

# PLAYS

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## INTERNATIONAL & EUROPE

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REPORTS, PICTURES  
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# Features

## UK Drama Schools, a report by Jeremy Malies

With applicant-to-place ratios of at least 7:1, being accepted at a major drama school in the UK is harder than winning a place at Oxford or Cambridge Universities. Full scholarships are rare, and after three years of study graduates can be left in debt to the tune of £40,000 as they struggle in a notoriously competitive sector. Is formal study worth the sacrifices? How much support do drama schools provide to students during their first few years in the industry? Who are the leading providers of training for technical theatre-makers such as lighting and set designers?

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Ofira Henig. Photo: Gerrard Allon

## Director Ofira Henig interviewed by Doron Elia

Ofira Henig is one of Israel's outstanding directors, and yet she also has close ties to Germany and other German-speaking European countries, New York, and London. Here she talks to a fellow Israeli artist to explain how she switched from being the darling of the establishment theatre to becoming an independent director with no financial or contractual ties to the Israeli state.

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### PLAYS INTERNATIONAL & EUROPE

Published by Theater Research Institute of Europe (TRIE, asbl)  
Registre de Commerce et des Sociétés  
Luxembourg F5191  
174A, rue de Kirchberg, L-1858 Luxembourg  
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### ©2016 Theater Research Institute of Europe

Printed by Welshpool Printing Group,  
Printing House, Severn Farm Enterprise Park,  
Welshpool, Powys, SY21 7DF  
Designed by Charisma Creative,  
visit [www.charismacreative.co.uk](http://www.charismacreative.co.uk)

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PLAYS INTERNATIONAL & EUROPE ISSN 0268 2028  
is published quarterly for \$100 (USD) per year  
by Theater Research Institute of Europe (TRIE, asbl),  
Seehalde 1, D-78464 Constance, Germany.  
Postage Paid at Middlesex New Jersey Postmaster,  
TRIE asbl c/o PO Box 177 Middlesex,  
New Jersey 08846. US Agent: Pronto Mailers  
International, 200 Wood Ave, Middx New Jersey  
08846. Postal Registration Number USPS 008-997.

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#### FRONT COVER:

Photo by Oliver Rosser and The Jamie Lloyd Company of Kit Harington in a critically much maligned *Doctor Faustus* at the Duke of York Theatre.  
Read the review on page 20.

# Thinking Beyond National Borders

## Ofira Henig interviewed by Doron Elia

Ofira Henig has had a long history as an Israeli theatre director, but increasingly she dedicates herself to elaborating transnational themes for her performances and theatre projects. This is particularly the case in three of her most recent theatre projects, *Yes, Stand Out of My Sun* (2012), *Three Dog Night* (2016), and a dramatic reading of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's *Nathan the Wise* (*Nathan der Weise*, 2016).

*Yes, Stand Out of My Sun* is a research-based performance conceived by Henig that examines how both historically and contemporaneously artists are influenced by the political circumstances of their era. It toured in Israel, Berlin and Baden in Germany, Liechtenstein, and Zurich, Switzerland. *Three Dog Night* opened in Israel and travelled to Germany. It was a trilingual international coproduction with the European Centre for the Arts HELLERAU Dresden, in cooperation with Berlin's Deutsches Theater, Tel Aviv's Goethe Institute and Cameri theatre and Lilach The Israel Society to Live and Die with Dignity. As the website of the HELLERAU theatre explains, the play, which was written by Henig herself, deals with self-determination not only in life but also in the choice of when and how to die. The performance challenges the spectator to ask how we can speak of a dignified death when life itself lacks dignity. The three female characters speaking Hebrew, Arabic or German gather around a dying man, and they ask how we can develop our own personal attitude towards death when it threatens us from all sides.

In *Three Dog Night*, three women from three different cultures explore issues surrounding self-determination both in life and in death. Originally unremarkable, these women change when faced with extreme situations such as natural catastrophes and war. A deathly chill surrounds them. The dramatic image is of a cold night when only the heat of three dogs and their animal presence can protect them.

The performance which I saw at the Arabic speaking theatre in

Haifa, Al-Midan, was rich with visual images, mixed musical genres, and a babble of languages. As is Henig's style, the performance took place in a simple space, with a very clear border between the show and the audience. The production addressed how different political systems deal with a person choosing to end his life through a hunger strike.

