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Climb into your skin: A Look at Personal Intimacy in Gaga Practice and Performance

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CLIMB INTO YOUR SKIN: A LOOK AT PERSONAL INTIMACY IN GAGA
PRACTICE AND PERFORMANCE

BY

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ABSTRACT

This paper looks to combine the seemingly disparate worlds of dance and psychological theory to unravel the work of Israeli choreographer Ohad Naharin. The investigation hopes to further understand Naharin's work beyond what is physically seen and what could potentially be felt by his dancers. Using one of Naharin's most noted works as the subject of investigation, this paper questions if through the physically, mentally, emotionally challenging work of Naharin's technique, Gaga, the physical practice of dance becomes a multi-faceted inquiry of the soul.

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Chapter One

MASLOW'S HIERARCHY OF NEEDS, INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS, AND OHAD NAHARIN

In the mid-1950's Abraham Maslow, an American psychologist, began to question how experts in the field of psychology were addressing patients and their diagnoses. At the time, Maslow noted that psychologists defined the person as their diagnosis rather than considering them as a human with a diagnosis. In order to support his initial urge to view each patient as a human being first and foremost, Maslow developed a theory to highlight fundamental needs that humans have an innate desire to fulfill.¹ Maslow's hierarchy of needs lists five basic necessities that every human depends on to both survive as well as thrive in the world: physiological needs, safety, love, esteem, and self-actualization.²

Maslow states that no need can be specifically isolated; each need relates to the state of the other needs for satisfaction or dissatisfaction of the particular need in question, implying that there is an inter-dependency between all five needs. Interrelatedness of physiological and psychological factors in human experience is not unique to Maslow's claims- though

¹ "How did Abraham Maslow Change Psychology?". Narrated by Margie Lachman. TED Radio Hour, NPR, April 17, 2015. <http://www.npr.org/programs/ted-radio-hour/399796647/maslows-human-needs>.

² Maslow, A.H. "A theory of human motivation." (1943). *Physiological Review* 50, no. 4: pg. 394. *PsycARTICLES*, EBSCOhost (Date accessed January 27th, 2016).

revolutionary in the field at the time. There is a rich history of connectivity between body and mind. This concept of interrelated states of the human being is reminiscent of the language used often in the dance world, speaking to the inter-connected physiological and psychological factors, often referenced in the dance world as mind-body connection.

While it could be argued that dance could potentially fulfill all five of Maslow's basic needs, for the purposes of this research I look specifically to the need of esteem. Maslow describes esteem as "...lead[ing] to feelings of self-confidence, worth, strength, capability and adequacy of being useful and necessary in the world."³ I have chosen to highlight this need (rather than the other four) due to its externally motivated nature. Maslow describes the internal effects for a person when esteem is satisfied; however, it would seem in order to reach satisfaction, the human striving for esteem seeks achievement, adequacy, attention, appreciation, prestige, and recognition from the outside world. Human beings begin to perceive value and importance in their own life through the approval of others within their group.⁴ Maslow's theory for external support of this internal feeling sprouted in the 1950's, putting at least sixty years between the present day and his initial findings. Would his concept for building esteem through external

³ Ibid, page 382.

⁴ Ibid, page 382.

sources hold, or would he find that there is potential in the individual to build esteem from internal sources?

Through the lens of dance scholar seeking further interconnectivity between the dance world and the non-dance world, I argue that through specific forms of dance technique, esteem can be fostered and fulfilled through internal investigation and dialogue rather than through acceptance and approval from the outside world. I look further to two sources, one from dance and the other from psychology, to support this claim. In this paper I combine the work of Ruth Sharabany (clinical psychologist based in Israel) and three of her eight components for concepts of intimacy and put them in conversation with choreographer Ohad Naharin's development of Gaga movement technique to potentially build a model for internal satisfaction of the need for esteem. Further, I seek to articulate the potential overlap between Gaga practice and performance through deep analysis of a section of Naharin's work *Decadance*.⁵ By combining psychological theories with a specific movement idiom, I hope to unearth how a mindful movement practice can develop and deepen an intimate relationship with oneself, and whereby fulfilling the need of esteem becomes the byproduct of a rigorous internal investigation. Maslow has put feelings of self-worth and self-

⁵ Fisherman, Shraga, (2008) Identity and Intimacy in Religiously Observant and Non-Religiously Observant Adolescents and Young Adults in Israel, *Religious Education*, 103:5, pg. 526, DOI: [10.0180/00344080802427192](https://doi.org/10.0180/00344080802427192).

importance in the hands of the outer world; can dance put it back into the hands of the individual? I argue that by creating a sense of personal intimacy, human beings could take the one need dependent on their external world and begin to rely more fully on themselves. Therein lies an immense power of potential to create healthier relationships with both the self and the outside world.

Professor Ruth Sharabany PhD is a Doctor of Clinical Psychology, Developmental Psychology, and Psychoanalysis, and is currently on faculty at the University of Haifa in Israel. Through her research she developed eight main components for supporting the concept of intimacy: honesty and spontaneity; familiarity, knowledge, and emotion; connection, touch, and seeking closeness; exclusivity and privacy; giving, helping, and sharing; taking and asking for help; doing things together; trust and loyalty.⁶ An intimate relationship, or intimacy, can be defined as "...the ability to commit oneself to living with a concrete partner, to develop moral strength and to hold fast to such commitment, even when this demands sacrifice and compromise."⁷ Sharabany describes eight basic tools in developing intimacy with a partner; but, what if those eight basic tools were utilized in developing intimacy with oneself? Could this begin to support the basic

⁶ Ibid, pg. 527.

