

A Distinguished Visual Language

Just like Dan Tsalka's post-traumatic novel, which was written in the aftermath of Yitzhak Rabin's murder, the surrealistic show by Passport Ensemble explores our existence as a split, dividing and bleeding society. "Under the Sign of the Lotus" welcomes the spectator with open arms, while raising a doubt regarding the executorial potential of the idea of establishing a Jewish kingdom in Israel.

Make Us a King

One needs courage in order to reopen for discussion *Dan Tsalka's* words in general, and those in his semi-prophetic novel "Under the Sign of the Lotus" in particular. Why courage? Well, where to begin – in Tsalka's unique language? In the enigmatic structure of the text, which seems unraveled, that allows you, the reader, many alcoves to curl up in, but doesn't allow you to get lost in it, and all in all, doesn't let you go or gives you rest? In the expertise and the diving into the unknown of the writer's ocean of wisdom? In the many worlds which were built on solid ground, unfortunately not longer accustomed for us, sandstone placed upon sandstone strictly and now, you go ahead and try to put them all together again, without them collapsing on you.

All that, as said, without even start discussing the novel's actual themes, in a place where religion and state collide to the extent of suffocating. And why prophetic? Well, somehow it seems that right now, after the collapsing-before-establishing of the Netanyahu kingdom, no less than when the novel was written, this is only a matter of time until someone will stand up and think that maybe, this is not a totally crazy idea, to resuscitate the kingdom of David, up on the ruins of Israel as we knew it. Someone will rummage and find some linkage to that old kingdom and miraculously, all the ideological, political, religious disagreements and others will be put aside, and right away a straight line, align like a ruler, will stretch behind the holiness of the kingdom.



Under the Sign of the Lotus, photo by Tami Shaham

Tsalka was one of the great Hebrew writers, who unfortunately didn't get the readers' embrace he deserved in his life. This post-traumatic novel was written after the murder of the Israeli prime minister, *Yitzhak Rabin*. Tsalka's last published novel was printed in 2002, right in the middle of the darkness of the Second Intifada, which broke all records regarding the extent of blood spilled over the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In those times, it exploded in our face and inside us, in our guts, on a daily basis.

The conflict was at its climax and the physical pain was visual, echoing. At the time, it seemed that wherever the hand will be placed, the blood will flow with no salvation. It was clear even then that the Oslo celebrations were premature, and the new Middle East buried deep in the ground, along with the optimism that wrapped, for a blink of an eye, the old Middle Easters, those tired from wars and destiny's hits.



Under the Sign of the Lotus, photo by Tami Shaham

Above all, the joy of creation.

Yael Cramsky, director and choreographer, multidisciplinary artist, has a years-long genre-crossing dialogue with various contents and forms, along with the members of *Passport Ensemble*, which she founded in 2014. Together, they have taken upon themselves to dig in the depths of the ideas Tsalka raised in his novel. Like him, they're attempting to search the engine that activate us, the Israelis, to follow wires that compresses the built-in knot of this place and its people and to refine an extract of the Israeliness.

No doubt, this is a sisyphian work, tough and far from playing nice, impartial and surprisingly full of love. Hovering over, above all else, the joy of creation.

It seems that Cramsky, who adapted the text to stage, directed it and orchestrated all its components, asked to expel out of her the fright of existence in Israel of 2021. As if something inside her reached a boiling point and had to boil over, out of her and beyond, to get resonance, in order to be set free. The feeling of urgency, like the ticking of a clock that can set off a bomb at any moment, is felt in the stage work, that is less amused than the novel, but reflects burning no less.

Just as the novel, Passport Ensemble's show is deceiving – it welcomes the spectator with open arms, while raising a doubt regarding the executional potential of the idea of establishing a Jewish kingdom in Israel. It awakens demons, ghosts and multiple frights, concerning the unstable in-between era we're stumbling in, stuck up to our necks.



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The work's esthetics is modest, allegedly, but crafty: a result of *Cramsky* joining forces with the set and custom designer *Dina Konson*, the lighting and video designer *Iris Mualem* and the photographer and video editor *Tami Shaham*. In fact, it hits you as soon as you walk into the modest space of Shidlovsky Hall in the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, that adopted the ensemble – an act which is not taken for granted in face of the harsh times the Israeli culture field experiences, even before the days of the pandemic and certainly, in the middle of the paralysis that spread throughout the pandemic.

The small gallery is an intimate space in which the actors and audience are at the same level. The closeness is significant and after almost two years of social distancing, quarantine and lockdowns, the very essence of gathering hits as an electric flow and accompanied by a weird feeling of participating in a rebellious act, on the verge of subversion.

The hall's floor is covered with olive-green canvas. A modern-designed rocking chair is painting the space in yellow. A hairdresser's retro boudreaux chair is balancing the energies. A blue painted box is in the middle of the space. Lights are hanging horizontal on a hanger from both sides, lighting in green what will become, in just a few minutes, the scene of action. Color stains on canvas.

