

outros músicos. E a segunda razão é que eu queria sair da caixa preta do teatro, de apresentar a minha arte só para as pessoas que normalmente consomem cultura. Por causa disso, o *Gramophone show* também funciona como um espetáculo de rua. O sistema de som e o microfone operam com baterias, ou seja, eu não tenho necessidades técnicas e posso ser totalmente independente. Eu posso compartilhar essa magia, a viagem de volta no tempo para a voz e a música do passado com as pessoas andando na rua, no caminho do trabalho, no meio da sua rotina diária. É um outro ponto de encontro entre vida e arte, realidade e fantasia.

Estas palavras finais foram escritas na Alemanha, no meu camarim, antes da próxima apresentação de *Paper cut*. O meu figurino de secretária está pendurado ao lado do espelho, o palco está montado, os objetos e os bonecos estão no lugar, e as luzes estão focadas. Dentro de uma hora, a plateia vai entrar e ocupar seus lugares. E, mais uma vez, nossa viagem vai começar.

On the Road – My life as a Theater Creator

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(Israel)

I am Yael Rasooly, a puppeteer, a singer, a theatre director, a designer, a teacher, a woman. This article about my work and path, has been mostly written in hotel rooms, on trains, planes and airports. The last few years of my life I have been traveling intensely throughout the world with my different performances.

I must admit I do not like to describe my work. I am very often asked to define and explain what I do. It cannot be explained, it cannot be grasped on youtube, it must be experienced live, in the darkness of a theater. That is the power of this medium, it is a personal voyage for the spectator, and it is transitory - comes to life for an hour and is gone. Yet I am glad for this opportunity to write here, and share stories of my formation, in hope this may shed some light to the backstage of my life and career. Writing here has led me to stop and look at my journey this far, a self-examination of my work process, the influence of where I came from, of the professional and personal choices I have made, the role of chance, perhaps fate, and definitely struggle.

Let us begin in the present. I am in a hotel room in France, on tour with the one woman show I created in 2009-10, called **Paper Cut**. **Paper Cut** is a performance about a buttoned-up ultra-efficient secretary, Ruth Spencer. The whole performance is centered around Ruth's desk which becomes a stage, while her office materials and papers become the scenery and characters in her romantic fantasies over her boss, Richard McCormick, who takes no notice of her love for him. The show is inspired by the black and white cinema of the 40's, the cinematic world of Hitchcock and the Hollywood glamour stars of this era. It is the first production I made after my studies, a great lesson of how to work without the warm shelter, support and conditions that I had while being in an academy. Originally I had intended to make a large production, with several puppeteers, and intricate stage design. But this proved to be far above my means at the time, both financially, and production-wise. I was living in a small apartment in Tel Aviv, selling ice cream to pay my bills, which was as depressing as it sounds. I had collected for my research photos of stars such as Marlene Dietrich, Greta Garbo, and Cary Grant, from which I began to make small models of the show I dreamt of, which seemed far far away. Slowly, while photocopying cutting and gluing, I began to play with the materials in my hands. At exactly that point I had the chance to attend an object theater workshop for a few days with the fantastic Belgium Artist Agnes Limbos, organized by the Train Theater in Jerusalem. I had brought these materials to the

workshop and in the few hours we had to present a small solo using objects, the language of Paper Cut was born. An entire story and universe could be created with such minimal and poor means, translating cinematic language and clichés to absurd “low tech”. And very importantly- I could rehearse in my small living room and kitchen!

In my shows the performer is never a “hidden” puppeteer, but always the main protagonist that creates the imaginary and crazy worlds from a deep need, usually in order to escape a grey and difficult reality. When I invent a character I try to define what is her/ his weakness? What is the fragility they try to hide?

In each production I use different methods, puppetry techniques and visual language. Nevertheless, letting the materials and objects themselves lead me, and loosening the control over them, is a fundamental tool in the way I work. I start to develop a story at the back of my mind, to feel the heart of the show, and at the same time I must play with what the objects and puppets can give, to realize what actually works.

A dear teacher told me once that you only create one show all your life. The technique and all the other elements may change, but it's always the same theme and essence you search for.

Paper Cut has been performed in over 40 International festivals in the past 3 years, all over Europe, North America and the Far East. It has won several International awards such as “ Best Artistic Concept and Realization” at the International Puppetry Festival in Pécs (Hungary), “Grand Prix” at the International festival of solo puppeteers in Lodz (Poland), and the Excellence Award for a Solo Show at the NY Fringe Festival.

