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Israeli Stage readings speak to damaged bodies, healing souls

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Ramona Alexander in “Fertile” PHOTO: ISRAELI STAGE What makes a person a woman? In the world that “Fertile,” the title character in Yakir Eliahu Vaknin’s eponymous play, grows up in, a woman is someone who can bear children.

Fertile – yes, that is the character’s name – is born without a uterus. Her mother considers Fertile ‘broken’ by this genetic defect, and she hides the biological facts from her daughter as long as she can. Fertile is no fool and she forces the truth from her mother, but she also quickly concludes that life will be a lot easier if she hides her barrenness from her teenage friends, her scout leader, and even her lover.

During the course of Israeli Stage’s terse and gripping one-woman staged reading, actress Ramona Alexander deftly switches from one character to another as she leads us on a coming-of-age journey from concealment to self-acceptance, presented with minimal, skillful staging by director Guy Ben- Aharon, who is also the company’s founder and artistic director.



Jaronzie Harris, left, Maureen Keiller, center, and Alice Duffy in “Happy Ending” PHOTO: ISRAELI STAGE Anna Deavere Smith recently treated local audiences when she masterfully played dozens of characters in the course of an evening. Alexander does Ms. Smith one better, portraying an equally large set of roles and flipping between several sharply drawn characters in the course of a minute.

The small but engaged audience in the chapel of Boston’s Temple Israel on a post-election evening mostly remained after the performance to participate in a discussion led by Joyce Antler, professor emerita of American studies and women’s gender and sexuality studies at Brandeis University. The lively talkback in essence served as a second act to the play and was of equal interest.

Dr. Antler’s opening remarks, presented with clarity and insight, placed playwright Vaknin’s work, written only a year ago, in the Israeli and Jewish cultural context in which it was created. Although not many women share Fertile’s structural birth defect, the topic of infertility certainly resonates greatly with many people and women in particular.

Dr. Antler also noted the biblical injunction, “to be fruitful and multiply,” has enormous significance, even in modern Judaism. She further drew connections between the play and the current national political situation. In Israel, where the play is set, receiving medical treatment is not an issue, whereas many of the professor’s students now have concerns about the future of women’s health insurance.

Dr. Antler concluded by pointing out that Fertile could only heal when she decides to be open about who she is with her friends, family and fiancé, noting the greater acceptance and openness in American society in recent years concerning matters of gender and identity.

The script itself is little concerned with overt questions of religion, politics or ethnicity. Fertile inhabits a world where notions of gender identity and biological reproduction are rigidly connected, and from which any deviation is ignored or hidden.

Ms. Alexander’s performance, by her account, draws on her own Cape Verdean family background, and is at its most skillful when she portrays Fertile’s teenage friends, convincingly rendered from the streets of urban America.

Here is where what is perhaps the one weakness of the evening lies. Israeli Stage has commissioned its own English translation of this modern Hebrew drama, and yet it is not entirely sure whether it is set in Israel or America. Either choice is a fine one; yet it needs to be made.

In the talkback, director Ben- Aharon spoke of his company as a “platform for dialogue” and asserted the work they perform is perhaps more revealing outside of its original, Israeli context. Still, some of the audience’s comments expressed confusion over the use of words like mensch and kibbutz, when moments earlier Fertile apparently was treading the mean streets of the U.S. Such uncertainty probably was not the production’s intention.

In an earlier interview, Ben- Aharon said Israeli Stage generally performs staged readings for a single evening before going on tour, and “Fertile” was no exception. However, those seeking the lovely and talented Ramona Alexander can currently find her in “Akeelah and the Bee” at Wheelock Family Theatre, and she will appear in the Lyric Stage’s upcoming “Barbecue.”

Overall, the evening was a delightful combination of topical subject, an engaging performance and thoughtful commentary, with only a few minor blemishes. Congratulations to Rabbi Suzie Jacobson, Temple Israel’s education director, for sponsoring this excellent work.

“Happy Ending”

“Happy Ending” is the second play that this reviewer has attended this year concerning an actress with terminal cancer who resists the medical profession over continuing aggressive treatment as hope slips away. Both plays were created by cancer patients who are no longer with us.

