

Purifying and Beriddling OR 'I Beriddle You!': Hofesh Shechter in conversation with UK journalist Donald Hutera

It's three weeks before the premiere of the first phase of Hofesh Shechter's *In Your Rooms*, and the 31 year-old choreographer is exactly where he belongs: in the rehearsal studio, watching every step and breath his dancers take. Shoulders hunched, heads down and hands occasionally flicking the air, they shift through space with a spidery stealth that leads to sudden explosions of motion. Shechter is sure and exacting as he refines the shapes their bodies make or the timing of their moves. Later, after the dancers have gone home, he settles his long, lean frame into a chair and responds to the following questions with a mixture of thoughtful consideration and impish wit.

DONALD HUTERA: It's quite an unusual situation for one choreographer's work to be presented in three different London venues in a single year. Why do you think you were selected?

HOFESH SHECHTER: It's a combination of being in the right place at the right time and, I suppose, doing quality work. This project of taking one artist through three venues was conceived between the three producers and the Arts Council. The question came up, Who would be the right person? I was looking to grow. They were looking to find someone who needed to grow. I'm not sure exactly who dropped my name in, but they all immediately agreed.

DH: You were a dancer in Jasmin Vardimon's company. When did you begin to devote yourself entirely to your own work?

HS: In 2004 I had a month off, and I used it to make my own choreography for a competition in Finland. After that I decided to drop everything else and not take any other job. I would instead give a year of my life to try and be a choreographer, and to really go for it. By the end of that year, after *The Place Prize*, I already had commissions for 2005. And so I just continued.

DH: Your dance *Cult* was a big success in the first *Place Prize* competition, in 2004. How important was being part of that event to your career?

HS: It was a great opportunity, and also about being in the right place at the right time. It kicked me 'onstage' in the UK dance scene in a fraction of a second.

DH: An exceptional group of dancers has gathered around you now. What do you look for in dancers?

HS: It's a hard job. I'm looking for dancers that I fall in love with artistically from the moment they walk into the studio, but who also have a strong physical skill and a strong potential. There are a lot of good dancers out there, but the ones I have working with me now are brilliant.

DH: How much in-put do dancers have in your work, and how much is coming expressly from you?

HS: *Cult* was 99% my movement material. In *Uprising* I gave a bit more space to people, but it was still 75% or 80% mine. *In Your Rooms* is the process where I've given dancers the most freedom to create. I took a lot of time to discover who they are and find their qualities. We did a lot of improvisations.

DH: And what's the percentage now?

HS: I don't know yet. We have two weeks before the premiere. For me, this is where everything happens. The percentage starts to go low for the dancers and high for me now that I'm starting to put the dance together. It's very frightening, but very exciting.

DH: Tell me about the music for In Your Rooms.

HS: I initiated it, coming up with the sounds and loops on a computer. I'm actually not talented at all. I just create loads of material and wait for something to happen. When this thing happens I know it, and then I use it.

DH: Where does the composer Nell Catchpole enter the picture?

HS: I bring my material to Nell, and we discuss how it can grow and where it can move. We start by bringing together some musicians and doing some recording sessions. Nell is really supportive. I felt immediately that we wouldn't have to walk on fingertips. Do you say that? Or is it toes?

DH: You mean, walk on eggshells.

HS: Exactly. If we like it, we say so. If we don't, let's do something else. She throws material at me from time to time. Or if I'm thinking about the string section, I sing and she plays it. I don't know just what we will use in the piece. It might be that it will be very simple musically. But her work has really changed my music.

DH: I understand that the music will be pre-recorded at The Place, but live and electronic at the other two venues.

HS: Yes. At Queen Elizabeth Hall and Sadler's Wells we'll have live musicians, so it will be more exciting. We're thinking about four at QEH, and eight or ten at Sadler's.

DH: How do you describe your choreography?

HS: There's something spicy about it. Something dark but smooth, and sarcastic in a very subtle way. And exciting in a very basic way. You're sitting in your seat and occasionally some adrenalin shoots into your veins. I don't know if thought-provoking is exactly the word, but it's kind of...riddling in a way.

DH: As in, making a riddle?

HS: Yeah. How to put it in English...? It makes people to be riddled. Yeah. 'I beriddle you!'

