



## Profile

### Mariko Kakizaki

Born 1988 in Kagawa Prefecture, Japan. She studied rhythmic gymnastics and ballet as a child. Her encounter with contemporary dance came while a student at Japan's Tsukuba University. She performed as a dancer in works by Shintaro Hirahara, Carmen Werner, Setsuko Yamada and other artists. In 2011 she won the Gold Award of the Korea International Dance Festival (KDMC). She has been a Batsheva Dance Company Ensemble dancer in the 2012/2013 season. Kakizaki is also a member of the Shun project.

# Artist Interview

アーティスト・インタビュー

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新体操からダンスへ

バットシェバ・アンサンブルの柿崎麻莉子

Coming to dance after competing in rhythmic gymnastics from childhood, Mariko Kakizaki has been developing her career since 2012 as a member of the Batsheva Ensemble, the young dancer ensemble of Israel's prestigious Batsheva Dance Company. While studying dance at Japan's Tsukuba University, Kakizaki had her first encounter with the Gaga physical movement method developed by Batsheva artistic director Ohad Naharin, which eventually led her to take on the challenge of performing in Israel. This interview gives insights into Kakizaki the person and her ambitions in dance.

Interviewer: Takao Norikoshi, dance critic

## Rhythmic gymnastics and dance

You passed the difficult auditions to be selected as a member of the Batsheva Ensemble, the younger dancer company of the world renowned Batsheva Dance Company, where you are now active. But, initially you were more active in rhythmic gymnastics than dance, weren't you?

I was born in the small town of Mikicho in Kagawa Prefecture east of Takamatsu and my mother was a rhythmic gymnastics teacher, so I learned rhythmic gymnastics from about the third grade in elementary school to last year of high school. It seems that I liked dancing from the time I was small and they say that I put my mother's CDs on and danced to them every day.

Although rhythmic gymnastics and dance may look similar, they are actually quite different. The way the body is used is completely different as well, because in rhythmic gymnastics the points are awarded for things like whether the spread of your legs reaches 180 degrees or how many seconds you are able to hold your balance in a position. At the national rhythmic gymnastics tournament in high school I was told by a judge that if I wanted to be one of the top competitors I should forget about dance and concentrate on perfecting my technique and work on my [gymnastic] moves. Then, just as I was losing interest in gymnastics, I saw Sylvie Guillem's *Bolero* performed in Osaka. I had been learning ballet a bit from the time I was a 6th grader in elementary school, but Guillem's dance was completely different from the ballet I knew. I didn't know much about dance but I really wanted to dance, so I chose to go to Tsukuba University.

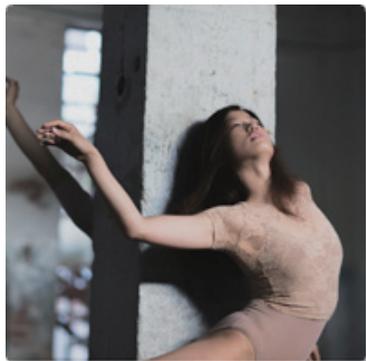
Tsukuba University didn't have an independent dance department, so my major was

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Batsheva Ensemble  
*HOME ALONE* (2013)  
Photos: Zohar Ralt



actually physical education specialized study group management. We had three dance professors (Motoko Hirayama, Yoshiko Murata, Yumi Terayama), but unfortunately I don't remember studying dance very much at university. I was in the dance club and we participated every year in the All Japan University Dance Festival, but I didn't do it with a passion. There was also the fact that I tore a ligament in my leg in my freshman year that contributed to my drifting away from dance, and I spent a lot of time just enjoying myself. But, in my sophomore year I decided to find out if I really wanted to dance, so I went to New York in summer vacation. On the internet I saw something about how New York is the hottest place to be now, and I was foolish enough to swallow it whole (laughs). I went to some of the famous studios but came back without really gaining anything.

Was it at that time that you met the dancer Shintaro Hirahara, who is also active as a choreographer now?

