

Published: Jun 14, 2009 02:00 AM  
Modified: Jun 12, 2009 05:01 PM



Cedar Lake Contemporary Ballet performs 'Decadance' by Ohad Naharin, who spent months teaching the performers his 'gaga' style of movement.

Photo by Paul B. Goode

Choreographer Ohad Naharin



Photo by Nero

### **Modern movement**

**Ohad Naharin has taught companies around the globe his dances; now ADF wants to acknowledge his work**

**BY REBECCA J. RITZEL, Correspondent**

DURHAM - The last time choreographer Ohad Naharin traveled to the United States, his dance company was greeted by protesters. Four months later, he's flying back, this time to accept America's highest honor in dance.

Naharin is no stranger to strife. He's Israeli. But when he steps into a dance studio, he enters a world that is nationality-free. On June 25, Naharin (pronounced nah-hah-REEN) will receive the Samuel H. Scripps Award at the American Dance Festival, which comes with \$50,000.

Past recipients include the biggest names in American modern dance: Merce Cunningham, Mark Morris and ADF cofounder Martha Graham. Naharin now works mostly in Israel -- he is artistic director of Batsheva, the country's leading company - - but he's also a dual Israeli/American citizen who studied at Juilliard and lived in New York for 10 years. He has taught companies around the globe to perform his dances, and now ADF wants to acknowledge his work.

"His choreography resonates with so many people," said Jodee Nimerichter, co-director of the festival.

Naharin's work is personally provocative, not political. So it came as a shock to many when Naharin and his company were protested last winter in Pittsburgh, Minneapolis and Vancouver, British Columbia. The Los Angeles protest was the most vehement. Demonstrators stood outside UCLA's Royce Hall holding red baby booties and signs reading, "400 children of Gaza will not dance because Israel killed them."

"Those people were trying to create a dialogue with the audience that came to see the show," Naharin said, speaking by phone from Tel Aviv last week. "I think some of their material was very biased, but they meant well."

ADF's organizers are not expecting anyone to picket the Durham Performing Arts Center or the Reynolds Industries Theater at Duke University. The festival is emphasizing Israeli modern dance, presenting works by Naharin and four other Israeli choreographers.

From June 22-24, choreographer Emanuel Gat will debut his duet, "Winter Variations." On June 25-27, New York's Cedar Lake Contemporary Ballet will perform Naharin's "Decadance." Later in the season, Pilobolus will present a work by two Israelis, and a young choreographer, Michael Miller, will be in residence throughout the festival. A documentary screening, panel discussion and master classes round out the Israeli offerings.

Naharin knows that for a country about the size and population of New Jersey, Israel exports a disproportionate number of choreographers. "It's true," he said. "For a small country, there is many who are active in the making of dance and the performance of dance. I am not sure why."

He pauses. Takes a deep breath, and then speculates.

"I think maybe it's because Israel is a new country, with a very short tradition of music and theater. It's a meeting pot for many, many different influences, from all the people who came to build this country in less than hundred years. It creates this great vacuum for [dance], an art form that doesn't require long tradition."

Graham founded Batsheva in 1964 with support from a French baroness. While conductor Leonard Bernstein led the fledgling Israel Philharmonic's performances of Beethoven, Batsheva dancers were free to tell their stories. The Israeli modern tradition was born.

"Decadance," the piece Cedar Lake will perform, is an evening-length piece featuring excerpts from 16 previous Naharin works. In 2007, Naharin and his assistants spent

three months setting the piece for Cedar Lake's dancers and teaching them to perform his "gaga" choreography, a style of movement that is simultaneously helter-skelter and precise.

Benoit-Swan Pouffer, artistic director of Cedar Lake, says it's because his dancers spent so much time with Naharin that the work has been a critical success for his company. "We took our time," Pouffer said. "Time is gold."

Cedar Lake can afford such leisure because its founder, Nancy Walton Laurie, is a Wal-Mart heiress. Say what you will about the retail giant, the dance world has benefited from Laurie's largesse. These "Decadance" performances will mark the up-and-coming company's ADF debut.

"They've done very well," Naharin said. Batsheva performed "Decadance" at ADF in 2004, but Naharin says what Cedar Lake will do looks very different.

"Don't come back -- come," he said. "There is an advantage for people to repeat viewing something, because there is an opportunity to recognize more of what's in it. ... The shared experience that an audience has connects more to the storage room of our subconscious, where we can all connect to what we share in common."

**All rights reserved. This copyrighted material may not be published, broadcast or redistributed in any manner.**

**[Get it all with convenient home delivery of The News & Observer.](#)**

© Copyright 2009, The News & Observer Publishing Company

A subsidiary of [The McClatchy Company](#)