

An 'Oyster' in Ohio

Inbal Pinto and Avshalom Pollak Bring Back Seminal Work



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Puppet on a String: Noga Harmelin as a marionette in 'Oyster' by the Inbal Pinto & Avshalom Pollak Dance Company.

By Stacey Menchel Kussell

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In the dazzling circus world of "Oyster," Noga Harmelin dances the role of a tiny, acrobatic doll. With her delicate face painted white beneath a wig of unruly blond hair, she is a whimsical and tragic clown. She jumps, she gesticulates and she even floats (with the help of a harness) high into the air, tiptoeing her feet along the outstretched arm of her dance partner below. Harmelin dances while being pulled by marionette strings, forced to succumb to the characters and forces around her.

In the real world, the petite Harmelin is a veteran performer who pulls her own strings. For 10 years she has danced this role, and many others, with the Tel Aviv-based Inbal Pinto & Avshalom Pollak Dance Company. While Pinto and Pollak have worked together since 1992, producing a diverse repertory, "Oyster" is their most famous creation. Currently celebrating more than 400 performances,

the piece, which last came to America in 2010, returns in January, for a tour starting in Cleveland and visiting New Brunswick, N.J.; Boston, and Philadelphia.

"When I saw 'Oyster' for the first time, I knew I wanted to be a part of the company," Harmelin said in a recent interview with the Forward. "Now, after a decade, I am still mesmerized by its enchanting characters."

Premiering in 1999 as part of a commission from the Maison de la Danse in Lyon, France, "Oyster" was the first large-scale collaboration between Pinto and Pollak.

Immersed in the arts from a young age, the co-directors are both seasoned performers. Pinto studied at the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design and danced with Batsheva Dance Company, and in 1990 started doing her own choreography. Pollak, son of well-known Israeli actor Yossi Pollak, was classically trained in theater.

"We had worked together earlier, but this was our first big international project," Pollak told the Forward in a recent phone interview. "'Oyster' combined our artistic sensibilities in a whole new way."

Moving through various connected scenes, the characters perform in different costumes throughout the piece. The show's imagery is humorous, clever and grotesque: The characters are a striking group of misfits. Wearing wild wigs, baggy suits and sparkling tutus, the eight dancers and four actors resemble a surrealistic sideshow.



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In a bright-orange wig, Michal Almogi plays a tall ballerina clown who gallivants around the stage with a black turtleneck pulled up over her mouth. Zvi Fishzon and Rina Rosenbaum portray two older scheming clowns who emerge from the red curtains of a small proscenium built onto the stage. The spritely Harmelin is one of eight dancing dolls that bend and bounce like wind-up toys. The skilled dancers cleanly articulate the choreography, which combines elements from classical ballet, mime and gymnastics. The hour-long piece is composed of vignettes set to Pollak's own arrangement of recorded tango, opera and swing music.

Dance critics have noted various allusions to filmmakers Federico Fellini and Tim Burton, but Pinto and Pollak are hesitant to ascribe an overt influence or narrative to "Oyster." "We liked the name of the Tim Burton book ["The Melancholy Death of Oyster Boy"], and that helped with the title," Pollak said. "But the ideas are from many sources — images from European street theater, puppetry and scenes from our own childhood dreams."

Pinto and Pollak fuse their stage design, costuming and choreography to create a unique performance experience. "Oyster" has engrossed audiences worldwide, compelling them to attend repeat performances. "Even looking at your favorite painting a hundred times, you may see something that you never saw before," Harmelin said. "'Oyster' has so much to explore. The piece is a playground, and even after so many shows, there are new games to play."

"We have taken 'Oyster' to four continents and have connected with so many diverse audiences," Pollak said. "'Oyster' has a language all its own. It communicates with the imagination."

Stacey Menchel Kussell is a culture writer. Her recent articles examine Israeli contemporary dance.

The "Oyster" tour begins at Cleveland's Ohio Theatre with performances on January 28 and 29. Other tour stops include New Jersey's State Theatre Regional Arts Center in New Brunswick on February 1; Boston's Paramount Theater on February 4 and 5, and Philadelphia's Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts from February 9 to 11.

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