DH: You may have invented a word. Tell me, how will you tailor In Your Rooms to each venue and how does that affect what you're making?

HS: It's a real challenge, because I'm very influenced by thinking about the theatres where it's going to be performed. But sometimes it's difficult to really think about the three spaces. I'll look at something we've made and say, Oh, brilliant, and then I think, In The Place, yes, but at Sadler's Wells I don't know if it will work. The Place and QEH are different, but they're closer than The Place and Sadler's. In QEH you can still get a certain amount of intimacy that in Sadler's is harder to get. But a certain point I just have to drop the rest of the journey and say, Let's deal with the venues one by one. And the immediate need is to think about The Place.

DH: You spoke of intimacy. This reminds me how I sometimes see work that asks, or expects, me to come to it, and other work that brings itself to me.

HS: I know exactly what you mean. And you want to know how that applies to In Your Rooms. I haven't decided yet if I'm going to aim towards something where you just sit and watch god-like and aren't so emotionally involved, or Uprising, where you don't have a choice because basically I grab your mind and pull it onstage. I know my task is to keep each individual in the audience bubbling with questions.

DH: Let's talk a little about Uprising. Seven dancers, all men, and you're one of them. It has a real tribal energy. Surely there's no need for you to expand it further.

HS: I finished it and I thought, Wow, I made a big piece. We have to conquer the stage now. And I think we did. The three producers all came to see it and said, We want it in the programme because it's big. So it's part of the deal.

DH: Which will come first on the programme, Uprising or In Your Rooms?

HS: Uprising opens the evening.

DH: How long is Rooms supposed to be?

HS: It doesn't have a time. I won't let it be less than thirty minutes, but it can be whatever feels right --- 30, 40, 45.

DH: What's the new piece about?

HS: It's an x-ray vision of what's happening 'in our rooms.' It's not theatrical, in the sense that you understand a story that is happening inside a room. It's more about what I think of as all those hidden emotions that we try to keep away from the public, or from being brought outdoors.

DH: Private things?

HS: Yes, private. The title comes from a place of, Let's reveal some of what's really going on inside without feeling bad about it. That was a starting point. Where it went, or where it's coming to, I don't know. We'll see.

DH: How pressured do you feel?

HS: Considerably. I know expectations are high. If I go to a place of thinking about them, it's inevitable that some disappointment will take place. I prefer to come back to a very simple place of trying to do something modest and simple rather than something amazing.

DH: Can dance change lives?

HS: Yes, but only of those people who want to change their lives. And not every dance can do that. Dance can change a state of mind or spirit for a moment, and that might stay with you or not.

DH: What keeps you involved in it?

HS: I know the good answer would be because it's fun, but it's not completely fun. I tend to suffer quite a lot from aspects of choreographing that sometimes are not even related to the work in the studio. I think what hooks me on it is meeting new people and confronting the work, which is a kind of mysterious thing that you need to struggle with. That challenge really attracts me. As a choreographer you're trying to purify something, but it always feels incomplete. At a certain point you just have to make it look like what you thought it should look like, and throw it onstage. Until now I never got to make a piece that I feel I've purified all the way.

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Donald Hutera writes regularly about dance and live performance for The Times, Time Out, Dance Europe, Dance Now, Animated and many other publications.

Happy Doing the Shechter Shake: Hofesh Shechter in conversation with UK journalist Donald Hutera

It's the last day of April, five days before the official unveiling of the next stage of a three-fold project constructed round choreographer Hofesh Shechter's 'In Your Rooms.' Light spills into Studio One at The Place in central London. Nine dancers in rehearsal clothes wriggle and shimmy, hunched over and lightly scuttling across the floor before indulging in a sudden, rhythmic shake-a-leg. Sometimes they break into a fleet run, or slide across the floor, or cluster together each shaking a fist above their heads. Altogether they suggest a pack of driven yet casual spies whose reluctant mission could be to create a convincing party atmosphere.

This galvanising and yet mysterious ensemble dance has already premiered at The Place at the end of March. At the end of the week it travels to another, larger London venue, the Queen Elizabeth Hall, for what is in effect almost like a second premiere. (A third will follow at Sadler's Wells in September.) Not only is the auditorium there going to be bigger, but also the piece itself will expand to include live music.

