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A Podcast on Contemporary Dance in Israel

Yali Nativ & Iris Lana

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Being Israeli at Cullberg

Anna Fitoussi, Shai Faran & Noam Segal

dancers at Cullberg

episode 50

Transcript

From the series

Embodied Contacts

Dance in the aftermath of October 7th and the 2023 war

With

Anna Fitoussi is an artist in dance, performance, and choreography. She holds a BA in Dance, Context, and Choreography (HZT) from the University of the Arts Berlin (UdK). She worked as an independent dancer and choreographer in Berlin and joined Cullberg in 2021.

Shay Faran is a dancer, teacher, and choreographer. She danced with the Kibbutz Contemporary Dance Company II, the Sigma Ensemble, and Dafi Altabeb Dance Group. She studied in the postgraduate program at SEAD – the Salzburg Experimental Academy of Dance – and worked in Europe with various choreographers. She joined Cullberg in 2024.

Noam Segal is a dancer and performer. He graduated from The Maslool – the professional dance training program in Tel Aviv. He danced with the Ballet National de Marseille under the direction of (La) Horde, and in works by various European choreographers. In Israel, he performed with Inbal Dance Theater and Fresco Dance Company. He joined Cullberg in 2022.

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Yali: Hi Iris.

Iris: Hi Yali.

Yali: As part of a series of conversations about dance following October 7th and the war, today we're talking with Anna Fitousi, Shai Faran, and Noam Segal. The 3 of them are dancers with Cullberg in Stockholm, Sweden. We would like to open with some of your stories from October 7th. From the actual day. So why don't we start with Shai?

Shay: I joined Cullberg in January this year. So on October 7th, I was still living in Berlin. I was in the midst of a creative process on my own work. Actually, in the final weeks of the process. The premiere was on October 28th. And because we were in the final weeks, we worked on Saturday. So when I arrived at the studio, we didn't understand what was happening yet. I don't even remember if I had already heard about it from someone close to me or from the dancers I worked with. Maybe someone had said something. I don't remember exactly how we heard about it. But on that day, what happened wasn't clear yet, but it had already created a dynamic that was a bit tense in the studio. Frankly, until then, we had never had any interaction about politics or anything that had to do with it. And that day, of course, revealed different kinds of things. And we didn't talk about it, because I was in total shock, and I wasn't in any shape to get into talking about it. But there was kind of something that immediately, without even understanding the event, kind of sided with the other side, so to speak. And that's what I clearly remember from that day. And over the following weeks, up to the premiere, which was in question, whether to do it or not, because those were very difficult weeks. And part of the difficulty was really because there was little support and containment in this situation we found ourselves in. And it was a project I had been anticipating for a very long time, and didn't want to postpone, so I said, ok, I'm just gonna go for it, and sort of get it over with. But it made things

complicated during the weeks that led to the premiere, and not much empathy and caring from the dancers.

Iris: Anna?

Anna: I was in Spain with my sister, travelling in the North of Spain, and we had just finished on October 6th in Barcelona. And on the morning of the 7th, we both... That was our last day, and we both flew out. My sister went to Tel Aviv, and I went back to Stockholm to start working the next day. And little by little, the news started coming in, and it was... yes, not being there, in Israel, and to be there for her, for my sister on her way back home. While I was on my way to another place. When the news started coming in, I too was in kind of, obviously, it was a ticking bomb, in the sense that it was a matter of time for something like this to happen. And then came the news about the party [Nova], and then it hit. It was the moment of understanding that this isn't the type of event we might have imagined would happen- with hostages, the IDF, the army. It was like, on those scales, and what personally crushed me at that moment, and created this abyss of a feeling, of trying to start to comprehend this horror, that... And also the horror of sending my sister back there into that inferno. It wasn't even clear if the flight would take off. It was a real mess. And saying goodbye too, at the airport in the middle of it all. I don't know. I remember how symbolic it was to take a plane even further away. And it opened this year that we just had here, in this distance, experiencing this thing from Scandinavia, so far away from the real thing. And the next day, we began a new creative process in the company, on October 8th, and that was really the end of one thing and the beginning of another, and being forced immediately to cope with going back to work and understanding what it means.

