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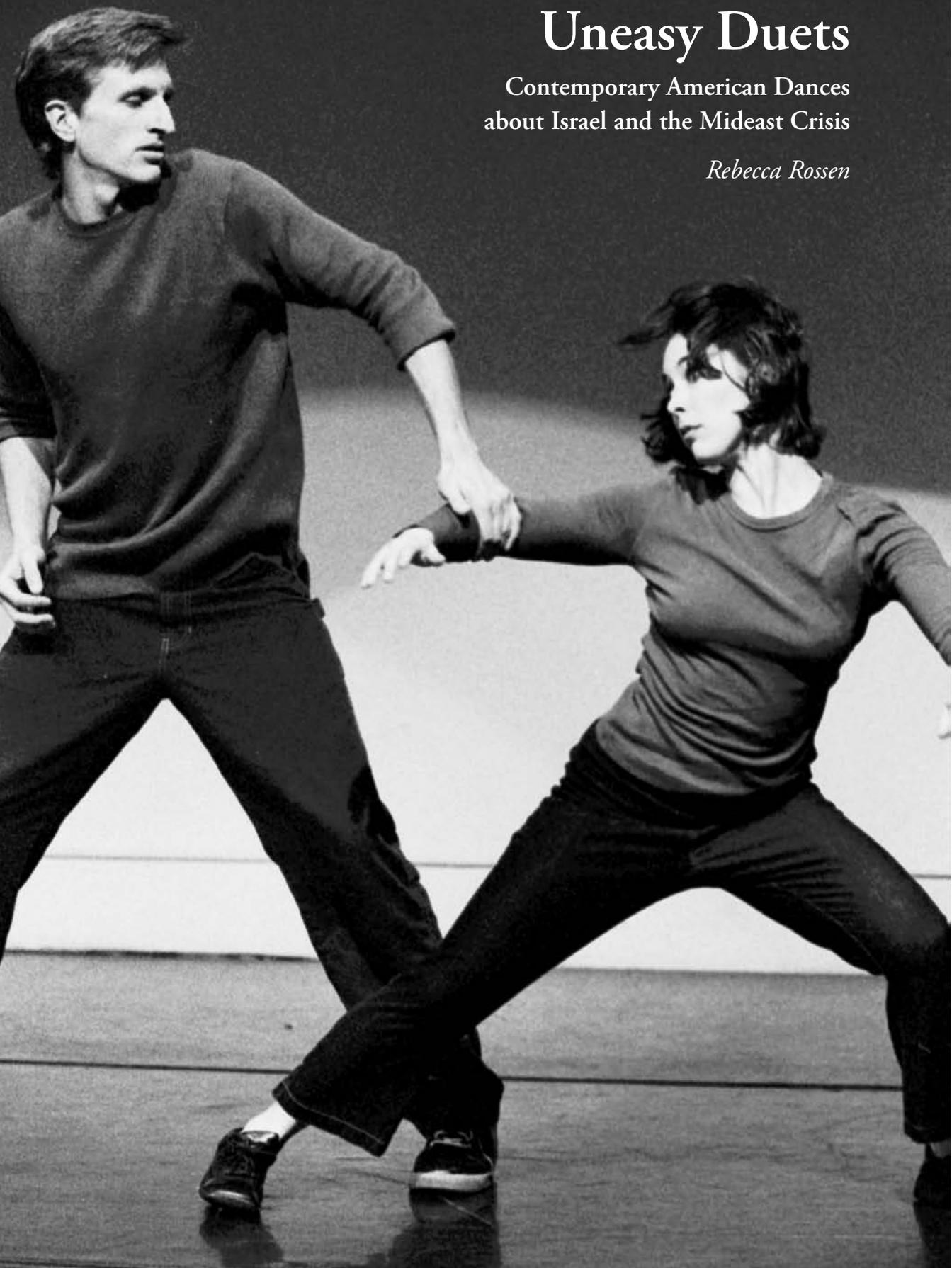
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Uneasy Duets

