

# Israeli troupe blends dance, circus flair

**ARLENE FINE**

**Senior Staff Reporter | Posted: Wednesday, January 18, 2012 4:36 pm**

Audiences attending Inbal Pinto & Avshalom Pollak Company's "Oyster" are apt to discover many hidden pearls in the quirky dance and theatrical work that includes mime, ballet, gymnastics, acrobatics and modern dance.

The 20-year-old Israeli-based dance troupe consisting of 12 dancers/actors will make its Ohio première at PlayhouseSquare's Ohio Theatre when it performs "Oyster" Sat.-Sun., Jan. 28-29, presented by DANCECleveland with support from the Jewish Federation's Cleveland Israel Arts Connection.

"Oyster," choreographed by Pinto with the help of her life partner and director/choreographer/artistic director Avshalom Pollak, had its world première in Lyon, France, in 1999 and has been performed internationally ever since.

The circus-world, mystical nature of the show includes wandering street acrobats wearing doll-like makeup, spiky blond wigs and tutus; they alternately become puppets or puppeteers. The eclectic score spans from opera and tango to Tuvan (southern Siberian) throat singers and Big Band jazz. Its quirkiness prompted Village Voice to describe "Oyster" as "part vaudeville and part toy store after midnight."

"It was a natural evolution for our dance company to have such an unusual array of imaginative artistic styles and moods incorporated into this performance," said Pollak from his home in Tel Aviv. "The dance community in Israel is very fruitful and receptive to new art forms. The contemporary choreography and costuming in 'Oyster' is reflective of the strange combinations of people and customs that comprise Israel."

The title of the performance comes from the book of poems and sketches *The Melancholy Death of Oyster Boy & Other Stories*, written by filmmaker Tim Burton ("Edward Scissorhands").

Pollak hopes that people will attend the unusual performance with an open mind. "'Oyster' often triggers varied audience responses," he said. "Its connection to life will vary from person-to-person in a very magical way. It is like dreaming without sleeping."

Dance and art have been a central theme of Pinto and Pollak's life since they met in grammar school in 1993. Pinto began her formal dance training when she was 13, was a member of Israel's Batsheva Dance Company, and studied graphic arts at The Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design in Jerusalem. Pollak, the son of renowned Israeli actor Yossi Pollak, was drawn to dance through his relationship

with Pinto.

"After I met Inbal, working in dance seemed inevitable," Pollak said. "We see our company's performances as a rare and unusual gift we are able to share with audiences."

When Pinto and Pollak's company performs around the world, the couple realizes they represent their homeland but don't necessarily consider themselves good-will ambassadors. "We may come from Israel, but we are part of everywhere," said Pollak. "Our work is inspired by memories, longings and imagination."

DANCECleveland's executive director Pam Young met Pinto and Pollak last December when she was invited by the Israeli Consulate in New York to attend the International Exposure Dance Festival in Tel Aviv.

"In four days we saw 40 different dance companies," she said. "It was phenomenal to see the depth and breadth of dance being created in Israel."

One of the groups that caught her eye was Inbal Pinto & Avshalom Pollak Dance Company. "I had seen 'Oyster' several years before and fell in love with it," she said. "To me, the production is Fellini meets Cirque du Soleil. The performers are representative of the human curiosities you would find in a circus back lot."

When Young learned that the company was traveling to America in early 2012 to perform "Oyster" in major cities, she was determined to bring the production to Cleveland. She contacted Federation's executive director Stephen Hoffman to seek some financial support toward the \$100,000 production costs.

"I was so grateful when the Federation pledged the type of funding that gave us confidence to move forward," said Young. "Federation's funds, coupled with private and public funding, make the production possible."

Bringing Inbal Pinto & Avshalom Pollak Dance Company to Cleveland is part of Cleveland Israel Arts Connection, a new Federation initiative to showcase Israeli artists. In a quote given to JTA, art appraiser Erica Hartman-Horvitz, co-chair of Federation's Cleveland Israel Arts Connection, said, "When most people think of Israel, they're thinking of the conflict, maybe the incredible efforts that Israel goes through to survive. We want to illustrate the Israel arts and culture world as something that is more than that for those who might not be interested in Israel for other reasons."

In the meantime Young is eager for the upcoming production of "Oyster." "Cleveland audiences are going to love it," she said.

[afine@cjn.org](mailto:afine@cjn.org)

WHAT: Inbal Pinto & Avshalom Pollak Dance Company

**WHERE:** Ohio Theatre at PlayhouseSquare

**WHEN:** Sat., Jan. 28, at 8 and Sun., Jan. 29, at 3

**TICKETS:** [www.dancecleveland.org](http://www.dancecleveland.org) (use code "JFED" for discounts) or 216-241-6000