

THIS IS PAIN

HILLEL KOGAN



In THISISPAIN I act as a tourist coming from contemporary dance to the world of flamenco. With me, Mijal Natan, a respected and experienced flamenco figure, dancer and choreographer. How come an Israeli women and flamenco? What does Hillel Kogan, a contemporary Israeli choreographer have to do with flamenco?

Spain is Picasso, guitar music, bullfights, Carmen, fans, castanets, passion, sex, sunny beaches, Almodovar, Penelope Cruz, Julio Iglesias, Franco, Columbus, expulsion of Jews, Gypsies, the Inquisition, Don Quixote, Dali, Goya, Wine, Black and Red and White polka Dots. Spain is an image. Spain is a code. Flamenco is many times an art of suffering and of pain. And THISISPAIN.



photo: Laetitia Boulud

"Western" art has been flirting with Spanish-ness for centuries and marks it as exotic, passionate, as noble savagery, sexy. In many ballets (Carmen, Paquita, Silvia, and more), the image of the Spanish dancer functions as carrier of coded Spanish signs that maintain a colorful dialogue with the pure, pious and non sexual balletic sylph and swan. Spanish characters full of zest and seductive bare breast gypsy women fill literature, painting, as well as opera. It's interesting though, that the most famous Spanish character, Carmen, is singing "L'amour est un oiseau rebelle" in French.

THISISPAIN is structured as a flamenco show - the work moves between the song-forms of the genre, interlaced within a dialogue between between Mijal Natan and myself, on questions of Identity, nationality, queerness and more. However, I do not approach flamenco only as someone who observes it from the outside but also as someone who has decided to experience it from the inside for a year, in the creation process.

My perspective is of someone who is truly fascinated by flamenco.

Flamenco in Israel is for me a puzzling situation. What does flamenco have to do in Israel ? I am a dancer-tourist drawn to the absurd and my position is reflexive: I manipulate flamenco materials to reveal the mechanisms of its activation and representation as art, language, institution, history, and above all as a site of local but also universal social debate or discourse: what is gender, what is Spanish, what is Israeli, what is European, what is cultural appropriation, what is national identity, what is art and what is folklore. All this while casting doubt on the concept of identity per se, in the spirit of Judith Butler's queer theory: identity is not an essence but rather a performance. And I, Hillel, am here to perform the Spanish.



THISISPAIN- Choreography by Hillel Kogan, with Mijal ...




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THISISPAIN



choreography by Hillel Kogan

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Hillel Kogan

Contemporary choreographer Hillel Kogan works at the crossroads of dance and theatre. His pieces combine movement, text and occasional found objects/sounds into a multilayered visual language that intelligently and whimsically navigates itself between subtle and more explicit commentary on the world of dance, popular culture and contemporary society.

Kogan's focal points of inquiry are recognisable, almost archetypical, 'people of dance': contemporary choreographers struggling with the creative process (What Now), dancers reflecting on dance (Dancer is the Answer), an Arab dancer and symbolic 'Other' in an 'Israeli' dance piece (We Love Arabs), and a 'swan-like' young female dancer working with a mature male choreographer (The Swan and the Pimp). These 'Everymen' (or women) move and think in the present while constantly encountering their danced heritage and various cultural icons - be it Jazz music, Hummus, the Star of David or Baguettes.

These artifacts serve Kogan's practice of uncovering the ideological within the aesthetic, acknowledging hierarchies of age, gender and ethnicity that exist, and eventually dominate, the realms of dance and culture. These systems of power are used - and abused - in the works, only to be deconstructed through theatrical and literary mechanisms, such as irony and parody, estrangement and intertextuality, in order to question their validity as standards and criteria for dancing, and creating, in present times.

Consequently, Hillel Kogan's works expose dance as not only an artistic language, but a locus for constructing meaning, defining categories and establishing norms, within which the dancing body - always conflicted in one way or another - raises, in its very presence, reflections on what is considered proper, beautiful, cool, interesting - in dance and society.

This unique form of danced-discourse that Kogan has developed embodies his self-reflexive position, best described as meta-dance: the exploration of identifiable artistic codes, visual images or theatrical conventions as a channel for critical contemplation on the craft of the choreographer, the nuances of the creative process, and the relationship between performance and spectator - always based on traditional, more orthodox, expectations.

