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"I told my brother that, 'I want to do that, too'. I had no clue about dance, but what I saw simply fascinated me and made me want to be a part of it."

Oren Braier - Choreographer and Dancer



Introductory Interview

Oren dancing solo with Lehakat Hakol Bamahol at Amphitheater Kiryat Motzkin, Independence Day, 2023

Oren Braier moves within the dance world on a variety of levels. First and foremost, he is an active dancer. From time to time, he joins Israeli dance troupes (lehakot) as a dancer and performs Israeli dance as a soloist.

He is part of the duo, "Rak Laga'at – Dance2Touch," where he can express his personal and modern aspects of dance. He is the founder, choreographer and artistic director of Lehakat "Hakol Bamahol" ("All is Dance" Troupe) and within this framework, he is a dance teacher. He is also an instructor and dancer in Lehakat Salma – a Middle Eastern dance troupe that integrates artistic Arab folklore within it. In addition, he teaches at a school for special needs students, a position which often involves utilizing his creative abilities in his dance work.

Oren, do you remember a specific moment when you told yourself, "This is what I want to do?"

My first memory is from when I was 5 years old, when my brother and I attended an Independence Day eve event at the Abba Hushi Center [or as nicknamed, "Beit Abba Hushi – Abba Hushi House"] in Haifa. We saw a group of dancers wearing blue shirts on a small raised stage. I told my brother that, "I want to do that, too". I had no clue about dance, but what I saw simply fascinated me and made me want to be a part of it.

I started at the age of 12 when I danced in a group called, "Hora Ilan" Haifa. I was exposed to dance up close when I was six years old when I first saw my father dancing. It was a couples dance with one person sitting in a wheelchair. At that time, this kind of dancing was new in Israel. It was imported from Germany and was originally intended for ballroom dancing, but Israel applied it to folk dance. My father would take me with him to the dance session (chug) and, as a child, I would play with the other dancers' children or just watch from the side.

At one of the rehearsals, I was asked to replace a young man who took sick before a performance. I danced with **Rivka Cohen** z"l, who is unfortunately no longer with us. I learned the choreography in one or two sessions and we performed at a big event at Beit Halochem in Tel Aviv. It was a good experience and I continued to dance with the group until I was 18. At about the age of 17 or 18 I was already dancing in **Barry Avidan's** dance troupes and after that, with **Rachel Waizman**.

My first opportunity to choreograph a dance was for three girls in wheelchairs. This attempt wasn't very successful, but thankfully, it gave me the opportunity to create a dance for Lehakat Hora Ilan to be performed at the Karmiel Festival. Together with **Adi Bandes**, who at that time danced with me in Rachel Waizman's group, we put together two songs and created a successful choreography that won compliments from the Karmiel events manager (**Leah Mishal**).

And from here, you continued to other Israeli dance troupes?

I danced in Barry Avidan's group in Haifa for about half a year. When I joined the group, everyone else was already acquainted. Unexpectedly, the person who paid me the most attention and tried to help me the most was the lead dancer. On one of the rehearsal days, I had a simultaneous performance in the auditorium with Lehakat Ilan and arrived late for the rehearsal that was also at Rothschild House in Haifa. I turned to Barry and he said, "Perform, finish and come here." At a time when the choreographer was "God" and lateness was unacceptable, I felt that Barry Avidan gave me a lot of credit. After about six months, I felt that I didn't fit socially with the dancers and I left the troupe.

I found my place in Rachel Waizman's troupe, a nice group that fascinated me, and I danced there for many years. At the same time, I danced with several other troupes: a bit with **Ze'ev Keren** in the Nazareth Iris Dance Group, a bit with **Dado Kraus** and a bit with **Shlomo Maman**. I also worked, studied, helped and filled in for missing dancers.

In 2002, I was Shlomo Maman's assistant and I trained his troupes in Kiryat Shmona. This was the turning point when I went from being a dancer to becoming an instructor. These were Maman's choreographies that I had learned and then taught to the dancers. Simultaneously, at about the age of 20, I taught folk dance at the Beit Sefer HaRoked in Karmiel, which brought me closer to working with schools. At the end of the sixth-grade school year, I did the entire process – the writing, the staging and the instruction. This was actually my growing process within the field of management, directing and production, alongside Israeli dance.

