

LUTSF Report

Destination: Tel Aviv, Israel

Dates: 01 Dec 2012 – 02 Jan 2013

The purpose of my travel to Tel Aviv, Israel was to spend a month studying Gaga – a movement language developed by Ohad Naharin, the artistic director of Batsheva Dance Company.

I have discovered Gaga in spring 2011 by attending a class in London lead by Batsheva's ex-dancer Chisato Ohno which left a strong impact on my understanding of movement. I have been fascinated by this approach that gives me freedom to move in a very individual way while being physically challenged at the same time. After attending a few more Gaga classes in London and in Riga I've realised how much it has empowered me in my own artistic practice, but also raised some questions and made me eager to learn more about it.

I spent the whole of December 2012 in Tel Aviv taking the most of my stay. The classes were held at Suzanne Dellal Centre either in the mornings or in the evenings, sometimes both, every day except for Saturdays. Each class was led by a different teacher, which meant that with my unlimited monthly subscription I could experience different approaches to teaching Gaga, as every teacher had their own interpretation of the principles of this movement language. Since these principles are described in detail on the Gaga People website, here I will focus more on my own experience of Gaga.

Now that I'm rereading my notes taken after the classes, I can see how my perception of Gaga kept changing throughout the month, shifting from pure excitement to confusion, leading to more questions, further realisations and clarity. The first few classes left me thrilled: the joy of improvising again after a month of working with the set dance material back in London was reinforced by seeing incredibly skilled dancers who taught the class – very different in their approaches, energies and interests, but very articulate in their own bodies and clear and precise in their instructions.

The question that came up for me quite soon was whether Gaga can be seen as an independent movement method/language or a supporting one? I was asking myself this question mostly during Gaga Dancers classes, because often the teachers assumed (or the method assumes) that the ballet technique forms the basis of every dancer's training. Since this is definitely not my case, I used to find it a bit awkward when the teachers asked us to layer a ballet step with a visual task to add a new texture to a familiar form. While this approach explains how and why Batsheva dancers move the way they do, for me it meant dealing with two unfamiliar ways of moving, an interesting exercise in itself, but quite limiting in what I could gain from it. This made me wonder how this approach can be applied to other dance techniques – a study that I would like to undertake in future.

I felt more at ease during Gaga People classes which were open to both dancers and non-dancers. This is where I rediscovered my 'passion to move', something that I have lost long time ago over the years of my dance training. Although Gaga demands precision and articulation and requires listening and full attention, it also teaches to enjoy movement. In some classes we were told to smile or laugh, even if we didn't feel like doing it, and notice how our body would immediately relax, becoming 'available' for almost any kind of movement. Being alert and 'available' (one of the terms used by Gaga teachers) to switch from one task to another, from one state to another, has been constantly emphasized during the class. Gaga also stresses the importance of connecting precision with playfulness and effort with pleasure, and the classes that combined both of these extremes for me were the most satisfying ones.

As I was progressing with the classes, certain concepts of Gaga stopped being just abstract ideas that inspired me, but something that I could actually experience physically: like keeping several images in different parts of my body at the same time and being equally aware of them all, or finding the sensation of being moved by external forces or the energies inside of me, instead of making decisions about how and when to move. Each of these concepts seemed very simple and clear, but finally embodying them seemed like a huge discovery.

It was a very different experience to be in the class taught by Ohad Naharin – the creator of Gaga. He taught with the authority of a choreographer who owns every single idea behind the movement language that he developed. He knew exactly how the movement that comes from the chest or from the pelvis would look and feel like, and could spot immediately if the movement had the required texture or if it was faked. He would make us work harder to achieve precisely what he wanted or at least make us notice that we were actually not doing what he asked us to.

The month that I've spent in Israel has been incredibly rich on many different levels. Apart from the luxury of dancing almost every day, I was also lucky to be in Tel Aviv during International Exposure – a dance festival that showcases works by both established and emerging choreographers and gives an overview of the incredibly diverse Israeli contemporary dance scene. I was impressed to know that there are so many contemporary dance companies of a very high standard, and I wish that more of their works were seen outside of Israel. I was also briefly introduced to other movement methods that originate in Israel, such as Ilan Lev method (which shares many similar principles with Gaga) and Grinberg method.

Even though I spent a whole month in Israel, I feel that there's so much more to learn about this country, as well as about its dance scene. However, I feel that all the aims that I have set for myself before this trip have been achieved – I've gained so much as a dance professional and as an individual, becoming more flexible physically and mentally; I've been inspired by the amazing teachers and dancers and by the performances that I have seen during the festival; I have also discovered many new tools and fresh ideas for my own choreography that I was working on back in London.

I'm grateful to Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund for supporting me on this journey which has been truly inspiring and enriching.

Elena Jacinta, 25 February 2013