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## Hofesh Shechter, the shape shifter

**He's known for his 'masculine' work, but the Israeli choreographer's new piece is all about women**

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In 2006, Hofesh Shechter's *Uprising* landed like a sucker punch in the contemporary dance scene. A piece for seven men, full of testosterone and confrontation, it was a powerful, visceral work, and it had audiences and critics hooked.

The word that became instantly associated with Shechter's choreography was "masculine". It's not that there aren't plenty of other male dancers and choreographers out there, but somehow this was different. Dressed in combat pants and T-shirts, they seemed like ordinary men who happened to be incredibly physically eloquent, their movement ruled by gravity and inflected with folk and street vernacular.

Shechter is bemused by his "masculine" reputation, and it's true that the 33-year-old is hardly very blokey himself — lean framed and softly spoken, with quiet intensity in his intelligent eyes. The tag stuck because he happened to make an all-male work, he insists, so it's deliberately contrary that his latest piece, *The Art of Not Looking Back*, a commission for the Brighton Festival, abandons that set-up altogether in favour of an all-female cast.

In rehearsals, the movement is just as recognisably Shechter's — a muscular undulation of bodies, artfully convulsing, with lots of fluid floorwork and raw rhythmic drive, but the choreographer says that the project has made him look with more "feminine eyes". "I'm trying to look for new ways to move all the time, so this is a good opportunity," he says. "There is something very soft about the body of a woman, and it makes me see the movement differently. In a non-pervy way, I really enjoy watching them."

The bodies aren't the only thing that's different. In a studio full of men, the atmosphere inevitably turns into something boisterous and banter-fuelled, but with female dancers it has been more serious. "It was a very tense atmosphere in the studio with the girls at the beginning," he says. "I think they needed more time to get comfortable with each other. There is competition everywhere — it's part of ambition, it's not necessarily a bad thing — and I think boys handle competition with a bit more noise. Girls try to figure out what's going on, it's very intense."

Shechter usually begins with a mood or feeling as the kernel of the piece, but the starting point for *The Art of Not Looking Back* was the title. "The *art* of not looking back," he emphasises. "I like the idea that it is something you have to be skilful at, erasing your past. It's about denial, but also about survival. There are the things that you try to forget but they are always there."

Of course, the question then has to be: what is Shechter trying to forget? His Israeli background always crops up in any analysis of his work. He has talked about the frustration of compulsory military service, his need to get out of Israel, of what it means to be free, and his work can feature a sense of oppression, exploring the loneliness of the individual versus the mass. So does this need not to look back come from personal experience? "Maybe, I don't know," he says evasively. "Everything has a personal echo."

If Shechter doesn't want to engage with the idea, it's probably because he doesn't want to be defined by nationality or politics. In the end, his experience of military service didn't turn out too badly: after only a few weeks he was given the opportunity to take a desk job along with the chance to join the junior branch of Batsheva, Israel's foremost dance company.

His work isn't political in terms of referring to specific conflict; it's a more universal angst, questioning our personal freedom, our role in society, how to deal with the forces that control and shape the world around us — issues we all deal with. He's just a young man trying to make his way in the world with

integrity, trying to find out where he fits. He has already tried on a few different things for size. Although he trained in dance as a boy and went on to perform with Batsheva, for a while Shechter's real passion, and what first brought him to London in 2002, was music.

It was only when he discovered that drumming in a not-yet-successful rock band wasn't going to pay the rent that he fell back into dance and got a job with his fellow Israeli choreographer Jasmin Vardimon. He soon began to choreograph himself and in 2004 made it to the finals of the Place Prize for contemporary dance. Everything rocketed from there, with commissions and tours and the much-acclaimed *In Your Rooms*, as well as working at the National Theatre and the Royal Court and even creating a dance sequence for the E4 teen series *Skins*.

Shechter hasn't left music behind altogether; he continues to compose all the music for his dance pieces. And it might be his instinct as a musician that holds the key to his work. Rather than politics or storytelling or pure technique, his obsession is with rhythm, atmosphere, emotion and sensation. He wants to create the same intensity of experience that you might feel at a gig. He has been known to crank up the volume so much that the theatre put up notices warning about the decibel level.

"I enjoy loud music because it makes me feel things more powerfully. It's a physical thing; the louder it is, the stronger the vibration is. There is something about the level of music that helps you to forget yourself. I think in a performance for someone to lose himself for a second and to drown in the images and the sound is a really fun experience. Some people might have more sensitive hearing," he adds. "They might need to think about sitting nearer the back."

In his quest for the ever-more-intense experience, Shechter has barely begun. The fantasy in his head, he tells me, is so much stronger than what ends up on stage. "Generally I don't feel successful at all," he says, "in the sense that what percentage of the fantasy succeeds in making its way into reality. Normally it's about 5 or 7 per cent, so you feel like a big failure. But sometimes the fantasy is really strong, and it's enough that it's 5 or 7 per cent.

"It's like a concentrated juice — you don't need much, you add some water and the power of it is still there."

Where this quest is going to take him next we don't yet know. In the past five years Shechter has gone from virtual unknown to one of the dance world's hottest properties. He's much in demand to create works for other companies, is well supported as an associate artist at Sadler's Wells and his is the company in residence at Brighton Dome, but there's always more music to write and he's quite interested in film — that might be the next medium to investigate.

Shechter seems untroubled by the possibilities. "In a way it was always the nature of my life — a lot of changes happening very fast," he shrugs. "I found myself in the army, and three weeks later, in the junior company of Batsheva. I was a dancer, I stopped being a dancer. I started being a musician, I stopped. I started being a choreographer . . ." he hesitates and smiles: "There is a pattern here but I don't want to finish the sentence."

*The Art of Not Looking Back*, Brighton Dome (01273 709709), Thurs and Fri. The Hofesh Shechter Company is also appearing at the Latitude Festival in Southwold, Suffolk, July 16-19

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