In the following years, I also taught dance at the Nazareth Iris, at Edna Bezalal's studio in Nahariya and at the Zevulun Regional Council. After accumulating knowledge and practical teaching skills, I felt the need for additional enrichment. I participated in a program founded by **Yonatan Karmon** at the Israel Dance Academy in Jerusalem and received a scholarship for excellence. Later on, I also applied for academic studies and a degree in teaching dance for which I earned a teaching certificate at Seminar HaKibbutzim [Kibbutzim College in Tel Aviv].

I never tried to fly too high in "Israeli Dance". Although I wanted to be in the significant arena of

"As the dance duo called, 'Rak Laga'at', we combine the leg and the wheel, by connecting physical abilities to dance movements and a connection between two people."



The duo "Rak Laga'at – Dance2Touch: Zehava Padnos with Oren. Photo: Doron Golan

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choreographers, and I did get there several times, I always take a few steps back because I prefer the experience of what I create. There's something comfortable and personal in [that area] for me, so I don't feel the need to compete with anyone. In my opinion, there's room for everyone.

The early experience with Lehakat Ilan Troupe led you not only into the world of Israeli dance but also to the founding of the duo "Rak Laga'at – Dance2Touch" together with the dancer, Zehava Padnos.



Oren with his father Yitzhak Braier after the Ilan Troupe performance at the festival

Both of my parents were part of the polio disabled community whose active members in Israel all knew each other. My late mother and Zehava knew each other since childhood. As an athlete, Zehava would come to practice at ILAN and that's how we had the chance to meet there. [Note: ILAN – The Ilan Association, strives to enable people with physical disabilities to live meaningful and high-quality lives: <https://ilan-israel.co.il/en/>]. On one of the occasions, when she came as a customer to the photography store where I worked, I suggested that she join me as my dance partner in Lehakat Ilan.

We danced for a short time as part of the troupe and, at her request, we continued with more intensive practices. Since then, we've been dancing together for more than 20 years, during which time we presented three shows that ran throughout the country. As the dance duo called, "Rak Laga'at," we combine the leg and the wheel, by connecting physical abilities to dance movements and a connection between two people. We are highly respected and are booked for stage and television shows. The last one was "Got Talent",

in which we made it to the final show.

Modern dance gave me wings to move between movement and music, soul and meaning. Thanks to working with Zehava, these dreams have also come true.

Before you reached the age of 30, you had gained diverse and comprehensive experience in the world of Israeli dance and had already founded your own troupe – "Hakol Bamachol – All is Dance". How was this idea born?

In 2004, I started to manage the dance troupes at the Kiryat Ata Community Center. I was asked to substitute for the regular instructor and later, I was involved in organizing a trip to Canada for the dance troupes, the orchestra and the singing groups. The troupes participated in municipal events and we even won prizes in the competitions held there. There were children of various ages in the groups but no adults. The idea was born when I heard the mother of one of the dancers say that perhaps one day she would dance. This became a dream for me that needed to be realized.

In 2006 the director of the community center responded to my requests and agreed to permit me to establish an adult troupe. I received assistance from **Paula Malka**, who is a member of the dance troupe to this very



The ceremony of laying the cornerstone for Beit Kessler, 1998. Oren with Rivka Cohen z"l

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day. At first the troupe consisted of six women, with whom we worked whenever possible in a small, and social group. At the end of the year, they went up on stage in a show that was a fantastic experience for them and which moved me more than my work with young people.

This was the beginning of the "real" dance troupe, the one with which you can do things that go beyond anything anyone dreamed of. This is where I began my journey as a choreographer, with a deeper understanding of the essence of the troupe – "because it was possible and because the dancers made it possible". In comparison to the nature of working with children and the difficulty of pleasing them and getting results, with the adults I could do what I wanted.

You are both a dancer and a choreographer. What skills of yours as a dancer do you take to your work as a choreographer? Where in the choreography is the dancer expressed?