By now I think I have played the show around 300 times. I can honestly say I'm never tired or bored of playing it. On the contrary every show is an opportunity to find new nuances, to be more precise technically and emotionally. Frank Soehnle, a brilliant puppeteer from Germany and co- founder of the 'Figuren Theater Tübingen' once gave me an answer that has remained with me since. At the beginning of my career I saw his famous solo production “Flamingo bar” which he performs with unbelievable virtuosity. I asked him a common question- how long did it take you to create this show? His response was 11 years- the few years he spent building the show and then the years he has performed it. Today I know what he meant. A performance is a living breathing creature. I never stop working on it. And of course the encounter with new audiences each night makes it a different show. If I don't play it for a week or two I actually miss my character. She can express sides of my personality that do not and cannot surface in my everyday life. She is definitely inspired by myself and my biography, but she dares to truly expose herself, her weakness and desires, which is why audiences are so moved by her. A

funny and strange thing keeps happening to me on tour. After the show my team and I may be sitting in a restaurant close to the theater to eat, and people come up to me, sometimes in a language I do not speak, and ask where they know me from. I look familiar to them. They had just seen me perform an entire solo show (!) but they do not make the connection.

Usually I write and perform my shows in English. A few years ago I started creating also entire versions in French, for them to be more accessible to audiences in France, even though at the time I did not speak a word of French. I believe this ability is greatly due to my strict classical music training. Use of spoken language is necessary in my work, I cannot only remain in the visual realm. In Paper Cut for example, there is text from beginning to end, non-stop. So what happens when I am invited to play in front of an audience that doesn't speak English or French? The first times I received such invitations for Paper Cut, for performances in Eastern Europe, I was rather worried. But the shows in the end were a great success. When I looked for an explanation for this I realized that it is the intensity of the visual elements that tell the story, the musicality and also the sympathy created by the character, portraying basic human emotions and condition that can be related to without the need of words.

Paper Cut speaks about the hunger for love, and disillusionment of romantic fantasies. How far we go in our mind to paint the reality we wish to have, looking in all the wrong places, and the painful but crucial moment of opening your eyes to see this. Although the show has heavy and sad moments, the overall impact is light hearted and humorous. I myself am surprised by this; I never thought I had much comic ability or that it interested me. Usually my works and the art I'm inspired by belong to a darker, horrific universe; The Polish Theater Director- Tadeusz Kantor and his theater of trauma and memory have had a tremendous impact on me. Films that motivated and moved me in my work are for example *Cries and Whispers*, by Ingmar Bergmann, Krzysztof Kie lowski's films such as *La Double Vie de Veronique*; Nikita Mikhalkov's *Burned by the Sun*, David Lynch's *Fire Walk with me*, Roman Polanski's *Rosemary's Baby*. As you can see from this short list, these are dark and heavy films, the kind that leave you haunted. The singers that attract me to this day are ones that were motivated by much suffering and force, such as Nina Simone and Edith Piaf.

Humor used to be only a technique for me, to make the audience relaxed and unsuspecting so I could stab the knife deeper into the viewer's heart, so to speak. But through performing Paper Cut to so many audiences, I realized the pleasure of creating a comic piece. First of all, I can hear my audience. I can feel them closer to me when they're laughing rather than when they're holding their breath in the dark. It is mostly through this show and its intense touring that I developed the

relationship I have as a performer with my public. From show to show I took more liberty to improvise. Many unexpected things have happened to me on stage, such as electricity black-outs, errors of the light and sound technicians, “disbehaving” audience members, my own mistakes and even physical accidents. From this I have learnt two major things: the first is that on stage, in moments of crises, another character from inside me is revealed, with a power and resourcefulness I didn't realize I had. The expected reaction of panic and fear do not enter the picture. And sometimes in these moments the best ideas arrive, which from then on are incorporated in the show. The second realization was, that there is nothing an audience loves more than to see a performer in a REAL situation of distress and having them emerge with the upper hand. During a performance of Paper Cut where the electricity suddenly shut down, leaving no light and sound, I decided to keep going. I had members of the audience come on stage and light the objects with their mobile phones, and become part of the soundscape. During another performance “The House by the Lake” I slipped and fell in a hole on the stage, sustaining a painful injury, but the adrenaline of the show made me go on, and channel this pain into my singing at the dramatic and shocking finale of the show. To this day the memory of that injury has been engraved into my acting in that final scene, enhancing the emotional power needed for that moment.

