

# What is held between bodies

by Clémentine Dubost

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Maytal Noy performing *Popular*, after Schwartz, in *A Big Big Room Full of Everybody's Hope*. Théâtre de la Ville—Les Abbesses, Paris, 7-8 September 2023. Photo: Nora Houguenade.



Maytal Noy performing *Big Men*, after *Little Girls* (Martin & Strouse), in *A Big Big Room Full of Everybody's Hope*. Théâtre de la Ville—Les Abbesses, Paris, 7-8 September 2023. Photo: Nora Houguenade.



Liora Noy and Ilan Noy (L-R) in *A Big Big Room Full of Everybody's Hope*. Théâtre de la Ville—Les Abbesses, Paris, 7-8 September 2023. Photo: Nora Houguenade.



Liora Noy, Amit Noy and Ilan Noy (L-R) performing the *Agon* section in *A Big Big Room Full of Everybody's Hope*. Théâtre de la Ville—Les Abbesses, Paris, 7-8 September 2023. Photo: Nora Houguenade.



Amit Noy and Ilan Noy (L-R) performing the *Agon* section in *A Big Big Room Full of Everybody's Hope*. Ballet National de Marseille, July 6th, 2023. Photo: Thierry Hauswauld.

*Paris-based writer and curator Clémentine Dubost went to see Amit Noy's A Big Big Room Full of Everybody's Hope twice; first in Paris, then Marseille. In her essay she describes this three-act, interdisciplinary performance devised and performed by the Hawai'i-born, Aotearoa-raised artist and his immediate family. Observing how the work flows—just as siblings and parents do—between frustration and affection, support and pain, a shared past and contested futures, Dubost writes about it as an archive; a place to hold unsettled things together.*

Exploring the notion of time through enduring relations, *A Big Big Room Full of Everybody's Hope* premiered at Théâtre de la Ville in Paris and was performed at Friche – La belle de Mai in Marseille in September 2023. Accompanied onstage by his sister Maytal Noy, his parents Ilan and Liora Noy and the digital presence of his grandmother Belina Neuberger, Amit Noy choreographs a corporeal archive of intimate stories, proposing different ways to

cope with the memory of systemic violence through performativity and community. *A Big Big Room Full of Everybody's Hope* is a performance in three acts in which three generations of a family offer a fragment of their lives across disciplines, including video, ballet and musical theatre.

At only twenty one, Amit is already establishing himself as a very promising choreographer. As a result of being raised on two sides of Te Moana-nui-a-Kiwa (the great ocean of Kiwa or the Pacific Ocean)—in Hawai'i until the age of nine, and Aotearoa New Zealand as a teenager by Mexican and Israeli parents—his choreography is infused with his early learning of Hawaiian hula in the way he thinks of movement as a form of storytelling. His training in ballet has had a visible impact in the way it shaped his muscular body, holding in tension a sense of rectitude with the undulating movements of hula.

Amit started travelling in the US and Europe as a young adult, dancing for the likes of Irish choreographer Michael Keegan-Dolan in his company Teac Damsa, extending his movement vocabulary further into postmodern and multidisciplinary practices. In 2022, he was awarded a Pina Bausch Fellowship for Dance and Choreography and had the opportunity to work with American postmodern choreographers Miguel Gutierrez and Deborah Hay. He has been developing his show *A Big Big Room Full of Everybody's Hope* since 2021, showing a short version for the dance contest Danse Élargie in Paris in 2022, of which he was a finalist. He kept developing it to its full length in the following year, until he was offered a three-week-long residency in the summer of 2023 in Marseille by artist collective (La)Horde, who have been resident directors at the National Ballet of Marseille since 2019. In September of the same year, they invited him to perform as part of Actoral, a Marseille-based festival for contemporary creation.

I met Amit in Marseille after seeing *A Big Big Room Full of Everybody's Hope* for a second time. On this occasion, he told me about his family, his vision for the piece and his future projects. I was immediately interested in the way he performs a form of archiving through the body, both of his own family's stories and of a canonical dance piece: George Balanchine and Igor Stravinski's 1957 modernist ballet, *Agon*.



