

**To what extent is Ohad Naharin's Gaga movement language
directing the future of modern dance?**

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Introduction

The dance world is constantly melding and changing as new ideas come in and out of the spotlight. Most recently, Gaga has become a new fad for modern dancers but to what extent is it directing the future of modern dance? The movement language started in Israel with Batsheva Dance Company in the 1990s as “a state of mind and a state of the body and a mental state that we explore” (Agami). The director of Batsheva at the time was Ohad Naharin, and he was the one that spearheaded the development of Gaga. The origin of his ideas was within the “animal” of human movement and the exploration of sensation which is what drives how the individual engages with dance (Mr. Gaga). Gaga is creating a new perspective on how the individual engages with dance through the language used in class and how that communicates the need for physical exploration, mental effort, and perceptual integration of intention and movement. Gaga classes are focused on improvisation guided by task-based metaphors, a far cry from the traditional modern dance class. Rather than thinking about technique, Gaga revolves around a set of ideas, and this perspective, as well as the ideas themselves, is changing the ways that modern dancers engage with their art. This shift in the individual’s engagement is changing the overall perspective of what dance is and what it can be, removing the limitations of traditional art and allowing modern dance to become a more powerfully expressive art form.

Gaga’s Connection to Individuals

The most basic way in which dance creates an impact is through the experience of the individuals who take part in it: the dancers themselves. Gaga is changing the way that dancers engage with movement through how it views the body, mind, and class time.

The body is the instrument of a dancer and Gaga has become so influential because it changes how dancers engage with their instrument. One of the challenges that all dancers face is to capture the nuance in the quality of the movement rather than just the picture that it creates (Katan 81). Dancers tend to work into movement from the outside, trying to coordinate what they think their body is able to do and what it looks like in the mirror without using any sensational awareness. This “procedural” method of learning “causes misunderstanding of movement and, therefore, frustration” (Katan 100). There is a perceptual gap between what a dancer feels and what they see and, therefore, a lack of communication between body and mind leading to an unsuccessful understanding of the movement. It also means that a dancer is more likely to injure themselves because the lack of connection with their own bodies makes them more likely to go beyond their limits. In Gaga, the idea is to “listen to our body before we tell it what to do” (Mr. Gaga). Time is spent researching a dancer’s habits so that they can strengthen their familiarity with their own body. Once this connection is attained, physical awareness can be merged with the intention of the movement and an accurate quality can be attained. Gaga is changing how the dancer connects to the quality of movement by increasing the focus on bodily research and creating a more in-depth engagement with the body.

Gaga is also changing how dancers engage with dance through the mental effort required from a Gaga class. In Gaga, “the dancers do not merely examine movement, they inquire into their own movement habits, and consequently their own schemata of perception” (Katan 25). Dancers are constantly challenging the physical habits of the body, but because experience truly happens in the brain the dancers are also trying to work with their own mental habits as they relate to the movement. So the challenge of Gaga movement is not only to stretch physical limits

but also to expand perceptual boundaries (Katan 118). In most other types of dance classes, the mental attitude is about endurance and directing the body in particular ways, but the language of Gaga directs the dancer's concentration to physicality (Katan 119). Rather than doing a particular movement, the focus is on *how* it is done and the understanding required to achieve a certain physicality. Instead of building up "good" habits of the mind and body determined by a set of aesthetic ideals, Gaga experiments with the limits of perception through different textures which take the dancer to an extreme place every time. Nothing ever becomes reflexive because of the nuance within a texture and the difficulty of achieving it. Gaga is introducing a mental challenge to dance that is more than just familiarity with forms; it adds the thoughtful comprehension of complex physicalities that force the dancer to engage with their minds in a different way than previous methods. Gaga is adding to the complexity of dance by creating a more engaged mentality on physicality as it relates to movement rather than just focusing on the physical form.

The general class structure of a modern dance class includes technical drills, movement phrases that are repeated, and then feedback from the teacher on how to do each of those things correctly. Gaga classes are quite different. Rather than going through physical positioning drills to create "good" habits, Gaga uses metaphors to instruct the class toward different physical activities. The teacher can then use these metaphors as "communicative ways of creating a shift in perception" (Katan 72). They help the class to better understand the nuance of each idea and focus their mentalities toward those details while leaving the freedom to explore that idea as each individual sees fit (Subin). For example, the word "boya" is used to direct the class toward the feeling of spaghetti in boiling water. "Lena" refers to the engine in your navel. Words like this are used, along with other short phrases, to direct the class toward ideas rather than movements.