Contemporary American Dances
about Israel and the Mideast Crisis

Rebecca Rossen



In the fall of 1993, I traveled to Israel to participate in the Arad Arts Project, a residency program for American Jewish artists located in a small town in the Negev desert. The project was sponsored by WUJS (World Union of Jewish Students), an organization that brings Jews to Israel, promotes Zionism, and situates “the State of Israel as the central creative factor in Jewish life” (WUJS 2006).¹ The program appealed to me because it offered generous studio space in an intriguing location and access to one of the most vital dance scenes worldwide—a seductive proposition for an emerging choreographer from Chicago, even one without any relationship to organized Judaism. Several months before I left, I attended a festival of contemporary Israeli dance in Chicago. Hoping to make a few connections, I introduced myself to one of the dancers after a show and naively explained my plans and desire to explore my “heritage.” His emphatic response surprised me: “We aren’t *your* people,” he said, “You are an American. We are Israelis.”

He was right. I did not have roots in Israel, but in Eastern Europe and the United States. Nevertheless, my expectation for a warm welcome was rooted in the fact that in my lifetime (I was born six months after the 1967 Six-Day War), most Jewish organizations, and consequently many American Jews, have positioned Israel as a critical component of American Jewish identity. Supporting the Jewish state politically and financially, hanging the Israeli flag next to the American one in synagogues, repeating “Next year in Jerusalem” at Passover each year, sending teens and young adults on Zionist pilgrimages are all ways in which American Jews demonstrate their commitment to Israel. Indeed, when WUJS offered me a dance studio in the middle of the desert with the promise that my artistic identity would bloom alongside my Jewish one, the unstated expectation was that this marriage of creativity and Zionism might foster, through dance, a life-long commitment to Israel.

While my experience in Israel transformed me artistically, in many ways the experiment failed. I did not make aliyah, marry a Jew, increase my activities in Jewish organizations, take up Israeli folk dancing, or choreograph any Zionist works. But I did become curious about dance as an expression of Jewish identity, and have since dedicated much of the past decade to studying Jewishness in American modern and postmodern dance. By investigating how American Jewish choreographers engage or revise Jewish themes and beliefs over nearly a century, I have been able to evaluate how meanings for Jewishness have evolved in relation to changing historical conditions and aesthetic practices. The relationship between Zionism and American dance is my most recent inquiry, a topic that has proven to be rich, vast, and incredibly complex. One thing is clear: even though dance is virtually absent from scholarship on American Zionism, Jewish choreographers have consistently created dances that have embodied the shifting role of Zionism in American Jewish life.²

1. The Arad Arts Program is now called WUJS Arts and is located in Jerusalem, not Arad.

2. One recent publication that addresses this gap is Judith Brin Ingber’s *Seeing Israeli and Jewish Dance* (2011).

Figure 1. (facing page) Tom Young and Kristen Smiarowski in Attempts (2002). (Photo by Sallie DeEtte Mackie)

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In contrast to early- and mid-20th-century dances that were straightforwardly Zionist in both content and context, postmodern works navigate an increasingly volatile political terrain and are often forthrightly ambivalent about Israel. In recent years, the conflict in the Middle East has been wrenching for many American Jews—including choreographers—inciting some to examine their relationship with Israel using the dancing body itself as a site of contestation. Two exemplary duets are: Liz Lerman’s *Fifty Modest Reflections on Turning Fifty* (1998), a work that conflates the choreographer’s and Israel’s histories to question the terms of this bond; and Kristen Smiarowski and Tom Young’s *Attempts* (2002), which explores the artists’ fraught attempt to depict, and intervene in, the Mideast crisis. In both works, the duet structure enables active dialogues between performers, between dancers and audiences, and between disparate political positions, and situates choreographic and performance processes as opportunities for open-minded inquiry, critical analysis, and vigorous debate. While these duets do not offer a path toward peace or aim to effect changes in policy, they do destabilize the notion that American Jews are unconditionally supportive of Israel, or that “Jew” and “Zionist” are synonyms, and therefore represent a distinct shift in how American Jewish choreographers perform their relationship to Israel.

