

Reviews

Gaga, Give Me More: The Spectrum of Human Movement in Two Dances by Ohad Naharin

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Introduction

Through a comparative account of the Feldenkrais Method® and Gaga, movement language and pedagogy developed by Israeli choreographer Ohad Naharin, Helen Singh-Miller explores the spectrum of human movement presented in two of Naharin's dances, both performed by the Batsheva Dance Company in the last year.

Keywords

freedom in collaboration, the role of rest in dance pedagogy and performance, the overlap of the Feldenkrais Method and Gaga movement language

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Naharin's Virus

Following a performance of *Naharin's Virus* (2002) at Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival in Western Massachusetts this past August, 2018, choreographer Ohad Naharin talked about the importance of convincing people of your ideas rather than making demands. Over the course of his 28-year tenure as artistic director of the Batsheva Dance Company, a position from which he was just stepping down, his collaborators—dancers, costume designers and government agencies—had taught him this much. Admittedly, Naharin confessed with a Cheshire Cat smile, the lesson had been hard-earned.

While Naharin clearly valued the learning, it was difficult to perceive how his piece, *Naharin's Virus*, performed by Batsheva's Young Ensemble just before the question and answer session, could be seen to illustrate the art of persuasion. The dance adapts Peter Handke's *Offending the Audience* (1966), a play without a plot, an exercise in provocation, at least when it first came out. The narrator of the piece, here played by dancer Evyatar Omessy, is overbearing, to say the least. From an elevated platform above and just behind a seven-foot blackboard spanning the stage, Omessy oversees a good part of the dance. At one point, he steps out of his starched suit—revealed, in the process, to be a standalone prop—and onto the dance floor below. Both on and off the platform, he hurls (more or less) creative insults at the audience—"you overworked gravediggers", "you perfect sons of bitches", "you wrong numbers"—until concluding, "You are welcome here. Good night".¹

If the tone is obnoxious by design, the intention behind other aspects of the dance is less clear. For example, the two-tone body-stockings worn by each dancer, including Omessy—beige from neck and fingertip to buttocks and black from there down to the tips of the toes—is minimalist. 'Adorkable', one could argue, in its resemblance to early 20th century exercise outfits, but awkward nonetheless. The dancers look, and often move, like so many anthropomorphized viruses, which is to say, mindless copies of themselves. Refeket Levy's costumes, which, on

¹ List of insults from Macaulay 2018.

closer inspection, are actually leotards (with long sleeves and fingers) and tights, feel inhibiting; the text, if occasionally provocative, is mostly abrasive; the use of chalk, contrived, and who doesn't love chalk!

One way of interpreting this inhibition is through the art direction and choreography. From this perspective, avant-garde costumes, sentences and set design could be seen to serve an overarching masochism, in that they never let up or provide room for the dancers to breathe. Even the incorporation of drawing, immediate and ephemeral with a great capacity for nuance—an obvious dance partner—lacks spontaneity. The contortions into which full-bodied tracing leads the dancers' stockinged limbs is characterized by the same numbing tension as every other aspect of the piece. It's intense, as they say. When you start at this level of intensity, where do you go? How do your dancers experience and communicate the significance of a climax, or, for that matter, the relative significance of any note?

Near the opening of *Naharin's Virus*, dancer Shir Levy takes a prolonged step onto the empty stage and, hugging the blackboard, begins to draw. The painstaking, overwrought manner of the movement is already apparent in these first few moments and with each steadfast inch of the clenched chalk our curiosity wanes. Other solos follow, some less rigid than others. Periodically, the dancers pair up or all 16 line up at the edge of the stage, "taunting" more than "offending" the people that have paid to watch. The tension carries on, against some invisible resistance, spines extending and contracting impossibly, little appearing to give.

