

## Book of Ruth

**The Ruth Kanner Theater Group has no home base, hardly any props, and uses literary texts rather than plays to rehearse; yet the unique works Kanner has staged for more than a decade are like nothing else being performed in the country's theaters.**

Aviva Lori | Sep. 9, 2011 | 12:40 PM

The fact that Ruth Kanner holds tight to little pieces of happiness is evident in every gesture she makes and every word she speaks. It's as though she had appropriated a place on the fringes the day she was born and realized only when she reached maturity that this was the true source of her happiness. A useful insight for anyone shunted to the margins in life, at times, as she was, with her head of frizzy hair making her an object of ridicule.



Ruth Kanner and her troupe. "What an actor does on the stage is the tip of the iceberg; inside he has a sack full of contexts." Credit: Reli Avrahami

One of those pieces of happiness is a new work. "The Flight of the Dove," based on a book by Youval Shimoni (Am Oved, 1990; Hebrew ), is now being performed regularly by the Ruth Kanner Theater Group, after premiering at the Israel Festival earlier this year. This is the 10th work staged by the troupe, which, although operating since 1998 and garnering both popular and critical success, is still considered to be on the fringes of the local theater world.

The three protagonists in the new work also seem to be searching for moments of grace and happiness, and a refuge from their loneliness; they cling to minuscule signs of life including an old slipper and the light in a refrigerator. A couple touring Paris and a local woman move in two parallel plots which are seemingly unconnected but nevertheless converge - drawn like two magnets to the mother/base, intersecting in the cacophony of the plaza outside Notre Dame Cathedral.

Kanner's theatrical persona is distinguished by a conscious pursuit of the impossible and by rigorous efforts to cope with unconventional choices of source material. She works from literary texts, not plays; not adaptations of books but the books themselves. For example, apart from some abridgement, she has put Shimoni's "The Flight of the Dove" on the stage as is. She has used the same method with S. Yizhar's "At Sea" and "Discovering Elijah"; Brecht's "He Said Yes / He Said No" (in Aharon Shabtai's translation ); Tamar Berger's "Dionysus at the Dizengoff Center" and others.

"I don't adapt a book into a play," she says. "I do some editing, but the literary texture remains exactly as in the original."



Kanner at age 2. Credit: Courtesy

## Why literary texts?

Kanner: "The simplest answer - and perhaps this is the truth on which I later piled mounds of interpretations - is that this is actually my natural world. I had no friends when I was little and I read all the time. And when you read, you read books, not plays. Even today I don't read plays for pleasure, because they are very hard to understand."

The result onstage is a carnival of what appear to be wild associations involving movement and music, which are channeled into a riveting and even structured sort of statement. And also demanding: Strict attention and intellectual effort are demanded of the audience. Those willing to make that effort are promised a rewarding journey.

Kanner derives her inspiration from the words themselves: words that activate people. A case in point is S. Yizhar, she says. "Yizhar is considered a difficult writer and is not really read. But there was a reason I got on his case, because when you read him carefully you see that his words are like a delicate spring - all you have to do is give the actor the right orientation and suddenly, on stage, the words are not difficult. They possess a warm and living communicativeness. It's the same with Youval Shimoni. His words exist. Bad literature is when the words are an invention and don't truly exist as an event of language."

Equally unusual is Kanner's method of working on a new production with her actors, all of whom were her students in the department of theater arts at Tel Aviv University. She describes the process as "murderous physical work" and adds: "I teach them to investigate the essence of the action that resides in words, and that involves tremendous work. Hard physical work. Very open work. Everything happens in the course of movement. The rehearsals are very wild, even violent - body-shaking."

This tough work lasts three to six months, though there are exceptions: Rehearsals for "The Flight of the Dove" lasted a year.

"It used to be that professional theater people took pride in getting a production onstage within six weeks," Kanner notes. "They strutted around, acting like everything was so professional and efficient. I am happy to think that they too have come to realize that rehearsals are a process - not a race against time."