It was in the autumn of my sophomore year that Hirahara-san choreographed a work for about 20 dancers for the Kanto Student Dance Federation (a federation of university dance clubs in the Kanto region) and there were auditions for participants and I applied. It was at a time when Hirahara-san had just quit the Noism company. It was about a 15-minute piece and throughout it the other dancers had parts with beautiful movement while my part was to lie in an inconspicuous spot on the edge of the stage and just wriggle (laughs). But, it was a great experience for me because I was able to see first-hand the choreographer's ideas and how they were put together into a dance piece. It was through the dancer Hirahara-san that I finally got a real interest in pursuing dance. The performances for that piece ended in January and in April he chose me to participate as a dancer in another work in April that he had created as a guest dancer.

Perhaps the reason he was interested in you as a performer was that he felt great potential in the fact that you didn't have any of the stylistic movement traits that come from years of training in ballet or modern dance and that you possessed great flexibility in your body that made various forms of physical expression possible. Was it around that time that you entered the competition in South Korea?

Yes. I was in my senior year at university and although I was beginning to think about graduating, I felt that I wanted to continue dance and I was beginning to create pieces of my own. So, rather than graduating, I decided to stay at the university for another year and I moved to Tokyo in April. That was when Hirahara-san brought me materials about the Korea International Dance Competition, and when I said that I definitely wanted to enter, he choreographed a piece for me. The competition was in June of 2011.

This competition consisted of performance of three pieces, including two newly choreographed 5-minute pieces and one short piece that the dancer had to compose on the spot from certain movements we were given, and it was conducted in a tournament format. In the quarterfinals I performed my prepared A piece and in the semifinals another prepared B piece. Then in the finals I performed two pieces, the piece I was given on the spot and either my A or B piece. Based on those performances, I got the Gold Prize for best dancer and a Choreography Prize.

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I saw your performance on YouTube and found it very impressive. It involved shaking different parts of your body independently, and the shaking sent vibrations through your whole body. By adding modifications to the shaking and its intensity the body movement changed. It was a 5-minute performance but the modulations made it seem like more, and with rich impact.

The composition of the piece is rather simple. For the first three minutes or so of the piece I stay at the very back of the stage area and then I gradually begin to move forward, shaking and waving my limbs with the equivalent of about four-eight time movement.

In fact, around the time of this competition someone close to me had just died, but I decided to enter the competition in spite of the loss. The award I won was a big boost to my career, but the fact that I even decided to enter and dance under those conditions was a significant turning point for me and a major reason that I am still dancing today.

You began creating works of your own too, haven't you? I saw the piece *Vergiss mein nicht!* that you created and performed as part of the "Dance Flower" series at Session House in Tokyo the following year in June of 2012. Compared to other people's work your piece really stood out. It had a consistent theatrical aspect like a shabby cabaret but it was soft and pliant at times and intensely physical at other times, and I felt that throughout it had your unique coolness and technical virtuosity.

The title is German for "Don't forget me," and that performance at Session House was a restaging of a piece I made in the summer. The setting is that of someone who has been left alone in a room as a young girl, but by the time of the restaging my way of thinking had changed and I had trouble dancing it with the same image I originally had. It gave me a clear feeling that if I dance the same piece again, what I can do with it and what aspects of my physicality I can bring out ... how I deal with the piece will change in accordance with the way I have grown [as a dancer/person].

### GAGA, the encounter with Batsheva Dance Company

Had you already auditioned for Batsheva Ensemble at that time?

Yes. The time order is reversed but when I was in my junior year at university, I saw the Batsheva Dance Company perform *MAX* at the Sai no Kuni Saitama Arts Theater in April of 2010 and it really moved me to the soul and made me for the first time that I had seen dance that was truly fascinating. But, at the time I didn't know anything about the Batsheva Dance Company (laughs), and when I researched about it I discovered that its artistic director Ohad Naharin had developed a unique physical movement method called Gaga. What's more, I learned that there was a course called Gaga Intensive that you could go to Israel to take, so I went to take it that summer.

