

# THE JEWISH JOURNAL

June 1, 2010

## BODYTRAFFIC Forges an International Connection

BY MELANIE REYNARD

[http://www.jewishjournal.com/summer\\_sneaks/article/bodytraffic\\_forges\\_a\\_ninternational\\_connection\\_20100601/](http://www.jewishjournal.com/summer_sneaks/article/bodytraffic_forges_a_ninternational_connection_20100601/)



*Tina Finkelman Berkett (left) and Lillian Barbeito, from a performance of "Transfigured Night." Photos by Christo Brock*

It's a Monday afternoon in an upstairs studio at the Westside Academy of Dance in Santa Monica. "One, two, three, four ..." With each count, Tina Finkelman Berkett demonstrates a series of gestures. A male dancer behind her imitates each move. Lillian Barbeito, watching from the back of the studio, also makes subtle references to the choreography with twists of her hips and feet, but her movements are restrained as she cradles a 2-month-old baby in her arms.

The two women are co-founders and co-directors of their own dance company, BODYTRAFFIC. They conceived the company as a vehicle to commission new works by contemporary choreographers and to hire other dancers to perform with.

On this day in early May, they are holding auditions for the upcoming "Made in L.A.," which will take place June 18 at the Ford Amphitheatre in Hollywood. BODYTRAFFIC will perform "Transfigured Night," the piece that first marked Berkett and Barbeito's success in garnering the support of the Jewish community. For the date, they commissioned the Israeli choreographers Guy Weizman and Roni Haver to create the work, which premiered at Sinai Temple in January 2009. The program will also showcase the L.A. Contemporary Dance Company and the a cappella group Sonos.

"We just want to dance," said Berkett, 26. "We made a dance company out of necessity." The New York native met her future husband, Bryan Berkett, while both were undergraduates at Columbia University. When he graduated from the MBA program at UCLA's Anderson School of Management, she moved to Los Angeles from her base in New York to marry him; until that time, she had been touring the world, dancing with Mikhail Baryshnikov and Aszure Barton.

"Instead of proposing to me with the ring," she said, "he basically proposed to me with a dance company. He told me he knew how much it meant to me to dance and he would support me in pursuing dance."

But Los Angeles' dance scene wasn't what Berkett was accustomed to: "I felt so under-used, under-stimulated and under-satisfied," she recalled.

Her in-laws were longtime members of Sinai Temple and, as Berkett's own relationship began to develop there, she was invited to dance at one of the monthly "Friday Night Live" Shabbat evenings for young professionals. There, her work caught the attention of Rabbi David Wolpe.

"I saw how incredibly graceful and gracious Tina was," Wolpe said. "What struck me was that it's amazing how much we use words and music, but we use almost no motion or dance to communicate our message."

In order to be happy in Los Angeles, "I had to create my own opportunity to pursue professional dance," Berkett said. She found a partner for her endeavor when she met Barbeito at a ballet class in December 2007.

Barbeito, 33, a Juilliard graduate from Santa Fe, N.M., is also an accomplished dancer, and together the two women formed BODYTRAFFIC. Both dancers come from Jewish backgrounds and decided they could distinguish their work by drawing inspiration from Jewish heritage and connections to the Jewish community.

"We heard about Guy Weizman and Roni Haver in the international dance community, and we knew that with their Israeli background they would be right to choreograph the work. We actively pursued them to come work with us," Berkett said.

"I was convinced by these two sweet girls who wanted to set up kind of a complicated venture in a city where there wasn't much happening for contemporary work," Weizman recounted.

While Berkett and Barbeito were still planning for their company, Berkett and her husband took a trip to Argentina, where they visited a synagogue presenting music banned during the Holocaust.

"It was beautiful to see that in the synagogue," Berkett said "People were talking not just about Judaism, but about Jewish values in light of art."

She returned to Los Angeles inspired, and in September 2008, Berkett approached Wolpe with a proposal: She and Barbeito would create an evening of modern dance for the synagogue set to music that had been banned during the Holocaust. The result was that Wolpe helped raise \$50,000, which would support the performance by six dancers as well as Weizman's travel and choreography expenses.

Wolpe put Berkett in contact with E. Randol Schoenberg, whose grandfather, the famous ex-patriate composer Arnold Schoenberg, wrote the string sextet "Transfigured Night," which was banned by the Nazis.

