

Trash talk – and action



YTheater, a collaborative Palestinian-Israeli project, tries to expose each side to the other's point of view on and off the stage

Dana Gleser in 'Take-Away.' (Courtesy)

• By BARRY DAVIS

The term “takeaway” has lots of gastronomic connotations, depending on which way your taste buds are pointing at the time. But there is a far less palatable aspect to cash-and-carry-edibles – non-environmentally friendly packaging.

That element is, physically, front and center in the *Take-Away* production that is currently being performed by Palestinian-Israeli thespian outfit YTheater. The next chances to catch the play are next week in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem.

The play centers on a garbage dump on a sacred hill where a bunch of Jews and Muslims live, spending their days sifting their way through the detritus of modern living to find usable objects and food. At the refuse site residents live together peacefully side-by-side, until a profit-oriented woman entrepreneur appears on the scene – and the coexistence boat is well and truly rocked.

It is not difficult to work out the wider social-political message here.

Canadian-born Jerusalemite Bonna Devora Haberman is co-director of the company and the show, alongside Kadar Herini, who also stars in *Take-Away*, together with Dana Gleser, Fidaa Zidan and Sivan Ben-Yeshaya. “We started working together about three years ago, and this is our second piece,” explains Haberman, who earned a doctorate at London University before relocating here. “I met Kadar here, at the YMCA, at a conference called Speaking Art, which is a gathering of people – Jews, Muslims and Christians, all kinds of people from all over the country – who work in theater, music and dance. It was the first time Kadar had stepped out of the West Bank and east Jerusalem.

He came to the conference to listen, to check it out, and I had never really worked with Palestinians before.”

The Haberman-Herini synergy was a slow burner. “We met again at the conference the following year, and we were in a very intense group that worked together for three or four days,” continues Haberman. “We met and spoke and were moved by each other, and the next year, when we met for a third time, we decided we wanted to do something together.”

While part of the intent behind YTheater is clearly to bring Israelis and Palestinians closer together, by portraying some of the sticking points between the two sides and laying them out to be discussed, the co-directors themselves don't exactly come from the same side of the cultural-political divide. “I am a Zionist Israeli and Kadar is a Palestinian,” notes Haberman. “It took so long for us to begin to work together because we have such extremely different roots. We basically don't agree about anything.”

Herein lies the kernel of the bilateral theatrical venture, although the co-directors are professionally aligned. “We agree artistically, but politically, religiously, our worldviews, our backgrounds – there is almost nothing we share there.”

Then again, according to Haberman that is not the point. “It is not about getting people to listen to us so we can convince them and get them to change their mind. It is about offering hope. There is no point in coming to YTheater without hope.”

The props in *Take-Away* are designed to convey more than just the garbage-dump setting. As Haberman and Herini state in the program notes, in Hebrew, Arabic and English: “Amidst satire and self-reflection, destruction and remorse, we aspire to respect and collaboration among us and with our world. We dig into how we trash one another and our world, struggle with love and loss – human and material – and inspire hope.”

So, it seems, the onstage garbage represents more than just what we consumers like to dump and forget. Haberman says it is more about how we treat each other on a day-to-day basis. “Basically, what we do is life in theater, and we do rehearsals for a better life,” she states unequivocally. “We act in order to prepare people for a better civil society, both in Israel and for the Palestinians.”

The co-director is quick to point out that she does not expect her audiences, nor even the actors involved in providing the entertainment, to undergo a political and/or social about-face. It is very much about the way things are done, and not just about the content. “We don't have any illusions that we'll convince the other person to accept or embrace our view. However, we do believe that we need to

conduct this with dignity and respect, and a lot of knowledge of the other, and even with the desire to work out how to live together well.”

Shakespeare did say – didn't he? – that all the world's a stage, and Haberman certainly goes along with the Bard's mind-set. “We address these issues with a lot of creativity. This [YTheater] is a kind of workshop, or I would say even a kind of incubator, for better civil society, of course through the prism of art.”

With *Take-Away* only the company's second production – the first was called *Freeze* and highlighted the importance of water to everyone in the region – Haberman, Herini et al. try to promulgate their ideas through off-stage activities as well. “What we do is really a workshop theater. We have been conducting workshops over the past two years, with Muslims, Jews, Christians, and there's a Druse performer, and with people from outside Israel. We use a theme to explore how we intersect through something which is even more universal than conflict, and that is the ecology of our world – not only the material ecology but also the human ecology.”

According to Haberman it is all about mutual appreciation. “We use people for a purpose we have in mind, and when they are no longer worthwhile for us, we trash them. What is a refugee? The trash of the world. Jews have experienced that for thousands of years, and Palestinians understand themselves in that role now. So there is a sort of common sense of this experience.

“What we are trying to do is enable people to understand how it is possible to live with completely different worldviews. That is something we'd like to get out there, outside Israel too. I think that is an important message for all of us to understand.”

Take-Away is showing at 8 p.m. on Sunday at Tzavta in Tel Aviv, followed by two shows at Jerusalem Khan Theater, at 6 and 8:30 p.m. on May 29. For more information about YTheater: ytheater.org. For tickets and more information about the forthcoming shows: (03) 695-0156/7 (Tzavta) and (02) 630-3600, ext. 1 (Khan Theater).*