Questioning Partnerships

Throughout the 20th century, American Jews grappled with the often competing drives toward identification and integration into American society. American Zionism thrived because Israel was not conceived as a substitute for Jewish life in the US, but rather as a symbol for Jewish existence that was compatible with American notions of democracy, freedom, egalitarianism, and ingenuity (Gal 1996; Raider 1998; Rosenthal 2001, 2005). In the 1930s, choreographers such as Dvora Lapson and Benjamin Zemach articulated this utopian vision in dances that idealized the tenets of Labor Zionism and celebrated the *haluzim* (pioneers), replacing negative images of Old-World Jews with industrious and spirited “new Jews” that complimented American pioneering mythologies. Throughout the 1930s and ’40s, large-scale pageants, including *Romance of a People* (1933), *Fragments of Israel* (1933), *The Eternal Road* (1937), and *A Flag is Born* (1946), used theatre and dance to promote Zionism and raise awareness about (and even funding for) the Jewish state (Citron 1989; Fischer-Lichte 2005; Whitfield 1996).³ Despite the magnitude of these spectacles, the most financially successful and long-running Zionist extravaganzas were the Chanukah Festivals presented at Madison Square Garden throughout the 1950s and ’60s, which raised millions of dollars in Israel Bonds annually. Choreographed by Sophie Maslow, a critical figure in American dance, the festivals equated American modern dance with the modern Jewish state and cast the US and its Jews as Israel’s chief benefactors.⁴ Although the festival’s theme varied each year, Maslow’s dances consistently presented a progression from biblical heroism to Eastern European nostalgia, ultimately culminating in a Zionist finale in which dancers would cultivate and defend Israel with their young and vital bodies (fig. 2).

In the years following the 1967 and 1973 wars, American Jewry looked to Israel as a panacea for its own troubles—assimilation, reduced commitment to Judaism, intermarriage, anti-Semitism, and survival. During this period, most American Jews practiced unconditional support for Israel without much reflection. As historian Steven T. Rosenthal has noted, “For millions of American Jews, criticism of Israel was a worse sin than marrying out of the faith”

3. See also “Performing Jewish Nationhood: The Romance of a People at the 1933 Chicago World’s Fair” by Lauren Love in this issue of *TDR*.—Ed.

4. Radio producer Himan Brown directed the festivals, although Maslow was given free reign with the dances. She choreographed all of the festivals between 1951 and 1970, with the exception of 1954 (choreography by Anna Sokolow), 1958 (choreography by Pearl Lang), and 1959 (which featured the Israeli company Inbal). For more on this see Rossen (forthcoming).



Figure 2. Sophie Maslow's ensemble of dancers used their bodies and hoops to build a pipeline in the 1956 Chanukah Festival at Madison Square Garden, New York. (Courtesy of Abby Blatt)

(2005:214). Israel's invasion of Lebanon (1982) and the first Intifada (1987–1991) began to chip away at American Jewish support for Israel, particularly on the left (215–16). By the late 1990s and early 2000s, a number of organizations emerged, such as Jewish Voice for Peace and Not in My Name, which called for American Jews to take “visible action” against the occupation (NIMN 2000–2005), including voicing dissent publically, encouraging debate, staging demonstrations, and overcoming fears about exposing oneself to criticism or accusations of self-hatred.⁵

Choreographer Liz Lerman seemed to take on this cause when, on 25 April 1998, she premiered a full-length piece at Arizona State University's Gammage Auditorium for the L'Chaim Festival, an event sponsored by the Jewish Federation of Greater Phoenix to commemorate the 50th anniversary of Israel's founding.⁶ Throughout 1998, in cities all over the US, Jewish organizations and cultural institutions celebrated Israel's anniversary with Jubilee festivals, art exhibits, music, theatre, and dance (most notably national tours of several Israeli dance companies). Lerman's approach differed greatly from the formal and festive nature of many of these events: she began her concert by sitting at the edge of the stage and speaking candidly with the audience about her fear that American Jews have become overly invested in the Holocaust, Israel, and prosperity, causing many Jewish artists of her generation to disinvest. “I can't say that Israel,

5. See the Not in My Name (NIMN 2000–2005) website. NIMN joined Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP) in 2005. Also see the website for Brit Tzedek v'Shalom.