But Ofira Henig was not always so international in her outlook. Born in 1960 on a Kibbutz, unlike most of Israel's young directors she never worked in fringe theatres but began her career in the country's establishment theatre in 1989. She became recognized after directing two plays by French authors which indirectly comment on the war in Algeria and its impact on French society *The Return to the Desert* by Jean-Marie Coltez at Jerusalem's Khan Theatre in 2001 and Jean Genet's *The Screens* at the Habima National Theatre in 2002. *The Return to the Desert* won the 2001 Play of the Year award of the Israel Theatre Prize and also earned Henig the title of Director of the Year. *The Screens* was understandably controversial. At one point in the play, Hadijah, an old Arab woman called Hadijah (played by Liat Goren) speaks of her hatred from the depths of suicidal despair. In an emotionally moving scene, she declares, "My hatred is stronger than their weapons." I saw this production and remember her speech even today.

About Ophira Henig's work in 2002, she told me, "A new space was established in Tel Aviv, and I was invited to create a piece. I started with *The Screens* and then, a year later I directed *Alice*. It worked very well with *The Screens* but much less with *Alice*—I guess I lost the charm of the story.... The space was a half circle and I worked a lot with this—confronting the audience with our disturbing crazy stuff. It was the period of the Second Intifada, and I wanted to provoke a confrontation. People demonstrated against the fact that the productions were subsidized by government money.... And when the scandal stopped, there was silence and the shows were

kicked off the stage."

In 2002 Henig was appointed to the prestigious position of Artistic Director of drama and dance at the Jerusalem International Festival. But because of her tendency to provoke she accepted to become the director of The Laboratory, a new experimental theatre in Jerusalem, in 2004. She made this a place for collaboration between multicultural authors. Her first production was Oscar Wilde's *Salome*, featuring an ethnically mixed group of actors.

Today, she remembers the shape of her career in this way: "I began as a young director at Tel Aviv's Hebrew language national theatre Habima. I worked for 25 years in the big institutions in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem and was an Artistic Director of a few theatres. I was very successful and got all the important awards; I was a sort of *Wunderkind*. It was very good to have those conditions, and I learned a lot and developed as an artist. But now, Israel has changed. We don't have the same freedom we used to have. The system is not permitting us to have a long creation period or to deal with deep ideas. Everything has to be quick, simple, and clear. I can't work like this, and I don't want to work like this. The very right wing government is restricting our freedom of speech. So I chose to leave. I only work in independent contexts. I don't take money from the government; I do not want to partake in their ideas about creativity. I don't want to co-operate with the status quo... I always prefer ... to keep the perspective which an artist needs. Only, the context has changed."

Her independent work is increasingly interdisciplinary and multicultural. Some of her projects deal with social and political issues relevant to life in Israel. However, her outlook is humanistic and universal. As she told James Woodall in a 2010 interview, "I was born into the new state and called myself *the new Jew*. Of course we were brought up to remember everything, so we know the facts from the past. But at home I was taught to reach a universal conclusion about human beings and not just about the Jewish



Ofira Henig. Photo: Gerrard Allon

issue. Genocide is terrible and it happens all over the world, and we have to care about the entire world. That was what I was told at home."

Ofira Henig's decision to stage a reading of *Nathan der Weise* in February 2016 in Tel Aviv, Beersheba, Acco, and Jerusalem is not surprising since Lessing's play, published in 1779, condemns religious bigotry and propagates ideals of tolerance and humanism. The Nazis banned the play, and today it is one of the most popular plays on the German stage. I attended a reading of Henig's version of *Nathan der Weise* at Acco's Alternative Theatre located in the middle of the medieval town. The actors came from three different cultures and again spoke three mother tongues: Hebrew, Arabic, and German. They had different religious affiliations.

When I asked why this play was not given a full performance, Henig explained, "I don't consider *Nathan der Weise* to be dramatic enough for a full production. I was interested in doing a reading, because for me it is a celebration of listening to the characters' clever but naive ideas. While listening to the text, we think about the reality. The play itself is not interesting for theatrical production. I saw some productions based on this text, and they always make it oriental or

else stage it in a kind of colonial style. So I won't direct it as a show. Moses Mendelssohn, the philosopher who was the inspiration for the character of Nathan, was the basic education I got at home. My beloved father was also named Nathan, and that made it all the more important to me to make people listen to his ideas. For me, the reading is a dedication to my father's wisdom."

