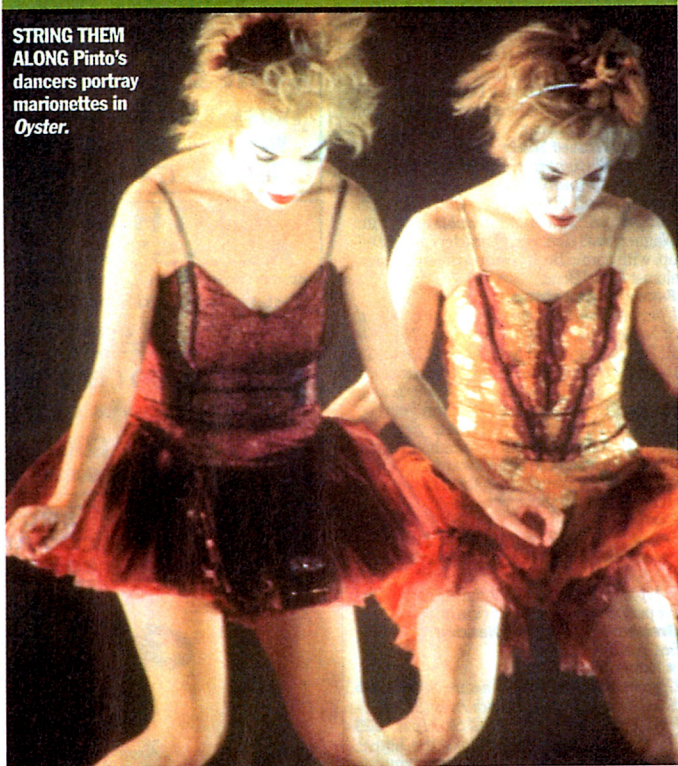


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DANCE

STRING THEM ALONG Pinto's dancers portray marionettes in *Oyster*.



Pearl jam

Inbal Pinto and Avshalom Pollak reveal the inner luster of *Oyster*

By **Gia Kourlas**

Inbal Pinto's *Oyster* blends the fantasy of a circus with the inquisitiveness of contemporary dance. The work's characters include a set of life-size marionettes (strings link their pointe shoes to their wrists), an aging performer evocative of Pierrot, and an awkward ballerina who wears a black turtleneck pulled up over her mouth and has a stool attached to her fluffy tutu. She may resemble the doe-eyed girls who adorn Walter Keane paintings, but as is the norm in Pinto's world, she's a million times freakier looking.

Even though the title of the full-evening work—which makes its New York premiere at the Joyce beginning Tuesday 22—is taken from Tim Burton's odd short story "The Melancholic Death of Oyster Boy," the inspiration behind the dance isn't drawn from that. Conceived by Pinto, who also designed the costumes, and director Avshalom Pollak, who compiled the music for the score (it includes pieces by Pagliacci, Astor Piazzolla, Harry James and Yma Sumac),

Oyster unfolds in a series of short, surreal vignettes.

"Whenever we choose a name for a work, we have a hard time, because we never start with one," Pollak explains in a telephone interview from Tel Aviv, where the pair, who are a couple, are based. "We were told we had to come up with a title when it was three-quarters made and we were on tour in London; that's where we found the book of Tim Burton's. I don't know why the word *oyster* was appealing, but it was as a sound—not as a meaning or basis for content. We just used it temporarily, and then a lot of things from our world ended up inhabiting this word."

The title is appropriate in an obscure way: As the piece progresses, the audience becomes privy to dozens of hidden theatrical pearls. Pinto and Pollak expand the notion of the proscenium by using a string of lights, thereby creating a stage within a stage. Another larger-than-life character—two performers who become one with the help of a roomy black suit—opens his

jacket to, once again, narrow the view and reveal another setting.

Despite its colorful atmosphere, *Oyster* is more complex than a circus-infused dance. "It can be interpreted in multiple layers," Pollak says. "It's something that really depends on the eyes and the heart and the feeling of the viewer. It uses the frame of the circus or traveling theater, but inside it, you can build thousands of more stories. We want the audience to not just be there to receive the information, but to be part of the creative process."

For Pinto, the piece was also guided by a decision to stop dancing. "It was the first time that I didn't perform while I was choreographing," she says. "Sometimes I see *Oyster* as a piece about the same people and their perspectives at different points in their lives. Why is something no longer important to a person? Coming from a place where I stopped dancing, this issue was important to me. Now I'm more objective about the work, and I don't limit the movement to what my body is able to do."

Pollak, a well-known actor in Israel since he was a child (he appeared on the popular television series *Florentine*), discovered dance through Pinto, whom he met in 1993. "I had written and directed a play, and I wanted to do something physical, with movement and dancing," he recalls. "Inbal showed me a dance she had made, and it was amazing. At first, we didn't work together, but we stayed together as a couple, and slowly I was sucked inside the world of dance. I found the world of theater becoming less and less interesting to me. When I saw what Inbal was doing, it gave me a lot of hope. It's so professional. I envy and adore dancers, who work so hard. Actors can be a little bit lazy sometimes."

"The other reason was that it was a really good piece!" interrupts Pinto, laughing.

"It was a great piece," he agrees. "But it was also a combination of the things that I like visually. Dance is something you don't necessarily have to explain, yet you get a lot of things out of it. You don't have to have words, but you still hear somebody speaking."

Inbal Pinto Dance Company performs at the Joyce Tuesday 22 through April 27.