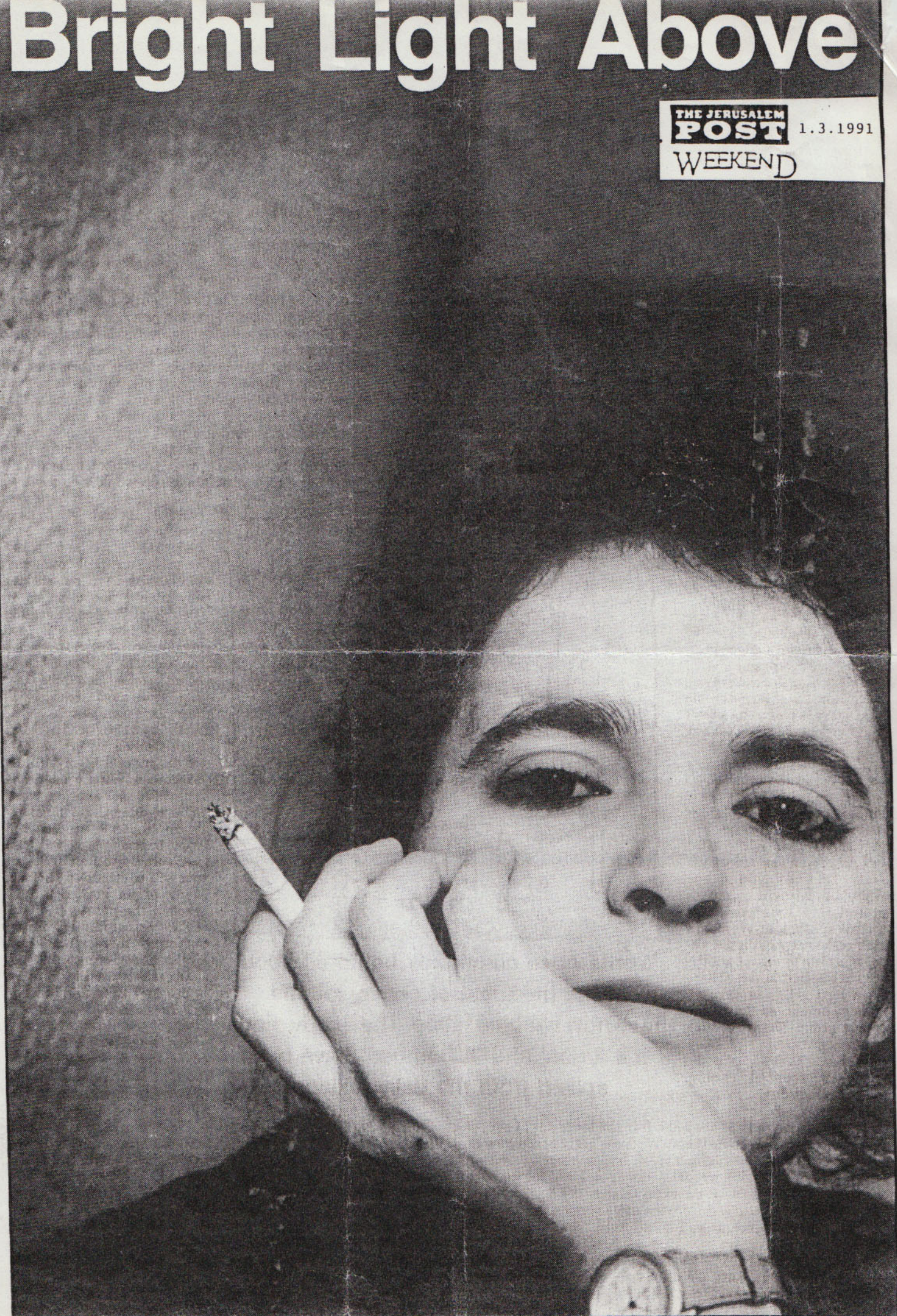


Bright Light Above

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אלוף הנ"ל

The Darkened Stage

Due to the missile attacks on Tel Aviv, Habima, Israel's national theater, is only now slowly resuming performances after being closed since mid-January. How is one of its rising stars, in-house director Ofira Henig, coping as real events continue to dim the stage?

