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DANCE REVIEW | 'DANCING WITH THE BERLIN WALL'

Dancing in the Streets to Celebrate a Toppling

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Twenty years ago on Monday, the [Berlin Wall](#) fell, but it wasn't only world leaders who celebrated the anniversary of its demise. The choreographer Nejla Y. Yatkin, a native of that city, offered her own site-specific homage, "Dancing With the Berlin Wall," as part of Performing Revolution in Central and Eastern Europe, a festival in New York.



Michael Nagle

On Allen Street, performing "Dancing With the Berlin Wall."

After congregating at Ludlow 38, a contemporary-art space on the Lower East Side, on Monday night, audience members followed eight dancers in khaki trench coats to Allen Street as a man, strumming a guitar, provided ambient sound. Dancers handed out notes and whispered instructions that we should read them and pass them on. (Examples were "How do we dance the dance of freedom?" or "171 people were killed or died trying to escape at the Berlin Wall.") It was a little secret police mixed with safety control.

After a too leisurely stroll — for it's not relaxing or especially meditative to walk at a snail's pace behind a group of dancers wearing trench coats in New York at rush hour — the performers lined up on Allen Street's median strip and in choppy, unison voices

recited text that revealed Ms. Yatkin's experiences growing up in a divided city. She was 17 when the wall fell.

"I still remember vividly standing at Checkpoint Charlie," the dancers said, and "having the sense that any wall that was built will eventually topple down." But Ms. Yatkin's life-changing moment came a year later during a concert at Potsdamer Platz, where, standing in a crowd, she thought about "walls, barriers, freedom — walls of fear that we build around each other."

The dancers illustrated ideas of isolation and yearning by thrashing forward and back in swirling attitude turns and low lunges, which gave their movement a clear sense of agitation. It was more compelling to watch the phrases unfold from the side rather than from behind; the length of the median strip allowed the movement to pulsate with little variety, but at least with a certain fearlessness.

Once the crowd was at the Goethe-Institut Wyoming Building on East Third Street, Ms. Yatkin presented a more formal dance in which the performers peeled off their coats, as if highlighting their newfound freedom. Careering from one side to the other, they stretched their arms with heartfelt emotion. In the end, it was all too literal.

"Dancing With the Berlin Wall" was like a sentimental diary entry — direct from Ms. Yatkin to her teenage self.

The Performing Revolution in Central and Eastern Europe festival continues through March; performingrevolution.org.