

Capturing Moments of Misperformance 'Local Tales'

DAPHNA BEN-SHAUL, RUTH KANNER,
JANELLE REINELT & FREDDIE ROKEM

*Following the PSi#15 Shift with the Ruth Kanner Theatre Group*¹

1. SUCCESS AND FAILURE

- FREDDIE ROKEM

The notions of success and failure and the endeavour to succeed artistically while depicting expressions of failure in (inter-)national, social or public contexts are profoundly knit into and implied by the concept of artistic creativity. But they seem to carry extra weight in the Israeli context.

The state of Israel was established (in 1948) with an obsession to succeed. Following one of the most tragic failures of human values in recorded history there was an inner necessity and a desire to create an alternative narrative, obliterating all forms of humiliation and victimization. This intention - which also contained the failure of the Palestinians to establish an independent state, the *Nakba*² - has had a crucial impact on all aspects of Israeli society and its culture. The Israeli 'success' has taken a high social and political, but also a moral toll: the many wars, the ongoing occupation of a constantly growing Palestinian population and the tensions within the Israeli society itself. Numerous Israeli artists have devoted their creative efforts to probe and examine the cognitive dissonances and the ethical consequences resulting from the complex, multi-levelled dialectics between success and failure.

The Ruth Kanner Theater Group (RKT Group) (founded in 1998) has also directly addressed these issues. Besides the director, Ruth Kanner herself, who has directed all of their performances, the group consists of six actors - all graduates from the Department of Theatre Studies at Tel Aviv University - as well as a musician and a production manager.³ The group now stands in the forefront of the Israeli theatre avant-garde, focusing on stage renderings of Hebrew texts, literary works as well as documentary materials performed with a broad range of story-telling techniques, never freezing the actors in dramatic roles, 'locating' them in 'spaces' that are deeply ambiguous and multivalent. The performances of the group re-examine and critique the hegemonic Israeli narratives by investigating issues related to war, oppression and the omnipresence of death, interweaving physical theatre, visual imagery, voice, music and sound.

The group follows the tradition of a politically and ideologically engaged theatre, which has always been an important component of Israeli theatre - beginning with the founding of the Habimah theatre, in Moscow in 1917, thirty years before the state, and today Israel's national theatre. The RKT Group has however, developed this tradition within a cultural climate that is gradually valorising theatrical entertainment, pleasing the spectators, rather than challenging their perceptions.

¹ The shift was curated by Freddie Rokem. It included four passages from the work of the group presented in Hebrew and English that were introduced by Ruth Kanner as well as by Daphna Ben Shaul who also summarized the shift. After the performance-demonstrations there was a more extensive discussion that also included commentary by an invited 'outside' spectator, Janelle Reinelt. The shift ended with an improvisation weaving together passages from the previous presentations.

² Arabic for 'catastrophe'.

³ The actors who participated in the Zagreb were Shirley Gal-Segev, Ronen Babluki, Dafna Arcavi, Adi Meirovitch, Guy Salman, Tali Kark; Musician: Nori Jacoby; Production manager and Multimedia: Guy Godorov.

• (top left) Fig 1 - Ruth Kanner Theatre Group - *At Sea*. Standing (from right to left): Yusef Sweid, Shirley Gal-Segev; Sitting: Tali Kark. Photo: Gadi Dagon



• (below) Fig 2 - Ruth Kanner Theatre Group - *Discovering Elijah*. Actor: Yusef Sweid. Photo: Gadi Dagon

The Zagreb Shift (partly reconstructed by other means here) raised questions of success and failure as expressed through misperformance. In the work of the RKT Group, demonstrating and discussing stage techniques that create deliberate aporias, caesuras, breaks, disassociations and other abortive efforts, exposing failures and shortcomings of the historical reality in which we live. The scenes (performed in Hebrew as well as in English) were from the following productions of the group:

- *At Sea* - an adaptation of two stories by S. Yizhar about love, life and death at the sea shore: 'Walking in the Sea', which takes place on the shore of the Sea of Galilee where a young man and a young woman discover their first love, and 'Swimming in the Sea' which examines the extreme situation of a drowning person. Both stories confront fundamental existential dilemmas - the value of human existence and the desire for meaning and direction while facing the whims of nature.