By Tamar Vital

Photos: Peter Rosenberg

THE MAMMOTH flag that has draped the Habimah Theater building since mid-January could not have escaped any one's notice. If it epitomizes the measure of patriotism and national solidarity generated by Saddam's missiles, it also represents the disappearance of the theater itself. Performances had not been held for over a month, and only in the last week have performances begun again -- and even at that, on an extremely limited basis. For the present at least, the drama outside more than suffices.

The inevitable result of this long closure is cut-backs. Though the more visible casualties of "the situation" are the young actors whose jobs have been axed, there is at least one member of the theatrical community whose wounds are internal. Her job may be intact but in professional terms, the war has, in her own words, turned her temporarily impotent and sterile. She now finds herself reassessing the whys and wherefores of the *métier* -- a craft in which she is one of the youngest and brightest stars in the local arena.

At the relatively tender age of 30, Ofira Henig is already an in-house director at the country's National Theater, Habimah. She directs actors and actresses who were strutting the boards before she was even born. She is taking on the classics as well as tackling new, never-before-produced material and occupying a position to which all young directors aspire and many experienced ones do not get to hold.

She was spotted by Omri Nitzan, the previous artistic director of Habimah, 18 months ago. He saw her work with students at the Beit Zvi Drama School and judged that she was ready for a chance in the big league. Barely three years out of college herself, she had never directed an experienced professional cast before.

"It really happened very, very quickly," says Henig, almost apologetically. "To get to Habimah wasn't even on my agenda yet. Most of the directors there have followed a certain path: drama schools, then the small theaters and so on. They usually arrive after reaching a certain degree of satiation. I hadn't done enough to even begin thinking about it. Habimah was still

just a concept that some day in the future I would have to address seriously. I didn't quite know what it was all about and suddenly I was in it."

IN THE small sitting room of her quiet Tel Aviv flat (which she has not abandoned despite a degree of fear and anxiety), it is difficult to visualize this soft-spoken and unassuming woman as having raced to the forefront of a profession populated by competitive individuals with unstoppable ambitions. Though highly articulate and clearly knowing her own mind, there is something quite fragile, almost unassertive about Henig.

Lady Luck may well have played a role in bringing Henig to Habimah; but once she had accepted the challenge, the responsibility was certainly all hers. She was given all the time she needed, and she took it -- reading 15 plays before finally deciding on Yosef Bar-Yosef's new and yet unproduced *Gold* (Zahav).

"Habimah is a place where you can do exactly what you want," says Henig, "and with the best actors in the country. There are no excuses. I realize it could have been a reckless, foolish choice to tackle something that had never been explored before, that had never stood the test of staging. And I knew then that it was a problematic piece. But I liked it, it interested me and it felt somehow right. I was also given an almost free hand in picking the cast, which included Lea Koenig. Nothing convinced me more to give it a try than having the opportunity to work with her."

Not that it was easy. Leading lady Koenig, with over 30 years experience, was understandably "suspicious of me at first. I was this untried, unknown girl out of nowhere directing a play that no one had ever done before. But I'd done my homework very thoroughly, working closely with the playwright and set designer." It took about a week of rehearsals, and the working relationship between veteran actress and young director bloomed "into a real love affair. I'd like nothing more than to work with her again," grins Ofira with obvious satisfaction.

Zahav, now running for its second sea-

"The constant preoccupation with sheer survival enables you to understand that working and creating are part and parcel of the survival process, that the paralysis and numbness have to be shaken off as quickly as possible."



Habima in-house director Ofira Henig knows the show must go on.

son, is an unequivocal success. She then directed Yehushua Sobol's controversial *Night of the Twentieth* (Leil Ha'esrim) with Itzik Weingarten and Gil Frank, which opened several months ago and was "going well."

OFIRA HENIG had arrived. It had happened with surprising speed and ease. Her ability was unquestioned and her professional future, as a result, appeared free of any real upheavals. Then the first Iraqi missile landed in Area A.