⁷ Ibid, pg. 526.

human need of esteem?

Before exploring the world of Ohad Naharin, it is best to examine where there may be potential cross over between these seemingly disparate worlds by first further understanding three of Sharabany's eight concepts for an intimate relationship and how they could potentially be recreated through an intimate relationship with the self. I look to highlight three because of their immediate ability to be translated into personal intimacy, perhaps through movement. The concept of honesty and spontaneity is the first mentioned by Sharabany, rooting the ability for human beings to relate to each other on an intimate level in the "...conveying of both pleasant and less pleasant information, and sharing feelings, fears, hopes, and plans."⁸ As human beings, we have the explicit opportunity to censor our conversations and actions based on our own inclinations (rooted in strong emotional response). It could be argued that we have that same ability to censor within our own mind, consciously or subconsciously, choosing not to acknowledge or even go as far as process occurrences that are unpleasant. By removing the censor within our own mind/body begin to foster the same genuine connection that creates an intimate connection? By unplugging, we could begin to turn the volume of listening up on our own individual experiences,

⁸ Ibid, pg. 527-528.

which could potentially enlighten areas of knowing oneself that remain unexplored.

Sharabany next denotes familiarity, knowledge, and emotion as the second supporting concept for developing an intimate relationship. In essence this concept implies knowing the other person, beginning to understand their likes and dislikes, needs, and inclinations. Sharabany states that this sort of knowledge can come from two sources: the first results from information being explicitly passed between one another (underscoring the importance of the honesty and spontaneity concept), and the second is based on perception and observation.⁹ A seemingly simple demand, to utilize perception and observation: however this concept demands physical time spent with the other person. Beyond time spent, it is beyond a skin deep understanding of another person of which I believe Sharabany to be speaking.

To further exemplify this depth understanding, I look to the Pulitzer Prize winning novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*, written by Harper Lee in 1960. One of the main characters, Atticus Finch, discusses how to meet intolerance with compassion and understanding with his daughter, Scout. "You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of

⁹ Ibid, 527-528.

view... until you climb into his skin and walk around in it.”¹⁰ Atticus Finch is not suggesting we steal each other’s skin, rather, that we attempt to create connection with each other as if we could feel each and every sensation the other person is experiencing. As human beings, we exist inside of our own skin feeling every emotion, preference, and need every moment of our lives. Perhaps we could take this cue from Atticus Finch and apply it to the individual experience as we seek intimacy within ourselves, hopefully remaining in our own skin upon insistence: to experience the world and its’ effect on our emotions, preferences, and needs. Remaining in our *own* bodies, in our *own* skin, to further understand ourselves through personal intimacy.

The final concept I would like to explore is Sharabany’s ideas of trust and loyalty, which can be summarized as simply trusting that upon entering an intimate relationship with another individual, this individual will only act in the best interest of the other person.¹¹ I find this idea in direct correction with two aforementioned concepts; you cannot have confidence that your relationship will confront deceit if you have honesty, spontaneity, familiarity, knowledge, and emotion. While Sharabany’s research centers around two people in a relationship, would these concepts cultivate a deepened sense of personal intimacy? To value the relationship with your

¹⁰ Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, (Grand Central Publishing, New York, NY, 1960), 39.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 528.

mind, body, and soul so highly that you would never act untoward to yourself? While the key to establishing personal intimacy is vast and multifaceted, intimacy is rooted in actively putting these three concepts into practice. A practice that I would argue is similar to the engagement in a movement technique.

To examine personal intimacy and how it can be fostered within human beings through movement (specifically through technique and dance performance), this paper looks explicitly to the work of Ohad Naharin. To more fully appreciate the master choreographer, attention must be paid to his history, and how he began to make his mark in the contemporary modern dance community through the creation of Gaga. Deborah Friedes Galili, dance scholar based in Tel Aviv, Israel, examines Ohad Naharin and Gaga Technique in her article “Gaga: Moving beyond Technique with Ohad Naharin in the Twenty-First Century.” While Naharin has made a notable mark on the dance world, his history is rarely mentioned in the rave reviews of his work; I look to Friedes Galili’s article for historic information, if only to gain a better understanding of where Gaga began to take form.

Ohad Naharin had immense love and passion for the performing arts—music, movement, and acting. The deep investment was clearly ingrained in his childhood while growing up in Israel with his artistically inclined

parents. Sofia Naharin, his mother, was a dance and music educator in Israel, and his father, Eliav Naharin, pursued psychodrama after a long career as an actor.¹² Most often, children grow up leaving their homes for music, dance, or theatre lessons however Naharin grew up in a home as breeding ground for potential curiosity and investigation in the arts. Ohad Naharin's home was the physical space where a strong movement practice had been seamlessly inserted into everyday life. His curiosity proved to be something more than childhood experimentation when Naharin performed for the Israel Defense Forces in the entertainment troupe.¹³ His home life, that was filled with varied performing arts, encouraged Naharin to explore where his specific interests lie. While participating in the entertainment troupe, he was able to feed his interest in dance making by choreographing dances on himself and the other children in the troupe, beginning to hone his eye for movement in space. Up until Naharin enlisted in the Israel Defense Forces, he was taking movement classes without any set goal of entering into the dance community. It was his mother that ignited a spark in Ohad Naharin to pursue the dance community in Israel.¹⁴

Sofia Naharin is credited with establishing the first connection between

¹² Galili, Deborah Friedes (2015) Gaga: Moving beyond Technique with Ohad Naharin in the Twenty-First Century, *Dance Chronicle*, 38:3, pg. 362, DOI: [10.1080/01472526.2015.1085759](https://doi.org/10.1080/01472526.2015.1085759).