Hand carving your own career in this business is a very tricky thing, but there is no other way. There are no rules or course to follow. If you want to become a doctor you go and study, and then do your specialization, internship, begin working in a hospital etc etc. But how do you become a puppeteer, a person that creates and tours independent productions?

I was born in Jerusalem in 1983, the third of four children. My parents, hard working physicians were both born in Israel but came from families of a very different background. My mother's side is mostly from Poland, my grandmother managed to come to Israel before the 2nd world war, and my grandfather is a survivor of Auschwitz. Many members of their family were murdered during the war for being Jews. My father's side, a Jewish family from Iraq, also suffered much persecution and fled to Israel in the early 50's after the country was founded. My parents were brought up in the shadow of this past and hardships of a young country in constant war. They each had a strong affinity to the arts; my mother played the piano and was an excellent painter, my father was a highly talented classical violinist who, to a great extent, taught himself to play, and thus could distance himself from the great poverty he faced. But both of them followed the expectations set upon them, in the path of becoming doctors, leaving art as a profession far behind. Education for their children, and specifically a strong musical education, was a high priority and in fact the most thorough training I ever had. I played the piano

from age 5, appearing in concerts and competitions, and at the age of 8 began my vocal training. My family and I moved from Israel to Canada when I was between the ages of 6 to 9. These few years were very important and shaping for me, with many positive influences. It was very hard to come back to Israel afterwards and consider it my home. To this day this conflict exists inside me. The Israeli went to as a 9 year old child had a very harsh and even violent environment, and returning to it from polite and mild Toronto was no less than a cultural shock. I was always the outsider, shy and introvert. I was sent to a prestigious children's choir, where my life as a touring performer actually began. I was 10 years old during the first tour we had to Germany and Poland, for a highly demanding concert with the Berlin Philharmonic. In the next 7 years that followed I sang in hundreds and hundreds of concerts. But here too beneath the shiny achievements, the inner reality was quite different. When I look back at this period in my childhood and try to focus on the emotion I had in rehearsals or on stage, I realize that more than anything it was fear. Terror of making a mistake, not being in line with the other girls, not reaching the high note, not breathing in the right place. We were all very much afraid of the head of the choir. I can remember entire concerts where I pretended to sing but was just moving my lips in silence, not to risk making a mistake. And when one of us was "fortunate" enough to have been chosen to sing a solo, this came with a heavy price of jealousy and rivalry at every corner. So it is no wonder that by the age of 18, when I had to decide which direction to take, the career of an opera singer came with many doubts. This is why the art of puppetry was so relevant to me when I finally discovered it, years later. It triggered my desire for individual expression - I could make my own rules, and I can also break them whenever I wish. The technical abilities I gained as a classical singer as well as my criticism towards this harsh and strict upbringing, could find their way into the stories I unravel. But it still took several years of being lost before finding this path.

Normally in Israel women as well as men have to do military service at the age of 18, but I was exempt from this. After a year of beginning and stopping several institutions such as the music academy, fine art, acting studies, even applying for studies in Science, I came up with the idea of studying stage design. It made sense since my visual skills were very strong, and this way I thought I could still stay close to the worlds I was still attracted to as opera and theater, but without the elements that I found destructive.

I moved to London to study at Central St Martin's College of Art and Design, but very fast I realized it wasn't what I was looking for. I doubted how many designers, even after years climbing up the professional ladder, really get to do what they want and not only to carry out the visions of their directors. In addition, I could not distance myself from stage and performing. During this rather miserable

time in London I saw a puppetry performance and decided to look up this genre on the internet. I wrote to Penny Francis¹, asking about this profession and where one can study it. I was not expecting an answer but she replied right away and referred me to the puppetry school of Charleville-Mézières. Unfortunately, they had just started a new cycle of students, and the next one would be in three years. I searched and searched for a place that is interdisciplinary, and “The School of Visual Theater” in Jerusalem kept coming up in my search. I returned to Israel with a heavy heart, not knowing how fortunate I would be to do so.

