***Disappearing Acts*/Flexer & Sandiland**

Since 2005 my works in different ways have touched on notions of disappearance, these include *Doing, Done & Undone* (2007/8), *The Living Room* (2010/12) and *Weightless* (2014). *Disappearing Acts* (2016) placed disappearance at the centre, as its key thematic and choreographic concern. The work references disappearance textually and choreographically throughout, often humorously or knowingly. *Disappearing Acts* was co-created with digital artist Nic Sandiland and myself as choreographer together with company members and collaborators.[[1]](#footnote-1) The work premiered at JW3, London, in May 2016. It toured extensively throughout 2016 in the UK, and Norway including a section of the work taught to and performed by students in Israel in June 2016[[2]](#footnote-2).

*Disappearing Acts* is interdisciplinary in its approach encompassing extensive use of text and bespoke light and sound devices or props, yet generically it is primarily read as a dance work. As such it offers a particular viewpoint on notions of absence and presence, disappearance and displacement (Gilpin 1996). As inferred from the title *Disappearing Acts* employs disappearance as a performative strategy, pointing to the construction of performance and in this way critiquing and dialoguing with performance theory’s discourses of presence, re/presentation, appearance and disappearance (Phelan 1993, Lepecki 2004, 2006, Kear 2008, Durkee 2008). Beyond the theoretical dimension the work follows other thematic threads encompassing a contemplation of loss, death and darkness as felt bodily experience. It also hints at dark political times, pointing to a parallel between theatrical performance strategies and the performative aspect of acts of terror.

*Disappearing Acts* is performed in close proximity to the audience seated in a circle of swiveling chairs. The dancers mainly perform inside the central circle with some sections performed outside the audience’s circle of chairs or on the edge of the circle. Throughout the work the dancers pass through the audience to enter and exit the space creating a permeable or shifting boundary between the audience and the performers. The work includes dense, intricate and fast paced ensemble choreographic sections as well as more intimate duets which are interspersed with textual sections written by

Wendy Houstoun as well as sections co-devised with dramaturge Pete Phillips and the company delivered and constructed in four distinct modes[[3]](#footnote-3).

*Disappearing Acts* also incorporates bespoke lighting and sound created by Sandiland. The lighting and sound devises create localized and surround sound and light and are frequently moved by the performers and placed in close proximity to the audience. As props they offer particular images such as amber roadside beacons associated with nighttime and hazard warning, or, lights worn on the performers heads reminiscent of deep-sea anglerfish. Alongside other lights and props such as the mobile phone and a variety of ‘empty’ shoes these amplify a sense of absence.

As can already be gleaned from the writing the work is focused in its intention yet widely open to interpretation, it acts as a kind of meditation on a set of ideas rather than attempting to offer a strict or limited set of meanings. Similarly, it could be said the writing here ‘suffers’ from an overabundance of references, drawing on a breadth of sources and ideas in a way, which is symptomatic of the live work. The writing attempts to trace and negotiate the overlapping themes, trajectories, positions and subjectivities drawn or assembled together in *Disappearing Acts.* These include my autobiographical position, as an Israeli-British female choreographer, an immigrant yet living most of my adult life in the UK. The work and writing address the complex and at times conflicting positions and the shifting situatedness of being both Israeli, diaspora Jew and British artist, at once both here and there, occupying both or concurrently absent (Hall 1995 cited in Mock 2009). The autobiographic position of me as choreographer is also negotiated with the collaborators and importantly the bodies, agency and live presence of the dancers whose artistic voice is prominent in and constitutes the work.

This paper is divided in to two sections. The first and more substantial section attempts to tackle the theoretical notions or discourses tied to disappearance, namely presence and absence or performance as a ‘rehearsal for absence’, appearance and disappearance and in/visibility as well as discussions around representation and the material presence of the body in the context of dance performance. The writing traces the ways in which some of these ideas manifest or are interrogated in *Disappearing Acts*, and how the work may untangle or even demonstrate some of these philosophical threads rather than necessarily offering concrete theoretical conclusions. The second part addresses the political dimension of the work as might be read by audiences less familiar or interested in the nuances of the moving body.