Yali: Did anyone bring it up in the company the day after?

Anna: Yes. It's really funny to sit here next to Noam, because on that morning, on October 8th, we sat next to each other in a circle full of people. About ten or more

guests joined the project that had just begun. It was kind of an opening circle, where, of course, people spoke about themselves on a personal level, until the moment of the formal opening, with the question of "What did you do on the weekend?"

Noam: "Say one good thing that happened to you"...

Anna: "The color of your underwear and something good that happened". And then, the gaps just started to become clear and be much more present. How far it is! Noam was kind of able to say something he did on the weekend, and I just burst out crying and left the room because it was impossible to try and pretend... to try being there as if... And I think that that's what opened the topic in light of the situation of this new work. This whole question, and everything happening in the world, and the political intervention of individuals in this group.

Yali: Noam, what was your answer?

Noam: Yes, I remember that we were sitting with something like 15 dancers who had already talked, and I whispered to Anna: "What can I say?". I remember saying something very general like: "Over the weekend, I was busy talking to my friends and family and making sure that everyone was ok". Simply describing how worried I was over that weekend. That's what I managed to say, though I was stumbling over my words. And Anna was right after me, and I remember that you left the room, and at that moment, the choreographer with whom we were working on the project, and the Artistic Director of Cullberg, understood that there's a big gap here that needs to be addressed in the collective conversation. Let's say that on Oct. 8th, it wasn't such a big issue yet, but as the creative process progressed, the subject of the piece opened up a very important channel for me, especially concerning everything I've experienced over the past year. Like Anna said, everything that happens around the world. There was a lot of talk about duality and co-existence, and a great deal of personal self-research by each dancer on their heritage and personal roots, on the political body that characterizes them.

And alongside the war, and alongside this question of this renewed identity that emerged for me in Europe as an Israeli dancer, it opened a world that was very central in this piece.

Iris: When you talk about identity, are you talking about the way you experience your identity, or about the way this identity is embodied in you?

Noam: Totally, both. Specifically in this work, I think I couldn't have gotten away from the way they saw me.

Yali: Which work was it? Can you give some context?

Noam: On October 8th, we started to create the work called *While in Battle I'm Free, Never Free to Rest*. It's a work by choreographer Hooman Sharifi.

Iris: Norwegian, right?

Noam: Norwegian of Iranian descent. It's a collaboration between 10 Cullberg dancers and 10 Street dancers, and their co-existence. So very quickly, we were asked to dance with amazing music from Iran -to dance ourselves, to dance our roots with very simple tasks... But there was an insistence about an understanding of who you are, and what color you bring to the space, vis-à-vis the dancers who come from the 'street'. They, of course, carry the responsibility of "I come from Voguing, I come from House"...

Anna: Representational.

Yali: And what did you bring?

Noam: Very quickly, I received feedback on the way I dance, and I wasn't surprised to discover that it was perceived as very Israeli. What is Israeli dance in Europe? I feel that I've been experiencing a certain way of people looking at me ever since I was in the Professional Program for Dancers Training [Hamaslool in Tel Aviv], and took part in exchange programs abroad. So I got this title very quickly and felt that I needed to fulfill it. Usually, it's something that I'm a little repelled by, or less curious about. But, in this work, I enjoyed working with the stigma of the 'Israeli dancer'.

Yali: What is this stigma? What does it look like? What do you talk about when you talk about the 'Israeli dancer'?

Noam: There's the big physicality, and the sweaty body. The Sisyphean and physical striving for more in big positions and high jumps.

Yali: But is that what you brought, or is that what they wanted you to bring?

Noam: I think that as I was going through the creative process, and with the feedback from the choreographer and the dancers, these were the things that intensified. And I remember myself thinking a lot about Israeli choreographers I worked with in Israel, and the techniques I worked with in Israel. So, Ohad (Naharin) and Gaga obviously came up very quickly. And there's something in that language that is also very out there, very groovy, very compelling for other people. So I felt very comfortable jumping there and to things from the worlds of Batsheva. Even though I never danced with Batsheva, I think a Batsheva dancer wouldn't see it that way. But you know…

Iris: This is the nature of stigma.