Amit Noy, Liora Noy, Maytal Noy, and Ilan Noy (L-R) photographed in their home during the rehearsal process for *A Big Big Room Full of Everybody's Hope*. Pōneke/Wellington, February 27th 2023. Photo: Edith Amituanai.



Amit Noy, Liora Noy, Ilan Noy, and Maytal Noy (L-R) rehearsing the opening section of *A Big Big Room Full of Everybody's Hope*. Vogelmorn Hall, Pōneke/Wellington, February 27th 2023. Photo: Edith Amituanai.



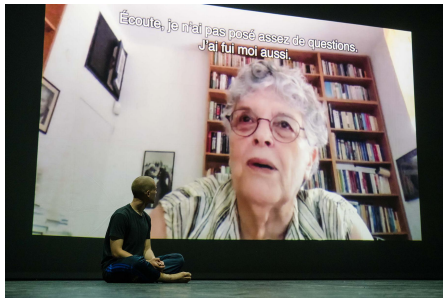
Amit Noy and Ilan Noy (L-R), rehearsing the Agon section in *A Big Big Room Full of Everybody's Hope*. Vogelmorn Hall, February 27th 2023. Photo: Edith Amituanai.



Amit Noy and Ilan Noy (L-R), rehearsing the Agon section in *A Big Big Room Full of Everybody's Hope*. Vogelmorn Hall, Pōneke/Wellington, February 27th 2023. Photo: Edith Amituanai.

Even before knowing what the content of the show would be, Amit knew he wanted to work with members of his immediate family, none of whom are professional dancers.<sup>[01]</sup> His choice made sense pragmatically, conceptually and aesthetically. As a young choreographer with limited access to production funds, the support of his family enabled him to realise a long term project involving multiple dancers. Amit's choice was further motivated by the visual appeal of his family members' corporealities, since, "as an audience member, [he] felt bored from watching highly skilled dancers."<sup>[02]</sup> He wanted to work with people who didn't have the extensive physical training that he had. Although the movement sequences are rather simple—often consisting of common gestures of care and affection (one's hand on another's arm, one's head on the other's shoulder)—the genuine intimacy that transpires from them moving together makes for a striking opening. This proximity is emphasised by the poses they strike in a series of vignettes, their limbs sometimes intertwined.

*A Big Big Room* opens with a question projected on a black screen: “What is held between the bodies of those who have lived together every day of their lives?” This written cue interestingly shifts our focus from what each body does individually to how, as an ensemble, they interact on stage. Here choreography is not just a score but, in Amit’s words, “a way of looking at relations between people.”<sup>[03]</sup> The performers’ bond becomes the driving force of the piece’s beginning. There’s a subtle way in which Amit’s mother, father, and sister portray the complexity of family dynamics, their movement oscillating between tenderness, care and rejection. The antagonism is always playful, such as the mother sticking her tongue out at her daughter, reversing the parent-child roles. The back and forths gives us a hint at the way ambivalence functions in the whole piece. When I ask Amit whether this was a reflection of the process, he mentions the complexity of working with family: “We argue a lot, we argue all the time,” he says.<sup>[04]</sup> While he choreographed and his younger sister Maytal authored and co-authored songs, his parents take up less stage time, supporting their children and letting them lead the performance.



Amit Noy (foreground) and Belina Neuberger (onscreen) during a work-in-progress performance of *A Big Big Room Full of Everybody's Hope* in the seventh edition of Danse élargie. Espace Pierre Cardin, Paris, June 25-26, 2022. Photo: Nora Houguenade.



Liora Noy and Amit Noy (L-R) performing the *Agon* section in *A Big Big Room Full of Everybody's Hope*. Théâtre de la Ville—Les Abbesses, Paris, 7-8 September 2023. Photo: Nora Houguenade.



Amit Noy and Ilan Noy (L-R) performing the *Agon* section in *A Big Big Room Full of Everybody's Hope*. Ballet National de Marseille, July 6th, 2023. Photo: Thierry Hauswauld.