¹³ Ibid, pg. 362-363.

¹⁴ Ibid, pg. 363.

Ohad Naharin and the Israeli dance company, Batsheva. The now internationally acclaimed Batsheva Dance Company was initially founded by the Baroness Batsheva de Rothschild in 1964 and has been in residence at the Suzanne Dellal Theatre in Tel Aviv Israel since 1989.¹⁵ Naharin began taking classes with the company shortly after leaving the IDF under the direction of Pinhas Postel, and he was swiftly brought into their immersive world as an apprentice. Shortly after joining the company, Naharin made his first connection with Martha Graham, an icon of American Modern dance who would facilitate a fuller introduction into the modern dance world.

In 1974, Batsheva celebrated the company's ten year anniversary by deciding to bring Martha Graham back in to Israel (she served as artistic advisor for Baroness Batsheva de Rothschild) to set a new work on the company, titled *Dream*.¹⁶ Naharin reminisced that "I hardly knew who she was and this old woman was falling in love with me [...] she said 'you go to the studio and come back with a two-minute solo' [...] I choreographed a solo for a Martha Graham piece. It didn't seem big it just seemed fun."¹⁷ That two-minute solo was the launch pad for Naharin's artistic venture in the United States, joining The Martha Graham Dance Company and studying at

¹⁵ Batsheva Dance Company: About, https://batsheva.co.il/en/about?open=the_company, (Date accessed March 16, 2016).

¹⁶ Ibid, pg. 362.

¹⁷ Naharin, Ohad, interview; "Mr. Gaga: Ohad Naharin documentary by Tomer Heymann" Youtube video, 1:42, December 29 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QDgKSxps14U> (accessed March 10).

the Graham School as well as the Julliard School. After a series of collaborations with various artists internationally, in 1980 Naharin began creating his own work. He began by touring his work through the United States as a smaller project, however, in the end decided to endeavor more formally and establish the Ohad Naharin Dance Company.¹⁸

Under the umbrella of The Ohad Naharin Dance Company, Naharin was commissioned to create work on Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre, Kibbutz Dance Company, Netherlands Dance Theatre, and (what would eventually become his creative home) Batsheva Dance Company. After ten years of traveling around the world, setting work on companies, Naharin took over Batsheva Dance Company, becoming the artistic director in 1990.¹⁹ The company itself underwent a visibly physical transformation after Naharin took control, which moved them away from Martha Graham's influences and ballet as the primary training methods and drove the company towards Naharin's own movement language.²⁰ This language had been developed over a period of 10 years, consistently shifting its emphasis and vocabulary used in class based on what was happening in Naharin's life. Naharin refers to those moments in his life as "stations," ranging from his formalized

¹⁸ Galili, Deborah Friedes (2015) Gaga: Moving beyond Technique with Ohad Naharin in the Twenty-First Century, *Dance Chronicle*, 38:3, pg. 363, DOI: [10.1080/01472526.2015.1085759](https://doi.org/10.1080/01472526.2015.1085759)

¹⁹ Ibid, pg. 363.

²⁰ Ibid, pg. 363.

movement training to the physical therapy sought after a severe leg injury, which led to back surgery; all moments in time that brought him to creating what is no longer known has his movement language, but is now known as Gaga.

Chapter Two

GAGA TECHNIQUE AND INTIMACY

Gaga is referred to as a technique for the simplicity of understanding certain physical delineations in the dance world; however, in a deeper viewing of the structural and conceptual elements of Gaga, I argue Gaga is a practice that can then be utilized in performance. For the purpose of this inquiry, 'practice' will be defined as a physical investigation that is rooted in process; practitioners deeply investing in their *own* inquiry of the material presented. Gaga as a practice requires commitment to self-knowledge without expecting the work to arrive at a finalized product. While the class itself begins and ends, the work that happens within that time frame continues to transform each time the practitioner takes the space. I look now to the specific structural and conceptual elements of a Gaga *practice* to further

understand how Ruth Sharabany's three highlighted concepts for intimacy could potentially be embodied within practice and performance.

Gaga practice, rather than being categorized as a codified technique, is understood in the dance world as a movement language, created by Ohad Naharin after dedicating himself to his own physical and mental recovery. Galili notes that Naharin's rehabilitation process to regain full range of motion included physiotherapy, T'ai Chi, and Pilates. These modalities combined themselves with Naharin's past experiences in the performing arts and (at the time) present interest in the moving body choreographed in space. This combination invited Ohad Naharin to begin to solidify his own movement practice which then became a movement practice to be shared with many.²¹

At its inception, Gaga technique became a training methodology for Batsheva Dance Company; its purpose was not to train the body specifically for movement Naharin was setting, but for its ability to fulfill broader needs of many dancers training both physical and mental rigor. A new way to experience mind-body connectivity. First known as "my movement language" (by Naharin), the movement classes Naharin facilitating sought to create an environment with enough physical and mental space for the