Noam: Yes. I've been around it for many years, so I'm glad it affects me too. And also, I'll say that I danced Israeli folk dance for most of my childhood, so a lot of the Israeli folklore was incorporated…

Iris: The Israeli Folk Dance Movement? Israeli folk dance, you mean?

Noam: Yes. I danced with *Ayalot Hanegev* [the *Dears of the Negev*] in Beer Sheba for most of my youth. And actually, there were a lot of questions about folklore, too. Such as feedback from the choreographer who deals a lot with folklore, and I asked myself, What is Israeli folklore? It's been an interesting question lately, this melting pot of all kinds of folklore.

Yali: I want to ask Anna, how did you deal with this whole story? Do you also feel this way, that you have this Israeli label on you?

Anna: Truthfully, no. I left Israel after my army service, and I didn't have a chance to be on the local dance training tracks in Israel. My professional training was in

Berlin. But yes, I come from a kibbutz and folk dance as well, but I didn't get that title, and I don't identify. Sometimes it, especially when there's this deep 'Second position,' then I immediately get labeled as an Israeli

Noam: 'Fourth position'...

Anna: Yes. A deep Pliė in Fourth.

Iris: I'll just tell our listeners that this deep Pliė in second position is highly associated with Ohad Naharin's dance language.

Anna: It also happened with other choreographies in the company in the past, when this 'Fourth position' was identified and called by name.

Iris: What is it called?

Anna: Batsheva?

Noam: Batsheva.

Iris: How do you perceive this tension between your identity as an Israeli and what is projected on you?

Shay: Before the 7th of October, I didn't really identify my Israeliness. And over the past year, I do feel much more Israeli than I've ever felt, and much more Jewish than I've ever felt. It's the connection to Judaism that has become somewhat more present, with all the years in Germany. I have always had a dissonance with this issue. But the Israeli identity has significantly come forward for me over the past year. And I think that on a personality level, it has always been there. And there's something in my straightforwardness, 'no bullshit' and such, something that is hard for people sometimes, especially here in Scandinavia. I think it has always been there. But I never felt like one of those people who only connect with Israelis and hang out only in Israeli social circles. I feel, let's say, I know almost nothing about today's dance scene in Israel. I'm not very involved in it. It came up in me again, this sense of belonging to Israel. Even though I also have a lot of feelings of strongly not belonging there. But something became clearer on the level of the way I'm perceived by others... I left Israel, I don't know,

maybe 16 years ago, 15 years, so I think I went through a kind of shedding process from the identity of the 'Israeli dancer' that always wanted to be in Batsheva and part of that very specific aesthetics that we all somehow are infected with, or absorb somehow. And I did experience years of undoing this thing. So I don't really feel that I'm being stereotyped as an 'Israeli dancer' on this level. But it might be more about the style of my work and my style of communication. Yes, a kind of straightforwardness, which is kind of a blessing and a curse. And in every situation, it has different consequences. But I think it's something that's a bit... Sometimes I can feel that through these lenses, one can identify the Israeli in me, and not necessarily through the manner I dance.

Iris: How has the institution, the Cullberg Dance company, been treating you on this matter in this context? Not just about caring or not, but regarding the war. What kind of things were sticking out explicitly or implicitly? Because Sweden is politically charged nowadays, very pro-Palestinian, even if it is a democracy that safeguards, and there is no official antisemitism. But what is happening underneath?

Shay: I can just say that even before I joined the company, there was already, I felt a sense of caring and concern from the institution, from the Artistic Director. And, a few months before I joined, she was in touch with me about this, caring and inquiring.

Very caring, very aware, even during the year, when there were attacks on Israel from Iran, and immediately she texted the three of us to check that everything was ok. And Linda Adami, too, who is our Ensemble Director, was very much on top of it, and very caring. That's really from the management.

Iris: And the dancers?