Teachers make the decisions on which phrases to use in the moment during a class based on what is happening around them so that no class is ever quite the same (Agami). The relationship between language and class organization in a Gaga class is very individualized in comparison to modern dance classes and allows the dancer to engage in the exploration of movement textures rather than just the acquisition of choreography and conformation to particular habits.

One metaphor within a Gaga class that is common no matter what texture you are exploring is to connect effort to pleasure. This idea started with Ohad's original focus on finding pleasure through movement (Mr. Gaga). At any point in a class your legs are burning and sweat is dripping down your face and the teacher will instruct you to connect the effort to pleasure so that "the focus is directed back to the body, as if someone had opened a gate to bodily, and thereby also mental, freedom. Then, suddenly, fatigue disappears and energy develops: the energy of pleasurable effort" (Katan 88). Gaga uses this mental instruction to prolong a dancer's endurance while generating an enjoyable experience. Through this particular metaphor and many others Gaga connects the dancer "to why we live" according to Ohad, so that Gaga becomes almost a spiritual experience (Schabas). In most dance forms the pleasure is found primarily during performance and the hours of rehearsal leading up to it can be difficult. Instead, Gaga creates a connection of pleasure to the effort of rehearsal so that rehearsal becomes just as active as the performance. Through these metaphors the dancers become more engaged with rehearsal time, and the perception of what class time should be used for is shifted.

Gaga is a movement language that is changing how individuals engage with dance to allow the individual to free themselves from their own limits. The extensive sensational awareness is changing the way that dancers connect with their bodies in order to challenge

physical limits without causing injury. Increased mental awareness creates a pathway to learning movement that forces an intellectual approach to texture and connects the dancer to the quality of the movement without disconnect from the form. This awareness allows the individual to challenge their own perceptual habits and free themselves from psychological limitations. Gaga creates a new engagement with dance using the relationship between physical and mental awareness. The language used to help teach this awareness makes learning movement more individualized and nuanced so that the dancers can comprehend more complex movement more efficiently, even when it is outside of their comfort zone. The structure of Gaga is redefining how class time should be used so that dancers are more engaged and exploratory within movement. These changes in the individual's engagement with dance open up the limitless possibilities that an individual can explore within movement, and those explorations can be shared when individuals start to incorporate Gaga with modern dance classes. This can happen through teachers taking Gaga or Gaga dancers becoming teachers. Either way, the Gaga language is spreading throughout dance culture and taking the next generation of dancers in a new direction.

Gaga's Effect on the Culture of Modern Dance

Modern dance is called modern because it is all about the current times. It changes with the culture of the world and always aims to be at the forefront of creation. So often the challenge for the choreographer is to create something that has never been seen before, much easier said than done. Gaga creates an atmosphere that is conducive to this process. "Gaga is a set of invented words and phrases designed to provoke movements — by turns ugly, exquisite and silly — which together constitute an anti-technique, a way to escape the tried-and-tested styles of modern and contemporary dance and break into a new range" (Subin). The words used in ballet

and modern technique are for specific positions which constrain the choreographer within the limits of contemporary dance. In contrast, the cues used in Gaga classes are open-ended metaphors that free the choreographer from these limits. Gaga has a language base that supports the exploration of new movement and connects the choreographer to a limitless range of dynamic movement. As mentioned in the previous section, this language is a large part of what helps the individual break out of personal physical and mental habits, and in this way it also aids the choreographer in breaking out of choreographic ruts. The lack of aesthetic ideals in Gaga makes everything fair game so that movement created by Gaga is only limited by the choreographer's imagination.

The entire practice of Gaga is structured around being able to create new things. Ohad believes that "We must go beyond our familiar limits on a daily basis" (Mr. Gaga). This turns rehearsal time into a laboratory for new movement because as dancers push themselves perceptually and physically they are also pushing their creativity. Everything that makes Gaga what it is is rooted in exploration, imagination, and newness which makes it connected to the goal of modern dance: creating new movement. This starts in how it challenges the individual and translates into the bigger picture. Its very structure as an art form pushes the limits of the individual, and through those individuals Gaga is pushing the limits of modern dance and expanding the definition of modern dance.

