



Galit Liss will premiere her fourth work for older women at the Curtain Up festival. A conversation about dance for a different body by Anat Zecharia

I came across Galit Liss's choreography for the first time through her first work, *Gila* (2008), which dealt with old age and old women. Liss brought five elderly women to the stage, and together they created a biographical dance revolving around age, the remainder of life, the past, memories, power and hope.

Liss says her younger brother died at 30 after fighting cancer for eight long years. "I remember one moment when he was leaning against me and I was helping him maintain his equilibrium, and in all this pain and suffering he tells me he knows everybody around him is worried, but he feels this is at the best time of his life. He made me work with the body as a material and ask the most important question there is: 'what do we call a life?' and 'what is a significant life?'"

Gila has also opened a new unexpected career path for Liss. Today, after completing a BA and an MA in the Jerusalem Academy of Music and Dance, and managing cultural institutes such as Matan-Arts, Bikurey Ha'Itim and Beit Dani, she teaches workshops for women sixty years old and older, whose body has carried a desire to dance their entire life.

No drama this time

Now, in *Curtain Up*, she is about to present a new – fourth – work, titled *557*. In this work, too, Galit continues investigating the many aspects of the experience of growing old and being old. "Except that in this present piece, instead of using old age as my theme, I chose to focus on working with one's current physical body, whose movement is guided by functional actions, without using drama," Liss explains.

Liss, who has danced with Noa Dar in the past, says she wanted to dance her whole life, but when this dream came true she realized she didn't want to be a dancer, that her body was stiff and inflexible,

turning dance into a war. She never considered choreography before, yet this was where she found herself. "I am still a young choreographer," she emphasizes.

I watched a segment of the dance, in which the participants simply walked, sometimes running a little, one of them was dragging her foot and slowed down, others were walking fast, stopping here and there. The tight cluster at center stage slowly disintegrated. Each woman started walking whenever she chose. They walked in widening circles counterclockwise, perhaps wishing to beat time and its effects. How do you know this communal work will have an artistically-valid result?

"I don't actually know whether it is going to work. I am addicted to processes and believe in a success that is achieved organically. Also, each body has a personality. There's something in it that is moving, heart-wrenching, something that elicits respect; that can, at its best, evoke love. These are things I can only rarely get from the virtuosic body of a professional dancer. I remember seeing a performance by the Canadian dance group "La La La Human Steps" and it was amazing and accurate and crystal-sharp, and still it doesn't move me as much as seeing an older, non-dancer body move."

Shedding what the body remembers, or doesn't

How do you begin working with people who have no professional dance background?

"I know most women from my workshops, so we actually started working together a long time before embarking on this creative journey. But everything we did is part of my methodology in approaching every new work. We talk a lot during the work process – about life, about feelings that are being aroused by the process and about the character of our artistic language. We started with a personal inspiration board – Who Am I? Each woman presented her world through objects, stories, images, words, songs and actions. It's important for me to say that this piece is dedicated to Efrat Hartal, who took part in the creative process and passed away."

As in *Gila*, in this piece too you work with women of similar ages who are not professional dancers. What makes it different?

"My motivation in *Gila* was my desire to approach life through the lens of old age, and to create a connection between art and personal and social issues. As an additional source of inspiration, I used my thesis, an analysis of Ruth Schloss's paintings of old age, which included a discussion of art history, as well as psychological, sociological and philosophical theories. It was important for me then to use my creative process and theoretical research in order to incorporate social and personal themes regarding the significance of choice in our life and in the manner we choose to live them. This time I was fearless, and all of us underwent a long process of cleaning and refining, from the dramatic-psychological approach to the physical one.

"Perhaps what Aviva Apple, one of the participants in the new work, had said to me can serve to illustrate this process. Aviva, an actor and the founder of Playback Theatre in Israel, is one of two professional artists participating in this work. The other is Galia Gat, a dancer and one of the founders of the Batsheva Dance Company. The rest of the participants – Orit Gross, Bina Reincort, Varda Seelig, Shlomit Riv, Talma Dim and Tamar Natanel – are 60-80 year old women with no professional stage experience.

"At some point Aviva told me that although I had invited her to participate in the dance following my acquaintance with her dramatic abilities, I kept asking her to clean the drama, to stay in the body itself.

She felt I was really asking her to forget everything she knew as an actress and do nothing, just be who she were in her body, so the content world I was after – the identity of the body in all its human, social and political aspects – can emerge.

“A similar thing happened with Galia Gat, whose body carries physical memories belonging to Martha Graham. I asked her to shed what her body remembered, but finally I realized it was in her DNA, that it was a part of her. So I let it go, and she has a solo that is all Graham, which I did not touch.”

Giving up the pretention to dance

Liss has but good words about her work experience with Itzik Giuli, Curtain Up’s new artistic director. “I don’t know if I would have submitted my proposition for Curtain Up if it weren’t for Itzik, with whom I was always curious to work. He has an attentive and wise way of stimulating processes, and he knows to pose the right questions to a choreographer, the ones that make your work more precise. Working with Itzik has undoubtedly been one of the biggest presents I received in this process.”

Liss explains that her addiction to processes stems from being a slow person; she needs time to create the archeological layers required for her work, to form a stable foundation. And I believe her, because there is something quiet and concentrated about Liss. And she only gets up once, to demonstrate a limp she found appealing – painful yet full of hope.

What were the things that worried you, while working?

“We present a body that is different from what people are accustomed to seeing on stage, and we must be careful so it won’t become gimmicky or pathetic. We must give up our pretension to dance, and rely on our body to just be, without turning to unnatural psychologistic processes. The way these women cope evokes a deep empathy in me. Their current body is mythological enough.”

The body always knows

I waited so long I almost forgot to ask. Why did you name the work 557?

“Because 557 is the number you get if you sum up all the participants’ ages, and I wanted to define this biographical starting point on the timeline of the present. It doesn’t matter if this total changes with time, 557 will always be our point of departure.”

Do you know what’s next?

“Not really. Perhaps extending this work. I have had some insights which can take it further, make it deeper. Perhaps staging the same work with men, or on a split stage – half women and half men – the two parts trickling into one another. I don’t know. It could have made me panic in the past, but today I am no longer afraid.”

What have you learned about yourself though dance that you wouldn’t have learned otherwise?

“Listening to the body has taught me so much – so many things I know and do not know. I have an answer that is banal but true: being in the body enhances me and lets me touch life in its finest resolutions. The body always knows; all one has to do is listen.”