**Part 1:**

**Absence**

Heidi Gilpin sees disappearance and displacement not as a lack but rather, as useful ‘strategies for composition and interpretation of contemporary performance’ (Gilpin 1996:106). She argues that the loss of presence that lies at the core of live performance is particularly felt in dance ‘where often only the presence (and not the verbal language, for example) of bodies on stage is apparent one moment, vanished the next.’ (Gilpin 1996:114). Gilpin discusses the impossibility of perceiving or capturing movement, movement as displacement and performance as the ‘embodiment of absence’ (Gilpin 1996: 106) in a way that resonates with the choreographic strategies I employ in *Disappearing Acts* (and past works). She argues that disappearance entails: ‘both movement and the cessation of movement, to pass from sight, and to cease to be. It also registers a lack of representationality’ (Gilpin 1996:114).

In common with Gilpin (1996), Andre Lepecki (2004) argues that ‘movement is both sign and symptom that all presence is haunted by disappearance and absence’. Gilpin and Lepecki’s discourse is grounded in performance theorist Peggy Phelan’s (1993) writing in which she argues (as is well noted) that ‘Without a copy, live performance plunges into visibility- in a manically charged present- and disappears into memory into the realm of invisibility and the unconscious’ (Phelan 1993:148). Lepecki sees Phelan’s ‘manically charged present’ as a useful tool in destabilising an ontology of the ‘body’ and ‘presence’: ‘This body, visceral matter as well as sociopolitical agent…manifests its agency through the many ways it eventually smuggles its materiality into a charged presence that defies subjection.’ (Lepecki 2004:6).

As will be seen the defiance of subjecation or objectification manifests itself in a number of ways in *Disappearing Acts*. One such way is through the ironic use of corporeal absence or lack of presence or in Gilpin’s terms ‘lack of representationality’ (Gilpin 1996:114). Both *Disappearing Acts* and my previous production *Weightless* (2014) in a very concrete way make reference to or include a seemingly absent choreographer, the choreographer’s presence substituted by a disembodied voice. In *Weightless* a large, round and lit speaker hangs from the rig amplifying the voice of ‘the absent choreographer’ in the textual prologue and epilogue of the work[[4]](#footnote-4). *Disappearing Acts* similarly injects the voice of the absent choreographer. Here too the ‘prologue’ and ‘epilogue’ are only audibly heard (rather than delivered) via a mobile phone placed in a tiny spotlight at the centre of the space. The choreographer is somewhat authoritative:

Can I say how good it is to see you?

May I say how lovely you are looking tonight?

And can I add what a great privilege it is to be here-? at this time- in this space- on this date- wearing these clothes- standing in this position- holding this script- saying these words- pausing like this now and then- taking a moment…

And can I say- what a big pleasure it is – to have this opportunity- this once in a lifetime chance to be so close to you all- so close and yet so far- Can I say that?

It could be argued that the use of a disembodied voice in both works is itself a strategy that ‘defies subjection‘ (Lepecki 2004:6). It places absence at the heart of the works as much as pointing towards the construction of performance. The performative instructions embedded in the text such as ‘holding this script-saying these words- pausing like this’ remind us we are witnessing a pre-scripted performance. It reveals the author or director’s hand at work, and the work itself as symbolic pre-rehearsed ‘organised content’ (Pontremoli 2010:5**).** In this way it also underlines the construction of representation as distinct to the corporeal presence of the dancers bodies. It highlights the nexus of choreographer/performers/audience, the way in which the work is constructed and co-authored by the choreographer and the performers and comes to be in the encounter with an audience[[5]](#footnote-5).

The mocking of the choreographer’s position, as a self-important authority underscores the performative aspect of representation. It is also present in the epilogue to *Disappearing Acts* in which I deliver an endless list of well known quotes, albeit altered, as if refusing to ‘leave’ and end the work, it begins with the statement ‘I am going to start finishing off tonight with the well known words we know so well- used by everyone- who wants to be unique and individual….’ Immediately undercutting the authority of the choreographer. The refusal to end is ironically accentuated with lines such as: ‘A long goodbye never did anyone any harm, a woman and her microphone are soon parted’. The text eventually fades to silence (and black out). ‘The long goodbye’ satirizes disappearance as well as serving to close the show.