Some of the relentlessness can be attributed to Handke's play, certainly. Although it's not entirely clear how an outdated assault on an Austrian audience is to be taken in the Berkshires in 2018, or in Tel Aviv in 2002, when the piece was first presented. In the 60s, Handke was attempting to awaken what he perceived to be a complacent theater-going public by drawing their attention to their own experience—of watching a play, before a stage, in seats. His effort was part of a movement in theater, film and art more generally to highlight the theatrics of artistic production and reception. The movement was more or less political, a commentary on the disengagement of the leisure class. The primary audience Naharin conceives in *Naharin's Virus* may be conservative Israel, an audience Naharin is not afraid to offend, and who he perhaps aims to alert not only to their own position but to what he sees as the avoidable effects of their actions, or inaction. Naharin's long-standing support of Palestinian-Israeli reconciliation is no secret and his use of Israeli-Arab composer Habib Alla Jamal's rhythmical crescendos to punctuate his dance is not without resonance. At the same time, the ambiguity of the subject matter in *Naharin's Virus* could be intended to cast a wider net, implicating us all.

Such provocation may no longer be effective considering what "the audience" has been through in the intervening years—TV, Twitter, current events mediated to greater and lesser degree. Still, it's exhausting, and not only for the audience. The dancers themselves appear to suffer from the ceaseless direction. As Alastair Macaulay wrote for The New York Times after seeing *Naharin's Virus* at The Joyce Theater in Manhattan, also last summer:

The climate onstage... is never one of freedom. There's always a sense that Big Brother is watching. The company performs Gaga, a movement style developed by Mr. Naharin to heighten sensation and imagination and to go beyond familiar limits. But even when the 16 dancers are at their wildest, they look driven rather than driving. (Macaulay 2018)

Gaga and Feldenkrais Method®

I caught a ride from Boston to the Berkshires last August fully expecting to enjoy a performance of *Naharin's Virus*. Several dancers and fellow Feldenkrais practitioners had recommended the work, and the classes I had attended at the Harvard Dance Center with Mario Zambrano, Batsheva dancer and acclaimed writer, were consistently invigorating. I had heard from Israeli friends that Naharin's mother was a Feldenkrais practitioner. The potential resonance between the Feldenkrais Method and Gaga, Naharin's beloved movement pedagogy, was intriguing in many respects.

Indeed, Naharin's mother, Sofia Naharin, studied with Moshe Feldenkrais in the 1960s and then trained as a practitioner in Tel Aviv in the 80s. Although Naharin talks little about the connection or influence himself, Gaga can certainly be considered in terms of Feldenkrais Method practice and principles. Some of what Naharin himself has said about Gaga could be said about the Feldenkrais Method. In *Mr. Gaga* (2015), a documentary film by Tomer Heyman, Naharin explains, 'What is unique about Gaga is the demand to listen to our body before we tell it what to do'. Speaking more personally, he says, 'The idea of physical pleasure from physical activity was totally part of how I conceive myself as being alive' (Heyman 2015).

So what is Gaga, exactly? I was fortunate to hear Naharin tell the story of Gaga during the 'Q&A' session at Jacob's Pillow. Originally intended to break open the movement capacity of his dancers, by 1998 Naharin was offering classes for people in other creative and administrative roles at his company, and, soon enough, for the general public. Whether working with dancers, arts administrators, or lay-people, Naharin stressed that he is pursuing an alternative to mainstream exercise and dance education, one that welcomes and awakens the mental, physical and emotional dimensions of our shared humanity.

The overlap of Gaga and the Feldenkrais Method is notable in other regards as well. Gaga, named for the nonsense sound that babies make, proposes an organic functional base—from rolling around and crawling to walking—for the development of highly differentiated technique (in particular, the use of sequential movement in the torso). Gaga and the Feldenkrais Method alike use repetition and variation to help participants shed unhelpful habits and realize more appropriate, efficient self-use. Both methods favor verbal instruction and shun mirrors. Something Naharin is perhaps still figuring out how best to facilitate—the creative agency of the individual—is a central concern for Gaga and the Feldenkrais Method.