- *Dionysus in Dizengoff Centre* - a penetrating performance investigation of the historical layers of a shopping mall in Tel Aviv, based on a historical investigation with documents written and compiled by Tamar Berger. It raises questions about the roots of the Zionist existence in Israel in relation to the historical layers of the area in which this mall is now situated.

- **Cases of Murder: November 9, 1938:**

A protocol of fear, brutality and death, is based on Manfred Franke's book *Mordverläufe (Cases of Murder)*, reconstructing the acts of violence committed against the Jewish citizens in the author's hometown in Germany during the night between the 9th and 10th of November 1938, the *Kristallnacht*, as he remembers them as a child. The performers probe these events from seventy years ago, not only in order to understand the past but also to critique the Israeli present.

- *Discovering Elijah* evokes the shattering events of the Yom Kippur War of 1973 through a story by S. Yizhar, raising the moral issues of this war as well as of any war, of the fear of killing and of being killed. By recounting and depicting the search for a person called Elijah - who is missing - the actors create a performance text that reaches below the surface to the naked scream, the depths of horror and the painful site of intimacy between the individual and his own vulnerability.



2. A MOMENT OF MISPERFORMANCE IN
DIONYSUS IN DIZENGOFF CENTRE:
'LOOTING' - RUTH KANNER

... carpets, refrigerators, radios, typewriters, sewing machines - even a piano, a telephone and a safe [...] There is widespread looting, and it is done by soldiers and civilians, women and men, one truck after another, in broad daylight. Nothing escapes the eyes of the looters or their hands; china and silverware of every kind and description; and also jewels, watches, rings, cash and banknotes. Food, bed linen, dresses, clothes and boots'

This text is from 'A Memo by The Emergency Committee of The Arab Residents of Jaffa' submitted to the United Nations via the Red Cross on July 19, 1948. It consists of a long list of articles looted during the occupation of Jaffa by the Israeli army during the 1948 war. A matter-of-fact, dry text, which as a theatrical text - one might say - is somewhat boring ...

This scene with this text comes towards the end of the performance. Avner Ben Amos who was the dramaturg for the first version of this production has described it in the following terms:

Dionysus at Dizengoff Centre presents the story of a place: the area around the intersection between Dizengoff St. and King George St. in central Tel-Aviv, the location of the Dizengoff Centre shopping mall. This is a piece of land with several layers of memories - of people, objects and events that intermingle and intertwine. One question inspires the story: what was here before? The answer is given in the performance through a process that resembles an archaeological dig, going deeper and deeper into the past. Beneath the glamorous shops that now constitute the Dizengoff Centre lies the Nordia neighborhood, made up of shabby huts, peopled by the Jewish refugees who had arrived penniless from Eastern Europe during the 1930s and 1940s. Beneath Nordia one can discern the verdant leaves of the vineyards that were once cultivated by the Arab peasants who lived in the villages of Manshiéé, Salamé, and Soumeil, situated to the north of Jaffa. And beneath the vineyards? The eternal sands of the Mediterranean shores.

I assigned the text taken from the Memo to an actress who at that moment embodies the character of Itaf Hinawi - a member of a rich Arab family that resided in Jaffa in 1948. (Apparently their piano and some other objects were included in the looted property)

During the first reading the actress read this text as a complaint - obviously a choice dictated by the nature of the text. This was the moment when I realized the need for creating a theatrical misperformance, the need to sabotage the expected, obvious speech act, to interfere with the idea as to 'how this text should be uttered.' My tactic was to go against the text, and literally create a misperformance.

As director, I asked the actress to say the text from an opposite attitude - an attitude of detachment, reservation, refusal to identify with the text, an attitude of a person who does not want to become involved, who wants to remain 'apolitical' and who even refuses to have anything to do with the protests and the grievances themselves. Enacting a member of a rich family, she is wearing an expensive fur coat and jewellery. She has been forced to read out this text to the audience, doing it unwillingly. What do I have to do with this business, which is not mine?

At the same time we created an ongoing developing stage event - the actors begin to hand over articles placed on the stage to each other - starting with furniture and props, leading toward snatching the memo paper from the hands of the actress as well as the note sheets of the musician. This culminates by tearing most of the actress' clothes off her body. During the looting of the stage equipment the actors start clashing violently with the actress while she is reading the text. Gradually, the detached reading becomes engaged and painful. The image of the 1948 events begins to creep into and dominate the stage, creating a transformation into a different time, a time of open, naked and scorching violence.

