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A Podcast on Contemporary Dance in Israel

Yali Nativ & Iris Lana

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The Right and the Duty to be Human

Yasmeen Godder

[Episode 51](#)

Transcript

From the series

Embodied Contacts

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

With:

Yasmeen Godder Choreographer, Dancer, and Artistic Director of the Yasmeen Godder Company and 'Moving Communities' Project

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Iris: Hi Yali.

Yali: Hi Iris.

Iris: As part of a series of conversations about dance following October 7th and the war, we're here, at the Yasmeen Godder Studio, at the Mandel Cultural Center in Jaffa. Yasmeen is a choreographer and dancer, founder and artistic director of the Yasmeen Godder Company. Hello Yasmeen!

Yasmeen: Hi, hello.

Iris: We want to ask you where you were on October 7th, and what was your immediate reaction?

Yasmeen: I was home, and I actually dreamt there were missiles even before the siren. It was very strange. I was dreaming and woke up shortly before the sirens. Initially, it was kind of ok, let's go to the closet because we live in an old apartment

Iris: Without a safe room

Yasmeen: Without a safe room and with several windows, so the only place that is 'as if' protected is the closet. But.

Yali: A closet?

Yasmeen: Kind of a walk-in closet, but tiny.

Yali: Like a small room.

Yasmeen: Yes. Like a cubicle. And then, slowly, slowly, the picture became clearer and developed. And yes...

Yali: You live in Jaffa.

Yasmeen: I live in Jaffa. Yes. I like living in Jaffa very much, and it truly feels like the most “home” I’ve ever had in my life.

Yali: And what was it like on that day in Jaffa?

Yasmeen: It’s Jaffa, it’s always kind of a family. The space I live in is very communal, very supportive. And it felt very... vulnerable, and anxious, and fear caught everyone. I went to the grocery store or the street and met neighbors, and everyone was in a kind of confusion. The more the picture developed, grew and unfolded, it took time to understand the magnitude of the event. I felt I had to get out of here; I was really frightened. I booked one-way tickets and canceled and rebooked and canceled and rebooked. It was like this loop of - are we running away? Are we not running? Are we leaving? And in the end, I kept the flight ticket, and for the first time in my life, really, for the first time, I bought a one-way ticket, and packed for several seasons.

Yali: Where to?

Yasmeen: Athens.

Iris: Did you go with the family?

Yasmeen: Yes. I travelled with Itzik and Alegra.

Iris: And what was it like being there with this thing?

Yasmeen: I didn’t recognize myself in a situation like this. It’s arriving somewhere and not really being a tourist. Running away from my home, a horrible fright. Yes, difficult, very difficult.

Iris: Because it’s not a vacation,

Yasmeen: It’s not a vacation, and all the beauty is also enfolded in an envelope of horror and bereavement, and confusion too. I think about it a lot now, in retrospect. The fact that my grandfather and grandmother, at ages similar to mine, came here to start a new life alone. I say, wow! It’s tough. To suddenly understand... well, it’s not just, ok - I have these grandparents...

Iris: Was it like being refugees?

Yasmeen: At that moment, it was, yes. Also, because I didn’t know what would actually happen. We were supposed to start a period of rehearsals here, exactly then.

Yali: Who are we?

Yasmeen: My company. On a project called *Shout Aloud*, it’s a project that I built for several years, to get funding and opportunities, and it was kind of the beginning of the big momentum towards our premiere in June. So that was also part of it. And also the beginning of school for my daughter, for the first time in Tel Aviv, at a new school. And then it took time. Almost three weeks, or maybe

even a month, until there was a kind of gradual return, of going out of the house, and to life. And then, actually, I got in touch with my group of dancers, and asked them how they feel, if they're capable... if they want to...can they come to the studio. And I was really surprised to learn that they wanted very much. Really, wanted to. And I'm talking about women who, three of them are mothers, and some don't live in Tel Aviv. That means leaving the house, getting into the car, during sirens.

