

"Ship of Fools" - Critics and Reviews / English

Shelly Kling, "Globes" / 10.1.2012

"Ship of the Fools" of Niv Sheinfeld and Oren Laor, expresses out loud the sense of a dead-end hovering over our heads.

The interesting work by Niv Sheinfeld and Oren Laor, "Ship of Fools" draws its name from several cultural and philosophical icons. Among the most striking of them: the allegory by Plato describing a journey of a ship on which one after another, people with a lust for power take over the helm of the ship and lead it to destruction; the satiric poem by the German author, Sebastian Brant, describing the journey of a ship sailing to the land of fools while heavily laden with thousands of different kinds of fools; or alternately, the 1965 film by director Stanley Kramer, describing a journey of 600 deportees from Mexico to Germany in the 1930s, the time when the Nazi party was gaining power.

The relationship between the three characters on stage seems purely coincidental. One by one they create a dramatic situation that eventually dissolves into the next situation. The precise implementation and the fascinating presence of each of the performers, the musical and theatrical choices of the artists and the dissolution and reconstruction of the absurd situations drawn from Israeli reality, create a unique piece, directing attention to the audience, and arousing discomfort and conflicting thoughts and emotions.

Watching the performance is in itself a voyage on the ship of fools. The audience is invited to take an active part in this journey, and together with the characters on stage it deteriorates to its absurd and painfully realistic ending. The work is filled with humor and touching moments that are immediately broken and fall apart. In the words of the artists: in every scene there is something regular and normal which is being twisted and disturbed. Each of the performers offers something to the observer: Anat Grigorio offers her body, Uri Shafir spreads his hands in a pleading movement and asks the audience to join in singing a naïve song which speaks of brotherhood at times of crisis, and later in his journey on this crazy ship he asks the audience and his partners to the work to take part in his own burial ceremony, which he tries to stage repeatedly without success. Sasha Engel, for his part, offers violence and aggression which he strangles until they turn into trembling that controls his body. Other captivating moments of this work – a discussion on a psychologist's couch that takes place while the discussants are seated on chairs that have been placed lying on the floor, the use of a camera as a nice accessory when the scene turns into the incredible image of a Palestinian prisoner photographed by a woman soldier from the Border Police,

a guitar that turns into a weapon directed at the audience, a ballerina with a crooked ponytail which urges the men carrying her in the air to make more of an effort in order to make her lighter and perfect.

The short scenes are resolved one after another, creating a fascinating journey, conveyed in an original, minimalist stage language filled with emotion and humor, and leading to a sad ending (that the audience is compelled to take part in) that expresses out loud the sense of a dead end hovering over our heads".

Ora Brafman, "DanceTalk / 21.8.11

"It very quickly becomes evident that the choice of casting was particularly appropriate. Each of the three brings something else, different, such that it seems that each one represents a bubble incapable of communicating. Yet, in retrospect, it becomes clear that the threesome maintains complex systems of communication and communicating without breaking the framework of their characters.

The first part of the evening is dedicated to substantiation of the participating characters and their gestures. This is the base from which they will sail quite far later on. Towards the end, it becomes clear that it is indeed the dominance in them is that which is wrapped in the fragile, physical appearance of Ori Shafir. Sheinfeld and Laor have concocted an appropriately stratified piece, setting amidst it more than a few scenes full of humor and charm. Among them is the scene where Gregorio takes the role of commander over the two men and instructs them to pick her up, to help her with flexibility exercises and to allow her to do a series of hairpin bends from left to right and back again, effortlessly – a kind of parody of the classical ballerina relying on her seemingly passive partner.

There were several captivating duets with the two guys, in which each one showed sentences of his movement language versus his opponent. However, this mechanical dialogue became more and more emotionally laden until it reached its climax in the rounds that ensued. In one of the scenes, Ori, armed with a guitar, manages to teach the audience a four-line song, and the audience participation that he recruits is not bad. This is only diminished towards the end when he gets all the audience on their feet for a long moment while he stages his death scene and his dream burial ceremony.

The comic intervals were accompanied by a sense of instability, of danger lurking around the corner, as often happens in stage dramas. Towards the end, suddenly, the gentle playing of the guitar turns into something totally different. Sasha holds Ori from behind and forces him to hold the guitar like a gun and threaten the

audience. The expression on Ori's clutched face changes from terror and refusal to acceding reconciliation, joy and apathy towards the strength of the power that has unraveled in his hands, a pleasure that approaches exhilaration from the intimacy that has been created between him and his captor.

This is precisely the moment in which the passengers on the "Ship of the Fools" can no longer bury their heads in the sand and continue with life, detached from reality, from their surroundings, from the situation. This is the point of no return at which each of them has to decide to rebel, and to take action, or to ignore it and thereby contribute to the process of the inevitable disintegration. The end remains open, like the reality of the present.

Sheinfeld and Laor have put together a very interesting work here, enhanced by precise execution – a work that can be interpreted in different ways, placing different emphases and exposing additional sources of inspiration – and that is its strength".