In my opinion, it is very difficult for a non-dancer to become a choreographer, even though such choreographers exist and some of them are also successful. Without dance experience, the choreographer will create more graphic things, which may be structurally more exact, but it won't have the imagination that a dancer understands and senses the significance of the bodily mechanics, the length of the movement, and many other important nuances. Sometimes while I'm working, I move aside for a moment and try to execute the idea myself. I know what I can execute and what a dancer can execute, and I have to adjust.

The ability to see the dancer comes when you have experience and you come from within the dance. When a dancer becomes a choreographer, his approach to dance will be better and his ability to see the dancer will be more focused. When a dancer dances at the beginning, under the guidance of a choreographer, he/she follows working methods, and this makes him think – what he would do differently or part of it he connects to most.

The actual dance is what made me want to be heard in the field. Beyond the fact that I am a dancer and can see the entire picture, I know that dancing in a group is not solo dancing. There are other rules that develop with time. You develop senses: Whether it's vision – perceiving the space correctly, or hearing – the musical understanding of the rhythms. You feel in your body what is right and what doesn't feel right. By knowing the movements of a dancer, you become a more holistic choreographer.



*Meholeley Kiryat Haim performing a Chassidic dance.
Soloist: Oren Braier*



Group photo with Polish troupe during the festival at Tomaszów

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What are your sources of inspiration? How is a dance born?

If there is music, it pretty much dictates something. You can go with it, or against it, or move in syncopation. It is not just an accompaniment tool. It tells a story, and this is what gives meaning or significance to every movement. I really connect with music.

When there are no lyrics, I listen to music and imagine the theme that arises from it and begin to interweave it with my thoughts and experiences. I start researching the theme that comes up – I ask myself questions, write things down, look in the dictionary, create. I try to apply the story that has emerged from this music until I reach a point where I've connected my idea on the one hand with the music on the other in order to make a kind of collage.

When there are also lyrics, then there is a theme to connect to. I try to animate the story of the song in my head. What would I like to see within the words? What would I like to emphasize? What would I like to transmit to others from within the story? How would I sharpen the emphasis on a particular word? For instance, the word "mountain". How do I see a mountain? Each one of these things is a tool for movement. A movement score that follows the lyrics which creates an experience for you.

There are things that come from me. When I want to work on a particular topic, whether I'm looking for music or working without music. And then, after I put together the movement, I try to apply it to the existing music. For me, the tools of music and lyrics are an excellent basis for work.

Can you give an example of words or music that became a choreography?

An example from last year is a dance to the song, "Balada LaChovesh – Ballad for a Medic", sung by **Yehoram Gaon**. You simply need to listen to the song that describes a very specific event or a particular moment in the midst of war. The song conveys a perfect description and you can close your eyes, imagine and listen to the song and then see a whole scene before your eyes. Movements immediately appeared before me that describe the moment and that connect to both the lyrics and the music.

In the dance, "Ha'Har Ha'Yarok – The Green Mountain", I wanted to see a big mountain, to see the winds blowing around the mountain and the way they affect its movement, as well as



Hakol Bamahol in costumes for the dance "Ha'Har Ha'Yarok" at the Karmiel Festival, 2022

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the story that's in the song. There are many nuances in the song that describe moments, and one can really feel them. I wanted to see the "togetherness" of the group versus the moment of a single person alone, a moment of love next to a moment of war.

The song talks about the cycle of life and it is divided into periods in our lifetime. In one of the sections of the song, I took the dance to a certain place of interpretation, and then one of the dancers said that the phrase refers to a different topic. So, along with my personal whims, I chose to go with the original meaning because if the writer meant something specific, I won't ignore it; I will just emphasize it through movement.



Hakol Bamahol at Prague Festival, 2019

Is there something to cling to in the Israeli dances of the past, such as Hora dances?

When I started to choreograph the dance, "Simchat Ha'Ma'a lot" (Shir L'Ma'a lot) – Happiness of the Ascents") I didn't really know the song or its significance. I didn't work from the [Biblical] sources; I didn't understand the significance of taking a song or music and actually verbalizing it to understand the interpretation, and I simply created movements. Someone enlightened me that it's not just about music and that this is a song of gratitude that is sung during Friday night [Shabbat] dinner.

