

**Research Cluster on Ohad and Reggie  
compiled by Susan Manning  
for Reggie Wilson**

On his trip to Israel in 2010, Reggie reconnected with Ohad Naharin, with whom he had danced in New York City more than twenty years earlier. In 1988 and 1989, Reggie had just graduated from New York University and was beginning his professional career as a choreographer and performer. Ohad, fifteen years Reggie's senior, had been making work since 1980 and was considered an up-and-coming choreographer. In 1990 Ohad was invited to return to his native Israel and take over the directorship of Batsheva, the company where he had started his career as a dancer in 1974. In fact, Ohad asked Reggie to relocate with him to Israel, but in the end circumstances dictated that Reggie remain in New York City.

From 1990 to 2012, Reggie kept in "loose touch" with Ohad. During those years, Reggie remembered how tough Ohad could be on his dancers when rehearsing, but also how Ohad had supported his ambition to become a choreographer and had seen his earliest works. However, not until Reggie spent sustained time with Ohad in 2010 did he realize that perhaps he had influenced Ohad. He had long realized how much Ohad had impacted him, but he had never considered whether the impact might also have gone the other way. His thinking raised compelling questions about leadership: Are leaders influenced by their followers as much as the other way around? If so, how might the Hebrews as a collective have shaped the leadership style of Moses? In fact, Zora Neale Hurston's *Moses, Man of the Mountain* explores this question quite directly, and Reggie sees her questioning as one dimension of a multidimensional inquiry, which also includes reflections on his changing relationship with Ohad Naharin.

Thus Reggie asked Susan to compile this research cluster on "Ohad and Reggie" as part of his preparation for *(project) Moseses Project*. What follows are more details about Reggie's work with Ohad in the late 1980s and their reunion in 2010, as well as information on dance clips that Reggie sent to his dancers while rehearsing *theRevisitation*, presented at New York Live Arts in March 2012. In the larger arc of creating *Moseses*, Reggie understood *theRevisitation* as the kinesthetic dimension of his research, designed to complement the research clusters documented on this website.

Reggie first saw Ohad's work in 1986—during his first year in New York—when Ohad set a piece on the Second Avenue Dance Company, a company of NYU seniors that presented works by invited professionals as well as by student choreographers. Two years later Ohad was again invited to choreograph on the student company, and this time Reggie—now in his third and final year at NYU—was cast in the New York premiere of *Chameleon Dances (6-12)*. During rehearsals for the piece in spring 1988, Ohad invited Reggie to join his company, and since Reggie was still a few months shy of graduation, he had to seek special permission from department chair Larry Rhodes to do so.

Over the next few years, Reggie saw and learned Ohad's repertory: *Pas de Pepsi* (1982), a solo for Ohad in which he partners a shopping cart and wears a cape fabricated of empty soda bottles; *Innostress* (1983), set to music by David Byrne and Brian Eno, described in a program note as "influenced by the political climate in Israel during the Lebanon crisis, and by the choreographers' resulting anxiety for his brother who was a combat soldier in the tank corp;" *Sixty a Minute* (1984), a duet for Ohad and his then-wife Mari Kajiwara that enacts a battle of the sexes by using musical instruments as props (he stops her metronome, she tightens the strings on his guitar, he slams her against a piano); *Black Milk* (1985), set to music by Paul Smadbeck, an all-female dance that enacts a dreamlike ritual; *Tabula Rasa* (1986), set to music by Arvo Pärt, which Anna Kisselgoff described as "[radiating] a general sense of loss"; and *Safe Tradition* (1988), set to music by Mieczyslaw Litwinski, a score for voice and harmonium which received a Bessie for its "poignant interplay of language and memory." Reggie also sat in on rehearsals for Ohad's last piece choreographed in New York, *Sinking of the Titanic* (1990), set to a score by Gavin Bryar that combined hymns with voices of Titanic survivors reminiscing many years after the disaster.

