



Israeli dance company creates beyond boundaries of style

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By **Donald Rosenberg, The Plain Dealer**

Creative artists and performers tend to avoid -- not to mention dislike -- describing their styles. They're usually too immersed in the process of devising or interpreting works to take time to ponder what makes them tick.

So it's no surprise that Israeli actor and choreographer Avshalom Pollak is hesitant to characterize the artistry he and his wife, Inbal Pinto, have been nurturing for two decades.

"It is what it is," Pollak said by phone recently from Tel Aviv, where the Inbal Pinto and Avshalom Pollak Dance Company is based. "We blend in our creations the things that we collect through our lives."

The collection the troupe will bring to the Ohio Theatre this week for its Cleveland debut is a concoction titled "Oyster," the most popular piece in the Pinto-Pollak repertory. The full-length work has received more than 300 performances worldwide since its premiere in 1999 in Lyon, France.

"Oyster" is a torrent of dance, theater and music, reflecting the varied artistic paths that coincide in Pinto and Pollak's creations.

Pinto performed with Batsheva Dance Company, Israel's most acclaimed contemporary ensemble, before striking out on her own as a choreographer. Pollak was an actor before linking up with Pinto -- they're long



Eyal Landesman

Members of Israel's Inbal Pinto and Avshalom Pollak Dance Company perform "Oyster," which the troupe brings to the Ohio Theatre in PlayhouseSquare this week for its Cleveland debut.

married -- and veering into new artistic territory.

"I was in drama school and did a project as a director and playwright," said Pollak. "I wanted to do a collaboration with a choreographer, and this is how we met.

"We didn't start working together, but we were seeing each other. It was something really magical. Our world really kind of blended beyond our personal life. Everything became one, artistically and family-wise. I became a choreographer, and she became a director."

The word "magical" also could be applied to works Pinto and Pollak have shaped for their company. Contemporary dance melding with acrobatics, ballet, mime and a smorgasbord of music conjures fantastical images. Some are narrative-driven, others abstract.

The wild and whimsical images and puppetlike characters in "Oyster" stem from many sources, including Fellini. But they're mostly figments of the imaginations of Pinto and Pollak, who never know what they're going to produce when they begin creating a piece.

"It's not something we set up," said Pollak. "In all of our pieces, there's a very defined signature, though we are trying to escape it every time there's something new.

"We want to make the audience feel, think, dream, reflect and be part of something that is disappearing. I think people are more and more disconnected from many things -- emotions and the past. Everything becomes very isolated."

Pollak and Pinto aren't isolated from their country, but they've also never consciously incorporated Israeli elements in their works. Instead, they aim, Pollak said, "to collect more and more things that we make something out of -- create worlds and invent new languages and new ways to communicate through our art."

And their creations are never finished. Although "Oyster" has been in circulation for more than 12 years, Pinto and Pollak continue to hone it. The work's title, chosen after the piece was completed, comes from Tim Burton's macabre book "The Melancholy Death of Oyster Boy and Other Stories," but the dance goes its own metaphoric ways.

"We deal in the piece with performers and human beings who want to achieve some high goal and be perfect or get some kind of catharsis," said Pollak. "Oyster can be the theater we open up -- this magical place that sometimes is perfect, sometimes is not. The connotation is that nothing really fits."

PREVIEW

Inbal Pinto and Avshalom Pollak Dance Company What:

The Israeli company performs "Oyster," a full-length work.

When: 8 p.m. Saturday; 2 p.m. Sunday, Jan. 29.

Where: Ohio Theatre, PlayhouseSquare, Cleveland.

Tickets: \$25-\$55. Go to tinyurl.com/ch24luz or call 216-241-6000.

Pinto and Pollak's company evidently functions well. What began as a tiny troupe that presented small pieces has become an organization with 10 dancers and guest actors who perform full-length works conceived, choreographed and designed by the co-directors, who are busy offstage with two young sons. (And the reason Pinto couldn't join Pollak for this phone conversation.)



Gadi Dagon

Inbal Pinto, left, and Avshalom Pollak have been nurturing their Israeli contemporary-dance company since 1992.

The dancers are employed 11 months a year. The company, whose annual operating budget hovers around \$1 million, receives funding from Israel's culture ministry and the city of Tel Aviv. Much of its earned revenue comes from touring and projects outside Israel.

Along with this month's U.S. tour, the company is scheduled to perform soon in Norway, South America, Europe and Japan.

Dance in Israel, according to Pollak, is flourishing, from ballet and contemporary to folkloric.

"Contemporary dance is very active here in Israel," he said, "I guess because of the variety of people and nations and this fusion. It creates a lot of tension. Maybe that's good for the arts."

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