

Uncompromised scrutiny: This artist-choreographer collaboration looks like a form of torture or alien assembly and confounds the categories of performer and spectator. Content follows form in the terrifying and fascinating stagescape of “Tetris” by Israeli choreographer Noa Dar
Ora Brafman reports

don't loose

If you have ever had to smell a dancer's feet inches from your nose, heard him breathe heavily above your head or had to turn your head 360 degrees to follow him slithering away around you while at the same time not being able to see any part of your own body and, what's more, had to watch your own balance and make sure you don't lose your footing, the chances are that you've already been exposed to the “Tetris” experience: a dance creation performed in an architectural installation, concocted by choreographer Noa Dar and visual artist Nati Shmia-Ofer. “Tetris” was recently premiered in Israel, at Acre's Festival for Alternative Theater, at Dar's modest new studio in the center of Tel Aviv.

Each “Tetris” performance is limited to 69 viewers who are required to take off their shoes before being escorted inside the studio by one of the seven dancers. There they are measured and handed

one of a selection of various sized stools, according to their height.

poked heads

The ceremonial introduction continues with individual instructions to step carefully, heads bent, under the raised stage, and place the stools on the designated marks on the floor. Each spectator is told to step on his stool and then straighten up, letting his head project through one of the many port-holes that dot the stage.

The sight of over sixty poked heads looking around, checking the white stage for the first time, produced both self-conscious giggles as well as some panic glances as people tried to adjust to their new predicament with heightened awareness of their own weird position and the surreal sight of the stage covered with heads. Even before the music

started up and the performance actually began, a community was formed; a community of fully exposed “cut-off” heads, that realized that they themselves were part of a surreal interaction, with not a shred of a chance of hiding their reactions from their fellow spectators or the participating dancers in the safety of a darkened hall which has so often helped maintain a safe distance between them and the stage.

scratching noses

Can any one yawn or scratch his nose while sixty odd spectators and seven dancers are in sight? Yawning is an involuntary reaction, but scratching your nose is a voluntary act that you couldn't perform here since there is no room for your hand above the floor, where your nose is. Does that mean that you are imprisoned to some degree, now that your personal space, or rather your own per-



your footings



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For the next thirty minutes – until the first intermission – you are exposed to dancing bodies that populate the tight space between the heads. Inevitably, glances are exchanged and as far as eye contact goes, the dancer has no advantage over you. You check him out from toes to armpits. He checks out your most minute facial expressions. All previous conventions that maintain the separation of the dance space from the viewers' sheltered haven are broken.

rooting back

Traditional expectations call for the viewer to take a physically inactive role while the dance hopefully triggers an emotional mechanism, eliciting various reactions. Visual and artistic stimuli are absorbed while the mind works to contextualize the dance and process the intellectual experience, filing it in its proper place according to

one's past experience of dance.

This process of sorting out the heavy soup of thoughts and feelings stirring in my mind sent me back to the first "mud work" I had encountered in the mid-sixties in an obscure tiny gallery on the lower east side in New York, when conceptual art had just emerged and was beginning to be accepted as a legitimate expression, against the odds. It also brought to mind the American post-modern dance movement that was introduced in the same era, offering dance in alternative spaces, be it at a lakeside in a park or on the rooftop of a residential building.

basic fibers

Many aspects of post-modern dance became universally influential and are now deeply embedded in the basic fibers of contemporary dance, and have even gained some popularity for conceptual dance perception.

son, is restricted in such a way? Are you actually going to be part of a performance that you bought a ticket for, and subjected to unimagined physical restrictions and unexpected emotional constraints to boot? You have to face it: you have now officially become a pawn in someone else's game that is about to start. You cordially receive an unusual perspective and in return you are subjected to some emotional and cerebral grinding. Let the rite begin.

As soon as the first dancer climbs on stage from one of the empty portholes and slides around you, inches from your eyes, it dawns on you: as strange as you may already feel, you also perceive what the dancers must have felt the first time they set eyes on a stage covered with dozens of protruding heads staring at their feet. The hellish scene from "Alice in Wonderland" flashed before my eyes as I remembered the Queen on her croquet ground yelling, "Off with her head!" Is it going to be my head today?

