

Passport: the permit for the freedom of man

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A fascinating conceptual play sheds light on the troublesome issue of refugees in Israel using images from the past

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A triangle of sources

What is a refugee? The refugees' convention determines that a refugee is a person who has real concern of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, their political point of view or their belonging to a certain social group, and there is danger for their lives or freedom. The convention doesn't relate to questions such as the existence or the absence of a passport or a travel certificate, or even to the legal status of the refugee in their home country.

Nonetheless, the convention determines that "the countries signed on this convention shall not impose punishments on refugees who, on their way directly from the country where their lives or their freedom were in danger, have entered the territory of their country or are there without permission, on the condition that they must show up immediately before the authorizations and provide a satisfactory reasoning for their illegal entrance or stay."



Dina Konson - photographer

This is the background for the fascinating conceptual play created by the director **Yael Cramsky**, who has so far been praised in Israel and abroad for many theater plays she directed, including "Ghosts" in Tmuna, and "Within the Loneliness of the Cotton Fields" in Herzliya Ensemble. Both plays were translated by the actor **Doron Tavori**, who also acted in them, and he is a main partner in the new production, as an actor and the translator of "Refugee Dialogs" by **Bertolt Brecht**, which constitutes one of the three sources Cramsky adapted for the play "Passport", with the dramaturgical assistance of **Freddie Rokem**.

The other two sources are "correspondence" between **Walter Benjamin** and **Gershom Scholem**, which was published in Resling publishing house and was translated by **Harel Kin**, and the text of a testimony Cramsky heard from her father, **Yeshayahu Kagan**, after their return from a journey to his hometown Pinsk, from which he was banished 70 years ago. This is the journey that exposed her to "the truth that he was hiding throughout his entire life," and now, eight years later, she decided to get back to that truth and deal with the issue of the refugees in the Second World War.

A disturbing platform for current events

Dina Konson designed the costumes and the unique stage space: a delineated square of white gravel, a table and several stools, a yellowing patch of grass in the right corner, which symbolizes, as it turns out, Palestine-Israel of the 1930s, and benches on both sides of the stage.

The two pairs of actors will wait on those benches, until they are called to conduct their two dialogs, according to the word of a fifth actor, which will play the role of the war refugee, but also the role of "director", who will conduct the order of things or disturb them, every time he climbs a ladder to mark the year of occurrence in the clock displaying the year, which hangs in the back. The lighting was designed by **Yair Vardi**, and the original music accompanying the play was written by **Ofir Bar-On**.

Within this framework, Cramsky creates the space, and perhaps the abyss, where the two dialogs and the monolog "speak" of the universal story of refugees, derived from that horror and madness experience of the Second World War, as she careful not to draw a comparative line to the situation we are familiar with here, in our days, or in the years around the establishment of Israel.

The responsibility for the actual interpretation lies entirely on me, but Cramsky place here a disturbing platform that doesn't let go, even as I refer to the stories told on the stage, and especially the testimony of her father, with **Eyal Zusman's** moving and aching acting work, who comments and sheds light on Brecht's brilliant, cynical dialog, which wonders what is the purpose of a

passport, of silence, of wandering, of an insane regime, and is served with the no less brilliant and cynical performance of **Doron Tavori** and **Naomi Yoeli**.

These, in their way, light the terrible darkness described in the correspondence exchange between Gershom Scholem, who, as a Zionist, emigrated from Germany to Jerusalem in 1923, and there became one of the greatest researchers of the Kabbala, and Walter Benjamin, his assimilated friend, who has become, even in his young age, one of the most important philosophical mass writers and culture critics of various kinds, but remained in Germany, escaped it in 1933, and apparently committed suicide seven years later, in despair of his condition as a refugee.

The refugee's shirt

The correspondence of letters is performed on stage by **Michal Weinberg**, who, in wonderful sublimation, cries Benjamin's pleas for assistance, starting with money that would allow him to purchase a train ticket, and ending in his integration into the intellectual-university array in Jerusalem, and **Roey Maliach-Reshef**, as sharp and decisive as Scholem, who refrains from reaching out to his non-Zionist friend, does not speak any Hebrew, and whose philosophical ideas are difficult to comprehend.

The tension between the three sides of the triangle created by Cramsky holds the spectator who is open to comprehend the occurrences, but like her, does not grasp the bare fact of the refugee's condition. Brecht's moments of cynicism and humor mix with her father's matter-of-fact like yet terrifying descriptions, and with the friendly yet chilling correspondence arriving from Jerusalem.

And it is for a good reason that Freddie Rokem brings a story written by Benjamin in his mass about **Franz Kafka**, which he wrote and sent to Scholem in 1934. This is a story that contains within it the essence of eternal exile and wandering, which can be summarized in a single word: "shirt", the one each and every refugee requires, be them kings or beggars, citizens or living in another country. A shirt in the meaning of a passport or hospitality that does not shame the guest or their host.

This unique production, which fascinated me with its contents and its performance throughout the hundred minutes of its unfolding on the stage, was brought to the Nahmani hall by the creators' association "**Eve**", the association of independent creators in theater, the **Theater arts program in Tel Aviv University**, **Itim Ensemble**, and with the support of the Ministry of Culture and Sports.