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Ohad Naharin's Sensual, Somatic Gaga

Hiie Saumaa

Embodied Philosophy in Dance: Gaga and Ohad Naharin's Movement Research

By Einav Katan-Schmid. 228 pp. Illustrated.

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Gaga, a movement practice developed by Ohad Naharin, the choreographer, dancer, and artistic director of Tel Aviv's Batsheva Dance Company, is gaining ground in dance departments, studios, and workshops around the world. However, little scholarship exists on Gaga, the Batsheva Dance Company, or Naharin himself.¹ After the release of *Mr. Gaga*, a documentary by Tomer Heymann (in Israel in 2015, in the United States in 2017), Einav Katan-Schmid's *Embodied Philosophy in Dance: Gaga and Ohad Naharin's Movement Research* (2016) cannot be timelier. Katan-Schmid, a research associate at the Cluster of Excellence, Image, Knowledge, Gestaltung: An Interdisciplinary Laboratory at the Humboldt University of Berlin, Germany, and a practitioner of Gaga with the Batsheva Dance Company since 2003, adds a much-needed,

thorough exploration of Gaga, highlighting its philosophical, physical, mental, sensual, imaginative, and perceptual possibilities.

Gaga can be categorized as a somatic practice in that it focuses on understanding movement as it is “currently felt within the body” (p. 97). Instead of emphasizing a movement’s outward shape or appearance, the dancers observe their physical and mental experiences as these unfold in movement. Gaga’s investigation is not predicated on preconceived notions of “right” and “wrong” movement: “Instead, the practice suggests instructions that direct dancers towards perceiving their current physical qualities, and towards comprehending their ability to dance with pleasure” (p. 166). Each dancer senses the movements, searching for feeling.

The book is divided into five parts. In her succinct, clearly articulated chapters under each section, Katan-Schmid relies on observations of the Batsheva dancers, in practice studios and in performance, and uses a philosophical lens to contextualize and understand the practice. In Part I, “Embodied Philosophy in Dance: Introduction,” Katan-Schmid establishes the philosophical and theoretical framework for her inquiry, addressing embodied philosophies of the mind, hermeneutics, phenomenology, and pragmatism. She notes that Buddhist meditation is only one among the methods for coordinating mental and physical processes: “body and mind can also be correlated when a philosopher’s thoughts run fluently within her/his inner feeling of integration with phenomena, or when a dancer is physically active and trusts her/his bodily knowledge in agile movements” (p. 33). Katan-Schmid embarks on analysis of the nature and significance of the verbal instructions the Batsheva dancers receive while practicing Gaga. Although there is no systematic order of instructions, certain tendencies emerge: the

instructions may require a concrete physical task or tend toward the metaphorical or conceptual. Verbal directions such as “pull your bones away from your flesh,” “quake,” “have a thick sensation,” “connect effort into pleasure,” or “discover traveling stuff inside your body” evoke particular movement tendencies or nuances. For example, “have a thick sensation” is often manifested as a contraction of muscles on the bones: the dancers “invest more effort, which is clearly differentiated from the lightness of a float” (p. 46). Traversing the terrain between verbal directions and the sensations they evoke in movement constitutes the mindful search and research of Gaga practice.

In “The Sensual Emphasis of Gaga,” Part II, Katan-Schmid focuses on the sensual effect that the verbal instructions may have and their potential to yield new movements. She addresses, for example, instructions such as “have a moving ball in your body,” “float,” and “integrate somatic attention and detached representations into innovative implications” (p. 77). The dancers’ effort to increase somatic attention helps them explore their sensuality. Embodied knowledge emerges and is being practiced “without hindering the movement with too much thinking” (p. 78).