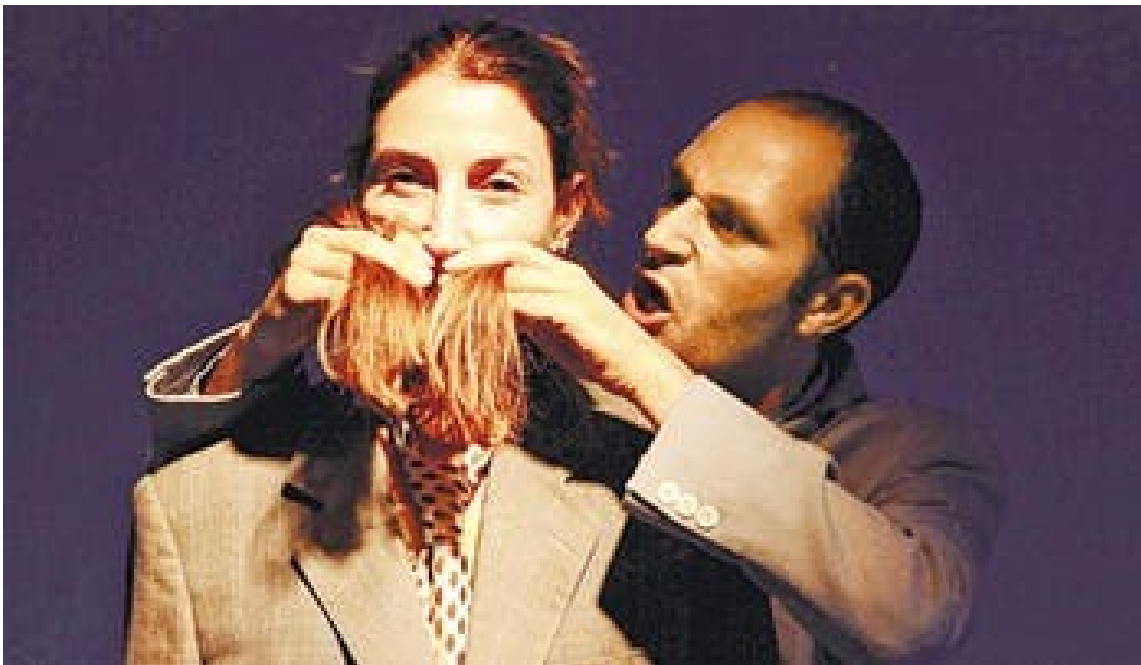
At age 17 in a photo by Hezi Laskali. Credit: Hezi Laskali

At the start of her company's rehearsals, the actors generally don't know what text they will be working on. They arrive as blank slates, without having seen or read anything. Kanner hands each of them pieces of paper with something written on them - but does not explain the overall context of their messages. This method, she believes, ensures that a "freshness" of consciousness is maintained and that no foreign element enters the bubble of understanding that will be taking shape.

"With 'The Flight of the Dove' it took three weeks until they cracked the text," Kanner says. The same method was used in "Cases of Murder," a work about 1938's Kristallnacht in Germany.

"I gave them pieces of paper with isolated sentences written on them, without any historical context. I thought that if I told them it was related to the Holocaust they would whip out the regular reservoir of associations, whereas I wanted them to draw new connections from themselves. I brought them to the rehearsal hall at night, in the dark, and asked them to give a personal interpretation to a series of questions: Where were you when you were asked to help, but refused? Where did you hear shouts and didn't go to investigate? The results were extraordinary. The actors touched on associations, on the materiality of the words. They were able to invoke an abyss of great pain from their own lives.

"It takes endless work until the word touches the senses," she continues, "with the material, with the tongue, with the teeth. It sounds simple, but we work on it for years, looking for the hidden things and the personal layers, the strata that accumulate with time. What an actor does on the stage is the tip of the iceberg; inside he has a sack full of contexts."



Cases of MurderCredit: Courtesy

Ruth Kanner was born in Haifa in 1955 and grew up in Givatayim. Her parents, Polish-born, met in Munich after the war, where her father, Emanuel Kanner, studied architecture, and her mother, Gustava Bot Kanner, attended medical school. They immigrated to Israel in 1951. Emanuel Kanner, who died three years ago, was an associate in the firm of Aba Elhanani and Arieh Sharon, and later had his own firm. One of his projects was Rambam Medical Center in Haifa. Kanner's mother, a family doctor who specialized in diseases related to blood pressure and the kidneys, worked in kibbutzim, moshavim and at Beilinson Hospital in Petah Tikva.

Kanner's first memories are of a loneliness which was forced upon her. "I was a girl who was alone, without friends, who only read books. A girl with strange hair who didn't look like the sweet, popular girls with straight hair. The object of my desire as a teenager was to have hair like [the singer] Ilanit. All the girls

used to straighten their hair then, even those with smooth hair. To be like me was unthinkable."

