

Dance Talk / Ora Brafman

Two Room Apartment - 22.10.12

Teaching current dance students the score of the original 1987 production of "Two Room Apartment" by choreographers Liat Dror and Nir Ben-Gal is a must. It's hard to think of a local work by independent choreographers - then termed as fringe artists - that has stayed so poignant in the memory of the dance world and audiences alike.

In fact, I remember that even then, when the work was first performed in "Gvanim Bamachol" Festival, it received an immediate recognition for being that work, which, after it's been made, the slow-to-wake Israeli contemporary dance world, will no longer be the same.



Sheinfeld & Laor. photo: Gadi Dagon

Ben-Gal and Dror, both graduates of the Ga'aton Dance Workshop, brought a new fragrance, a more European one, of a dynamic dance-theatre. A form of dance that is free of

heavily stylized movement of any kind, primarily exploring inter-sex relationships in a way reminiscent of Pina Bausch, but with a different slant: direct, honest, equal, cutting through the issues, insular, busy looking inward at itself, and not at stage signifiers.

And on top of that these two dancers gave themselves the not-so-obvious liberty of creating a work based primarily on their almost obsessive presence in the space, without props, costumes and other tricks-of-the-trade stage wizardry, and instead of making a 15-18 minutes work, as was the accepted norm back then, they created a frame, both physical and mental, that has kept the audiences captive for a whole night. That in itself alone was considered a major breakthrough.

Without going into too much detail, Ben-Gal and Dror divided the stage right in the middle with a visible line, and have kept themselves physically bound each to their own territory. They busily marched around dressed in identical casual wear, both wearing high-cut leather shoes.

They marched back and forth and around the space in complete unison, carrying out a series of continuous hand gestures - repetitive, looped movement sequences, while marching around. Yes, there were frontal clashes, even small victories here and there, there was a projection of their private lives onto a public space, ranging from the concrete to the suggested, but mainly there was a new rhythm and a new energy. And then they went to the Bagnolet - the prestigious French dance competition - and won first place.

Winning the competition brought them to perform the work in five different art centres around France, and without a doubt, the couple created a real outside interest in the contemporary Israeli dance scene.

They continued on to receiving a residency in Montpellier, and their success has opened the door to a range of independent Israeli choreographers whose work began to gain interest from overseas bodies.

Soon enough, the dwindling fringe artists, have started to occupy a more central space within the local dance scene, while almost at the same time the Suzanne Dellal centre opens, Ohad Naharin becomes the Artistic Director of the Bat Sheva Dance Company, shifting it from being a somewhat peripheral and eclectic repertory company in global terms, to an esteemed choreographer-based company of the highest standard.

Things continued to roll on, a wave of independent makers is becoming stronger, flooding the field, looking onward and upward. And suddenly, local choreographers Niv Sheinfeld and Oren Laor, an esteemed duo in their own right, decide to look back for a minute and revamp this canonic work, "Two Room Apartment", known to most contemporary makers only by rumor.

While overseas such a thing is known to happen, here in Israel it's something of a precedent. We have seen Yasmeen Godder being asked to create a work for Bat-Sheva for example, but can we think of Yasmeen Godder asking Ido Tadmor to create her interpretation of "Sima's Cooking Pot"?



Sheinfeld Laor. photo: Gadi Dagon

Ben-Gal and Dror, in an act of extraordinary generosity, have allowed Sheinfeld & Laor to take the work and do with it as they will. The duo indeed took quite a few liberties with the details, added their own layers of content and sensibilities, sang a song, got undressed, someone even washed their shirt and unpacked their frustration.

In this version gender plays a big role, because even though Sheinfeld & Laor are both men, like with any couple regardless of gender, there is that range of colors, within which we are all united and separated at the same time.

They begin the work when the audience members are seated on the edges of the space, which is also the stage itself. Niv and Oren mark the threshold of the performance arena - i.e. the apartment, with white-colored marking tape, continuing onto halving the space into two private territories and marching energetically along the threshold of their territory, while carrying out a sequence of functional and yet obsessive everyday hand gestures - rolling a loose sleeve up and down, moving one's hair back, all those gestures we do every day, mostly completely unnoticed.

It is clear that the work explores the notion of boundaries of any kind, and it's possible to view it as a discourse on local conflicts, body politics, gender issues, an exploration of that liminal space between public and private, reality and performance, the tension between previously 'processed' stage work and raw material, on borders and fences of any kind, on the ordinary, the habit, and whatever exists in between. Everything is open, accessible.

Niv and Oren imbued the work with their intimate relationship and emotions, and the result is fascinating. I believe that the image of Oren naked, a head higher than Niv, jumping into his arms hanging onto him like a child asking for solace over and over again, together with the range of emotions passing as clouds over Niv's exposed face leaving him, in his own way, naked too, will be burnt in our memory as a beautifully intimate moment, managing to surpass even the slightest hint of eroticism.

Applauds to Niv and Oren for taking a work that was created some 25 years ago, and showing first and foremost how it withstood the test of time, and stayed surprisingly relevant. They showed us how it's possible to maintain a work's basic structure and dynamism, and yet imbue it with their own authentic content without undoing the basic structure and form that holds it all together. The 'renovation' is a success, it's even a great success, and so we won a beautifully refurbished two-room apartment.