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Wartime Theatrical Metaphors

My generation grew up with the self-evident truth that "when the cannons are heard, the muses are *not* silent." This was the experience of WWII. In the twenty-first century, in every country and in every war, this truth has been tested. The war that I witnessed began on 7 October 2023 with a brutal attack by Hamas militants on the civilian population of southern Israel, killing children, women, old people, and young people who had gathered for a music festival. Jewish women, many of them peace activists, were abused and tortured, parents were murdered in front of their children. Some of those who later saw documentary footage shot by the attackers themselves at close-door screenings around the world fainted and ambulances were called for them. This was followed by the shock and trauma experienced by virtually the entire population of the country. The mind refused to comprehend what was happening. Many of my colleagues thought that theatre no longer had a place in this world. Adorno's formula 'to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric' had returned in a slightly altered form: art is meaningless. One of my close friends, a stage designer and teacher at the Faculty of Arts at Tel Aviv University, told me that theatre is over, it no longer has any meaning.

Nevertheless, theatre returned quite quickly and went in two directions. The first had to do with children. It turned out that Israeli children who had lived through the events of October needed theatre. The actors themselves, without any framework, went to the hotels where the refugees were temporarily housed. At first, they came just to play with the children, tell them stories, paint together. Then the leading actors of the Tel Aviv Chamber Theatre created an ensemble that travelled to the centers that housed the evacuated children in order to perform scenes from the famous children's musical play, *Utzli Gutsli*. At the same time, as the actors themselves noted in posts published on Facebook, the kids were fascinated not so much by the content of the philosophical modern fairy tale, written by the Israeli poet A. Shlonsky after the story by the Brothers Grimm, but by the opportunity to experience joy, which distracted them from their suffering. Particularly successful were the scenes with grotesque characters of evil and stupid courtiers, transformed by costume designer Ruth Dar into brightly colored, doll-like creatures. Although it was not puppet theatre, the puppetry

of the characters was fundamental to a children's audience in a situation of war and trauma.

The second direction, related to the reappearance of theatre in the public space, emerged during artistic actions dedicated to Israeli hostages held captive by Hamas, including women, children, and the elderly. In memory of the hostages and in their defense, a huge table covered with a white tablecloth was set up in front of the Art Museum in one of Tel Aviv's main squares, as if for a Sabbath meal but with no people at the solemnly set table. The number of plates and glasses on the table corresponded to the number of hostages. Each plate signified a person who was not present. Instead of people who had become hostages, their names were written on the backs of chairs, and toys were placed next to the plates intended for children who had been taken hostage. You could call it an installation, but it was more like a theatre of objects. As is the custom in the theatre of objects, the objects here lost their everyday function and acquired poetic meanings, turning into puppetry. There was always a crowd around this table and a zone of silence. However, as B. Vaccaro, says: "But I can see that absence has a role to play in vitality all the same. To contemplate and ritualize it is not macabre, but an act of true consciousness".¹ Later, such tables appeared in many cities around the world.

At the same time, the ongoing war brought new questions and challenges. In Gaza, women and children were dying as the Israeli army fought Hamas, and the images of Palestinian families being relentlessly displaced made one think of universal grief. Israeli society split between those who demanded an immediate cessation of hostilities and a deal for the return of the hostages, and those who believed that Hamas, which continued to threaten a repeat of October 7, must first be defeated. Somehow, judging by the news reports that have reached us, the same thing happened in Palestinian society in Gaza, where part of the population called for the return of Israeli hostages and an end to the war, and part joined the ranks of Hamas.

Gradually, under these circumstances, theatres began to work again: in response to the war events, to console, to mourn, and to give artistic meaning to what was happening. The language of these plays can hardly be called realistic. The stage speaks the

¹B. Vaccaro. "The Presence of absence". American Scholar. March 11, 2014
<https://theamericanscholar.org/the-presence-of-absence/>).

language of metaphor. These were plays for adults in which puppets appeared unexpectedly, embodying both the semantic and artistic elements of the performance. The use of puppetry proved to be varied, from filling the text with unexpected puppet characters to turning the characters in the play into puppets. In short, when I was asked to share my thoughts on theatre in real time during the war, I decided that the best thing to do would be to talk about some of the plays currently being performed in the Israeli theatre scene.

