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## American Dance Festival's Israeli Dance Celebration

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In the heat of a Carolina summer, I'm pleased to be taking in a bit of this year's American Dance Festival (ADF) in and around Duke University in steamy Durham, N.C. I'm here with another local dance writer (Kathy Valin) for the Israeli Festival portion of ADF to catch performances from two companies: Emanuel Gat Dance and Cedar Lake Contemporary Ballet. 2009 marks ADF's 76th season, "Where Ballet and Modern Meet."

Primarily modern dance-based, the festival offers a dazzling array of diverse companies each season, complete with several world premiers and international "festivals" that each year focus on a given country's finest dance exports. *The New York Times* has heralded ADF as "one of the nation's most important institutions," and it's indisputably one that's inseparable from the history and development of modern dance. Check it out [here](#).

Last night, I attended Emanuel Gat Dance's *Winter Variations*, an evening-length piece commissioned by ADF that had its world premiere at this festival. Gat's company is Israeli by origin, but is now working in France. I wondered what effect this might have on his work politically, creatively. But that's another story ...

*Winter Variations* is a triumphant and ever-evolving duet created and performed by Gat and Roy Assaf. Dressed in drab tees and dark pants and shoes, the two men mesmerize with the sheer fluidity and authenticity of their movements. Through dramatic changes in mood, lighting and music, a choreographic language gradually emerges—one that takes the audience on a journey into the facets and possibilities of their relationship to one another. Whether it's literal or figurative doesn't matter here. Neither does a clear narrative thread. It's body over brain, yet their foreheads join for an instant in a sort of mind meld.

Corporeal expressions range from quivers and gestures (especially ones about the head and face), to quirky ballroom-inspired social partner dancing with a twist. Their seamless connectivity and spatial relationships maintained impressive telepathic qualities regardless of their relative proximity or distance on the expansive stage.

What I found most breathtaking were the synchronized dance sequences. Now and again, Gat and Assaf launch into rhapsodic episodes of perfect unison: taps, hops, jumps, turns and steps that would have impressed Fred and Ginger. The soft patter of their feet was satisfying, real.

Other passages spent "walking" on their knees lent an eerie, primeval quality, particularly in the shadowy lighting upstage that obscures their legs in limbo. Animal-like grace was also summoned: one moment, they were feline; another instant, avian; now, serpentine.

The duo's actions unfurl in scenes across a diverse soundtrack—Richard Strauss' *Im Abendrot*, The Beatles' "A Day in the Life," Franz Schubert's *Die Krahe* and an oud composition from Riad Al Sunbati.

In short, *Winter Variations* showcases Gat and Assaf's movement virtuosity. It was a pleasure to watch such pure, unadulterated kinesthetic skill and presence.

