

Galit Liss on Dance

“If you can breathe, you can dance”

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Interview and Translation from Hebrew to English

Bella Rubin



Blue Zone by Galit Liss, photo: Eli Passi

Galit Liss is not a newcomer to the world of contemporary dance, yet she has followed a unique path of development in the works she has created. Several years ago she chose to work with non-professional mature women who are drawn to dance, whose non-dancer bodies need to be constantly challenged as they are in a process of ageing. Liss has choreographed many inspiring works, among them, *Gila* [joy, age, discovery in Hebrew], (Women Festival 2008), *Tzila* (2012), *557* (Curtain Up Dance Festival 2014), and together with Orit Gross as co-creator, *Go* (2017) and *Blue Zone* (2020). *Go* has been performed at international festivals both in Israel and abroad and *Blue Zone* has been performed at the Suzanne Dellal Center as well as the Israel Festival. She has developed a methodology for working with older women as practiced in the *Gila* Workshops of Movement and Performance Art in her effort to, in her own words, “create an artistic space for older women.” Liss is a member of the Israeli Choreographers Association and has given lectures and participated in artistic meetings at international conferences at Harvard University, Oxford University, the Hebrew University, the Academy of Music and Dance in Jerusalem, and Haifa University.

This interview consists of reflections emerging from a conversation between the choreographer and one of her mature non-dancers held at the Tzahala studio in Tel Aviv.

Bella: Thank you for making it possible for us to have this conversation. I was wondering if there was a particular event or personal experience in your life that led to your interest in the various shapes and textures of women's bodies growing older in a world often focused on youth and fitness? How did you begin?

Galit: I started to choreograph rather late, at about age 40, though since I was a child, for as long as I remember, my passion for dancing has been part of my identity. I later studied dance and choreographed as a student. I also worked in management at various dance organizations, but at a certain stage I began to feel that the studio was summoning me. I felt that I had to choreograph. It simply burst out of me, from a seed that had been planted inside me triggered by a life-changing event: My younger brother died of cancer. He had a brain tumor and had been battling cancer for 8 years. About a week before he lost consciousness, we went for a walk in the forest. He was having balance and coordination difficulties and I had to hold him up, when he uttered a few words that completely changed the course of my life. He said to me: “I know that everyone around me is worried about me, but this is one of the happiest times of my life.” Our lives could end at any moment, and if we don't realize the things we wish to do now, we may never get the chance again. A week later he lost consciousness. We were with him until we could sense that his soul had left his body. One week after that spiritual experience, I went into the studio and began to choreograph.

Bella: Can you tell us what are some of the questions you wished to explore in your research?

Galit: I was interested in pondering questions about the meaning of life and about how we can take responsibility over how we live out our lives. These questions have accompanied me throughout all my choreographic works in one way or another. I decided

to explore them within the context of the cycle of life after working with both professional and non-professional women dancers. What seemed to interest me the most was to work with older non-dancer women whose bodies had so much life and energy, so many stories to reveal, and so I parted from the world of professional dancers and decided to do my research with mature women non-dancers. I could explore through the lens of ageing what it means to live, what the limitations associated with ageing are, and how society views the ageing body. During the years, I found that the mature woman's body had physiological aesthetics that, in the context of stage art, had implications of personal, social and political representation that intrigued me.

Bella: How can artistic endeavors effect change in society regarding attitudes toward ageing, the roles of men and women, self-realization and development throughout life?

Galit: After interviewing many older women, I chose 5 of them to be in my first work *Gila* (age, discovery, joy in Hebrew) which would become a milestone in my work with mature women's bodies. After watching the performance, many women approached me expressing their desire to dance but there was nowhere appropriate to do so. I had not planned it, but I gave a workshop for older women to study dance, and then another, and so the *Gila* Workshops were born, and I began to conceptualize a methodology of how to work with mature women's bodies. What drove me was my passion and curiosity to research the bodies of non-professional mature women dancers and to create an artistic space for them.

Questions arose about the aesthetics of the ageing body in terms of presence, how the body is present on the stage. For me it's about the quality of the movement in terms of the parameters of attention (the plasticity of the body), intention (what we wish to convey, e.g. mood) and direction (how the body moves in space). The process is not accidental so we work with the materiality of the body by using certain tools to express what we intend, whether it be confronting society's attitudes toward ageing or exploring the various roles of men and women, or achieving self-realization through engaging in artistic endeavors and development throughout life.

Bella: How do these practices affect the women's emotional development?

