

“Good theatre makes you ask questions”

An interview with Khalifa Natour and Ofira Henig

Richard Phillips
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In *Spitting Distance*, a one-man show performed by Khalifa Natour and directed by Ofira Henig, was recently staged at the Sydney Opera House (See review). Henig and Natour discussed the production with the World Socialist Web Site.



Ofira Henig

Henig is currently artistic director of the Herzliya Ensemble, having previously held that position at the Lab Theatre, the Israel Festival and the Khan Theatre. She also worked as a drama coach at the Russian Academy of Theatre Arts in Moscow in the mid-1990s and has directed numerous dramas in Israel and in Europe and the US. Some of these include, *The Town of the Little People*, *Back to the Desert*, *The Seagull*, *Sky*, *Scenes from an Execution*, *The Wedding*, *Alice in Wonderland* and *The Screens*.

Natour is a well-known Palestinian actor who graduated from the Beit Zvi Acting School in 1991. Since then he has appeared in numerous productions, including *Tonight We Dance*, *The Screens*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Jew Zeiss*, *Alzir Salem*, *Jerusalem's Lab Theatre production of Salome* and *Gadaria* at the *Al Hakawati Palestinian National Theatre*. Recent film roles include, *The Band's Visit* (2007) and *Rana's Wedding* (2002).

Natour spoke briefly with the WSWS just before one of his Sydney Opera House performances and I asked what had attracted him to *Spitting Distance*.

Khalifa Natour: Although it's a very personal, private story for Taher [Najib] who wrote the script it's also my story. There are differences of course—I didn't have the experience flying back to Tel Aviv—but I know this sort of situation and have encountered similar things in Israel.

Taher wrote the play after we were together in Ramallah and so I

know all about the events he describes. When the Israeli soldiers arrived he went to Paris and I went to my village. I returned to Ramallah after three weeks and he eventually came back to Ramallah and asked me to be involved in the production.

I wasn't sure at first but after participating in a reading of the script I realised that I had to be in it. Taher wanted to take it to TheaterNetto [an Israeli festival for one-man shows], which we did, and it won first prize.

RP: How did you prepare?

KN: It was my first one-man show and so I was nervous about that, but I just had to take the plunge. There was lots of discussion about the text and how it would be phrased in Hebrew and then later in Arabic and we talked about how the rhythm of the languages would be retained.

I've been playing the role now for two years and it's a wonderful experience. If it's being performed in Hebrew I do various warm-ups because it's not my language. In Sydney the performance is in my language so it is easier.

Although I'm alone on stage I know that Ofira is there—we have worked together with Oscar Wilde's *Salome* and Jean Genet's *The Screens*—and I have great confidence in her direction and advice.

When we were developing it she didn't want to touch what I was doing but to just let me develop it, which is very important. There was a suggestion at some point that I might need some professional assistance to teach me how to dance. Ofira rejected this and insisted that this was not necessary and that it had to be all my movements.

RP: It's a very emotional show. How do you keep control during the performance?

KN: Yes, sometimes it becomes too emotional and often when I go home I say to myself, “Why am I like this?”

In Zurich, and a few other places, people have asked how I do the show every day because it has some very sad moments, especially at the end. It's difficult, and although I sometimes enjoy the sadness, I'm not a masochist. Every day I tell myself to be calm and make sure

that my performance is as honest as possible.

RP: Were you in Ramallah on September 11, 2001 and what did you think?

KN: It was a real shock and at first I couldn't believe that some small group had done this. I thought it might have been some sort of trick organised by Bush.

Some people in the Middle East celebrate when either Israel or America is attacked; they believe that this sort of thing will teach these countries a lesson. I don't agree with this sentiment at all. We are dealing with human beings, whether they are Israelis, Americans or Palestinians, and terrorism and revenge of any sort is no solution to the problems we face. Revenge only produces more revenge.

At this point Natour had to leave and so the discussion continued with director Ofira Henig. I asked Henig about how In Spitting Distance was developed and her work in Israel.

Ofira Henig: Taher wrote the script and wanted me to direct it, and although I usually don't do any one-man shows this was very different and I felt that I had to present this story. We started to talk about it and then began working on it at home. It was a kitchen production.

RP: What was your input?

OF: The initial draft of the play was quite long and so we did some editing. The section that deals with the young boys spitting in Ramallah, which is at the beginning, was originally in the middle. We did some improvisations and decided to start with it. This provides a very strong image right at the beginning and helps to catch the audience's attention. We also cut some of the text. In fact, I hope that Taher will be able to make another play from the text that we eliminated.

The question of my input is complex, however, because it's not my story. I'm very sensitive to this. Of course it's my work and my space, and Taher and Khalifa and I collaborate, but this is Taher and Khalifa's story. They don't need me to tell it. I'm just helping to facilitate the performance as a director, an artist and a friend.

RP: There's a particular movement Khalifa makes during the play that's very effective. Where did this come from?

OF: It's ambiguous and everybody understands it differently—some people think he's rowing. Khalifa developed this one day in rehearsal and it's loosely based on Alzir Salem, a mythological Arab hero who carried a spear and killed many people.

There were many things happening at the time when Khalifa began doing this. There was a bomb explosion in Jerusalem, and other things going on, so he was late for rehearsal. He didn't say much but just started doing it, and so I selected some music. It's very effective and creates something that cannot be explained in words—the sort of moment that I love so much about theatre, when you don't have any more words and so you use your body to convey emotion.

RP: The show has been running for a couple of years now. Could you describe some of the responses?

OH: There are usually very strong and very different reactions. Sometimes it produces a lot of laughter, because there is a lot of comedy—absurd and yet real humour—in the production. In a way, people inside Israel are able to laugh at the black humour, but when we're outside the country, audiences tend to think that we should be very serious. After one performance in Europe, we were asked something about the political issues and the discussion erupted into a big fight in the audience. Israelis and Palestinians were arguing and shouting at each other about the conflict.

RP: While the poetry of the presentation is lost on me because I don't speak Hebrew or Arabic, the play, especially the opening scenes in Ramallah and then the return to Tel Aviv, gives a powerful sense of the difficult conditions in Israel. What's it like working in this political atmosphere?

OH: There's a constant atmosphere of terror being stirred up by the right-wing politicians who keep the population in a state of fear about the Palestinians. It was terrible during the last intifada, and we're always told that the Arabs want to kill us and throw bombs at us. This is based on very deep fears and, of course, has connections to the Holocaust.

RP: The atmosphere you describe has been replicated by governments everywhere since 9/11 and the so-called war on terror. What political pressures do you or other artists in Israel face?

OH: The pressure to conform comes through funding, or lack of it. I'm one of the youngest artistic directors in Israel and have been successful, but I receive less and less government funding for projects. And this is the situation with many artists in Israel, most of whom are left-wing and some even radical left.

RP: I recently watched *Waltz with Bashir*, Ari Folman's excellent animated movie about the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982. This seems to indicate that there are some healthy developments in the Israeli film industry.

OH: Yes, it was a good film. In fact, the documentaries and feature films now being made in Israel are very interesting and very political—much more so than the theatre.

RP: Has *In Spitting Distance* been on in Ramallah?

OH: Not yet, but probably in April. We've performed it in Jerusalem—in the East in Arabic and the West in Hebrew—and Khalifa has performed it in the north of the country, in Arabic villages, but not yet in the Occupied Territories.



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