The hour long lessons typical of Gaga and the Feldenkrais Method are communicated in large part through spoken language. In Feldenkrais lessons, the words employed are intentionally

neutral, commonplace and concrete, where in Gaga, adjectives, adverbs, made-up words and metaphors fill the studio and buoy each person's discovery of "flow", one of the more colloquial terms used by Gaga teachers (although Naharin-esque flow can be quite distinct, displaying a recognizable consistent activation from head to toe).² Over two decades, Gaga has developed somewhat of a specialized, if flexible, language, and while one could argue that the Feldenkrais Method has done the same (over a much longer interval), I think the difference is in both degree and kind. In Feldenkrais lessons, "constraint", "differentiation" and even "possibility" mean more than they might in everyday conversation, and that can take some explaining. "Bell hands", "Dead bird" and "Spine like a chain" are popular lessons with vivid pictures for titles.

But while the use of imagery to help illuminate particular actions is not uncommon in the Feldenkrais Method, Gaga employs imagery more freely, and the images are not usually tied to specific sequences of movement. In Gaga, "marionette threads hold you", "helium balloons lift the knees", your "spine like seaweed", "pulling the bone out of the flesh (Hogstad 2015: 27-28)". Other Gaga words or instructions, like "float", "quake", "shake", "be silly", "give into sensation", "don't be shy of the effort", "smile to each other", "fall into movement" and "enjoy the burning sensation", can mean quite different things, in terms of body mechanics, to different people (Hogstad 2015: 27-28). I wonder how these instructions get underneath our ideas of things, the way a Feldenkrais lesson can upend and reintroduce us to the gesture of a smile, for example. I wonder how these Gaga phrases lead to increased differentiation, or to what extent they do.

There is a core overlap in the Gaga and Feldenkrais Method lexicons: Attention to internal sensation. But while Feldenkrais practitioners usually suggest doing less as a means of detaching from what you normally do and allowing other things to happen, Gaga teachers beseech their dancers, multiple times over the course of an hour, to give as much as they possibly can. At least, this was my experience of Gaga here in Cambridge, and the use of insistence seems to be a mandate for Gaga instructors. As one instructor described the guiding principles of a Gaga class to a researcher—"effort has to be there, speed", and then, "letting go, countdowns, sensitivity and layers" (Hogstad 2018: 27-28). Letting go in Gaga is an activity, a direct result of the intention to do so if not a result of quaking and shaking, where Feldenkrais Method sets up the circumstances in which letting go can occur more quietly, as more efficient pathways make themselves known. It might seem like a minor distinction or mere semantics; not to a Feldenkrais practitioner.

While neither Gaga nor Feldenkrais Method rely on mirrors for feedback, and Naharin was adamant about having them removed from his company's studio in Tel Aviv, Gaga instructors insist that participants keep their eyes open for the duration of each class. People are periodically told to watch the teacher in order to better understand the action or movement quality being taught. In other words, participants are expected and reminded to pay attention, at all times, whether to themselves, to the teacher or to their fellow dancers (as the movements

² Increasingly, it appears that a distinction is being made in the language used to teach Gaga/dancers and Gaga/people, as can be observed on the recently revamped Gaga website: <http://gagapeople.com/en/>

grow increasingly mobile). Maybe these layers of activity, this complexity, becomes the context, or constraint, in which a person can do nothing but let go....

Compelled to keep moving, delving deeper and deeper into the Gaga experience, participants report accelerated learning and healing (Hogstad 2015). It may be a skill worth developing, the ability to internalize external direction, and build stamina, especially important for performers, and especially for those tasked with demanding choreography such as Naharin's. Continuous movement means that Gaga is a workout, which probably adds to the experience for ordinary people as well as dancers, especially those accustomed to always doing something. As mentioned, Naharin developed a version of his Gaga class for the non-dancers on his staff, at their request, and "Gaga/people" has a following the world over, not unlike "Gaga/dancers".