Galit: These questions and practices are intimately connected to developing a feeling of well-being. For many women who engage in this process, dance has become a way of life. They gain a sense of self-realization and the ability to explore new pathways at a stage in their lives when attitudes in society tend to impose limits on their development. Some women have told me that dancing has completely changed their lives.

I'm certain that as soon as we are dealing with the body and the process of creativity, we are observing ourselves. It's a conversation between the conscious and subconscious and this dialogue enriches our creation. I'm aware of the research done on the connection between dance and a feeling of well-being. In a study presented at an international movement conference, Movementis Israel (Tel Aviv University 2019) by the clinical psychologist Daniela Aisenberg-Shafran who studies emotional and cognitive neuropsy-

chology in older adults, it was found that the Gila Workshops contribute to the mental well-being of women even while they are in the process of ageing. After a year of dancing, women who were depressed attained a higher sense of their body image. Dancing helps them feel more satisfaction in life, a sense of belonging and greater fulfillment. I can see this happening before my eyes in the studio. In a few months I see women who were afraid of crawling and rolling around on the floor, for example, learn to move onto the floor and become comfortable doing so. The powerful connection between the mind and the body in dance is something that people who are not engaged in this process cannot understand. Dance has become a way of life for the women in our workshops. It has given them and me a meaning in life.

Bella: Your previous work *Go* presented at the Suzanne Dellal Center depicted a male-oriented society intertwined with older women who have chosen to reawaken a long-suppressed aspect of themselves, their desire to dance. What was your intention?

Galit: In *Go* I wanted to create my manifesto of the ageing body after 10 years of work with mature women's bodies. I wanted to



Go by Galit Liss, photo: Orna Kalgrad

say “yes” to the body as it exists at the moment in time; “yes” to the maturing body; “yes” to the discovery and curiosity about the ageing body. And how could I accomplish this? A manifesto always has an element of protest. I was inspired by the “No Manifesto” of Yvonne Reiner who in 1965 rejected all the traditional elements of dance: the spectacle, the virtuoso element. She rejected all ideas of what was considered as dance until that point, and I would like to challenge what has always been considered to be the ideal dancer's body. Who can perform on stage? Is there an age limit for dancing? In *Go* I wanted to deal with such questions as to what extent do social perceptions manage us and to what extent do we really listen to our desires and bring them into our actual daily lives. Many of the older women in my workshops once had a childhood dream of becoming a dancer, yet this desire was suppressed due to society's prejudiced view of dance. One woman recalled that her father told her that being a dancer was like being a prostitute. I get numerous emails from women who have expressed this dream. And now these women declare they are going to dance. My manifesto is against all the stereotypical attitudes that once existed toward dance. I want to present all these previously rejected bodies onto the stage – the fat, skinny, aged bodies – to say “Here I am, as I am.”

Bella: Your recent production of *Blue Zone*, which premiered at the Israel Festival in 2020 and is currently being performed at the Suzanne Dellal Center, seems to be about women not only accepting their bodies in the process of aging but being comfortable with them, even feeling powerful in their ageing bodies despite society's prejudices. How were you able to work with mature women dancers with little or no professional background in dance to research such complex phenomena?

Galit: These women have been dancing with me for a few years and have developed a language of dance – the Gila Language. If we look at my earlier works, we can see how this methodology is reflected in my current work with the bodies of mature women. In *Blue Zone* the dancers are working as a professional dance troupe. They have acquired the ability to move, to listen to each other, to work together as a group.

Blue Zone deals with the Zionist ethos, the collective body, and Eros, the private body. We took images associated with the building of the State of Israel where there was no place for the body; the body served the state. We took those images of the body and deconstructed them into the most intimate aspects of the body, exposing them as close as possible to the spectators by choosing the square format (rather than the traditional stage) where the audience sits in close proximity to the dancers. They can almost touch each other, look into each other's eyes, as if the dancers can caress the audience as they dance. The dancers lift their dresses and expose their bodies; they cannot hide anything from view. We wished to explore the intimacy between the spectators and the private body of each woman. This arouses questions about the point of view of the spectators in terms of how they feel with their own bodies. In fact, the spectators become part of the dance itself. In *Go*, because we wanted to present a manifesto, I was more concerned with what expectations people would have about seeing a performance of older women. I decided to present the dancers in an unexpected manner. In *Blue Zone* I wanted to expose the materiality of the body. If once my body served the state, today it serves me. I am dealing with what I am allowing myself to do as a mature woman. We experienced many uncertainties which aroused questions: Who am I? What do others think of me? As soon as we are loyal to ourselves, we are less affected by how others will judge us. The generation I am working with, your generation, was so concerned about what was expected, what was acceptable, what would people say about you. I think my generation is less concerned with these issues. Maybe we are asking other kinds of questions.