The 1980s were the decade when Ohad evolved his characteristic movement style, although it would be many more years before he formalized his method of Gaga. During the 1980s Ohad regularly presented his own company in New York, while also setting works on companies outside New York. By 1988, the year Reggie appeared in the premiere of *Safe Tradition* at DTW, Ohad had set works on the Netherlands Dance Theatre, Sydney Dance Company, Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre, Pennsylvania Dance Theatre, and Maryland Dance Theatre as well as on a number of companies in Israel, including his alma mater Batsheva. Although critics in New York were not always enchanted with Ohad's works, dancers always loved his movement, recalls Reggie. For his part, Ohad looked back on his time in New York a few years after relocating to Israel, and commented:

When I was in New York I learned to choreograph by choreographing, and every next step was a different period.... When I was in New York during the Eighties, I always felt that a lot was happening but that a lot of it was uninteresting. In order to make something good you have to try a lot of things.... Certainly there is a lot of pressure in New York to succeed, to be "in." For me it is better to find a personal way of working, something really connected to the real potential of the person—instead of trying to be part of a style of a group.

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While working with Ohad in 1988 and 1989, Reggie also launched his own choreographic career. In fact, Reggie premiered a solo on the same program of the Second Avenue Dance Company that saw his performance in Ohad's group dance. Jack Anderson reviewed the concert in the *New York Times*, noting that the student choreographers "acquitted themselves professionally," while the "professionals offered workmanlike, although seldom memorable, creations." Anderson continued:

Reginald [sic] Wilson, a student, choreographed *Geerewol*, a solo to recorded Pygmy music in which he rose from a crouch to move assertively. He thereby built his dance to an effective climax and held attention with his stage presence. . . . Ohad Naharin made 10 dancers stagger and run in contrapuntal patterns in the New York premiere of *Chameleon Dances (6-12)*, to music by John Hassell. Everything was done with great intensity, yet the unremitting solemnity made the choreography seem pretentious. (NYT, April 16, 1988)

Reggie found the title *Geerewol* in a book on ritual dance performances in Niger. Inspired by the photographs in the book, Reggie used cowry shells to decorate his brief costume.

While dancing with Ohad, Reggie decided to audition for the Fresh Tracks program at DTW. In so doing, he went against the advice of the NYU faculty, who had told the graduating class to wait a few years before even attempting an audition for the prestigious series. But Reggie figured he had little to lose, and so he was all the more pleased when he received a slot on the Fresh Tracks program scheduled for December 1989. However, by the time the concert came around, he was sidelined by a knee injury, and so he set his solo, titled *N/UM*, on a classmate from NYU, David Titchnell. At this point, Reggie was still planning to follow Ohad to Israel, for his bio noted that he would soon relocate to Tel Aviv.

Reviewing Fresh Tracks for the *New York Times*, Jack Anderson perceived an underlying theme of “people in crises,” and he judiciously described all the dances in positive terms. About Reggie—again identified as Reginald—he wrote:

Although Reginald Wilson’s *N/UM* could be viewed simply as a study in rhythms, it proved to be far more than that in its implications. David Titchnell stamped his feet, clapped his hands and slapped his chest and legs in complex sonic patterns, thereby creating his own music as he moved. It was stormy music, and Mr. Titchnell’s intensity suggest he was portraying someone confronting adversity. Rhythms give rise to meanings in this fascinating solo.

(NYT, December 16, 1989)

The following month, in a Sunday column in the *New York Times*, Anderson commented on how abstract dance had taken on a newly dramatic tone. He cited Reggie’s *N/UM* as his first example and then went on to discuss works by Doug Varone, Bebe Miller, and Victoria Marks, among other choreographers. When Susan recently reminded Reggie of the fantastic press for his first appearance at DTW, he simply said, “I was very lucky.”

