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a lifestyles exclusive:

## Or Nili Azulay

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Photos courtesy of Roman Salda

# Or Nili Azulay

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by Nancy Kleinbaum

When Israeli-born dancer and actress Or Nili Azulay walks into a room, heads turn. The stunningly statuesque, raven-haired beauty is glamorous, graceful and poised. But her beauty is more than skin-deep. When she speaks, her intelligence about matters cultural, as well as political, is evident.

Or Nili, as she is known to her friends, is an artistic phenomenon. She has trained and performs as a classical Spanish flamenco dancer; she is a choreographer; she is an actress; she writes poetry; she is a director, and she is fluent in three languages: Hebrew, Spanish and English. She also translates poetry from English and Spanish into Hebrew.

Renaissance woman? An understatement, at best, as she discusses politics and the conflicted world situation with the intelligence of one who has also studied philosophy and classical literature.

This combination of beauty, talent and intelligence only hints at the breadth of her mastery of the visual arts, where she uses her varied background and training to create a synthesis of modern and traditional dance based on Spanish and Middle Eastern traditions, as well as classical literature and music.

Azulay was born of mixed Ashkenazi and Sephardic origins. "I have always been drawn to Spanish culture," she says, when *Lifestyles* asks how a nice Jewish girl becomes a classic flamenco dancer?

"I watched the movie *Carmen* by Carlos Saura, featuring Antonio Gades. The film received an Oscar nomination in the '80s," she recalls. "That was the trigger. That awoke my passion for the flamenco. It was so theatrically elegant, revealing the dramatic potential of the art of flamenco."

Chatting in a Los Angeles cafe, where she is currently living and pursuing her career, she explains that she worked and studied very hard until she discovered her own signature style. "I had to find my own voice, my own way," she says. "My work is Spanish inspired, but I'm not trying to be a Spanish artist. I had to open myself to classical literature. I had to open myself to other materials."

Our conversation moves to an office where Or Nili pops her video into a VCR. The film clip clearly illustrates that she has definitely found her way in an incredibly beautiful performance of her original work, *The Flame and the Frost—A Dialogue for a Dancer*



and an Orchestra," which she performs accompanied by a full, live symphonic orchestra. Watching the gymnastic movements of this talented young dancer, one sees her, draped in red and black, evolve into the essence of fire itself.

Another film clip shows Or Nili as her revered Bizet's "Carmen," a dramatic and sensual character, into whose very essence she brings herself as a dancer.

In another work, Or Nili put a spin on Edvard Greig's *Peer Gynt Suite*, in which she portrays three different women in Ibsen's play.

"I'm telling the story of the last night of Peer Gynt's life" she explains, "when he is an old man about to die, recalling his passions, his loves and his women. The first is the young Solveig, his first love. Next, I create another of his lovers, a version of Anitra, the daughter of a Bedouin Sheik, and third, I evolve into Ingrid, the abandoned bride."

Azulay uses a rhythm, called "Siguriya," one of the most ancient flamenco dancing styles, she explains. "I love Spanish repertoire, but it is only one part of my work." She adds that the emotion of the music of classic flamenco dancing strongly attracts her. "I find it gives me a wonderful way to express moods and emotions, other colors, other longings. Unfortunately, people think of flamenco as shallow, with people snapping castanets, wearing red skirts in nightclubs. For me, at its heart, I feel a wonderful opportunity to discover and display deeper feelings and emotions. A good dancer has to be a musician in her soul, a virtuoso of rhythm who can hear and feel the music. With my dancing, I can play the music with my body."

**A**zulay was born in Ramat Gan. Her Sephardic Israeli-born mother, whose own mother was born in Syria, lives in Herzilya. "On my maternal side I am one big mixture," she laughs. "Syrian, Italian, Spanish, Moroccan, Egyptian, pure Sephardic. The pure Sephardic goes back seven generations in Israel!" she says proudly.

"My late father was Ashkenazi, Russian and German. He was a Holocaust survivor. He escaped from Treblinka as a young child, although his parents and five sisters were killed before his eyes. He ultimately joined the partisans and became a pilot in the Polish Army. Later he became a Nazi hunter and was among those who captured Adolph Eichmann.

