

LES OPTIMISTES (The Optimists)

A new production by Théâtre Majâz

Text by Lauren Houda Hussein and Ido Shaked
Together with the crew
Directed by Ido Shaked

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A new production by Théâtre Majâz
In Hebrew, Arabic and French with subtitles

Text by **Lauren Houda Hussein** and **Ido Shaked** together with the crew

Stage director **Ido Shaked**
Lighting **Victor Arancio**
Set design **David Buizard**
Costumes **Sophie Visentin**

With
**Lauren Houda Hussein, Sheila Maeda, Christine Paquier, Henry Andrawes,
Mathieu Coblentz, Ghassan El Hakim, Hamideh Ghadirzadeh, Bashar Markos,**

Produced by Théâtre Majâz, Théâtre Gérard Philipe, centre dramatique de Saint-Denis
With the support of Mairie de Paris, ARCADI and Adami.

The show was first performed in November 2012 at Théâtre du Soleil then again in September 2013 at Théâtre Gérard Philipe as part of *Une semaine en Compagnie* (A week with new theatre companies) for three and then ten performances between May, 20th and 31st, 2015.

Keen on promoting this work as well as the activities of **Théâtre Majâz', Théâtre Gérard Philipe** will help distribuet the show in the years to come.
Futhermore, the company was granted residence in a school of the Seine-Saint-Denis district as part of the *In Situ* project and with a coproduction contribution towards the next new show in March 2016: *Eichmann in Jerusalem, a Report on the Banality of Evil*.

The Théâtre Majâz was created in 2009 by Ido Shaked and Lauren Houda Hussein.
We are willing to re-appropriate our collective memory, to transform it into fanciful reality in the theatrical space in order to shed light on our present. Through exiting archives we choose to reveal alternative pasts, while questioning the place of the artist in the world. From Israel, Palestine, France, Lebanon, Spain, Iran or Morocco, each actor of the company brings forth his own identity, language, culture and story, contributing and nourishing the common artistic project.

This is not a “humanitarian” or “social” play but political and engaged theatre dedicated to pertinent artistic language.

Synopsis

Samuel, a thirty-something lawyer, is sent to Israel after his grandfather dies, to sell his house. He discovers it will trigger a personal investigation during which he will recount the story of this unknown grandfather.

In the aftermath of World War 2, his Jewish grandparents settled in Israel, in the house of a Palestinian family who had just been evicted. After the abomination of Nazi camps, the newcomers yielded to the temptation of believing they are the pioneers of a people with no land arriving on a land with no people.

Beno, a journalist, is a diligent student of Hebrew involved in building the ideal this country represents. On the contrary, Malka is unable to adopt neither the land, nor the people and she goes back to Europe. Once alone, Beno receives a letter from the former owners of the land he was given. While living as refugees in a camp in Lebanon, they inquire about their house, the orchard, the neighbours, and the town.

How can one these questions?

Bringing together pictures, films and archive documents, the members of Théâtre Majâz invent a story that mingles fiction and truth, past and present, Arab, Hebrew and French. This hopeful tale peppered with humour is also a reflection upon collective memory by young artists who inherited, from their origins, very complex questions. This show qualifies and humanizes a conflict loaded with misconceptions and brings a dream to life : one of resistance whose unique weapon is benevolence.

Remarks on the staging

If History is written by those who conquer, what happened to the history of the defeated?

At the beginning of the play, poet Taha Radwan comes to Paris to read his poems during a conference on Palestinian poetry. He starts reading when he is shortly interrupted by the shouts of an outraged audience.

Only the first part of the poem is audible:

*“At times... I wish
I could meet in a duel
the man who killed my father
and razed our home,
expelling me
into
a narrow country.
And if he killed me,
I'd rest at last,
and if I were ready—
I would take my revenge!”*

The reading is interrupted and the rest of the poem is given at the end of the show.