Anat Zecharia, "Yediot Achronot" / 19.7.11

"It looks like they have decided not to be lightheaded, to stop being nice and fun, to present a work that thinks dance differently, that dreams dreams where there are nightmares too. The work is not afraid to speak of decrees and tidings, about destiny and time. What is placed at the heart of "Ship of Fools" is much more than what you found at the center of Sheinfeld and Laor's previous work. It is the will to be a human being participating in the world. "Ship of Fools" is the name of the satirical poem by the German writer, Sebastian Brandt, published in 1494. It was one of the most popular works of the Renaissance. It is an allegory describing the weaknesses of human beings. It tells of a ship laden with thousands of fools of different kinds which sails through the paradise of fools to the land of the fools.

Three characters float on the stage: Sasha Engel who appears as though he is restraining himself from trembling or screaming, and all the while an unfelt, internal fluctuation is occurring before him, like an animal trapped by the spotlights. Uri Shafir, the youth who chooses to sing naïve words above the situations, or to extend two arms outwards and to wane each time anew with a heart touching sweetness. And Anat Gregorio who offers herself for contemplation, giving herself entirely to the looks of the observers, and that which is exposed to the eye only reveals the tip of the iceberg of what is inside her. The world in "Ship of Fools" is a world of a group of people in constant friction, in familiar and foreign moments. And this is the internal world of the dancers and the creative artists, where there is nostalgia and irony of equal

measure. All of them, the good who have become bad and the bad who have become good. There are moments as sharp as a razor blade, which will not allow the observer to escape to all too easy comfortable fields, the moment at which the guitar turns into a weapon, the camera which became a tool for torture in a moment of euphoria, a pointed finger directed to the center of the forehead. True, there is no subversive defiance of reality and not all the moments of humor are necessary, yet, nonetheless, "Ship of Fools" grants us blessed moments of self immersion and paves the way to contemplation of the here and now. And it manages to hurt, because instead of focusing on evil it focuses on the random".

Tal Levin, "City Mouse Online" / 11.7.11

"The new piece by Niv Sheinfeld and Oren Laor combines elements from the world of performance art in order to make a critical statement about our lives as fools, unable to communicate with one another... Like the ship in Plato's allegory, the sense is that our society is being described here – swaying in a storm without a captain to steer the way. In the absence of a leader, Plato relates, one after the other, people get a hold of the steering wheel, not motivated by wisdom, but by lust for power. A ship like this, we can only assume, is destined to drown and all of its sailors will drown with her.

As opposed to Plato who sees the political solution in the character of a philosopher king, Sheinfeld and Laor are far less optimistic. The uncontrolled collapse of every structure created on the stage doesn't allow for thinking of any horizon, but rather at the very most, about brief moments of humor.

"The Ship of Fools" is indeed an interesting piece, occasionally amusing, and says something critical of us, those watching it. You could even say that she is observing us no less than we see her. Just as the two dancers can't manage to communicate with one another in the beginning, the attitude towards the audience is also challenging, fractured and unstable from its foundation. The courage of Sheinfeld and Laor also has to be praised for putting up a work which does not flatter the familiar vocabulary of movement, and pushes its audience to think a little different about dance."

Judith Brin Ingber, "Forward"/ 29.12.11

"Grigorio was seen again as a stellar dancer in "Ship of Fools," a trio with the slight Uri Shafir, who also plays a mean guitar, and with the chunkier, tattooed Sascha Engel. They were co-creators of a tale told through song, talking and strongly danced characters in Niv Sheinfeld's choreography, with an amazing array of dance styles blended with dramatic direction by Oren Laor. Shafir plays a seemingly innocent man who repeatedly shows his palms to the aggressive Engel. But with a trick of costuming (a b-boy bandana slips to eyes from forehead), the macho Engel becomes a blindfolded prisoner and he's jeered at by his captor (a visual allusion to a recent Facebook photo of a Palestinian prisoner, posted by an Israeli soldier). The woman's character morphs before our eyes: Sometimes she's humorously shoved by the men from one preposterous ballet pose to another, other times she's saucy or she admonishes the men like a schoolmarm. She alternately eggs them on and stops them as they torment each other.

The audience is beguiled into learning a hopeful, gentle song as Shafir pulls his chair downstage to play his guitar and teach the tune. When he asks for the song again, however, it's no longer with a kindly hootenanny feeling. The audience is cleverly directed to stand for a ritual which disintegrates into a fake funeral. As unwitting bystanders, the audience members witness the characters in their waves of subjugation and violence. It's clear that we are all still trapped on the medieval ship of fools".

Brian Schaefer, "DANCE" magazine / 4.12.11

"Perhaps because so many of the marquee names in Israeli dance seemed to collapse under the weight of their own heavy-handed design—conceptually buried by elaborate costumes, dramatic sets, and precious props—certain artists emerged with refreshing simplicity and heartfelt honesty... Niv Sheinfeld and Oren Laor's small-scale *Ship of Fools* was one of the few pieces during the festival that felt like it actually came from a place that, to put it mildly, has some issues. Sheinfeld and Laor didn't lay it on too thick—the work was entertaining, at times humorous, and engaging. But then we were caught off guard—a harmless game turned cruel or a guitar suddenly erected like a gun—and in these subtle moments, we were reminded that there is a big world outside of the theater, and for many in this region, it is broken".