"He became a professor in the science



Photo courtesy of Ben Lam

of transportation at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge, but then returned to Israel. He met my mother there and proposed marriage to her in the house of David Ben-Gurion, which today is a national museum.

"My parents spent hours with Ben-Gurion in his library after they became engaged," she smiles. "In fact, the guards came and asked Ben-Gurion if he wanted them to leave, but he insisted that they stay. My father passed away a long time ago and I did not really know him. I follow my mother's name because I grew up with her family. I never met my father's family. Most were lost during the war.

"My mother was one of the first women in Israel to become a barrister," her daughter points out proudly. "She is a very beautiful woman. She has very classic fea-

tures, a natural and exotic beauty," her equally beautiful daughter smiles. "But my grandmother, Nona, was the earthy woman, my source of inspiration for my dance and my poetry. She was always moving, working.

"I grew up listening to Nona's legends and music, a strong Spanish and Oriental influence. She had a beautiful voice and told the most incredible legends. I grew up in a home of a "Thousand Arabian Nights,"

but it was also a strongly Jewish home, where we practiced Jewish traditions, kept kosher, observed Shabbat. I was also exposed to classical awareness through music and literature. My Nona contributed to that atmosphere, a magical-feeling atmosphere. But my mother definitely must be praised for her tremendous personal investment in my education.

"She sent me to study piano when I was four years old. She taught me to read when I was less than two and-a-half. Everyday, she put a letter of the Hebrew alphabet on the window and I would learn it. Before I knew it, I was reading little books! The misfortune of not having a father around was compensated tremendously by my mother and my Nona. They exposed me at an early age to classical music, literature and the theater. Living in a house of women, I absorbed codes of strong women. They were tremendous feminists, even though they never burned bras!" she laughs.

Or Nili attended the prestigious Tichon Hadash, or New High School, named after the late Prime Minister, Yitzhak Rabin, where she specialized in science and the humanities. She then trained as an actress at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts in London and pursued her love of literature and philosophy at Tel Aviv University.

Always a top student, Or Nili began writing poetry at a young age, winning many prizes for her works, including the Ron Adler Poetry Award from Haifa University in 1993. The following year her book of poetry, *To*



"I love Spanish repertoire, but it is only one part of my work. I find it gives me a wonderful way to express moods and emotions, other colors, other longings."

*Worship God, To Worship Man*, published by Yaron Golan Publishers, received the Rachel Award for Hebrew Poetry.

As an Israeli citizen she did her patriotic duty by serving in the Israeli Navy. It is a famous Israeli expression that the beautiful girls, the so-called "heartbreakers," are generally assigned to the Navy and the Air Forces.

Is this true? she is asked.

Laughing modestly, she agrees that is what some people say. "Most of us worked as secretaries to generals and other high ranking officers. Today women are beginning to have the chance to be trained as pilots. But as an only child of a widowed mother, I was assigned an inside job not far from home in Tel Aviv," she says.

Or Nili's range of interests and talents is vast. She considers herself fortunate that her love of classical Spanish and Flamenco dance enabled her to be a student of the famed Sylvia Duran, "whose influence and contributions to my formation were so significant. She is one of my influential mentors, an extraordinary artist and teacher, whose opinion is always very important to me," she explains.

Her studies continued in Spain from 1995-96 under eminent teachers including Thomas De Madrid, who chose her to perform his own special creation "Beauty and the Wind," based on a Federico Garcia Lorca piece; Maria Magdalena, the famous teacher from the film *Carmen*; Paco Fernandez; Victoria Eugenia, who was the artistic director of the Spanish National Ballet; La Tati; El Guito, and Antonio Canales, who selected Or Nili as one of a select few from all over Spain to participate in a special process of developing and advancing his modernistic style.

Azulay also performed in Spain, Israel and England, accompanied by guitarist Juan Maya Marote, a leader of the pure interpreta-



Photos courtesy of Roman Sukla

tion of the art of flamenco; El Ian, a protégé of the legendary guitarist Seranito, and the well-known gypsy vocalist Salvador Suero, premiering in Tel Aviv in 1995 at the 12th International Guitar Festival, under the artistic direction of her teacher Sylvia Duran. She received rave reviews from the *London Classic Magazine*, which said, "...the brilliant Israeli Or Nili Azulay gave a dazzling performance which brought rapturous applause from the capacity audience of the theatre."

