

## **It's Like performing Psychosis**

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**In Ilay den Boer's performance you are not a spectator but a participant. You sit around his family dinner table, you stuff your plate with chicken and you drink red wine. When the skeletons are out of the closet, the chicken gets physically stuck in your throat.**

Since a theater piece is not made and performed in a vacuum, the reality outside the theater unfolds a significant importance on the way in which the audience perceives the theatrical event. If a you and your partner are stuck in a traffic jam on the way to see a performance about love and partnership, you might see it in a different light than If you had seen it right after a passionate intercourse.

For that reason, among others, two performances of the exact same piece are never the same. The reality outside the theater, we might say, is one of the elements of the theatrical event. But it is the one element upon which the theater-maker has no control whatsoever.

### **Eating Ilay's Youth**

Ilay den Boer performed *Eet smakelijk* ten times in Maastricht in December 2008.

The performance is constructed as a family dinner. The audience, embodying Ilay's family members, is sitting around a dining table. Delicious Jewish dishes are being served while wine is being constantly poured into the glasses. It is Ilay's Bar- Mitzvah party, an important event in the life of a Jewish boy. A family event of such importance has a pure potential for an explosion. It is a mechanism which has been used before - in films as well as in theater – a cozy family dinner which develops into a family nightmare. In the Danish film *The Fest* (1998), a young man reveals a dark past of sexual abuse in the middle of his father's 60th anniversary. The contrast between the gathering, the food and wine and the dark secrets which are revealed in the course of the evening, shows the great deal of hypocrisy of the family's mentality. In the theater the impact is even stronger, especially when the spectators get to sit around the table and stuff their plate with chicken legs, as in *Eet smakelijk*.

Later on, when the skeletons are out of the closet, the chicken gets physically stuck in your throat.

"It is my youth you are eating", Ilay says and the smell of a punch in the stomach is already in the air. The choice to tell that personal story around a dining table, while serving fried eggplants and chicken legs, is the best recipe for a sensual experience; An experience that does not only stimulate your appetite and senses, but also works on your emotions, be you the most cynic of a person. After a first taste, a short exposition and a couple of wine glasses, ilay takes out some letters. Letters that he wrote to his Israeli mother and letters in which his mother replied to him, trying to cope with her son's accusations, frustrations and anger regarding the choices she made. These letters are extremely personal. They unfold a great deal of pain. The letters are lying on the dinner table: real letters, in hand writing, over-wrinkled from the folding and unfolding which indicate the great deal of importance that these letters have in the relationship of the two. Ilay reads his own letters out-loud and he is asking a person from the audience to read his mother's letters to him. Now, imagine you are in the role of ilay's mother. How can you eat when your son is in such emotional distress?

One by one the forks are being laid down on the table. Only then the performance really begins. The performance in Maastricht and the performance in Frascati were almost accurately the same (except for the changing audiences, who also play a role in the performance.) The only essential difference between the two performances concerned the one element upon which Ilay had no control – Reality outside the Theater.

### **Amsterdam is far from Maastricht**

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is being covered in the media as a matter of routine. Almost every European has some idea, maybe even an opinion regarding the subject. However, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict knew calmer and stormier times.

In the beginning of December 2008, when Ilay performed *Eet smakelijk* in Maastricht, Israel's media coverage was somewhat in the shadow of the American elections, and anyway, no fundamental events took place. The Maastricht audience was not necessarily preoccupied with the political circumstances when entering Ilay's Bar Mitzvah dinner.

For a Dutch person, issues of immigration are far more relevant than the conflict in the Middle East. In that sense, Ilay's performance is an invitation to an Israeli dinner table in Jerusalem as a more of a cultural than a political experience. It is an opportunity to get acquainted with the cultural customs, the local food and the strange language. Ilay's conflict with his mother and family members could seem as a natural anger deriving from the complex identity to which he was doomed as a result of the choices made by his mother. Every son or daughter of immigrants might experience such feelings against their parents, with the revelation that their identity is far more complex than that of another thirteen year old whose parents are both Dutch. The longing for Israel, the history of the family, the conflict of opinions regarding Israeli policies, are all interwoven in a powerful personal family story. There is the political aspect, of course. But coming from the point of view of a young innocent individual with sparkling eyes and a witty smile like Ilay's, a personal story can rarely evoke judgmental reactions even touching the political issues. That's his story, and it is not open for debate.

In Amsterdam Ilay had to perform *Eet smakelijk* in a totally different context. First of all, his performance was an integral part of Mighty Society 6 – a three weeks theater project with a vast program of performances, installations and talk shows about the Middle East. In the context of the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and Lebanon, the focus on the political aspect of his performance, rather than his personal identity issues, is inevitable.

Moreover, in middle January the bigger reality - the reality occupying the public sphere- changed. In the three weeks between the Maastricht performance and the Amsterdam performance, the Israeli army started a massive military operation in Gaza in reaction to the constant firing of rockets by Hamas. In the fifteenth of the January, the first Frascati performance, the operation was in its peak. The pictures from Gaza, broadcasted in the Dutch news every day the whole day, didn't paint a very beautiful picture of Ilay's state of origin and set of performance. There is a fair chance that the pictures of Palestinian civilians searching for family members under the ruins of their homes were the last pictures that the audience had seen just before leaving their houses to go to Frascati. The attention is drawn to the political issues and Ilay is no longer a Dutch young man, son of an Israeli mother, but an Israeli living in Holland. Moreover, the audience is not just taking part in a nice family dinner of another culture, but sitting around the table with Israelis, in Jerusalem, the last place on earth you want to be in after what you have just seen.

It is not irrelevant, therefore, to say that the Frascati performance is seen in an extremely different light; a very political light which one cannot avoid.

### **Three Generations – Three points of View**

The reality outside the theater is adding a crucial complexity to the performance. We encounter three generations of Israelis who see the reality in extremely different ways. Ilay's grandmother who went from Lithuania to Israel to fulfill the Zionist dream for the Jews to have a land, his mother who was born in Israel, grew up in a kibbutz and served in the Israeli army, and then the third generation - Ilay – who grew up in Holland, seeing his grandmother's dream falling apart from the far, longing for the good old Israel while watching it going the wrong way in the European news channels. For the audience, exposed to the same images as Ilay, it is easy to identify with Ilay's point of view. But the political issue can no longer seem as a background or a trigger for Ilay's personal story. The other way around, the personal story is intensified as it seems that the dead people seen on television and the impossible circle of violence is all laying heavily on Ilay's shoulders. Ilay was very aware of that fact

and handed a letter to the audience in which he is sharing his doubt whether he is capable at all to perform *Eet smakelijk* while the Israeli operation in Gaza is getting out of hand.

When I asked Ilay after the performance how does it feel to perform *Eet smakelijk* in this time of war? He said to me: “It’s like performing Sarah Kane’s *Psychosis* while your sister is hospitalized in a mental institution with a psychotic episode”.