Idit Suslik (PhD)

Dance and Performance scholar

Mijal Natan

Born in Israel, Mijal Natan chose Spanish dance and flamenco after studying different dance styles - ballet, modern, Butoh and more. She began her flamenco journey with the Israeli Flamenco Pioneer Sylvia Duran and continued where she studied with great masters such as Javier Cruz, Manolo Marin and Paco Fernandez. In Spain she performed at Tablao Flamenco in Madrid and with Miguel Angel's company España Ballet in Spain and around the world, with whom she also collaborated as a co-creator in various productions. In Israel, Mijal Natan founded and directs the Israeli flamenco dance company Compas, and during its three decades of existence, created dozens of productions. Mijal is one of the leaders of the Spanish dance and flamenco scene in Israel, trains generations of flamenco dancers, and collaborates regularly with musicians of various genres, theater directors and choreographers, in Israel and around the world.



THISISPAIN by Hillel Kogan - excerpts with English sub...



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PAIN



Photo: Laetitia Boulud



photo: Eli Katz

November 15th 2022.

Almost everyone now talks in dance, but no one does it like Hillel Kogan

(by Ran Brown, Dance critic)

In most premieres this year in Curtain Up Festival, there is an incessant surge of speech. What causes this right now in Israel? One piece, THISISPAIN by Hillel Kogan, answered this question.

Although today it is not unusual to hear dancers talking in a contemporary dance piece, the cumulative effect of listening to the dancers' voices at the Curtain Up events raises a question: why this inflation in Israel? Is this an empty gesture, a fashionable form of artistic experimentation or an expression of a deeper drive, the order of the hour, a resistance to the rising winds that threaten to erase the legacy of the 60s?

One piece answered this question in a complex way but also one that is not ambiguous: THISISPAIN by Hillel Kogan, a sharp and humorous piece, in which Kogan dances with the choreographer and flamenco dancer Mijal Natan. In a brilliant move, Kogan weaves clichés about Spain, flamenco, Nationalism and identity wherever it is. Along with flamenco style dance parts that both of them perform in an astonishing manner, Kogan juggles his words with a speed that does not fall short of the rhythm of his feet, makes jokes and rushes forward without waiting for the audience to laugh. Sometimes he praises the Spaniards and sometimes he mocks them (and actually us), and all with the same degree of logic, supported by historical facts and subtle cultural diagnoses, which are intricately woven into his and Natan's stage conversation.

Kogan continues to portray himself in this work, as he has consistently done for the past decade in a series of duets in which he collaborates and converses on stage with other dancers and creators; In "We Love Arabs" (2013) he had a choreographic conversation with Adi Boutrous, in "The Swan and the Pimp" (2017) with Carmel Ben Asher, and in "What Now" (2019) with Sharon Zuckerman-Weiser. In all of them there is an attempt to find out closeness and distance, connection and disconnection, identity and foreignness.

Kogan brings the obsessive compulsiveness of the culture on the issue of identity politics to the point of absurdity when he accompanies Natan's dance by singing the Jewish surnames that may entitle their bearers to a Spanish passport. (The Spanish Law from 2015 makes the acquisition of Spanish citizenship possible for the Sephardic Jews that are descendents of those Jewish families expelled from Spain in the 15th Century, without requiring residency in Spain).

Along with the humor, the piece also contains gloom, as indicated by the inscription PAIN that is projected throughout the piece on the right side of the back wall of the stage. Death is also present-absent, appearing again in Kogan's words and in the imagined death of the bull that Kogan and Natan construct from flamenco dresses. At the end of the piece, Kogan stops talking and embodies gestures of intense human suffering, with his mouth wide open in terror. For a moment, in the dramatic lighting designed by Nadav Barnea, Kogan's naked upper body became particularly bright, in stark contrast to his black dress. The entire stage image becomes monochromatic and remarkably similar to Picasso's "Guernica", a stark reminder of the destruction wrought by a culture sickly preoccupied with identity. THISISPAIN illustrates how even in these murky days, "Even in the mud and scum of things", as the poet Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "something always, always sings".