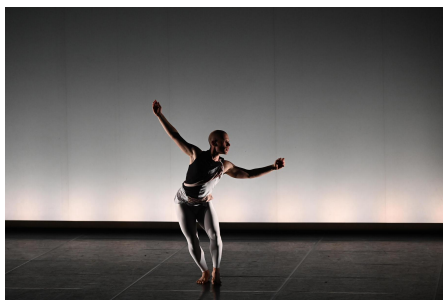
Ilan Noy and Amit Noy (L-R) performing the *Agon* section in *A Big Big Room Full of Everybody's Hope*. Théâtre de la Ville—Les Abbesses, Paris, 7-8 September 2023. Photo: Nora Houguenade.



Amit Noy, Ilan Noy and Liora Noy (L-R) performing the *Agon* section in *A Big Big Room Full of Everybody's Hope*. Théâtre de la Ville—Les Abbesses, Paris, 7-8 September 2023. Photo: Nora Houguenade.



Liora Noy, Amit Noy and Ilan Noy (L-R) performing the *Agon* section in *A Big Big Room Full of Everybody's Hope*. Théâtre de la Ville—Les Abbesses, Paris, 7-8 September 2023. Photo: Nora Houguenade.



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Complexity traverses the whole piece as its three movements unfold, each focusing on the story of a single family member. The

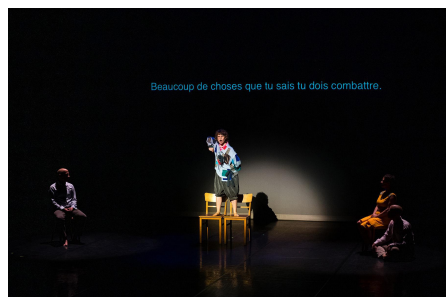


structure appears as a collage of three life fragments that have very little in common at first sight, creating an impression of arbitrariness. It was nonetheless deliberate that Amit “let them inform each other in different ways each night, for each audience member,” inviting the spectator to understand the links between the different stories as they would.<sup>[05]</sup>

In the first movement, we are introduced to a fifth family member: as the lights go down and the screen lights up, an elderly woman, Amit’s grandmother, sits at her desk. Belina Neuberger, a former school teacher, reflects on episodes of her life and shares her thoughts on memory and remembrance as a Holocaust survivor. She addresses her difficult relationship to images of the camps, compulsory school trips her students would take to former camps in Poland, and the sometimes-insensitive responses of the young people upon their return. Amit made it clear to me that he chose to tell this story because it was what appeared important for his grandmother to talk about in this moment of her life. When I asked him about the concept of intergenerational trauma, I was surprised to hear him say he hadn't thought about that language while they were making the piece.<sup>[06]</sup> Despite the theme being dominant, it was something that existed unconsciously. Belina’s life experience, and that of her husband and her former students, teaches us that there is no consistent or uniform response to the Holocaust and its repercussions continue to affect millions of people in varying ways.

Although the show was written before Hamas' civilian attacks on October 7, 2023 and Israel’s reprisal (ongoing at the time of writing) which has killed thousands, and left hundreds of thousands of already-displaced Gazans without shelter and other basic needs, the question of the politics of remembrance around the Holocaust as addressed in *A Big Big Room* is paramount. Through her conversation with her grandson, Belina Neuberger reminds us of the ways in which the Israeli government mobilises grief and the collective memory of trauma in order to justify violence and occupation. The question that emerges is how to actively and collectively grieve, generation after generation, when, in Amit's own words, descendants of Israeli Jews run the risk of reinforcing a "post-traumatic position [that] is essential to the current [Israeli] regime's justifications of its crimes against humanity.”<sup>[07]</sup> Presenting her testimony, the performance becomes