²¹ Galili, Deborah Friedes (2015) Gaga: Moving beyond Technique with Ohad Naharin in the Twenty-First Century, *Dance Chronicle*, 38:3, pg. 364, DOI: [10.1080/01472526.2015.1085759](https://doi.org/10.1080/01472526.2015.1085759).

practice to be about what each dancer needed. This is an opposing concept to other technique traditions in which the teacher creates an overall goal for the class and then fulfills that goal through specified movement material. By calling the classes “my movement practice,” Ohad Naharin realized there was an immediate association drawn between the physical practice and his own body; it was in that moment the designation changed to Gaga.²² Sensing its ability to reach the masses, Naharin’s choice to remove his authority and thereby removed his physical presence from each Gaga practice then alleviated any expectations of the leader and practitioners. What Naharin continues to value about this *practice* is the community based environment moving together, however the movement itself generated from the individual. Removing his name removed the immediate association of the practice itself and his moving body, reinforcing the individual.²³

Gaga technique is currently taught under two different designations: Gaga/dancer and Gaga/people. Naharin’s movement language was initially introduced as a dance training method (Gaga/dancer) however in the practice itself, he saw potential for non-dancers to engage in a similar

²² Naharin, Ohad, interview; “Ohad Naharin discusses Gaga movement”, Youtube video, October 25 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OGPG1QL1vJc&nohtml5=False> (accessed February 20).

²³ Galili, Deborah Friedes (2015) Gaga: Moving beyond Technique with Ohad Naharin in the Twenty-First Century, *Dance Chronicle*, 38:3, pg. 364, DOI: [10.1080/01472526.2015.1085759](https://doi.org/10.1080/01472526.2015.1085759).

Note: The effects of Gaga technique on non-dancers could unearth additional information about the embodiment of intimacy and esteem, however that notion and exploration is beyond the scope of this project at the present moment.

practice (Gaga/people). Ohad Naharin was correct in assuming his movement language would begin to spread. Gaga/dancers today is taught in Israel, the United States, Germany, Italy, Japan, South Korea, Spain, and Switzerland.²⁴ The international pollination has given Gaga and Naharin a specific recognizable aesthetic, characterized not by codified movement material but rather a clearly visible mind, body, soul experience.

To begin to illustrate what this experience might look like and why eludes adequate verbal description, I first look to the structure of a Gaga/dancers class. Over the course of an hour and fifteen minutes, how could the components of a Gaga/dancers class begin to cultivate an internal mind-body investigation, or, an intimate relationship with the self? The general description of a Gaga/dancers class begins by outlining the requirements for participants, to include a certain amount of maturity and physical experience; according to the official website, "Gaga/dancers classes are open to professional dancers or advanced dance students ages 16+."²⁵ It could be argued that Gaga as a practice requires a certain amount of intellectual maturity due to the deep investigative nature of the work, which supports the age/skill requirements. As these willing, mature practitioners

²⁴ "Ongoing Classes". Gaga People Dancers. <http://gagapeople.com/english/ongoing-classes/> (accessed February 20, 2016).

²⁵ "Gaga/Dancers". Gaga People Dancers. <http://gagapeople.com/english/ongoing-classes/> (accessed February 20, 2016).

enter the session, participants are guided through a series of instructions that are layered upon each other as the class progresses. The individual leading the class (a dancer who has studied Gaga extensively with Ohad Naharin) rarely physically demonstrates the instruction, but rather guides movers through verbal cues.²⁶ Additionally, the instructor encourages dancers to interpret the instruction on an individual basis, based on “knowing [themselves] below the surface; beginning to understand their [own] likes and dislikes, needs, and inclinations.” The cue “find a good taste in your mouth,” is used often in a Gaga practice, which immediately suggests that the practitioner must tap into a sense of familiarity and knowing of *themselves* in order to know what a “good taste” might be.²⁷ Practitioners familiarity with their own preferences stems from a developed sense of self knowledge, a concept of an intimate relationship specifically highlighted by Ruth Sharabany, as mentioned in Chapter 1. How does a Gaga practice effectively utilize the mature senses it is requiring?

I am immediately curious about the description of age and where the dancers entering into this class should be developmentally. The traditionally logical explanation might be that there are a variety of movement

²⁶ Galili, Deborah Friedes (2015) Gaga: Moving beyond Technique with Ohad Naharin in the Twenty-First Century, *Dance Chronicle*, 38:3, pg. 364, DOI: [10.1080/01472526.2015.1085759](https://doi.org/10.1080/01472526.2015.1085759).

²⁷ Galili, Deborah Friedes (2015) Gaga: Moving beyond Technique with Ohad Naharin in the Twenty-First Century, *Dance Chronicle*, 38:3, pg. 370, DOI: [10.1080/01472526.2015.1085759](https://doi.org/10.1080/01472526.2015.1085759).

explorations requiring dancers to have a particular technical skill set associated with the designation 'advanced or professional'. Looking deeper at the description of a Gaga/dancer's class, it is clear that there are not specific movement exercises used in each class requiring physical skill work one might experience in an advanced dance class. Nor does it describe the work produced in class to be physically taxing in a way that would demand a certain level of muscular strength. When asked what a Gaga class is 'about' Naharin replied, " it is about listening to something that is beyond the athletic side of the dancer... it is... something about the soul."²⁸ What could be beyond the athletics of dance that requires a dancer to have a certain level of skill to be labeled as professional or advanced?

