

ISRAELI THEATRE IN LONDON

SONIA ZAFER SMITH reports on an unusual encounter

The capacity of theatre to offer a momentary bridge between peoples and worlds is inexhaustible – particularly when it comes to the mushrooming corpus of works being made by a generation of experimental theatre makers and writers, currently coming of age in Israel.

Eager to present Israeli identity beyond the frames of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and the inheritance of the Holocaust, the *Tik-sho-ret* theatre company is highly responsive to the creative voice and thematic interests of emerging Israeli theatre practitioners. Working in collaboration with Tristan Bates Theatre and the Actor's Centre, *Tik-sho-ret* embarked on a project to nurture this voice, bringing Israeli and British dramaturges, performers and directors together for a weekend of experimental encounters across theatrical borders. The culmination of this project was a 'sharing' of performances of five extracts from plays by young Israeli writers – an event which also tested British receptivity to new Israeli writing.

Across the five plays showcased, complex issues of identity in Israel's multi-ethnic, multi-aspirational society were brought to life. Frustrations with shifts to the right in Israel's political moorings; anxieties about the future, desires for escape outside the country amongst Israeli youth, class consciousness and a general curiosity about the non-Israeli other – all seemed to be preoccupations driving new Israeli writing. These works, carefully chosen, also dealt with issues of love, loneliness, gender, frustration and longing that would be familiar to Israeli and British audiences alike.

In the first play, *Leap* by Ela Moskovits-Weiss, an Arab-Israeli woman has made it into the higher echelons of Israel's male-dominated and primarily Jewish-Israeli police force. As she interrogates a narcissistic and ruthlessly manipulative Jewish college professor about the murder of his lover, he joyfully reminds her of her being both female and Arab in a male and Jewish-run society. As the scene unfolds, we are given access to her memories; to the choices she had to make to get this far in her career; to the family she had to leave behind and the rejection of her

Arabic self as she tries to succeed in a Jewish system. Whilst some of the depiction of her forsaken Arab identity drew on hackneyed, Orientalist clichés of Arab selfhood, the extract introduced beautifully some of the subtle and overt hierarchies in Israel, to a non-Israeli audience.

The second short, Oded Lipshitz's *The Light Turns Upon Me*, was a slick and triumphant piece of writing and

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performance. Set in an apartment block in Tel Aviv, the young, middle- and upper-middle-class Israeli residents live in close proximity but are kept far apart by layers of neuroses and internal worlds of angst. Their thoughts of self-doubt and anxiety are continually voiced throughout the scenes, and pass between them like hot potatoes. Throughout the dialogue, the characters co-construct a flowing narrative out of the articulation of these private inner thoughts. They each tell us, the audience, about what makes them tick and how their falling in and out of love and their constant searching for connections in their surroundings are the source of the hope, happiness and the pain in their lives. After the performance, a

fellow audience member turned to me and commented that this short was "good. But what was Israeli about it?" The physically close proximity of these characters set against their isolation told the audience about life in a post-socialist and post-collective, unashamedly capitalist Israel. No, it was not about war or kibbutzim. It simply spoke about the everyday, contemporary Israeli psyche, plagued by complex emotions of separation and longing – ubiquitous themes that pass unchallenged in both American and British theatre.

Speaking about the five extracts in a post-show discussion, the highly eloquent dramaturge Roe Chen of Gesher Theatre (Tel Aviv) commented that Israeli new writing depicts the Israeli desire to "be cynical about Israel and to not think about the conflict". The shorts chosen for this showcase are all indicative of this desire and of the issues that Israelis do want to think about. Chen also described Israeli theatre as "a dead dragon that once had fire in its belly". Stuck on issues of "the Holocaust, the army, the family, the kibbutz and the conflict (in that order); you cannot move this dragon."

However, Chen optimistically applauded this event for demonstrating how new Israeli writing at the fringes brings to life the tensions and concerns, the ironies and the cynicism prevalent in contemporary Israel.

This was particularly well done in Eyal Weiser's *Hokey Pokey* a hilarious caricature of the pettiness and pretensions of the generally Ashkenazi and Jewish Israeli bourgeoisie and intelligentsia.

This short took Israeli black humour to a brave frontier by depicting a Jewish therapist who fantasizes about a sexual affair with Hitler. The play also features a young Israeli playwright/director. When an Arab actor turns up to audition with a speech from Lady Macbeth, he sees an opportunity to connect with the times and display his supposedly leftist and liberal sentiments by insisting that she bring her experiences as the victimised Arab to the character of Lady Macbeth. Bemused and baffled, this eloquent, educated, intelligent woman stands aghast as she is told to "be more Arab".