In Part III, titled “The Mental Emphasis of Gaga,” Katan-Schmid sheds light on how Gaga directs the dancers’ moods, concentration, and attentiveness. She investigates how instructions such as “connect effort into your pleasure,” “connect to your passion to move,” “be ready to move,” and “be silly” guide the dancers into deeper sensual research, perhaps even lessening their physical fatigue and mental distraction. The instructions can connect them to the pleasure of movement and affect their mood. Katan-Schmid draws attention to the idea that “dancing requires concentration in the process of movement. For that reason, dancing is a mental procedure no less than a physical one” (p. 91). Staying

constantly attuned to movement and to tracking sensations over an extended period is not just a physical but a mental act. Attunement, according to Katan-Schmid, means that the dancer is one with his/her body and mind.

Katan-Schmid next, in Part IV, “Gaga: Physical Practice of Intelligence,” examines layered instructions in which dancers receive multiple physical tasks simultaneously. Among the instructions she cites are “move quickly while you lead slow gestures in space” or “explore your curves while at the same time have a shake in your body.” This section sheds light on how coordinating the teacher’s different directions increases the dancers’ sensitivity. Katan-Schmid points out that this “harmonization of movements demands another layer of attentiveness” (p. 135). This section also explores how Gaga engages the dancers’ imaginations. Katan-Schmid observes that the dancers not only interpret what is sensed, but “they also imagine how the body can induce processes that are not currently the case from an existing procedure” (p. 140). New combinations of familiar or unfamiliar instructions stir the dancers’ imaginations and inspire new somatic inquiries. The skill of somatic attention increases the dancers’ proprioceptive and kinesthetic acuity.

Part V, “The Moving Forms of Dancing Gaga,” centers on “Bellus,” an opening section of Naharin’s choreographic work *Three*. Katan-Schmid notes that viewers might feel kinesthetic empathy and sense physically the quality of the dancer’s movements, an experience, it is worth noting, that is available in all dance viewing. According to her analysis of *Three*, “Viewers follow the dance with their bodily feeling of kinesthesia and not merely with their ears and their eyes” (p. 191). Whether Gaga’s heavy emphasis on

sensation offers spectators a stronger or clearer experience of kinesthetic emphasis, compared to other dance forms performed on stage, needs further research.

Each part of the book starts with “An Experimental Point of View,” a section describing the dancers experiencing Gaga practice. For example, Part II opens with a scene of the Batsheva dancers lying on the floor, tired, waiting for their morning practice. Upon Naharin’s direction, “float,” each dancer’s vertebrae begin to “move away from one another, the arms are lifted slightly, and the entire skeleton seems to hold itself and to elevate the flesh gently” (p. 43). The dancers’ bodies become “airy and elastic” as their inner organs “find an internal feeling of easiness; the limbs seem to be independent, the space between the joints becomes noticed” (p. 43), and the movements are suffused with minimum effort. In another “experimental” section, Katan-Schmid describes a dancer in Naharin’s choreography on the stage: “His flesh and skin seem to be alive and delicate. His body changes texture when he melts at the core. . . . He moves, and he is attentive to his movements” (p. 179). These vivid sections help readers visualize Gaga practice and access what that practice might feel like.

Several aspects make *Embodied Philosophy* remarkable. First, as noted above, the phenomenon of Gaga is lacking extensive theoretical, historical, critical, and pedagogical approaches. Second, while some important studies of philosophy and dance exist,² philosophical approaches to dance are still rare. Katan-Schmid’s inquiry sheds light on “embodied thinking,” “embodied wisdom,” and “physical intelligence.” For Katan-Schmid, “embodied wisdom” refers to knowledge gained through the physical act of dancing and reflecting on the physical sensations of that dancing. She shows how Gaga has the potential to “clarify tacit cognitive processes within understanding and thinking”

(p. 7). Third, scholarly accounts of somatics have developed understanding of such approaches to bodily awareness as the Alexander Technique, the Feldenkrais Method, and Body-Mind Centering, to name a few. Katan-Schmid's work adds an important scholarly model of a somatically grounded dance practice where vigorous improvisational movement is central.³ Fourth, Katan-Schmid's constant attention to the physical and mental aspects of Gaga is admirable, as is her analysis of concepts such as mood and sensuality, particularly the potential of sensuality to enhance movement possibilities, a topic infrequently touched upon in the scholarship of somatics. Moreover, Katan-Schmid's account convincingly shows the importance of language, verbal instructions, and verbal imagery in this movement practice: in Gaga, language and movement are inextricably linked. Katan-Schmid introduces several areas of inquiry for future scholars, such as the problematic categorization of Gaga as a "movement language," as well as the need for thorough explorations of the pedagogy of Gaga and possible future directions for its training programs.