I have seen all of the Batsheva performances in Japan, and among them I recall *MAX* as an especially simple and intense work. So you became interested in Batsheva from *MAX* and Gaga. Still, I must have taken some strong motivation and effort to go all the way to Israel to study.

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I didn't have anything in the way of connections, so I just got a cheap airline ticket by myself and found a cheap place to stay and immersed myself in dance there for two weeks. Every day we did Gaga class in the morning and then had repertory class in the afternoon. There were a lot of participants, so we were divided into four groups with a Batsheva dancer instructing each group. For the repertory classes each group did different things and my group did *Arab Line*, which is a piece where the dancers form a line and dance one at a time, and another work titled *Kamuyot*. It was just so enjoyable to be dancing all day, every day.

I have taken the "Gaga People" class that not only dancers but people from the general public can participate. I know it is different from the "Gaga Dancer" class for dancers but it was apparent that the unique thing about Gaga is that it doesn't teach movement forms or technique. Instead it places importance on individual discoveries that come from having the participants search to find movement that comes from the core of their own body, doesn't it? The Gaga leader just serves as a facilitator to help that process happen. For you, who had no real technical base in ballet or something else, Gaga must have been easier for you to feel comfortable with the Gaga method, wasn't it?

Perhaps that is true. By the way, at the [Batsheva Ensemble] company we do Gaga as a technique class and it is the same as what we did in the Intensive session of Gaga Dancer, but having done it for a year now I feel that I have a deeper understanding now of the method.

In the Intensive course we use our imaginations and, if there is a group of 30 people we enjoy the sense of unity in having all 30 people ascend or sublimate in the same direction and the feeling of the body becoming free. These things are the key to the first step of Gaga, but in the Gaga we do in the company classes we go deeper into it as a technique and concentrate on the difference between moving the bones or the skin of the body. It is Gaga in which we train to "air out" the different parts of the body and insert different textures into it.

When I am performing on stage now there often times when I get the feeling that Gaga has trained my body well. Also, if there are times when, for example, I feel that perhaps my left leg is feeling different from usual, I will use Gaga to do a little body maintenance.

The Gaga the dancers do is interesting because everyone's own individuality comes out in it, but for certain the most interesting Gaga is Ohad's. He is the one who first invented it but his Gaga is still evolving consistently and he is always taking on new challenges.

There are a variety of dance method besides Gaga that are based on a process of using images based on powerful words to influence the movement of the body as a whole, so it is not unusual. What do you feel makes Gaga different from those other methods?

When I first did the Intensive course, I was impressed when we were told to love our bodies more, to take better care of our bodies and use them as something that you love. And I believe that connects to the philosophy of Gaga.

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When you are working from the imagination there is a tendency for the consciousness to move toward the inner body. But, in Gaga the important thing is to use the imagination in ways that make you aware of how your body responds.

When we are imagining something, it is natural for people to tend to look down or look up or perhaps close the eye, isn't it? But, with Gaga that is not allowed. We don't use mirrors either. We don't look at ourselves from the outside. We pay attention to the other participants who are sharing the same space and keep ourselves aware of what is outside the body. The basic pattern for the leader's instructions is that they are given to the entire group as a whole and when the quality of someone's movement changes the leader says, "It just changed. Did you notice?" In that way we are made aware of our changes. The important thing is to be aware of when your body's ingrained patterns of movement are changed as the result of an image.

In the company Gaga there are movements like the ballet passé and tendu, but even when we are doing them we are always looking for new ways to do them that your body doesn't know yet. For example, if we are told to try firming up the muscles and then lifting the leg, or to try being aware of our muscles lifting the leg, the movement will be completely different than if we are told that the leg moves because the bones move, or that the leg moves because the skin on the bottom of the leg is stretching. It becomes important to discover and become aware of these differences one after another and then to reassess how we are normally using our bodies.