As Feldenkrais Method demonstrates, however, individuals who have felt compelled to do this or be that could also use a context in which to become more familiar with their own desires, motivations and intentions, not only their sensations, imagination and strength, but their inclination to move more or less. One's relationship to instruction, to paying attention, to attention itself, one's habits of mind, are also something to learn, observe and coax rather than corral or make demands of.

Where an Awareness Through Movement lesson regularly "takes gravity away, a Gaga class removes the option to rest, at least for a solid, chock full hour. And the more I learn about Gaga, the more I reflect that rest might have been the missing element or touchstone in *Naharin's Virus*. Real rest—the letting go of letting go—unconscious or partially conscious, eyes-closed or eyes-rolling-back-in-the-head recuperation, and the movement that can grow out of these states—more rest, sleep, inspiration, animation, slow motion—seem like they might constitute a foundational reference for a dancer, and for the rhythm of a dance.

Venezuela

The elegant gang of dancers making their way to the back of the stage when the lights go up at the Boch Center Schubert Theatre in Boston on April 6, 2019, for Ohad Naharin's *Venezuela* (2017) have their backs to the audience. And what backs they are! Skin glimpsed in the half-light of a bar; slinky black dresses and T-shirts selected by costume designer Eri Nakamura. Add Gregorian chants and stripped down, confident choreography not afraid to pull equally from high art and popular culture, and everything appears to have loosened and grown up.

Dancers and audience members alike are free to imagine and remember in the mysterious landscape of *Venezuela*, as much universal underworld as South American country suffering an extreme, unthinkable economic downturn. Naharin, in notoriously coy fashion, claims to have selected the location with a spin of the globe and tap-down of his finger. Well, the results of the exercise clearly resonated for the choreographer. How could they not?

Not far into the piece, after swaying their way to the back of the stage and breaking off one-by-one into tango poses, and then partnering, the dancers throw themselves into skipping. At the height of each momentous upswing, they appear to freeze—we know the feeling. It's not unlike the pause, "after the exhalation and before the inhalation", as Feldenkrais trainer Jeff Haller describes the moment in a cherished bootleg recording of 'Global Breathing' (a once lost Awareness Through Movement lesson) (Personal communication, Haller, August 3, 2015).³ Skipping, that exceptional pastime, becomes an occasion to witness Gaga and Feldenkrais Method in sync.

Heading in any and all directions, the dancers never lose their composure, and yet they really let themselves go. This is "acture", as Feldenkrais famously renamed posture. These Gaga trained dancers can and do go forward or backward at any point, a sign of self-possession in Feldenkrais Method and martial arts, whenever another dancer is to be avoided. Tossing and catching themselves, they rely on feedback from their own bodies in motion to inform their next effort or retreat. This is reversibility, and range. There is a lot of strength on display but also a lightness I don't recall in *Naharin's Virus*; you can hear the dancers' footsteps but you can also hear the stillly after the breath. The contagious thrill builds and more and more dancers seamlessly, seemingly from out of nowhere, crisscross the stage, skipping up a storm out of thin air. It looks something like the height of a Gaga lesson, or, as Amber Adams writes in *Broadway World Review*:

A profound skipping sequence ensued. As more dancers joined the stage momentum and awareness of one another increased like in life's hustle and bustle. The coming and going of relationships, the back and forth nature of monotony, a constant buzz. (Adams 2019)

Venezuela is filled with this kind of repetition and variation, this powerful minimalism and potential for metaphor. The main, overarching use of repetition comes midway through the dance, when the entire first half replays. Of course, you don't know what's happening, at first. And this is part of the seduction, as in Feldenkrais Method. The second half is different, and yet familiar. The 14 dancers, at least some of them, have swapped roles; the music, designed and edited by Maxim Waratt (Naharin's pseudonym), is louder if no more somber—Rage Against the Machine, for example, in place of Gregorian chants; the lighting by Avi Yona Bueno (Bambi) is also louder, even a bit harsh—like the lights in a dark room at a dark hour. The choreography is pretty much the same. Or is it? Did I just see that 40 minutes ago? Is that another dancer (most