By the end of the scene the actress has become locked into the situation, thrown on the floor,

• Fig 4 - Ruth Kanner Theatre Group - *Looting from Dionysus in Dizengof Centre*. Actor: Shirley Gal-Segev. Photo: Gadi Dagon



beaten, humiliated, attempting to cover her naked body with the under-shirt left on her body. Her initially detached attitude has been turned into outcries for help and burning protest. She has no choice now. It was exactly she, the person who was reserved and refused to complain who found herself, despite herself, crying out loud. From having been a detached reader of the document the actress/ character has become an involved participant in the very heart of the events and with her, in a parallel process, also we in the audience become involved.

The discovery of this moment in the show was particularly significant for me. The refusal to collaborate in an obvious, to-be-expected act, the reversal tactic of misperformance breeds a special connection between a performance technique and its message.

3. A MOMENT OF MISPERFORMANCE IN CASES OF MURDER: 'SAVING ROSENBAUM' - DAPHNA BEN-SHAUL

Inaction is also Action. To listen, watch, run over and observe, run over and listen, run over and observe and go away again, to hear something and not to go and look, to be called and not to come, to be awoken and to be worried and to look and to be intimidated and to drive oneself away are also Action.

Cases of Murder establishes a docu-literary performance historiography of the *Kristallnacht* events, mainly narrated as a reconstruction of a child's memories (some quite uncertain) of that event. The performance ends with a disturbingly beautiful episode: an actress (Tali Kark) relates how, as she expresses it, the child became a 'witness of his own story,' imagining it helps Mr. Rosenbaum, one of his Jewish neighbours, to escape safely. The actress-narrator-child figure orchestrates the *mise-en-scène* as a stage director, summoning the actors with a slight gesture, and while holding the hand of Mr. Rosenbaum (Guy Salman) - sending him on his escape route - she starts speaking in the first person voice:

I let him sit on a bench ... I let him drive to the coast and board a ship there.

She hands him a small paper boat. As he holds it in his hand, climbing on a structure of tin crates - an archival filing cabinet that has had several functions in the performance - the iconic final scene from the film *The Sound of Music*, ending the family's escape from the Nazis with a sublime climb of the Alps is shown on a backdrop screen. The crate structure is pushed slowly along the stage while Mr. Rosenbaum smilingly holds the paper boat, his body leaning forward and his silhouette merging with the screened backdrop, while the harmonious singing of the actors surrounding him, in unison with the film, increasingly becomes stronger.

While seemingly a success, not a misperformance, this enchanted composition is in fact deeply related to the notion of misperformance. The fragmentary archive presented throughout the performance, split into diverse performative voices, including the child/narrator's fragmentary acoustic memories from the *Kristallnacht* - veiled by the justifications expressed by his mother as she feeds the audience with porridge. This attempt to reconstruct the events also includes testimonies of adults, relying on what they have heard while hiding inside their apartments.

The actors are struggling with manifestations of denial: the parodic mimicry exposing the outbursts of violence and destruction as a staged performance. And at several points the stage actions displace events of the *Kristallnacht* from their context. Thus, for instance, actors posing as spectators are loudly cracking sunflower seeds (a typical Israeli custom) while another actor, as a 'German' tells an anti-Semitic joke, and has an ostensible slip of the tongue, replacing the year 1938 with 1948 (from the Israeli point of view, the year the State of Israel was established; from the Palestinian point of view, the year of the *Nakba*).

All these manifestations are expressions of a performative practice that exposes the 'fabrication' of acting itself, expressing an epic commitment through which the masking practices inherent in the historical process are revealed and dialectically enriched with additional temporal layers and ethical comments. Since the repetition of the basic narrative of the holocaust disrupts the sublimatory ritual of identification and affirmation that has formed the Israeli society, it allows - and even forces - the spectators to recognize the similarity

between the historical passive stance (of the Germans) described by the performance and their own current one. Both perspectives converge in real time in the fixed collective stance of watching the performance.

Facing the audience, with orchestrated gestures and chanted delivery, the actors declare:

Inaction is also Action.