*"But if it came to light,
when my rival appeared,
that he had a mother
waiting for him,
or a father who'd put
his right hand over
the heart's place in his chest
whenever his son was late
even by just a quarter-hour
for a meeting they'd set—
then I would not kill him,
even if I could."*

(This poem is actually the work of Taha Mohammad Ali, and was translated into English by Peter Cole, Yahya Hijazi, and Gabriel Levin)

This interruption of the poem, which is delivered by an old Palestinian character inspired by Mahmoud Darwish, provides for the unveiling of the *Optimists* story. The tale of a fictitious resistance, that did not "endanger" the regime's infrastructures but the historical version the conquerors wanted to force on the country.

In 1948, Orwell published "1984", and the adventure of this revolutionary organisation began.

An Orwellian resistance indeed: the characters understand that their battle is not to be fought in the street or with weapons but inside the "memory" and in the way the next generations will understand this era. A battle to win the conscience of the people.

The challenge standing before us as a company is twofold. We also try to reinvent the past, in order give a better account of the present and maybe change the future.

The utopian and inevitably tragic tale of this group of resisting people is not just an account of events but a true investigation of the opportunities the Jewish and Arab leaders of the moment had to create another future for the people in Palestine and Israel. We also talk about the never granted part that could have been played by Jews and Arabs as middlemen between the Israeli society and the Palestinian people. And about the terrible link between World War 2 and the Palestinian Nakba ("the Catastrophe").

In the beginning, there is the house.

Between stage presence and abstract idea, the house wraps itself around the characters. It represents the past that haunts them all and continues to move them forward. On stage, it is a light structure, like a sketch in an architect book, to centralize the axes of the play. It unites the exiled and becomes the home of all the characters and all the different narration times, that of Benjamin in Poland, that of the group in Jaffa, that of the Palestinian refugee family living in a Lebanese camp, that of Samuel today.

The Théâtre Majâz has chosen to bring this house to life on stage in order to allow for changes in places and time without giving up this link between the characters and their past.

The house itself becomes a character of its own, constantly changing costumes to create an illusion, stronger than material reality.

There are three points of view in the play.

The first is Benjamin's, nicknamed Beno. A Polish Jewish refugee, a survivor of Nazi concentration camps. He arrives in his promised land, accomplishing Zionism's founding myth "A land with no people for a people with no land".

His vision, a new one in his opinion, cannot embrace the tragedy of the other (the Sephardic Jew or the Palestinian Arab).

We follow him working as a journalist and writing praising articles about the opening of the kibbutz, but he is blind to the rest: the discrimination against Sephardims or the military regime monitoring the Palestinians.

To exist, he needs to annihilate his own past, the past of the camps, of this land and of the house he receives upon arrival.

The second perspective unveiled is that of the Palestinian family who sought refuge in Lebanon.

It is in direct opposition with Benjamin's. The family refuses its present and continues living in its past, in Jaffa, in their home. This is the "Tzoumoud (the concept of clinging to native land). The physical root is replaced here by a link to memory, to recollections. They appear on stage only through the letters they send. This absence makes them even more tangible for the members of the group.

Eventually, the third angle is Samuel's. He is a lawyer, living in France and arriving 60 years after his grandfather, following his steps, in his house, but this time to sell it. His mere presence tests his grandfather's dream and threatens him with oblivion and indifference coming from Samuel's generation.

If Benjamin and Taha view their plan as an incentive for future generations to change their perspective and even their grasp of the past, Samuel represents the present. He is practical and very different from his grandfather's innocence. The arrival of Samuel in the house will set up a triangular conflict: between different generations, between the Western and Eastern worlds, between the utopian socialist dream of his grandfather and Samuel's materialistic way of life.

Theatre and cinema

By blending theatre and cinema on stage, the perception of the truth and the influence of image in the creation of a collective memory are put on display. As part of the Zionist plan, some filmmakers were making "false" documentaries using actors to give the illusion of reality despite a constrained narrative.

These films were depicting both legitimate thinking and a collective standard the audience was meant to adopt. In the play, Benjamin and his counterparts use the same technique of "false" movies to expose the acts of repression from the system and offer an alternative. The film, which was shot in Jaffa's real setting, is projected on the back wall of the stage, and represents many levels of truth: the truth of the theatre, of film and the truth of Jaffa today.

