Ayman Safiah: the Dimensions of Empty Space and the Question: What Comes Next?

Wisam Gibran offers a broad reading of the life work of the late Palestinian artist Ayman Safiah. He examines how the body becomes a site speaking the language of freedom, and dance disrupts all that is familiar with its courageous details; he delves into the issue of freedom, gauging the boundaries of the self and its collapse.

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When reviewing the life of the Palestinian dancer Ayman Safiah, who drowned on May 24, 2020 at the age of 29, it is hard to comprehend his work's pace and the breadth of his achievement in his brief life.

Safiah was born in 1991, in Kafr Yasif in the Galilee. His surroundings and the conservative education he has received could not contain the young artist's unbridled dreams. The horizons, the possibilities, and the knowledge of the place were too narrow, as the distance between the line of *Dabke* dancers at a wedding and what Safiah had achieved in the last years of his life is like the distance of a galaxy's longing and its origin. Safiah set out to study and train in the languages of dance and international music at the Rambert School of Ballet and Contemporary Dance in London, and had since then performed in hundreds of theaters worldwide, choreographed several dance works, and participated in dozens of dances in Israel and abroad – gaining a lot of experience very quickly.

However, Safiah did not limit his professional expertise to dance and choreography. He was aware of the empty space in his society when it comes to the art of dance, and he devoted himself to the education of new generations. He taught in several local dance schools and designed special shows for the students. The most important one was *Between Two Worlds*,1 produced by the Al Amal Dance School in Nazareth. Its traces will continue to be evident in the works of the generation Safiah has nurtured and trained.

Safiah's importance stems not only from his being the first Palestinian male dancer to become a professional in the fields of ballet and modern dance and the first to blaze this trail in his society and generation, although this in itself is a bold breach of boundaries. He also influenced his audience's aesthetic perceptions, leaving his mark in the heart of a generation of dancers. He bequeathed them a compass marking a new, avant-garde direction they had not known before, expressed through his many artistic, social, and educational achievements.

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[1]Ayman Safiah, Between Two Worlds
Courtesy of Al-Amal school, Nazareth

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[3]Ayman Safiah, Between Two Worlds
Courtesy of Al-Amal school, Nazareth

Comprehending who Ayman has been is impossible without an understanding of the language of dance - of ballet and modern- and post-modern dance – in which the dancer's body thought, dreamed, and "spoke." This language develops gradually and demands strict, continuous, and exhausting training for body and mind, beginning in early childhood. This is a non-stop training, surrounded and watched over by mirrors that cover the studios' walls. Over the years, and with accumulated experience, they become internal mirrors, increasingly cruel and critical. Sweat covers the body that flies freely as the dancer's foot hovers in the air for a moment, as in the *Swing painting*,[2] or when he toys with gravity, lightly, in naked innocence, like the goddess in Sandro

Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus*.3 These difficulties are compounded by the forces of prejudice deeply rooted in the society in which the dancer has grown up, from within, and the social disadvantage from without.

I've attended several performances he participated in as a dancer or choreographer. The otherness that enveloped these performances unsettled the audience, being unaccustomed to this kind of dance, leaving no room for denying the scenes' magic. The expressiveness, the coherence, and the musical choices demonstrated what fluent speech could not state.

Safiah's personal works, those he has designed and led, were characterized by "beautiful, refined, contemporary, piercing, and unsettling artistic language, free of compromise."4 The student performances he had led were distinguished by the brilliance of meticulous collective work that allowed a generation of dancers to "reach the depths of being of each individual, and to break it down into multiple beings that thrive on tough questions, doubt, and existential anxiety that connects humanity to its essence."

safia 2.jpg **[4]**



[5]Ayman Safiah, The Body's Language, Aida school of contemporary dance, 2018
Photography: Tamer Massalha

safiah 1.jpg **[6]**



[7]Ayman Safiah, The Body's Language, Aida school of contemporary dance, 2018
Photography: Tamer Massalha

Less than a year before Ayman's passing, after watching *Between Two Worlds*, I had a long conversation with him in March of 2019. At the time, I didn't think I would need to come back to it and document it so soon, but I will try to recreate some of the central themes of that conversation, as my memory allows me.

Wisam Gibran: you and the dancer Lina Diab ran a group of young student dancers (at the Al Amal dance school). You've achieved an impressive result, which can be gauged in terms of international performances – perhaps not yet at the execution level but definitely in the final product. This has been a challenge.

Ayman Safiah: most of what you've seen in the show was done by the girls, from within their own depths... my role and Lina's was to help them draw out their concerns and then to direct the dance's language, expression, and even speech (which is also one of its components).