Toy's Show

Tsruya Lahav's monodrama, 'She Called Her Angel', performed by Naomi Yoeli, an iconic artist of contemporary Israeli theatre, premiered in April 2023 at the Teatronetto Festival of one-actor plays. Yoeli's performance is designed as a theatre of storytelling, in which the narrator tells the story of kibbutz childhood in the 1950s with the help of old toys, also from the 1950s. But it would be wrong to describe what is happening on the stage as a performative game with ready-made objects. In essence, each toy signifies a character in the story that is being told, although outwardly each of these toys has nothing to do with the story being presented. Only by association, and not at the beginning of the story, can we understand why the old naked doll represents the heroine's favorite missing cat; the sheep on wheels—her mother; and the plastic cow—her schoolteacher. At first, the narrator's actions and explanations seem like a remarkable absurdity, where the memory of the past is filled with an ironic game with arbitrarily placed toys that are forced to fulfil other people's roles, whether they want to or not. On the one hand, this is in keeping with the freedom of children's play, where anyone can take on the role of anyone else. On the other hand, it is a metaphor for human existence, especially at catastrophic moments in history when people lose control of their lives. When Yoeli returned to performing the piece after the start of Israel's war with Hamas, the very essence of the tragicomic and hilariously absurd toy action was revealed.

The broken links between the signifier and the signified prepare the way for the play's climactic event: a "pogrom" by the children in the house of an old woman who is living in the same kibbutz. By objectifying and animating the childhood events of Miriam, the protagonist in whose name the story is told, Yoeli shows how a wrong conclusion becomes the trigger for further devastating and irreversible events. Miriam

tries to find her beloved, missing cat Esterka, who ran away after her kittens were taken from her, and suddenly comes to the conclusion that the cat was stolen and taken away by an old neighbor who has dozens of other cats in her house. The only basis for this conclusion is that the old lady is very fond of cats. This is enough to convince herself and others of the old lady's guilt, to organize her classmates to go to the old lady's house in search of the missing cat, and to make a terrible mess there as punishment. In this scene, the toys that play the roles of Miriam's friends almost fly through the air in jubilation. When their jubilation reaches its climax, Yoeli simply beats out a victory march with the palms of her hands. Here, blind decisions and blind victory are frighteningly far removed from reality: the cat is not found in the old woman's house, the children are instructed by their teachers to return there to set things right, and Estherka herself finally returns from the forest, where she had fled to in anger at Miriam's mother for taking her kittens. In the finale, the old woman, to whom Miriam brings a bouquet of flowers to make amends for her terrible deed, calls her an angel. Miriam's last words are that she never went to the old woman's house again, apparently because she could not forget what she had done.

Yoeli does not place herself above her characters or the world she narrates. At one point, her narrator becomes a puppet herself, merging with the puppet world. Standing at full height next to the table, she lifts the hem of her wide, brightly colored dress, thereby covering the sheep and the jug—the toys that represent her father and mother—like a dome. The dress is solemnly pulled up to reveal her shining white panties, affirming both the poetry of the forbidden and the ultimate equality of the storyteller and the story.

Yoeli, in the role of narrator, takes on the roles of all the characters in the play as she sits at a tiny table, a kind of classroom desk that can barely hold more than two toys. The size of the space is important; its smallness magnifies each and every character that is present. This table, a traditional element of the puppet genre, brings aspects of both meta-theatre and close-ups of situations of twisted childhood, wrong decisions, false joy, and feelings of guilt. The metatheatrical performance on the table gives the toy show the characteristics of a meta-narrative whose meanings, going beyond one plot, are allegorical and perceived as a symbolic parable. In this way, theatricality

becomes meaningful and draws the audience into its orbit.² Through theatricality, the main themes of the play, which speaks out against the dehumanization of the stranger, become the subject of the audience's reflection. However, the meaning of reflection has changed: those who saw the play before the war referred to it as a universal message. In the midst of the war, the speech against dehumanization became more powerful, more complicated and even more courageous, creating a new theatrical event. All in all, this play is a warning against the blind rage and the blind desire for revenge, and that is its meaning and its humanist message to its audience.