As discussed above the props used in the work equally convey absence of physical presence, in particular the phone, ‘empty’ ordinary shoes and a set of robotic Michael Jackson ‘moon walking’ shoes. While these are often used in a humorous way the contrast between the highly charged dancing and felt presence of the dancers in close proximity and the ‘empty’ props remind us of this absent presence. This is particularly apparent in performer Lyndsey McConville’s two text sections which we named ‘the shipping forecast’ and ‘questions’. These are delivered on a mic seated at a desk outside the audience circle and have more reflective quality. In the ‘shipping forecast’[[6]](#footnote-6), at the start of the show, the audience comes in and sees pairs of shoes placed in a diagonal line next to and lit by the amber beacons, the shoes ‘standing in’ for live bodies. The ‘questions’[[7]](#footnote-7) section, is performed in the dark with only the amber lights flashing on an off, briefly lighting the dancers in an almost spectral way highlighting a sense of void. The dancers move in space between the light flashes, the affect of which is visually disturbing as they can not be visually fixed by the audience who loses their spatial reference points (Golańska 2016:12). The amber beacons in this section are occasionally placed in a way that is reminiscent of a crime scene outlining the space of a dead body.

Grounded in new materialism Dorota Golańska, in her discussion of ‘dark tourism’ and specifically ‘dark installations’, argues that ‘ “dark installations” cannot be simply seen as objects coded with predetermined memorial meanings. Rather, their memorial nature is a matter of material-semiotic event. Their operations can serve as illustrative instances of how matter and meaning are entangled and how they co-produce each other.‘ (Golańska 2016:13). Similarly, Vivan Patraka in her discussion of performing presence and absence in U.S Holocaust museums suggests that ‘intimate material objects document and mark “goness” and the loss instead of simply substituting for them through representation’ (Patraka 1996:99). In her description of the US Holocaust Museum, D.C’s exhibit of a roomful of a pile of shoes collected by the Nazis, she states ‘in their very materiality the shoes mark presence as much as absence…the shoes, as objects made to perform, do “not reproduce” what is lost but rather help us to restage and restate the effort to remember what is lost” (Phelan cited in Patraka 1996:103). Gilpin more positively suggests that ‘presence can only be conveyed by absence,…the performance of emptiness makes a perception of existence possible (Gilpin 1996:120).

Gilpin, Golańska and Patraka argue for the materiality, both of the object and its encounter, the residue of loss and absence as felt experience for the viewer. Patraka suggests this performative strategy not only highlights disappearance but also, in its intimacy, creates ‘a site for community of witness; as strangers we are confronted with the presence of others…we experience multiple perspectives, the sense that no single perspective can absorb this information’ (Patraka 1996:101). It is important to note that *Disappearing Acts* is not thematically concerned with the Holocaust, however it does more abstractly confront a sense of loss and memory both personal and collective with particular reference to Israel, as well as themes of death, darkness and dark political times. It too calls for the presence of the viewer as witness in its intimate proximal staging in which the audience is on view, and as will be seen, in this way questions notions of belonging, togetherness and community.

**Performing absence, displacement, appearance and disappearance**

The performance of absence, appearance and disappearance is felt throughout *Disappearing Acts* through the movement language and its choreographic construction as well as use of text. Throughout the work the dancers create spaces that are suggestive of an absence of ‘an other’, and the duets and groupings which form the main choreographic bulk of the work were created with this choreographic instruction in mind. The sense of absent body or, as often referred to in choreographic terms ‘negative space’, is particularly noted in a series of duets we named ‘street light duets’ towards the early part of the show. Each duet concludes with one dancer lying down and another standing, in which, following a short blackout, the standing dancer is replaced by another, as a kind of disappearing act (echoing a series of ‘disappearing-magic acts’ presented and delivered by performer Nick Keegan throughout the show). A key ensemble section we named the ‘folk dance’ also uses a similar strategy, here ‘negative space’ duets are interspersed with group sections, where often one of the dancers, is initially held or touched by the group only to slip away leaving an empty space.

Another group section, ‘the lighthouse’, performed in a circle of blue-lit spotlights forming a circle outside the audience uses a similar movement vocabulary, here again the dancers disappear in blackout only to appear elsewhere, in a different spot. Alongside the constant play with appearance and disappearance, ‘now you see me, now you don’t’ disappearance as displacement or as trace is implicit in the movement vocabulary with its emphasis on sequential movement rather than shape or fixity. This active play between appearance and disappearance, the displacement and dislocation of bodies in space echoes Gilpin’s discussion: ‘In the act of movement, of “putting something in another place” there is the displacement of a body. In the act of interpreting movement, then, there is the displacement of a displacement.’ (Gilpin 1996:108). Gilpin sees displacement and disappearance and their inherent instability as a mode of reading dance and as an enabling choreographic tool, ‘disappearance can be witnessed only in the moment of its passing, at the threshold between presence and absence’ (Gilpin 1996:108) which movement makes possible.