One of the reasons that Gaga is able to challenge the status quo of modern dance is that there is no ideal or perfection that is being strived for. "Dance, especially ballet, is often seen as a quest for perfection in human form. Not so for Ohad Naharin... Rather than watch an hour of accomplished performance, Naharin would prefer to see five seconds of something sublime"

(Subin). Sublimity is defined as when an individual succeeds at a goal within their physicality. Unlike ballet, there is no dictionary of positions to follow, and the research is so tailored to the individual that determining a universal state of perfection within Gaga is impossible. Instead, Ohad's goal to find something sublime is reached when pleasure is found through logical research of sensation and successful performance of a task within that research. The attention is on the experience within the body and since it is such an individual experience for everyone, there is no right or wrong (Subin). This absence of perfection creates a class atmosphere where anything is possible. Class no longer becomes a repetition of skills or a way to perfect a form; it is a time to connect to the body and the room and your perception, and it creates an atmosphere that induces creativity. Gaga class is often described as a playground for individuals to enjoy and explore to whatever extent they feel necessary. This acceptance of variation within individual exploration helps the individual feel safe to explore new movement and allows dance to become more accepting of new ideas, once more expanding choreographic possibilities within modern dance.

Many types of dance tend to train the individual within a particular style of dancing. As Ohad once said, "Some codes of dance limit you because they lock you in a style" (Schabas). It is often difficult for a ballet dancer to do modern or hip hop, and it is the same in reverse because those dancers have become locked into a particular technique. They have built up habits according to the values of one dance style. Gaga frees the individual from those habits and therefore frees them from those limitations because it explores all realms of movement. Danielle Agami, director of Ate9 Dance Company and former member of Batsheva Dance Company, told me that Gaga "welcomes a lot of other methods and other research moments" and "it's a bunch

of ideas, not a style” (Agami). The ideas of Gaga can be used within any style of dance because time is spent stretching all possibilities of movement. The research of Gaga is so expansive that it can apply to any movement style, and it serves as a point of connection between the styles. Gaga is changing the perspective on dance because it removes boundaries between movement styles and views dance as a continuum of exploration. It is removing the idea of “style” in dance and freeing dancers from limitations associated with style. Modern dance is becoming stylistically limitless due to the incorporation of Gaga’s expansive perspective on movement research.

As much as Gaga is about the dancer’s perception and experience, dance in general has to be visually expressive in order for an audience to connect to it. This expressivity is difficult to find for dancers because it is so difficult to define, but one thing is true: “Expressivity is an outcome of the perceptual work of a dancer as an overall mental and physical process” (Katan 181). The dancer cannot just be physically doing the work, they have to somehow be perceptually involved in order to give the movement life. The intentions of the dancers is what creates meaning within the choreography, and that intention is refined by perceptual activity. Often in dance the movement is learned first and then the ideas or qualities are layered in, but Gaga starts with everything right at the beginning, as discussed earlier, with the metaphors used in class that bring together intention and movement. This process leads to a more incorporated reflection of ideas within Gaga movement that is known as mimesis. “Mimesis is an act of ‘embodiment’ of ideas and values in concrete media” (Katan 184). It is a reflection of ideas as movement with real sensation and intention which connects to meaning and is what allows a dancer to be expressive on stage. Gaga creates mimesis within class through the focus on mental

effort, physical exploration, and the narrowing of the perceptual gap. The audience connects to the perception of the dancers so whatever they are perceiving the audience will experience as well (Katan 191). Since the intention is so closely connected to perception through mimesis, as the audience feels the perception of the dancers they will also feel the intention. Modern dance strives to be a mode of expression for complex ideas but is often met with an audience that doesn't fully understand it. Gaga's combination of intent and movement as mimesis is creating a more powerfully expressive art form within modern dance that is pushing the limits of what can be expressed with dance.