Iris: It was very scary

Yasmeen: It was very scary. And the kids! And also of leaving that space where you feel protected. And we decided to meet anyway. Their need grounded me, gave me this kind of feeling that it's important, it's important that I come back, we must continue rehearsals. It's important that this project happens because it's important to these artists, these dancers, who have invested their lives into this field. And it goes above and beyond. Meaning, it's not just a profession, it's an identity, it's the well-being, it's the continuity of life. And that's what brought me back.

Iris: When did you return?

Yasmeen: It was relatively quick. At some point, I also felt that it was very hard for my daughter to be there because of her age. She's already a teenager, and something about being far from home, from familiar things, from her girlfriends, from the place, the community. So yes, then... And I'll also say that yes, we decided that as an act that was important to us as a company, to pay for the entire period that was cancelled, with the understanding that people, women in this particular project, committed themselves to a kind of journey. And yes, in life, things happen that are beyond our control sometimes. It also requires us as an organization to take a certain stand on who we are as an entity, in relation to our partners. And we are also that place that it's important that will be supportive. And I think that this is something very essential that happened within this project, and within this work. I'll say that the return to the studio after several weeks... I don't remember the exact day they started before me, and then I joined. It was very difficult. The first rehearsal wasn't about dancing at all. It was crying. It was about coming and crying. And there is a part in the work, the first part of the piece, which is a kind of warm-up, a vocal warm-up, and it's a way of building partnership and a kind of... They ignite the piece even before it begins, and it happens mostly through vocal work. It was the only content that they were capable of doing. And even that was like a kind of tool, for emotional release, and often for crying, and for a feeling that was not even verbal. And I think another

thing that happened here, and I know this about myself, and from the other mothers, and also those who aren't mothers, that there was something very strong about holding it together at home. Staying sane and calm, and being rational. And something about the studio suddenly allowed a breakdown. It truly allowed other emotions that couldn't be present at that moment in spaces where we had to hold ourselves together to be there.

Iris: Did you notice any kind of effect on the body of people, of the dancers?

Yasmeen: Yes. The encounter with dance as dance wasn't available in the same way. First of all, there was a question, and there was a kind of frozen state in the body that caused the feeling, yes, of its shock. I think that there was shock in the body, that as long as it was about cooking and to prepare food and this and that, there was a functionality, but in transforming it now into something that both expresses freedom, or release, or an expression of a spectrum of feelings – there was a kind of paralysis. It could not be taken for granted, and it took time to come back. It took time to return. And I felt, honestly, suddenly I remember, it's not something I had thought about, but it was like, when I first came back to dancing after giving birth, there was a kind of need to rediscover myself, and being in a kind of awareness to my body, with the content I already knew.

Yali: There's an Arab dancer in your group of dancers.

Yasmeen: Nur Garabli, who is also my partner in another project. I'll just say something broader for a moment, and then I'll get into it more specifically. There was a desire to gather a group of women, but beyond that, Dikla and the musicians, a group that isn't homogeneous. Meaning, that there was an invitation for all kinds of approaches to the content. Whether from an identity-based perspective, or a political one, or an activist one. Even dancers I have never worked with before, whose background perhaps was a bit different, not within my bubble, not with whom I usually work... And really, I think because of that, and also because of Nur, and in general, later on, I think it also manifested in the encounter with the musicians and Dikla, but especially when we returned after October 7th, there was a need, I think, for a different kind of sensitivity. In what was said and what was not. And things surfaced, because I think that most of the population in Israel, unfortunately, does not work in shared spaces for Arabs and Jews, or even have exposure to the Palestinian perspective or narrative. So I think that there are all kinds of triggers or sensitivities. even talking about relatives serving in the IDF, or even the choice of words, how to describe the situation. It's very sensitive. And I think that our group, relatively, was aware of this. People also really listened to Nur's story with her family in Gaza. It wasn't hidden, it

wasn't repressed. I'm assuming that for Nur, there were times, there was an awareness that perhaps it wasn't always easy to hold her identity in this space, given what is happening. It's as if it polarized the existential experience, maybe, and the political and geo-political situation. I don't know if it's political, because it's not just about where I stand on the spectrum, it's more about what I'm experiencing right now, within my space. Which, of course, is ultimately political. And this is connected for me... It's amazing how our whole process of work on *Practicing Empathy* was so significant in this.

