

Putting the Holocaust in Its Place

'My Ex-Stepmother-in-Law,' Naomi Yoeli's one-woman theater show, bewilders with its tricky mix of closeness and distance.

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Naomi Yoeli in 'My Ex-Stepmother-in-Law.' There is no 'correct' here. Uri Rubinstein

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One of the most enchanting things about theater – and the principal reason for its survival in our digital age – is that it involves intensive real-time human contact, and thus is ostensibly spontaneous, yet is planned down to the minutest detail and goes through endless rehearsals. The result is an artificial, unreal event, a carefully planned pretense, which deceives the audience into thinking that it's "reality." And best of all is that the spectators know they are coming to a planned event, but are willing to suspend their disbelief and join in the game.

"My Ex-Stepmother-in-Law," a stage work (a term that is somehow more accurate and less misleading than "play" in this case) written and performed by Naomi Yoeli, is even more bewildering, with its tricky mix of closeness and distance. The title immediately suggests confrontation, with a potential for hostility – which, unfortunately, based on longtime empirical human experience, is the conventional situation between brides and mothers-in-law. To this is added the "ex," namely a situation of post-conflict, and by the same token post-trauma, since with the emergence of the "ex," the bride and the mother-in-law are no longer mutual trouble, while the original cause of the conflict (the son-husband) seemingly no

longer exists. But residues remain, of course. And if that's not enough, there's also another bit of excess baggage: the "step." Stepmother sounds ominous, but maybe "stepmother-in-law" would neutralize the underlying conflict (after all, a stepmother will not go to war over her stepson against his wife). And if so, how does the "ex" factor in?

But there's more: the special character of this stage work, and the particular occasion when I viewed it. It looks like a kind of standup performance by Yoeli. An artist playing herself stands in front of an audience, which has come to see her because it's her, and speaks as herself and not as a fictional character. The purists will say that she is playing her own character, but we'll shun such finicky notions. The text she speaks sounds improvised, but there's no doubt that most of it was written beforehand and went through rehearsals. Yoeli is very good at playing herself as a novice standup comic: the everyday, natural language, the slightly offhand, sloping posture, with the pelvis thrust forward, the use of a microphone (even though she's also wearing a headset microphone).

But in contrast to standup comedy, the play is not about her. Basically, she tells us about (and a little about her relations with) a "real" woman, a sculptor named Agi Yoeli (who is in fact Naomi's real-life former stepmother-in-law). Agi Yoeli was born in Central Europe, between Hungary and Czechoslovakia, survived ghetto and Auschwitz, and afterward forged a life in Israel. When she speaks as Agi, Naomi adopts a more erect posture and switches into a kind of German-Jewish yekke-Hungarian accent, reflected in speech intonation and in her slightly askew use of Hebrew syntax, with a multitude of linguistic oddities. An example is, in the midst of the Hebrew monologue, the marvelous remark "apropos de rien," meaning more or less, "this has nothing to do with anything" – something one says before changing the subject radically, seemingly for no reason (though there usually is a reason, and generally a weighty one).

But before I get to the "this" that the play is apparently not about, I want to say something more about this special evening by Naomi Yoeli and the date on which I was part of the audience.

It was a Tel Aviv premiere (a production of Hazira Performance Arts Arena) to which both theater critics and friends of Yoeli's were invited. Sitting in the third row was Agi Yoeli, whose story Naomi Yoeli – her ex-stepdaughter-in-law – told and acted out on the stage. Naomi Yoeli asked members of the audience to "take part" in the play, speaking to them as the ex-stepmother-in-law. I know some of the "volunteered volunteers" and I fought against the temptation to be a volunteer participant myself. Some of the volunteers were Naomi Yoeli's friends, and I suppose that the participation of at least some of them was coordinated in advance. What struck me most forcefully was a sense of something resembling artistic incest, deliberately

confusing artifice and reality, human closeness and theatrical distance, constantly changing form and shape and never allowing the spectator to home in on the “correct” approach to the interplay between stage and audience.

That brings us to the “this,” what we call “Holocaust,” a generalizing, all-embracing word that says everything and therefore no longer says anything. I saw the performance on the evening after the end of Holocaust Remembrance Day. We live in a society in which the Holocaust, with all the horrific complexity of the events and the impression they have engraved in our memories, is an essential part of the human experience and the subject of a constant tug of war between an approach of cautious, worshipful sanctity and cynical, petty political manipulation. To avoid getting entangled in elaboration, I will say that there is no such thing as a “correct” approach to the Holocaust. Still, we are flooded with this subject, in all its “incorrect” manifestations.

Agi Yoeli – her voice emanating from the body and throat of Naomi Yoeli – does not talk about the “Holocaust.” She talks, sanely, in a manner suffused with a blend of self-irony and naivete, about what things were like “before,” about childhood games with her younger brother in their affluent Jewish home in Central Europe. Naomi, in the persona of Agi, reads out a letter from her mother to her aunts, about a meeting with the parents of Agi’s intended husband, who are less “Jewish” than Agi’s family. The tone is a bit jesting, but we all know now what happened afterward.

She also tells about the “after,” and it turns out that Agi’s siblings, whom we expected to have been murdered, actually survived. She almost sneaks in the information that she was on “death marches” with her sister and her sister-in-law and friends, but goes into greater detail about those who helped her: American soldiers who “liberated” them and French soldiers (captives of the Russians) who guarded them. She says nothing about the Russian soldiers and their behavior. From what she does not say, it’s clear how terrible it was. At the same time, Agi’s little stories are strewn with heartwarming, charming details; indeed, they are gushy, but without falling into illusions or nightmares about the future, and also without wallowing in the suffering of the past.

Agi, in Naomi’s telling, does not ignore the past and certainly does not repress it. She simply refuses to allow that monstrous period to shape her life in the present. She “puts the Holocaust in its place,” and as one of the images in the play is drawers, she puts the “Holocaust” into a drawer, places it on the table when it’s relevant and is capable of stuffing it back into a drawer (as Naomi Yoeli does with miniature Central European-style furniture at a certain moment in the performance.)

This is perhaps the finest aspect of the play: it creates a bewildering mix of theater and reality, standup comedy and stage play, fiction and truth, and addresses a

subject that is a confusing whirlpool of the place of the “Holocaust” in our lives – it is at one and the same time close and intimate and terrible, and also incomprehensible, political, distant and terrible. There is no “correct” here. This is the thing itself, and at every given moment you must decide what your attitude is toward the people and the issues. And contrary to other people who talk about the “Holocaust,” Agi Yoeli has the right to say, and not say, whatever she wants and feels about it. What I felt after the performance was that she knows how to live her life “correctly” somehow.

I’ve left to the end an example of Agi Yoeli’s “correct” approach – as recounted by Naomi, her ex-stepdaughter-in-law – in part because anyone planning to see the play can stop reading here and avoid a spoiler. The play ends with a story about a Swiss couple, a professor and his wife, who visited Agi Yoeli and her professor husband in Haifa. The professors talked about academic matters, and the frau professor asked Agi, in Swiss-accented English, “Mrs. Yoeli, you were in Auschwitz. How was it”?

To which Agi replied – and I can’t reconstruct her distinctive accent in print – with the ultimate answer to that definitive question: “Not very nice”.

I doubt that anyone will ever be able to contradict that description, or to suggest a better one.

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