

Unison dancers in action.
(Photos: Oren Cohen)



Two marshmallows or one?

• By ORI J. LENKINSKI

As any parent of a dancer, athlete or musician can tell you, having a gifted child is a pricey business. Equipment, lessons, performances, gas for shuttling back and forth to said events – all of these things rapidly consume money.

Though money doesn't buy excellence, it is certainly a component without which the road to greatness becomes infinitely more challenging. It is for this reason that studio owner Moran Barak put together "Marshmallow," an evening that will take place this Sunday night at the Suzanne Dellal Center in Tel Aviv. (The name was taken from the famous Stanford Marshmallow Study, in which children were asked to put off eating one marshmallow for a certain time in order to receive two later.)

The founder of the 14-year-old Unison Studio in Even Yehuda, Barak has made it her goal to push her students forward in every way possible.

"Two of my students just got accepted to the Paris Opera Ballet's summer program. But how do we pay for that?" says Barak over the phone. "In order to continue on their paths, my students need a lot of money."

Barak, 40, hails from Kibbutz Kfar Menahem. Her desire to open a dance studio was sparked straight out of the army. She completed a BA in dance and was certified as a dance teacher. Then, in 2002, she opened the doors of Unison. Along the way, she decided to pursue a master's in dance, which is currently under way at the Jerusalem Academy of Music and Dance.

TUCKED AWAY at the tip of Even Yehuda, Unison's two-studio school is pushing beyond the boundaries of the



expected. Barak has carefully sought out teachers of the highest levels, whose dance experience includes time spent in leading companies in Israel and abroad.

"There is a lot of information in Israel," she says. "There are amazing choreographers, incredible talent. I have teachers that give so much of themselves, of what they learned in the field. They are role models to my young dancers."

Barak's curriculum includes studying the works of prominent Israeli choreographers. This practice not only improves

her dancers' technique, it connects them to the cultural community they are becoming a part of.

"We work with the repertoire of Inbal Pinto, Ohad Naharin, Barak Marshall and many others. I see girls at the age of 12 dancing like soloists," she says.

"There is a bright future for dance students in Israel," she continues.

"They have places to go to. Dancers from all over the world come here to dance and it's right here for them. I

want them to choose their own path, their career. Not all will be dancers; those who won't be dancers will learn a lot of life lessons, aesthetic vision, discipline."

To be a Unison dancer means to forgo many of the pastimes other kids enjoy. To prepare for "Marshmallow," students have been attending rehearsals six days a week.

"Preparing for performances, like that [Stanford] study, teaches the kids about delayed gratification. After all they give

up, after waiting and waiting, those moments on stage are so invigorating for them," Barak says.

Performing, in her eyes, is of the essence when training dancers. "Marshmallow" will give the students a chance to feel the warmth of the spotlight firsthand.

"They need a stage to practice on. Dance is a performance art and they need to try out being on stage. Suzanne Dellal is the stage to be on," she says.

"Practice builds them; the more they rehearse, the more they perform, the better they will be," she explains. "Today in Israel, in order to get into a company, you need to have a resume already. Each performance gives another line on that resume, plus giving a lot of motivation and the sense that they can and will fulfill their dreams."

The students' annual roster includes multiple performances, competitions and trips overseas. Unison recently represented Israel at Lincoln Center in New York, and also in Salt Lake City.

"We just came back from Utah, and next we will perform at the Brooklyn Academy of Music," she says.

These engagements make Barak's job immensely complicated, and yet she sees them as the cherry on top of a fulfilling life.

"My goal is to develop excellence in dance in Israel. That means exposing my students to excellence and to the

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– Unison Studio founder
Moran Barak

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sacrifices and drive that they need to get there," she says.

"There are weeks that we have a show in the States, a show in Israel and presentations for industry people in Israel. I want to continue to pull them forward, in the hard moments, mostly, to always give them the desire to be and do more

and better," she says.

In the days leading up to "Marshmallow," Barak's plate has become especially full. The program boasts performances by Unison dancers, as well as guests from Batsheva Dance Company, the Israel Ballet, the Jerusalem Ballet and more.

It will be the first evening of its kind in

Israel, marking a new kind of integrated education and professional event. All of the proceeds will go toward grants for students to pursue their passion in the dance sector.

'Marshmallow' will take place on April 10 at 9 p.m. at the Suzanne Dellal Center. For more information: www.suzannedellal.org.il.

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