Shay: From the dancers, I feel there's support, there's care, we're all friends in a way, and people are really nice. And at the same time, I'll say that I don't follow

anyone on Instagram. I actually unfollowed everyone, because I couldn't deal with the content they shared. I also didn't want it to affect the relationships in the studio, or create a kind of distance that I see from people who share things they're involved in, and then I'm supposed to feel closeness and solidarity and intimacy with them in the studio. In that sense, I stayed away.

Yali: You too, Anna?

Anna: Yes. It was sort of something very immediate and instinctive. Because I think that the interpersonal space at work... In terms of management, I felt a lot of support. They got their act together quickly, had good communication with us, and wanted to understand. And from that aspect, the institution handled it well. And I know that it isn't so obvious.

Shay: There were other institutions here that did not do that.

Anna: I think that many cultural institutions often come out with declarations, with political statements about wars. And here too, they considered doing that, but then they realized that they chose not to respond to the war in Ukraine, for that matter. So the institution was thinking about taking action, but then also wanted to give itself some kind of proportion. So there was a kind of experience of self-reflection, and a kind of restraint, or something like "Wait a second, we did not respond to that, so why should we respond to this?".

Noam: They also consulted with us about it.

Iris: Do they know that your family is evacuated?

Anna: I think I told them. Yes. Some of my colleagues know as well and ask about it, and some don't. It wasn't a kind of collective sharing. But I think the management, I probably told them. I don't know if they remember.

Anna: I wanted to say something...

Noam: About friends

Anna: Ah, yes, about the Instagram space and social media and the content that was posted. The physical interpersonal space was manageable, although of course

there were things a little more complex. But the online space was just very intense and hard to navigate. So it was, yes, for me too, a simple act of shutting it down. Not to necessarily publicly unfollow, but simply not check it out, to choose not to know things that way. Because I also know that people feel that it's much easier to share content even when they don't really know what that content is.

Iris: Are you talking about pro-Palestinian content, hate content?

Anna: Content that simply encourages polarization and content that often comes from unknown sources. Or news that it's hard to understand where it came from... Things that are here on the news but don't reach circles in Israel, for that matter. Or one-sided things. But for me, it was more about the content. In general, the dividing content tore up my heart, so I preferred not to participate, not to see it. I didn't understand why.

Iris: Noam?

Noam: In a way, I couldn't not see it. Yes, I think that somehow I might have been in the opposite mode of action, and very frightened of what I was seeing. But I continued to read and look at what people posted, what people were thinking. There were many silences, a lot of momentary distancing. I think I tried, as much as I could, to create, to practice and create empathy in exposing what's happening, in an attempt to listen to the other side which I disagree with right now, and in very polite and general conversations about the situation, that to me, felt like the first right step to closeness.

Iris: Were the dancers around you interested in complex truths? Or people outside the company? The wider community? Were there people interested in complex truths that we all come across? In the tensions between conflicting positions. Can you have a conversation, or do you stay silent?

Noam: There is interest, on many levels, everywhere.

Shay: I disagree.

Noam: No?

Shay: No. I disagree. I don't think everyone is interested in understanding the complexity, or can contain the complexity. I think many people see things that are so horrifying, and they really are horrifying, that they don't have the capacity to think it is possible to consider anything else. And often that's that. Because I wasn't at Cullberg when all this happened, and in some way... the company requires, because we're together, we must find ways to work together. But as a freelancer, many of my professional and social ties were severed because of the content people posted, and it actually took me some time to bring myself to be able to detach. At first, it affected me, and I would get into arguments, and people would attack me. And it was like, it caused a lot of injustice. And even now, I feel that there are people who... Of course, there are people who... And just last week, I spoke with two colleagues from the company, who said, "Wow, we don't know anything about it, like, tell us something", and it was very moving. And we sat and spoke about it for hours. But that was very rare, because I often find that I can't. I need to feel that it's a really safe space for me to be able to talk with people about it. To feel that I don't have to be defensive, or prove anything, and I don't have to persuade, but that there's a real interest in listening. And I immediately feel how, the minute you start talking about it, with someone who isn't Israeli, my pulse rises, and then I go into high alert, being forced to explain something now. And most of... not most, but some of my experiences were that kind too. The minute I felt that it was not a safe space, my pulse rose, and I'm about to trembled, and I'm in tears. Then, I simply disengaged. And that often created a situation where I didn't allow it to happen at all in advance. Maybe it was a mistake to prejudge, to decide it was not appropriate to talk about it. So that's my experience. Of course, some people are interested. And there are people who truly, literally, don't know how to feel ok with me – I'm Israeli, and they're against Israel, and they don't understand how they're supposed to act. How am I not a bad

person, even though, in their minds, in some way, I represent this. It's hard to contain the complexity. That's my experience.

