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Image: Philly Cam

Modern Dance, Zionism, and a Free Palestine

by Lu Donovan

While Palestine is undergoing [genocide](#) with the aid of our U.S. tax dollars, it is urgently necessary that we all step into an active role toward an immediate and permanent ceasefire. On January 1st, thINKingDance writer [Leila Mire](#) visited Philadelphia offering her lecture [“Unpacking Zionism in Modern Dance”](#) to call upon dance artists to join the resistance.

Mire began by sharing the history of modern dance’s “pioneers,” noting the imperial language we often use to describe [Ruth St. Denis](#) and [Ted Shawn](#). As an antithesis to Russia’s aristocratic ballet, they proposed improvisational forms and movement structures inspired by Egyptian and Hindu iconography. They gained international recognition for the liberated body they brought to dance while promoting and relying on themes of colonialism and Orientalism.

[The Denishawn school](#) raised another generation of modern dance “founders,” including the “mother of modern dance,” Martha Graham. Graham became a model for artistic diplomacy when she served as Artistic Director of the [Batsheva Dance Company](#) from 1964 to 1974 and, according to Mire, claimed to bring “peace to the Middle East.” Her role exemplifies the insidious use of dance in U.S.-Israeli foreign policy, all at once declaring its unifying power while asserting apoliticism at its core. This dangerous dichotomy has led to an ongoing artwashing of both countries, concealing the occupation of Palestine and inaccurately depicting these countries as progressive democracies while they both stand on stolen land.

Mire then explained how Graham ignited dance as a “soft power” used to portray Israel in a positive light. Central institutions such as the [Joyce Theater](#) and [Gibney Dance](#) are funded by the [Israeli Consulate](#) and [Brand Israel](#), a PR campaign of the Israeli government to improve its global image, supports individual artists. If Israel is so supportive of American institutions and creatives, in fact, more so than even our own government, why would dancers question it? This funding not only distracts from Israel’s atrocities, but also [demands that recipients](#) “promote the policy interests of the State of Israel via culture and art.” This quiet manipulation, Mire said, is exactly why

dancers must wake up and engage with the industry and institutions we work within.

This creative propaganda doesn't end with Israeli funding structures, but seeps into the very dance techniques created inside the state. [Gaga](#) is an improvisational practice codified by Batsheva's House Choreographer, [Ohad Naharin](#), that uses a "deep activation of the body and physical sensations" to enliven dancers and non-dancers alike. To my non-critical body-mind at age 19, taking a Gaga class felt like complete embodied liberation as I rejected the balletic discipline I had trained in my entire life. I walked away completely enthralled with the form, and unquestionably coding Israel as a forward-thinking site of contemporary dance. It worked on me.

Mire helped us unveil Gaga's extremely powerful propaganda that successfully diverts attention, conveys care, and [legitimizes Israel's Zionist nationhood](#). The form, according to [Gaga's Facebook page](#), "originated from the belief in the healing, dynamic, ever-changing power of movement." Mire explained how Gaga uses somatics to turn healing inward, rather than toward systems of collective liberation which, Mire and I agree, must remain at the center of our justice work. [Nicole Bindler](#), who invited Mire to speak in Philly, [writes about](#) how Gaga works as "a tool for forgetting... especially when the pleasure and release experienced in the movement is used to distract us from the suffering of others." This neglect is exemplified when we look at how Gaga has failed to acknowledge the thousands of Palestinian lives taken since October. How, I ask, can you feel free through the "snake of your spine," while Israel [cuts off food and water](#) from your Palestinian neighbors? This individual sense and experience of freedom both distracts from the hyper-militarization of Israel and communicates the state's liberal facade to dancers internationally.

Mire brought our attention to [Zvi Gothenier](#), an American Israeli choreographer whose dance [Dabke](#) made New York Times' top 10 dances in 2013. [Dabke](#), Mire told us, is a folk dance created in the [Levantine region](#) from a stomping technique used for mud roofs. It was danced in resistance to the Ottoman Empire and is now danced at weddings and celebrations in Arab countries and cultures. Gothenier not only [appropriated](#) this dance, gaining recognition for its false Israeli origins, but received praise for portraying peaceful ties between Israel and Palestine. The dissonances are clear when we reckon with the terror inflicted in Palestine long before October 7th, from the [Nakba in 1948](#) to the more recent [digital surveillance strategies](#) in Gaza. Palestinian refugees and their descendants fight for the [right to return](#) to their homeland, while Gothenier freely moves between the United States and Israel-Palestine to research, rehearse, and present his work.

Our art does not exist inside a vacuum, and it cannot change the systemic powers of the world solely on its own. Mire reminded us that "artists need to be on the side of revolution... anything less is a disservice to our craft."

Take action:

As the talk came to close, Mire recommended a list of action steps to stand in solidarity with Palestine in our dance spaces and beyond. Engage with the [Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions Movement](#) (BDS) in your dance spaces and beyond. Partake in [cultural boycott](#) by refusing to attend workshops in Israel, events funded by [Brand Israel](#) or propagandist works in the U.S. and instead, support the [Ramallah Festival](#) in Palestine. Talk to your fellow dancers about why you're making these choices and encourage them to do the same. Hold Israel-funded institutions accountable, asking them about their stance on the current genocide and decades-long occupation. Sign the [Dancers For Palestine](#), [Artists Against Apartheid](#), and [Queer Artists for Palestine](#) pledges and stay alert for upcoming dance-based campaigns and actions. Follow your local [Palestine Coalition](#) and stay up to date with direct actions in your city. [Call your representatives](#) daily and demand they sign resolutions for an immediate and permanent ceasefire. [Learn about](#) the decades-long history of the Israeli occupation in Palestine. Continue talking, asking, and listening to people in Palestine, and don't stop until Palestine is free.

A recording of this lecture can be found at [Philly Cam](#). This talk was co-presented by [Leila Mire](#), [La La Lil Jidar](#), [JVP Philly](#), and [Studio 34](#). Each organization continues to hold events in solidarity with Palestine. Check out their websites for more information.

[Unpacking Zionism in Modern Dance](#), Leila Mire, Studio 34, Philadelphia, January 1, 2024.

Additional reading material from Leila Mire:

[Dancers, Let's Talk Palestine Part 1: Honor the Dancestry | thINKingDANCE](#)

[Dancers, Let's Talk Palestine Part 2: Ignorance is Bliss Until It Isn't | thINKingDANCE](#)

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