W.G.: so this was group work.

A.S.: that was the beauty of the whole thing.

W.G.: Arab dance (and Dabke specifically) is a group dance. What is new and different here?

A.S.: the Dabke is linear and symmetrical. There are repeating movements that you need to memorize and be in line with the group. You just identify with the group, mimic it, merge with it, and everyone is speaking the same language. But here, it is different since the group in *Between Two Worlds* is uniform, but the multiple meanings exist with the multiplicity of dancers to create a

polyphonic texture and kinetic narratives. This is not identification with the group, and there's no similarity or mimicking. Each dancer has her own personal story, even when it might seem similar or coincides with others' stories.

W.G.: How did the dancers deal with the daring openness in the topics or the body language? Did you encounter certain barriers with Lina? Or perhaps not from the students, but from the parents?

A.S.: unexpectedly, there are tremendous energies and hidden desires in our society. All that's needed is the availability of experts capable of drawing out and directing them and embracing and supportive institutions.

W.G.: and what about the audience?

A.S.: the audience is always smart. We must respect it and not insult its intelligence. That's all there's to it.

W.G.: but the innovation is unsettling, especially when it comes to body language.

A.S.: the audience can become accustomed to anything. An artist must believe in his way, persuade, persevere, and influence.

W.G.: what was it that you wanted to do in this work and didn't?

A.S.: nudity.

W.G.: in what way?

A.S.: in every way. How do you write a poem with a dry pen? How do you play your instrument if you're ashamed of its sound? How can you paint without freeing your colors? The body in dance is not just an instrument but the actual language. And if you want to speak with complete freedom, you must also free your idiom.

W.G.: you returned from London and decided to live and work here, among your family and the society you've grown up in. As an artist, do you still see yourself as part of this society or as a citizen of the world?

A.S.: I see no contradiction between a concrete place and universality. My mind thinks in the language of international dance, with the objectivity and professionalism on which I've grown up. I cannot tie my body with the binds of the place and its conditions. But universality does not necessarily mean alienation and being uprooted from your origins, does it?

W.G.: if you ask me as a musician or a poet, this is a complex issue. If the conditions and the limitations of a place force you to be bound by it (as you say), then you must defy them and break out, or even disengage. Why not? Disengaging from a place as a representation of the past is an option in art, isn't it? And yet, inviting heritage into your universal language is subject to the limitless criteria of creativity, even without preconditions. Each one of us does it in our own way. You persuade and influence, or you fail.

What project do you dream of as a dancer? What part of it have you realized so far?

A.S.: I don't have a specific dream. My dreams grow with me. The artistic environment invites me to work here or there, participate in a project, a workshop, a performance and so on… Sometimes I feel that it fills my time and provides me with a path, or several paths, frees me from choosing for myself, and gives me joy and satisfaction because I love to work with people. However, sometimes it distracts me and makes me circle around the "dream" that might satisfy me, not knowing what this dream might be. But I will recognize it when it will materialize.

W.G.: has it materialized?

A.S.: I don't think so. Everything I've done so far may contribute to the coalescing of my maturity, with my failures and successes, and maybe one day I will discover that all this has been just a take-off course, and the flying hasn't happened yet. Perhaps it never will, and that is what keeps us alive.

Safiah's work will never be completed unless future generations build on what he has established, follow in his footsteps, and embed the language of dance in our society. Not as a professional art language, but as one of freedom and openness that cannot be achieved but through hard work, persistence, and sweat. Our gratitude to him will be incomplete if we let his passage through life be a passing event.

Ayman Safiah has died in an accident, which calls for no celebration. But his life was a human shout and artistic activity. It was a message and a mission, and this does justify a continuing tribute. Not imposing prohibitions on the body or sanctifying it, but rather acknowledging it, accepting it as it is.

- 1. Wasim Gibran, "the Self Between Two Worlds," Fusha [8] Web site, March 31, 2019, https://tinyurl.com/ybxu4c25 [9]
- 2. Jean-Honoré Fragonard (1732 - 1806). "The Swing", The Wallace Collection is a museum in London.
- 3. Sandro Botticelli, The Birth of Venus (c. 1484-1486). Tempera on Canvas on canvas. 172.5 cm × 278.9 cm (67.9 in × 109.6 in). Uffizi, Florence.
- 4. Wasim Gibran, "the Self Between Two Worlds, Fusha [8] Web site, March 31, 2019, https://tinyurl.com/ybxu4c25 [9]

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