



## New York venue dances to Israel's tune

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Israel's Batsheva is booked to perform at the Brooklyn Academy of Music this week. (UPPA / Photoshot)

Israel's Batsheva Dance Company will perform this week at the Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM) in New York.

Batsheva is a dance company, [dubbed \(https://embassies.gov.il/helsinki-en/AboutIsrael/Culture/Pages/CULTURE-Dance.aspx\)](https://embassies.gov.il/helsinki-en/AboutIsrael/Culture/Pages/CULTURE-Dance.aspx) by the Israeli foreign ministry as “perhaps the best known global ambassador of Israeli culture.” After more than a year of Israeli genocide in Palestine, BAM leaders’ decision to program Batsheva has sparked a wave of protest from the Palestine solidarity movement, particularly from solidarity activists in the arts.

Three performing arts groups that emerged shortly after Israel's genocide began – [Dancers for Palestine](https://dancersforpalestine.wordpress.com/) (<https://dancersforpalestine.wordpress.com/>), [Theater Workers for a Ceasefire](https://theaterworkersforaceasefire.com/) (<https://theaterworkersforaceasefire.com/>) and [Amplify Palestine](https://www.amplifypalestine.org/) (<https://www.amplifypalestine.org/>) – launched a campaign in early 2025 urging BAM to drop Batsheva.

The campaign began with a private letter to BAM leadership in mid-January with one straightforward request: noting BAM's "long history as a progressive arts institution," these organizations "respectfully request that [BAM] cancel [its] upcoming engagement with Batsheva Dance Company."

BAM's leadership did not reply to the letter, so as February began, the three organizations [took their letter public](https://dancersforpalestine.wordpress.com/2025/01/31/no-batsheva-at-bam/) (<https://dancersforpalestine.wordpress.com/2025/01/31/no-batsheva-at-bam/>) and called for artists around the US to sign on. As of mid-February more than 60 performing arts organizations and hundreds of individual artists from around the US had signed the letter.

BAM's leaders have yet to respond.

Notable among the signatories to the "Drop Batsheva" letter was the BAM Cinema Floor Staff, whose decision to publicly criticize the decision to host Batsheva signaled a sharp divide between BAM's upper management and its workers.

As one BAM cinema worker explained, the decision to program and promote Batsheva during a genocide is "indicative of how [BAM's top executives] operate." While BAM promotes itself as a "[champion](https://www.bam.org/about/)" of "[inclusion and accessibility](https://www.bam.org/about/)" (<https://www.bam.org/about/>), in practice it functions as a highly stratified workplace where, according to BAM cinema workers, management has minimal contact with workers. And the nature of that contact is often disciplinary, staff have confirmed.

Like many arts organizations, BAM appears to chart its political and artistic course in private consultation with wealthy board members and donors, while ignoring the voices of the artists and workers who keep the institution running. According to the worker I spoke with, most BAM cinema workers were not even aware of the leadership's decision to program Batsheva mid-genocide, leading to "confusion" and "frustration" among BAM's workers.

This type of disconnect – between arts workers who oppose Israel and arts executives doubling down in support of it – has become increasingly visible throughout the US arts industry since October 2023.

In theater, workers have organized dozens of protests, teach-ins, and other actions in support of Palestine over the past 17 months, while prominent theaters and theater organizations have either stayed silent or shown open support for Israel. When Israeli forces [raided \(https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2023/12/20/no-safe-place-jenins-freedom-theatre-raided-daubed-with-star-of-david\)](https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2023/12/20/no-safe-place-jenins-freedom-theatre-raided-daubed-with-star-of-david) The Freedom Theatre in the occupied West Bank city of Jenin in December 2023, arresting two of its directors, hundreds of US-based theater workers participated in [demonstrations \(https://www.972mag.com/freedom-theatre-jenin-art-world-protests/\)](https://www.972mag.com/freedom-theatre-jenin-art-world-protests/), demanding their release.

Meanwhile, ostensibly progressive theaters that had supported and collaborated with the Freedom Theatre in the past – including New York’s famed Public Theater and New York Theatre Workshop – [refused \(https://www.broadwayworld.com/article/NYTW-Responds-to-Playwrights-Demands-for-Public-Call-for-Ceasefire-in-Gaza-20240304\)](https://www.broadwayworld.com/article/NYTW-Responds-to-Playwrights-Demands-for-Public-Call-for-Ceasefire-in-Gaza-20240304) even to call for a ceasefire.

## Cold War “culture”

In the dance world, support for Zionism – Israel’s state ideology – may be even stronger than in theater. As one organizer with Dancers for Palestine (D4P) explained, “there’s a long history connecting Zionism and the development of Israeli modern dance,” a history that “goes back to the Cold War, when the US was using many types of art, including modern dance, as propaganda.”

Modern dance icon Martha Graham, one of America’s most prominent [Cold War cultural ambassadors \(https://gagosian.com/quarterly/2024/10/23/essay-dance-as-propaganda/\)](https://gagosian.com/quarterly/2024/10/23/essay-dance-as-propaganda/), helped found Batsheva, [serving as its first artistic consultant \(https://batsheva.co.il/en/about/more-about-the-company/\)](https://batsheva.co.il/en/about/more-about-the-company/).