“Imagining the Imaginary Invalid,” performed this past winter at New York’s La Mama, used Moliere’s “Imaginary Invalid” as a starting point for a play within a play within a play, twisting suddenly from a rollicking farce into a heart-wrenching confrontation between a caring doctor and a patient who has lost the will to continue medical treatment.

The late Anat Gov’s “Happy Ending” similarly mixes the comic with the confrontational, although this work is steadfastly traditional in its construction, almost to the point of formula. Fortunately, Israeli Stage enlisted some very strong players to take part in this staged reading at Boston’s Goethe Institute.

We first meet a trio of chemotherapy patients, young, middle aged, and old, who serve as a sort of Greek chorus, all played with humor and verve by Alice Duffy, Jaronzie Harris and Maureen Keiller. Their nurse, Karen MacDonald, functions as a messenger to the medical gods.

These patients are dealing with their illness as best they can, using religion, wisecracks or a few surreptitious toques of medical marijuana. The wig man, Bret Silverman, who is almost as important to these women as the medical practitioners, has a somewhat predictable comic turn of his own.

The central figure of the drama, the well-known (in the play) actress Talia, played by the well-known (to Boston theatergoers) actress Nancy E. Carroll, soon arrives for her first chemo session. The recently diagnosed Talia is in complete denial about the seriousness of her condition until Will LeBow’s Dr. Katz shows up and describes Talia’s medical status to his students. Katz talks about Talia as if she were not even there, and thus begins the conflict between doctor and patient that drives the evening.

Talia’s ignorance about what it means to have non-operable Stage 4 cancer is quickly dispelled just by looking at the anguished faces of the Chemo Chorus when she asks them how many stages come after “4” (there are none). Talia resolves to end treatment rather than endure the rigors of chemotherapy in order to enjoy as best she can her remaining time. Because of some

complicated legalese, which seems specific to the Israeli setting of the play, plus some contrived plotting, only the despised Dr. Katz can free Talia from enforced treatment.

We can easily forgive contrivances because they bring us the highlight of the piece: the irresistible force of Mr. LeBow's physician attempting to overcome the unmovable objections of Ms. Carroll's patient who has lost patience. The powerful subject under discussion moves us as we ask what it means to have a life worth living. Even in a lightly rehearsed reading, these two powerful actors do not fail to delight.

The actors' lack of full familiarity with the script weakens the play in other areas, though. Some of the jokes suffer from less than sharp timing. Perhaps the veteran and venerable Ms. MacDonald, given more time for research, would have chosen to play her nurse with something other than a quavering trepidation. All the real life nurses this reviewer has encountered seem able to handle anything a patient throws at them without being easily rattled.

Overall, the cast is very strong, and director Guy Ben-Aharon handles them with an appropriately light touch. The translation by Maraglit Rodgers is also completely at ease.

The long, narrow room at the Goethe Institute, not designed for theatre, was nearly full and those in the audience consigned to the cheap seats in back had to crane their necks a bit.

After the performance, most of the audience remained to hear and participate in a discussion led by Dr. Susan Block, professor of psychiatry and medicine at Harvard Medical School and a pioneer in the field of palliative care, and Jonathan Soroff, a longtime area journalist. Dr. Block especially had illuminating insights into the play's subject and characters. In response to an audience member's question as to why a physician would choose to specialize in oncology, Dr. Block offered, "You don't practice oncology unless you're committed to intense, long-term relationships with patients."

She also observed how hard her late husband's oncologist worked to decide how to proceed, grappling with several possible courses of treatment as well the patient's myriad priorities.

Israeli Stage's artistic director Ben-Aharon has put together an evening with an engaging subject and some strong performers. "Happy Ending" is a theatrical *tzimmes* that ultimately simmers, not because of its familiar recipe, but because it has potent ingredients stirred by some expert chefs.

"Fertile," by Yakir Eliahu Vaknin, translated by Natalie Fainstein "Happy Ending," by Anat Gov, translated by Maraglit Rodgers