In 1999, she performed and created a work for the Acre Theatre Festival with controversial director Honi Hamaagel. She also worked on a film, under the direction of Haim Bouzaglo, whom she describes as one of Israel's best film directors. That same year, she starred in the dance festival "Dance on Fire" at the Suzzan Dellal Center in Tel Aviv.

Accompanied by twenty dancers, she performed the lead role in *Carmen*.

"It was a dream come true," the young dancer beams, recalling her portrayal of the exotic *Carmen*. "How can you not fall in love with this intoxicating character?" she enthuses. "I always feel that she was portrayed the wrong way. She was not a prostitute! She was a very great feminist, who would not trade her emotions. She wouldn't let a man she didn't love dominate her and this in times when women were educated to be ruled by men!"

The summer of 2000, Azulay was in Rio de Janeiro as a guest star of the OSB, Brazil's Philharmonic Orchestra, performing at the legendary "Teatro Municipal," where she was selected to give the opening performance of the theater's 90th anniversary.

"The Theater is magnificent, a treasure in cultural history," she explains. "To be privileged to perform there at a young age..." she pauses, surprisingly at a loss for words. "It was too amazing!" she laughs. "For a young dancer to perform there was like being at Carnegie Hall in New York or the Royal Albert Hall in London. The theater was modeled after the Paris Opera. It is one of the most elite world theaters. To have had that experience as a young dancer was a big achievement, a great honor which I will always treasure," she smiles.

This peripatetic dancer was soon back in Israel, performing at Habima, the National Theater, presenting an Israeli-Palestinian interpretation of a Federico Garcia Lorca poem "Somnambulant Romance," in a multi-faceted role as interpreter, director, choreographer, dancer and actress. "It was a very strong experience!" she recalls. "We received international acclaim.



“The main protagonist in terms of flamenco is the dancer, the performer’s personality, whereas in classical ballet the body is more of an instrument in the service of the overall piece and it looks like the movements are the protagonist’s more than the personality of the performer.”

“This work is very much like Romeo and Juliet trying to conceal their love in spite of their rivaling families. I re-translated the poem into Hebrew from Spanish and staged it as an impossible love story between an Israeli girl and a Palestinian boy. I did the translation, the direction and created the soundtrack. I had to get special permission from IDF Israeli radio to include the first extracts of the *Intifada* in the background,” she says.

But that was the least of the difficulties in presenting this concept in the war-torn Middle East. Political problems arose when the Palestinian actor was pressured not to perform with an Israeli girl on an Israeli stage, she recalls.

“No one remained indifferent. It was very hard to present this work. It was very controversial. We were right in the middle of the war, right in the middle of the fire,” she says. “There were daily suicide bombers and the emotions and fury were bursting from both sides. It was a daily confrontation to the point that the day before the premier, I did not know if we were going to go on!”

In spite of the political pressures, however, the performance did go on and received international rave reviews, Or Nili recalls.

By January 2001, Azulay gave several performances with the Israeli Philharmonic Orchestra, followed by a one-woman show that July at the “Carmiel Dance Festival.”

“I am having the time of my life,” she enthuses. “I have been trained by the best people. I have worked with the most demanding people and their bar for excellence has caused me to do my very best work. I was the festival’s bestseller at the Carmiel Dance Festival. It was just incredibly satisfying. But in art, you cannot sit still, literally. You must practice, practice,

practice! Constantly be moving, developing new ideas, working with other highly motivated people.”

Her devotion and hard work paid off in September 2001 when Shimon Peres, a big fan of the young dancer, requested Or Nili to be the sole performing artist in an important charity gala.

“It was an honor to have been selected for this fantastic opportunity!” she smiles, showing a letter of appreciation from the former Foreign Minister.

