

Through a combination of high-octane choreography,
explosive percussion and a filmmaker's sensibility,

Words **Andy Thomas**

HOFESH SHECHTER

is bringing contemporary dance to a whole new audience. He
reveals his influences, from Baz Luhrmann and Stanley Kubrick
to compulsory military service in Israel.



The production of *Political Mother* at London’s Brixton Academy last autumn was a turning point for Israeli choreographer Hofesh Shechter, making his work accessible to a whole new audience and bringing a fresh perspective to contemporary dance. When asked by Hannah Ellis-Petersen of *The Guardian* why he chose to stage his dance show in a concert venue, Shechter said: “Contemporary dance is like some sort of underground club and when people encounter it and discover it, they feel like they own something very special and kind of crazy. It’s a bag full of surprises – it can be great, it can be horrible and people have to accept that as part of the experiment.” And experimentation has been at the heart of Shechter’s work since he burst onto London’s contemporary dance scene in the early 2000s.

Born in 1975, Shechter graduated from the Jerusalem Academy of Music and Dance before moving to Tel Aviv to join Batsheva Dance Company, where he worked with the influential choreographer Ohad Naharin, among others. He arrived in the UK in 2002 after two years in Paris, playing percussion with his band the Human Beings. He joined the Jasmin Vardimon Company soon after, before creating his first choreographed work, *Fragments*. Set to his own soundtrack, the performance led to his appointment as an associate artist at the Place, London’s contemporary dance hub.

It was Shechter’s 2006 work *Uprising* that really signalled his arrival on London’s contemporary dance scene. “There was suddenly an important new voice,” said Alistair Spalding, director of Sadler’s Wells

Theatre. “I think it’s not just the choreography, it’s his dominance of the stage. He works more like a filmmaker in a way, telling you what you should be looking at when. He composes the music. He is brilliant at structure. And his choreographic style is very organic.”

Uprising was a highly charged, visceral work featuring seven male dancers in combat trousers sparring and bonding to Shechter’s throbbing, percussive score. “I almost felt I had this wild dog inside me that needs to be unleashed,” Shechter said at the time. “It’s really about the childish and competitive mood of a group of men flung together in a room, so there’s something very powerful about it. It’s loud, the guys are very, very physical.” The work drew from his experience of national service in Israel, and the atmosphere of his home country hangs over much of his work. “There’s a combative feeling in the air. It melts into everything. It’s like an energy you’re living inside,” he said.

In *The Art of Not Looking Back* in 2009, Shechter reversed the roles, with an all-female cast and a narration by himself about being left by his mother when he was just two years of age. It was made under the name of the Hofesh Shechter Dance

Company, his Brighton-based troupe that have been creating highly individual work since their formation in 2008.

When asked for inspirations, Shechter enthuses about film directors rather than other choreographers, in particular Stanley Kubrick. “I find him a genius of storytelling. He leaves the audience thinking all the time – it’s very suggestive, powerful stuff,” he said recently. His interest in reaching beyond the dance world also saw him work with British sculptor Antony Gormley on *Survivor* in 2012. It was a collaboration he described as “two lost particles in a universe of many particles – which are all lost as well”.

First created in 2010, *Political Mother* is the company’s most famous piece. Dance critic Mark Monahan described the performance at Brixton Academy last October: “On ground level is a row of faintly terrifying martial snare drummers. Way above them, also spaced out across the full width of the stage, is a classical octet. And floating above them, some 40 feet up – like something that might have blasted its way out of the latest *Mad Max* film – is a 12-piece band of drummers, percussionists and electric guitarists, with a ranting dictator-cum-rock star at its centre.” Many of the young people in the crowd that evening would have been introduced to Shechter through ‘Maxxie’s Dance’, the opening sequence of the second series of Channel 4’s *Skins*. Today Shechter continues to create work that challenges the contemporary dance world. We spoke to the choreographer over the phone from Nederlands Dans Theater, where he was preparing for the world premiere of his latest production, *Clowns*.

What was your first love, music or dance?

Oh music, I knew nothing about dance and was not connected to it in any way. I was as distanced from it as we are from the sun. I started to study the piano when I was six years old. I hated to practise but I loved playing and making tunes. I had a little tape recorder and I loved messing around with that. And also listening to a lot of records. That was my first contact point with art and what I really loved.

