

Totally *engagé*  
Janelle Reinelt

Being asked to comment, after viewing the Ruth Kanner Theater Group's performance at the PSi-shift, seemed very risky to me because I knew I would be an 'outsider' to the major language spoken as well as the history shared by the performers and their usual Israeli audiences. Then again, perhaps none of us are 'outsiders' to the history of the Jews, the horrors of the Holocaust, the founding years of the Israeli state, the displacement of Palestinians, the Middle East conflict. The relationship between those events and all of us who live in their shadow is complicated and multivalent, and involves many layers of possible mis-performance from mis-taken assumptions to mis(sed) opportunities for action or insight.

The shift combined fragments of several of the Group's performances, which together made visible the theatrical techniques of storytelling and physical embodiment that create their impact on audiences. The group revisits historical narratives and powerful myths while invoking, in the present moment of performance, an engagement with the struggle to comprehend and represent such conflicted genealogies, interests, sufferings. The earliest piece dealing with youth and death, *At Sea*, provided a backdrop for the rest of the work that emphasized the fragility of life, the now-you-see-it, now-you-don't of possibility, relationship, vitality—in short of life-breath, through the depiction of almost drowning.

The second piece, *Dionysus in Dizengoff Centre*, was clear enough as the excavation of a site that has become a shopping mall but contains layers of deep investment beyond the financial by successive families with different hopes and dreams for a future built on the site. The pain and irony of the failures of these efforts is captured yet refracted through performers who are ironic knowers of these stories, both caretakers of them and in dialectical relationship to them—as they are the ones who have come after.

The last two pieces seemed to be in dialogue with each other-- *Cases of Murder* and *Discovering Elijah*. While the first represented the horrible experience of living

through *Kristallnacht* as a child—with all the nightmarish discovery of things you do not understand as a child brought forward by the intense performances of the company—the second piece reverses the experience from being on the receiving end of the violence to being involved and/or complicit in the violence itself. One searing image in my mind from this last performance was the physically imaginative depiction of driving in a car and coming upon a scene of carnage in the middle of the Sinai desert. At one side of the stage in the mimed car, the woman turns her head just to peak or glance at what appears in the landscape (bodies, corpses, ruined desolation). The glimpse is almost comic in its execution, but in its capture of the impulse to both look and avoid, it signified for me the terrible encounter with the results of our own nation's policies in their awe-ful and stark reality. It was an electric moment.

There were many such moments in the work of the Ruth Kanner group—I think because their style of performance is geared to making the body the site of deep and multiple significations of a range of human emotions, actions, experiences. The postures, movements, rhythms of the actors created haunted characters: haunted by history and tradition on the one hand, and by the engagement with the complexity of the present on the other. I also thought that the company had embraced the Brechtian technique of the not/but—they were not who they were portraying, but instead they were showing these figures to us in a manner which foregrounded the relation between the actor and the constructed character. The involvement of the company in the investigations of their subject matter was always apparent while watching them. They were so clearly, to use an old-fashioned existential phrase, totally *engagé*.