Gaga's relationship with expression makes it an art form that is very powerful throughout and beyond the dance community. For example, the intent and expression in Batsheva Dance Company's performance of *Decadance* by Ohad Naharin allowed it to become a symbol of national identity in Tel Aviv and a powerful part of their culture. In 1998 Batsheva was supposed to perform this piece at the 50th anniversary jubilee of Israel, but some of the officials were concerned about the costuming in *Decadance* so they asked Ohad to change it. He agreed but his dancers refused to perform the work in any way other than the original so they decided, as a company, not to perform. The people of Tel Aviv were very opposed to this, protesting in the streets for Batsheva to be allowed to perform. Eventually they won, and Batsheva performed the work with its original costuming (Mr. Gaga). This example shows how Gaga is already changing the culture of dance through its expressive power. The expressivity of Gaga is rooted in the inherent ideas of newness and texture that allow mimesis to occur within the dancers themselves. This power of expression can then be harnessed by choreographers to create new work with the ability to tell stories that have never been told before, stories that are important to people within a

culture whether or not they are dancers. In this way, Gaga's ability to remove the limits of expression in modern dance is allowing it to become a more prevalent art form throughout the world.

Conclusion

Gaga's place in the dance world is not as another style or technique to be learned and used to add versatility to a dancer. It is a movement language that is changing the perception of many different ideas in dance and allowing modern dance to become a more limitless and therefore expressive art form. Gaga helps each individual dancer to push their mental and physical limits through the more personalized use of class time and metaphors that connect to ideas rather than fixed movements. Exploration of ideas within a Gaga class and the absence of aesthetic ideals allows choreographers to create new work that pushes the limits of what dance can be. It transcends all styles of dance and removes boundaries based on technique so that modern dance doesn't have to be restricted to a particular style of movement. Once these perceptual limits of dance are lifted, Gaga can be used to expand the limits of the individual's engagement with modern dance, therefore allowing the art form as a whole to become more expansive and expressive.

The influence of Gaga began in Israel but has slowly become more prevalent across the globe. The creation of Gaga People brought dancers, like Danielle Agami, from Batsheva Dance Company to the US to teach classes and spread the influence of Gaga training. More and more, modern dance classes have some element of Gaga in them, directing the future generations of dancers to a more limitless engagement with dance.

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Appendix: Transcript of interview with Danielle Agami, director of Ate9 Dance Company and former member of Batsheva Dance Company (02 July 2017)

Kara: So just first off, have you taught any styles other than Gaga or has that been your main focus the entire time?

Danielle: That's been my main focus.

Kara: Okay, um, so are there, like, very specific things about teaching Gaga that you feel maybe, if you could just describe that process specifically...

Danielle: I think the key is alertness. Um, a teacher has to be communicating with his own body and reading the bodies around him to judge the time, the effort, the vibe around him and be judgmental about his own vibe if its from what's actually happening or if its from something else and make all the decisions according to all this information that has to flow to the brain and to the body. So it's a very high level of coordination and sensitivity basically.

Kara: So you just make the decisions of like what textures to move through based on what's happening in the room, in the moment?

Danielle: And what's happening in my body and what's happening in the room. It's a combination.

Kara: Okay, um, kind of along with that, technique in other genres in like ballet and modern are very, um, like focused and you know like in ballet you have the specific positions that make up the technique so what would you define as Gaga technique? And how does that sort of differ?

Danielle: Gaga is not a technique, it's very crucial not to call it a technique. Ohad is very adamant about it, it's a movement language, not a technique. Um, first of all. Then inside of

movement there are um foundations which we fight for which is flotation, sensitivity of anything in our body, mobility, flexibility, agility, um, connecting to our weakness, not avoiding effort, connected to pleasure, there are so many things in this language and these are the, this is the core of the language, so it is also very focused and very clear.

Kara: Right, just in a different sort of way --

Danielle: No, clear is clear. It's just, we believe in other things, not what ballet believes in.

Kara: Okay...

Danielle: It's just different way, it's just different.

Kara: Based in the textures, more?

Danielle: Um... yeah but it's also a state of mind and a state of the body and a mental state that we explore. We use the textures to, to research but we don't believe in the texture, doesn't work like that.

Kara: It's in the process of the research...

Danielle: Yeah. It's part of the research, we believe in researching, absolutely. And part of the research is to visit different textures. The textures are not the foundation of Gaga, all the other things that I just said are.

Kara: Okay. Um, so, so kind of in that same vein, a lot of styles when you're practicing how to get better at it you repeat like the correct form of it, and a couple days ago you talked about how you want to like avoid repetition in Gaga, you know trying to push for something new kind of within things every time, so , um, is that really how you improve at Gaga? Like is-- what is-- how does improvement relate to repetition in Gaga versus in other styles?