Mind-body connection, as described by Bartenieff Fundamentals practitioner Peggy Hackney, references the interplay between the inner connectivity and outer expressivity in order to develop a movement experience that could be described as more alive.²⁹ Hackney explains in her book *Making Connections*, that this lived movement experience is an end goal of an intensive study of the body which Bartenieff Fundamentals is based in. I would argue that what Naharin is speaking to in his description of Gaga, this element that reaches farther into the dancer past the pure physicality of

²⁸ Naharin, Ohad, interview; "Ohad Naharin discusses Gaga movement", Youtube video, October 25 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OGPG1QL1vJc&nohtml5=False> (accessed February 20, 2016).

²⁹ Hackney, Peggy, *Making Connections*, (2002: Routledge, New York, NY), pages 214-215.

dance, is the mind-body connection.

Inner connectivity refers to the dancer considering his/her internal experiences; preferences, emotional experiences, what the mind brings to the physical experience. The outer expressivity is then the body reacting to or representing the inner connectivity, essentially a mind-body-soul experience. Recalling Naharin's requirements for entering into a Gaga class, if the dancer has a sense of their own mind-body connection before entering the space, they are then equipped to engage in "...the connection between [their] demons, fantasy, passion."³⁰ Naharin is asking that these dancers tap into their inner connectivity in order to create physical expressivity, rather than allowing the teacher dictate their physical happenings. The dancers are tuning into their own needs, feelings, and preferences based on their observation and perception of themselves, tapping into one part of the intimate relationship with themselves in order to skillfully develop the ability to physically express.

To explore with further depth, I look to a key structural element of a typical Gaga/dancers class. In the hour and fifteen minutes of class time, dancers are challenged not only to physically enter into the unknown, but also to find emotional and mental integration of unexplored physical

³⁰ Naharin, Ohad, interview; "Ohad Naharin discusses Gaga movement", Youtube video, October 25 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OGPG1QL1vjc&nohtml5=False> (accessed February 20, 2016).

boundaries. Teachers provide task-based support verbally to allow each dancer the opportunity to zoom in on specific body parts and sensations.³¹ More specifically, the key structural element that I argue further encourages a personally intimate relationship is the improvisational nature of each Gaga class. The teacher is not prepared with set material to teach the students, nor is the work structured around basic technical elements typical of a dance class, such as *pliés*, *tendus*, across the floor exercises, or a large group phrase to finish the class. The layering of ideas and material is presented by the Gaga instructor as a basis for improvisation to maximize the movement possibilities within each individual dancer. Naharin speaks of turning the volume up in order to listen better, which increases the mind-body connection. That listening will invite vastly different movement material depending on each person.³² It was the individually driven nature of Gaga that increased both Naharin's intrigue as well as the interest of others, insisting that each dancer remain in his/her own skin while tuning in to avoid what he calls "dead flesh" (which I posit refers to the lack of mind-body connection).³³ By asking enlivened bodies to engage in improvisation, dancers are beginning to tap into another concept of intimacy; Sharabany

³¹ Naharin, Ohad, interview; "Batsheva Dance Company: 'It's about making the body listen'" Youtube video, November 14 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gRky99sO-og&nohtml5=False> (accessed March 3, 2016).

³² Naharin, Ohad, interview; "Ohad Naharin discusses Gaga movement", Youtube video, October 25 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OGPG1QL1vJc&nohtml5=False> (accessed February 20, 2016).

³³ Naharin, Ohad, interview; "Batsheva Dance Company: 'It's about making the body listen'" Youtube video, November 14 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gRky99sO-og&nohtml5=False> (accessed March 3, 2016).

refers to it as honesty and spontaneity.

Dance improvisation itself is a practice in spontaneity; asking the dancer to make decisions and choices based on the present moment rather than looking into the past moving body or anticipating the future moving body. In a Gaga class, the teacher asks each dancer to authentically remain in their own skin, in the present moment, responding to the cues presented, and making physical decisions based on the internal investigation and interpretation of each idea. In responding to one singular cue, a dancer can either choose to move from preexisting experiences with that idea or dive into the inquiry of said experiences and creating honesty within themselves to find a spontaneous reaction to the idea. It would seem that this act of honest spontaneity could make for harried, unorganized movement, however Naharin is adamant that while this practice is improvisational, “it’s... about form and clarity of the form.”³⁴ Each dancer must regard their facility in the highest manner, never acting on this spontaneity in a way that would put their body in jeopardy. This self-care and self-awareness engages the last concept for intimate relationships: trust and loyalty.

How could a Gaga class engage the dancer in elements of trust and loyalty with their own body beyond the physical trust it customarily takes to

³⁴ Naharin, Ohad, interview; “Ohad Naharin discusses Gaga movement”, Youtube video, October 25 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OGPG1QL1vJc&nohtml5=False> (accessed February 20, 2016).

engage in an experience physically and artistically? How does a Gaga class support the soul-filled trust that Sharabany speaks of in this particular concept encouraging intimacy? Dancers are invited into a Gaga class to engage with their souls, tapping into not just the physical body but the mind and a whole range of desire as well. I would argue Naharin reinforces this element of trust by conducting classes in studios without mirrors.³⁵ Mirrors in a dance class allow dancers to receive immediate visual feedback on their physical moving body which then allows the dancers to evaluate their performance.³⁶ This evaluation subscribes to the notion that, within the structure of the class, there is a set aesthetic goal or product each dancer should achieve by the end of the class. Looking at Gaga technique as a practice, which is an ongoing investigation, rather than a codified movement technique, there are no end goals that can be evaluated through visual feedback. Gaga practice asks the dancers to engage physically and receive information through investigation of their own physical experience which is information that cannot be seen, but must be felt. Dancers are trusting that what they are feeling in their bodies is as a result of engaging with the verbal cues and invitations in the work. Personal interpretation of cues and ideas

³⁵ Galili, Deborah Friedes (2015) Gaga: Moving beyond Technique with Ohad Naharin in the Twenty-First Century, *Dance Chronicle*, 38:3, pg. 368, DOI: [10.1080/01472526.2015.1085759](https://doi.org/10.1080/01472526.2015.1085759).

