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Going up in the world

Hofesh Shechter's rock-god energy and raw power have made him dance's hottest property as *Political Mother* plays in London

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Hofesh Shechter in rehearsal for the revamped *Political Mother* (Francesco Guidicini)

It's surprisingly rare to see a contemporary dance show that makes you want to, well, dance. The Israeli Hofesh Shechter's work has that effect: his self-penned blasting music and ferocious choreography pulse through your body. It's thrillingly intelligent, thrillingly visceral.

To kick off the interview in a London dance studio, I have a question from my editor. She likes his work, but why is the music always so loud? He repeats the question, bemused. There are several possible answers, he admits, but in the end it's because he enjoys it. "It's something about the totality of the experience, the ability of sound to take us off our feet, to make us feel we're drowning in this universe. But it depends on your mood — if you've got a headache, you should probably go another evening."

Shechter's pounding ocean of sound reached its apogee at London's Roundhouse in 2009. Smoky lights and percussion that rattled your ribcage whipped up the audience long before the dance began. Shechter's narrow face breaks into a smile. "It was one of my best times. The vocal participation of the audience, simply because they are not sitting — suddenly they can shout! That was unbelievable, the energy it creates. Pure fun."

Fun may not be a word readily associated with contemporary dance, but Shechter's work has an irresistible energy and compulsion. Amplified by his music, movement erupts in colourful punches that you feel in your gut. People crouch, stamp, jabber — sometimes as wild individuals, sometimes a slab-faced unit. Political Mother, the 2010 show he is retooling for Sadler's Wells, opens with a samurai committing hara-kiri and pits defiant folk dance against a bullying squadron of drummers and a hostile crowd. The show also features a vehement demagogue, frothing with malign conviction. As he rehearses with his 10 dancers, Shechter's manner could hardly be more different. The tallest man in the room, he is more teacherly than commanding. In his cherry-red tracksuit, he smiles, explains, takes questions.

Shechter's ascent has been remarkable, dragging dance agnostics in its wake. Based in London for less than a decade, he won the audience award at The Place Prize in 2004 and made a name with his thrilling all-male piece Uprising (2006). In Your Rooms, the following year, leapt from the 300-seat Place to 1,500-seat Sadler's Wells within a matter of months. These works catapulted him onto the international touring circuit. After his first American shows in 2008, The New York Times advised: "It's a name to remember."

This dynamic career seemed unlikely when he stepped off the Eurostar from Paris at 8am on New Year's Day, 2002. The hung-over capital seemed deserted: "It was like a bomb fell on the city."

London's contemporary dance scene was about to explode, but at the time it seemed a daunting move. "I quickly hit the harsh reality," he remembers. "Even though I spoke English quite well, I spoke American English. I literally couldn't understand people in the street." Shechter hadn't planned to make a career in dance here — music was the goal. Dancing jobs sustained the rock-god ideal, but neither proved fulfilling: "Not the day job, not the night dream. That's when I decided to try to make choreography with my own music. I was more excited about having my music played in a theatre — that's how it started to roll."

In the studio, he has the dancers morph downwards until they are twitching on their bellies. Next they enact a kind of zombie folk dance, stomping as they shake. The choreographer struggles to convey the weight of a whoosh. "It's such a small thing, but it's so important," he urges. It's a reminder that the whomping visceral impact of a Shechter gig builds through delicate, fidgety detail. "I'm a freak of details," he confirms happily. "They make the little thoughts that can spark a great excitement."

English may not be Shechter's first language, but his instructions are evocative, almost tangible. He urges dancers to make a move "goeey", as if, he says, they are being smeared into new shapes by a painter's brush. "You have to get a bit wild inside it," he says, "a bit more primal." He speaks often about feeling — not how a move should look, but how it might feel. "Yeah, I'm into feelings, what can I say?" he says. "I'm not so much into shapes, or I'm into shapes that make me feel, that spark a sensation in the audience. When the dancers feel the same thing or have the same image in their head, it feels like they are one body or unit. The beating heart of the work is the dancers and the emotion they bring."

Born in Jerusalem, Shechter has described the brutal shock of military service in Israel. "I was put into an institution that was the complete opposite of democratic. It felt like an electrical short circuit in my brain." Does working in Britain offer a distance from his fraught birthplace? "Maybe," he concedes. "When I create, I don't focus on the 'Israeli question', whatever that may be. But it bubbles — things come to the surface that are definitely from the experience of growing up in a tense environment. I don't feel I make work about Israel, not at all. I make work about people's emotions and experiences inside a tense reality."

That is true of *Political Mother*, which began with an argument with a stranger outside Angel Tube station. "I don't want to go into it," he says, "but they were manifesting about something and we got into a chat about it." The barney got Shechter thinking about extremes of ideological commitment. "I thought of the samurai, committing suicide — that's the most extreme example I could think of, deleting yourself from the equation to serve something bigger than you." Sitting on a bus, he drew up a list of images that prompted the hurtling opening sequences of *Political Mother*.

This galvanic work inspires diverse reactions in different places. British audiences don't get hung up on ideology. Things were very different when the company performed in the former Volkswagen factory in Berlin. "It was built for the Führer, a huge structure with a big chimney. To perform the work there was very emotional for me. Suddenly it felt very specific, very tense. There was a silence in the audience where you could hear a pin drop. At one show, a person left shouting something in German, which I later discovered meant, 'Life is beautiful! Nobody told you that?'"

Shechter's voice has dropped; he sounds shaken by the memory. When the show returns to Berlin in this "choreographer's cut", he hopes it will be "a bit more rock show, a bit more fun". But he's happy to leave audiences both thrilled by the rousing theatricality and puzzling over its meanings. "Confusion," he smiles, "is a really interesting place."

Hofesh Shechter's Political Mother: The Choreographer's Cut is at Sadler's Wells, EC1, Tue-Sun

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