So far away from the utopian town the group had imagined.

With these screenings, we do not seek to "liven up" the stage nor to add to the setting, but to see our characters as artists that derive the meaning of life from the creative process. The shooting of the film, as well as the research it required, is part of the show.

Ido Shaked

Geopolitical context

Until 1948 the city of Jaffa was at the heart of Palestine. Most of the trade, transportation and immigration from and to Palestine took place on the port. By the end of the 19th century, the railroad from Jaffa to Jerusalem was built thus increasing the purpose of the town.

Post offices, foreign consulates and cultural centres were also to be found.

After the war of 1948 and the demographic shift it provoked, Jaffa became a mostly Jewish town. Of the 120,000 Palestinian residents of Jaffa and the surroundings, only 3,000 stayed. The majority of Palestinians that could stay in Jaffa belonged to the most underprivileged of the pre-1948 inhabitants.

This small group is the base of today's Palestinian people in Jaffa, together with domestic migrations, from the West Bank and Gaza.

Nowadays, Jaffa's Palestinian population accounts for 14,000 inhabitants.

The war of 1948 has thoroughly erased not only the Palestinian presence but also the rich history of Jaffa from the collective memory, from the conscience of its inhabitants as well as the city's architecture.

The Jewish inhabitants of Jaffa have gone through major changes. After the war of 1948, survivors of the Holocaust coming from Europe, as well as Jewish immigrants from Arab countries have been transferred to the city. Those who could afford it left Jaffa to get to better parts – in their opinion - of the country. The privileged Jews stayed in the city, a process that left the most vulnerable populations in a similar socioeconomic condition. However, there were blatant status differences rooted in the military regime under which the Palestinian people of Jaffa lived until 1954.

After 1954, Jaffa was annexed to Tel-Aviv, thus becoming the South neighbourhood of the city. Through continuous financial discriminations, Jaffa stayed in a state of permanent neglect and its troubles worsened far from the eyes of the inhabitants of Tel-Aviv.

As early as 1980 and until today, a gentrification process began: rich Jewish inhabitants began to buy Palestinian houses in various neighbourhoods in town, taking advantage of

the low market. As a result of this inflation, prices went up and the more vulnerable members of both communities could not afford to be landlords or tenants. Formerly homogenous neighbourhoods have now become mixed, although social differences are extreme from one house to another. Some live in palaces while their direct neighbours live in buildings on the brink of collapsing.

The staff

Ido Shaked (Israel)

Ido Shaked was born and raised in Israel. He studied at Tel Aviv's art school and came back to Paris to finalize his training at Ecole Internationale de Théâtre Jacques Lecoq in 2006. After he graduated, he settled in Paris having met fellow artists sharing his views on theatre. He took several classes with Yoshi Oida and Ariane Mnouchkine, among others. His first show *Roméo et Juliette* by Shakespeare at Théâtre Tmuna in Tel-Aviv lasted over two years (09/2007-10/2009) and was granted twice the Independent theatre award in Israel. He then put on *Gram* based on A. Tchekhov with students of the Max Reinhardt Seminar in Vienna, at Théâtre Salon 5 (08/2008). He co-created Théâtre Majâz with Lauren Houda Hussein in Paris in 2009.

Lauren Houda Hussein (France Lebanon)

Lauren Houda Hussein grew up between France and Lebanon, raised in both cultures at the same time. After completing her secondary school education, she obtained a degree in Theatrical Studies and then joined the Ecole Internationale de Théâtre Jacques Lecoq in Paris where she lives today. She is now an actress and a stage director for several companies (Sisyphus, La folie ordinaire) and has played in various short films (*L'année de l'Algérie* by May Bouhada, *J'ai interviewé Ricardo Borgese* by Félix Albert). She took many training courses, some of which taught by Ariane Mnouchkine. As she was in Southern Lebanon during the 2006 war, she realized a photographic project and took part in the Viva Liban project at Théâtre National de Chaillot in September 2006. She is the co-director of Théâtre Majâz, as well as being an actress in company.