When did you discover dance?

That was much later, when I was about 12. I started to dance with a youth dance folk company that I mainly joined for social reasons. It was nice to be with a group of people and touring around Israel. And also going abroad, because that was a very special thing back then.

How important was your time at Tel Aviv’s Batsheva Dance Company under Ohad Naharin?

That was extremely important. I joined the junior company when I was 18 and I wasn’t very developed as a dancer. So I learned so much through Ohad. He is a real master of the body, space and time. There was so much to learn from him. It was also great being in an environment where the dancers were so talented. At the time,

Ohad was inviting other choreographers in to make work as well, so I brushed against the work of people like Paul Selwyn Norton. And then we would perform the work of [William] Forsythe. So it was a real education for me.



But yes, learning from Ohad was my school and that is where I came from.

When did you start playing percussion?

I didn’t start studying percussion until I was about 21. I had been at the Batsheva Dance Company for a few years and got to the stage where I didn’t know if I wanted to dance any more. I really missed the world of music so decided to come back to it through percussion. I also bought myself a digital four-track and started experimenting with recording music.

What impact did national service have on you and on the psyche of young people in Israel?

On the one hand my service was very light because I got a special status as a dancer and was kind of like a clerk doing very little for the army. But at the same time I felt the oppressive presence of it in my life, because

they wouldn’t just release me as a dancer. So there was some effect there but I would say it was more about just the existence of the army and the general state of Israel. And how bizarre it is to have inside a democratic society a hierarchical organisation where there are completely different rules. So whatever rules you grow up educated with as a kid, suddenly you’re thrust into the army and the rules are different. So it is a very, very bizarre and slightly scary situation. I think it’s had a huge influence on me and on Israel. The presence of the army in Israel is something you can’t miss, it’s part of the politics, it’s part of the discussion, it is part of the terror and the fear.

Male bonding has been one of the themes of your work. Does some of that come from your experiences of national service?

Yes, there is some of that in there, from my little time in the army and seeing the boot camps and that. But again it’s also just seeing the society around and seeing the guys who were what we call the real fighters. The ones who come back every 30 days or whatever and you see the connections they have with each other, which is based on being in an extreme situation together. It’s a very bizarre kind of bonding. There is something very basic about it and close to primitive.

I understand you spent some time in Paris away from dance. How did you end up there?

I was married to a French girl and we decided to leave Israel and spend some time living there. We decided to travel for a bit and for me to have a break from dance. We were living in a village outside of Paris at the home where my ex-wife grew up with her mum. It was a very different experience for me, kind of pastoral. It was a moment when I was deciding what I wanted to do with my life.

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I wasn't sure if it was dance because being at Batsheva had been like a high-speed train at times. I wanted some time to myself. So I continued to study percussion and experiment with music. I was also playing with a rock band [Human Beings].

And then you moved to England?

My wife wanted to study at the British School of Osteopathy and at the same time my band wanted to move to London. So I was like, yeah, OK. I had previously only been to London once for one day and it wasn't a good day. It was so expensive I couldn't afford a sandwich, and I thought it was so big and messy. So when I got there it took me some time to love it. But I really didn't have any plans or dreams when I arrived.

How did you end up joining the Jasmin Vardimon Company?

When I got to London I had decided I didn't want to dance any more, but seeing that surviving there was really challenging, I thought, oh well, I'm a professional dancer, I better find a job to pay the bills. So that really was the way I came back to dance. I heard that Jasmin was looking for a dancer so I got in touch and auditioned and they took me on.

When did you move into choreography?

I'd been at Jasmin Vardimon for a couple of years and decided that now I really wanted to do my own work and not for other choreographers. And so I created my first work, *Fragments*.

How did you make that transition from being a dancer to a choreographer?

I had experimented for many years with making music and suddenly I thought, I am going to create



Barbarians. Photograph Gabriele Zucca

music for a dance piece. I had a month free so I tasked myself with creating a piece of dance to go with this music I had finished. I went to the local church hall and started to work the choreography with the music. At the time I felt like I needed a purpose to do this and I found a choreography competition in Finland and decided to apply. They accepted it and I took *Fragments* to Finland. So I jumped into it.

How did you get picked up by the Place?