Shechter is in a corner of the studio, positioned behind a drum kit and overseeing the climax of this run-through of the dance. He observes the action attentively as he plays, accompanied by another man on double bass as well as his own voice on a pre-recorded soundtrack. The run ends and, after a brief reminder of the rest of today's and tomorrow's schedule, the dancers disperse. His mood about as sunny as the studio itself, Shechter is now free to talk about the next stage of his creation.

DONALD HUTERA: What did you learn from presenting 'In Your Rooms' at The Place?

HOFESH SHECHTER: I learnt a lot about what it means to be really prepared technically for a performance, or not, and how important that is. I knew that before. But because this project is slightly more ambitious, and because of the numbers of people involved, it was more difficult for me to get it to the usual high standard that I want. It's just bigger and harder to control. I was, in a way, so worried about the premiere and experimenting so much trying to find the right recipe for it that there wasn't enough time to get it into a really tight place. Taking all of that into account, in this second period I've made very fast decisions about how I want to change the rhythm, the pace and the dynamics of the piece in a way that will make it more fluent. It's amazing how important the little details and the rhythm are. Now when I look at it, it's much more fluent and easy to digest. It just rolls much better because it's in a more skillful place. It's shorter by three minutes than it was, and more to the point. And then of course there's live music, which lifts everything up. You won't hear me saying this many times, but I'm satisfied.

DH: What will the musical line-up be at Queen Elizabeth Hall?

HS: Nell [Catchpole, Shechter's co-composer and arranger] on viola, the double bass player and another percussionist playing with me.

DH: How is it to be playing for your own dance?

HS: It's fun. I really enjoy it.

DH: Is this your London musical debut?

HS: Actually, it's not. When I arrived in London about five years ago, I came with a rock band. I was the drummer. We called ourselves The Human Beings. We performed a bit. It was kind of a hobby for me, really. I knew that I would have to get serious at a certain point with dance.

DH: Did you come here because of dance, or because of the band?

HS: Various reasons. Partly instinct, and partly just the way things were rolling. I was in Israel, and I wanted to go to Europe. I lived in France for awhile. Even though I speak French, it's easier here [in London]. It's not only the language in France. When you're not French it's very obvious. Here it feels like everybody is not English so, hey, I'm at home.

DH: You mentioned making changes to 'In Your Rooms.' Can you be more specific about how these might affect the way the audience perceives the dance?

HS: This piece works in images, but I felt that a lot of them were too slow and people were kind of losing contact with the piece. So in a way now you will see faster flashes of images, which kind of help you to stay with the dance and not lose your train of thought.

DH: Does that mean the dance has got even greater momentum and drive?

HS: Yeah. I'm contradicting things more sharply. Just kind of sharpening everything, really. Anything that was added was done within the context of making everything clearer. Maybe also I'm trying to remind the audience of what the piece is about.

DH: What is it about?

HS: It's about miscommunication, a problem that we all share. Or at least that is how the piece sees it. Our pathetic efforts to communicate.

DH: Let's talk more about the music. What determined the selection of live instruments to be added to the pre-existing soundtrack?

HS: In a way I had complete freedom. I mean, I could have had two electric guitars and two saxophonists or whatever. I chose the instruments we're using because of the element of electronic music in the soundtrack. I felt that it would be nice if the live players bring in a really warm sound, a kind of human touch that is not very sharp but is about something quite ancient and warm and soft. A viola is much softer than a violin; it has a real warmth to it. The double bass just hugs everything. We also made sure to choose the right percussion instruments in order to give this warmth. It's basically frame drums and bass drums, things that are really warm and soft.

DH: Where will you and the other musicians be onstage?

HS: Because the composition of the choreography is quite complex, I felt that I needed to get them out of the way. So they're just floating at the height of three and half metres. The audience can then choose to either look at them or the choreography, or stare somewhere in the middle and try to grab it all.

DH: Lee Curran's lighting at The Place was brilliant, and literally quite dark. Will it stay more or less the same at the South Bank?

HS: Because of the distance involved in a bigger theatre like QEH, I will push up the levels of light quite a lot. You still have this atmosphere of cave-like darkness, but the light bounces and comes to you more easily.

DH: Do you feel differently about 'In Your Rooms' now?