In addition, the Lessing play conforms to her belief in the power of language, even within the multi-sensorial space of the stage. She says, "I love text very much. I love to read, I love to deal with and interpret complicated and special ancient text. I need text and words to start my creation. For me, a word is a world. The text can be dramatic, or documentary - but it has to be text. The text, certainly, is not the only way to deliver 'the story'. Even when I create my own projects and write by myself, I write as a director and not as a writer. I write the performance; I do not write a play. When the text is precise, not too many words, only what needs to be said -- it is so beautiful: an actor, a word, empty space, sound and light: the power and the wisdom of the human being."

The medieval space of Acco where this particular dramatic reading was staged is a special multicultural Jewish and Arabic town. The unique geopolitical setting and Henig's use of direct

multilingual text gave proof of the possibility of a dialogue between cultures, at least for this production. Henig herself is quoted as saying that she and the actors "come from three different cultures... and each time we rehearsed it was an ongoing dialogue between us and the text itself. We experience a different culture and a different language enriching us, without having to understand completely."

One of Henig's favourite recent productions was the play *Ulysses on Bottles* (2012). She says, "*Ulysses on Bottles* was written by a very good friend of mine, Gilad Evron. I've directed three of his plays, and he is the best Hebrew-speaking living playwright. The play is contemporary and speaks about Gaza, but Gilad keeps his poetic style and it is a beautiful shocking text. Also I had a great actor for this piece, Khalifa Natour. He is a Palestinian actor living in Israel. If he were to live in his own country, he would play Macbeth, King Lear, Hamlet, etc. But he is a Palestinian and he lives in Israel. I directed this play for him. I am so happy that he and Gilad won awards for this production."

Henig describes her present work in the following manner: "These last years, I mainly create projects which are based on fragments and not on a complete, well-made play. *Black Rain* was the first such performance in 2007. It dealt with the story of Hiroshima, but I was exploring the issue of

remembrance. I didn't try to tell the story of the atom bomb. The victims tell it. As an artist I tried to understand the way the trauma is recalled. How does culture deal with a memory; what does it mean to our society? It links of course to the way we, the Jewish people, remember our trauma and the way the Palestinians remember their 1948 exodus, the Nakba. I guess you can say this project is "post-modern theatre". It is not only about a mix of different forms of text. It is also about mixing different themes, different levels of languages, and lately in my last projects (*Both upon a Time; Yes, Stand out of my Sun; Three Dog Night*) I also mix different spoken languages. I am very much interested in creating harmony in an empty space. I like to give dramatic life to my belief that different ideas and cultures, different narratives, can live together in one theatrical space."

This is Henig's special way of expressing the world of theatre as collaboration between different cultures and a diversity of living spaces. She is presently passing on her knowledge: "I am now teaching directing at the University of Tel Aviv. I meet talented students who warm my heart. Teaching those students with their wide-open eyes is an opportunity to influence. These students still have a thin skin; they can be touched."

Ophira Henig acknowledges that theatre is first and foremost

an art form, but still she believes it can facilitate tolerance. Not only are audience members affected by what they witness, but also when her actors work together, they develop close-knit friendships and acquire tolerance of each other's culture. She told me, "I do not believe in changing reality with theatre, but it can touch people. It can make them think and ask questions. They stop their routine for a couple of hours. I don't expect the theatre to be an instrument; I see it as art. I never choose themes or cast only for political reasons. I have to find an aesthetic reason as well. But because I am a political person, because I work a lot with Palestinian and German actors, I am obviously surrounded by multi-cultural ideas, and I am very much motivated by this. The artists that I work with are also political people. We bring our interests into the rehearsal room. So, even if I were to develop a show based on a simple love story it would be political. It is difficult to diagnose what comes first: political conscience or aesthetic interest. I must admit that even today after about 30 years of directing, I wake up in the morning, watch the news, and think I'd do better service if I became a doctor or a lawyer.... But I've achieved my first dream of working in theatre, and I have a talent for creating dramas, so that is what I give back to society."

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Scene from *Three Dog Night*. Photo: Gerard Allon.