Did you suffer in silence?

"I have never totally delved into that. Maybe one day I will do so, and try to understand how I felt when other children laughed in my face or behind my back."

Did you tell your parents you were being picked on?

"No, because a child doesn't have the awareness to complain; I didn't know how to behave, and that pushed me even farther to the side. I lived in a world of my own, I read books, and I didn't know much about what was happening around me. I did what I was told, I was an excellent student, I was in the Scouts, I went to school, I came home - but I possessed no life skills. I remember that one day a girlfriend from primary school went with her mother to a factory to buy a dress and my mother gave me money to buy one, too. That was the first time I had a new, feminine dress. I didn't know what it was. I didn't know how to ask and my mother didn't offer, so I wore old dresses that friends of my mother gave her, clothes that were too big for me."

Kanner's day came in the early 1970s, when the musical "Hair" was produced in Israel. Her hair suddenly became the "in" thing. "I met someone who was in the musical on Broadway and he told me, 'Hey, let it all loose' - because until then I used to tie the hair up at the back."

When she was about 15, it occurred to Kanner that what she wanted most was to be on the stage and to act. She didn't know exactly what that meant in practice, but she was certain it would be right for her: "I didn't yet know that there was something called theater. I wasn't taken to plays or museums. We didn't have bourgeois values of money or propriety at home. I also didn't internalize values such as existed in other Polish homes: that there is a difference between Ashkenazim and Sephardim.

"One day I came home after Scouts and I saw through some big windows princes and princesses in silk clothes, talking. It was a rehearsal of 'Twelfth Night' at Beit Zvi [drama school]. Some sort of instinct drew me there and told me that this was theater. I stood there, rapt, not moving. I then started to look around for how I could be part of that. Only the next year, in the ninth grade, did I learn about it."

Thus Kanner embarked on her journey into the world of theater; the Beit Zvi

acting group charted the course. It wasn't a matter of a decision, Kanner recalls; it was simply self-evident that henceforth this would be her life. During her army service she was a member of the first Israel Defense Forces theater troupe.

"We were ensconced in the transport base in Beit Naballah and for half a year studied theater and classical ballet, poetry, voice and music with the finest teachers. We got a terrific grounding. We put on a play by Brecht that was directed by Rina Yerushalmi and we staged it on every dune and every base - and sometimes we were even put up at the King David Hotel ... We were like gypsies, working around the clock and giving two or three performances a day."

Kanner had studied in the theater department of TAU before being drafted into the army, and after her service she returned there for another year. She and her partner then went to New York, where she took various courses, and also acted in New Haven, Connecticut - where they lived - in some theater troupes.

"I did insane things there," she recounts. "I took part in endless acting workshops, learned how to be a circus performer and worked in a bagel restaurant. That was a delight; I would go back to it today. A moment arrived when the work interested me more than the studies. There was something about the action, the flow of people and the interactions and strategies of controlling all the elements, especially the element of time, that enthralled me. I was asked if I had experience and I lied a little - I said yes - and only later did I realize how complicated it is, for example, to hold five dishes on your arm. But the reward was immediate, the tips streamed into my pocket."

In 1981, after a year and a half in America, she and her partner returned to Israel and bought a house in Ramat Hen, a neighborhood in Ramat Gan: "We had lived in downtown New Haven, where people opened fire in the streets, and the atmosphere in New York was also violent, so I decided that I didn't want to live in the city center. I wanted quiet and a plot of land. I didn't want to meet people I knew on the way to the grocery store."

On her plot of land she grows tomatoes, loquats, figs, grapes and olives, and she raises silkworms as pets. "I can get home at night totally wiped out from a performance, and then I go to a tree, pull off leaves and feed the silkworms. I do that three times a day," says Kanner, who has two children: Nana, 26, who is at university, and Avshalom, 18, a musician.

In the 1980s, Kanner had a successful acting career in Israel. She was in the Beit Lessin production of Joshua Sobol's "The Last Worker" and took part in director Hanan Snir's project with the Cameri Theater, "Direct Light and Reflected Light," which examined the connection between movement and acting. She then teamed up with Mika Dany and Noa Lev to create a theater group which operated for 10 years under the auspices of Teddy Hafakot, a production company.