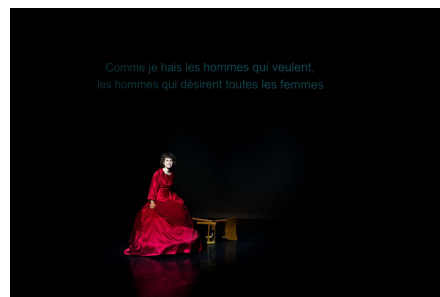
a space for archiving her specific memory. It enables us, as an audience, to work with it in the present, as, according to Jacques Derrida in *Archive Fever*: “the question of the archive is not, we repeat, a question of the past. [...] It is a question of the future, [...] of a promise and of a responsibility for tomorrow.”<sup>[08]</sup>



Maytal Noy (centre) with Ilan Noy, Liora Noy, and Amit Noy (L-R), performing *Maria*, after Rodgers & Hammerstein, in *A Big Big Room Full of Everybody's Hope*. Théâtre de la Ville—Les Abbesses, Paris, 7-8 September 2023. Photo: Nora Houguenade.



Liora Noy and Ilan Noy (L-R) in *A Big Big Room Full of Everybody's Hope*. Théâtre de la Ville—Les Abbesses, Paris, 7-8 September 2023. Photo: Nora Houguenade.



Maytal Noy performing *Big Men*, after *Little Girls* (Martin & Strouse), in *A Big Big Room Full of Everybody's Hope*. Théâtre de la Ville—Les Abbesses, Paris, 7-8 September 2023. Photo: Nora Houguenade.

What to do with cultural heritage that, when brought into the present, risks perpetuating the violence of exclusion is a question that lingers throughout the piece. In the part that follows Belina's account, Amit delivers a fragment of his own experience with ballet and its ambiguities. As he comes back on stage in costume and interprets fragments of Balanchine's *Agon*, he offers the audience a virtuosic moment, demonstrating his strength and the breadth of his dance training. *Agon* (a word for “contest” in ancient Greek) is the archetype of a modernist ballet: grandiose, dramatic, *en force*; performed by young, able-bodied and athletic dancers. The piece sits within a tradition of discipline and normativity that many contemporary dancers and choreographers disengage with in order to platform other voices in the field. Aware of its meaning, the choreographer undertakes his “reactionary” choice: rather than try to ignore and set aside what is embodied, he works with the piece in a way that conveys his difficulties with it.<sup>[09]</sup> *Agon* is a piece about competition, it stages a struggle with oneself, a pushing of one's physical limit in order to win a contest against others. In *A Big Big Room*, Amit grabs his thigh, pressing it, shaking it, transforming his athletic body into amorphous flesh, distorting his body as he does the ballet itself. His work is not a quote of the



original per se, but an impression, departing from his experience of performing Balanchine's ballet and how it feels. He adapts it, disregards the choreographic score while occasionally lifting steps and poses to merge them with other cultural references, including elements of hula. These elements are made to sit together in opposition to the expectations of ballet in both its classical and modernist forms. "The point of the relationship with *Agon*," he tells me, "is that [it is at once] loving and distressful and critical."<sup>[10]</sup> The accomplishment of Amit's performance therefore lies not in history of the choreography but rather in the ambivalent relation to the self that his interface with a canonical modern ballet allows him to disclose.

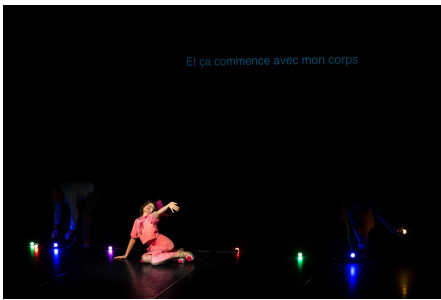
In this way, *Agon* is a key to reading the last part of the show, in which Maytal, Amit's younger sister, rewrites tunes from the musicals *The Sound of Music*, *Annie* and *Wicked*, all of which are "iconic in the musical theatre canon" and have "clear emotional tenors" for Amit.<sup>[11]</sup> Maytal, in a comedic parody, sings about what it means to be a thirteen-year-old with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder going through life under patriarchy. In a blunt discourse which she authored in collaboration with her brother, she sings of her hate of the "big, big men," her struggles with her body-image, and her mental health. The last song particularly addresses the unrealistic social expectations upon a young woman's looks and behaviour. This part resonates with her brother's performance in the way they both address the question of disciplining the body. While Amit is torn between a will to conform to, and resist, what's expected of him in dance, Maytal is even more radical in her refusal of patriarchal injunctions.