In the case of Ankoku Butoh dance, for example, the words of instruction that [its founder Tatsumi] Hijikata would give his dancers would not be in practical terms about what part of the body to move, but rather he would choose images that were extremely poetic in nature as if intended to cast a spell on the dancer's body. It is what Hijikata referred to as *Butoh-fu* (Butoh notation). In a way, it is a process in which the [positive] tension or focus of the mind and body produces forms of physicality. It seems that in Gaga the process is, by contrast, one of making yourself pliant and free and you body always flexible and in an open state in order to find [new] movement.

Yes. I believe it is a technique for opening up the parts that are unconsciously locked and encouraging various energies to flow out through them in various directions.

Last winter I had the opportunity to perform in a work by Setsuko Yamada, and it was a very interesting experience. Yamada-san is a contemporary dance artist but her roots are in Butoh and she is one who says that you don't make false movements before the time comes when the true movement will come out [naturally]. If you try to do a movement [deliberately] she will immediately recognize it and say, "You did that because it is the choreographed movement you thought you were supposed to do, didn't you?" I believe that sense that the body is a physical object but within it lies moments of true [not false] movement shares something in common with what I felt the first time I saw a performance of the Batsheva work *Sadeh21*.

### Auditioning for Batsheva Ensemble

Did your experiences with Gaga make you decide to audition to enter Batsheva Ensemble?

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I enjoyed Gaga and Tel Aviv was a city I felt very comfortable in, and it made me feel that I would like living there for a while. When I was there for the Intensive course I said to Ohad that I would like to join Batsheva Ensemble and he said to me that if I audition for it I can join it. At that time I had only been dancing [seriously] for about a year (laughs), so I decided that when the time came I would return to audition.

**But dancers flock from all over the world for Batsheva Dance Company audition and very few are accepted. How are the auditions conducted?**

There are so many people auditioning that the dancers in Israel have to pass two or three preliminary auditions before they can enter the final auditions together with foreign dancers. In the auditions they have you learn short movements from Batsheva works on the spot and then perform them one after another in teams of about five dancers. After that comes improvisation sessions where they just keep music playing constantly. The overall process is one where they are watching a mix of the applicants' movement performance an improvisation.

Between 20 and 25 applicants make it to the final audition, where we are divided into small groups and take turns performing choreographed pieces we are given and doing improvisation. At the end, we were all lined up in a semicircle in front of Ohad and the Batsheva rehearsal directors and a DJ put on music and we took turns doing improvisation to it individually. You could step up to perform whenever you wanted and withdraw whenever you wanted. That was a lot of fun for me (laughs). In the end, three foreigners and three new Israelis and two from the training program passed the audition and were accepted into the Ensemble Presently there are 14 members and four trainees in the Ensemble company. This year the Ensemble has four foreign dancers (two from Spain, one American and me) and ten Israelis.

**That makes you one of a very small elite group (laughs). About ten years ago Yoshifumi Inao, Mami Shimazaki and Chisato Ohno were active as members of the Batsheva Dance Company and today Eri Nakamura is in the company, but you are the first Japanese to be a member of Batsheva Ensemble in some time.**

The Israeli's train from childhood to become members of Batsheva, so the foreign dancers, especially ones like me, are a sort of oddity (laughs). We stand out as different no matter what we do. At first I wondered if that was OK, but of course Ohad has chosen us with full knowledge of that fact, so now I just accept the fact that oddities may have their own role as oddities. Seeing Eri-san perform in the Batsheva Dance Company, I find in her a uniquely Japanese quality that might be described as the opposite of dryness, but there is certainly an attractive quality to her unique presence.

**What is your daily life like as a member of Ensemble, and what activities do you engage in?**

On regular rehearsal days we have an hour and a half of class from 10:00 in the morning and from 11:30 to 2:00 we have morning rehearsal, followed by an hour of break from 2:00 to 3:00 and then the next rehearsal from 3:00 to 5:30. The schedule differs some months and when we are not touring we have school performances and rehearsals of works by Ohad and house choreographer Sharon Eyal who is a former Batsheva member. In March and April of this year we rehearsed works by British

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choreographer Hofesh Shechter and American choreographer Danielle Agami. Both are former Batsheva members. Besides these, the Ensemble members do their own creation in a program called Home Alone, for which I created a piece too.