Iris: *Practicing Empathy*, which is a previous work?

Yasmeen: Yes. A project of three works, actually four, with *SOS (Songs of Sequence)* under the titles: *Practicing Empathy#1, #2by2, #3* and, *SOS*, which was truly a practice, not just for – let's create a piece for an audience, but also an internal practice for the dancers and the space, and to ask, where do we do this in our meetings in the studio. And by the way, that's what led me to work with Nur. It's a kind of constant back and forth, because, within the process of *Practicing Empathy*, I understood I wanted to do workshops with different communities, and the community that seemed the most relevant to learn from, was the 'Hand in Hand' community in Jaffa, which I'm also part of. My daughter was in the school "Kulna Yachad" (All of Us Together), which was founded by a community of Arabs and Jews who were searching for shared spaces, and built kindergartens and public schools all over the country. So we decided to invite the mothers from this community for a workshop of *Practicing Empathy*, what does it mean to practice empathy through the body?

Yali: This was before?

Yasmeen: It was during the period, right up until Covid. During the workshops, I realized that this is something that needs its own space, that goes beyond the company, and my creative work here. I also understood that I must have an Arab Palestinian partner, so that it would feel more aligned. And then, during a demonstration-performance, I met Nur through an initiative of the Jaffa Theatre, which they organized as what they defined as protests, and that's how the police allowed it during Covid, and they held performances, and I saw her solo, and really connected with her, to her approach and her work. And I was very moved by the fact that there's a Jaffa-based dancer, a local, who expresses herself here. And then a partnership was formed between us, which also led to the workshops, and even to two festivals.

Iris: What was in the workshops?

Yasmeen: The workshops were dance workshops, building trust workshops, with dance as a tool, in this medium, to bring Arab and Jewish women closer together, and between women of different ages. So yes, young women in their twenties, some of them Arab women from communities in the North, who were studying at Tel Aviv University. Some were young women working in this area, in the center of Israel, mothers from the “Hand in Hand” community, activists, women who believe in this connection, a wide range. Let’s say the ages were from 19–20 to 60. So the encounter was also not just around the issue of identity, but also simply around women who gather and share what they’re going through, sharing processes the body is going through, and a variety of stages in life, a kind of multi-age experience. I was very fulfilled by these meetings, and challenged too. And things happened there.... At first, Nur and I, for the most part, focused on combining our practices. I come from the realms of anatomic release and awareness, and work with mental spaces that create a kind of acceptance of the body, and work from letting go, acceptance, and discovery. Let’s say it that way. And Nur brought in a lot of Dabke, and that shared experience through the circle, and the Palestinian rhythms. And we created a specific class that was really different, that starts on the floor with a warm-up and then reaches to a very ecstatic place. And this ecstasy led to a desire for sharing, led to a desire for a dialogue circle. It was very interesting for me, as someone who has participated in all different kinds of Arab and Jewish dialogue groups and been in all sorts of situations like that, and then to arrive at it after sweating and dancing together, laughing and dancing! And suddenly, the conversation is different, the starting point is different, it’s not just from the pressure and the intellect of what’s right to say now, but it’s really from a place where we have already gone through something together, and now there might be a different kind of trust-building. And then, at some point, we were questioning whether to continue with the workshop. We were supposed to start, I think, in the middle of October, I don’t remember exactly, or the beginning of November. And we turned to our participants, and the answer was yes, yes, yes. Now. Urgently. I mean, it was really... It’s really interesting that even in those moments of real shock, and the greatest pain, and upheaval that I think we’ve experienced here, there was even a stronger need to come together, and to live, and to meet. Even if just at a dance class in the evening here, in this space, with the question of whether there are or aren’t missiles. And I think that all this content, this complexity, and the content both from before and after was soaked into me, into the creation of this piece, which

