STATEMENT

on the dissertation work

Contemporary Dance in Israel: Imagination,
Choreographic Methods and Artistic Practices

submitted for the award of the educational and scientific degree of
"Doctor"

Candidate: Yanitsa Atanasova Shopova
Professional Field 8.4: Theatre and Film Arts

Academic Supervisor: Prof. Anna Pampulova, PhD

Reviewer: Assoc. Prof. Tatyana Sokolova, PhD

I have known Yanitsa and followed her professional development as a performer and choreographer. Her affinity for Ohad Naharin's Gaga movement language, and the way she interprets body intensity, inner sensation, and the individuality of the performer, these were the reasons she was invited to join the teaching team of the Dance Theatre programme at New Bulgarian University (NBU). Atanasova's bodily condition prompts her to seek movements that do not rely on excessive muscular tension, external control, or the pursuit of perfect form. Her attention shifts towards relaxation, spontaneity, natural movement, and inner sensation. The body begins to be explored not as a form to be mastered but as a source of impulses, sensations, and individual movement choices. She skilfully combines all of these elements in her performing, teaching, and choreographic work on Bulgarian and international stages.

The dissertation **"Contemporary Dance in Israel: Imagination, Choreographic Methods and Artistic Practices"** consists of an introduction, three chapters, a conclusion, and a bibliography.

In Chapter One, **"An Overview of the Development of the Contemporary Dance Scene in Israel from the Beginning of the 20-th Century to the Present"**, Atanasova traces the formation of the contemporary dance scene in Israel. She reaches the factual conclusion that it is the result of a complex interplay of various cultural influences, migration processes, and international cooperation. Within this context, German Expressionist dance is presented as having had a significant, though not predominant, influence on the development of the dance scene in Israel. This influence did not occur through the direct transfer of an established stage model, but through artists, teachers, and choreographers trained in the tradition of Rudolf von Laban, Kurt Jooss, and Mary Wigman. The influence of American modern dance techniques, which began to change the direction of the Israeli dance scene after the 1960s, is also traced, including the influence of Martha Graham and Anna Sokolow. The conclusion is drawn that the choreographers discussed followed different paths towards developing their own distinctive stage language. Their practices delineate a diverse artistic environment in which individual movement, inner sensation, and an independent bodily identity gradually become established as important characteristics.

In this context, the dissertation argues that contemporary dance in Israel was not formed through one-way borrowing from Europe and America, but through a process of transfer, reinterpretation, and local reformulation. From this perspective, the later emergence of Gaga as a movement language can be understood not as an isolated phenomenon, but as the result of a prolonged search for a distinctive bodily and stage language within Israeli concert dance.

Atanasova presents key characteristics of movement in selected works by Israeli choreographers. Her selection relates to the exploration of different manifestations of movement on the Israeli dance scene from the late 20-th to the early 21-st century.

The performances "Anaphase" by Ohad Naharin, "Aide-Mémoire" by Rami Be'er, "White Noise" by Vertigo Dance Company, and "OCD Love" by Sharon Eyal are examined analytically.

In Chapter Two, **"Gaga – A Movement Language as a Choreographic and Performance Practice"**, the Gaga movement language created by Ohad Naharin is examined in the context of his work as a choreographer and artistic director of the Batsheva Dance Company. The emphasis is on understanding Gaga not as a fixed dance technique, but as an open and evolving practice

that directs attention towards sensory perception, imagination, bodily awareness, and the individual's relationship to movement.
A distinction is drawn between Gaga as a movement language and the traditional understanding of dance technique. Gaga is not a complete system of fixed positions, movements, or stylistic rules, but an open practice that evolves through continuous exploration of the body.

Across six detailed sections, the principles and methods of Gaga, as well as the way this movement language is presented, are examined. This is followed by an investigation of how Gaga sessions are conducted in practice and the principles underpinning them. In the next section, Atanasova presents contextual parallels between Gaga as a movement language, somatic practices, release techniques, and dance meditation – the Five Rhythms practice. The influence of the Gaga movement language on the performer's imagination, movement, and artistic presence is substantiated. Ohad Naharin's stage practice and his contribution as an innovator in contemporary dance, not only in Israel, are examined analytically and competently. Finally, Chapter Two discusses Gaga as a movement language in contemporary dance in Bulgaria during the period 2021–2026.

In Chapter Three of the dissertation, entitled **"Personal Practical Developments and Methodology Inspired by the Gaga Movement Language"**, the doctoral candidate's personal experience and creative inspiration behind her choice of topic come to the fore, along with her individual practical and creative contribution through "Gaga Expression" (Гага-изказ).

Here, Atanasova presents Gaga as a basis for personal and artistic exploration. Through brief descriptions of her own choreographic productions, she demonstrates the application of principles from the Gaga movement language in the rehearsal process with professional performers. The doctoral candidate then examines her personal teaching experience in applying principles inspired by Gaga. She presents her experience of working with professionals and students in NBU's Theatre programme.

In conclusion, I would say that Atanasova's personal practical experience with Gaga can serve as a basis for choreographic and pedagogical exploration when it is understood as a source of bodily understanding and inspiration, rather than as a practice to be taught or adapted without the

necessary qualifications. This distinction makes it possible to preserve the specific character of Gaga while also analysing its influence on independent artistic work.

The dissertation systematically presents and analytically traces the relationship between the historical development of contemporary dance in Israel, the work of Ohad Naharin, and the emergence of the Gaga movement language. The presence of Gaga in the Bulgarian dance context during the period 2021–2026 is documented.

In summary, considering the qualities of the dissertation “Contemporary Dance in Israel: Imagination, Choreographic Methods and Artistic Practices” discussed in this opinion, I note that they meet the criteria for a successful defence before the academic jury. I therefore recommend that doctoral candidate Yanitsa Shopova Atanasova be awarded the educational and scientific degree of “Doctor” in Professional Field 8.4: Theatre and Film Arts.

I vote YES!

10 October 2026 Assoc. Prof. Tatyana Sokolova, PhD