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Naharin's brilliance on display at ADF

BY ROY C. DICKS, Correspondent

DURHAM - Ohad Naharin's impact as a modern dance choreographer was acknowledged in two ways Thursday at the Durham Performing Arts Center: a lifetime achievement award and a riveting presentation of career highlights.

The American Dance Festival has given the Samuel H. Scripps Award annually to outstanding choreographers since 1981, now rightly including Naharin alongside Martha Graham (the first recipient), Paul Taylor, Mark Morris and Laura Dean.

Naharin's instantly recognizable style has held audiences in thrall for nearly 30 years. Whether the dancers are completely motionless or in extreme frenzy, there's an astounding combination of total control and unfettered abandon, layered with an electrifying intensity. His pieces can be darkly mysterious or joyously playful, but they're always gripping.

The Israeli-born choreographer is artistic director of Batsheva, Israel's premiere dance company, for which he creates many of his works. Earlier this decade, Naharin put together excerpts from his larger works performed under the title "Decadance," which made a big impression when Batsheva presented it at ADF in 2004. Since then, Naharin has added, subtracted and re-ordered the parts, making each iteration partially new.

In 2007, Naharin made a version for New York City's Cedar Lake Contemporary Ballet, a bright new star in the modern dance world. The fit was perfect, bringing great acclaim for the way the company's dancers embodied Naharin's unique moves.

The company's debut at ADF Thursday proved what all the fuss was about. With no disrespect to Batsheva, these dancers have even more vitality, athleticism and exuberance. From the opening lineup of mannequinlike figures bursting into sudden spasms to the finale's stage full of dancers racing around backward, the performance revealed image after image that will likely remain forever etched in viewers' minds.

There were the familiar sights of the monklike men in flowing pants participating in ominous rituals, the mesmerizing domino effect of the full company in dress suits on folding chairs, and the giddiness of the on-stage audience participation in the cha-cha portion. The newest piece, from 2006, had five women in black dresses giving visual representation to Charles Bukowski poetry, elevating its harsh frankness with deeply personal responses.

If the evening's overall feeling is darker than the 2004 version, there's still an underlying spirit of survival and uplift. Some might find the level of intensity too unrelenting and the grittier images too disturbing. Also, the printed program does not identify the order of the pieces or who's performing them (intentional but nonetheless frustrating).

Still, these are small prices to pay for the constant wonder and striking effects created by this stellar company and this singular choreographer.

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What: Cedar Lake Contemporary Ballet

Where: Durham Performing Arts Center

When: 1 and 7 p.m. today

Cost: \$14-\$43

Contact: 684-4444, 680-2787, www.tickets.duke.edu

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