The racist assumptions poorly veiled within politically correct politeness were



Isabelle King and





Shai Forester and Tara Jaffar

Photos: Shira Klasmier



Robert Bradely and behind director Eyal Israel and writer Oded Liphshitz



Tom Latter, associate director, speaking, and next to him Zoe Robinson co-producer



brilliantly attacked in this script, forcing liberal audiences, Israeli and British alike, to confront latent prejudices. The extract demonstrated well the sophisticated and self-aware new Israeli writing of which Chen spoke.

5 Kilo Sugar, by Gur Koren, offered a more traditional, witty and charming story of inter-generational mischief. This extract gave space to remember Israel's Yiddish – or rather Yekke – ancestry, quickly becoming antiquated and ever-unfashionable in contemporary Israeli society.

The anxious Ashkenazi humour and references to herring and gefilte fish made this play the most familiar for audience members who have been brought up to associate Israelis with Judaism and Judaism with Woody Allen and Larry David. But the exchange between a young, secular Israeli man and his deceased Yiddish grandfather tells a deeper story about generational shifts and cultural identity, unique to secular Israel.

The final play, *The Promised Land* by Shahar Pinkas, was a timely piece about Sudanese and Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers in Israel. The extract gave a very human face to this latest of Israel's new immigrant communities, adjusting to life in what is becoming an increasingly hostile and unwelcoming refuge.

This play called on its audience to see the deep emotional wounds of these refugees and their dependence on empathy and assistance from Israelis, who are increasingly turning against them according to the latest polls. It was encouraging to see this sympathetic piece presented as a reflection of issues at the heart of new Israeli writing, made even more meaningful in light of the recent weeks of anti-refugee violence in Israel.

Headed by Ariella Eshed, *Tik-sho-ret* was established in 2005 with the aim to create a platform for Israeli and Jewish plays in the UK and create educational and community-based projects around themes of communication and coexistence. The selection of plays matched this ethos well. However, what was equally fascinating about this sharing of works was its revelation of a growing creative and politically alert community, making its presence felt in London.

The audience at this event was made up largely of British theatre practitioners but also the London branch of a burgeoning Israeli diaspora. The showcase of new writing articulated the particular concerns, aspirations and identity politics of this community, which mistakenly gets swept into the corpus of the Jewish diaspora.

The capacity for lucid self-presentation amongst the Israeli diaspora should not be ignored or played down. In light of these extracts and the *Tik-sho-ret* project as a whole, providing platforms for new Israeli writing has a fantastic potential to build bridges and promote understanding between Israeli and British communities. It also offers those familiar with Israel a chance to learn some profound and remarkable insights about our new, talented cousins who are putting down roots in the neighbourhood.

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New Writing from Israel, a project of Tik-sho-ret Theatre Company, was held at the Tristan Bates Theatre, London, on 29 April 2012.

MORE BRITISH-ISRAELI CULTURAL EXCHANGE

One of the sponsors of *New Writing from Israel*, was the British Government through the channel of the Bi Arts programme in Tel Aviv. Managed by the British Council, the programme is funded 50% by the Council and 50% by the Israeli Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Culture and Sport.

This year Bi Arts is sponsoring British artists, writers, musicians, film-makers and puppeteers to take part in events in Israel as well as the visits to Britain of Israeli street artists Broken Fingaz Crew, who created a street art exhibition with British People of Print and Heretic; artists Guy Ben-Ner, and Yael Bartana, who took part in the Wide Open School at the Hayward Gallery earlier this summer, and the Doo Wop Girls and Yossi Wasser, who made an appearance at the Jewish

International Performing Arts Festival in Leeds in June. Israeli photographers, whose work will be shown in a 'Shooting the Green Line' project, will come to London for a panel discussion.

There are also intriguing programmes taking place in both countries. In a Modern Art Israel project three Israeli artists will communicate with three British artists through joint virtual studios before meeting in Jerusalem and London; in Voice into Performance, Bristol-based artist Miranda Borman facilitates a workshop in Tel Aviv for artists and musicians, and Israeli artist Sivan Gabrielovich will run a three-day conference in Bristol later this year on creating political performance in and outside the Middle East.