

# AMERICAN ACADEMY

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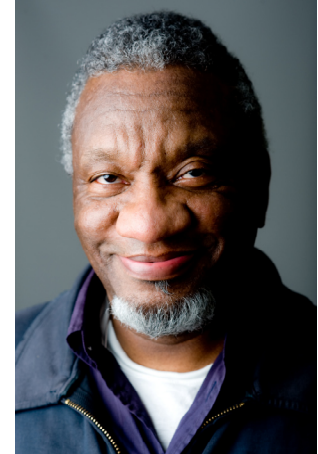
## IN JERUSALEM

# HAARETZ

## National Familial Dysfunction

Elad Samorzyk/January 3, 2012

Everything started on that gloomy day ten years ago. “I lived about four blocks from the World Trade Center. I saw the first plane fly into the building and watched all the events evolve,” recalls the American choreographer, Donald Byrd. “At the time I asked myself why that surprised us so much in the United States, and it caused me realize that we were living in a bubble of ignorance. And then I began thinking that if we look out at the world, we must observe the Middle East because the events of September 11th were directly related to it. One of the things that fundamental Islam claims is that the problem cannot be solved until we deal with the Palestinian issue.”



American Academy in Jerusalem Fellow Donald Byrd

That’s how Byrd’s interest in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict began to develop, which some time later led him to initiate a project in which Israelis, Palestinians and Americans were supposed to work together on a dance performance that addresses the burning issues of the region. “It was a rather naïve idea,” he admits with a smile, “but at the time it looked like a good idea. I was very enthusiastic, but then I discovered that other people were not as enthusiastic as I was.”

About four years ago he came here to try and locate artists who would cooperate with him. On the Israeli side, he managed to recruit Liat Dror and Nir Ben Gal; but many Palestinian artists rejected his advances, he says, for fear of being perceived as collaborating with Israelis. The East Jerusalem musician, Wissam Murad, ultimately embraced the task, but by the time the efforts to obtain a visa for him to the United States succeeded, the work on the production was already over.

Byrd, Dror and Ben Gal put on the show in Seattle in 2008, which was performed by the ensemble that Byrd has directed in recent years, the Spectrum Dance Theater. The name chosen for the show was ‘A Chekhovian Resolution’ – a phrase borrowed from Amos Oz describing the bitter fate of the conflict. But Byrd’s inquisitiveness regarding the subject didn’t end with that. He recently came back here again under the auspices of the American Academy in Jerusalem, a project of the Foundation for Jewish Culture in New

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York, in order to research the issue from a different angle and to work with dancers from both sides of the conflict. He located three Israelis for the project – the male dancer Irad Mazliach and two women dancers, Anat Yaffe and Or Avishai, as well as an Arab woman dancer from Nazareth, Shaden Abu Elassal. The five of them entered the studio together in Jerusalem and worked there for several weeks.

“It evolved into something fascinating in my opinion,” Byrd recently recounted during one of his visits in Tel Aviv. “At a certain level, we’re looking at Abraham’s narrative as the source of the conflict. I wanted to think about it as a family matter, a kind of dysfunctional family. We’ve been working now for six weeks, and my plan is to bring the dancers later on to work in the United States, and then come back here for an additional period of work. Perhaps within a year we’ll have something we can present as a final product to an audience.”

### **What do you hope to accomplish with this project?**

“I noticed that people here work individually, and they’ve given up on the government doing something, so they take action on their own. There are all kinds of people and small groups who hope that perhaps within five, ten, or twenty years some change will occur as a result of their actions. So I hope it also characterizes what I am doing, that it’s one more voice among the other small voices which will make people reflect, which will challenge their thinking. I don’t have high hopes about changing the world. I’m simply adding another vegetable to the soup in the hope that it turns out to be a first-rate soup.”

## **Creates for Alvin Ailey**

Byrd was born in 1949. He grew up in Florida and as a youngster played the flute. He attended Yale University, but ultimately got his degree from Tufts University in Boston. At the same time he put all his energy into studying dance. “I fell in love with dance because it has something that’s connected to the body’s sincerity, the truth found in the body,” he recounts, “and also because it was really difficult and I liked the challenge.” He studied at the Alvin Ailey Center and the London Contemporary Dance School, and danced in the companies of a number of choreographers in New York, including Twyla Tharp and Karole Armitage.