HS: So different! It's funny, because now I feel that I really love this piece. The first stage was just so hard. I was just in a struggle with it. It was like having a 16 year-old kid. You love him, but...

DH: Both you and the dance have matured.

HS: I came to the second part of the project just wanting to enjoy it and play with it. I'm much more confident and easier dealing with something that's already there. I don't have to reinvent everything. I can simply improve it. The fact that I'm playing music, and that there is live music at all, is much more fun. It's so personal for me, the taste of this piece. It has a texture that is slightly sarcastic and humorous, slightly sad and lonely, and then you feel with the group again. It has this kind of round and soft feel to it. I don't know how to explain it better.

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GOING ON INSTINCT:

Donald Hutera talks with choreographer Hofesh Shechter about the final phase of his dance, In Your Rooms.

It's near the end of another of Hofesh Shechter's rehearsal days at The Place, and Studio 1 is quietly buzzing with activity. The dancers have split into small groups, partly so newer company members can reinforce their knowledge of a wealth of detailed, precisely timed choreographic material. A female quartet slices up space that is occasionally invaded by a male trio. A man and woman repeatedly go through the same tight little routine, each tracing fingers over their own bellies before convulsively bending forward. Two men scuttle about in a corner, purposefully stretching and recoiling their limbs. Some of the dancers feint like boxers, while others seem to be momentarily shaping their hands round invisible basketballs. Here they're slithery samurai warriors, and there sneaky monkeys who suddenly shift into show biz side steps. The movement throughout the room is weighted and punchy, sometimes lush and laced with slippery gestural filigree. Shechter observes it all from the sidelines, occasionally joining in when a particular bit of physicality requires clarification. Afterwards we head to the nearest Pizza Express for sustenance and conversation.

Donald Hutera: You're working with eleven dancers now, whereas before at The Place and Queen Elizabeth Hall it was nine.

Hofesh Shechter: Each time In Your Rooms is kind of stretching. And I tell you, a line of eleven dancers instead of a line of nine makes a difference. Nine people you can almost count in a second. With eleven you don't understand how many people are there. It just looks...huge! The first time I saw it I was amazed.

DH: A few of the eleven are replacement dancers, aren't they?

HS: Yes. Someone had an injury during the few months of vacation after QEH. With one of the other dancers we had a bit of a clash with another tour.

DH: How did it go at QEH?

HS: The new element at QEH was the music, more than anything else. There were four musicians --- two string players and two percussionists, including me.

DH: And now at Sadler's Wells you'll have a bigger stage, two more dancers and more musicians.

HS: Double the musicians. Five string players and three percussionists. How exciting is that? The stage at Sadler's is exciting, too, because it can be as big or as small as I want it to be.

DH: Is that called editing the space?

HS: Yeah. At QEH I closed it a little bit. It was bigger than The Place, but not as big as QEH can be. I'm going to do the same for Sadler's, but it will be bigger again than QEH. The room will be a bit more public.

DH: Can you say more about the music in this next phase of In Your Rooms?

HS: In QEH there was something massive about the soundtrack. The feeling was quite raw. That same feeling will be there at Sadler's, but a bit fatter and thicker. Having five string players gives me the freedom to find much more tenderness and softness in the soundtrack as well. It's already there, but we can bring it out even more. And to have it played live again is a real thrill.

DH: Have you altered the choreography significantly, or is it just little tweakings?

HS: For now little tweakings are exactly the right words. First of all, I have two more bodies that I can choose to use, or not. I don't use them all the time, or just shove them in. Only when I feel that it's helpful. The really interesting thing is to have the opportunity to fine-tune the piece. It's about having the privilege of time maybe to totally rework one section, which is what we're doing. It annoys me and I just wanna change it. But the main thing is to try to find out a little bit more about the characters, those people on the stage. I know so much more about them now, and I'm trying to bring out more of their individual colours. It could be really small things, like suddenly realising that this one person has to be in this section just sitting at the back and it makes me feel, 'Oh, that's so much better.'

DH: I wonder how objective you're able to be about *In Your Rooms*. Has it made greater sense to you the more you've worked on it?