6. My analysis of Lerman's performance at the L'Chaim Festival is based on a videotape of the entire evening including the curtain talk, performance, and post-show discussion (Lerman 1998).

even the Holocaust, suburban life, and affluence,” she remarked, “were elements of the world that my peers were interested in exploring.” By directly confronting mainstream Jewish values, before even beginning the dance, Lerman directly undercut expectations for a “nice Jewish dance” about Israel, and asked the audience to open themselves up to new possibilities for Jewish identity and expression. Her initial interrogatory approach certainly alienated some—at least one person walked out (Lerman 2009). But ultimately she united the audience members by asking them to name and describe someone that they honored (a grandmother, a rabbi, a mother, etc.) and then skillfully transformed their memories into a gestural sequence that the spectators practiced performing collectively to music. Finally, the audience was invited to move from the large house to an intimate arrangement of seats onstage, where Lerman began her dance—*Fifty Modest Reflections on Turning Fifty* (fig. 3).⁷

Lerman has been asking controversial questions and re-imagining collectivity for the majority of her professional career. A choreographer, activist, educator, and director of the multigenerational Liz Lerman Dance Company, she explores in her works and in her community-based educational initiatives ways to bring people together across difference. Since the early 1980s, she has created many dances that confront standard modes for depicting Jewish culture, criticize the patriarchal and homophobic aspects of Judaism, reinvent Judaic ritual, and present Jewish identity as a process that is neither fixed nor free from controversy. Lerman has not just done this work onstage, but she has also brought her methods to synagogues and Jewish organizations, where she uses dance to help Jewish leaders and their constituents envision, build, and sustain new models for community. Given her background, it is not surprising that she would be invited by a branch of the Jewish Federation to create a work for Israel’s anniversary. Nor was it out of character for her to fearlessly destabilize Jewish and performance conventions by beginning her dance with a heartfelt, interactive discussion that openly addressed her concerns about Israel, and by association, questioned the celebratory nature of this commemorative event.

Fifty Modest Reflections on Turning Fifty merges autobiographical and collective narratives, and imagined and actual events, to reflect upon the personal and political impact of Israel’s history. Although the dance’s title binds Lerman to Israel—she was born 25 December 1947, less than five months before the establishment of the state on 14 May 1948—she reveals a disconnection from Israel early on in the piece by admitting to having visited it only once. In contrast, she describes her brother’s ardent Zionism—“He yearns to go to Israel again and again. Not me.” Despite this disavowal of Israel’s significance in her life, the work intersperses dynamic movement passages that alternatively evoke ritual, Hasidism, folk dance, and athletic postmodernism with expository monologues that chronicle her family’s emotional and political investment in the state.

In one section, she performs an elegant waltz while discussing how Theodor Herzl’s First Zionist Congress in 1897 coincided with her grandfather’s emigration from Russia to Milwaukee, where he would evolve from a territorialist into a Zionist and eventually meet Golda Meir (Lerman 2011).⁸ Midway through the story, she disrupts the grace of her promenade and presentational narration by dissolving into kinetic and verbal temper tantrums—frantic stomps, manic pacing, dramatic belly-crawling, and spoken outbursts in

7. Lerman has performed the full version of *Fifty Modest Reflections on Turning Fifty* only once, at the L’Chaim Festival. However, she has presented excerpts of the dance throughout the United States, at Jewish and non-Jewish venues.

8. The ITO (Jewish Territorial Organization), established in 1905 by Israel Zangwill, gave a political structure to territorialism, which advocated for the necessity of a Jewish homeland, even if that could not be Palestine. In this section of the dance, Lerman also discusses the ill-fated Uganda Proposal, Herzl’s initial plan with the British government to consider a settlement in East Africa. The plan was rejected at the Seventh Zionist Congress in 1905 (Weisbord 1968).

which she asks whether she should assimilate or fight for a Jewish homeland. Her formal narration depicts a history of anti-Semitism, exile, immigration, and political fervor that produced Zionism and that romanticizes the founding of the Jewish state. In contrast, her physical actions reveal confusion and friction, embodying the conflict her grandfather's generation perceived between becoming Americans and embracing Jewish nationalism.

