

## RECONSTRUCTING A DANCE WORK - THE REVIVAL OF "TWO ROOM APARTMENT"

**Dance researcher Deborah Friedes Galili interviews Niv Sheinfeld & Oren Laor**

It is a truism that dance is the most ephemeral of art forms. When a dance performance is over, there is no concrete art object left behind for posterity; instead, the dance lives on in the minds of the viewers and the bodies of the performers. Yet these traces are fragile and temporary in nature. Once a dance is no longer in active repertory, it is in danger of being lost forever.

Working against the inevitable passage of time, dance professionals have long engaged in the act of reconstruction to bring new life to older dances that have disappeared from the stage. The formidable process of re-creating and re-embodiment a dance raises a slew of questions. What is the essence of the dance? What sources do you consult, and when there are multiple versions of the dance – whether in the form of notated scores or videos or memories of previous performers – what rendition do you privilege? What is your goal in reconstructing this work? How do you respect the past while recognizing that this work must now live and resonate in the present? What contemporary relevance do you find in this dance? How do you bring yourself to roles originated by dancers who lived and trained in a different time with different norms?



Niv Sheinfeld and Oren Laor -2012

Illustration: Ruth Gwily

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Liat Dror and Nir Ben Gal -1987

Photo: Daniel Avidan

Niv Sheinfeld and Oren Laor faced these and other questions as they embarked on their reconstruction of Nir Ben Gal and Liat Dror's iconic *Two Room Apartment* (1987). With little precedent in the sphere of Israeli concert dance, the couple forged ahead into unknown territory and emerged with an innovative production that lays bare the complexities of their project. Prior to the work's premiere, Niv and Oren sat down with me to discuss their process.

**Q:** How did this project start? Do you have anything you want to say about why you chose *Two Room Apartment*?

**Oren:** For quite some time we've had a desire to create a duet for ourselves, to meet each other on stage. Then we thought, "What, do we go into the studio now and talk about our relationship and try to create something out of it?" It didn't feel right. We wanted a text that was premade, something that we can mold and play with. It might seem like a paradox, but we felt that choosing material that is not ours will enable us to get close and find each other. We thought the duet [*Two Room Apartment*] would be a good piece to dive into because of what it enables.

**Niv:** I even see it as a play, some kind of score that we can refer to, and we can give it our own twists, ideas, and interpretations. For me there is also a personal attachment to Nir [Ben Gal] and Liat [Dror] – I started my dancing career as a dancer in their company between '92 and '97. In terms of Israeli dance, this work had been very significant. After this, the whole dance scene in Israel changed. This work was presented dozens of times, all over the world. It had a relatively long life span, and it triggered a lot of interest.

**Oren:** I want to add another perspective. I think there are many similarities between Nir and Liat's artistic statement in this duet and what Niv and I are seeking in our own creations. I think we share the same kind of vision and desire of what we want to give to our audience. We're trying to reduce, to be more minimalistic as a means to peel off layers that will expose the core. Not to show how tons of money can be poured onto the stage, not to present immortal gods on stage, but the other way around: we are mortal, what you are witnessing is temporary, and it is present only here and only now. We seek simplicity, and this duet was very simple and humble to begin with.

**Q:** Niv, going back to what you touched on regarding your performing career with Nir and Liat, how is it for you to dance *Two Room Apartment* now? How does it connect physically with what you had done with Nir and Liat in their company?

**Niv:** Some basic principles in terms of plié, release, falling to the floor, free movement, energetic movement, and psychological behavior in movement – these are all things that I grew up on in their company, and so it felt very natural to get into this work, which is based on those elements. I felt at home in terms of the movement.

**Q:** Had you seen Nir and Liat perform *Two Room Apartment* live?

**Niv:** Yes. I saw it before I joined their company, and Oren saw them on stage three years ago when they did it at the Gvanim [Shades of Dance] in 2009. But they only did the first ten minutes of the work and that's it.

**Oren:** It really blew me away. They were, of course, not young anymore, not in shape anymore – still, it was so fascinating to watch the simplicity and humbleness of them doing these repetitions of what seem to be everyday gestures. I felt, "Wow! This is so new; this kind of thing

is still missing so much from our stages.”

**Q:** Let’s talk about the process you have been going through in bringing this work to the stage today.

**Oren:** We went to the dance library in Beit Ariela, and we took all the material about *Two Room Apartment* from that time: interviews with Nir and Liat, reviews, reflections on the work. It was important for us to gather as much information as we could about what Nir and Liat thought the piece was about and what the critics thought the piece was about.

