

Note: This interview occurred on the phone with Yasmeen in Israel. Therefore, “here” refers to Israel and “the city” refers to New York.

**Roseanne Spradlin:** So, Yasmeen, it’s nice to talk to you. It’s been a while since I’ve seen you.

**Yasmeen Godder:** Yeah, it has been a while since I was last in New York, too.

**RS:** How long has it been?

**YG:** Last time I was there presenting something was at the Whitney. I think it was spring of 2004 at the Whitney at Altria.

**RS:** Right, right.

**YS:** It’s so nice to come back. I miss it.

**RS:** I know a lot of people who read the website will know you, but some people may not. There seem to be new people in the scene all the time. Do you mind giving a brief framework of your bio?

**YS:** I was born in Israel, and I moved to New York with my parents when I was eleven. Basically I grew up in New York City, and then after finishing the High School for the Performing Arts, I went back to Israel. Then, after two years of living there, I went back to New York to study at Tisch School of the Arts at NYU, and at that time I was starting to make work. During my last year at NYU, I started presenting work outside of school at different spaces, in Brooklyn at what was called the Gowanus Arts Exchange at the time, and at different venues. Then I presented my work at DTW a few times and at the Mulberry Street Theater. And then I moved back to Israel in 1997, I think, and I was going back and forth presenting work in New York, doing different things like Dancing in the Streets, and then going back to Israel. Then slowly, with time, I found myself more based in Israel—making work here, working with dancers from Israel, and committing to being here. That’s how things have developed, in a very brief, quick way of describing it.

**RS:** So, that sounds like the process of finally locating in Israel was gradual.

**YG:** Definitely. It was hard. I really enjoyed making work in New York, and I developed myself as a choreographer there, so it was very difficult to give that up and decide to commit to being here only. I still feel like I'm part, even though I'm not actively part of the scene there, I feel like I often am very connected to that. I'm glad to bring my work to New York. It's different than presenting work elsewhere because it is bringing it back home, in a way. I'm always interested in that dialogue that arises between my work in Israel and in New York, and having these two different perspectives on it. It's almost like two sides of myself looking at the work or experiencing it differently.

**RS:** Do you find that the audience response is different?

**YG:** Yeah, definitely. I felt it particularly with a work like *I Feel Funny Today*, which I brought in 2001 to DTW. There was a very different response in New York to Israel, and that was interesting. Different doesn't necessarily mean black-and-white-different. It was just that the perceptions and the nuances of the work were taken in differently, and also the way people experience or talk about what they experience [is different]. There's a way of talking about dance that is different here and in the city.

**RS:** I'm sorry, I think I missed that particular show, but could you just give a little example of what you're talking about? How the response was different?

**YG:** Yeah. I often feel that the responses I've gotten here are very emotional, very direct emotion, whereas in New York, the dialogue tends to be more analytical. Still the aspect of emotion is there, it's present in the conversation and it is part of the experience, but there are other layers of dialogue that come in. Also, this whole concept of "feedbacking" and giving information or viewing... I even think this whole system of *The Field* that I also went through of "What do you see?" has become a part of this way of seeing work, and talking about it, and having tools to deal with what you see. I feel like there's less of that here.

**RS:** I guess that's good and bad.

**YG:** Yeah, yeah. I don't know. I guess I enjoy both, because I can relate to both, both ways of talking or experiencing work. I don't know if the experiencing of it is different, but the talking about it, and also the perspective, the cultural nuances of things. I brought *Hall* to the Kitchen in... I don't remember, I think it was 2003. And some of the scenes of the work, some of the underneath scenes were about this sense of security or

illusionary world falling apart or tearing apart inside of these individuals that were in the work, and it related at the time to something that I was experiencing with my generation here in Israel. Those aspects of the work really came out for people who were seeing the work in Tel Aviv, whereas I felt in New York, it was not seen through those eyes, and that was interesting to me. Of course it relates to certain hints that you have in a work to culture, to other familiar ideas or signs that you have. In that work there was a song in which the lyrics were very much related—not directly—but to this sensation in Hebrew, and I imagine that that also impacted the way people experienced it. I enjoy these two lenses because I often feel like that's what I'm dealing with in the work. I often have this double perspective on things that I do and different cultural impacts, or different experiences that are influenced by the cultures that I lived in that define the kind of associations that make up my work.