talks about female partnership and the possibility of some kind of encounter through dance, which isn't just representative. It's not just – 'oh, look how they dance beautifully together', but there is listening on stage'. Rather, this sense of listening tries to exist in real time, both in rehearsals and in the performance itself. I think that as a dance maker, it really interested me, especially through my collaboration with Dikla, and seeing her perform. What she brings to the stage when she gets on stage, and to expose the need, this need to arrive, and... to encourage that dimension. I don't know whether to call it joy, or rhythm, or release, or ecstasy, among the people who come to experience it. And all of these things are also deeply connected for me with the Middle East, and what it means to connect and to come together, and to a culture that is more related to Arab influences and localities that it is also influenced by. So to begin the work like that is very... not typical in my repertoire. The first song, 'Tavlinim' (Spices), is very "uppy", full of rhythm, and the women come out to it with this kind of energetic uplifting that is very, very intense. I don't know whether to call it a celebration, but a celebration of themselves, within themselves. And encouragement, we dealt a lot with the idea of mutual encouragement, as a kind of foundation, because I think that something in the world of *Naot Ma Ba'ad* taught me this thing about ecstasy as a place, a point of departure that allows for emotional connection.

Iris: I thought about how... What they say, that characterizes our Israeliness, is the warmth, the intimacy, lack of boundaries, and directness, and all these things I think we're flooded by in the dance field, but also in general, we're all intensely flooded. Also, the need to connect now, and to be even more without... without being held back, and to be together and not meet on Zoom. To meet, and to look into each other's eyes and talk.

Yasmeen: Yes

Yali: I saw it at the Jerusalem Theatre, at the Israel Festival, in the big Sherover Hall, which was packed. And the minute it started, I felt it in my body, I felt this wow. It was a healing pill that entered into my body, and it was simply uplifting, and it stayed with me till the end. After the performance, we all stood outside and didn't want to go home.

Iris: It's also a shock to see all of these colors on stage. This intensity, which is really uncommon here in the dance world, and in general, we're all a little monochromatic, and also you, in your works, there are spots of color here and there, but...

Yasmeen: right

Iris: Yellow, pink

Yasmeen: purple, green, blue, light blue

Yali: Gold. There was gold!

Yasmeen: Gold

Iris: Glitter in the back

Yasmeen: Yes, later it intensifies. And already at the beginning of the show, it starts with a lot of color.

Yali: How did you think about these colors, because originally the work began long before what happened

Yasmeen: Really, a kind of feeling like, wait, we're at war, there's grieving, there's so much pain, and hostages, and so many people who are innocent and are hurt or killed, and injured. As if, what is this now? And I think that, throughout the war we were in dialogue about it, often, in regards to dramaturgy, the dramaturg is Itzik Giuli, my partner. And Itzik kept telling me: no! Could I still be allowed to feel this range of emotions? The healing lies in my ability to speak through my humanity. In my ability to feel in order to love, to feel, in order to contain. Because if I... you have asked me at the beginning, about the numbness – the inability to feel, inability to contain. Then suddenly, through this range, to allow my humanity to be a place that allows me to be more sensitive, or more open, or even in pain. It's interesting because someone who isn't from the dance world with whom I spoke told me: "This is the first time since October 7th that I felt that emotion which I felt in your performance, that opened me up, that released something in me, that enabled me to allow myself. It mediated this emotion back into my body." And really, the colors... Shahar Avnet is the costume designer. I approached her because she really stands out in this way. She plays with colors very intensely. It even makes me self-conscious to think about how I would wear that dress even. I'm much more at ease in black, in monochrome. There's something here about female boldness, and fantasy, in the ability to allow oneself, even when it's bold, even when it's frivolous in a way that stands out, which really connected to it. It also challenged me. I was uncomfortable with all of that colorfulness. I also asked myself how it connects to this place, and I think that it really relates to a kind of local visual language, which often, perhaps in the local design, you don't see as much. But the bold and uncompromising colorfulness is something very Israeli! As a former New Yorker, I can say there's much more black and grey than here, in certain situations. And daring to come out with color freely,

