

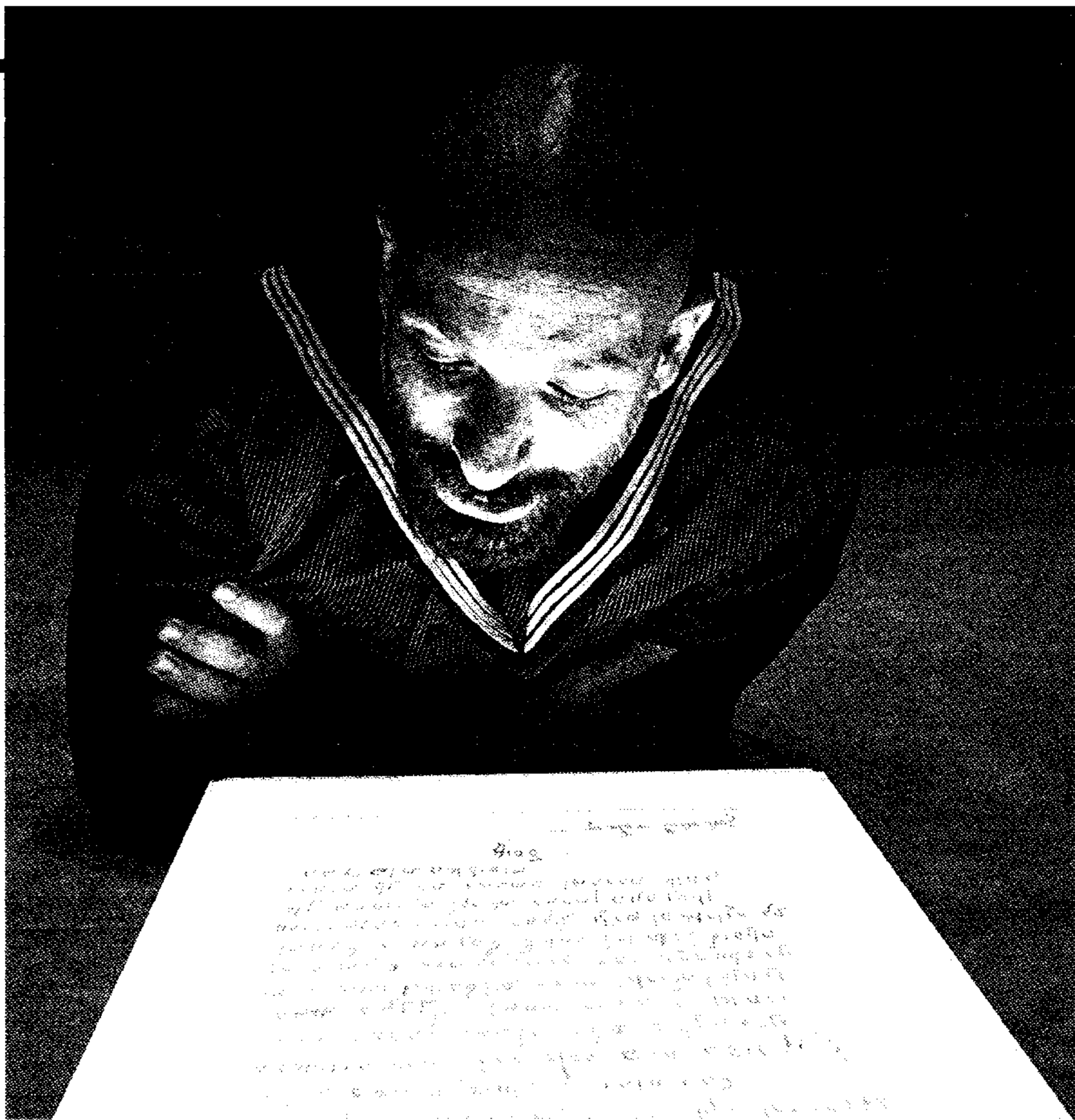
Between the lines

This stage work rivets the eye and the ear and the mind, shaking the psyche with a story both national and personal

Gradually, during 70 minutes in the company of Naomi Yoeli and her associates as they perform Yoeli's new work, "Good Tidings," viewers come to realize how bitterly ironic that title is. As in her previous work, "My Ex-Stepmother-in-Law," a one-woman show (which I praised to the heavens, and it wasn't high enough), here, too, the raw material is Yoeli's life, in the narrow and broad sense of the word "life."

It's the story of her father's family, which she learned about only toward the end of his life, through letters and postcards that were exchanged between her father, who lived in Mandatory Palestine from 1934, and his family, who remained in Tarnopol, Poland, until they perished in 1941. They cast their eyes toward him, feel the ground shaking beneath their feet in Poland, miss him, consider joining him, are fearful of the dangers there. And all along they maintain a pretense that oozes good tidings to refresh the soul, while between the lines lurk evil tidings that stagger all souls, here and there. It's a personal story of a family with all its members and milieu, and a national-Jewish-Israeli story of the past 80 years.

If Yoeli had written a play in the conventional sense of the term using these materials, the result would undoubtedly be a drama of the kind that was experienced by many families, for this is indeed a stereotypical tale. But Yoeli works not only by means of plot, characters and words, she also uses visual and vocal images, movement, and innumerable shades of gray. Thus, at one point she places her actors within a historic, photographic framework, with each actor wearing an item of clothing that existed in the original picture. The actors' facial expressions and body motions illustrate Yoeli's depiction and interpretation, as she is both the director and a character (the daughter of the son who "immigrated-fled" to Palestine in time,



Ronen Babluki plays the father in "Good Tidings." Authoritative-repressed-anxious. *Eldad Maestro*

and "left-abandoned" his family there until it was too late). She is also the actor who plays her role, and also the most neutral of storytellers and interpreters.

Her partners in the work, drawn from the Ruth Kanner Theater Group, are activated by her and by the words contained in the letters. They declaim-sing these messages from the past a cappella (with fascinating original music by Yossi Mar Chaim) in superb coordination, and with astonishingly deep identification with the characters – though they simultaneously maintain an ironic distance from them.

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They exchange roles, so that each plays all the parts, but each of them is more "immersed" in one specific character. Ronen Babluki is the father of the family, authoritative-repressed-anxious; Tali Kark is the mother – sentimental, naïve and practical at the same time; Shirley Gal-Segev is the brother, in a type of painful submissiveness of "it all ended in nothing"; and Adi Meirovitch is the wide-eyed teenage daughter full of hope for her "time of youth."

They are very worried about him and until the last minute reassure him

that they are "healthy and happy." From words that time has liquefied and blurred (some of the letters they exchanged are on the stage surface, lit up, like altars of memory), Yoeli has woven a highly complex stage work. It is packed with details, each of which is calculated and in its place, as though having been examined and chosen under a personal magnifying glass. The work is also a highly intellectual experience, and deeply moving, under Yoeli's absolute control of her materials. The content consists of her life and family and history, and of her body and mind as a person and as part of her own self-examination. All the elements blend and merge with forms and colors and sound and movement until one loses track of what is content and what is form, but with consistent awareness of all the content and the forms, the words and the feelings.

Some of the letters deal with a bathrobe the son sent from Palestine to his mother in Tarnopol. Even before the bathrobe reaches its destination, the father Yoel writes to the son Shlomo, "I imagine it will be / something lovely. / I enjoy it when mother wears / something lovely."

I imagined before Yoeli's stage work began that it would be something lovely. And I very much enjoyed watching the show, because it is, despite the tragic character of its materials, "something lovely." Very lovely.

The next performances of "Good Tidings" are at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art on June 24 at 14.00; June 25 and 26 at 19.00.