**RS:** In your piece that you're going to show here next month—*Strawberry Cream and Gunpowder*, is that right?

**YG:** Yes, well, the full name is actually *Yasmeen Godder and the Bloody Bench Players Present Strawberry Cream and Gunpowder*.

**RS:** Ok. Is that piece also something about your generation, do you feel?

**YG:** I don't know, maybe, it could be. I feel like I'm not sure if I could say that it's about my generation, however I can say that it's about a place that I've come to as a person and as an individual that I felt like I needed to touch or experience. Perhaps it resonates in a bigger way at this time and to people of my age, but as much as the subject of the work is a big subject of this time, for me it was a very personal piece, very much about how I was dealing with the images that surrounded me in daily life about the war here.

**RS:** Why don't I just interject for the people who are reading or listening something about this piece that you're showing: You've said that you began the piece by looking at photographs of war or photographs of suffering. Is that...?

**YG:** Yeah, photographs, which I felt were iconographic photographs of this period of the conflict here in Israel. What I mean by iconographic is that, with time, I felt that there were certain photos that kept on repeating themselves. There was a way of expressing this war through these photos, and so I felt like I wanted to bring those into the studio and deal with them, not only in my life of passing by a newspaper stand or watching television,

but also questioning how I deal with them in my own bubble, my own art-bubble.

**RS:** I think the reason I asked that question—does the piece say something about your generation—is because when I watched the piece a couple of times on DVD I was trying to trace what happens to these people in this piece. How do they get to the end? What do they go through? And even, kind of the moral voice of the piece, how does it develop and where does it go? I found that very interesting.

**YG:** Yeah, it's interesting what you're saying. It's almost like the studio became a laboratory to bring these images into our bodies, first from a very exterior place, but ultimately the work was about how we, the people in the work, the dancers, experience these photos. In that way it is related to your question about a generation because perhaps this is a generation, you know, a group of people from the generation going through this process, and within the process seeing what that does, or how that affects us as people. As I mentioned before, because I saw this as a very personal process, it has been interesting to me over the past few years, performing it quite a lot, hearing how it resonates in a bigger way, that it has this sense of a generation that is dealing with something that they cannot deal with, or how that impacts... How that violence enters into their lives or into their own perceptions of themselves. How these questions of being victims and aggressors enter into their psyche? And it's true, that is what the work is about.

**RS:** And being witnesses. I mean, you're right there, in Israel, but because you're using not the real-life images necessarily, but the photographs, in a certain sense it's the same for anybody anywhere in the world...

**YG:** Right, exactly.

**RS:** ...in that we're all witnessing constantly. I think a lot has been written about the use of photographs in terms of how they penetrate our psyche. What can photographs do? What do they ultimately do? What response do they draw forth, if any? Is it the response we expect or not?

**YG:** That's exactly what I was searching through the body. I wanted to have the answers come by embodying these images before having an opinion about them or knowing what I think about them, which is very difficult of course, because you already... As it is, these images were very heavy and difficult and full of information, and each one of us had a difficult time with how we even dealt with touching this because it's almost holy; it's

almost touching this certain reality, or this certain moment of a person's life just by... posing in it. It was already so intense, so overwhelming that the witnessing went through another layer.

**RS:** When you say you wanted to approach it through the body, can you say at all what it came to for you and your dancers?

**YG:** As I said, in the beginning I pushed the dancers to just be the thing that they saw without trying to add on to it anything that they think about it, and then slowly with time that gesture, that mask, that physical stance or state started penetrating into them, and part of the process brought out, on one hand, the understanding that we all carry these bigger-than-life things. I mean, some of these images were really difficult to perceive at first, but then with time, we did all these exercises to try to see how to make this thing alive, how to make it live inside of you, sometimes very mechanically, by the way, not necessarily psychologically or through the intellect. That brought out this place where people's understanding of that moment was so deep and so profound that that was really strong. On the other hand, another side of it was touching it from a very superficial place, and very much staying attached to this plastic expression. And at times your own inability to deal with the resonances of this image was part of the process, was part of the way of dealing with it. So, I think the work touches upon all these different levels of witnessing the place in which you are rejecting it, laughing at it, critiquing it inside of you, to the point that you are completely identifying with it and on to the point of not being able to handle it. It's hard to talk about it in words because part of the reason that I wanted to do it was because my feeling was that there was always a lot of conversation about it, but the conversation really never touched upon some of the complexity of the experience that I had in viewing these images. I wanted to challenge this "normal," or already-known way of dealing with it, this everyday-way of handling it. I wanted to say, to myself at least, to stop thinking about it like this, and to try to reach this experience, to enter it from a different place.

