

Jews and Jewishness in the Dance World: A Lasting Legacy

Conference Proposal

Working Title: Scaling the Wall: Accessibility and Contemporary Dance
in Israel and Palestine

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“The Holy Land has taught us some harsh truths about human nature: brotherhood does not necessarily imply brotherly love, and sometimes, as in the Biblical story of Cain and Abel, it leads to the exact opposite – fratricide.”

“Israeli Jews and Palestinians have much in common. Maybe – just maybe – one day the realization will dawn that the complicated, contested, and highly lethal border between Palestinians and Israelis is separating brothers from brothers, and sisters from sisters.”

- Frank Jacobs

Overarching Research Question:

How can information about Palestinian choreographers and their works become more readily available so that an equitable discourse about the role of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in contemporary dance can occur?

Context

During my final semester of undergraduate studies at Muhlenberg College I participated in a dance research project where I analyzed two contemporary dance works, one by an Israeli choreographer, Dafi Altabeb, and one by a Palestinian choreographer, Farah Saleh. Throughout this research, I became profoundly troubled to discover the lack of resources, both online and in text, regarding Palestinian choreographers. How could I attempt to fairly analyze these two works if the available literature was so deeply inequitable? How could I possibly keep my already inherent bias in check when the information from one side was so clearly overshadowing the other?

Even after consulting with multiple professors and dance industry professionals, I was unable to find a full work by a Palestinian choreographer to study. With deadlines approaching I was forced to settle on analyzing clips of Saleh's "Ordinary Madness," and was able to find a full video of Altabeb's "Sensitivity to Heat." My goal was to pinpoint similarities between Israeli and Palestinian choreographies.

This new research seeks to build and backtrack on my previous project: this time, I will not be looking for choreographic similarities, rather, I will be looking for the choreographers themselves. In order to study choreographic similarities, the works of Palestinian choreographers and related information must become available. This is the void I seek to fill.

Background / Rationale

Growing up as a Conservative American Jew, I attended Hebrew School and youth group, learning about the history of the Jewish people and the State of Israel. After high school I decided to see the holy land for myself, and embarked on a nine month trip as part of the Nativ College Leadership Program in Israel. Without hesitation, I stepped onto the plane, not knowing that less than two months later Operation Pillar of Defense would break out, and test my understanding of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict. That year opened my eyes to the multiplicities and dichotomies entrenched within the Conflict, and I could no longer ignore those people beyond the border wall. And I did not want to – because they were not ignoring me.

Throughout my undergraduate career I jumped at every opportunity in which to fuse my lived experiences with my academic interests. As a recent college graduate, I am excited at the prospect of continuing to meld these ideas through this important research.

Project Overview

I intend for this research to meld two of the sub themes of this conference:

4) Performing Trauma and Transformation

How have experiences of persecution, war, genocide and the Holocaust and issues related to memory, preservation, memorialization, metamorphosis and transfiguration engaged the dance field?

6) Diasporic Monologues and Dialogues

How have struggles/experiences of navigating roots, routes, and memories influenced how Jews experience dance and relate to other minorities and diasporic groups/individuals in shaping the dance field?

In an effort to broaden and deepen the nearly nonexistent field of research surrounding contemporary Palestinian dance, I intend to compile data on current Palestinian choreographers and their works. This research will function similarly to an ethnographic study, a census of sorts. A Google search of “Israeli choreographers” yields multiple pages of lists and in-depth information, such as biographies, videos, and images. A search of “Palestinian choreographers” yields no in depth lists nor chronologies, but rather a few articles on Farah Saleh, dabkeh (folk dance), and choreographers and companies who have performed in Palestine, but not Palestinian choreographers themselves. I seek to fill this void.

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Additional research/interview questions:

- What is hindering the public’s access to the works of Palestinian choreographers, and why do those same hindrances not exist for Israeli choreographers?
 - How does this impact the world’s understanding of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict?
- How has the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict affected (or not affected) the ability to locate sources of information about contemporary Palestinian choreographers?

Ultimately, I want to gain an understanding of Palestinian choreographers and their works to further my understanding of the Conflict, yet the information is currently not accessible.

Methodologies

I will conduct this research mainly through interviews, both in-person and over Skype.

Secured Interviews:

Israeli Choreographers	Palestinian Choreographers
Yossi Berg	Farah Saleh
Oded Graf	Samar Haddad King
	Khaled Barghouthi
	Khaled Elayyan

Prospective Interviews:

Israeli Choreographers	Palestinian Choreographers
Dafi Altabeb	Nadia Aroui
Saar Harari	Adi Boutrous

Conclusion

The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict has become a central part of modern Jewish identity. It is a defining factor in our lives, prayers, and holidays. Yet, the Jewish people, myself included, have long “othered” those beyond the walls. The dance community is guilty of this as well, and the longer ignorance exists as the norm, the farther away experiencing cultural empathy becomes. In short, access to information is critical to our understanding. In seeking to make the discourse around Israeli and Palestinian dance more equitable, specifically increasing the research and literature surrounding Palestinian choreographers, we can, in turn, make the discourse around the conflict more understandable as well.