The utopian reconstruction of saving Mr. Rosenbaum, linking cinematic aesthetization and the theatrical presentation of childhood memories, seemingly negates this misperformance by 'correcting' the post-traumatic memory of disaster. The spectators are granted the grace of a beautified, cohesive image of salvation, which is contrary to the fragmentary archival accumulation presented throughout the performance. But this ironic idealization, generated through an action that likens the reconstruction of memory to stage-direction, is in fact a symbolic re-enactment of denial, poignantly intensifying the sense of failure. Mr. Rosenbaum himself did probably not survive. As the performance ends the actors



• Fig 3 - Ruth Kanner Theatre Group - *Cases of Murder*. Actor: Guy Salman. Photo: Gadi Dagon

quietly chant words that associate self deception with theatrical simulation, pointing out that what seems to be another place is also in fact this place, here and now:

*As if it were all staged in a theatrical setting,
As if in a foreign place.*

4. TOTALLY ENGAGÉ - JANELLE REINELT

Being asked to comment, after viewing the Ruth Kanner Theater Group's performance at the PSi-shift, seemed very risky, because I knew I would be an 'outsider' to the major language spoken as well as the history shared by the performers and their usual Israeli audiences. Then again, perhaps none of us are 'outsiders' to the history of the Jews, the horrors of the Holocaust, the founding years of the Israeli state, the displacement of Palestinians, the Middle East conflict. The relationship between those events and all of us who live in their shadow is complicated and multivalent, and involves many layers of possible mis-performance from mistaken assumptions to mis(sed) opportunities for action or insight.

The group revisits historical narratives and powerful myths while invoking, in the present moment of performance, an engagement with the struggle to comprehend and represent such conflicted genealogies, interests, sufferings. The earliest piece dealing with youth and death, *At Sea*, provided a backdrop for the rest of the work that emphasized the fragility of life, the now-you-see-it, now-you-don't of possibility, relationship, vitality—in short of life-breath, through the depiction of almost drowning.

The last two pieces seemed to be in dialogue with each other - *Cases of Murder* and *Discovering Elijah*. While the first represented the horrible experience of living through *Kristallnacht* as a child—with all the nightmarish discovery of things you do not understand as a child brought forward by the intense performances of the company—the second piece reverses the experience from being on the

receiving end of the violence to being involved and/or complicit in the violence itself. One searing image in my mind from this last performance was the physically imaginative depiction of driving in a car and coming upon a scene of carnage in the middle of the Sinai desert. At one side of the stage in the mimed car, the woman turns her head just to peek or glance at what appears in the landscape (bodies, corpses, ruined desolation). The glimpse is almost comic in its execution, but in its capture of the impulse to both look and avoid, it signified for me the terrible encounter with the results of our own nation's policies in their awe-full and stark reality. It was an electric moment.

There were many such moments in the work of the group—I think because their style of performance is geared to making the body the site of deep and multiple significations of a range of human emotions, actions, experiences. The postures, movements, rhythms of the actors created haunted characters: haunted by history and tradition on the one hand, and by the engagement with the complexity of the present on the other. I also thought that the company had embraced the Brechtian technique of the 'not/ but'—they were not who they were portraying, but instead they were showing these figures to us in a manner which foregrounded the relation between the actor and the constructed character. The involvement of the company in the investigations of their subject matter was always apparent while watching them. They were so clearly, to use an old-fashioned existential phrase, totally *engagé*.

5. MISPERFORMING THROUGH 'IDEOLOGY OF FORM' - DAPHNA BEN SHAUL

In the performances Ruth Kanner has created with her group ideology is embedded in the practice and structure of the performance itself. Such an ideological content, hermeneutically located in or applied to a form or a structure, functioning as its metonymic re-enactment,

could, following Fredric Jameson's *The Political Unconscious*, be called an 'ideology of form' (1981: 74-102). At the same time as events from the past are echoed by stage telling and are particularized by the corporeality of the acting body, that body fails to serve as channel to a singular event and functions as a relational prism that has no unisonous justification; it misperforms.