Combining her love of dance and her love of poetry, Azulay next performed as a main attraction in several festivals of Israeli poetry, performing her own dance and acting interpretations of her own poetry. In addition, she has made music videos for various singers, including David Broza’s song, “Isadora,” in which she danced and portrayed the character Isadora Duncan.

Last April, Or Nili made her American debut in Los Angeles, with the Los Angeles Jewish Symphony Orchestra. Founded by Los Angeles conductor Dr. Noreen Green, the Symphony brings together a range of interesting combinations—singers, dancers, and chorus groups—in its quest for unusual expressions of Jewish art.

Azulay performed two works with the Symphony, *The Israel Suite*, by Noam Sheriff, and Yuval Ron’s *Sephardic Songs of Exile*, which received outstanding reviews from the *Los Angeles Times*.

“Flamenco calls for one perspective,” she explains. “The main protagonist in terms of flamenco is the dancer, the performer’s personality, whereas in classical ballet the body is more of an instrument in the service of the overall piece and it looks like the movements are the protagonist’s more than the personality of the performer.

“This is an important distinction which I make in my own repertoire, but I admit that I definitely rely more on the flamenco perspective. The performer’s personality, this is the strongest influence on my work,” she emphasizes.

“*Sephardic Songs of Exile* allowed me to be more colorful, rhythmical, more improvised. In *The Israel Suite*, every movement has a story, or at least a specific mood, from the first movement, which is very dreamy. In it, I held a big piece of lace material that a Jewish bride would wear, like a lace mantilla, or Spanish shawl. While in a later movement, I looked like a prisoner trying to find a way, perhaps a physical or emotional escape, perhaps both, finally, moving to a mood of a lullaby, in which my moves suggested birds, horses, a baby, and more.

“Noreen sent me a tape with the pieces to be performed. Some tunes really touched me. I realized they were Israeli pioneer songs which had been molded into the *Israel Suite*. I created my movements based on a paragraph from Amos Oz’s book, *Black Box*, in which one of the characters describes her feelings when she hears these songs. I felt the very same way. His words inspired my movements, the feelings I have always felt when hearing pioneer songs.”

Speaking of the “Promised Land” always brings talk of Israel back to political realities and threats of war.

“Being in Israel and being a Jew obliges you to be conscious of war,” she says matter-of-factly. “For me, it has always been a way of life. In spite of my mixed heritage, I am an Israeli first. I think sooner or later we will be at war. The question is not of whether, but when.

“We are living in a highly tense zone





of the world. The Palestinians were given an incredibly good offer by Ehud Barak at Camp David. They did not take it and the terror continues. I can only hope that they accept something similar sometime soon. Otherwise, we have no choice. We cannot live with this kind of violence, children with bombs thrown around trying to kill us. It is insanity.

"But, you know, I am never fearful when I am in Israel. It is harder to be away, here in Los Angeles or anywhere else in the world, and worry about family and friends. As I walk on the streets of Tel Aviv, I am not afraid. The country has given me so much, loved me so much. When I am home I have my heart filled with an intense emotional attachment, but not with fear. It is more difficult to be away than to be inside the country. To me the Promised Land is not a cliché.

"I related more as a teenager, in my early 20s, even as a child, to British and European culture. I could never have anticipated how much I relate to the United States! I'm in love with America. Israel is the 51st star in the American flag. There is respect and support for Israel, because we are strong, we are committed, we are determined. But I also feel very much at home here."

So what's next for this multi-talented young Israeli lady whose beauty is unquestionable, whose talent is multi-faceted, whose optimism is contagious, and whose gentle charm is so endearing?

Perhaps films, Or Nili smiles, noting that she did a guest scene with Serena Scott Thomas in a movie called *The Brothel* due out this year.

"I danced," she smiles. "I was the bridge between the past and the present, representing the consequences from other lives and her own subconscious," she explains.

"I have great passion for what I do and I truly believe that passion to be the key to success. What is success?" she laughs. "So many different things. Doing what you love, loving what you do, finding the right person to love.

"I am aware that some of the work I do is innovative: the use of Spanish dance, and my dance interpretations of my own poetry. I would love to have the opportunity to get as many people as possible exposed to my personal creative interpretations of dance and drama!"

**lifestyles**