**Rehearsing absence**

The notions of disappearance, trace, loss and death and are summarized, reiterated and satirized in a section which we named ‘the quiz show’. Keegan poses a series of questions to performers Aya Kobayashi and McConville, who, seated on the swiveling chairs as part of the audience, attempt to answer in movement, as contestants in an absurd game show. Some of Keegan’s questions include:

Can you name all the words taken out of the oxford dictionary this year?

What is the missing word from the following sentences.

1. Into a thin air
2. Off the face of the earth
3. In a puff of smoke”

And later…

When something was standing and suddenly lies prone we think of it as what?

When somebody who was moving suddenly becomes still we begin to wonder if it is what?

When a person who was standing in front of you is no longer in the same room we think of that person as what?

As the quiz show continues Keegan’s speech seems to trail off, he does not complete the questions. Equally the dancers gestural movement is only minimally traced or ‘marked’ rather than fully executed. This trailing off is also notable in the final ensemble movement section of the work where the dancers repeat images we have seen throughout but in an almost sketched way, tracing or re-tracing their steps but not fully, gliding across the floor as if in the process of fading. This section is followed by the epilogue, which also fades away, the work repeatedly enacting its own disappearance.

**‘Showciology’ and the in/visible**

In contrast to the fading or tracing quality, in other sections of *Disappearing Acts* and particularly in the ‘folk dance’ the dancers physically manipulate one another. This highlights a degree of violence, which is amplified through repeated images of ‘dead bodies’, dancers lying on the ground (in the ‘folk dance’, ‘street light duets’ and McConville’s ’shipping forecast’ and ‘questions’ described above). Sitting in the circle, the audience is visually and spatially framed within the action, the audience is constantly seen by other members of the audience, engaged in the act of viewing. The ethical dimension of witnessing the action (and the reiteration of death), is further underscored by performers looking in on the action as ‘on-stage witnesses’[[8]](#footnote-8). This reminds us of Patraka’s notion of ‘a community of witness’ (Patraka 1996:101).

The ‘performance’ of death or violence can be seen in Phelan and Lepecki’s formulations as a rehearsal towards absence: ‘the way in which the body constantly represents itself as always being at the verge of self-dissipation (this persistence of re/presentation being so many rehearsals for absence, for death)’ (Lepecki 2004:6). However, in the work death is treated as matter of fact. Rather than sentimentalised, demanding empathy, or conversely using death as a shock tactic, the dancers lie down, get up and lie down again, or are compliant in their manipulation, reiterating it as a kind of game or rehearsal. This could be aligned with Gilpin (1996), who sees repetition as a choreographic strategy that foregrounds disappearance and its relation to memory[[9]](#footnote-9). Or as aligned with Alan Read’s assault on performance theory’s discourses of death and loss in which he calls for a theatre of life, recognising the fact that after all, the death in theatre is only ‘make- believe’ (Read 2008:67).

Read argues for appearance or show making through his term ‘Showciology’ (Read 2008:22). My interpretation of his ‘theatre of appearance’, is a theatre that admits to artifice, in the sense of revealing its modes of performance making, or what I often refer to as ‘the act of performance’. Appropriated to my works, this describes the way in which the works declare their appearance through their direct address of the audience and at the same time are conscious of their artifice. Some examples in *Disappearing Acts* include the performance instructions included in the prologue, the way in which performers Luke Birch and Keegan position Kobayashi’s body in the ‘shipping forecast’, just so, presented as a body performing a ‘dead body’.

This approach is particularly demonstrated in the series of ‘disappearing acts’ presented by Keegan as a magician or master of ceremonies (who also delivers the ‘quiz show’ as a 1970s game show host). These are ironically delivered, directly addressing the audience commenting, and placing an emphasis on the performativity of the act rather than the actual ‘disappearance’ or magic. There are supposedly five acts, although only four are announced as one has supposedly disappeared. The theatricality of the acts is accentuated with drum rolls, costume and props. Three acts simply point to appearance and disappearance, Sandiland and myself quickly slide to the floor from our chairs in the blackout assuming a ‘dead body’ position following a lengthy drum roll at the start of the show, McConville seemingly disappears behind a small golden curtain held by Birch as Keegan’s ‘sidekick’, and Michael Jackson’s empty shoes make an appearance as they moonwalk by themselves across the space. These acts are purposefully ropey, overdramatic and silly highlighting their own performance.