³ As Jeff Haller wrote about the Awareness Through Movement lesson 'Global Breathing' in an email: "Moshe taught a series of lessons in Berkeley. I think there were 48 lessons. This was number 1. The tape recorder was broken and it recorded too fast to understand. I used an old Sony handheld recorder that had a speed control on it and slowed it down to the point I could understand it. A number of years ago I taught the lesson in Mexico. A guy came up to me afterward and asked me where I got the lesson... because he was the guy who recorded it and his tape recorder was broken. Wanted to know how I got it. Pretty sure you can get the lesson from Feldenkrais Resources. Berkeley with the 48 lessons. See if they have it." (Personal communication August 13, 2015)

likely it is) striking another ballroom dance pose? Same pose, different pose? At every level, *Venezuela* enacts reversals and inversions, playing at the limits of our memory and recognition. Don't I know that song (*Dead Wrong* by The Notorious B.I.G., initially delivered at a stage whisper and then, in the second half, over the loud speakers [with shouting over the top].)? What animal is that? That almost mythical gait....

In his New York Times review of *Last Work* (2017), another recent dance by Naharin, Brian Seibert characterizes the popular choreographer's style: 'It doesn't seduce so much as assume rapt attention' (Seibert 2017). In *Virus*, I think the assumption verged on presumption, but *Venezuela* takes its time drawing you in, and then takes its time again, and again. Many passages were performed and then performed in reverse, others were danced in slow motion. Maybe this is the 360-degree seduction that Naharin was talking about, almost longingly, in the Berkshires, when he held up freedom in collaboration. This kind of choreography pulls people in; takes its time and changes; comes in waves. About a quarter of the way into the performance, and then again three-quarters of the way, across the horizon of the stage, three women sit astride three men. The men take on the posture of four-legged beasts, carrying the women on their backs towards the back of the stage, their toes tucked under and dragging along the ground like a gown. The men's bowed progression is reflected in the women's seesawing torsos. A side-bending movement we know so well from side-lying Awareness Through Movement lessons appears here with powerful associations. It is at once a majestic, regal, imperialist gender-bending scene.

Film is the other art in *Venezuela*, along with music (which functions as a contemporary soundtrack in terms of its emotional, sometimes abstract, atmospheric relationship to the primary action of the dance). The widescreen of the stage the animals cross, the liturgical score, Old World over New World, and vice versa, the slow motion, the activation of foreground and background, dancers viewed in the round that they create in turning, and over the shoulders of other dancers. The weakest element remains the incorporation of analog media—in this case naked canvas banners and then, in the second half, identifiable flags from around the world. Not unlike the chalk and blackboard in the earlier dance, the flags seem fussy. The piece could have managed without this material, as when the dancers' bodies themselves transform into horse and rider. Worth mentioning again—this epic scene of three women slowly riding three men to the back of the stage, where the men pivot and begin the crawl back, is breathtaking, more symbolic of border-crossing, territorial disputes, and the ways in which the world has been divided and conquered, than any piece of cloth.

In *Naharin's Virus*, exaggerated solos and in-your-face collective thrusting never add up or cohere, but the movement spectrum explored in *Venezuela* offers a sublime, moving picture of humanity making its mysterious way around the globe.

Last summer, I was left wondering how to connect Ohad Naharin's inspiring ideals and endearing expression to his choreography. This spring, his most recent dance has illuminated a

range of movement I cannot wait to inhabit in my own practice of the Feldenkrais Method and the live form of Gaga language and pedagogy at the studio down the street.

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