

**Hofesh Shechter Company: Dance Summer School at The Cherwell School,
Marston Ferry Road, Oxford.**

Monday 27 to Friday 31 July 2009

Great to see OTG following up on its new policy of sponsoring community based projects by helping to fund the Oxford Playhouse series of summer schools this year. I really enjoyed my visits to the Hofesh Shechter Dance course at the Cherwell School, and can report that it was a great success all round!

Hofesh Shechter is becoming one of the leading lights in the UK contemporary dance scene, having won the Critics Circle National Dance Award for Best Choreography in 2008. His winning production, *In Your Rooms*, was performed by the company at the Oxford Playhouse last autumn. I was lucky enough to see it and found it spell-binding – hence my interest in observing how his dancers would work with the nine keen young people who arrived for the school in July.

Shechter's dance technique, described as 'distinctive, edgy and urban', proved immediately popular. It was evident that, far from being rank beginners, they all had some experience of dance – the two boys actually studying at Cherwell were Street Dance addicts, and a more senior member of the group, Anja Meinhardt, was involved in setting up a professional Physical Theatre company in Oxford, hoping to perform for the first time this autumn.

Everyone was wowed by Shechter's very original way of moving: a technique which emphasizes such elements as 'heaviness, relaxation, giving in to gravity', the teachers making constant reference to animal and jungle imagery, to 'being quiet, stealthy and low', and the dancers crawling, rolling, sliding and tumbling, keeping on or very close to the floor. This 'earthiness' gave a strangely magical feel to the movement, very different from what we expect of more traditional classical ballet dancers.

In the morning sessions the students would practise specific techniques and learn movements from some of Shechter's work in performance, while in the afternoons they created their own sequences, solo or in groups, which they then danced for their classmates. On the last day there was to be a showing for an audience of friends and relatives, which the dancers were all looking forward to when I met them!

Leon (rehearsal director for the company) who led the course, spoke to me about Shechter's way of moving, stressing its instinctive, improvisatory quality. He was constantly asking the students to 'dance with their whole bodies', emphasizing strength in the centre, 'softening of the hips', suppleness in the shoulders etc, but watching as a former dance practitioner, I could see – or more truthfully, feel! – that the really hard work was going on in the thighs ... Keeping just a few inches above the floor, being constantly asked to 'be lower' is killing, as was witnessed by the groans of the dancers at the end of each session!

However the verdict of one of the street dancers from Cherwell, Thabela Mojaki, was "fantastic, great technique, I really enjoyed it!" It was certainly fabulous to watch and I look forward to seeing the company again at the Playhouse in the autumn. Mark it in your diaries now!

Jackie Keirs