity of composition, made out of broken pieces put together in a coherent way. What matters is the freshness, and that has to do with the tension between the elements, even if one work dates from 50 years ago."

Naharin named his movement language "gaga," "not for any particular meaning of the word, but for the sound of it," he says. Yet, it's serious, almost spiritual—and uncompromising. He drapes the trademark mirrors in the rehearsal studio so dancers can't watch themselves.

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“Mirrors slow down the development of the dancer; they’re an illusion, old-fashioned and conservative,” he argues. “They spoil the dancer and, I believe, the soul. Basketball players don’t use mirrors, and you don’t see a surgeon doing his work while looking at himself in a mirror.

“Dance is about movement, about our bodies and our connection to effort and our passion, about how sensitive we can be, about our explosive power and how animal we can be.”

He dislikes the label “international,” citing the word “national” inside it. “I’d like my work to be personal, not national,” he says. “It’s about us as people, our weaknesses and strengths, our shared experience of human madness, demons and fear. It’s not about geographic barriers.”

Though his is a country plagued by war, he addresses that issue from a humanist perspective.

“War is horrible, but all of us experience the horrible in many ways,” he says. “None of us is immune to an abuse of power, to being lied to, to being victimized.”

He credits some of the appeal of “Minus 16” to its original, very young cast. “When I first put it together, I made it for our junior company,” he says. “Whenever I work with younger dancers, I have an extra open heart. There’s something about the taking care of the young that comes out in the process.”

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Batsheva Dance Company

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