**RS:** How successful was that for you? Did you feel like you did have that different experience?

**YG:** Yeah. In doing the work, yes. In doing the work, I do feel like... It took a long time, because when we premiered it, it was still difficult for us, and I think also for the audience. It took time because the process itself needed more time. We needed to get over certain things in our heads about it.

**RS:** Like what?

**YG:** Like the kind of questions that were really big in the process, at some point, to allow them to just be present. I think because of the subject of the work and because of the questions which the work proposed, I kept on changing it for about 6 months of performances. It was completely... I think the video you saw is from the first performances.

**RS:** Oh, really?

**YG:** Yeah. You'll come to see it in July at Lincoln Center. It's not completely different, of course, but it's gone through some changes, and I think really part of the reason that it was so difficult for me to commit to one structure was because it was so complex and because what you're asking me is a question that I question myself all the time: Did I manage to do what I wanted to do? I don't know. To have a dialogue about it in a different way with myself, with other people? Yes, definitely. To touch something that was scary to me? Yes, because that was part of it. It was really to touch something that was not easy. It wasn't easy to bring it into the studio. It wasn't easy to talk about it, you know. It wasn't easy also for the dancers, for the performers, they also had a difficult time.

**RS:** You know, one thing I wasn't totally sure about when I watched it, because I wasn't sure if I might be missing some cues or something, but in terms of who the people are, would you say that their identity is not meant to be clear in terms of one side of a conflict or another side? They can be...?

**YG:** Yes and no. There are hints, I think.

**RS:** There are hints, ok.

**YG:** There are hints. That was one of the interesting questions that came out in the process, how do we identify our side? What are the methods with which we point to a picture and say, "This is me; this is not me."

**RS:** Right, right.

**YG:** Whom do you identify with? That was one of the issues, and it is meant to be a question that's there in the work. I think there are hints at moments, but ultimately really it isn't about identifying. It also seems that the performers are a character, that each one has a character, but in reality...

**RS:** And they stay that same thing throughout the piece?

**YG:** Exactly. To many people that's what it seems like. In fact, when we did the work each person worked with about three images, and it could be a man, a little girl, and a soldier, let's say. It could be different images, because ultimately I didn't necessarily want them to portray a character. At times it was more important for me that their experience was to go into an image, or to be an image. But, of course, because we have one body, and that body carries... It's an interesting thing how narrative happens without you wanting it, and I find that really interesting because I didn't want narrative here and it did happen. There is a narrative in it, but that's ok because I think there's something about you as a person that can embody a few different people, but somehow in the wholeness of you, on stage, you carry these three personalities. I'm contradicting myself because I wasn't dealing with personalities, but more so three images of a person, or three experiences of three different people.

**RS:** Well, and if photographs have any impact on us, which I think they do, there is that process of empathy. You enter into the person that you're looking at in the photograph, maybe, and it can be anybody. It can be a child, or an old person, or a soldier, the victim or the victimizer.

**YG:** Exactly. In the work those roles became—the roles of being a victim and a victimizer—that became really the essence of the process, taking on those roles.

**RS:** And did they switch? Did a certain person switch roles? It seems like they did, as best I remember.

**YG:** Yes, they do. I think it's more about this place of how as a victim, you become an aggressor or a victimizer, and how as a victimizer, you become a victim. It's around those grey zones that the work touched upon.

**RS:** Your performers are really incredible. They're so great. Can you just say a little bit about who they are?

**YG:** Yeah. The cast that you saw in the video has also changed.

**RS:** It has. Because I was just looking at the photograph that's in the Lincoln Center brochure, and I was asking myself, "Are these different people or not?"