³⁶ Radell, Sally A. (2013), Mirrors in the Dance Class: Help or Hindrance?, IADAMS, <http://www.iadms.org/?400> (accessed April 30, 2016).

presented suits the dancer's own physical structure and mental interest thereby reinforcing the mind-body connection. When engaging in a Gaga practice, they are invited to "...act in...the best interest [of themselves]..."³⁷ It develops trust and loyalty within themselves by making decisions spontaneously for the mind and body in the studio at that moment. According to Sharabany, the only way to develop trust and loyalty is through investing in the other elements upon which intimacy is based.³⁸ Therefore, in the hopes of developing trust and loyalty for personal intimacy, there would need to be a foundation of honesty, spontaneity, familiarity, knowledge, and emotional connection.

The structure and content of a Gaga class, developed by Ohad Naharin, requires knowledge of self on a mind-body-soul level and a willingness to make physically spontaneous decisions. This self-knowledge and commitment to making authentic choices in the body also requires an ability to make decisions in the present moment, acting in the best interest of that mind-body soul in that particular moment. Therefore, a Gaga class utilizes the intimate relationship with the self throughout the hour and fifteen minutes each class takes. However, what happens when this mind-body-soul practice is put into performance? Specifically, what happens when multiple

³⁷ Fisherman, Shraga, (2008) Identity and Intimacy in Religiously Observant and Non-Religiously Observant Adolescents and Young Adults in Israel, *Religious Education*, 103:5, pg. 526, DOI: [10.0180/00344080802427192](https://doi.org/10.0180/00344080802427192).

³⁸ Ibid, pg. 527.

Gaga practitioners- adept in self-knowledge, practice, and exploration- are given identical and set choreography? I would argue that through the development of this rigorous and intimate relationship with the self through Gaga practice, esteem is first fulfilled **through the self** (rather than through external factors) and can then be transferred into dance performance to create skin that lives within a community experience. This two-step process then reinforces Maslow's original claims on how to create esteem, which fosters "...self-confidence, worth, strength, capability and adequacy of being useful and necessary in the world."³⁹

Chapter Three

GAGA PRACTICE IN PERFORMANCE: *DECADANCE*

In seeking delineation between practice and performance, looking specifically at Gaga, the movement which was formerly improvised now becomes set material. Each dancer enters the performance space knowing the movement, the timing of each movement, the impulses for the movement, as

³⁹ Maslow, A.H. "A theory of human motivation." (1943). *Physiological Review* 50, no. 4: pg. 394. *PsycARTICLES*, EBSCOhost (Date accessed January 27th, 2016).

well as the intention of the work overall. I look to specifically explore Gaga in performance through Batsheva's work, still under the artistic direction of Ohad Naharin. As the creator of Gaga, I would argue principles of the practice are utilized in performance to increase the lived experience within a community setting which can be visually experienced by audience members.

As a quintessential example of viewing Gaga practice in performance, I offer an analysis of the movement of one section of Ohad Naharin's work *Decadance*. This iconic work, which had its world premiere in 2000 at the Suzanne Dellal Center in Tel Aviv Israel, was created in celebration of Naharin's ten-year anniversary with the company.⁴⁰ As it continues to be performed, the vignettes presented are drawn from the existing repertory, altering the piece's composition slightly from year to year. It is currently comprised of eleven dances created by Naharin between the years of 1990 and 2011; the work I look to highlight has maintained its position in *Decadance* since the world premiere.⁴¹

Zachacha was created in 1998, however the clothing and musical composition evoke a sense of classical Orthodox Jewish traditions.⁴² The

⁴⁰ "Season 2015-16". Batsheva Dance Company. <https://batsheva.co.il/en/repertory?open=decadance> (accessed March 3, 2016).

⁴¹ Delaney, Brigid, "Decadance Review- Batsheva Dance Company back with force and feeling". The Guardian. <http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2015/oct/16/decadance-review-batsheva-dance-company-back-with-force-and-feeling> (accessed April 1).

⁴² Cowles, Charlotte, "Black Hats Traditionally Worn by Orthodox and Hasidic Jews Are Now Trendy, According to the Times", last updated May 2016, http://nymag.com/thecut/2011/05/black_hats_traditionally_worn.html#.

work is currently performed by 16 dancers (male and female) dressed in black sneakers, black trousers, a white button up shirt, a black suit jacket, and a black Borsalino hat (typically worn by Orthodox and Hasidic Jewish men). The sound score is a song typically sung during Passover; “Echad mi Yodea” was arranged and performed by Ohad Naharin and The Tractor’s Revenge for this work.⁴³ Both the musical composition and the choreographic structure of the dance mirror each other; as the piece(s) continue, there is an accumulation of movement and verses.