The final act, is introduced by Keegan as follows:

I’m going to attempt something that might make you feel a little bit strange, something that might undermine the very reason your are here, Disappearing Acts number Five: the audience disappears.

McConville as Keegan’s sidekick here supports the act activating a smoke machine. Yet when Minaai and Birch begin to move together with eyes closed the act presented is surprisingly delicate and touching. In trying to find each other in the space the duet references notions of visibility and in/visibility ‘Interior and exterior, visible and invisible are two modes in which Being appears, and they reveal themselves with even greater clarity precisely in the dynamics of corporeity’ (Pontremoli 2010:). This can also be seen as a return to Lepecki’s ‘defiance of subjection’ (Lepecki 2004:6).

For Peggy Phelan (1993) performance operates as a site of both representation and its failure, and as a site for intimating the ‘unsaid’ or ‘unseen’. I appropriate, her notion of what evades representation to refer to the way in which dance or embodiment offer both the visible and invisible, simultaneously interior and exterior, subjective experience and its objectification. This also echoes dance theorist Ann Cooper-Albright’s (1997**)** writing on the tension between dancing as an internal somatic experience and the inevitable fact of being seen (within performance). In closing their eyes, and in Keegan’s proclamation of ‘the audience disappears’ there is recognition of this internal bodily experience, one which the audience might corporeally sense, but nevertheless can never ‘see’.

The defiance of being on view in this duet, is coupled by the choreographic insistence on speed and overabundance of movement material or visual information. As touched on at the start of this paper, the episodic nature of my works juxtaposing movement and textual sections alongside the use of digital technology avoids narrative or dramatic development and reject any sense of totalized meanings instead highlighting an ambivalence (which, as will be discussed, also carries a political dimension). On the one hand, the works commit to an ‘authenticity’ of the body (as is felt in Birch and Minaai’s disappearing act duet) as well as dancers’ representation, whilst at the same time placing doubt at the heart of that representation. The choreography is strewn with moments in which all five dancers move at great speed, at the same time, making it impossible for the viewer to capture the entirety of the choreography. As suggested by Gilpin ‘There is always an excess in vision over and beyond what the subject can master in sight.’ (Gilpin1996:108). This overabundance intentionally exhausts the viewer, making the dance in Yvonne Rainer’s words ‘difficult to see’ (Lambert- Beatty 2008:1)[[10]](#footnote-10).

Visibility is further complicated through the ‘in the round’ setting. The work is full of what choreographer Rosemary Butcher termed as ‘visual holes’[[11]](#footnote-11) (Butcher, Pollard & Melrose 2005:69) the things the audience can not quite see due to speed or because of where they might be sitting in the circle. ‘Visual holes’ can be understood as a form of in/visibility resonating with Phelan’s notions of the ‘unseen’. They are coupled with the dancers gestural and facial expressions throughout the work, commenting on their own or others representation and performance as well as the work itself.

**Re/presentation**

For me these choreographic tactics, and the dancers’ relationship to the material acts as another form of defiance or ambivalence towards representation. It resonates with Adrian Kear’s discussion on appearance in which he states (in relation to Phil Collins work ‘They Shoot Horses’ (2004)) ‘the work presents an *excess* of presence over the regime of representation’ (Kear 2008:22). The overabundance of movement happening concurrently in different parts of the stage, the use of speed, ‘visual holes’ and commentary prevents the viewer from framing or ‘fixing’ the dancers within representation. This highlights the tension between representation and the material presence or ‘present-ness’ of dancing bodies as already suggested by Lepecki.

Grounded in phenomenology Alessandro Pontremoli discusses the way in which dance concurrently presents and represents the body. ‘Presenting a body invariably implies reference to the concrete life of the performer, who acts in front of the spectators trying to affect their experience. The body is that ineliminable residue which generates a material form of the expression… perceived by the spectators as somebody's active experience and not as a mere passive object to be observed.’ This, as discussed above is particularly felt in Minaai and Birch’s disappearing act duet in which the dancers’ are observed in their sensuous engagement with one another, trying to find each other and complete the duet with their eyes closed. For Pontremolli, in common with Golańska (2016), the encounter between audience member and performer is an encounter experienced by ‘two incarnations’ (Potremolli 2010: 1)**,** ‘this encounter actually happens on the material plane—a material (or a body) encounters other material (or another body) with which it forms a creative and aesthetic assemblage’ (Golańska 2016:6). Yet, at the same time, ‘the dancing body is a body provided with form: for the spectator watching it, it is a powerful symbol-making machine, even before being perceived as a mechanic and biological object. Each action, each gesture, each sequence of movements is spontaneously interpreted by the spectator as a programme within a continuum of organized content’ (Pontremoli 2010:5).