These artistic roots, discernible in "Tetris," have facilitated the creative process which leads to complex, inventive experimentation and rewarding new experiences, while also fulfilling an insatiable craving for new, original manifestations of the artist's say.

For an artist's urge to detect and explore the cracks in the obvious territory of his craft, rather than toil on previously trodden ground, is the real artistic challenge that allows him to find a new voice; one that will resonate and form new dialogues that shed light on his craft and offer a new reading of his reality. "Tetris" – an interdisciplinary, conceptual work – derives its compelling impact not from the movement itself, as the dancers could have been dressed differently, performed different moves, used a less, or more, expressive approach, danced meditatively slowly or jumped on all fours and chirped like sparrows. Besides, the issues of breaking invisible borders or changing the roles between performers and viewers have been raised before, in fact whenever a dancer invited a non-dancer to join the act on stage.

surround screens

This particular work invites various readings; it can be interpreted as an almost "cinematic" production that brings to mind a modest rendition of the Surround Screen experience. It offers unusual perspectives for viewing; a clever alternative to the video camera which is often incorporated in dance creations these days in order to provide projected images of dancers from different angles, such as shots from above, from the sides of the stage, close-ups or long shots, layering visual information. Associatively, "Kammer/Kammer" by Forsythe comes to mind, in which the dance action takes place behind large panels that block the audience's view of the movement, which is then revealed by means of cameras and film projected on designated video screens.

Dar and Shamia-Ofer have also previously used video cameras, providing other perspectives of the stage that the spectator would not ordinarily have access to and adding the perspective of the dancers, plus images of the spectators' lower bodies below stage-level as they watch the above-floor action. As interesting as these images were, they added only marginal information, although more extensive video intervention could potentially – par-

ticularly through interactive techniques – be a meaningful tool to layer the experience further.

extending elements

Thus, the definitive factor that renders “Tetris” so powerful is the architectural manipulation of the physical space which gives rise to an array of experiences derived from its specific form. It is yet another convincing manifestation of a case in which content overtly follows form. One may argue that this artist-choreographer collaborative product is different from earlier forms of art on a dance stage of the past decades, from Picasso’s painted screens to ballets by Massine, Nijinsky and Lifar, through Isamu Noguchi’s stage sculptures for Martha Graham, Rauschenberg’s designs for Cunningham and architect Zaha Hadid’s set for “Metapolis” by Frédéric Flamand and a thousand other instances. The role of the artist in these collaborative equations followed a more traditional pattern; in some cases, adding important decorative value that helped to clarify the mood, or influence the style or ambience support-

Noa Dar, a veteran dancer/choreographer, was one of the founders of the Tamar dance group in the late eighties that dealt mainly with social issues.

She formed her own company in 1993. Her theater dance group performed in various countries and won the Ministry of Education and Culture’s prize for outstanding performance in 2001. Natty Shamia-Ofer is an interdisciplinary artist involved in design, installation and video-art. She has exhibited in numerous galleries and museums in Israel and abroad and has won various prizes. The original music score was contributed by Uri Frost, composer, musical producer and director of several short films and dance works.

ing the choreographic objectives. In other cases, the art on stage also determined the options and feasibility of fresh movement on stage, and enabled the choreographer to explore new vocabulary or use the space differently – such as Rami Be’er’s work on “Aide Memoire” for the Kibbutz company. Still, in those instances, the choreographer’s input was the decisive artistic force.

Inadvertently or not, many dance creations have gained an added dimension and complexity from

the collaboration of various artists, and in some cases it is their visuals that have proved the most memorable aspect. In that sense, the two-layer stage construction of “Tetris” extended the explorative element of dance, and will be engraved on the viewers’ memory, but not as much as their own part in the game, whether it resulted in their objection to the experience or their embracing the encounter and valuing the opportunity to explore their own thoughts and many physical and emotional reactions – reactions provoked by the witty manipulation of the piece, which assigned an unprecedented, active role to the physically confined viewers of “Tetris,” invited to stand for an hour on a less than stable surface. Ritual or social dance is about the participating layman, as well as the dance. Stage dance, on the whole, maintains the differentiation between active and passive roles. “Tetris” allows for an acute dual state of awareness – external and internal – making it a sort of initiation rite into a very contemporary experience.

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