

# "Leah's" Soul Speaks to and of the Human Soul

The play "Leah" by Yael Cramsky is based on the diaries of Leah Goldberg, as well as on her novel "And He is the Light". Even spectators who are less familiar with the writings of this poet in depth will identify with her pain

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"Leah". A tight concept. Noit Zakai - photographer

The play "Leah" is based on Leah Goldberg's diaries, as well as on the novel she wrote, "And He is the Light" (1946). The young Nora Krieger studies archeology in Berlin, and returns for the summer vacation at her parents' home. Then her mother informs her that during her absence, she divorced the father, who suffers from mental illness. His old friend, Erin, also arrives for a visit to the homeland, after many years abroad, and Nora falls in love with him. The dramatic tension in the novel is expressed in this unfulfilled and desperate love, in Nora's terrible fear from the madness, as she expects to suffer from it herself, and finally, from the revelation that Erin, who seemingly represents hope for a new and balanced life, also suffers from mental illness.

In the play "Leah", the director Yael Cramsky chose to first remove almost all the set, in the wide meaning of the word "set", and leave only the principal, in its most refined form. And the principal is the consciousness of the protagonist, Leah/Nora, in her highly fragile and pained emotional state. It all begins with the childhood, with the traumatic "initiating event" in which she and her parents escaped their home, and in which she was left all by herself in the field when her father was taken to be tortured because of his red shoes, which made the Lithuanian soldiers suspect him to be a

communist. And from that place he did not return the way he used to be, and from that point everything started to go terribly wrong, in unbearable twists of pain.

It starts with the words "I remember", spoken by the actress Yarden Gilboa, who plays the role of Leah/Nora, and Dina Bley joins her as her mother, as an additional emotional echo, as the male actors, Eyal Zusman (who plays several roles, all representing a physical or mental illness) and Ronen Yifrach (Erin) are, at first, responsible for the presentation of the more narrative aspect, which is true to the location and chronology.

The verbal repetitiveness, which appears in many places in the play, intensifies the memory of the events, which does not let go, and continues and returns in torturing circularity. The traumatic main event begins when the child Leah is too helpless and young to respond, but mature enough to understand: "I understood the terror of it all," she says, "I was already eight years old at that time." Now, more than a decade after the occurrence of the event, it is possible to see clearly how her head still burns and her hands are still frozen, and that, like then, she is still left to her own anxieties, without the ability to really call for help.

### **Incredibly painful**

Cramsky cleverly connected Goldberg's diary fragments with pieces from her novel. In most cases, such connections seem artificial, literary and not dramatic, but this is not the case here. The mere connection also points to some lack of separation between life (the diaries) and the creation (the novel), but beyond that, the purpose of the connection is also to intensify the drama. Cramsky intensified the drama in the diaries by choosing that the mother (Nora's mother) is the one who reads them, stealthily peeking in, and thus the situation is appended with an additional dramatic layer of a worried mother. That, in addition to the text itself, which speaks of lack of purpose, depression, and the impossible wish to be "provincial", "simple", and know something real of the chaotic life of someone who is not such a person.

In reference to the second text, which is taken from the novel, Cramsky mainly chose the dialog scenes between Nora and her mother, and between Nora and Erin, which display a desperate attempt by Nora to give a normal, quotidian and relaxed image to her life and behavior, something that Erin does not believe, not even for a moment. And so, quickly and summarily, Nora is in a situation where she is torn between the behavior she has been practicing for years, an insistent attempt to maintain her sane façade, and the desire to express these strong feelings, and that someone (Erin) will finally contain them, where they were never contained before. These are two seemingly contradicting dramatic desires, but in fact, they are complementary to one another, and this mental state is displayed in "Leah" in a fierce, dramatic, and precise manner, and therefore also incredibly painful.

At the beginning of the play, it seems like Yarden Gilboa, as Leah/Nora, acts in an external and artificial manner. The lines she mechanically "shoots" are recited, cut by

commas and points located not in expected and natural places, but rather in places that are almost wrong in terms of understanding the language and its gestures. However, after a while, this manner of speaking is imbued with a profound and clear psychological meaning – why, this is exactly the way the problem manifests – this young woman guards herself with her life, lest her soul explodes with pain, and the madness will burst out. Only by this kind of extremely tight behavior, one can comprehend the immensity of the thing she protects. The physical suitcases, which she guarded as a child in the field, are now the suitcases of her soul, and she still stands guard over them, without the ability to unpack them in a safe place.



"Leah". A very high level of text work. Noit Zakai - photographer

"Leah" displays a very high level of text work, starting with the adaptation and weaving of the two texts together, and continues with wonderful acting work on the part of Gilboa, who, bit by bit, in a highly professional manner, lets fragments of the pain rise to the surface, and exposes not only her character's personal pain but also the nature of the human soul, which, when must remain hidden in the darkness, is revealed too late, much more forcefully, and tragically.

Erin's character seemingly constitutes a sublimating and relaxing factor for the extreme emotions, until it is revealed that he also suffers from mental illness, which, in retrospect, lights the entire plot from a different angle. Goldberg placed original and wonderful ideas and phrases in Erin's mouth, such as "a person can skip themselves" or "we should start life from adulthood", meaning, skip the childhood and its inherent pains and traumas. Ronen Yifrach intensifies this spirit with his delicate acting work, which is intelligent and graceful, and he manages to maintain ambiguity that is so well suitable for his character.

This mental puzzle is appended by Eyal Zusman, who plays the roles of the father, the sick uncle, and more. In the part where he plays the uncle, who speaks between horrid gargling noises, which he completely ignores, Zusman reaches absolutely brilliant places of acting, in a precise dosage that is simply heart-rending. Dina Balay, in the role of the anxious mother, moves between all of them and makes wonderful work in the transitions between fragility and stability, in acting full of nuances and singing that touches the soul.

### **Profound teamwork**

The minimalistic set, the costumes, the lighting, the sound, and the video all attest to profound teamwork and go together with the tight concept. It is impossible to cover it all here in detail, but I will mention the choice to perform the entire play in full light, as an original and challenging choice. In addition, the round object that is located on the stage and combines video and sound, has in itself a strong effect, and it raises many images: a moon, a crystal ball, a sick and blurry eye, and more. It is hard to put into words this object and the pleasant integration between the visual and musical elements, and it would be better to simply watch them and sense them in this concise and expressive play.

"Leah" is a play that can be cataloged as a play for knowledgeable spectators, who know and cherish Leah Goldberg, as well as veterans in the paths of theater. Some would consider it as an "elitist" play, and clearly, the more the spectator knows Goldberg's writings, the more context and echoes they will notice. That said, it is because of such particularly profound thought that "Leah" manages to escape the traps of rationalism and "culture", which capture many plays based on renowned creators. Its topic, which is the soul – in its nakedness, its dangers and its wounds – can be something even less knowledgeable spectators can relate to. The play was made with much thought and intelligence, and it is evident that many emotions were also involved in the process. When you leave after watching it, it is impossible not to sense, in great intensity, the pains of each and every person's soul.

### **"Leah". Passport Ensemble and Tel Aviv Museum.**

**Adaptation and direction: Yael Cramsky, Space and lighting: Iris Mualem, Costumes: Dina Kunson, Music: Faye Shapiro, Video: Iris Mualem, Nimrod Zin, Acting: Dina Blei Shor, Yarden Gilboa, Eyal Zusman, Ronen Yifrach, Shay Levi, Fay Shapiro**