Byrd later moved to the West Coast, where he taught at the California Institute of the Arts and began to flourish as a choreographer. At the end of the 1970s he started a company bearing his name in Los Angeles, which he subsequently transferred to New York a few years later. According to reports in the press, during that same period he suffered from a substance abuse addiction, which he eventually kicked thanks to a special detox program. Over the years he also created for several other companies, such as Alvin Ailey and the Joffrey Ballet, and collaborated on various theater and opera productions. He also received

a Bessie Award in 1992 for a piece he created for his company, called the Minstrel Show. He moved to Seattle in 2002 where he revolutionized 'Spectrum,' which prior to that had been a rather insignificant company. He has to date created about 80 works in total, most of which address social or political issues.

**Doesn't the framework you're working in, namely that Jewish organization, seem problematic to you considering the fact that you're trying to create a kind of balanced artistic dialog between the two sides?**

"If it were an Israeli foundation, it would be more problematic. I think it's less of a problem because it's an American foundation. But, yes, the program does lean altogether in the Israeli or Jewish direction and at first I was opposed to that. But I know that's how it is because people do things in the context of how they're familiar with them, and the ties that the Foundation for Jewish Culture has are with bodies on the Israeli side – they have very few contacts in East Jerusalem or the West Bank. So I'm aware that it's already biased in that way, but as an individual I still can ask questions and learn a few things which are not identified with the Foundation. I have my own opinions. I don't think it's always beneficial to express them in this context. The issue itself is very complicated. No one is totally right and no one is totally wrong, and that's what makes it so complicated."

## **A Personal Obsession**

**What really draws you to deal so much with our conflict? Would you say it's an obsession?**

"I believe that it's a bit of an obsession. The conflict doesn't only affect Israelis and Palestinians. I think it's something that has to concern all of us because it illustrates to me the complexity of coexistence in general. One of the things that often annoy me is that people want to reduce the conflict to very simple language. It's a rather lazy way of thinking because I believe it's much more complicated, and I'm looking to create a work that encourages people to conduct dialogs about the subject in a more complex manner. Furthermore, one of the things I learned from going back to it over and over again is that it doesn't matter how many times I go back to it - I'll still never see or understand it all. It's like peeling the layers off an onion and there are more and more of them."

**Has your stay here changed your perspective on the conflict?**

"Yes and no. One of the things I noticed - perhaps it's not directly related to the conflict but is somehow related – that I didn't know, and most Americans don't know, has to do with Christian Arabs and the role they are likely to play in this equation. In certain respects, Christian Arabs feel pressure from the Muslims and feel they have been marginalized. On the other hand, many of them feel that the State of Israel is trying to divide them into Muslim Arabs and Christian Arabs. That's an aspect of the conflict I hadn't thought about before. I didn't know it existed."

Byrd admits that he can talk endlessly about the political and social issues in our region.

And, in fact, he offers a detailed opinion about every topic that comes up as if he were a permanent resident here. And he no less enjoys talking about Israeli dance, which he had a lot of exposure to during his stay in Israel – primarily at festivals that were held here recently, such as Curtain Up and International Exposure. He has particular praise for works created by Iris Erez, Barak Marshall, Osnat Kelner and Ariel Cohen, among others.

“I realized that in the United States and Europe we are used to the big things by Ohad Naharin, Itzik Galili or Emanuel Gat, where everything is highly theatrical and produced,” he says. “And now I’ve been exposed to the smaller works and there are things I liked, but also thought they have limitations. During my first week here I met Arkadi Zaides, who told me that much of Israeli dance is currently lacking composition, that the movement may be very interesting, but it doesn’t have structure. And that’s what I felt, that people have an idea but there’s no structure to hold the idea, that the organizing principles which can hold the work together are missing. When it comes to Ohad Naharin, for example, the movement is highly original and that’s great, but there are also structures in place that hold the work together and the movement’s architecture is always very strong. It appears that the younger choreographers are less concerned with the architecture of the work and more with the expression.”