### Dancing in Israel

You have been living in Israel for a year now. Living there, do you feel any differences from life in Japan?

In Japan, I felt that people think with the head as human beings and that becomes movement, but in Israel it is more a feeling that the mind and heart are in the body. The body's sense of group and sense of rhythm seems to communicate more directly to the audience as it is. Looking at the response of the audience, it seems to me that rather than looking for the background behind the dance or the story or challenge represented in it, the Israeli audience appears to enjoy it more directly and purely as it is.

They give their opinions more clearly and directly [than the Japanese] and present their physicality more fully. In Israel the men have three years and the women two years of mandatory military service and I feel that the state of political and physical tension they are living in can't be separated from the conditions under which dance is born there. As a woman from an Eastern nation that is at peace, how do you feel about such a different life environment as that in Israel?

I have experienced some culture shock. In November of 2012 when we toured the UK for a month giving 18 performances, there was some kind of boycott movement at every performance. It included not only demonstrators shouting outside the theaters but sometimes there would be people shouting protests in the audience during the protest or trying to burst up on stage. Of course, I know about the problems with Palestine and there are air raid shelters in Tel Aviv and on the morning news we hear accounts of how many soldiers died the previous day. However, that was my first time actually experiencing the sound of protester voices directly, so it was a shock for me.

Just prior to your UK performances there had been attacks against the Gaza Strip and it ignited protests not only in the UK but internationally. How did you feel being in that situation?

I have not performed a lot as a dancer in Japan, but I had always felt that we could see very little connection to the society at large. Dance almost never makes the news and it has little connection to politics. Being in that kind of environment where, even if you did something in dance to make a statement few would ever notice it, had caused me some impatience. But it is the opposite in Israel, because even though what you are doing as an artist should have nothing to do with politics, simply being representatives of Israel makes you immediately connected to political attention. Among the dancers there are many young people who are doing their military service too. It is almost a daily experience to get a phone call in the morning from someone saying their squadron is going into a Palestinian district that day and then another call in the evening saying that they made it back safely. And on a day when a rocket has landed

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in Tel Aviv we see people calling their families just before a performance to make sure they are safe. I have experienced the shock of seeing that kind of condition.

Among the Batsheva programs, one that I think is especially good is the Ensemble's outreach programs that has you perform at schools. It means that Israeli children are being exposed to contemporary dance from an early age by one of their country's representative dance companies. So, that makes dance a very familiar art for them.

Yes, that is true. When we walk through town people will come up to us and say, "You are Batsheva dancers, right?" and they are happy to tell us that they saw Batsheva perform.

For the people of Israel, not only dance but also music and theater are all very familiar parts of their lives. The government issues lists to the schools of companies like Batsheva and Inbal Pinto and theater companies and music ensembles that clearly show the price of bringing each company to their school to perform.

On the average we perform at schools twice a week, and last year we went to perform at three Arab schools as well. Of course the children enjoyed the performances, but the interesting thing was the reactions of their teachers. Some of them thought that they mustn't look at the exposed flesh resulting from the costumes of some of the female dancers, so at first they were looking down at the floor. But by the end of the performance they were looking forward like the children and smiling or laughing at the amusing scenes. For some of our younger dancers it was their first experience entering an Arab school and they were saying how surprised they were to find such good, delightful children there or that this was the first time they had ever spoken with Arab people one to one that close. Their reactions were very fresh and honest.

Do you have the feeling now that you would like to stay with the Ensemble for a while longer and eventually join the Batsheva Dance Company and continue your career there as long as possible?

