

JUN
30

Israeli-Born Choreographer Honored at American Dance Festival

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The American Dance Festival's [Israeli Festival](#) portion of its season escalated Thursday night with the inaugural ADF performance at the new Durham Performing Arts Center in downtown Durham, N.C. New York City-based repertory company Cedar Lake Contemporary Ballet made their ADF debut unforgettable with a high-octane performance of Israeli-born choreographer Ohad Naharin's 2007 work, *Decadance*.



Naharin, a citizen of both the U.S. and Israel and Artistic Director of Batsheva Dance Company, was bestowed with this year's Samuel H. Scripps American Dance Festival Award for Lifetime Achievement in a brief ceremony just before the curtain rose. Past recipients of this prestigious honor include a veritable who's who of modern dance: Martha Graham, Merce Cunningham, Paul Taylor, Katherine Dunham, Twyla Tharp, Alvin Ailey and so on ...

Naharin appeared humble and warm as he spoke, offering some advice to dancers in the audience — words that could also benefit anyone: "Have no secrets. Dance and live like you have nothing to hide. ... Get rid of the mirrors. Mirrors spoil your soul. ... Be silly, not stupid. ... Discover and learn something new daily." He says one of the great things about dance is it exists beyond ethnic, religious, geographic and other boundaries; it's the best example of what is good about humanity.

According to Naharin, *Decadance* is about reconstruction. The evening-length work contains reworked excerpts from 10 his previous works spanning 1985 to 2006, allowing for a diverse, comprehensive and wholly satisfying voyage into his choreographic world. And what a trip it is! Drag-style lip-synching by a dressed-to-kill diva dancing about on stilts in all her feathered, glitzy, thong-leotard glory. Five shirtless men in draped cloth semi-skirts smear liquid clay down their torsos and hurl themselves through the air. Black suits and shoes are gradually torn off and thrown into a collective heap. Company dancers leave the stage to choose audience member partners to bring up onstage for a collective riotous romp to "Over the Rainbow" and Dean Martin's "Sway."



After all, Naharin has said he believes everyone should dance. But few can dance like the very international cast of Cedar Lake performers. Don't let the "Ballet" in their name fool you — these *Decadance* performances are full-out modern.

The dancers appear to have nailed Naharin's characteristic "Gaga" movement language. This stands to reason, as I learned that Cedar Lake had the luxury of hiring Naharin to work with the dancers for about three months. (In most cases, due to budget limitations, a choreographer might only have a few weeks or so to set a piece on a company.) Cedar Lake was founded in 2003 by Nancy Walton Laurie — Walton as in Sam, as in she's a Wal-Mart heiress. As a result, Cedar Lake is reputedly rather well funded.

But back to the dancing. Gaga demands moving with a wild, visceral abandonment, yet with precision and intention. Results bring emotionally and physically charged dancing, fierce flexibility and ferocious athleticism. The dancers work in high contrast, between very slow movements and stillness that erupt into forceful and often explosive sequences. Most sections feature inventive, daring and even aggressive partnering.



Their gorgeous thrashing and stunning technical skill proved so exhilarating to watch that the audience broke into spontaneous, mid-act cheering a couple of times on opening night.

Several segments are steeped in ritual, whether in the form of repetition or accumulation of a series of steps. Unison and canon patterns frequently emerge, too. Strong, yet sensual feelings of weight and gravity also permeate the dancing, as seen in rhythmic foot stomps and a keen sense of extension and mid-air suspension in leaps.

In addition to Gaga, Naharin also employs other physical vocabulary in the form of gestures, such as fingers extended and pointed, shoulders hunched or arms slicing air.

Even popular dance gets a nod during the aforementioned audience participation portion, where we see suit-clad dancers with "jazz hands" and tipped fedoras boogie to "Hooray for Hollywood."

In short, Cedar Lake Contemporary Ballet didn't merely perform Naharin's *Decadance*. They attacked it, giving it their all.