Bella: The concept of *Blue Zones* is intriguing and complex and has connotations associated with certain designated places around the world where people live longer and healthier lives. What does it mean to you?

Galit: This is exactly what it means to me. In Hebrew we chose the title, *khulot*, represented by the blue dresses of the pioneering workers of the state, and in Hebrew the word *khulot* is feminine with all its connotations. In English, the title is *Blue Zones*. “Blue” connotes “Eros” and there is the blue period of Picasso's paintings. “Blue” is also associated with depressive moods connoting a state of psychological depression reminiscent of Freud's association of depression mainly with women; depres-



Poster of *Blue Zone* by Galit Liss, dancer: Nurith Limor, photo: Eli Passi

sion is a woman's illness, postpartum depression, for example. *Blue Zones* refer to those 5 places in the world where people live longer, where a great deal of respect is afforded to people of all ages, especially the elderly who have an important role in society. *Blue Zones* depict an ecological society in terms of the well-being of all and a sense of respect among the people. This title seemed to fit our work well. The choreography requires the dancers to have a high level of coordination and awareness of each other. They had to breathe together as well as move together in a deep level of concentration. Everyone in the group had to support everyone else otherwise everything would fall apart. If we compare *Go* with *Blue Zone*, in *Blue Zone* we focus on the exposure of our private bodies as compared to the idea of the collective body. In *Go* we deal with the social perception of two types of bodies, the body of the ageing woman, which, if we look at it from society's perspective, is excluded compared to the young and admired masculine body of military pilots dressed in military gear. It's a play between what we exclude and what we admire.

Bella: After one of the performances, I saw of *Blue Zone*, the audience, the dancers, you and Orit Gross were invited for a spon-

aneous conversation. What emerged from this exchange is that the dancers themselves seemed to be an integral part of the choreography. Is this true and if so, can you tell us a little about this approach?

Galit: First, Orit Gross, who was in the Gila Workshops, became the co-creator, of *Go* and *Blue Zone*. In my last two pieces I also worked with the distinguished dramaturg Nataly Zuckerman. The dancers and us always work together. In the process of creating a new work, I throw out some ideas and the dancers start to explore and relate them to their bodies; I observe what they are doing and obtain ideas from them; afterwards we ask questions about what they are doing, which tools they are using. Even the songs accompanying the dance were contributed by the dancers from the experiences they grew up with, movements born of what they had learned. The works develop from what I bring to them as well as from the feedback of the dancers themselves. The works are very much a coordinated effort where the dancers participate in the choreography.

It's not possible to work in any other way since the dancers know their own bodies and what they are capable of. When one works with professional dancers, the body is so adept that they can do almost anything. When working with maturing women non-danc-

ers, what interests me is to take what they can bring to the dance because this is what their bodies can do.

When I choose the dancers for a new work, I can already imagine how the work itself will be and what the limitations might be as well as what type of energy each body exudes. This process is similar to the way actors are cast for a movie role. Some works require free movement of the body while others require much more intensive work with memory and a much greater level of physical agility. Whenever I choreograph a new work, I choose the dancers from the Gila workshops that are most suitable for the spirit of a particular dance.

Bella: The following quote came from research published in the *Journal of Women and Aging* (Southcott and Joseph, 2019). It was stated by a participant in the study of older ballet and contemporary dancers in Australia: "If you can breathe, you can dance." How do you relate to this statement?

Galit: I completely agree with this notion. In the workshops we work with what there is, with what each woman can do, with the limitations that exist. The limitation enables the body to discover more options for movements. Sometimes it is objective, it's physical: "My back hurts, I have a problem with my knee." Sometimes the limitation is imaginary. I believe that we can dance using our imagination, no matter what the limitation, even when we are lying down on our back.

