

In 'Monster,' dance troupe channels innermost feelings about the female body

The Sharon Vazanna Group premiered new work this week in Tel Aviv, will perform in Russia, Switzerland, and Australia, this year and next

By **JESSICA STEINBERG** | 6 September 2018, 8:33 am

Pregnancy isn't something every woman undergoes, but the shifts and changes of the female body are universal to women, an encounter that choreographer Sharon Vazanna channels in "Monster," the dance work that emerged following the birth of her first child.

Vazanna's eponymously named troupe, The Sharon Vazanna Group, an independent contemporary dance group, premiered "Monster" earlier this week at Tel Aviv's Tmuna Theater, and will perform on September 25 and 29 in Russia. Future dates are being planned for Switzerland and Melbourne, as well as back home in Israel next month.

The work is rooted in Vazanna's pregnancy and birth of her first child, Lavie, born 14 months ago.

As a choreographer, Vazanna, 36, has always put the body in the center of her works, and women's bodies have often played a major role in her contemporary dances.



The three dancers in Sharon Vazanna's latest work, 'Monster,' which premiered in the first week of September 2018 in Tel Aviv (Courtesy The Sharon Vazanna Group)

Yet the body-altering experience of pregnancy and childbirth served as more than just a minor wave in Vazanna's thought process and research; they were more of a trigger, she said, forcing her to consider women's bodies and societal expectations of women, and of female dancers.

"When I got pregnant two years ago, there was something happening to me that I couldn't control," said Vazanna. "At the beginning, it was really strange. You gain weight, there's something going on in your belly, there's all this newness. It was a process to accept that that's what was happening, and I couldn't control any of it."

She could not train or dance the way she was accustomed to, after decades as a dancer, but she accepted that change. Her brain was processing the shifts and considering how to channel that to her troupe, the group of six dancers that includes four women and two men.

"Monster" is made up of only three of the female dancers.



The three dancers from The Sharon Vazanna Group who will perform in 'Monster,' her latest work (Courtesy The Sharon Vazanna Group)

“I was having my story, and they weren’t going through that story, so I had to figure out how to approach it with them,” said Vazanna.

She began with improvisation sessions, in which the dancers scanned their bodies from head to toe, looking for scars or marks on their skin. It was a process that brought up different associations and stories for each person, creating a type of body map of their different personalities and narratives.

“I didn’t expect or want them to take my experience and make it their own,” she said. “That wasn’t possible. But I found that what everyone had in common was different life stories connected to the body.”

One person had been injured while performing on stage, and that was their form of losing control of their body. Another had come from the world of gymnastics and told a story about her coach and her dance teachers and having to face the eyes of the audience from the stage.

“I felt pulled to them and connected to them and their bodies,” said Vazanna. “We divided up the different emotions and sensations and started to ask how the body wants to move according to those sensations. From that, we developed the movements for the dance.”

It was a process that Vazanna often undergoes with her dancers, finding ways to collaborate with them in her choreography. It represents a transformation in the choreography process, and one that has become fairly common in the contemporary dance world.

“For me, it’s very important,” said Vazanna. “I’m not on stage, they’re on stage, it needs to come from their hearts and experience in order to move the audience. Otherwise, there’s always a gap.”

The piece was finished a few months ago, and Vazanna called it “Monster,” as a reflection of how she believes society viewed her body during pregnancy.



Sharon Vazanna, the choreographer of the eponymously named, The Sharon Vazanna Group (Courtesy Peggy Kaplan)

“That’s the honest, most personal answer,” she said. “I can also say more theoretically, that the body of a woman is always changing throughout her life, once a month and in pregnancy and nursing. It changes much more than a man’s body which is much more solid and stable. Society can’t accept that change and almost fears it.”

As for Vazanna, she has undergone her own process of understanding society’s expectations of her body as a woman and as a dancer, but it has been a lengthy process.

society,” she said. “It’s a long road.”

“I feel more mature about that, but I’ve been shaped by

“Monster” will be performed by The Sharon Vazanna Group on September 25 in St. Petersburg, Russia, and on September 29, in Yekaterinburg, Russia.

The piece will be performed in Torino, Italy, in April 2019; on May 24, in Zurich, Switzerland, and in June 2019, in Melbourne, Australia.

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