**Niv:** There was also this book that we bought – *Preservation Politics* – that looks into past reconstructions of dance works. We wanted to learn more about how other artists dealt with reenactments that they did. Then we went to meet Nir and Liat in the desert, to conclude this legitimacy that they gave us in recreating the work the way we want. They told us to feel free to change whatever we want in the recreation. They were generous and they trusted us; we are very thankful to them for that. We also asked them, “What do you think this duet is about?” Liat said, “For me, it’s about two people: when are they alone, when are they together. That’s the basic thing.”

**Oren:** “Solitude versus togetherness.” I liked that they didn’t speak about the dancing. They spoke about the idea behind it – not that the dance should be so-and-so and the movement should be so-and-so, but about the issues that stir the action onstage from underneath.

**Niv:** After that, we took the video, and we started working from the video. We had two versions on video. The first version was from 1987 from *Shades of Dance*. That video was edited, which meant we sometimes had problems learning the material because we couldn’t see all of the body. And then we had one other version that I had found. It was one of their last performances of *Two Room Apartment*. It’s from 1996 in Berlin at the Podewil. We took a lot from the ’96 version because they had updated small things in it.

I think the main thing for us during the process was to find the key to our own apartment. The process raised many questions for us, and we kept some of them onstage as part of the performance. So there is actually this tension throughout the work between artistically processed material and raw, in-between moments of reflection on what we just did.

**Oren:** It was really important for us to avoid – by all means – putting a dinosaur onstage just to show how beautiful it was. This is not the aim of bringing it back. After running the work several times exactly like Nir and Liat performed it, we realized that it was not going to work. It was going to be a dinosaur; it was going to be a museum to this work. We had to do something to infuse it with our own awareness: if we’re doing this, we are going to do it our way. This was the second phase of the process – liberating ourselves from the image of Nir and Liat performing the duet, and exploring our own language inside the basic structure.

**Q:** How are you, Niv and Oren, similar onstage in this work to Nir and Liat, and how are you

different? How are you being yourselves in this? Where are there similarities, and where do you diverge from who they are in the piece?

**Oren:** Two months before the premiere of the work, after having copied all the material from the video and running it several times in the studio, we confronted a crisis. The movement was not ours, the nuances were not ours, the behavior was not ours – it was all theirs. We couldn't tell whether we were being ourselves or representing Nir and Liat. It was elusive. But it was not only the question of who we are but also questions of artistic choices; some of the choices made in 1987 are not convincing for us today anymore.

So we decided to open up the work for improvisation in the studio. We took the liberty to cut material; to change and re-arrange material; to play with musicality, intensity, and speed; and to insert our own variations on Nir and Liat's material. We also allowed ourselves to talk during the work if we felt we needed it. Scene by scene, we injected our own sensibilities and our own sense of authenticity into the work.

For example, in the original version there was a seduction scene in which Liat walks over to Nir and starts undressing him in an erotic way, leaving him in his underwear and shoes before walking away. We, on the other hand, had a totally different approach to this scene. We sought emotional, non-sexual intimacy in that moment, so we re-directed the scene. I strip to complete nudity in front of Nir and then climb into his arms like a child seeking comfort and protection, and Nir carries me and moves slowly, as if he is putting me to sleep. This scene became such an intimate scene for us that we couldn't even leave the original soundtrack untouched; we needed to bring something that we will deeply relate to, something that is "our" music. So we decided to use Elton John's "Goodbye Yellow Brick Road."

**Niv:** The fact that we are two men on stage – and they are a man and a woman – is by itself a major difference. Elements such as energetic output, nuances, balance, and tenderness all yield to a different set of expression and behavior when it comes to two men with high testosterone levels. The original work reflected on the issue of gender by looking into the eternal battle of the sexes; we, on the other hand, reflect on the issue of gender by looking into the relationship of two people of the same gender.

We also decided to have the public sit around the stage and not in front of it. We wanted to share our intimacy with the audience, and the proximity to the stage allows them to watch every detail and every nuance.

I would say that generally the process developed in three stages. First we had to re-write the text of the work in our bodies, and when we finished that stage, we were a representation of the text that Nir and Liat wrote. We were being "them." In the second phase we decided to improvise, change, and allow talking while we move or in between movement sequences. We could speak about everything and ask any question that ran in our minds. This situation enabled two layers: one was their score and the second was our reflection. In the third phase we fused these two elements into what today came to be our version of *Two Room Apartment*.