Birds' Play

Another play that was staged just before the outbreak of war and returned to theatres two months later was *Antigone*[Brecht], based on Brecht's famous adaptation of Sophocles' tragedy, an almost original pacifist play by the great theatre reformer of the twentieth century. Ira Avnery, the director of the performance, and the scenographer Dina Konson chose the Tel Aviv Museum of Nature as the performative space. This is not a puppet show, but elements of puppetry abound in it and create its symbolic meanings. The play opens with a conversation between Ismene and a bird puppet representing Antigone. In some ways this echoes Yoeli's play, where the paradox in the relationship between the signifier and the signified momentarily acts as an effect of alienation. This dialogue takes place on a staircase leading to a museum exhibition, which for a few moments is transformed into a stage. The quiet, frightening dialogue about the death of the world, in which one of the participants is transformed into a bird, characterizes the events as a symbolic tale of inevitable doom. Behind Ismene's back, we see a group of stuffed birds caught in flight which, in the context of the play, take on a puppet-like quality and look like messengers of death. The passage through the museum's halls, as the audience examines the skeletons on display, is incorporated into the performance. After the first scene with the Bird-Antigone, the exhibition itself looks like a kind of puppet show. Here the site-specific feature turns out to be the language of puppetry. Moreover, the people who wander among the museum's skeletons inevitably become part of this "puppet" exhibition, since they are practically objects on their way to becoming skeletons.

² See the theoretical discussion of theatricality as medium in Samuel Weber's book *Theatre as Medium*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2004.

The main puppet character of "Antigone" appears later in the museum classroom, where the main part of the play unfolds, presenting a battle of wills between those that curse war and its consequences and those who accept it as inevitable. Here the energies that drive illusional thinking, with which all the characters are obsessed, are contrasted with concrete reality, in the form of a pair of long bird's legs, almost featherless and without a body but with enormous claws. They look as if they are ready to be cooked, yet they stand on a tiny platform that emphasizes their importance. The legs are set up in the museum's workshop almost at the beginning of the performance and remain there almost until the end, as if watching the goings-on. This is the memento mori of the creators of the performance and the image on the poster. I think it is unforgettable and could be both a warning and a symbolic verdict.

Avneri and Konson frequently work together. Their artistic collaboration is known to be at once highly intellectual and deeply emotional. They both teach at the Theatre Department of Tel Aviv University.

Autobio with Toys

Marcel is the name of a funny toy. He is one of a pile of toys, presented on the stage of the Jaffa HaBait Theatre Center, in a production of the same name. The Center was designed especially for independent, experimental shows. The creators of the play, Jason Danino Holt and Meital Raz, are among the main artists of this center, and Danino Holt is its artistic director as well. *Marcel* is an autobiographical work of art in which the two artists, who are not related but belong to the same generation—both are around forty years old—tell their story through toys. Both are known as performers and writers. Raz is a graduate of the Jerusalem School of Visual Theatre; she creates absurd and poetic puppet shows for adults. Danino Holt is a well-known multidisciplinary artist and TV presenter in Israel and Europe.

More specifically, *Marcel* is a variation on the theme of a post-apocalyptic autobiographical play in which biographies are presented as a dialogue between artists performing under their real names. Each one narrates the dreams of the other. Their refrains—'Meital is dreaming...', 'Jason is dreaming'—are hypnotic in their intimate, confidential intonation. Jason mostly communicates with his alter ego, a funny, pathetic, lonely mouse. Meital talks to various toys, a bear whispers words of love to her, a giraffe convinces her to emigrate, a monkey advises her to remain skeptical and

not to believe anyone. The constant reference of both performers to toys, to storytelling through toys, helps to maintain both sincerity and a kind of distance. The toys take up most of the stage. They are certainly picturesque, but their self-sufficiency is frightening. They are toys without children, without people, representing what is left of childhood, of humanity, of those killed on both sides of the terrible conflict, of Israeli hostages languishing in Hamas underground tunnels and kids in Gaza.