HS: The piece is bizarrely interesting for me when I watch it, but I don't completely understand it. I don't want to completely understand it, but I do want to learn more about it. Or to learn more about the people there, or the emotions they provoke. It's a bit like watching a child grow. It happens really slowly, a little thing every day. But I know that as a whole the piece evolves.

DH: What happens after it and *Uprising* play *Sadler's Wells* at the end of September?

HS: It goes on tour.

DH: In the UK, internationally or both?

HS: Both. It's already toured internationally to Hannover and Stockholm. Stockholm was kind of like a preview before *QEH*. Hannover was a really good way for us to get back into shape really fast after having had time off. There's a tour in October and part of November, and a lot of communication about dates in Germany and other places in 2008 or 2009. My intention was always to try to create as long a working period as possible for the dancers, and as full as possible a tour so that we can just go on.

DH: You've already answered this in small ways, but what are you learning from all of this?

HS: You're catching me on a day where learning is not even in my vocabulary. Today I was surviving. Maybe I'm learning to survive. [Laughter.] There are days where it feels like it doesn't go anywhere. But because of what I learned before, I know that as long as it moves it's going somewhere. But what am I learning now? To differentiate between what's important and not important in relation to the flow in the studio, and how to just go on. That's the most important thing.

DH: Can you give an example?

HS: You might be trying to fix something, but it will never make you move forward so it's the wrong thing to fix. You just have to let it go.

DH: Is that based on instinct?

HS: Instinct is probably the best and first thing you have to trust when you go into the studio, from the way you deal with the dancers to the movement that you create. But instincts are tricky. You have to be clever enough to differentiate between instinct and laziness, or tiredness. It requires a certain amount of honesty with yourself. You can say, 'Oh, I'm getting stuck here, let's just go on,' but are you actually just finding an easy way out? So you ask yourself, 'Do I really wanna solve this problem? Is it really important for me, or the process, or the piece?' And sometimes you go, 'Yeah, that's the point, that's what I wanna do,' and sometimes it's, 'Why am I bothering? It doesn't matter.' Even if you have a really good idea, you have to forget about it the moment you start to do it and just do it, which at the end of the day is instinctive.

DH: I look at In Your Rooms, and at the dancers doing it, and I can see you in every single one of those moves. To me it all comes from your frame. Is that accurate?

HS: Let's say, a lot of the movement came from this frame of mine. And if it didn't, it still came out of someone trying to think as if he or she was in this frame.

DH: Do dancers tend to think like the choreographers they're working for? Is it, on some level, about getting into the head of the choreographer?

HS: I think it is. We did this experiment, I don't remember where or when. I said, 'Okay, improvise Akram [Khan]. Improvise Wayne [McGregor]. And now improvise me.' Dancers have a certain image, an energy or a spiritual impression of someone, and they just go for it. They embody energies.

DH: Could you say, 'Improvise your cat'? Or, 'Improvise a pizza'?

HS: Exactly!

DH: Let's pretend we've never spoken before, and that I've never seen In Your Rooms. What's the dance about, these days?

HS: We're still trying to find out what it's about. I had conversations with the dancers about some of the things that it's about for us. Of course there's no single answer. Instead you get a rain of answers, a rain of feelings, a rain of thoughts. In Your Rooms is probably about this rain. I'm trying to be careful not to narrow it down to, 'Oh, it's about life.' We've come back to some ideas from the beginning of the dance's creation: the tension between individual and group, between chaos and order, between men and women, between private needs and the ceremonial, or of being an animal inside a ceremony. All of this implicates so many things on so many levels. What I like about the piece, and what I feel when I see it, is a certain quality of loneliness inside a huge, beautifully functioning machine. They're all together, and everybody knows exactly what they're doing, but they're all alone. I really like this very isolated feeling.

DH: Is the dance still sarcastic? Or is it less sarcastic?

HS: I'm trying to get it slightly more sarcastic. Sarcasm is an excellent tool for perspective. Sarcasm is cold, and I want to play with cold and warmth. I'm playing all the time. So the piece is cold and warm, and mass and private. There are really tickling, sarcastic moments, but really serious ones too. As a person who watches this dance a lot, sometimes I find it touching. Which is the other side of sarcasm. But if you prepare someone by telling them you've got something really deep and important and touching to say, you kind of ruin the moment. I like it best when you just catch them unprepared.

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