The recorded version I was able to access for analysis was broadcasted to a German Television station in October of 2013. This particular performance of *Decadance* begins with *Zachacha*; the dancers enter the space in their black attire, standing in a semi-circle with wooden chairs placed behind each of them. There is an immediate sense of power from their stance, legs in a wide parallel, looking towards the center of the circle, arms cascading down their sides. There is a unified intention behind each dancer’s grounded body however it is visibly individualized through the rise and fall of each chest, each dancer taking in air as his/her body needs. As the sound enters the space, a woman speaks in French and then a strong percussive

⁴³ “Season 2015-16”. Batsheva Dance Company. <https://batsheva.co.il/en/repertory?open=decadance> (accessed March 3, 2016).

Note: The religious content of the musical composition and the dance itself are present, however the exploration of the religious underpinnings are beyond the scope of this research.

sound cues the dancers to take their seats.⁴⁴

Hunched over with their gaze towards the ground, the dancers rest their elbows on their knees, clasping their hands loosely; this posture is far more pensive than their initial grounded posture. As if each dancer is taking this moment to absorb the words that powerfully fill the space. The chant crescendos increasing in volume and audible rigor. Next begins a cannoned explosion of movement. Dancers from right to left swiftly burst out of their seats to expose their entire torso (sternum, ribs, heart, throat) to the ceiling. Heads thrown back and from the sheer force of the thrust upwards, their hats fly from atop their heads to land behind each chair. Driven by individual motivation, the last dancer in this rapid sequence of explosions seems to find such a great amount of force driven from the inside of his body that he has no choice but to collapse to the ground as the rest of the dancers slowly descend back to their seats.⁴⁵

Each dancer rises to attention shouting out the words “shebashamaim uva'aretz”, which translates from Hebrew to English as “who is in the heavens and on earth.”⁴⁶ Their words in sync with the recorded sound, each dancer then slowly melts back to their seated position: hunched over, eyes

⁴⁴ “Ohad Naharin Deca Dance”, Youtube video, October 11 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bk-odQ-23_4 (accessed March 15, 2016).

⁴⁵ “Ohad Naharin Deca Dance”, Youtube video, October 11 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bk-odQ-23_4 (accessed March 15, 2016).

⁴⁶ “Echad mi Yodea”, <http://www.hebrewsongs.com/song-echadmiyodea.htm> (accessed April 27, 2016).

lowered, and hands loosely clasped. Another verse is added to the song, and with its addition, movement is accumulated. In unison, the dancers jab an elbow with great force; so much force that the center of their bodies is now exposed to the ceiling, juxtaposing their previous posture. The lighting overhead no longer darkens the shadows on their faces, instead shining light onto their cheeks. Each dancer absorbs the light differently, the light highlighting their individual facial structures while they move as a unit. Both hands then punch inwards at their guts, the torso reacting, if only for a brief moment, before exploding in their seats in unison. Bodies then retract quickly as the cannoned explosion moving from right to left begins again. All dancers rise to attention shouting, "shebashamaim uva'aretz," while the previous dancer finds that his explosion again brings him to the floor.

A third verse of movement and music is added. The dancers wait patiently hunched over in their chairs, without anticipation. That calm stillness is broken as they all violently shake their heads up and down a few times before launching their bodies into the air. Dancers press their hands downwards onto their chairs, which hurls their bodies into the air, bent at the waist, guts absorbing the force. The second verse of movement and music repeats itself, growing in fervor. The dancers are unified in their intention while the movement is becoming individualized in the intensity.

The cannoned explosion returns again, followed by the dancers' voices joining the recording as they shout in Hebrew.

From their seated, hunched over position, the dancers suddenly grab the tops of their heads in unison to expose their throats towards the ceiling, light cascading down the front of their necks. Hands meet, the dancers then punch themselves in the gut which launches them out of their seats. As soon as they rise to stand both hands unfurl out to the side as the back of the neck quickly breaks. These actions abruptly returning the dancers back to their seats. Dancers then repeat what has come before the fourth movement verse; head shaking, press down to launch body into the air, throw to the right, punch to the left, seated explosion, cannoned explosion. "Shebashamaim uva'aretz," all dancers shouting, risen from their seats with the lone dancer still ending the explosion prone on the floor.⁴⁷

The dancers have just completed a full repetition of the movements accumulated up to verse ten; mimicking the music, their repetitive movement seems to have reached critical mass in individualized intensity. The dance itself (at this point) has found its' way to a peak point of physical exertion through bigger throws, heavier punches through each dancer's personally intimate investigation of how their own body can reach this

⁴⁷ "Ohad Naharin Deca Dance", Youtube video, October 11 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bk-odQ-23_4 (accessed March 15, 2016).

moment. They are once again slowly descending to their seats after stepping towards the center of the semi-circle to throw the entire right side of their body inwards, to step back to their seats. Dancers grasp their faces with both hands in an urgent manner, their heads receiving the impact by tilting backwards slightly and then returning to vertical alignment. Then, hands drop from faces. Spinning out of their seats, each dancer spills out to a plank, facing and supported by the chair. Dancers drop to their knees to then push back up to a small hover while one dancer bounds from the ground up to standing on top of his chair. It is as if the hover of the community supports the dancer exploding out of his seat to standing; their bodies a small explosion reverberating through the space to support his body while airborne. Everyone then pushes themselves to their knees on the floor facing the chairs, swiping the left elbow propel themselves back to sitting. Dancers grab forehead, punch to stand, unfurl hands, shake head right to left, press hand and expel out of their seats, throw right, punch left, seated explosion, cannoned explosion, "SHEBASHAMAIM UVA'ARETZ."