The homeless toys on the stage correlate with the urban spaces of Tel Aviv, squares, streets, benches, where people bring children's toys in memory of the hostages. This is an image of the disaster, its metaphor. Moreover, looking at this strange mountain of toys, I think it is also a kind of bitter mourning for all the victims of war, regardless of age and nationality. The performance seems to ask itself what role it should fulfil in times of war and answers this question: to mourn and to warn, to preserve the human in human beings.

No wings, just a plumage

My Dad's a Birdman by David Almond is directed by Orian Lipshitz as the opening performance of her Jerusalem-based company, "Pumbi" (Public), which speaks to both young and adult audiences. Lipshitz's professional background helps with this idea: on the one hand, she is the director of the series of performances for children that grew out of the combination of Jewish folk tales and Brechtian theatrical language at Jerusalem's Beit Avi Hi cultural center; on the other, she is known as a creator of experimental, innovative theatre projects performed in unconventional spaces. The play premiered in September 2024, about a year after Israel's war with Hamas began, at a time of general hope that it was about to end. It's hard to imagine what could be most appropriate for such a moment, filled with the pain and hope of thousands of people in Israel, Gaza, and many other places. From Lipshitz's point of view, it is a play about a mad world in which children bring sanity back to the adults. She creates a performance of absurd reality where all meanings are turned upside down, and this proved very appropriate for the last year of our lives, when all values and ideas about good and evil, permissible, and forbidden, were reversed.

There is not a word about the war in the play; it is simply set during the war. The main motif is wings, which do not help to take off but only to dream of flying. The

wings are the main material sign of what is going on: they are lush and colorful, made of many peppers. They hold the promise of happiness. Having put on the wings, the heroes are transformed. They become free puppets, but only for a moment. However, the play, as directed by Lipshitz, is not about flying but about man's desire to free himself from his own human nature. This desire, presented in the form of a game—as it should be in a children's play—seems fundamentally disastrous. Almost all the adults in the play are so eager to turn into birds, as if they see it as their salvation. At some point, what is happening reminds us of the *Rhinoceroses* by Ionesco, the bird virus takes hold of one after another, people thoughtlessly and joyfully turn into birds, forgetting about their human nature.

The only character who indeed freely plays a bird, takes the form of a bird, and returns to herself, is the girl Lizzie. She is also the voice of reason: she easily transforms herself into a bird so as not to leave her father alone in his mad bird game, and easily returns to herself and her own human nature. Her childlike natural instincts help her, and she helps her father in every moment of his life. The role of Lizzie is played by a ten-year-old girl, Aviya Rabinowitz, and she is the real star of the play. Her presence creates an atmosphere of clever theatrical action. She participates in the game but is more intelligent than the game; she understands her father's fantasies but remains true to the human in herself. She does not play the little girl, and there is no demonic mystique about her. Lizzi-Avia is the embodiment of the Brechtian goodness of reason, of its salvation. The return of Brecht's ideas in the image of a child makes a powerful impression.

Avia Rabinowitz, along with other actors, took part in the opening ceremony of the Pumbi (Public) Theatre, which is dedicated to the idea that art is the voice of freedom, stronger than any inhibitions. When she was given the floor, Avia said: "It is so hard to be free, theatre is the place where we are free."

To conclude these remarks, I could say that in today's war, which has become part of my personal reality and is still not over, theatre often takes on the role of a voice of reason, aiming to remind us of the importance of preserving the humanity in man and in human society. According to the Israeli Theatre Research Association, about 40 pieces of theatre and performance art have been created in Israel around the events of 7 October and the ensuing war. The works discussed here are among the most

important, and they show the tendencies: the theatre does not speak of victory but of the catastrophic nature of war. Although it's not easy amid war, theatre has proven to be an independent channel that exists outside of politics, propaganda, and military interests. The audience fills the theatres, apparently feeling the need for the kind of complex truth it hears from the stage. As the St. Petersburg philosopher S. Gusev said in a series of lectures devoted to the emotional foundations of rationality (2024), not only the outer world has the power to influence the human world, but the inner world of human beings also has a great influence on the outer world and can change it. This idea is very important for the discussion of theatre and war. Theatre in this context is an agent of the inner world, and it has energies that I want to believe can influence the outside world, making people talk and not demonize each other, talking and not killing each other.