

Barak Marshall: Dance Bridging Cultures

[Adapted from a talk Marshall gave at Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival]

"My dance company was invited to a festival up in Milano, Italy, called "Archi Milano." It was run by communists who were quite anti-Israel. However, because of the Oslo accords, they wanted to make a gesture, a cultural gesture, to invite an Israeli company. To make a long story short, the entire organization was very rude to us, and cursed us in Arabic, which we understood, thanks to my Aunt Leah and my mother, Margalit Oved. And, most of my dancers are of Middle-Eastern descent. They are Moroccan Jews, Tunisian Jews—I don't ask them what they are before I choose them, but it tends to be the case. We ended up going on stage after a Palestinian singer from Nazareth who was singing very nationalistic, very angry songs.

Then they announced that an Israeli company was coming up to perform. The entire crowd of over 1,000 people who were all wearing kafiahs started chanting "Intifada, intifada." So, needless to say, we were a little scared. We had three undercover security guards with us at the time, and my dancers asked them to please check under the stage. I said nothing is going to happen; they didn't invite us to kill us. In any case, the crowd settled down, and we did check under the stage so my dancers would go on the stage because they were really scared.

The first song I sang was in Arabic. The crowd went silent. They did not understand why an Israeli was singing in Arabic. They did not understand that half of our country came from Arabic lands. They began to settle down a bit. In the second section my mother played the Tarbouke, which is a traditional Arabic instrument and she ululates (an Arabic vocal expression of joy). The crowd started ululating. They did not understand what was going on, since here was this Israeli company—the enemy—doing things that were exactly from their tradition. Then in the third section, we started saying curse words that were in Arabic, to which they started laughing. The fourth section was music from one of my favorite Pakistani musicians who is a Sufi singer, and the entire audience started singing and jumping.

That was the most beautiful cultural bridging experience I have ever had in my life. When we came off, all these people who hated us—really hated us—hugged us."