

DANCE REVIEW

A Man of Confliction Takes on Mideast Conflict

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It's a mouthful, but the title of Tarek Halaby's lecture-performance, which rambles along like a garrulous dissertation topic, was the first wink of the night: "An attempt to understand my socio-political disposition through artistic research on personal identity in relationship to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, Part One."

In the solo work, performed over the weekend at Abrons Arts Center as part of the American Realness festival, Mr. Halaby unveiled a political dance without any dancing as he played an artist with passion but no dedication. While he constantly tried to pull off his mission (see title), his wavering stage personality — easygoing and slightly disorganized while also toeing a fine line between humor and ferocity — continually undermined his political pronouncements.

Mr. Halaby, an American-Palestinian choreographer based in Brussels, arrived onstage wheeling a suitcase before sitting on a chair and grabbing a microphone. His manner hovered near bashfulness, and his voice was hesitant and whispery as he slipped in and out of what seemed genuine. "This is really weird," he said. "I've never had an audience where I recognized so many faces."

He pulled out a red notebook and began his monologue — a string of stories told with feigned innocence — explaining he was carting luggage around because he had just been evicted. Furthermore his passport had expired, and he had no identity papers. He was worried at first, he explained, but then a little voice told him that everything was going to be fine: "You're Palestinian. That's the way it's supposed to be."

The premise of the show was simply that Mr. Halaby couldn't make one. "I would sit there by myself in the studio just kind of staring off into space. Frozen. Confused. Lost." Political parallels to Palestinian statelessness emerged as Mr. Halaby lamented his lack of a production: "I don't want to come across as someone pathetic who's just crying about the situation that they're in."

He discussed some of his ideas for the piece, including occupying the audience as if it were a country. This he managed to demonstrate, ever so faintly. Dragging a rack of lights to the front of the stage, he spoke about using them to interrogate the audience. (He then handed out protective sunglasses.) "Pretend you're all a bunch of Palestinians," he said, "and I'm going to pretend I'm an Israeli soldier at a checkpoint harassing you."

But the lights weren't strong enough to attract a moth. He asked: "Is that O.K.? Is that too bright?"

Mr. Halaby's comic sensibility is one of charming ineptitude that can turn on a dime. After recounting his final tale, which involved a particularly nasty immigration officer, Mr. Halaby decided to show a few movements inspired, he said, by the strength and determination of the Palestinian people. Standing, he held several positions: arms down, crossed in front of his chest, hands on hips and held behind his back. His facial expressions — frozen, confused and lost — tied it all together.