Other sections of the work further amplify how such discord impacts the body and the body politic. In one of the piece's most striking segments, Lerman invites the audience to imagine that her body is the map of Israel, using text and movement to literally and figuratively demarcate the state's contentious borders and boundaries. Pointing to her forehead, she locates Haifa, and uses her hands to draw a line from her feet up past her head to represent the sprawl of resorts in Eilat. Her hip, which she casually sinks into, is the Gaza Strip; her armpit represents Tel Aviv. Tilting her head back to expose the vulnerable underside of her neck, she identifies the West Bank between her esophagus and trachea. Sliding her fingers slowly down her chest, she says, "Right here is where Abraham entered Canaan. And here is where Jesus was born." Her heart is Jerusalem—a

trite and problematic metaphor—but one that she nonetheless embraces because, "No one gets to 50 without a broken heart." She dances as Israel, shifting between anatomical, geographical, biblical, and emotional analysis; her actions and words coagulate to suggest tension, harmony, shifting borders, and competing claims. At the end of this sequence, she speaks to the audience about her recent work with the Abraham Fund, a foundation that aims to promote equality between Israeli Arabs and Jews. When researching the meaning of the fund's name, she discovered that both Jews and Palestinians claim Abraham as their patriarch. "I didn't know this," she quips. "Of course I was only 49 at the time." The revelation shocks her: "It's like finding out that your father has a second family." Instead of holding on to an incomplete and biased origin myth, she states that she decided to accept that she has a larger family.

Fifty Modest Reflections on Turning Fifty does not simply acknowledge parity between Arabs and Jews; the work also insists that we recognize aspects of Zionist history that we would rather overlook. In another section, Lerman describes events that occurred exactly 50 years before, on 25 April 1948, when the Irgun (a militant Zionist group) attacked the Arab city of Jaffa. Quoting Menachem Begin's speech to his troops, she says:

Men of the Irgun—we are going to conquer Jaffa. Tonight we go into one of the decisive battles of the independence of Eretz Israel. Know who goes before you, and who is behind you. Before you the enemy, cruel, who has risen up to destroy you. Behind you, your parents, your brothers. Smite the enemy heart. Show no more mercy to them than they have shown for your people. Spare the women and the children. Anyone who lifts his arm and surrenders shall be saved, do not harm them. The only direction is forward.



Figure 3. Liz Lerman performing an excerpt of *Fifty Modest Reflections on Turning Fifty* in 2001 at the Skirball Cultural Center, Los Angeles. (Photo by Robert Sanchez)

As she recites this text, she slowly lowers herself to the ground and progresses through a series of poses—a painful shoulder stand, a swift withdrawal back on her belly, an imploring reach, a curled fetal position, fingers that uneasily tap on the floor, an obsessive scrubbing action, a sudden thrust to the side, her body stiffly rocking back and forth. Her voice confidently quotes Begin, but her body struggles to come to terms with this violence. She may not take a direct stance against Israel's militarism, yet she demands that her audience reflect more fully on what they are actually commemorating and recognize the impact of Israel's founding on the Arab population.

Lerman further accentuates this point with another dancer, Gesel Mason, who quietly supports, and eventually interrupts, her testimonials. There are a number of distinct differences between the two performers. Lerman is white and middle-aged; Mason is black and younger. In contrast to Lerman's costume, which includes a black overcoat, pants, combat boots, and shawl (alternately evoking a rabbi and the epitome of '90s dancer chic), Mason is shrouded like a nomad in an earth-toned costume and hooded robe. Lerman also performs onstage, in close proximity to the audience seated around her, while Mason mostly performs in the distance, throughout the blackened house, occasionally echoing one of Lerman's positions. Her exilic passage eventually comes into focus, while Lerman's danced monologue recedes into darkness. In this poignant segment, Mason becomes a desert wanderer, struggling to move across chairs, bounding lithely over rows, occasionally pausing to rest or survey her progress. Mason's journey is accompanied by a tape recording of Lerman's elderly father: "There are three things I stand for in my life," he says. "Civil rights, civil liberties, and Israel. And you want to know why I included Israel in this category? [...] Because for two thousand years I wandered around without being a nation, without having a nation. Now I have one." Lerman hoped that the audience would initially view Mason as a Wandering Jew. At the end of the dance, however, Mason joins Lerman onstage while she recounts how Abraham's sons, Isaac and Ishmael, came together only once to bury their father. Lerman, as Isaac the Jew, and Mason, now identified as Ishmael the Arab, collectively perform a burial ritual composed of the very same gestures gathered from the audience at the beginning of the evening. By first establishing her audience's identification with Mason, and then revealing Mason's status as a Palestinian (who nonetheless shares with Jews a common origin and ritual vocabulary), the piece encourages viewers to have empathy for this character, whether Jew or Arab (Lerman 2009). The casting also subtly comments on racial and class tensions in the United States. While Jews and African Americans began the 20th century facing similar challenges, American Jews assimilated into whiteness, or as Lerman put it in the preshow talk, they became invested in affluence, perhaps losing sight of their commitment to social justice and economic equality both in Israel and in the United States.