This brings me to one of my earlier works with professional dancers, *Tzila* (Woman of Valor), which tells the story of a woman who underwent a process of rehabilitation while lingering between life and death. She relayed that even when she was lying down, her body limp, she knew how to activate and direct her thoughts. Only after she went through an internal process in which she thought to herself, "My hand isn't any good, my pelvis can't move, but I have

a nose and it's in good shape, so as long as I have a nose, I can start." This is how she began her rehabilitation. During the process she established a connection between her mind and her body that seemed like magic. After she was no longer in danger of dying, she developed a symptom known as "drop foot." Her doctors said she would be able to walk again, but she would have to wear a special type of shoe. She thought to herself: "This would not work. I really love shoes. I don't want a special shoe." She thought about the situation, then concentrated, looked at her foot and began to speak to it saying, "Move!" Her big toe began to move. I consulted a brain researcher, Dr. Yossi Chalamish, who became our scientific consultant because the rehabilitation was a unique process involving the plasticity of the brain and I needed to understand this. He explained that she used a method known as the power of concentration, and in this way, she succeeded in activating a vital component in her spinal cord which enabled her to induce movement. This could only have been done since she had the physical capability to do so. This was a great revelation and today she is able to walk with the shoes she loves. The shoes were the motivation. The motivation is a good tool to work with and a similar process occurs in the workshops. The motivation to create their own solo dance allows the women to confront the physical difficulties and challenges during the creative process.

Bella: Another participant in a dance class for older women said, "...I love to improvise and find freedom in my own movement." (<https://dancemagazine.com.au/2013/12/fine-lines-meets-a-need-for-older-dance-classes/>) Do you encourage the women you work with to improvise and if so, how?

Galit: You tell me.

Bella: You give us the tools and we take it from there.

Galit: Exactly. We do plenty of improvisation but I try to give you



Gila by Galit Liss, dancers (from left to right): Ruth Ben-Israel, Hanna River, Miriam Gabriely, Thelma Dim, Miri Lerman Beer, photo: Eli Passi, graphics design: Nurit Brande

the tools for how to work. What interests me is how we can get to the level of quality we desire and how we can repeat our movements, thereby transforming our improvisations into creating a solo piece. I'm returning to the "presence" of the body: the attention, intention, and direction. I understand to what level of materiality my body can get to and then all kinds of movements are born and that is the difference. My basic tools are images, senses, imagination drawing attention to the way in which senso-motorical information is transmitted to the body. This creates control over the movement that crystallizes the quality of each specific motion. So there's improvisation, and also freedom, but there are tools available if I wish to create a solo dance. This is the difference. You work with tools to achieve a level of quality. This is different from just improvising. It's the ability to repeat what you have done and channel it toward a solo dance.

Bella: Of course, you have been asked this question before. You have chosen to work only with women though many men also experience similar attitudes toward their bodies (and changes) later in life. Why is this?

Galit: I have never found a good answer to this question.

I started with the feeling that there's something extremely comfortable being with women. As a woman I am very familiar with the feminine body; I'm intrigued by it. I think we live in a society consisting of so many stereotypes, and there's so much to do to foster feminism. I feel that it wasn't a conscious act; it was an intuitive choice to create a safe space for women, without stereotypic attitudes, to allow the freedom to research. When I create, I refine the process of creation and I don't feel that I need men to be in the dance. They are present in their absence. It could be that in the future I might create a work where I want to include men but so far I haven't found the need to.

Bella: Where are you planning to go from here in your research and your artistic agenda?

Galit: I can say now everything that has happened to me throughout these years was not planned. This has been part of the path I've taken to take responsibility for my life which brings me back to the beginning of our conversation: being aware of the moment. I

used to be very task oriented. I had to accomplish this and that, I had goals to achieve, and then my brother gave me a gift: to be present in the moment and to work with it; something internal to guide me.

After 15 years of working there's a school, there's a methodology, and I'm creating. I can say that I feel as if I am a kind of pioneer in Israel. In the beginning when I wanted to participate in all kinds of dance festivals, I was told that I couldn't because I was working with non-dancers; I couldn't get financial support because I was working with non-dancers. Today everything is open to us. We perform in all the professional festivals, including the Israel Festival. We are part of the artistic scene in which we are saying, "Here we are. Here are our bodies." We have been able to breakdown all the stereotypes about our bodies – not being able to dance, not having the typical features of dancer bodies. I feel strongly that I am working with my passion and curiosity to research ageing bodies and work with them to get to higher levels of quality. It's a never-ending process.

Bella: Thank you for sharing your views in a most stimulating and enlightening conversation.

Bella Rubin, Senior Lecturer at Tel Aviv University, has been a participant in the Gila Workshops for several years. For over thirty years, she pursued a thriving career in the teaching and research of academic reading and writing and pioneered the introduction of academic writing as a discipline in Israeli higher education supported by the Wolfson Family Charitable Trust of England. After retirement, she became involved in Holocaust Education by giving writing workshops all over the world to survivors, 2nd and 3rd generation and publishing widely in this field.

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Go by Galit Liss, photo: Orna Kallgrad