"Serendipitously, Guy Weizman had always wanted to make a piece to that music," Berkett said. Schoenberg, an L.A. attorney and philanthropist, underwrote the funding for the musicians, and Weizman and Haver based the concept on "The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man," by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. The work had its premiere in Sinai Temple's social hall, which was transformed for the occasion into a black-box theater.

"Over 600 people came. People were even standing in the back and complaining they couldn't see. ... We were like, 'Yesss!' " Berkett remembered, grinning.

Back in the Santa Monica studio, Berkett directs Greg, the auditioning male dancer: He flings himself over a crouched Berkett, then thrusts out his legs and arms while violently tossing his head.

"That's it," she encourages him. "It's not about the movement, really. It's the silence after, the stillness."

"You have a tension up your spine, through your back," Barbeito tells him. "Flex all your muscles, and then release."

The piece they are re-creating is both literal and symbolic. According to Berkett, the jarring breaks in the dancers' motion are meant to denote "those arrested moments" that Jews experienced in hiding during the Holocaust. However, in a symbolic sense, Berkett said, this is a piece about the "fear of stillness" that people have until they realize that what is sacred is "not just what you do during the week, but the time you take to rest."

Berkett and Barbeito chose to remount "Transfigured Night" for the Ford Amphitheatre because it is their most substantial work to date and because it had been staged only that one time at Sinai Temple. For the Ford engagement, it will be shortened slightly, and they will work on using the music "as more of a driving force," a departure from their original approach, Berkett said.

Since the first performance, BODYTRAFFIC has performed elsewhere in Los Angeles, including at the Wadsworth Theatre, where they presented the story of Jacob and Rachel in separate parts by three Jewish women choreographers. Their most recent show was a full evening of works by Los Angeles-based choreographer Barak Marshall, at the Saban Theatre before an audience of 1,800, which Berkett described as "eating by the spoonful" Marshall's dance theater.

"Barak Marshall is one of very few artists of that caliber, and he lives in L.A. He's committed to us, because we're committed to a quality standard comparable to the dancers he's found in Israel," Berkett said of the choreographer who has worked for the renowned Batsheva Dance Company in Israel

Now, when asked how she feels about Los Angeles, Berkett says without hesitation, "I love L.A." And while other dancers may have the goal of international tours, Berkett has her sights set on developing her company's presence and repertory in her new hometown.

"We chose [the name] BODYTRAFFIC because we wanted something that represented L.A. culture. It's important to us that it's not just our dance company, but a company for Angelenos," Berkett explained in an e-mail. "One of the most obvious things about L.A. is the traffic. Traffic represents both movement and tension-filled stops."

After the Ford show, the company will present a new program by Marshall. "He's never made a full-length work here — only in Israel — even though he is based in Los Angeles."

"What they are really doing for the dance world is transformational," Marshall said of BODYTRAFFIC. "Their eyes are toward the center of dance right now, which is, unfortunately, Europe, where choreographers are investigating territories that have not been touched on in the United States, such as incorporating theater into dance, and not using technique for structure, but inventing more forms. What Lillian and Tina are doing is using the European and Israeli model and bringing the vision here, with less funding."

In preparation for the Ford engagement, Berkett and Barbeito are preparing more than 300 handwritten invitations to send to the Sinai Temple community. But the two women are emphatic that their appeal is not simply that they represent Jewish heritage. "We hope people will come back for good dancers and interesting dancing, not because we have a good marketing pitch," Berkett explained.

*Starting June 7 and continuing through their rehearsal period, as part of the company's commitment to the local dance community, BODYTRAFFIC's morning warm-up classes will be open to all advanced/professional dancers, free of charge. For more information, e-mail [bodytraffic@gmail.com](mailto:bodytraffic@gmail.com) or visit [bodytraffic.com](http://bodytraffic.com). For tickets to the June 18 performance of "Made in L.A." at the Ford Amphitheatre, visit [fordtheatres.org](http://fordtheatres.org) or call (323) 461-3673.*

© Copyright 2010 Tribe Media Corp.

All rights reserved. JewishJournal.com is hosted by [Nexcess.net](http://Nexcess.net). Homepage design by [Koret Communications](#).

Widgets by [Mijits](#). Site construction by [Hop Studios](#).