Yali: I want to ask you about the creative process and the encounter with the choreographers. Today, Cullberg is an ultra-contemporary/conceptual company. The people who come to work with you are interested in subjectivity, the dancer as a person, who you are, and what you are. Noam spoke about it earlier. So I want to ask you, how do you deal with these issues of your Israeli identity and the Oct. 7th war?

Noam: Usually when we start a process, there's this very generous gesture regarding our interest, who we are, where we come from. Cullberg deals with a very wide range of practices and working approaches, so I remember many times talking about texts, bringing texts, or Israeli references, or Hebrew. It immediately meets you. As dancers who are involved in the creative process at Cullberg, we don't perform repertoire, so the entire process stems from us. So there's an immediate question of what I want to bring into this work. As of Oct. 7th, I've been carrying a whole world of references. I think we all have been flooded with content since it started, which sharply colors many activities in the studio, and if they weren't easy for me in the past, today I have a different context that lives with me daily. In the work we created before Hooman Sharifi's, we did a work that ended with... It's called *SYLPH*, by choreographer Halla Ólafsdóttir, and at the end of the piece, we worked with fake blood. A very theatrical work. We're not human in the piece; we're some kind of sylphs. But suddenly dancing in this pool of blood was an entirely different experience than before, much less playful, much less dramatic. Or in the last work we created at Cullberg, *Exposure*, by Alexandra Bachzetsis, I have a very violent duet, literally beating another dancer. The work is in the nude, so we beat each other while undressing each other, and there is violence that is also very sexual. That... [sexual violence] has been a huge headline in this war, so that performing and agreeing to do this duet, I think my

everyday associations are very different from those of my partner's in this duet. I remember he said to me, when my parents came to see the work, and I remember he told me that he's so calm because at least he's circumcised. There were all different kinds of... It really brings up connotations....

Iris: Were there things you refused to do?

Noam: No.

Yali: But were these things articulated? Were there things that you kept to yourself?

Noam: Yes. There is a process. I can either refuse to do it because it hurts me this way, or I can remove it from my context, and it happens a lot. And to agree to do it without relating to my references, or without sharing them, at least in the studio. I might not have refused much, but I think there's a lot of censorship... Yes, I choose the content of what to bring, and often I share.

Yali: Do you mean internal self-censorship?

Noam: Yes, self-censorship. I deal with it alone. Of course, it's very nice to have 4 more eyes in the studio that understand what we feel without words.

Iris: Did you self-censor the presence of the Hebrew language on stage?

Yali: Or were you censored for that matter?

Anna: Actually, we spoke about it. A few weeks ago, we were in a workshop in preparation for.... No, it was already at the beginning of a new process, with a Brazilian choreographer, Renan Martines. And yes, there was something like an open-mike, standing microphones, and we were encouraged to go up, sing, talk, add textures of language, of music, of poetry. It was really like a week of jamming with the most open and enabling environment. And that's where I felt that.... It was very clear to me, there were moments when I understood that I was the one who was self-censoring. The primary censor was me when it suddenly came to Hebrew on stage, and to self-identifying as Israeli. There are moments... even working on *Exposure*, there were layers of translation, text that repeats itself in

many languages. And there too, I think there was a moment when I asked myself... I suggested saying the text in German, because I speak German too. And it dawned on me that I'm doing it because I understood that Hebrew is inappropriate now. So I tried to bring the other tool I have.

Iris: Explain why it is inappropriate.