Danielle: I think that what's brilliant about Gaga is that we know the repetition doesn't exist. So even when we repeat, we don't try, we're not trying to do the same, we're just doing something again, again, again, we're not repeating. We're using repetition meaning we're one, two, three, four, whatever amount, we're using the quantity of something to get better at it, to train the muscle to learn, so we are repeating and we are also repeating a lot of the foundations, so I repeat flotation every class, I repeat shakes sometimes, I repeat a lot of things. We repeat and that's why we get better: by repeating. But we know that every time that we approach something it's not like we did it yesterday. And a lot of times other techniques will just, you know, imitate a shape and will visit the shape again and again. Good ballet classes won't behave like that, it won't be like a repetition it will feel juicy and interesting every time you hold the leg, every time you do a movement so, um, it's just, that's a teacher approach and very much embedded in Gaga: that we are aware of the need of the muscle and the brain to do the same action but we also understand that the echos are different. If you are very sensitive and if you listen to the body every time you do something you have extra ideas, you have new ideas even though it's just doing the beginning flotation but you're so connected that it doesn't feel like a repetition it feels new, it feels refreshed from like you did it yesterday and when you did it five minutes ago.

Kara: Cool.

Danielle: The repetition, it doesn't exist.

Kara: So, um, if I have the timeline correctly you were with Batsheva and Ohad when you sort of made the decision right to like go into Gaga and have that be a focus, um, what in that moment was like the purpose of moving forward with Gaga and the origin of that decision?

Danielle: I don't understand the question. Who's decision to do what?

Kara: Um. Batsheva, or Ohad's, or even yours.

Danielle: His decision. Um, yeah, he just understood that this method is much more interesting than ballet classes to warm up people.

Kara: And that was really it? Just it was more interesting than other things?

Danielle: Yeah, much more interesting.

Kara: Cool.

Danielle: It's endless and healthier.

Kara: Um, so, I sort of still do -- I do like workshops and then i still go back and do you know modern, hip hop, whatnot in um my everyday life and so I sort of find it more interesting to connect what I've learned with Gaga to every other style of dance that I do so do you feel that Gaga is kind of its own separate style or do you sense that connection to other genres at all?

Danielle: I think it welcomes a lot of other methods and other research moments um constantly. We always can borrow and move and shift and really literally just welcome other things into it. That means that it can be visiting in any other form. In any other method to communicate ideas and groove, of other people and other places. Yep. It's an animal, it's a bunch of ideas, not a style.

Kara: Cool.

Danielle: A language is not a style, it's like telling you know Spanish people that they have a style, they don't have a style they speak Spanish. Right?

Kara: Yeah.

Danielle: It's very different, very deep, it's very difficult for people to understand that Gaga is not a style. Sleep on it.

Kara: Yeah... it's kind of hard you know with all of these I need to sleep on it and um process... so um, what -- did you train in other styles before or after Gaga or with?

Danielle: Um yeah, I did ballet, Graham and other modern things as well

Kara: So what do you feel you gained from them versus what you gained from Gaga?

Danielle: Um, it's the evolution of the dancers that I am. I had I think a good base, I learned the ballet technique, the Graham ideas, I had the versatility of having both. Um it was just you know tools. Gaga is ah... Gaga connects you to your passion to dance, for me. So then all of those tools are inside and i take them with me. They go with me anywhere, I didn't drop things behind, I took them into Gaga. So I don't do versus, I don't do this versus that I don't think it's an interesting question, I think a person is created from everything that is you know. You don't sit and think wait, my mom versus my dad what each one gave me, you don't sit and spend time on that right? You just understand that you are this and that and you're similar to both and it is complex. You don't need to do those comparisons. You can't really measure those things.

Kara: Yeah, Um I don't know, is there anything else that, that you have to say about Gaga that you think is really important or interesting?

Danielle: Um.. no i think we've touched really important moments just if you listen to them some of them are really, crucial. Like the style issue and the technique issue versus a language are things that confuse most people. The common language is very off about Gaga...

Kara: Right, okay. Well thank you.

Danielle: If you have any other questions you can ask at the Q and A.