After he explained the meaning of the words for me, I realized that the movements I created intuitively connected to the words. I made a few changes to emphasize the connection to the text of giving thanks to G-d and to the joy that intensified through the choreography. The dancers understood that they needed to express happiness. It was only after a year or two, when the dance was already being danced, that it dawned on me that the dancers also needed to know deep down why I created the dance and the meaning of the words. When a dancer understands the source, he creates a better connection to the movements and their execution.

You say that you create the connection between the dancers and the dance by imparting an understanding of its content. In what other ways do you motivate and inspire the dancers in the troupe?

My perception today, which began with the troupes in Kiryat Ata, is that we are speaking of work in a social setting. We made sure, along with the directors of the troupe, to arrange events and holiday celebrations, prepare quizzes or to go to someone's home to dance and we became more of a family group. This became the glue that preserved the quality of the dance group.

The camaraderie is an important thing. At the same time, I tried to realize the dreams of the dancers. Everyone wants to be seen in the front row and to feel good about themselves during the dance. The choreographies are always very varied so that a dancer in the back row will always find himself in the front row as well at some point. When you allow your dancers to do something they themselves don't believe they can do, when you give them a hand, they will take it and become empowered.

Another thing is to bring the joy of dance into the lesson. Many dancers become a kind of choreographer. They seem to live within the story and dance the story. You see it when

dancers understand technique, the movements and their meaning. Executing movements is indeed enjoyable, but it doesn't have the depth and the connection to what you are doing. It's important for the dancer to understand what it means to love to dance, to move from a place of knowledge. To understand what you are doing is literally life changing for me. When this concept of how to work with the dancers took shape, it raised the level of my choreographies as well as the experience for the dancers and the spectators.

You haven't spoken about yourself and your personal characteristics in the context of motivating the dancers.

This question should be addressed to the dancers – if I have charisma or certain abilities. The troupe, "Hakol Bamachol" gave me quite a platform and respect, as well as the name. This works in both directions – the moment they gave me motivation, I gave it back to them. When I come in devoid of energy, it seeps into the dancers, and vice versa. I look forward to working with them. We moved to once-a-week meetings and this is difficult for me because I'm on hold. Sometimes a fantasy hits me and I want to check it right away to see if it works and to "drop it on the dancers". There are many sleepless nights, with dreams and thoughts. And then I come to the once-a-week rehearsal and it ends too quickly. I don't have the time to do what I had planned, and I need to wait another week.

So, I will add that you also entertain the members of the troupe with the impersonations you sometimes do, and that you also have acting talent, which, of course is reflected on stage, but also during rehearsals.



Performance of Oren and Zehava at Yaron Carmel's harkada (dance session) in Afkim, 2014

This is part of the teaching and it does the job. It doesn't just stay with me because the group is with me. At a certain point, I realized that the people who work with me are not my dancers but my colleagues. They can express and say things that are important to consider. They are the ones who dance and who see things that I don't see when I'm not dancing with them. And this relates to the question about being both a dancer and a choreographer. To dance is to see things in the here and now; to navigate from the side is to lose the understanding of how to create something correctly. When you are part of the dancers – from the inside - you see something that can't be seen from the outside. It is a joint creation with the dancers. At the end of each year, I thank all the dancers for allowing me to create for them. The fact that they are with me is not taken for granted.

Your work includes several unconventional components. Among other things, you dance and teach at Lehakat Salma – the Salma Troupe in Haifa which deals with folklore of the local Arab heritage. How do you view the integration of this dance into Israeli dance?

To dance with Arab dancers is to learn a language. I learned a new language. What is it like to dance Debka or "Sharia" dance? In Middle Eastern dance, men have a very specific role. It's clear that there is a difference that is expressed in style. I noticed, for example, that in Arabic dance the footwork begins on the heel. I include a bit of modern dance and it's not easy for them to accept someone from the outside implementing changes. Pre'el Hesbon, the choreographer and artistic director of "Lehakat Salma", has included modern components into the traditional

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style. She really respects the Arabic culture and music and gives it a place. At the same time, she incorporates more modern choreographies that are high quality and unique. I really appreciate the way she preserves the culture.