The juxtaposition or overlapping of presence and re/presentation is accentuated and palpably felt in *Disappearing Acts* through the proximity to the dancers, the permeability of the boundaries of the space and the dancers skin, their charged and sensuous dancing and their direct gaze and address of the audience. It is also felt through the ways in which dancers interpret, comment and reflect on the movement or text and on the work itself as a feature of their performance, dialoguing with representation including its socio-political dimensions. What *Disappearing Acts* then attempts to do is to both ‘affect’ the audience as much as conceptualize the very act of performance and its disappearance. The aim is that disappearance is both viscerally and emotionally felt as much as intellectually understood and interrogated by the viewer. When the dancers touch one another, they are both touching and being touched, at the same time, they also reflect on the meaning of touch as both physical material and conceptual, aesthetic or even political framework of ideas. Hence a sense of hesitation is felt in the ‘folk dance’, as the dancers question their relationship to the material- to Israeli Folk dance? To the sense of togetherness it might conspire as is touched on in the next section.

**Part 2:**

**Political Threads**

*Disappearing Acts* although set in a circle intimates a permeable sense of boundary. The dancers move through the space and the audience, inside and outside the performance space. The audience too is afforded a degree of freedom in what they chose to look at using the swiveling chairs. Visually and audibly, the space appears and disappears, shrinks and expands through the use of blackouts, the movable amber beacons or the small spotlights around the mobile phone and Michael Jackson’s empty shoes. The effect is one of shifting boundaries and visual discontinuity. This disrupts a comfortable viewing, initially threatening; it surprises and amuses the audience. Metaphorically it also enacts an in-between position of visible/invisible, internal/external, subject/object. This could also be aligned with a diasporic condition of negotiation, ‘the diasporic subject is always already here and there’ (Pile and Thrift cited in Mock 2009:75).

Equally this sense of shifting boundary can be read in the context of Israeli contemporary dance. Gaby Aldor (2003) charting the historical development of Israeli contemporary dance notes the shift from early Israeli modern dance ‘desire to conquer space or to celebrate boundless open space’ (Aldor 2003:85) to the ways in which works from of the late 1990s onwards became withheld and contained in the body[[12]](#footnote-12). She suggests that ‘Not all contemporary Israeli dance is overtly political. Instead, political commentary  is read through bodies that register the realities of daily life in Israel, that have become sites of resistance. A country without real borders eventually finds this borderlessness reflected in other areas of life’ (Aldor 2003:84). Aldor cites a number of key Israeli choreographers who have, since the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin, interrogated notions of home, borders, and violence including among others Noa Dar, Ronit Ziv, Yasmin Goder and Ohad Naharin. Although *Disappearing Acts* is aesthetically distinct and can be more easily aligned with British contemporary dance particularly in terms of the movement language, extensive use of contact work and wry humour, it nonetheless echoes some of the themes tackled by these Israeli choreographers.

Roberta Mock grounded in Doreen Massey’s writing reminds us that ‘Places are not fixed areas on a map but integrations of space and time’ and that ‘one of the reasons it is impossible to go “back” home is because it will have moved on from where we left it’ (Mock 2009:68). In her writing on performance and diasporic cultural memory she draws connections between autobiography, body and place and notes the ways in which ‘Jewshiness’ was ‘rarely named’ but simply subsumed into the work of feminist Jewish artists of the 1970s (in California).

*Disappearing Acts* only directly references Israel twice, once through the ‘folk dance’ and once in a section we named the ‘story line’ in which the dancers interweave their stories on disappearance and darkness. As can be traced through the writing here, the work and in particular the text sections discuss disappearance, in a much wider, ‘abstract’ or even ‘global’ sense including McConville ‘questions’ section which (as is discussed next) addresses the performativity of terror attacks. Yet the work is haunted by this spectral reading. It is, at least in part, framed and therefore read by audiences through its creation by a Jewish, Israeli, British choreographer.

The ‘questions’, is probably the most overtpolitical section in the work. It is written by Houstoun yet is read in a particular light in the context of a work made by an Israeli choreographer. The text operates not as a way of re-living or representing traumatic events or acts of terror. Rather, the text highlights the ‘performance’ of terror, it makes a correlation between this performance in particular its ‘disappearing acts’ and the ways in which terror itself is enacted, using the mechanisms of performance, especially in the media and social media. A selection of the questions McConville asks include:

Where in the body is the credit card?