Henig falls silent. She stubs out a just-lit cigarette with several deliberate movements. Both hands search for the clip that holds up her hair, and remove it. An auburn shoulder-length mass falls about her face, and Henig pats it into place, taking comfort in the extra shielding it provides. She is clearly going over recent events. She lights another cigarette, inhales slowly and returns to the present.

"For the first two weeks, I was completely paralyzed, incapable of doing anything but survive each day at a time. My actors kept calling to ask when we'd go back to rehearsals, and I had to tell them that I couldn't, I just couldn't do it."

The war had caught Henig in the midst of rehearsals for *The Merchant of Venice* with Beit Zvi students. "It wasn't just a matter of my own personal fears, of being pre-occupied with ducking missiles or of the fact that the school is uncomfortably close to one of the damaged sites and that its windows had been shattered.

"There was all that, of course, but there was also the no-less-devastating realization that suddenly there was no need for theater, that theater had become quite unnecessary, even useless. I woke up one morning and everything I had worked for, everything I had done or was doing seemed to have lost its meaning.

"There always has been and always will be theater," Henig is quick to reassure. "And given that, there will always be meaning to what I do. If I didn't feel that way I'd leave the profession. But the theater's real task is to pose questions. I don't like theater that instructs people on how to act. The theatrical experience should excite, exhilarate, disgust, make its audience uneasy but never supply it with answers.

"Using the stage to tell people what to do creates a fascistic theater. Now, however, we have a situation in which we are all so helpless, in which all the relevant questions have been raised again and again and received everyone's full attention. It's obvious that my kind of theater would be tantamount to torturing the audience. Theater is for an audience, and we've lost our audience.

"And how do you tackle a play about anti-Semitism at a time like this? I've been sitting here in Tel Aviv for almost a month now, on the receiving end of a very real kind of hatred, knowing that nothing I can do or say will abate this hostility one iota, and realizing that the best thing to do under the circumstances

is just to sit and take it. It certainly sheds light on the drama I'm staging now."

And so, gradually, over the past week, she's gone back to work. The phone rings. A student asks whether tomorrow's scheduled rehearsal is being held. The director reassures her actor that it is. A moment later the phone rings again. Another student, with the same query. "Yes," promises Henig, "we're working."

The fears and apprehensions of her actors often surface during their daily six-hour sessions, and she lets them stop the show. "They can take as long as they need. I can't really argue that the drama on stage takes precedence over the one outside, can I?"

Since the situation itself hasn't changed significantly, what made her return to the theater? "The constant preoccupation with sheer survival enables you to understand that working and creating is part and parcel of the survival process, that the paralysis and numbness have to be shaken off as quickly as possible.

"Then, inevitably, you ask yourself how they managed to stage plays during the Holocaust. If they were able to create theater, find a meaning and purpose to it, then so must I. And anyway, I simply couldn't go on just eating and sleeping until it's all over. And there was the Russian experience too, of course..."

TWO YEARS ago, Henig was invited by the director of the Gitis Drama School in Moscow to direct his students in a play. Taken up with the newness of the Habimah experience, she declined. The following year the invitation was extended again, and she accepted. Last September, Henig spent six weeks living and working in Moscow. She has already agreed to go again next autumn.

"It suddenly dawned on me that though we may be facing the possibility of losing our lives during one of these missile attacks, the end is foreseeable, even if we can't yet put a date to it. In Moscow, on the other hand, they exist with the knowledge that there may be no end to the hardship, that the ray of hope that perestroika brought into their lives may have been blighted, never to be seen again in their lifetime.

"They are a nation that has never experienced democracy or freedom and may have to face the fact that they are not equipped to survive it. I understand perfectly why Soviet immigrants keep coming even now. The certainty that our nightmare will be over, that we might incur injuries but that there is no danger of our being crippled or maimed made all the difference to me. There is a future here."

Back in the theater — and with a future — what does a young director who has arrived almost before she has begun see in her personal crystal ball? "I realize it happened too soon. But there is a lot of room for growth and exploration within Habimah. I don't feel stifled or burnt out in the least. I probably won't remain an in-house director all my life, but there is a great deal I can do while I am.

"It's like people who get married at a very young age. What happens when they grow up: do they all get divorced? Not necessarily..."