"I first met Tamira Yardeni when we organized a demonstration by artists against the Lebanon War in 1982," she says. "Afterward, when I had an idea for a play, I met with her and she said, 'Let's do it.' We produced a few plays in that framework and each one was a hit."

Among the productions were "Legends of King Solomon," based on tales by Hayyim Bialik, a play about the writer Yosef Haim Brenner, and "Animals," a children's revue.

"This was pure art, from the depths of my artistic credo. It was still young and unformed, but it was a kick in the pants to everything that had been done until then. In the late 1980s you could still do things like that and make a living from them. The culture basket [a state-subsidized program for schools theater] saw that it was good, so they ordered a few performances every month. The kibbutzim invited us, Adi Semel [programming director] of the Tel Aviv Museum of Art fell in love with what we were doing and had us appear in the foyer of the museum, where he built us a special amphitheater. And occasionally we were invited to put on the same play at the Gan Oranim banquet hall, after a performance by [singer-comedienne] Tzipi Shavit.

"When you do the best you can," Kanner continues, "everything comes about, including a livelihood. I know it's not like that anymore today, but I continue to behave in the same way. In the theater I always do what I believe in. I never lied in the theater and I never did anything for extraneous reasons. I never asked myself about a career, I just did what I wanted, and I am doing the same today."

Her success was translated into economic terms as well. "We made a fantastic living," she observes. But the dizzying heights scared her and she decided to take a break to rethink her creative path.

Kanner: "I suddenly got frightened that the next show would also have to be staged 2,000 times. I decided that the next thing I would do would be the opposite of what I had done until then. I went to the theater department at



TAU, and again a small miracle occurred. I told the head of the department that I wanted to teach and investigate the language of the stage as in a laboratory, and he said: 'Fine.' That doesn't happen today. People are fighting for part-time jobs, and I was accepted immediately.

"I kept going with the performances for two more years, and then for 10 years I focused exclusively on the university. In 1998, together with a group of students, I founded the theater group. It's tremendous to perform with it ... Each of the members develops an uncanny ability to 'read' one another on the stage."

Kanner is now a tenured associate professor at TAU, a post that makes it possible for her to manage her troupe on a very modest salary. Her actors also don't make very much, she adds. The group's annual budget of NIS 800,000 comes from the Ministry of Culture, donations and ticket sales.

Kanner has a loyal following of people who love theater; tickets for the group's performances are usually snapped up in advance. The critics also generally like what she does. But this picture is not one of complete happiness: The Ruth Kanner Theater Group does not have a permanent home. Most of its performances take place in the hall of the Batsheva Dance Company at the Suzanne Dellal Center in Tel Aviv when it's available; otherwise, Kanner has to look for other solutions.

"I accept the fate of being a nomad in the name of inner freedom and the freedom to deliberate," she explains. "This lack is filled with inner riches, material wealth. When I get up in the morning, I am drawn straight into the work at hand. I don't worry about more existential things like an air conditioner that broke down and another million things that pile up on my desk. Ultimately, I opt for working on the production. And I still say that I will do only what interests me in the theater. There's no question of that."

When did a question like that come up?

"A couple of years ago, during the centenary of Natan Alterman, someone suggested that we do something by him. Alterman is one of my favorite poets, but I would not do something by him during the Alterman year - maybe some other time. We appeared at the Haifa Museum and culture coordinators came to the performance. Afterward they asked me if I had something by Agnon, because he is studied in school. I told them I would not do Agnon [just] because it would be good for someone and is appropriate for the education system."

Did the big theater companies try to lure you?

"I met with a very distinguished artistic director of one of the repertoire theaters and he said, 'Why don't you do something here?' I replied, 'Because I don't think you would be interested in the things that interest me.' He said, 'Why not? It may interest me very much.' This was a little after we did 'At Sea,' which got very good reviews and was sold out, because people are hungry for a deep experience of the spirit. But if he had seen the text before seeing the production, he would have tossed me out."

Do you prefer theater in underground conditions?

"I would like to have a place of my own. There are values which I feel we are trying to foster as an onstage 'research' group, such as simplicity and frugality. We do not use big sets in our productions - in fact, there are hardly any sets at all. We can do a great deal with very little. That's how the effectiveness of a scientific theory is examined: whether you can prove a lot with a few formulas. We don't have a single prop that doesn't go through a few metamorphoses, and that too sends an implicit message of thrift."

Do you go to the theater?

"Sometimes. I generally see more student productions than other types of theater."