Amit Noy, Maytal Noy, and Liora Noy (L-R) in *A Big Big Room Full of Everybody's Hope*. Théâtre de la Ville—Les Abbesses, Paris, 7-8 September 2023. Photo: Nora Houguenade.



Maytal Noy performing *Big Men*, after *Little Girls* (Martin & Strouse), in *A Big Big Room Full of Everybody's Hope*. Théâtre de la Ville—Les Abbesses, Paris, 7-8 September 2023. Photo: Nora Houguenade.



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Ilan Noy, Maytal Noy, Liora Noy, and Amit Noy (L-R) in *A Big Big Room Full of Everybody's Hope*. Théâtre de la Ville—Les Abbesses, Paris, 7-8 September 2023. Photo: Nora Houguenade.



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Although the lyrics address serious issues, they are tinged with dark humour and sung slightly off-key over the jolly melodies. The crinoline fuchsia dress Maytal wears (designed by Ōtautahi Christchurch-based Steven Junil Park), over a pair of glitter pumps, introduces a clownlike element to her performance, a play of contrasts that is particularly effective. For the audience, as for herself, the burlesque dramatisation of her intimate struggles sets at a distance the institutional violence it critiques. Everybody's hopes in the end are embodied by the youngest member of the family. Moving on from depression, she affirms her will to continue thanks to her family. The show closes with her, standing on two

chairs with her eyes closed, repeating frantically “they are the reason I want to live,” before shaking emotions out of her body and opening her eyes to us. In exploring possible strategies to cope with systemic violence, the show proposes turning both outwards, through different modes of performance, and inwards, in the way it centres the family as a space for care. What is held between their bodies is both a history of violence and a lot of love to soothe it. This is the vital energy that animates the artist in moving through his work.

For Amit, choreography is a practice that allows him to be with something without requiring him to move towards an answer or a clear explanation. His research into identity through dance is ongoing. Now that the piece has premiered in France, he is looking to tour the world, sharing these stories with more people. Already onto the next project, he tells me about his desire to keep working with his grandmother towards a new solo work on cultural inheritance. As of October, his preliminary research for this new solo piece consists of “picking up where [his] grandmother’s video left off and thinking about the contemporary reality of Israeli nationalism.”<sup>[12]</sup> For another forthcoming project, he will present a video installation in public toilets in New Zealand on the topic of cruising, as he stays close to his multidisciplinary background. “I’m always working as a choreographer, even if the material is film or writing”.<sup>[13]</sup> Using performance as a way to think about culture and ancestry, Amit Noy produces a subjective archiving of culturally significant stories.

### *Footnotes*

01. Amit Noy, conversation with the author, 1 October 2023.

02. Ibid.

03. Ibid.

04. Ibid.

05. Ibid.

06. Amit Noy, conversation with the author, 1 October 2023

07. Amit Noy, email to the author, 26 October 2023.

08. Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 36.

09. Amit Noy, conversation with the author, 1 October 2023.

10. Ibid.

11. Amit Noy, email to the author, 26 October 2023.

12. Amit Noy, conversation with the author, 1 October 2023.

13. Ibid.

## *Biographies*



Amit Noy is a choreographer and writer. He grew up as a visitor in Kailua, Hawai'i and Te Whanganui-a-Tara to Latine and Israeli parents. In 2022, Amit received the Pina Bausch Fellowship for Dance and Choreography, and he was recently named a 2023 Springboard Awardee by Te Tumu Toi: The Arts Foundation of New Zealand. In Hebrew, 'Amit' means good friend.



Clémentine Dubost is a writer and curator based in Paris. Her research is concerned with materialist feminist and intersectional approaches to performance and contemporary art. She curated several exhibitions at Beaux-Arts de Paris, Lethaby Gallery (London), Amsterdam University College and was the art director of music collective Dormessions in Amsterdam.