Shortly after Fresh Tracks, David White invited Reggie to present a full evening of work at DTW, scheduled for December 1990. Under the overall title “Kaffir,” the concert opened with Reggie, now recovered from his knee injury, performing *N/UM*. Then a trio performed *Lie Me Be* to three different recorded versions of a song by Bessie Smith, followed by a female solo to silence titled *-ESS*. (The title alludes to the feminine ending, as in “priestess.”) Four dancers, including Reggie, danced the final work, titled *Guns You*

*Can't Eat, Buildings You Can't Live In, Trinkets You Can't Wear* after lyrics by Sweet Honey in the Rock. The final dance was set to a collage of “Baptist Church Services, gospel music, children’s games and Jamaican radio music,” according to Jennifer Dunning, who reviewed the concert for the *New York Times*. Dunning noted that “both shuffles and strides were in evidence... along with some stylishly cool and ambiguous post-modernist sidles” (NYT, December 14, 1990). The program bio noted Reggie’s membership in Ohad’s company in the past tense. In retrospect, Reggie says that his knee injury and surgery, along with the choreographic opportunities opening up in New York, determined his decision to not move to Tel Aviv, but to stay in Brooklyn.

From 1990 through 2010, the public narrative of Reggie’s career rarely made mention of Ohad, although Reggie privately always remained aware of Ohad’s influence on his work. Not until visiting Ohad in Israel, however, did he realize that the influence went two ways. In Israel Ohad invited Reggie to teach a master class for Batsheva II, and after taking his class, the director of the school remarked, “you and Ohad are like two sides of the same coin.” Ohad also invited Reggie to watch a Batsheva II rehearsal of *Kyr*, a work that Ohad had created just after his return to Israel and that was based on *Safe Tradition*, a full-evening work from 1988 created on the company that included Reggie. A duet from the work, originally created on Reggie and Bettina Escañó, focused on movements for the arms; in fact, the dance became known simply as “Arms,” and in Israel was considered one of Ohad’s early masterpieces. Twenty-two years after performing in the premiere, Reggie watched Ohad set the duet on younger dancers and saw moves created on his arms now transferred to others’ arms. Associates of Ohad’s were astonished when they realized that Reggie was the dancer who had originated “Arms.”

These experiences led Reggie to reflect on his relationship with Ohad more consciously than he had before. While making and rehearsing *theRevisitation*, presented at New York Live Arts in March 2012, Reggie sent his dancers four clips on Ohad, all posted on the website:

- The first clip, narrated in Hebrew, includes footage from the early 1990s of Carl House and Mari Kajiwara dancing together. Carl had joined Ohad’s company a year or two before Reggie did, and Carl moved to Israel with Ohad and remained a member of the company for another few years. Carl has subsequently stopped dancing, although he and Reggie have remained friends. Mari was a leading member of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater when she met Ohad; they married in 1978 and Mari was central to Ohad’s New York company in the 1980s. After Ohad took over the directorship of Batsheva in 1990, Mari joined the company; eleven years later Mari died of cancer at age 50. It goes without saying that the clips of Carl and Mari dancing together powerfully evoke for Reggie his time with Ohad’s company.
- The second clip of Ohad talking about his approach comes from a 2007 documentary, titled *Out of Focus*, made by Tomer Heymann, a well-known Israeli filmmaker. In this clip Ohad rehearses the Cedar Lake Contemporary Ballet and discusses how he values the “disappearance of dance... and the abstract thinking it provokes... and the connection

of emotions with form...and the excitement from your world of feelings and imagination derived from its vanishing.”

- The third clip, also from Heymann’s documentary, shows Ohad talking about Gaga, a training system that he formalized in the years after Mari’s death. Gaga has two streams: one for amateurs (“people”) and one for professionals (“dancers”). In this clip Ohad emphasizes the complementary relationship between Gaga and ballet.
- The fourth clip shows excerpts from *Project 5*, a compilation of repertory works that Batsheva premiered in 2008 and brought to the Joyce in 2010. (Reggie saw the program both in Israel and in New York.) The highlight reel opens with *Black Milk* (1985/1991), familiar to Reggie from his time with the company, a dance where the dancers take turns scooping Dead Sea mud out of a bucket and wiping it on their bodies. (Later in the work the dancers wash off their bodies with clear water left near the top of the bucket after the mud has settled to the bottom.) The clip then moves to *B/olero*, a duet created for this program set to a synthesizer remixing of Ravel’s well-known score. Next comes *Park* (from the 1999 *Moshe*), when three “modish individuals...chant forcefully about food and sex and death”—to quote Claudia LaRocco (NYT, September 26, 2010). And finally *George & Zalman* (2006), a piece set to Arvo Pärt’s “Für Alina” that “advances by accumulating a series of poses” and progresses to “brief arresting solos” for each of the five dancers—to quote Deborah Jowitt (Village Voice, September 22, 2010). Ohad designed the work to be performed by either an all-male or all-female cast, and the Joyce run in 2010 alternated both casts.