When I came back to London from Finland I thought I would

look for opportunities to perform *Fragments* there. So I sent videos around to many people who just ignored me. But a small theatre in High Barnet picked it up. I performed it there and John Ashford, the director of the Place, came to see it and invited me to perform it there. Then he invited me to become an associate artist and it went from there. I owe John Ashford more than you can believe.

Uprising was one of the works that came through your time with the Place. Why did you decide on an

all-male cast?

I wanted to create material that was wild, strong and from the body. I'm not saying women can't do this, but there was something about the energy of a group of men that I really felt like unleashing at the time.

In works such as Fragments and Uprising, your dancers are dressed in casual wear. Why did you decide on that?

I like things that are very simple and that belong to the street - to us, the people. I'm trying as far as possible to not isolate the work from life. Of course the work takes place in the theatre, but I like that there is a real connection to who or what we are, and that there is no pretence. But in the last few years, for example with *Barbarians*, I've started to use costumes more.

Why is it to so important for you to make your own music for your shows?

It goes back to something William Forsythe said, along the lines of "what you can do yourself, then do yourself". The more you do yourself the more complete the work is. I think I made a name for myself as a bit of a control freak though. But to create the music for me is to create the atmosphere and the rhythm of the work. It's very hard when you're using someone else's ready-made music because you are enslaved to it, to the timing of it and to what it says. Sometimes I use ready-made music but usually I create my own.

And what comes first, music or choreography?

It really depends on the creation. With some work the idea of the choreography comes first and then I start searching for what music to make. And then with other work it's the other way around, I will have a snippet of music which will kick-start the idea for the dance. I don't have a set process, and in fact it's quite chaotic the way it happens.

Sadler's Wells director Alistair Spalding said you work more like a filmmaker. How important has cinema been to you?

Film is a real inspiration to me. There is one film that I don't mention enough and that is *Moulin Rouge* [directed by Baz Luhrmann in 2001]. I saw it again recently, and there is just something about the franticness of it. They were so brave in the whole chaos of the film with the layering and editing. And also the production of the music, that is something I really aspire to, that multi-layered massive kind of production.

Which other directors have inspired you?

I love Charlie Kaufman with films like *Being John Malkovich* and *Adaptation*. Just the storytelling and editing is so interesting there. And then Kubrick is of course another major influence. His ability to portray human emotion through images and ideas is just amazing. I think he

really understood something the rest of us don't know.

I've always been struck by your use of lighting.

I worked with [lighting designer] Lee Curran for many years and he has a very strong footprint in what he does, and really strong colours. I think the lighting for me is about creating a space that is epic. That creates a really strong feeling for me.

You mentioned the all-male cast for Uprising. In The Art of Not Looking Back in 2009 you chose an all-female cast. Why?

It really came from a very simple idea of challenging myself. After doing *Uprising* with the all-male cast, I wanted to put myself in a room with female dancers and see what happens. And that was really interesting.

What was the first work for your own company?

It was created out of *In Your Rooms*, which was an Arts Council-backed project that we performed at the Place, then the Queen Elizabeth Hall and Sadler's Wells. After we took it to Sadler's Wells they said they would give us regular funding to set up the company. And the dancers from *In Your Rooms* became the dancers of the company.

How do you find being in England now?

I love England, but I find London particularly invigorating and exciting. For me there are so many windows of opportunity here. If you try hard enough it seems like something must happen. There are so many options, in

the people you meet and the projects you can do. And that richness is something I really love. But as I said, I learned to love it because it was a very hard entry.

Political Mother introduced your work to a much younger new audience. Is this something that's important to you?

It's not a mission that I have. But like I said, I didn't grow up on dance, I grew up on music. And I think my tastes are probably closer to the people who love music than the people who love dance. So it excites me that a lot of new people are coming to the work. Because something about the work is about us - the tribe. And it's really powerful when a lot of people are connecting to it and feeling something direct coming from it. There is something very raw about it. I like that the work is not pretentious and distant or a work that is just there to serve the well-educated contemporary dance audience. I make work that I want to see and to experience myself.

The contemporary dance production Clowns by Hofesh Shechter opens at Stadsschouwburg, Utrecht, on 7 June stadsschouwburg-utrecht.nl hofesh.co.uk



Political Mother. Photograph Gabriele Zucca

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