Anna: I think it's the fear I feel that comes, that exists, and also resonates for years to come, and in general, the question of my national identity, simply the biggest question, was cracked. It's something that I specifically, personally, have been dealing with since I understood Israel and its complexity and the problems of the reality there, and of the Palestinians and the Palestinian identity and the complexity of the conflict. But something about the horror of October 7th, and what it opened for me. If I ever had had a more intimate process with it, with myself and in front of the world, now it's just... The Israeli identity. My national identity had become the most important thing, the hottest. And it's a question, yes, it feels like in the next few years, that's what we'll be dealing with. That's also what we'll get as feedback. It's something that right now, if you ask me where I'm from, I'm in a kind of... It's so fragile, and it's such a simple question, but the meaning of saying where I'm from these days is so heavy, it's insane.

Iris: Is there fear? Is it inappropriate because there's a physical concern?

Anna: There's a concern, I think. Of understanding that maybe, yes, let's play it down.

Yali: Are you talking about public spheres now? Not about the company.

Anna: No, about our performance on stage.

Shay: The inappropriateness is more about your inner thoughts... Would I, in the end, want to be the one standing on stage speaking Hebrew? It's less about the fear that someone will say it's less appropriate.

Anna: I'm not afraid of speaking Hebrew. personally, it's not. I don't know if it matters. I don't have that kind of fear, and I don't feel any threat in public spaces

either. Maybe at the beginning, yes. I had all different kinds of dealings with it, and naturally, I suppose subconsciously, I self-censored it everywhere. But not in a very harsh manner. I'd say I talk on the phone in Hebrew. But on stage, I think I don't want to open this issue, I don't want to hear the discourse that will follow... or what it means.

I don't want...

Yali: That there might be a rejection...

Anna: To be rejected, and then I feel the conversation with myself and my history on self-identity is much more interesting and deeper, and complex. And the current conversation is very binary. On stage, it's the flattest thing. It's a signature. And this signature is something I'm going to understand more and more. To what extent is it going to be simple and sharp, same as the binary world we live in. To what extent is it going to be a mark on the forehead when it happens

Iris: The Yellow Star.

Anna: Yes.

Yali: Were any Israeli officials in touch with you?

Noam: Ziv Nevo Kolman

Anna: Yes, the cultural representative, Anat Safran. Yes. They come to see us. Anat is a curator and an artist, and her insistence on continuing to bring art as a way of communicating with the world and reality, especially explaining these complex and delicate situations, with demonstrations and all. She uses art and its power, and it's moving.

Iris: Shai, how do you deal with these positions? To actually use Hebrew on stage?

Shay: I wasn't in a situation where I needed to make a choice; that is, we were there during the week with the open-mike, and there was that possibility, but less so.... I didn't have this conversation with myself. I saw the microphone more as a space of sound and not of language. I wasn't as into the issue of language. Now,

when I think of it. I have a preliminary acquaintance with that choreographer, and I have some experience with his being a bit anti-Israel, so I might have, in advance, something that was clear to me that it's not welcome here, in this situation. And I think I'm experiencing it; we're all experiencing this situation in different ways. And I, let's say, somehow know that I'm safe here. Generally, life is safe, but I don't really feel safe. That's my personal experience. I feel like I'm always looking behind my shoulder. If the Metro is crowded, I don't feel comfortable talking on the phone in Hebrew, or reading my book in Hebrew, or I'm always looking at who's looking at me. I might be a little paranoid, but... something has totally broken in my sense of safety over the past year, and it manifests itself in that all of us need to think twice, if not more, before we say where we're from if asked. It's something I never imagined I'd have to do, as a Jew in Germany, to be afraid to say where I'm from. And I often find myself not saying anything. Yesterday I was at the airport and I was asked where I was from and I said – from home. I didn't say the country. And there were times I said I'm from Germany, or other things. So again, it's a little feeling I create for myself, but it's not totally out of context.

Iris: No.

Noam: It's not out of context.

Iris: It's hard to be Israeli. It's hard to be Israeli in Israel and abroad. We'll end with this. Thank you very much for this moving, a bit sad conversation.

Yali: Thank you.

Anna, Shay, Noam: Thank you.

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Paris Nostalgia Opus 1 by John Lopker, 2025

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Creatures of Dance

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