If it seems odd that organizations like the Israeli government and the [US State Department \(https://gagosian.com/quarterly/2024/10/23/essay-dance-as-propaganda/\)](https://gagosian.com/quarterly/2024/10/23/essay-dance-as-propaganda/) would invest heavily in modern dance, for the D4P organizers it’s just more evidence that “colonial powers know how powerful art is.”

As one of the organizers put it, “If art wasn’t powerful, why would governments leverage it so hard? Why would there be censorship?”

The organizer noted that the flip side of Israeli artwashing is the brutal oppression of Palestinian artists who are commonly “held in prison without charges for being artists...kept in prison without charges. That demonstrates how powerful art is.”

While the artists of D4P celebrate the liberatory power of dance, the dancers of Batsheva, led by the company’s choreographer and longtime artistic director Ohad Naharin, appear to take a more pessimistic view. While Naharin readily voices criticisms of Israel’s government, Batsheva has refused on multiple occasions to disavow its role as Israel’s cultural ambassador or refuse government support.

In a [January 2024 interview \(https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2024-01-12/ty-article-magazine/.highlight/on-stage-and-off-ohad-naharin-conveys-a-powerful-message-amid-gaza-war/0000018c-fb01-d517-af9d-ff3fc49a0000\)](https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2024-01-12/ty-article-magazine/.highlight/on-stage-and-off-ohad-naharin-conveys-a-powerful-message-amid-gaza-war/0000018c-fb01-d517-af9d-ff3fc49a0000) with the Tel Aviv daily *Haaretz*, Naharin bemoaned the “cycle of violence” in Palestine, while also arguing that the Palestinian-led boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) movement “doesn’t help the Palestinians, unfortunately, but it does add drama.”

In a stark contrast to D4P’s assertion of the power of art, Naharin stated, “There is no clear distinction between good and bad, so everything is bad, everything is different shades of bad. I am helpless and have no influence over anything.”

This is hardly the manifesto one might expect from an artist [lauded by critics as “visionary” \(https://indulgemagazine.com/2025/02/20/batshevas-momo-a-hypnotic-journey-for-the-senses/\)](https://indulgemagazine.com/2025/02/20/batshevas-momo-a-hypnotic-journey-for-the-senses/), though it is perhaps appropriately nihilistic for the cultural ambassador of a genocidal state.

Batsheva aside, the movement in support of Palestine in the arts is growing by the day, as evidenced by [the breadth of support for the “Drop Batsheva” campaign \(https://dancersforpalestine.wordpress.com/2025/01/31/no-batsheva-at-bam/\)](https://dancersforpalestine.wordpress.com/2025/01/31/no-batsheva-at-bam/). Artists and organizations from New York to Seattle have signed on, from Entertainment Labor for Palestine (a coalition of pro-Palestine union members in film and television) to the queer Yiddish theater collective GLYK to Theatre of the Oppressed NYC.

Discussing the importance of bringing artists into the movement for a free Palestine, one D4P organizer quoted Bertold Brecht, saying that “art is not a mirror held up to reality, but a hammer with which to shape it.”

“A lot of times artists use the mirror held up to reality,” the organizer said. “But our real role is to burst through that and not just show it, but show what’s beyond it, and underneath it and past it.”

Whether BAM decides to drop Batsheva or not this time around, a reckoning is clearly on the horizon for those in the arts who refuse to take a stand against the genocidal Zionist project.

*William Johnson is an organizer with Theater Workers for a Ceasefire and a member of the New York-based Art Workers Inquiry.*

◆ [Batsheva Dance Company \(/tags/batsheva-dance-company\)](/tags/batsheva-dance-company). [Brooklyn Academy of Music \(/tags/brooklyn-academy-music\)](/tags/brooklyn-academy-music). [Dancers for Palestine \(/tags/dancers-palestine\)](/tags/dancers-palestine). [Theater Workers for a Ceasefire \(/tags/theater-workers-ceasefire\)](/tags/theater-workers-ceasefire). [Amplify Palestine \(/tags/amplify-palestine\)](/tags/amplify-palestine). [Jenin Freedom Theatre \(/tags/jenin-freedom-theatre\)](/tags/jenin-freedom-theatre). [Public Theater \(/tags/public-theater\)](/tags/public-theater). [New York Theatre Workshop \(/tags/new-york-theatre-workshop\)](/tags/new-york-theatre-workshop). [Martha Graham \(/tags/martha-graham\)](/tags/martha-graham). [Ohad Naharin \(/tags/ohad-naharin\)](/tags/ohad-naharin). [Entertainment Labor for Palestine \(/tags/entertainment-labor-palestine\)](/tags/entertainment-labor-palestine). [GLYK \(/tags/glyk\)](/tags/glyk). [Theatre of the Oppressed NYC \(/tags/theatre-oppressed-nyc\)](/tags/theatre-oppressed-nyc). [Bertolt Brecht \(/tags/bertolt-brecht\)](/tags/bertolt-brecht).