is sometimes also related for me to this place. Let's say at events and weddings, and such. But the dramaturgy really... This music album, again, I'm working with it throughout the entire performance, it's Dikla's album "Love Music", which was released in 2000, it's her first album. It was very interesting to hear her talk about the album. I invited her to talk with the dancers about what she went through then because, as it turns out, it was very complex for her, as a young artist from Be'er Sheva. She wandered around the city of Tel Aviv, slept on couches, wrote it while roaming the streets, and then came out with it, and felt very exposed. And I think... I didn't know that story in the background. I knew that I connected to the music, to what comes out of it, to that feminine voice that speaks itself, and also to her complexity with herself, even through the music, which is both Arabic and local Israeli, and rock & roll, and many different musical colors.

So the dramaturgy was also tied to the lineup of the album. Meaning, I spoke to Dikla and she said, Listen, this is going to be the lineup. It's very interesting to work with musicians. They have a way of thinking about dramaturgy, and I loved it. I loved the way that more or less she gave me the order of the songs, and I said – what? We'll end with "Love Music"? It is a very cheerful song. I don't really feel comfortable with that. But, "Love music, what did they promise us? Love, music, and freedom. Love, music, sunshine". Meaning: "What did they promise us?" It connected well for me, unfortunately, in regards to the Nova (music festival on Oct. 7th). As if to a place of what was promised, and where does this place actually exist today? When I heard the music, 24 years ago when it came out, it felt to me like an uplifting song, and maybe it is uplifting in rhythm. But if you read the lyrics, it comes from pain. Where is the love, where is the music, where is the sunshine, where is the freedom? Are we allowed to say those words?

Iris: It's really interesting that you say that because most of the publicity of artistic productions nowadays, whether exhibitions or performances, begins with an apology: "Despite the situation, we're working. It's hard for us, we feel the pain of the hostages, the war... but we are working".

Yasmeen: Right

Iris: And this place where you're setting your artistic work as the right to be human, or the duty to be human, is a redefinition of the role of art. Marina Abramovic says, "Art is an oxygen".

Yasmeen: Yes. And I think that this piece has a kind of healing, which is very present, for the dancers as well. They have a space to experience it within

themselves. And also through the music I... It's not that I just wanted to create a show with live music; there are nine musicians on stage. Because there's something about the impact of the art of music that is happening in real time, in front of an audience, that penetrates, the body, pierces, and moves. Also, in dance, in my opinion, but especially because Dikla works in musical contexts where often you need to... I see it in performances where a big part of the intention is to sweep the audience, to get people standing on their feet at the end of the show. So for me, part of the healing... It's a gift, giving it to the audience. It's allowing the audience to experience this thing from a place that's truly, maybe less apologetic.

Yali: This work premiered in Germany.

Yasmeen: Correct.

Yali: Tell us about those contexts.

Yasmeen: The premiere shows were in Frankfurt, and it was very strange.

Yali: While there were protests.

Yasmeen: While there were protests. And even just travelling to Europe, with a show that's mostly in Hebrew, there's a song in Arabic, and also a song in English, the lyrics are an essential part of the piece. And the dramaturg of the theatre that invited us, The Mousonturm Frankfurt Theatre, her name is Anna Wagner, she accompanied this work throughout the whole process. Also, in regards to apologies, it's very important to say that I almost had the feeling like I needed to apologize to my partners, my collaborators, who supported and invited this work abroad, because it was like, wait, do you still want us? I mean, it's the atmosphere. The atmosphere is like, even if people are supporting you as an artist, at the end, it's pretty complicated to bring... It's not obvious to bring a group from here within this atmosphere.

Iris: For them?

Yasmeen: Yes. Also, given the financial situation when there are many fewer flights, and a need for security.

Iris/Yali: What did you do about that? Did you have security?

Yasmeen: Yes, there was security. We asked for it and they provided it. She even flew in to see the work before we presented it there. She came in May to see it.