In the introduction to their anthology, *Wrestling with Zion: Progressive Jewish-American Responses to the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, Tony Kushner and Alisa Solomon argue that a "certain version of 'love for the State of Israel' requires nothing less than the disappearance of Palestinians" (2003:5). By presenting Mason as a kind of specter whose fleeting presence haunts the dance, Lerman underscores, and to some degree purposefully replicates, the ways in which Zionism has rendered Palestinians invisible. Mason is not given a voice, but she does not simply fade away. Rather, her Palestinian gradually moves into focus and intrudes in the tale, eloquently demanding that we not only acknowledge her presence but also admit our role in her plight.

Contentious Duets

Fifty Modest Reflections on Turning Fifty aims to find commonalities between Arabs and Jews. The point of view, however, is not even: it tells a Jewish story, not a Palestinian one. In contrast, Kristen Smiarowski and Tom Young's *Attempts* consciously presents both Israeli and Palestinian perspectives. Although *Attempts* represents violence on both sides, the choreographers did not aspire to achieve equilibrium. Throughout, Smiarowski, a short woman, and Young, a tall man,

fluidly swap roles and swiftly shift power dynamics as a means to convey the instability of the situation and to model an outlook that is dynamic and flexible rather than static and unbending.

Smiarowski and Young choreographed *Attempts*, which premiered at Highways Performance Space in Santa Monica in May 2002, in the aftermath of 9/11 and during a particularly volatile period in the Mideast. In March 2002, Israel responded to an increasingly brutal series of suicide bombings and terrorist attacks with Operation Defensive Shield, which included two incursions into the West Bank, airstrikes, the occupation of Palestinian territories, and increased restrictions of people (including aid workers) moving across checkpoints (United Nations 2002; Kushner and Solomon 2003:1–9). Independent choreographers in Los Angeles, Smiarowski and Young entered the collaboration without a set plan. Smiarowski is Jewish and describes her relationship to Israel as “meaningful”; Young is not Jewish and identifies himself as pro-Palestinian. They began their work together by reading news articles about the Mideast, many of them contradictory (Smiarowski 2009; Young 2009). The duet that emerged from these conversations powerfully conveys opposing viewpoints and ably expresses the artists’ desire to do justice to an impenetrable political situation, while deftly communicating their ambivalence about whether or not they have a right to take a stand.

Attempts opens in silence; the couple performing a series of well-crafted encounters in which they take turns manipulating each other with an energy that is at once controlled and violent, intimate and aggressive.⁹ Their actions at first suggest a fraught romance, until the performers repeat the same duet while reciting newspaper headlines.¹⁰ “January 22, 2002, Israel Tightens Its Noose on Arafat,” Young says as he wraps his long arm in a choke hold around Smiarowski’s neck. “February 26, Israeli Check Points Grow Even Deadlier,” Smiarowski responds by efficiently sliding her hands down Young’s arms and causing him to fall limply over her back. “January 23, Gunman Kills Two in Jerusalem,” they state together as they slap their hands against their chests, forming their fingers into guns and waving their torsos back and forth with the impact of imagined bullets. “January 18, Palestinian Kills Six at Celebration,” Young says, wrenching Smiarowski’s head around six times before throwing her to the floor. In this violent *pas de deux*, performed with crisp efficiency, neither party fits cleanly into the role of aggressor or victim and both are unable to break the cycle of violence (fig. 1).

