



Ariella (centre) with Gur Koren and Morag Sims

ARIELLA ESHED

JUDI HERMAN talks to the director of Tik-sho-ret, whose mission is to make the work of Israeli playwrights better known in Britain and to promote exchange with their British counterparts

“I’m not in the mindset of saying ‘yes I am really here permanently forever’. In my mindset, I’m going back to Israel tomorrow and that’s what’s important to me, to keep the relationship and the connection with Israel. My identity is very much that of an Israeli who is here rather than British.”

Ariella Eshed goes on to qualify this statement, “I’m settled enough to complain about life here.” This may come as a relief to the British husband she met here, the father of her two-year-old son. And it’s a neat summing up of the dilemma of all expats who put down new roots in a new land.

Eshed first came to London 15 years ago “to study and also to experience living somewhere else for a little while”. She had trained as an actor in Israel and soon signed up for an MA in directing at Middlesex University. “I liked the international nature of the course. London was a very good place for me to be a student. It was a really great experience to be involved in such an international culture, meeting people from all over the world, from diverse cultures.”

Her work as the founder and artistic director of Tik-sho-ret (Hebrew for ‘communication’) Theatre Company often takes her back to Israel. The company’s mission statement is “to promote Israeli and Jewish Theatre, encourage collaborations through cultural and artistic exchange and create educational and community-based projects around themes of communication and coexistence.”

“It’s getting Israeli stuff out of Israel and into English so we can understand it”, she sums up the most active part of her work. So how did the mission to bring Israeli theatre to London, to raise consciousness about what Israeli theatre has to offer, become central to her life?

“Actually I was surprised how little people know about Israeli theatre. I hardly

saw Israeli plays here. And if they were here, it was travelling companies like Gesher (Hebrew for ‘bridge’), but they weren’t specifically focusing on Israeli plays. And a lot of plays that deal with Israel are not Israeli, so you get a perspective of Israel by someone who lives here, like in *Crossing Jerusalem* by Julia Pascal and *Two Thousand Years* by Mike Leigh. What I thought was missing was what comes from Israel itself, the Israeli voice and actually to show there are critical voices, and a diverse range of voices.”

There have been full productions, notably of Hanoach Levin’s full-blooded comic love triangle *Ya’akobi and Leidental*. “Levin is like Chekov in Israel but no one had heard of him here,” she says. Tik-sho-ret’s great strength to date, however, is rehearsed playreadings of whole scripts and evenings of staged extracts of carefully chosen plays, that provide an intriguing and illuminating window on current Israeli trends and preoccupations – in life and art. This is where Eshed’s company fulfils its aim to “encourage collaborations through cultural and artistic exchange”, through post-show discussions.

Both last year and this year, Israeli plays and their writers have been brought to London for these evenings.

“I particularly liked the fact that the writers came from Israel. They sat in rehearsals with British directors and actors and there was this nice rapport and exchange, not just of text but also of artistic views, thoughts.” There was indeed a terrifically warm and purposeful atmosphere of sharing at this year’s event, called *Lifgosh: To Meet*. The five extracts produced last year were reviewed by Sonia Zafer Smith in *JR* July 2012.

It is planned to take a play that featured both years, Gur Koren’s *5 Kilo Sugar*, a witty story of intergenerational mischief, with the background of Israel’s Yiddish

ancestry becoming ever more unfashionable in contemporary Israeli society, to the Brighton Festival next May.

This year’s evenings took place at The New Diorama, a new attention-grabbing central London space and Eshed has successfully placed Tik-sho-ret events in other high-profile venues, including Hampstead Theatre and even Tate Britain. Of course the work attracts a Jewish audience but far from exclusively. Eshed’s 2005 staged reading at Hampstead Theatre of Motti Lerner’s *Hard Love*, describing the relationship between an ultra-Orthodox Jewish woman and her atheist ex-husband, evoked “quite a strong response from Muslim people who said ‘Oh it’s very similar in our community, this relationship’.”

I want to know if it is ever difficult to be in the Israeli arts scene here, in the light of opposition to Israel expressed in demonstrations at the recent visits of Batsheva Dance Company and Habima. “Touch wood I’ve not been affected so far, maybe because so far the work we have done is small-scale enough to not be on the radar of those protesters. But I am aware of it so it’s kind of upsetting if there is a demonstration”.

In 2008 Eshed herself connected personally with Palestinian writer Taher Najib, providing the English surtitles for his play *In Spitting Distance* at the Royal Court and the Barbican. “I got to know him well and that was a great experience for me”. So she is part of the dialogue between the two artistic communities, though she continues to see her mission to promote Israeli theatre as vital. “In some ways people here know more about Palestinian theatre than Israeli theatre. So I feel my niche is to focus on what I know more about. There are enough people bringing the voice of Palestinian theatre to London and they do this really well.”