How many hands does it take to make light work?

What is the rhythm of a fanatic?

What snack is favoured by the performers of Isis?

Which choreographer created the chaos in the London Riots?

What is the step pattern of fundamentalism?

What floor pattern was used in the Royal Wedding?

What gesture was used in Abu Graib?

Can you dance all the religions of the world?

Which body part houses belief?

Who did the set design for destruction of Baghdad?

Did the actors of Ukip train at a college or a conservatoire?

Have you ever performed in a crime?

Do you believe in the power of crossed legs?

Concluding with:

Where are you now?

Can you see me?

Does my heart look big in this?

Rather then attempting to answer the questions, the dancers and I move the amber beacons, our faces and bodies flickering in the light creating the visual dislocation and displacement described earlier. The section ends with us bringing the lights together, sitting round an imaginary fire place. We leave the questions hanging, rather than trying to resolve them. Isolated by the flickering lights, both the audience and the performers reflect on their position and relation to the text, any sense of ‘togetherness’ becomes impossible in the dark and put into question by the words.

The ‘folk dance’ precedes the ‘questions’ and weaves in references to the ‘Hora’, the Israeli circle folk dance[[13]](#footnote-13). The folk steps (alongside other step patterns in the work) offer one of the few unison dance moments in *Disappearing Acts*. These are interrupted by the intensely physical, duets, trios and group moments where the dancers touch, lift and manipulate one another, assisting and blocking as well as creating ‘negative spaces’ to slip from or slot into. The ‘folk dance’ has a sense of urgency following the ‘storyline’ section, the music and the ‘folk steps’ which appear and disappear are oppressive. For me they serve as a metaphor for or simply a lament of the disappearance of particular kind of Israeli identity, now co-opted by an Israeli right wing. This echoes Aldor’s description of works by Israeli choreographers and in particular her description of Ronit Ziv's work ‘Botz’ (2002) as ‘metaphorically a longing for the very country we live in’ (Aldor 2003:86).

Mock discussed Diana Taylor’s notion of cultural memory as ‘repertoire’, that which ‘enacts embodied memory: performances, gestures, orality, movement, dancing, singing- in short, all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, nonreproducible knowledge’ (Taylor cited in Mock 2009:69). Mock discusses the ways in which ‘repertoire’ allows for individual agency and is transmitted through materiality and place (being there). This question of cultural memory becomes apparent in the different performances of *Disappearing Acts* and in works by other artists which make reference to the ‘Hora’.

Brian Lobel in his work *Ruach* (2012) confesses ignorance to the Zionist roots of Israeli Folk dance (Lobel 2014). He seemingly choses to celebrate affirmation with his audience through the Hora, whilst at the same time pointing to the problematics of affirmation and identity. He justifies his position, to a degree, by confessing to being an American diaspora Jew, quickly dismissing any Zionist culpability. Similarly I would argue that Hadar Ahuvia’s deconstructed folk dance in *Everything You Have is Yours?*(2018) interrogates and critics Israeli folk dance from an American diasporic position, Ahuvia having emigrated to the US at a young age (Burke 2018). Yet such as a position is not afforded to me as a first generation immigrant, as an Israeli. Thus, while the audience dance the Hora joyously and somewhat unconsciously in Lobel’s *Ruach*, the dancers in my work dance it with suspicion or even reluctance.

It is interesting to note that in Israel, the fluidity or familiarity of the Hora reference was clearly apparent when performed by the Israeli students in Tel-Aviv. For the students, the private and at times aggressive ‘contemporary dance’ material as well as the folk steps were familiar in their conception of the dancing body as described by Aldor (2003). As suggested by Mock the students could more easily embody the Hora as cultural memory in the sense of ‘repertoire’. Having ‘been there’ the students have an embodied knowledge of the movement, its origin, locality and meaning. The professional dancers who have not, can reproduced the Hora steps but not its sentiment, they are by no means lacking in agency but theirs is infused with sense of hesitation, questioning belonging and affirmation in a way distinct to Lobel’s celebratory tone.

