Sarah Foster Sproull

By Jenny Stevenson

Auckland dancer and choreographer Sarah Foster Sproull spent last Christmas Day dancing. At the time when most Kiwis were sitting down to a sumptuous feast, firing up the barbie or heading off to the beach, Sarah was starting the first day of a ten-day intensive in Gaga Technique with Ohad Naharin and the Batsheva Dance Company in Tel Aviv; fittingly not too far away from the Holy City of Bethlehem.

Naharin, who has been the Artistic Director of Batsheva since 1990, evolved the innovative Gaga training method to enable dancers to interpret his extraordinary choreography, not only physically but also on an emotive level with the senses fully engaged. Through a framework of rigorous self-practice dancers can gain body "knowledge and self-awareness... while lightering the senses and imagination", Naharin says of his method. (http://www.adancersprism.com/2011/05/29/ohad-naharin-introduces-gaga-technique). He emphasises that dancers can, through practising this method, make themselves “available” to new sensations and “aware of our explosive power”.

The Gaga training methodology or “movement language” as it is known, has transformed the Company, which was once a bastion of Martha Graham repertoire, after being founded in 1964 by the Baroness Batsheva de Rothschild, who had persuaded Graham to be the Company’s artistic adviser. Although there have been a number of directors in the interim, once Naharin took over, both as director and choreographer, the Company flourished, enjoying escalating success and methodology, and the manner in which it empowered the dancers.

So what sets it apart? Reviewing the Company’s most recent season of Hora in March 2012 in New York, dance critic Joan Acocella writes: 

And it contains, in no apparently logical order, just about every movement you could imagine: snake hips, dog paws, chicken head-jacks, plus tilts and grabs and falls and flutterings for which I can find no adjectives. (http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/culture/2012/03/batsheva-dance-hora.html)

Sarah, whose own choreographic career has enjoyed an impressive momentum since she graduated from the New Zealand School of Dance in 2006, has been following Naharin’s work for years from afar - courtesy of YouTube. The manner in which the women in Batsheva work so strongly and “word-like” in their presence sparked her interest and she was feeling the need to explore “new movement possibilities” she says. Sarah applied to Creative New Zealand and was given a professional development grant to undertake the workshop.

Over the ten-day intensive, Sarah was able to take six classes taught by Naharin personally, the rest been taken by current or former dancers of Batsheva. Although she found every class was different, Sarah gained an understanding of the overall structure of the training. She has even found herself working with a “dream group of people” and is able to apply some of the principles she absorbed from the Gaga training, in making new work.

Most recently, she has been working on Rotunda which was commissioned by Shona for NZDC, to be performed in 2013. The work features the North Shore Brass Band as an integral part of the performance. At the end of the year Sarah will also create her own work features the North Shore Brass Band as an integral part of the performance. At the end of the year Sarah will also create her own work and return to Israel. In a review for Theatreview Jonathan W. Marshall wrote:

Somewhere between confusion and martyrdom, ecstasy and enlightenment, these and other phrases evoked a highly complex and never fully resolved sense of questing which pumped violently and strongly through the bodies on stage. http://www.theatreview.org.nz/reviews/review.php?id=4676

Having moved to Auckland to work in Shona McCullagh’s New Zealand Dance Company, Sarah has found herself working with a “dream group of people” and is able to apply some of the principles she absorbed from the Gaga training, in making new work.

Meanwhile the next project is also for NZDC: a 40-minute piece entitled Human Human God which is a response to the next generation of dancers – young people who have absorbed and become proficient in the technologies of the age - operating multiple means of communication with a masterful ease. They are creating new movements in response to external stimuli – very much in keeping with the philosophy of Gaga.