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**Interview: Hofesh Shechter**

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**Dance: Interview**

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**By Lyndsey Winship**

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He's the darling of the dance world who wants his audiences to act like they're at an all-cheering, all-boozing rock gig. Lyndsey Winship meets acclaimed choreographer Hofesh Shechter.

When I first met Hofesh Shechter, in 2007, he was a thoughtful, talented and rather handsome young choreographer, about to be launched into the big time. He'd been a finalist in the Place Prize, the dance equivalent of the Turner, and then his all-male work 'Uprising' had grabbed its audiences by the throat. It was a moody, muscular and confrontational piece, and it was one of those 'wow' moments; one of those 'Okay, who is this guy?' shows.

There was something about the way his dancers were so undancerly. Amazing movers, yet they looked like ordinary blokes. They moved with a simian slouch, hooked into the rhythm, and it hooked you in too, on an instinctive, physical level. Shechter's background with the Batsheva Dance Company in Israel was evident, but his was an original voice.

While other choreographers struggle to break out of the small-scale circuit and shrug off the 'emerging' tag, Shechter quickly became more than just one to watch. By the end of 2007, he was fully fledged, he'd arrived, having been chosen for a project that leapfrogged him from playing to audiences of 300 at The Place to 1,200 at Sadler's Wells in just six months.

'I didn't have big dreams about anything,' says 36-year-old Shechter, grabbing a lunch break in what is now a hectically busy schedule. When Shechter first came to London, it was actually to play drums in a rock band, but when the band crumbled, he returned to dance. Would he rather have made it big as a drummer? 'No, not at all,' he says. 'I'd rather not make it big at all.' A bit late for that, you might say.

The work that solidified his reputation was 'In Your Rooms', all shadowy atmosphere shot through with wry humour. Then came the all-female piece 'The Art of Not Looking Back'. But last year's 'Political Mother' was the boldest work he's made yet, a compelling chorus of wailing electric guitars and driving drums, folk dance, hara-kiri, crazed dictators and dramatic lighting, along with filmic effects, like the dancers rewinding the action at the end of the show - quite the coup de theatre.

Although in person Shechter is quietly spoken and considered, his shows are LOUD. There's an intensity that's incredibly exciting, that feels more like a rock gig than a dance show. Or at least, that's the idea, and for his upcoming shows at Sadler's Wells, they're taking out the seats in the stalls so the audience can stand. It should be similar to the sensational shows Shechter's company played at the Roundhouse a couple of years ago, where the 'rules' about watching a dance performance instantly changed. People cheered as the lights went down, for example, which is usual for a gig, but not at the theatre. 'That was amazing for me,' says Shechter, 'that they felt they can express themselves in the middle of the show, they can shout, clap, chat, have a beer; it's a very free environment.'

'Political Mother' is not actually the kind of show you'd duck out of for a beer. It's more of a pinned-to-your-seat (or to the spot) experience. Shechter is aiming for the kind of full-throttle, all encompassing intoxication of the senses you get from going to see some epic at the O2, not cerebral chin-stroking. 'For me, success would be the audience forgetting themselves in the intellectual sense, losing the judging part of the brain,' he says. 'And they are suddenly drowning, totally engaged, they lose themselves inside this massive sound, movement, visuals, whatever emotions it brings. It's when the carpet is dragged really quickly from under your thinking mind and you experience a powerful emotion without seeing it coming.'

For this 'Choreographer's Cut' of the show, Shechter has relished being able to swell the band's numbers to 24, adding an 11-strong string section and more percussion to the original guitars and drums. Not only does Shechter choreograph the work, but he also writes his own music. I can't think of any other choreographers who habitually write their own scores, but it's all part of the very complete vision for the work Shechter has in his head.

'If I have the vision, if I know what I want, what's the point in working with other people to achieve it if I can do it myself?' he says. So is he a bit of a control freak then? 'Am I a control freak...?' he ponders. 'The saying "control freak" implies that control is what's important. That's not the point. What's important for me is the work, and I want to feed every aspect of the work. And now you're thinking: "Well, yeah, and that's a control freak." So maybe I am.'

Shechter has difficulty acknowledging his own success. 'I'm experiencing failure daily,' he says. 'It's difficult for me to connect to the idea that I'm successful. I can see it in the fact that my work tours all around the world and I get commissioned and produced, but I really don't experience my life like this. I mostly don't succeed in doing what I want to do, on a daily basis,' he says, explaining that what he has in his head never comes alive as vividly as he'd like in real life. 'The fantasy is amazing but in the reality everything is compromised, so I have to just keep trying again, and maybe it will get a little bit more focused, a little bit more like what I was imagining; maybe I will catch the feeling, I will catch the timing. But mostly the feeling and the timing are missed.'

He's certainly not giving himself an easy ride. 'I very rarely feel like, "Wow, great, we nailed it!"' he says. 'It's really not my style.' But he keeps at it, nevertheless. 'Getting up in the morning every day is a struggle,' says Shechter, 'and it's like you keep on fighting and keep on finding the reason why yes, we will continue and yes, we will work hard, and yes, we will try again.'

Although there isn't narrative or always obvious 'meaning' in Shechter's work ('There is no lesson,' he says) there is often a sense of struggle on stage, of the individual versus the mass, of freedom versus oppression, of being stuck in 'the system', and it's something that pervades Shechter's thoughts. Journalists often connect this to his Israeli upbringing - having to do compulsory military service would make anyone question their personal freedom (although Shechter was ultimately given a desk job and permission to dance with Batsheva as an alternative). But it's broader than that.

'I experienced it very early on in my life - the family I grew up in, the country I grew up in, understanding slowly the situation around me,' he says. 'You get propaganda from everywhere. People are selling you stuff all the time - the West, the East, the Arab world. You realise that you have no idea what the truth is, what the reality is, and you have very selfish individuals around you all the time. 'And as a result of a lot of selfish animals living together there is the feeling that there are very powerful systems that nobody actually planned, they fell into place through selfishness and greed.'


But surely, I say, something like the uprisings of the Arab Spring prove that those systems aren't indestructible? 'Yes, you think, they have to be free. And then you think about the alternative, which is our life, and in essence, how much more free are we than them?' Well that's a whole different article, but for Shechter, the sometimes nonsensical systems that rule our everyday London lives are just as frustrating. 'A place where travelling 300 yards on the tube costs like what you can earn in an hour,' he offers, by way of example. 'That's a small thing,' he qualifies. 'Very upsetting all the same.'

'It's like the thing they give the hamster to run it. The hamster wheel is a freedom machine,' he says. 'Whenever [the hamster] wants to feel free he runs in it, and he's running free.' But he's still stuck in his cage. 'I know that you can feel free, for some amount of time. But to actually be free? Well, I don't know.' And that's where his work comes in. 'That's the amazing part of art: we have a stage, we have an hour, and in this time, in this space - as long as we're not breaking any laws - we can do whatever we want.' Running his own company, Shechter has plenty of hoop-jumping and bureaucracy to contend with, 'but what's important for me is to try to create space inside those systems, a bubble where I'm free', he says. 'Because that's as good as I can get.'

*Hofesh Shechter's 'Political Mother (The Choreographer's Cut)', Sadler's Wells, July 12-16, [www.sadlerswells.com](http://www.sadlerswells.com).*

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