Reggie conceptualized *theRevisitation* as the kinesthetic dimension of his research for (*project*) *Moseses Project*. As he stated during the talk-back on opening night, he wanted to “reground in [his] essentials” before moving onto his “next big project.” Thus, *the duet* sampled moves from choreographers who had influenced Reggie early in his career as well as from a number of his earlier works—*The Dew Wet*, *The Overwhelming Scenario*, *The Tale*, *The Good Dance*. In addition, *the duet* revisited “Arms,” the duet that Ohad had created for *Safe Tradition* and recycled in *Kyr*. Thus *the duet* incorporates Reggie’s allusion to Ohad’s allusion to Reggie.

The website also includes other clips that Reggie sent to his dancers while rehearsing *theRevisitation*—*The Rite of Spring* and *Café Muller* by Pina Bausch, which Reggie saw on film at the Dance Collection after seeing her *Kontakthof* and *Bluebeard* his first fall in New York City; dances by Bob Fosse from musicals Reggie had performed or seen in high school; and Laurie Anderson’s *Walking and Falling*, a spoken poem that Reggie appreciated for its acoustic repetition and allusion to falling and catching your weight.

During the first studio residency in Chicago in June 2012, Reggie returned to Ohad’s work as one possible starting point for (*project*) *Moseses Project*. Fortuitously, it turned out that the archive at Dance Center at Columbia College Chicago had video documentation of a concert that Ohad’s company had performed there in 1986, as well as of Ohad teaching. From these sources, Reggie had his dancers learn the opening sequence

from *Innostress*—the first work that Reggie had learned as a member of Ohad’s company—and then had his dancers perform varied manipulations of the sequence.

So what did Reggie learn from Ohad and Ohad from Reggie? At the open rehearsal staged as part of the Chicago studio residency, Paul Hamilton reflected on the experience of learning the opening sequence from *Innostress* and commented on how both Reggie and Ohad emphasized the “weightedness and directionality of the pelvis.” Paul wondered aloud: did Ohad see this in Reggie, or did Reggie borrow this from Ohad, or did the influence go in both directions? Reggie says that he still is “sussing out” his relationship with Ohad, and so this research cluster continues as one of several lines of inquiry as *Fist and Heel* moves toward (*project*) *Moseses Project*.

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When Reggie first asked Susan to pursue research on “Reggie and Ohad” in September 2011, she misinterpreted his request and compiled a narrative summary and timeline highlighting Reggie’s and Ohad’s shared dance lineage—and the shared lineage of modern dance in Israel and the United States. This common lineage only becomes clear when one follows the development of modern dance as a intercultural and transnational movement, and this is the next large research project that Susan intends to undertake. Until recently, most dance scholars—Susan included—have looked at the development of modern dance within the context of the nation-state. But over the last few years, many dance scholars—Susan included—have begun to see the limitations of histories premised on the nation-state and to consider how they might script a transnational history, a project still in its infancy.

During their last session editing the introductory memos for the research website, Reggie asked Susan to retrieve the material she had compiled one year earlier and to include it on the website as background for Reggie and Ohad’s interactions from the late 1980s until the present. So this research cluster includes two additional documents:

- A narrative summary of Reggie’s and Ohad’s shared lineage, titled “Global Encounters and Imagined Communities in Modern Dance,” emphasizes the significance of charismatic leadership in modern dance.
- A timeline of dates from 1900 to 1966, titled “Timeline: Transnational History of Modern Dance,” traces the development of modern dance in Europe, the United States, Japan, and Palestine/Israel.

It cannot be emphasized enough how preliminary are both the summary and timeline. Nor can it be emphasized enough the extent to which the cross-cultural collaborations of contemporary choreographers—Reggie included—have prompted scholars to write dance history in new ways.