Just before I returned, I decided to go to Charleville-Mézières for International puppet festival in 2003. In 10 days I watched about 60 shows. This is where I truly was exposed to the field of puppetry and specifically puppetry for adults, realizing that perhaps my dream was possible. The two performances that left the strongest impression on me were Neville Tranter's *Frankenstein* and Ilka Schönbein's *Voyage d'hiver*.

Frankenstein is an interpretation of the original novel by Mary Shelley. A one man show where Neville manipulates all the puppets, as well as appearing as a character himself with incredible skill. It deals with the loss of innocence, unfulfilled dreams, and the relationship between love and hate. The most intense moment for me was at the end of the show. Tranter left the puppets behind and walked to the front of the stage where he began to sing the Aria by Percel "Let me freeze again to death". Just him, alone, dripping sweat. Among all the musical performances I saw I never experienced singing so relevant to life, so meaningful.

Voyage d'hiver is an ingenious performance in which Schönbein is in constant transformation. It is a visualization of feminine trauma. I remember the physical impact it had on my body and the feeling that someone else in this world *knows*. Her totality of performance was phenomenal.

And with these impressions and others from the festivals, I began my studies in Israel.

The School of Visual Theatre in Jerusalem is a small school, with many teachers for about 50 students in total each year. I studied a whole range of disciplines - light design, animation, puppet design, sound editing, movement, acting, puppet-manipulation and directing. Today I know how crucial it is for me to have all the technical knowledge I gained there. Today I do not do everything by myself any more, still I have the language to express what I want to the different professionals I work with. At this school I was encouraged to find my own artistic expression, with very close guidance from a fantastic group of teachers who

¹ Penny Francis is an important Unima member, living in the UK. She's a Honorary Fellow at Central School of Speech and Drama, University of London.

supported me as a growing artist and as a young person with many insecurities alongside a determination and passion to learn. In fact it was more than a school. It was my home, and I was very often the last to leave every night. At my 3rd year at school I created **How Lovely**.

How Lovely is a solo performance about a lonely child, who is trapped in a grownups' mulligan world, and is raped by her music teacher. This horrible story is told through the ironic and bitter sweet voice of a recorded story teller. The child's sense of guilt over the sexual abuse she's experiencing is so huge, that she is more afraid of being exposed than she is afraid of the trauma itself. This performance brings out varied and unexpected responses from the audience. Sometimes the entire audience holds its breath during the entire show and can barely clap in the end. This is the main impression I get from the public when I perform in Europe, perhaps because the show criticizes the negligence of children in bourgeois society. When I played in Bangkok, during the rape-scene people burst in laughter. Sometimes I shock my audience, and sometimes the audience shocks me, leaving me to wonder what the laughter and silence hide.

It happened to me several times that after a show, women and men from the audience come backstage with the need to speak to me; to tell me that they knew exactly what I was talking about, that this in a way was their story. That's the power of being specific and personal in your work, it can echo into the spectator's own life.

The work process of **How Lovely** evolved by itself. When I entered the rehearsal room I knew very little of what would come out. I only set the playground, and the rules of the game, not the moves. Whatever happened there was between the limitations I set. I had a chair, a cello-case that at times was the parents in the story and at times the music teacher, and a puppet I'd built from pieces of broken string instruments, such as violin, viola, cello, with a face of a child-instrument I molded. The physical improvisation showed me the way, and I realized that the story is already written in me; a world driven by the need to keep the surface clean, the conversation pleasant and the truth out of sight. It is not only the parental demands and fantasies from the child that are on trial here, it's the domestic culture of lies and secrets.

For me, the process of creating is like being blindfolded in a huge deserted house. I wander blindly, searching for something to grasp, with a heightened sensitivity to every crack, distant sound, passing shadow. My intuition leads me to find the doors and enter the rooms of my dreams, memories and nightmares. After a long long time I also find the light switch and it becomes visible - the world I have created on stage.

Throughout my childhood and adolescence I had waves of impulsive need to read and see all the holocaust materials I could put my hands on. The silence that

surrounded the past of my family pushed me to do so. The horrific holocaust songs I sang as a child binded me even deeper. My performance **The House by the Lake** was my first attempt to deal with the trauma of the holocaust.