The dancers descend to their seats, after shouting "who is in the heavens and on earth," seems to be the reset button before each verse is added. The instrumentation, supporting the lyrics, gain momentum as verses are added increasing the amount of sound supporting the words thereby

increasing the sheer volume. At the end of *Zachacha* there are a total of thirteen versus to the music, however as the movement reaches verse ten and there is a drastic shift. The building of material at this point has begun to educate each dancer on the way his/her body performs the movement material which then allows audience members to begin to appreciate and invest in the building of material and where the work has taken the group as collective thus far.

The music suddenly decreases in momentum, only to pick back up as each dancer takes a familiar step towards the center of the semi-circle. The purpose of the initial throw becomes clear: they repeat the throw after removing their jackets and toss jackets, in individual frustration, towards the center. A repetition of movement verse nine brings them back to sitting; all roll their torso around right, back, left with their sternum exposed to the ceiling. Dancers remove one sneaker and then the other to step and throw their sneakers now into the growing pile of clothing. Repeat verse nine, we now see the dancers removing their button down shirts, again adding to the pile. Repeat. "Shebashamaim uva'aretz." Pants are shed; the music is full, adding in electric guitar creating an edge underneath the final verse of "Echad mi Yodea." Dancers have disrobed, remaining in grey briefs and grey tank tops. Except the lone dancer that fell to the floor after each cannoned

explosion, alluding to the potential that this explosion can physically manifest and result in vastly different experiences for each dancer. Verse ten marked the stripping down of clothing and perhaps a removal of the sense of calm the dancers began with. The movement and their sense of composure begins to unravel. After their final round of “shebashamaim uva'aretz,” the dancers remain standing, their breathing visibly taxed from what can only be described as physical expulsion. From the ease in which dancers were inhaling and exhaling, their bodies have begun to reflect the physical work they have experienced.

Zachacha takes place primarily in unison among all of the dancers, which means each dancer is performing the same movement in the same timing. As the piece progresses we start to see a decay of exact unison, it instead highlights the unified performance approach while dancers engage in their individual experience of removal of clothing. Variations in timing are also seen in the duration through which the dancers return to the versed material. I believe each dancer while performing the movement in unison has an individual sense of autonomy, an individual sense of self.

Zooming in on Ohad Naharin’s world of Gaga practice in performance has revealed the ways in which the practice itself can carry into performance. The movement material *Zachacha* is comprised of evokes a guttural human

experience; punching, exposed throats, expulsion from seats. It is as if each dancer is moving from their deepest center to quite literally jump out of their skin, which is a stark contrast to the quiet, hunched over posture that seems to bring each dancer back into themselves. Perhaps this calm return represents the self-trust bred in each dancer through their practice.

Additionally, I argue that through the *practice* of Gaga the dancers of Batsheva are able to find their individual sense of intention through these two polarities. Through the course of a Gaga practice, dancers are tapping into an intimate relationship with themselves through improvisation (honesty and spontaneity), mind-body connectivity (familiarity, knowledge, and emotion), and the physical space, which forces each dancer to move only from themselves (trust and loyalty).

When that personal intimacy is transferred into performance of Naharin's work, I then argue that Naharin's choreographic structure of *Zachacha* reaffirms Maslow's original idea of creating esteem. First and foremost, Naharin is creating esteem through personal intimacy *through* the choreographic structure of *Zachacha*. Accumulation of intensity draws the audience in, but also reaffirms the fervor and commitment of community. United attention to movement material honors individual expression; variation is welcomed not simply tolerated. Naharin is then putting that

individual experience into a unified approach to set movement material. The movement material (as previously mentioned) accumulates, which has the basic structure of repeat and add. This challenges the dancer to continuously deepen their understanding of the movement. It also requires a heightened understanding of each body in order to then increase the self-actualization, deepening the intention of the movement which thereby increases the understanding of the self. Each time these dancers grasp their forehead to expose their throat, the movement is creating a generating foundation which can then be added to with each repetition.

The other choreographic structure utilized is canon which creates a deviation in the unison timing structure that Naharin has set for the rest of the piece. The first dancer begins to explode and each dancer quickly follows, the explosion working its way from stage right to stage left. Timing of the canon relies on the dancer's ability to individually explode all while staying in connection with the dancer's on either side in order to create the visual effect of a wave that this canon produces. The dancers performing the canon must remain in tune with their own body to produce the explosion-like physicality while persisting to connect with the other dancers in their community for a unified intention and approach to this movement. By attending to themselves within the community of dancers, they are

reinforcing the general sociological structures that create esteem and intimacy.

Beyond the specifications of Gaga, Ohad Naharin, and *Zachacha*, there are a variety of methods for fulfilling esteem. This project seeks to specifically reveal the ways in which this fundamental human need, Abraham Maslow developed, could be fulfilled through self-actualization. Further, personal intimacy and internally motivated esteem can be reinforced through community, putting dance in conversation with psychological context. The possibilities for departure from this preliminary study are wide reaching and could include philosophical ramifications. Additionally, the deep religious underpinnings in the work of Ohad Naharin could be further interrogated alongside the historical lineage of Ruth St. Denis, Martha Graham, and Ohad Naharin. While a variety of other physical practices based in self-actualization might also be fodder for research, esteem and intimacy can be fostered through movement experiences. Specifically, movement experiences that highlight internal investigation which is experienced in a physical space that encourages community and human connection.

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