**YG:** It happens a lot. I've been running this work for two years now, and it took eight months to make, so it's been since... in November 2004 I premiered it, so it's been a while since it first went up. The people that I work with... some of the dancers have been working with me for a long time, like Iris Erez. She and I have been working together for like seven years. Others, this was their first project with me, and they basically come from different backgrounds. A few of them were in the Batsheva Dance Company like Arkadi Zaides, who is from the original cast, and now we have Jeremy Bernheim and Inbar Nemirovsky, and also Eran Shanny. So, a bunch of them have worked with Ohad Naharin and others, like Maya Weinberg, have worked with me for the past four or five years. Different backgrounds.

**RS:** Do they have backgrounds as actors as well as dancers, or not?

**YG:** No, but my way of working often incorporates... I also kind of train the performers with whom I work, and it incorporates a lot of theater work, which my partner Itzik Giuli is very much involved in. In this process in particular, I don't know whether to say if it was about dance or about theater because it was really about searching in your body, your soul, your psyche, for something.

**RS:** I just asked that question because they really seemed to resonate emotionally with what they're doing. Often you don't get that right off the bat with people who are mostly trained in dance. You know what I mean?

**YG:** Yes, I do. I totally know what you mean.

**RS:** They're just not always paying attention to... And also just the name, "The Bloody Bench Players." Is that your ongoing company, or is that just for that project?

**YG:** No, just for this project. It was part of this acknowledgement that we are "bench players," we're sitting on the side. We're not actively the players in this thing, but we are players. We come and show this thing, we represent this thing, we present it... not represent it, but present it. So it has this kind of twist inside the name.

**RS:** Yeah, that's good.

**YG:** It's interesting. Maybe I'll use this name again for my next project. Perhaps it will still be right to say this, that we are the "Bloody Bench



Players." But no, it's not my company name; it's part of the name of the work.

**RS:** I think that's interesting because in a way, that acknowledges a big piece about making a work like that, when you're really taking on somebody else's experience in a way, and trying to inhabit it yourself.

**YG:** Exactly. In the name, I wanted to acknowledge it. I also wanted to say that we are players; we are presenting something here. Ultimately the work is about us. It's about how we deal with it.

**RS:** I noticed, and I totally understand that you could say this, you say in one of your press pieces that you're not a political artist. I think any other artist would understand you saying that, and yet, what is the purpose of this particular piece? It seems like it could have a political purpose in one way.

**YG:** I'm a political person. I have political views, and I think they are relevant in the work; they are present there in some ways. I can't completely detach, but that's where I always go back to this thing that it is a personal work because the subject could be a political subject. It's also the way people see it. We've just performed it in Japan, and the audiences had very different views about what this piece was about. Many of them saw this victim/victimizer issue. Some of the people did not connect it to the conflict here in the Middle East, and some saw it more about relationships between people. I guess when I say I'm not a political artist, I don't necessarily want to disregard the political aspects of my work because I guess they are there. Also, with my previous work *Two Playful Pink*, which I've also performed a lot over the past four years, people often say, "Wow, it has a very strong agenda. It's very feminist, and very... Are you a political activist in this field?" Really, it was more about a place that I was in, and something that was a mix between my emotion and intellect and the people that I was working with and how that impacted what came out. So, that's how I can answer that.

**RS:** Can I ask you one more question that's in that political realm, and then we can get off that? I notice that there are three Israeli companies performing this summer at Lincoln Center Festival, and I don't know if that's intended to be a mini festival-within-a-festival particularly looking at Israeli dance, or not. Do you know?

**YG:** I don't know. I have no idea.

**RS:** On the other hand, I wondered if it was some sort of unspoken show of support, as well. Has there been... Is there some stuff going on around the world with people on that political level with artists from Israel? Have you encountered any kind of...?

**YG:** No, well, what I've encountered is there have been like celebrations around... about ten years ago, when it was a 50th anniversary for Israeli independence... There is sometimes an interest around doing something around the Middle East, or having work from different places in the Middle East, and seeing the different voices that come out of this. I've been involved in a few of those festivals. I guess there is an interest because of the conflict, but I don't know how that relates to Lincoln Center. It is amazing that three companies from Israel are being presented this year... very different work. I don't know what to think of it.

**RS:** Well, I had just read about some little flap, and I don't know if it's something that one person is making a big deal out of, but there was something about this magazine, *Dance Europe*, refusing to cover some Israeli company...