In 2005, Kanner became involved in a torrid affair with Japan. "We had done 'Amos,' a story about a field mouse that I read in the annual Haaretz short story contest, which burned me up. The words ripped me apart inside; it was clear to me that one day I would do something with it. We staged it at the Acre Festival for Alternative Theater and it won every possible award, including first prize, and then we went to perform in Tel Aviv. At one show, some guy approached me and said he was the cultural attache of the Israeli Embassy in Tokyo, he had really loved the play and would like to bring us to Tokyo.

"We performed the play at a festival there and forged very good connections. I had previously conducted acting workshops in Japan. It seemed that we were speaking the same language. Then I was asked to direct 'Mother Courage' for a [Japanese] repertoire company, although I don't usually direct dramas. In Israel I would have rejected the offer, but they said: 'Stage it your way.' So I accepted. The lead actress was a very famous star in Japan. A true star. What's more, a director in Japan is God. In rehearsals the microphone is presented to you on a red velvet cushion with white silk gloves."

Ever since then, Kanner has spent a few months a year in Japan, directing and leading workshops. What about her the children, home, family? Kanner: "I love my children more than anything in the world, but I will always be like this: I do what I want and things work out."

Your son was still quite young when you went to Japan for a few months in 2005.

"So what? He was with his father, with his grandmother, and I assume they got along."

In addition to Japan, she has taken her troupe to India, Poland, England, the U.S., the Czech Republic and Croatia.

Kanner has the ability to focus her concentration on one thing: work. All the rest is distraction. "The worst thing is that I don't read books because I work at home. Work is what I love best. Work has always given me the most tempestuous experiences," she declares. "I have a girlfriend I am dying to see. For three years we have been asking each other when we will meet for a beer - and it's not happening."

Youval Shimoni, who was born in Jerusalem in 1955, is the grandson of the poet David Shimoni, and a writer and fiction editor at Am Oved, the veteran publishing house. He has published two novels - "The Flight of the Dove" and "A Room" (1999) - and a collection of literary essays, "Dust" (2007).

"The Flight of the Dove," his first novel, consists of two separate plots, in which small details planted by Shimoni are revealed to readers who plunge into their depths. To emphasize the different story lines, each plot is printed in a different font - and in addition, Shimoni also took the radical step of having them appear throughout on either the right- or left-hand side. Thus, on each double spread of pages the right-hand page may feature the story of a day spent by the tourist couple in Paris, while the left-hand one contains the inner monologue of a woman in exactly the same time frame. The pages are numbered 1 and 1-A, and so forth. Thus, those who wish can read one full story and then go back and read the other one.

"There are two story lines that develop in parallel," Shimoni explains. "Story lines that are completely different in content and style. The differentiation between pages is intended to underscore this parallel element in a formal way, until the convergence in the last line of the book. There is no obligation to read a page on the right and a page on the left, you can read a few right-hand

pages and then a few left-hand ones, and this small freedom also serves the inevitable convergence at the end. In other words, whether we make faster progress in one story line or in the other, it all leads to one place."

Are you aware that this is not an easy form of communication?

Shimoni: "It certainly doesn't 'flow' in the conventional sense, and maybe it's non-communicative as compared with the usual linearity [of writing in books], but things here are flowing toward a very specific place, and the structure serves that. In other words, it works for anyone who is ready to try to cross two channels simultaneously."

What did you hope to accomplish by this method?

"I wanted extra emphasis - a visual emphasis that is present throughout the reading - to create the parallel development of the stories. It's not necessary, as I said, to stop reading mid-sentence; you can go to the end of the paragraph and continue later, after going back to the parallel story line."

What do you think about the stage version?

"I have a very high regard for Ruth Kanner, who has developed a distinctive path in the theater, totally removed from the tendency to produce the skits that characterize plays today, whose main aim is to entertain. I also have a very high regard for the company of talented actors she has gathered around her, and for the way they delved into this text, which does not respond easily to its readers. I enjoyed the portrayal of the tourist couple from the first story, the facets she found in the character of the woman in the parallel story, and the many other theatrical inventions that were overlaid on the written text."

Many critics believe that Shimoni is a major Israeli fiction writer, but his books have not been commercially successful thus far.

"Such success is not a supreme value," he says, "though it is certainly not unpleasant. Writing that does not 'flow' is certainly not a recipe for getting on the best-seller lists."



At Sea.Credit: Coutesy