In THISISPAIN too, the discourse is at the heart of the creation. In fact, flamenco itself can be described as a double and multiplied discourse. It is an ongoing cultural conversation between Gypsy and Andalusian heritage, and it is also an artistic form that emerges in real time from the dialogue between its three basic elements - singing, music and dance. When Natan dances, Kogan accompanies her in singing. When Kogan bursts into a monologue, Nathan gives him a strict musical framework (compass) through rhythmic hand claps. She counts in Spanish, he in Hebrew, he makes sure to deliver the text in a 12-beat rhythm, even when he sings Hebrew children's songs and Jewish nursery rhymes, obviously different from the original. Kogan and Natan are experienced, charismatic and confident performers. Both of them are portrayed as not sharing with the spectators everything that is in their hands, as if their impressive control of movement, rhythm and voice is a trivial matter, as if it happens naturally, but as the performance continues, more and more of their virtuoso ability is revealed. Natan stomps her feet powerfully while her hands swing, sail, beat her hips, slows down for one moment and sweeps the audience with her in the next, eliciting cheers from him ("Ole!"). Kogan does good not only to dance and entertain the audience with his imaginative and witty texts, but also with thunderous and confident singing that for a moment resembles an ancient Jewish liturgical ode.

In THISISPAIN, the choreography is a fluid conversation between styles, between times and between cultures. The ways in which Kogan shapes it also have another, political meaning: choreography as a conversation allows viewers to also understand identity as a constant discourse, as an action in the making rather than as a finished, stable and fixed product. Thus, although Kogan praises the Spaniards for being "a culture of exclamation marks!", a culture where "macho is simply a definition of a male, neither liquid nor volatile" (and by the way alludes to the elusive identity of dance itself), In his solo, a hand movement becomes the typical flamenco hand movement, and from there it slides into a movement reminiscent of Pavlova's hands in "The Dying Swan" by Fokine, which then become a quote of Nijinsky's hands in "Afternoon of the Faun", and ends with the hands Jesus on the cross, leaning against the back wall.

*Translated from the Hebrew source

<https://bit.ly/3MfAYKe>

"Together, they play at everything. Counting in rhythm with their feet and hands. Saying profound things to each other casually and leaping over the question of passports. Climbing up national networks like salmon, but better, thanks to dance, they leap over borders. They untangle clichéd images as they deconstruct the codes of 'pure flamenco. Beautiful"

- TÉLÉRAMA TTT

"This fascinating and controversial subject - body and identities - fits like a glove to Hillel Kogan's tart language, full of ironic jokes, dribbles, and defiances. And one generally applauds the project: to show how much dance is also a place for constructing norms, which one must outsmart."

- LIBÉRATION

"Accompanied by the flamenco dancer Mijal Natan, the dancer-choreographer Hillel Kogan creates a show where flamenco becomes a platform for his obsessively questioning postures. Funny and beautiful at the same time, THIS/SPAIN brilliantly reconfigures the geography of arts and thoughts, and definitively prefers movement to identities."

- SCENEWEB.FR

"In Kogan's dance, although lightened by humor, it is more than a play with language; it is a dialogued exorcism between our psychological and identity dilemmas. (...) An unresolved and wavering performance, "Thisispain" manages, on the edge, to show that dance is itself an identity and a territory, a space-time whose appropriation, never complete, is not colonization but a shared reverie."

- IO/GAZETTE

"Pain" as both "douleur" (pain in French) and "Spain," Spain is the new anistic and cultural territory conquered by Hillel Kogan in his enchanting and multifaceted piece. Extending his iconoclastic dance universe, illustrated with "We Love Arabs," a previous success presented here in Avignon, he now invests in flamenco dance with a new stage partner, the magnificent dancer Mijal Natan."

- LICRA



05:34

castanets. Rial Madrid.



vimeo

THISISPAIN by Hillel Kogan, Culture Agent, Kan 11 (Israeli national broadcast) August 2023.

THIS IS SPAIN

HILLEL KOGAN

Choreography: Hillel Kogan

Performers: Mijal Natan et Hillel Kogan

Dramaturgy: Yael Venezia

Art Direction: Laetitia Boulud

Lighting: Nadav Barnea

Musical Advisor: Yael Horwitz

Translation and Adaptation to English: Ori Lenkinsky

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Duration 75 min / Text in English

Production: Hillel Kogan, Curtain Up festival, Ministry of Culture (Israel).

Premiere- Curtain Up festival, Tel Aviv, November 9th, 2022.

International Touring and Production: Drôles de Dames

www.dddames.eu

38 Dunois st 75013 Paris - France +33153611676

Contacts: Christine Huet, christine@dddames.com

Noëlle Géranton, noelle@dddames.com



photo: Laetitia Boulud

WWW.HILLELKOGAN.COM