A distinction exists between two types of Gaga classes: Gaga/dancers classes, on the one hand, serve professional and student dancers, resembling Batsheva's classes, while, on the other, Gaga/people classes are open to participants from all walks of life and movement backgrounds. While Katan-Schmid makes it clear that her work centers on the Batsheva dancers' engagement with Gaga, this study raises the question of whether and how the ideas explored here could pertain to Gaga/people classes. Gaga's connections to somatic modalities and methods for describing movement, such as Laban/Bartenieff Movement Analysis, could be another aspect for future research. Katan-Schmid thoroughly examines how the verbal instructions are received by the dancers; a

worthwhile inquiry would be exploration of the teacher's choice of instructions, as well as whether and to what extent the dancers are being encouraged to use their own instructions or trace their inner language during movement. Future scholars might also ask whether and how Gaga has an impact on the dancers' engagement with other movement modalities and stage performance, or whether it helps them maintain a somatic connection outside the dance world.

Embodied Philosophy is of interest to somatic practitioners and researchers, as well as dancers and choreographers. In her recent book, *Mindful Movement*, Martha Eddy mentions Gaga as a somatic practice but does not elaborate on the practice's somatic content;⁴ now, Gaga's somatic aspects are persuasively explained in Katan-Schmid's work. The account may be of interest to researchers investigating neuroscientific approaches to dance and the dynamics between dance and cognition. Without doubt, *Embodied Philosophy* will be invaluable for current and future Gaga dancers and educators and scholars mining the riches of Gaga.

NOTES

¹ For a helpful account of the emergence of Gaga, see Debrah Friedes Galili, "Gaga: Moving Beyond Technique with Naharin in the Twenty-First Century," *Dance Chronicle*, vol. 38, no. 3 (2015): 360–92.

² For example, see Sondra Horton Fraleigh's *Dance and the Lived Body: A Descriptive Aesthetics* (Pittsburgh: The University of Pittsburgh Press, 1987); Kimerer LaMothe's

Why We Dance: A Philosophy of Bodily Becoming (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015); Maxine Sheets-Johnstone's *The Primacy of Movement* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1999); Richard Shusterman's *Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

³ On dance somatics, see Martha Eddy, "A Brief History of Somatic Practices and Dance: Historical Development of the Field of Somatic Education and Its Relationship to Dance," *Journal of Dance Education and Somatic Practices*, vol. 1, no. 1 (2009): 5–27.

⁴ See Martha Eddy, *Mindful Movement: The Evolution of the Somatic Arts and Conscious Action* (Bristol, UK: Intellect, 2016).

HIIE SAUMAA (Ph.D.) is a Dance Fellow at New York Public Library for the Performing Arts and an adjunct associate research scholar at Columbia University, her alma mater. Her work explores interconnections between dance writing, somatics, and imagination. Her articles have appeared or are forthcoming in *Dance Chronicle: Studies in Dance and the Related Arts*; *Dance Research Journal*; *The Journal of Dance, Movement & Spiritualities*; and *Somatics Magazine/Journal*. She has contributed to *The Jerome Robbins Newsletter*, *Hybrid Pedagogy*, and *Movement Research Performance Journal*. Saumaa is a certified instructor of Nia dance, The BodyLogos Technique, and JourneyDance and teaches classes and workshops in sensory-based dance modalities, creative movement, expressive arts, meditative strength training, and somatic awareness.