Similarly, in another section the pair engages in choreographic role-playing to infuse the contact-derived duet with a manifestly political narrative. “I’m a bulldozer,” Smiarowski says as she pushes against her partner, “Pretend you’re a rolling hill and I’ll flatten you.” Young responds in kind by grabbing and throwing her to the floor: “You’re dead too.” The section is tinged with violence, political commentary, and ironic humor. When he announces that he is a civilian, for example, she takes him by the shoulder, tells him that, “this is an accident,” and decisively flings him to the ground. Throughout the sequence, they become checkpoint guard, checkpoint crosser, gun, bullet, bus, Hezbollah, soldier, death, the Israeli prime minister, Israeli, Palestinian, a curfew, a mosque, a synagogue, dirt, dust, a hole in the ground, and finally, a suicide bomb, suggesting a child’s game that has gone horribly wrong.

Although Smiarowski and Young wished to subvert the tendency to read a duet between a man and a woman romantically, they nevertheless toy with sexual dynamics, gender norms, and their radically different heights, which embody the power imbalance between Israel and Palestine in unexpected ways. For example, at one point they take turns hurling each other to the floor while keeping count. The exchange begins with a tit-for-tat civility, but Young eventually asks Smiarowski to drop him several times in a row—until she is way ahead. Finally, he insists that they start again at square one. She seems to accept his terms, but then instead

9. My analysis of *Attempts* is based on a DVD of the performance at Highways Performance Space in Los Angeles (Smiarowski and Young 2002).

10. Smiarowski and Young quote *Los Angeles Times* reporter Tracy Wilkinson. See Wilkinson (2002 a–d).

grabs him and triumphantly throws him down. The United Nations reported that, between the second Intifada in September 2000 and Operation Defensive Shield, 441 Israelis and 1,539 Palestinians were killed (United Nations 2002:1). In an interview, Smiarowski reflected that, “depending on who you talk to, Israel is presented as this tiny little place in the Mideast [...while to others] Palestine and the Palestinians would be smaller [...] because they have less power. [...] We knew the imbalance we saw between Israel and Palestine would be represented in our bodies” (2009). Although Smiarowski is not directly identified as Israel in this section, the implication is clear. She may be physically small, but she has the upper hand.

In many ways, *Attempts* is less about the Mideast crisis and more about the choreographers’ attempt to represent it. As Smiarowski explained, the dance became a rumination on “the impossibility of making this kind of work” (2009). They manifest this struggle by frequently interrupting the piece to critique it. At one point, Young comments that Smiarowski’s dancing “doesn’t look like the conflict.” Likewise, at the end of the role-playing section, Smiarowski steps back and looks at Young, who has proclaimed himself to be a suicide bomber and sprawls inertly on the ground. “That looks fake,” she says. To which he responds, “Of course it does.” In the end, they remind the audience who they are and what they really do: “We’re dancers,” they say. “We go into the studio and we fake it.” The imposition of this meta-narrative challenges the effectiveness of dance as a political instrument as well as the choreographers’ rights—as Americans—to even address the subject. Still, they intended the work to confront the rigid perspectives of some viewers and inspire those who are indifferent to become involved. As Smiarowski says, faking is “both a confirmation and a critique of dancing”; while dance “has its limits,” it can also “open the door to empathy. [...] In faking it we actually have created something that is honest and true” (Smiarowski 2009). Ultimately, *Attempts* does not offer a solution, but aims to instigate reflection, dialogue, and even action.

In *Wrestling with Zion*, Kushner and Solomon challenged the ideology of unconditional support by re-envisioning the relationships between Israel and the United States, Israel and American Jews, and Israelis and Palestinians as a “dynamic problematic” that should enliven, rather than squelch the “centuries old Jewish traditions of lively dispute and rigorous, unapologetic skeptical inquiry” (2003:8–9). *Fifty Modest Reflections on Turning Fifty* and *Attempts* do not simply function as platforms for taking a political stance (which may suggest stasis over flexibility), but rather they demonstrate how dance can act as a “dynamic problematic” that can inspire vigorous research and critical analysis, provide a forum for asking questions and not simply giving answers, offer an opportunity to tangle with complexities and ambiguities, and represent shifting, unstable, and multiple points of view.

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