**YG:** Yeah, I read about that.

**RS:** ...unless they gave a statement saying that they were against the occupation of disputed territories in the Middle East. Is that important to you right now, or is that just a minor, expected type of flap?

**YG:** It's expected because I feel like it's been... it's there; it's present. As an Israeli, it's always a question, it's always... Because the presence on television, because of the presence internationally because of the conflict here, there's always this question. And it's present, it's in the air, and it takes on different modes of expression, whether it's a rejection or a support. Sometimes I have... it is a part of my identity. Sometimes it could be difficult because it's always in relation to a place, the politics, the situation. On the other hand, that's the reality, and it's a very difficult time, and of course it's going to be there as an issue. It's something that has been a part of my life.

**RS:** I think the anti-American sentiment is more subtle right now, but certainly it's there as well in Europe. Sometimes it's almost easier to deal with it when it is really overt, or to respond to it. I don't know if you can deal with it, but to respond to it.

**YG:** You know, it could be difficult at times when... In this work, for example, I'm dealing more directly with the issue, but with some of my other work, which is not necessarily dealing with it, it's been interesting how I've presented it and have had questions about the conflict in relation to what I did. So I think it's kind of a reference that people have in relationship to being from Israel. It's maybe the first thing that jumps up in the mind of someone who hears of someone being from Israel. I can't say that it's always easy. I don't always feel like that is what I would like to talk about or describe or explore, but on the other hand I can understand that that's what comes up from this kind of coverage that comes out about being here.

**RS:** Well, it does seem like your point of view about making work, and probably just the person you are, you do seem to be interested in the kind of feeling-level of the body. What are your other interests in dance? I read in your bio that you're teaching Release Work. Is that still true?

**YG:** Yeah, it's true. Do you mean what are my other interests in dance in my work?

**RS:** Yeah, in your work.

**YG:** I think that I'm always searching for this tension between really intense structure or strong structure, and where does the performer live within it, or how does the performer deal with it. Those two points are the points that I'm most interested to challenge. Can I create a structure that is, on one hand, very complex and strong and, on the other hand, allows for the performer to kind of re-experience? I think on that same note, I'm always also going in between movement exploration and questions of how that resonates, or how that impacts a performer. Oftentimes my process was from the inside out. I would start from a place to explore some kind of a state or a memory or different things that exist inside of us and allow that to take the process. In *Strawberry Cream and Gunpowder* it was really the opposite. I started from an outside place: let's be that. Then you search inside how to relate to this exterior place. I think that's kind of where I'm always searching to challenge how I present some of the thoughts to the people that I work with and to myself, and within that, to always search for something that holds it from a bigger view, from structure, from rhythm, from space. My process is very different each time.

**RS:** Each time you make a new piece?

**YG:** Yeah. I try to ask myself new questions. I try to make myself do things that I'm not used to, or things that I'm scared of or that I don't feel comfortable in.

**RS:** What are you working on now?

**YG:** I'm working on a new project, which I will premiere in Berlin in November, and it's a quartet, and I'm performing in it. That's about what I can say about it at this point. It's hard to say because I'm right in the depths of the process, but that's what I've been working on. It has a lot of different layers, but because of where it is in the process, I prefer to keep it inside of myself, rather than try to define it.

**RS:** Are you going back and forth in your work now between being in it and not being in it?

**YG:** Yeah. Even in *Strawberry Cream* now I'm performing. I replaced one of the dancers. In this work, I really wanted to be on the inside. In the process, I missed being on the inside of it. It's hard to know because both places are interesting, but I think that I've been really connected to the place of performing, and doing some of the experiments or the processes on my own body and person. Yeah, I'm going back and forth. That would be the way to describe it. It hasn't been consistent.

**RS:** What's it like living in Israel now, in terms of support for dance? Is it very good?

**YG:** It's all relative, as you know. In relationship to what it was like in New York, right now it's much better for me. I get supported on a yearly basis from the government here. Basically the funding here is mostly through either the city or the government, and there is no private funding, almost none. That's how artists work here. They are supported either yearly or per project, or they get funding from a festival for a new creation.