I created the show for the Akko Fringe Festival² in Israel, in 2011, a production of the Zira Performance Art Arena in Jerusalem. **The House by the Lake** tells a story of three little sisters, somewhere in Central Europe during the 2nd World war. They are hiding in an attic, waiting for their mother to return. Working on a historical catastrophe could have been too hard to relate to; I never starved, I haven't been taken away from my life and family, never witnessed murder. But **The House by the Lake** is also a performance about a childhood that is robbed, which I can very much relate to. It's a drama about jealousy between siblings with its confusing combination of love and competitiveness. The historical context gave me a frame in which this relationship could be taken to the extreme. Only one of the three sisters survives and she is left to live with the guilt, left to tell and relive this shattering story.

This show is the most ambitious work I have made in terms of production and scale, involving 16 highly talented artists. It swings between the boundaries of musical cabaret, and contemporary puppetry for adults. My artistic partner for this production was the director and puppeteer Yaara Goldring, with whom I began collaborating while we were both fellow students at the school of Visual Theater. Our strongly shared language of design and directing permitted us to truly incorporate both our worlds, and complete each other's abilities. One of the many challenges I faced in this production was stepping out of directing only myself. I had two other brilliant actresses with me on stage. When I direct myself in a solo show I can move in my own rhythm, the answers to my questions are slowly revealed through work. But when working and directing others I have to be always a few steps ahead, and to be able to give them answers and direction, be open to their ideas and interpretation, but still maintain the vision I have. All the aspects of the production have to move forward simultaneously- writing the dramaturgy, writing the songs, creating the soundscape, designing the stage and puppets, developing the characters, choosing the acting technique and form of manipulation. Here again the method we worked with was setting out limitations that define the playground: we have three sisters, forced to hide in a small room with three little chairs, to which they each bring their doll, their one possession from the safe home of the family taken away from them. This doll becomes to represent each sister. As the time passes and their physical and emotional distress worsens, their bodies come together with the body parts of their dolls that are falling apart. The logic of reality fades away, replaced by an imaginary world they fight to create in order to

² Akko festival is the annual biggest fringe festival in Israel.

survive, as the darkness closes in on them. A floor board they pull from the ground becomes a ballet bar or in another scene - a window they long to have. Through an empty present box the ghost of their mother returns to give them one last embrace and sing them a lullaby. A pile of clothes become a prince they imagine will love and save them, later turning into the soldier with the high boots who send them to death or tears away their innocence. Here again, I used humor as a means to draw the audience into a game that spins out of control.

I am often asked what makes my work Israeli, and how my nationality is reflected in my creation. Reality in Israel is hard to explain to an outside observer. It is a warm and fascinating place, full of tension and anxiety, with an ongoing cycle of absurd violence. This claims a high price on both sides of the conflict and on each individual. Growing up in Jerusalem, I experienced from very close acts of terror by suicide bombers. I am also very aware of the suffering inflicted on the Palestinian population. My art has served me as both a place of much needed refuge and sanity, as well as a means of avoidance I often question myself about. Perhaps in my future work, I will be able to resonate much further the cries and whispers of the place I come from.

Alongside being a theater director and puppeteer I also lead a career as a singer. I found my voice again and pleasure of singing when I discovered the Jazz and Swing music of the 20's and 30's. I perform with musicians in Israel and all over the world. Sometimes these are small bands, and sometimes swing orchestras of 25 people. The performances may take place in tiny intimate bars in front of a handful of people, or in front of many thousands. In 2012 I created **The Gramophone Show**, a singing show I perform alone, with a gramophone that travels with me. I sing the classics of the 20's and 30's in English, French and Yiddish. There were too important reasons for making this musical production- The first being my wish to sing whenever I wanted. Since at the moment I am travelling around so much, it makes booking shows with other musicians complicated. And the second reason is that I wished to step out of the black theater box. Of presenting my art only to people who regularly consume culture. Due to this, **The Gramophone Show** also functions as a street performance. The sound system and microphone operate on batteries, meaning I have no technical requirements and can be totally independent. I can share this magic, the travel back in time to the voice and music of the past, with the people walking down the street on the way to work, in the middle of their daily routine. Another meeting point of Life - Art, Reality - Fantasy.

These last words are written in Germany in my dressing room, before the next performance of Paper Cut. My secretary costume is hanging by the mirror, the stage is set, the objects and puppets are in place and the lights are focused. In an hour the audience will enter and take their seats. And once again, our journey will begin.