On the wall, illustrated by pencil, silhouettes of two characters – a man and a woman walking. Walking and walking, but staying at the same place, captured in a wall of stone. The visual perception and design are reflected in every detail.



Under the Sign of the Lotus, photo by Tami Shaham

Leaderships Skills – Out

The plot's line is allegedly simple. In the staged production, the plot revolves around Prof. Yanai Waldman's vision. Waldman is an ex-military officer and a charismatic historian with a furious brain, sharp instincts and a megalomaniac tendencies. The realistic and cynical Waldman recognizes longing for the origins and for the glorious, abundant days of Salomon's and David's kingdoms. He believes that crowning a queen from the "right" seed will bring a necessary change, and eventually, to redemption, in a society that had lost its humility, generosity and kindness.

In order to execute his life's mission, he recruits his former student, Yotam Ninio, a linguistic who's expertise is semantic languages, a former stoner, that got kicked off the academy and is making a living from communication workshops. His task is to teach Geffen Abarbanel, the future queen, to speak, to stand in front of an audience, to sell the idea and to sweep away the crowd.

With the help of Tal, the hairdresser (*Elizabeth Vaisman*), a member of the subversive group, also a photographer and video editor occasionally, a weave of images, editing, photoshop and sound is being embroidered. This weave makes Miss Abarbanel, a woman that, theoretically, all of her skills sum up in her unproven family relations, to a leader that can be sold to the crowd. After all, this is the era's spirit: leaderships skills – out. We'll be satisfied with the family relation, that gives a celebrity aroma, good public relations, an oiled marketing outline, texts that were carefully repeated, promotional videos and fine display, packed in an attractive way.

Sounds odd? Not completely. After all, the split Israel, the one that desperately needs reconciliation from the inside and a hug from the outside, Israel that walks in the darkness, wandering and lost (not to say, suicidal), is a fertile ground, that can easily regrow out of her the vision of the kingdom of Israel, if only to grasp the hope for change.



Under the Sign of the Lotus, photo by Tami Shaham

A Surrealistic Feeling

From an interview conducted by *Anat Zecharia* with Cramsky on "Habama" website, it seems that the adaptation process spread over five years. The materials' adaptation is well done. The choice to change the designated monarch's gender, from male to female, is thought-provoking. In addition, placing the "crown" on *Dina Blei's* head, an actress that embodies inside her fragility and confusion and at the same time, youthful and maturity, peacefulness and ruthlessness, softness and humanity, but also some kind of distance on the verge between the "masculine" and "feminine", adds many colors and layers to the role.

Waldman (*Eyal Zusman*) and Ninio (*Yoav Hait*), are two edges that cause built-in tension on stage: the first is restless, neurotic, impatient, sharp-moving, flexible, jumpy. The words are

thrown-sprayed out of his mouth into the space and they're, too, impatient, sharp. On his head, earphones where there is music that dictates the rhythm throughout the show. The music stops when he removes the earphones. The second one is slow, contemplative, introverted, his movement delayed, gangling, insecure but full of nuances. His words, like him, are a bit stuttered, insecure in themselves, hesitant. All of him contemplates.

Overall, everything that happens on stage is accompanied by a surrealistic feeling. The characters talk with each other, seemingly, there is a dialogue, but actually they're surrounded by a transparent wall of loneliness. The cooperation is the try of hopeless people to take matters into their own hands, to take action and perhaps, to break down the wall.



Under the Sign of the Lotus, photo by Tami Shaham

Between Word and Body

"Under the Sign of the Lotus" is a laboratory of creation, humbly asking, with a lot of questions marks, to formulate the place in which it grew. Indeed, this is a work that leans on text, like the rest on Cramsky's works, but it takes it further into unique theater language, that sculpts figures in the space and into more abstract worlds of the body's movements and of ideas in space.

While watching the show, the thought wanders from what is being said to the body and suddenly, Tsalka's written words, that passed Cramsky's strainer, echo and influence the performers' position and physicality and surprisingly, the audience's, too.

This is a show that stimulates doubts, that is not easy to categorize and excuse me the director, it is not what you can call "a show for everyone", because it demands to contemplate on it and not to pass by it. In that, there is a seed of careful optimism in all regarding the artistic field, which was eulogized in recent times repeatedly, only to prove

again and again its resistance. In the end, the show brought me back to the bookshelf, from which, with honor, the original novel was pulled out, for me to dive into it again. This alone is a considerable achievement.



Under the Sign of the Lotus, photo by Tami Shaham

Under the Sign of the Lotus: Writing, Adaptation to stage and Director – **Yael Cramsky**, Set and Costume Design – **Dina Konson**, Video Art and Lighting Design – **Iris Mualem**, Music – **Ronen Shapiro**, Video Editor – **Tami Shaham**

Actors: **Dina Blei**, **Yoav Hait**, **Eyal Zusman**, **Gabi David**, **Elizabeth Vaisman**