**RS:** Is it difficult to qualify for that?

**YG:** It takes time. It is competitive. It's difficult, and it takes time, but it is possible. What I like about the process here is that it's very much about presenting your work. Also, the committees which decide upon the funding see the work, rather than what I experienced in New York at many different times, which was about writing about the work. The process here is usually not about writing about the work. It's about showing it and then either getting support for continuation of it or not. And then the long-term funding

is more about you showing activity. What's difficult about it for me right now is showing activity in Israel because I do present my work here maybe once a month, when I'm in Israel, but when I'm away, and I have been on tour a lot, I haven't been able to. Also, not so much outside of Tel Aviv. That's difficult. It's difficult to tour the work here, outside of Tel Aviv, not because there are no theaters, but rather because of what the theater directors choose to present.

**RS:** Oh, I see. I'm interested in the more long-term support than one can qualify for there. What's the process of renewal for that? Is it something you have to apply for every single year?

**YG:** Yes, every year. However if you are living up to the criteria that are presented, you are automatically moved on to the next year. You don't have to apply each year and then wait to see if you get the support, if you live up to the criteria, which means, four times a year you need to present your budget and you need to have a certain amount of activity and a certain amount of income from your own shows. You can't completely depend on the funding. You have to show that the ticket sales are bringing in some of the funding. It works on percentages and whether you present your work outside of the center area of Israel, that's also very important. For example, for an artist that is being presented all over the country, they have more credit for getting more funding, but it's very complex. Right now the Ministry of Culture is working on redefining the criteria, and it's been this complex dialogue about how to define how much to give to the artists, how to define a big company and a small company and a medium-sized company? And that's been kind of a difficult dialogue at this point, but at least it's there, at least it's a dialogue. So that's how it works here. It's not always so perfect and easy. Sometimes you're expecting the budget, and you don't get it until the summer because the ministry of culture didn't get their own budget. So, it's not so easy, but ultimately it works.

**RS:** It's interesting the point you make about here, in New York, getting grants is so dependent on writing about your work. That's a whole other conversation I guess, but I have really felt myself that in a subtle way it changes the kind of work that people make because certain things you can write about more easily than others.

**YG:** Right, and what you know about what you're going to do...

**RS:** Yes, exactly.

**YG:** ...a year and a half before you start, or not even, maybe even earlier, but I think that's another part of it.

**RS:** I know. It makes it more difficult for people who like to start their process from an open, knowing-nothing-about-it place. I've found that hard myself. You eventually figure out ways to do it.

**YG:** I guess when I was in New York and I was trying to do it, I was starting to understand the process of it. I didn't get to the point that I was really depending completely on that and continuing to do that. But here, what has been good for my experience is the fact that I have been able to tour in Europe quite a lot, and that makes me able to, in the past few years, have longer-term relationships with dancers that I work with and have a more consistent structure to offer, rather than once in a while have a show and hope everyone is available.

**RS:** Yeah, there are so many aspects to what it takes to keep it going. You have to be able to give something for the dancers; otherwise they're not going to be around. Yasmeen, is there anything else you'd like to say that I didn't ask you about?

**YG:** Maybe I could say two words about the music of this show. It was created by Avi Belleli who is the lead singer of a band from here that's called The Tractor's Revenge, and he's created quite a lot for dance. He's worked also with Ohad Naharin and did different projects with interesting theater people and musicians. And that was also a challenging process for me to work with him because in the work, he's performing the music live on stage. And the process of finding, also, what kind of sound or what role does the music have in these images, if at all. How to work with textures? How to work with sound that was... 'Cause it always has such a heavy impact on the way that you view what you see, and I think that that was part of what made this piece also strong for me was this sound aspect, that was really a struggle... On one hand, not to give up the idea of using sound, on the other hand, to allow something to color this experience on stage.

**RS:** Will he be performing live here?

**YG:** Yes.

**RS:** Oh, great. Well, I really look forward to seeing you and your company here.

**YG:** Oh, good. I'm looking forward to it.

**RS:** I think it will be a great success.

**YG:** I hope so. I hope so. So, thanks.

**RS:** Thank you so much.

**YG:** I hope to see your work some time. Let me know if you're presenting something while I'm in New York.

**RS:** Not this summer, but in November I'll be doing something at DTW. That's the next thing.

**YG:** Are you working with Tasha?

**RS:** Yes, actually. She's still working with me.

**YG:** She's great.

**RS:** Yeah, she's great, isn't she?

**YG:** She's really wonderful, yeah.