In *Cases of Murder* storytelling seemingly echoes the historiographic act, which constantly strives for integration, but is incapable to perform it. Thus, for instance, a unified image of Man is created from iron rods through a performative collaboration between the actors. But it is a reductive icon of a 'hanging man,' which almost immediately disintegrates into its parts. Perceived through bare, multi-voiced acts of telling, the *Kristallnacht*, while not losing its horrific place in history, becomes negotiable. Displaying the never-ending process/story of becoming history, the performance also mirrors the recurring choices we face: to act or remain passive, to become assailant or assailed.

In *Dionysus at Dizengoff Center* an ideological analogy is drawn between land and stage - between a piece of land and the theatrical space - in an attempt to grasp the status of the depicted site: the Dizengoff Center shopping mall in Tel Aviv. The actors, the empty stage and several chairs function as modular vessels for both theatrical images and layered memory, or an accumulation of social space planes in Lefebvre's terms (1991). The costumes - white shirts with duplicated elements, like multiple collars and khaki pants or skirts - are worn in several combinations that can be identified with early Zionism, stressing the tension between the identity of a place and theatrical modularity. Such performative modulations (including the evacuation of some spectators from their seats) point at the parallel mechanisms between the stage and the historical layers of the piece of land where the shopping mall now stands, propelling the act of performative story-telling. The place fails to become coherent and solid, and is

presented as a transitory 'imaginative geography', as Edward Said has described the conceptual construction of the Orient (2002: 241-59). It is, as one of the actors - quoting the writer S. Yizhar - says: 'As though everything was just a changing stage set'.

The spatial-anecdotal array by which the story of the 1973 War is presented in *Discovering Elijah, a Play about War*, presents a single goal: the desire to find Elijah. The narrative pattern of this search is the quintessence of the wider motivation, to find a rationale where wars take place and gain control. The retrospective performance narrative of the 1973 War seems to be a comprehensible construct (or poiesis), even a superstructure substitute, to use Althusser's terms (1984: 8-10). However, as various performative practices in the work oppose and disrupt the aspiration for logos, a collision between sign systems is created and the story of the war is constantly misperformed.

At the end of the performance, after the formation of a complex stage imagery undermining both the pseudo-causal logic of the plot itself and the necessity to fight, a fierce doubt is expressed by the narrator figure (in Yizhar's words):

The lone trees passing by now say: Did it have to be this way? The strip of shimmering water from the canal says: Did it have to be this way? The group of soldiers waiting for a lift wave and say: Did all this really have to be? this way? Really?... until it's playing everywhere now, God, did all this have to be? Really?

Through their story-telling techniques the actors of the RKT Group 'visit' characters and events both as individual actors and collectively. They create stage compositions of individual characters and groups that propel a multi-voiced narrative which does not contain a single 'true' story. The actors present emotional and ideological stances that are contrary to their temporary characters or rather parodic alternatives to them. The spaces and objects (e.g.

• Fig 5 - Ruth Kanner Theatre Group - *Cases of Murder*. Standing (from right to left): Adi Meirovitch, Tali Kark, Dafna Arcavi, Shirley Gal-Segev; Sitting: Guy Salman, Ronen Babluki. Photo: Gadi Dagon



a shop, a car, an historical document or a shop) become imprinted in and on their bodies and personified. The actors' bodies convey a perplexing oscillation between the collective dictum (such as functioning as a tool or a weapon of war) and a striking sense of vulnerability.

The historical situation is thus particularized in a corporeal presence that exposes physical exhaustion that also includes interference among bodies, like friction or knocking down each other. Language becomes a material, its articulation tends to disintegrate and function as a barrier or an impediment to the construction and reception of meaning, and it is speckled with associations and slips of the tongue. The act of enunciation and the movement of the bodies of the actors are always synchronized rhythmically as an orchestrated articulation, prone to endless breaks, pauses and imposed silences that are constantly threatened by a disharmonious pitch. The failure 'to become' and 'to be' or to represent a place is the expression of the impossible task to tell 'aright' and is thus the inherent cause for misperformance in the performative practice of the group.

REFERENCES

- Althusser, Louis (1984) *Essays on Ideology* trans. B. Brewster & G. Lock, London: Verso
- Jameson, Fredric (1981) *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, London: Methuen
- Lefebvre, Henri (1991) *The Production of Space* trans. Donald Nicholson Smith, Oxford: Blackwell
- Said, Edward E. (2002) 'Invention, Memory, and Place' in *Landscape and Power* ed. W. J. T. Mitchell, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.