And we said, Ok, maybe we'll have subtitles to connect people to the content of the songs. And after she saw the run, she said to me: I don't need it. I'm in. I feel connected. And you need

to trust it. And in reality, another thought that was there along the way, which we often discussed, it's a bit like in a flamenco show, where you hear the singer

singing, and see the musicians, and feel like, ok, I'm with them. I might not understand Spanish, but I understand the feeling. I connect, and maybe even... It's interesting that I don't completely understand, and it draws me into my own associations. We did hand out brochures with the lyrics, so that whoever wanted to could understand what it's about. I thought it obscured something, because like I just said, "what did they promise us?" Or, "good morning to those who didn't have a night". Suddenly, this song, 'Good Morning', became almost a lament. There was a kind of fear in the first show, especially. Dikla, who is used to getting applause after every song. She's used to the format of a concert, and here it meets the world of dance after all, and Germany, and a different language for the audience. And slowly, slowly, people started to enter into the atmosphere of the show and clap along the way. And that just made me happy. I was happy that it reached people, and that people were dancing on the sides, or in their seats.

Yali: Were there any negative responses? Were there protests? Flags?

Yasmeen: No. The festival we were part of in Berlin was a festival focused on the Middle East, and there were artists, women artists, because it was a festival of women artists and feminist artists from the Middle East. So when I was invited I said, it was already after the war had started, so I asked them to check it out with the other artists. I really wanted to be part of this; this context is important to me, I'm for it, I want it to happen. And I say this, it's very important to me, this encounter. It's healing and important. It might bring something different, and not always accept what the reality we live in dictates to us. And.. Yes, there was some oppositional feedback when they advertised that my show would be part... But on social media too, there was a bit of objection about the HAU Hebbel am Ufer Berlin, about the fact that they're bringing an artist who is supported by the Israeli government. So yes, it created tensions within the community in Berlin, I think, and within the context of the festival. But in the end, I was invited and the work was presented, and it was full, and it was accepted. And I think there is a kind of... I hope that there is still a space where I, as an individual, can be seen without the stamp of what my government does. I want to believe in that, I think it exists. I think the political situation is so complex that for some of the artists, it's just hard to exist in this kind of situation. The others, I don't blame them. Sometimes the tension is beyond their ability to take part in this, and for their safety, too. Yes.... So to say that it was easy, it wasn't. And in reference to what I said at the beginning, about the very wide range of opinions within our group, I want to say that, working with Dikla, and the musicians she brought, who are people she collaborates with, and my dancers, it's also about bringing together

different sides of Israeli society which at the moment don't exactly meet. And there is a lot of difficulty here.

Yali: And polarization

Yasmeen: And polarization. And while we're talking a lot about it externally, but internally too, there is a big divide. And to do a production that connects between truly very diverse opinions, even at the extremes, I'd say. Not just within my bubble, of people I know, our mutual views, and what we believe in. But to really do it, and be a kind of community that performs together, that experiences things together, that travels together during these times, and in a very pleasant and loving manner. It's important for me to mention Omer Alsheich, who is my producer, who also does a very important job of holding this thing together when we're abroad. How to maintain

and create a warm, safe space for people at this time. It's a very complex thing,

Yali: That in itself is no small achievement.

Yasmeen: Right. And also when we performed at the Israel Festival, I felt that it brought in very, very different audiences, who normally don't meet at these events. So, for me, I keep going back to this thing, of how it's not only an outward artistic offering, but it also heals from within. How does it bring that energy inward to us.

Yali/Iris: Yasmeen, thank you very much.

Yasmeen: Thank you. Thank you for creating space for this; it's important.

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Featuring **Yasmeen Godder**

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In collaboration with the Cultural Diplomacy Bureau, Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Photos

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Brigit Hupfeld

Music

"Ahava Musika" (Love Music) from the album *Ahava Musika (2000)*

Lyrics, composition, and performance: Dikla

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De-Da Productions

Noa Ben Shalom

Courtesy of Yasmeen Godder Company

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Dikla

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Creatures of Dance

podcast

DANCENOW in Israel

Iris Lana & Yali Nativ

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