The ‘folk dance’ and the story which concerns Israel in the ‘story line’ (where the dancers relay their stories) subtly critic or reflect on the recent silencing attempts both of the arts and of various NGOs by a right wing Israeli government. The story discusses a potential terror incident I experienced on a bus journey to Jerusalem. A young female soldier raised her concern about a male soldier who was on the bus, as he spoke Arabic. As I was watching the exchange I felt I needed to comment and stand up for the male soldier as I had an inkling he was a Druze, an Arabic speaking religious minority who serve in the Israeli army. Yet as the ‘tourist’, as an outsider, someone who does not live in Israel and who has not experienced the threat of terrorist attacks on a daily basis I did not intervene. While the story is mostly relayed by McConville I conclude the story with the line: ‘In Hebrew when I say I’m disappearing it also means I’m shutting up’ or more poetically I’m dumfounded, ‘ani neelemt’[[14]](#footnote-14). This incident for me, brought into sharp relief my very particular and delicate situation as a hybrid subject (Bhabha 1994/2007, Hall 1997), the ways in which on the cusp of both cultures, in being here and there, belonging to both but not quite to either articulating your position or making a stand becomes utterly complex. Hence *Disappearing Acts* as is stated in the beginning of this paper negotiates trajectories, ideas, bodies and subjectivities. It attempts to make space for other voices and the viewer to make up their own mind and sit with or even mourn the complexity.

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1. Flexer & Sandiland company performers: Lyndsey McConville, Luke Birch, Aya Kobayashi, Julie-Ann Minaai and Nicholas Keegan and collaborators: writer Wendy Houstoun, dramaturge Pete Phillips, stage lighting designer Natalie Rowland, composers Karni Postel and James Keane and costume designer Holly Murray. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Students of the Maslool Professional Dancers Training Programme, Tel-Aviv, Israel. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. As is described through the paper some text sections address the audience directly or are performed in a presentational way such as performer Nick Keegan’s ‘disappearing magic-acts’ and ‘quiz show’, some are more reflective or poetic allowing the words to take prominence such as Lyndsey McConville’s ‘shipping forecast’ and ‘questions’, some are ironic such as the ‘prologue’ and ‘epilogue’ delivered by me as the ‘absent choreographer’ on a mobile phone and some are conveyed in a story form such as the ‘story line’ in which interwoven stories on darkness and disappearance are delivered by the full cast . ’The ‘story line’ is delivered with a sense of urgency lit by a strong light reminiscent of an interrogation light with the dancers standing in line actively pulling one another to get to the front in order to deliver their story. As the section progresses the stories get interwoven, and in this way lose their narrative line. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. ‘The choreographer’ in the prologue has a male voice, the text delivered by performer George Adams, commenting on and giving instructions to me (the ‘real’ choreographer) as I perform on stage. Later two speakers appear as if hanging in midair (held by the dancers in the dark) and Adams and myself deliver a dialogue which seems to go in circles rather than progress, inline with the work’s exploration of what remains, the disappearance of dance and the impossibility of archiving one’s dance history or the instance of performance. I finally deliver the epilogue as the ‘real’ choreographer. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See Bannerman & McLaughlin (2009), Butterworth (2009) and my previous discussion on notions of inter-authorship in Flexer (2013), PhD thesis pp.: 36-37 & 165-167. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The text in this section, written by Houstoun is based on the shipping forecast, altered to accentuate images of darkness, fog, and night street lighting. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. ‘Questions’ also written by Houstoun, is a list of hard-hitting questions which focus on the performative aspect of acts of terror and is referred to later in the paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See Freeman (1991) and Flexer (2013) PhD Thesis page 80-84 for a discussion on witnessing and on-stage witnesses. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See Gilpin (1996, pp.110-111) for a further discussion on repetition and its relation to memory and trauma. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See Lambert Beatty (2008) and Wood (2007) for a further discussion on choreographer Yvonne Rainer and her formulation of ‘dance is difficult to see’. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See Butcher, Pollard & Melrose 2005 and Flexer (2013) PhD thesis pp.: 79-81 and, for a further discussion of choreographer Rosemary Butcher’s Scan and the term visual holes. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. For a more comprehensive discussion of the history and development of Israeli Contemporary Dance encompassing its political dimensions see Eshel (2016) [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. For further information on the roots of the Hora and Israeli Folk Dance as socialist and Zionist construction drawing on Eastern European roots, Hassidic Jewish tradition, Yemenite and Palestinian, folk dance see Bahat (1977) and Eshel (2016)**.** [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. The phrase ani neelemt in Hebrew, when spoken (as distinct to read) could be understood as both I am disappearing and I am dumfounded or silenced. It is the spelling which distinguishes between the two meaning in a written context. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)