Sheila Maeda (Spain)

She graduated from Escuela Superior de Arte Dramático de Murcia (ESAD, Spain) in 2006, she then pursued her education at École Internationale de Théâtre Jacques Lecoq in Paris. Apart from her academic and multidisciplinary training, she took several stage classes, taught by Mario Biagini, Yoshi Oida and Isabel Úbeda among others. Between 2003 and 2006, she got into ESAD's classical theatre company touring in Spain, Mexico and the United States. In the meantime, she worked with various companies: La Habitación Amarilla putting on *Medea* and *Enclavados*, the show *Cinco* by Albert Giner. She is part of the Théâtre Majâz company since her debut in 2009. When she came back to Barcelona, she also performed with the company Sol de Nit between 2010 and 2012 and toured with *Romeo y Julieta* and *El diario de Ana Frank* in Spain.

Hamideh Ghadirzadeh (France-Iran)

She studied dancing at the Studio Free Dance for 12 years, then at the Ecole Internationale de Théâtre Jacques Lecoq in Paris where she lives today. A former student of Laboratoire d'Étude du Mouvement (LEM) she presented her work at the Centre Pompidou in Paris and went on exploring physical theatre with the company Scène Infernale in *Louise / Les ours*. She holds a Master in Dramatic Arts and took part in the organisation of many cultural festivals within the collective La Fédé, as well as several shows and street performances.

Bashar Markos (Palestine)

An actor trained at Haifa university, he works under the direction of Munir Bakri at Théâtre Al-Maidan of Haïfa in *Le Mariage du petit bourgeois*, *Ahaham sakya*, *Halat isar*, *Hahana al annet*, and *Al Bait*. As a stage director, he created the shows *La pomme de l'exil* and the *Idiot* at the theatre Al-Maidan of Haifa as well as several new productions for the international festival of Saint-Jean d'Acre: *Herzel a dit* and *Bilibibil*.

Henry Andrawes (Palestine)

Actor, author, playwright and research worker.

One of the founders of the company KHASHABI, a group of comedians based in Haifa keen on creating their own stage grammar. He graduated from Haifa university with honors and acted, directed and wrote several shows. He notably worked in *Le servent de deux maitres de Goldoni*, directed by Munir Bakri; in *Bilibibil* by Bashar Murkus and in *Mountain language* by H. Pinter, directed by B. Murkus. He also acted in movies: *Hajar* by Hiam Abbas, *Le sauveur* by Robert Savo, and *été 89* directed by Esther Alamo.

Ghassan EL Hakim (Morocco)

In 2003, he was admitted to the Higher Institute of Drama & Cultural Animation of Rabat. In 2005, he worked with Catherine Dasté during the IARIA meetings in Corsica directed by Robin Renucci. In 2007, he was accepted in the Conservatoire National d'Art Dramatique de Paris for a one-year course, where he was taught by Yann Joël Collin and Nada Strancar. He worked as an actor and stage director for several companies and played in a few school films (Fémis). He was in several classes with Bruce Myers, Yoshi Oida, Marc Proux, Mario Gonzalez and Sotigui Kouyaté among others. In 2009, he performed in *Radeaux, a modern opera* on African Boat People written by Christian Siméon and directed by Jean Marie Lejude. Between 2010 and 2011, in Morocco, he put on *Kroum l'ectoplasme* by Hannokh Levin and *Sahra mon amour*, extracts from J.M.G Le Clézio. Meanwhile he performed in *Baybars le Memlouk qui devint sultan* directed by Marcel Bozonnet. In Morocco, he co-created the companies Daba-Teatr and Nous Jouons pour les Arts, as well as the Thé-Arts Festival of Rabat. While continuing his career in acting,, he graduated from Université Paris-Saint Denis and did a dissertation on the Mask and Islam in Morocco.

Mathieu Coblentz (France)

A history buff, he became a tour guide in sites of heritage at 20. Always looking for new forms of storytelling, he learned about tales and theatre with Claude Mathieu. Altogether author, actor and stage manager, he has been working for ten years with various stage directors such as Kesiah Serreau, Marie Vaiana, J-Y Brignon, Sylvie Artel, Hélène Cinque and Jean Bellorini.