The basic rule is that you can only in Ensemble for two or three years, but one year has almost been enough for me (laughs). But, I am thinking that I will continue for a second year. The number of people who can move up to the Batsheva Dance Company is limited because people only move up from Ensemble when one of the dancers quits the Company, so it is perhaps one person a year. Also, at Batsheva Dance Company they mostly perform Ohad Naharin's works and I am at a point in my career where I want to experience encounters with a variety of other choreographers.

I would also like to see you find opportunities to have works of your own performed in Japan.

There are now plans in the making to have me and a number of Israeli dancers perform in Japan in 2014. But, I feel that I am by nature a dancer and probably not someone who choreographs works. But in my encounters with other [dancers] there are times when I find inspiration for new movement or images, and then I want to create something. Since I am creating movement based on my belief in myself as a dancer, I don't do things that I don't feel good with as a dancer. When I see a [dancer's] body and get the feeling that it would be interesting if that person would do a particular kind

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of movement I envision, that is when I will create something and ask them to perform it.

I feel that it would be good if more people like you who have been trained in things like rhythmic gymnastics that is popular in Japan, or perhaps other non-dance things like martial arts, would become interested in dance. That would help increase the possibilities of contemporary dance and make it richer in variety, while also expanding the pool of dancers.

There are a considerable number of people who have been doing rhythmic gymnastics that are also interested in dance, I believe. The problem is that in rhythmic gymnastics the standards that will bring you high points in competition are set and it is not easy for an athlete who has trained those standards into her or his body to break loose from them and express themselves freely in dance. In my own case, I was told that it was great how high I could jump and how beautiful my turns were, but then I was told that those qualities aren't what dance is about and I got confused as a result. So, when I first choreographed my own pieces, I eliminated those qualities inherent to rhythmic gymnastics and created works that didn't involve raising the legs high or jumps as much as possible.

Fortunately, however, I was able to learn about creating pieces that didn't depend on showing those physical capabilities from the people I met at that time. From Hirahara-san I learned about how to stand and walk and how to create a point of support and how to be aware of the space around you. I also met a number of people like the former Wuppertal Dance Company member Jean Laurent Sasportes and the Spanish choreographer Carmen Werner who entered dance from a theater perspective while keeping a consciousness of physicality. And experiencing from such encounters that I could create interesting dance without depending on my technique from rhythmic gymnastics was very important for me.

But, now I am in a situation where I have to dance Batsheva choreography. The other dancers can all lift their legs high and jump high, so I can't continue to deny those capabilities in myself like I did at first. However, although the Batsheva dancers have great physical abilities, they can't compare in many areas with someone like me who was trained in rhythmic gymnastics. At times when they get to much momentum to stop quickly, I am able come to a complete stop on a dime, and I can freeze my leg in position and hold it at the highest point of its lift. So, when I do things like that the audience reacts and thinks it is great, and choreographers come to me saying that they want to use those physical qualities. So, the qualities from rhythmic gymnastics that I had considered my weak points and kept under wraps in Japan are now much appreciated by audiences in Israel. Thus, I have gradually lost the fear of using my physical capabilities that are not dance-derived. And finally, I have reached the point where I believe that the techniques of rhythmic gymnastics are not completely separate from dance and I feel that I can connect them in as a part of dance. I believe also that Gaga has helped me to some degree in this respect.

What kind of qualities do you feel you have found as a result?

My physical qualities are that arms a bit long, I have good movement in my shoulders

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and I have good range of movement in all my joints. Also, as I just mentioned, I have an excellent sense of balance. When I was in Japan, mine was a body where the legs were legs and the torso was torso and I felt that my movement was the result of connecting the movements of those parts. But now, you could say that I feel the leg need not necessarily be a leg, or that my consciousness of my legs is the same as that of my arms and I feel that I can use them with the same kind of feeling. And, since my consciousness has changed in this way the way I move has clearly changed, as I can also see from looking at videos of me dancing.

My experience at Batsheva Ensemble has not been one of learning one specific technique or style. Instead, it may be that this has been a year that freed me of feelings that had been hindering me and freed my body at the same time.