Another unique aspect of your work is teaching movement to people with physical disabilities. You introduced dance with an autistic and blind young woman, which brought people to a very emotional place.

The young woman, whose name is **Chai Hod**, already had some experience with ballroom dancing. When I met her for the first time I was a bit intimidated by the complexity of the task. At the same time, I utilized her knowledge of the waltz and of movement. I used this and then expanded on it. Later, as a school teacher, I had the opportunity to do therapeutic work with her that dealt with the term, "to resist". We had a very unique means of movement communication because we already knew how to trust each other.

What magic do you use to turn people who have no dance background into dancers and to even put them on stage?

The magic is very simple, and it is: "My belief in their ability". We are all born dancers because we all move. I believe that we can all dance; but I don't believe that all of us can dance on stage, just as I don't believe an author can be a mechanic. Movement is a form of expression. Just as with everything in life, we can practice, shape and perfect. Many of the people who have come to dance with me are not dancers. They have a certain ability that I work with and I challenge them to reach the precipice – whether in thinking, movement, understanding the space or teamwork. I try to develop their coordination, give them the vision of the stage, and the tools to cope with movement and with musical understanding.



*Meholeley Kiryat Haim in the dance "Hakol Patuach".
Choreography: Shlomo Maman*

You have to remember that we are creating folk dance. In other countries, there are types of folklore that amount to standing on stage with some singing, some acting and some dancing. If I want to do this for "the folk", I must have people who are not dancers and who will transmit this feeling of dance that they have acquired. I believe that whoever wants to dance will dance. Sometimes people don't know that they are capable of this this and they don't develop it. It's always worth striving for advancement.

What choreography do you dream of creating for Israeli dance?

As a choreographer, I have many thoughts and melodies that I've put aside, and I tell myself that when I'm ready, I'll use them. There are things that I left and then returned to. I think that in order to work with certain melodies or creations, you need to be ready to deal with that piece. It's not that I can't create a choreography for it; it's that I wait until the lyrics are clear and ready for me, that I can to connect to the general idea of the song. Or, for the melody to speak to me and give me the idea for the theme.

My job is actually to connect either to the music or the movement or to my dance partner. I'm

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always happy to create something, especially other dance choreographies that I can connect to. When I see it and it kicks me in the stomach, I am moved to tears. This is the most amazing part of my work.

Where do you see Israeli Folk Dance folklore in 30 years and where do you see yourself, then, as part of Israeli dance?

It's not easy to guess where Israeli dance will be in another 30 years, because it is constantly changing beyond recognition. Moreover, I'm not sure that in five years we'll see the same Israeli dance that we see today. Today's dance is not the dance I was raised on. The music is changing and the way we work with dancers has also changed. In the past, for example, there was an orchestral ensemble that played at rehearsals and the choreographer would collaborate with them. Today, who has the budget to do such a thing?

What differentiates us from folklore troupes abroad is that they have a tradition that goes back years and generations. Most of the songs we work with today are old songs, some of which people aren't familiar with. And even if they do, they usually don't know what the meaning of the song is. In another era, songs will sound different; probably the dances will look different, too. Israeli dance will have undergone changes, and probably, in the end, we will miss what it used to be.

In the midst of all this, I believe that my "language" will remain. Maybe some variations will be added, but in the end, it's a part of me. I was raised on it and developed it, and I will continue to fine tune it and pass it on to my students.

At the same time, it is necessary to renew so that there will also be modern things that will suit the spirit of the times. I will probably find myself within "this whole thing", either dancing, or teaching, or watching from the sidelines and enjoying the experience.... I hope we enjoy the experience.

My dream is to succeed in dancing at any age, and if not, then to continue creating. It keeps the brain busy and sometimes an idea pops up in the shower. But this is the beauty of the creative process and I love it very much. The creation of a piece fills me no less than the dancing. Today it already fills me when I see my dancers performing. It's a more meaningful experience for me than actually being on the stage with them. Now I'm enjoying the best of both worlds and I hope to continue to do so even after the age of 70+.



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