

From “Creating an Interest” – questions for artist Galit Liss, The Israeli Choreographers Association’s Website (March 2012), edited by Nerda Ben Yaakov

How responsible are we for our own life? To what extent can we change reality, and how much of it is in our hands? For years I have been wrestling with questions regarding the meaning of life, the ability of our choices to change, determine and affect the quality of our lives. These questions become all the more significant in extreme situations. Galit Liss talks about the birth of her new work, *Tsila*, based on the rehabilitation story of Tsila Hayun, considered a medical miracle.

**Congratulations for the new work. Can you tell us what it is about?**

The piece is based on the inspiring rehabilitation story of Tsila Hayun. Tsila nearly lost her life, but survived, and her recovery was dubbed a medical miracle. From the vast nothingness she conducts a dialogue between the medical findings and her spirit, weaving her identity anew. Her struggle and the ongoing rehabilitation process raise existential questions about life, about our responsibility for our lives and the way we choose to live them. In the meeting point between the personal voice recounting its story and the performing arts, new dimensions open up and invite us to see life as a work of art. Three performers collaborate in this multidisciplinary performance – Iris Nise-Hadar, Tal Avni, and performance artist Hadas Gertman. I also worked with a soundtrack designer – Moshe Shasho, and a video artist – Niv Ben-David.

**What led you to choose this subject for your work?**

For several years I have been wrestling with questions about the meaning of life, about the ability of our choices to change, determine and affect the quality of our lives. Can my choices change reality? These questions become all the more significant in extreme situations. After examining these questions through the lens of old age in my previous work, *Gila*, I approach them this time through the story of Tsila and her struggle, her ability to change reality by assuming responsibility for her life.

**How did you get in touch with Tsila? Did it take convincing, or did she immediately express interest?**

Tsila was one of my professors in the “Artists for Social Change” program at The Naggar School of Photography, Media and New Music (Musrara). It was also there that I met Hadas Gertman, my creative partner. I first heard Tsila’s story on our last class. I was fascinated, and asked to meet her in order to learn more. With great sensitivity, Tsila agreed to share with me the thoughts she experienced during the rehabilitation process. I was interested in her inner thoughts and voices, those internal, private realms, which are usually left unheard.

It took me about a year to return to her with a proposal for creating a performance based on her rehabilitation story. We met many times, and these meetings raised many thoughts and doubts as we got to know each other and tried to determine what form our collaboration should take. Nothing was clear at this point except Tsila’s story, and we understood this process was going to require trust and mutual listening, and that it was going to be a long journey.

**This is a multidisciplinary performance, including a dancer, an actor, a paper artist and a video artist. What led to this choice?**

I am looking for ways to tell a story on stage. Everything goes, the way I see it, as long as it serves the story while opening a new dimension for examination. Different images come up during the work

process, and I try not to limit myself –you can always delete at the end. The elements that ended up on stage are those I felt were the most accurate way to tell Tsila’s story from my perspective. When there are multiple elements on stage, I must be accurate with myself and choose where to direct the attention. The same as in cinema, where the camera does most of the work for the director. It is a very challenging work: to orchestrate all these elements and reach the right harmony, as in life. On the other hand, I try to leave room for the viewers’ interpretations.

## Life in Paper

### **Why did you choose to use paper?**

I use paper as an image, as an interpretation of the content world of Tsila’s rehabilitation story. One of her important motivations in recovery was through the aesthetic aspect of the body image. During the performance, Hadas designs paper clothes for the different characters and dancers on stage; they are suggestive of those paper dolls in books we played with as kids. The designing of clothes by itself is already associated with questions of body image. The changing body, like the changing character reweaving its identity out of uncertainty and a desire for a new form.

Paper is a fragile, easily torn material, which reminds us of Tsila’s fragile body. On the other hand, it can be used to create new forms and contexts, like the neural bypasses in Tsila’s brain. Those bypasses changed the nerve conduction in her brain and supported her recovery.

### **What are the main questions the work wishes to raise?**

How responsible are we for our own lives?

To what extent can we change reality, how much is it up to us?

### **How did you create the documentary parts?**

The documentary parts are conveyed through the performance’s soundtrack. I recorded my conversations with Tsila and with doctors who treated her and doctors who specialize in pain medicine.

I used the soundtrack editing as the foundation for my work, this is how I began. Choosing the content helped me formulate the work’s structure and its dramaturgy. I had to choose how to tell the story, from endless possibilities. In the end I chose to tell it through Tsila’s motivations, the motivations which helped advance her rehabilitation process. There were many, and the thing that amazed me was Tsila’s ability to be attuned to herself in an extreme situation, and to understand what was right for her at that moment. She did not reach the top at once, neither did she know whether she was going to reach it at all. She examined her abilities at that specific moment, and then took a small step forward. Those small steps resulted in a tremendous change. Her first motivation was choosing life.

After selecting the texts, I entered the editing room with Shasho, where they underwent another process of crystallization. It was a fascinating process of building a “choreography” for the text. We listened to the words, to the sentences, to the meaning and rhythm they created. This fine-tuning continued until now, one week before the premiere. I had about 24 hours of recordings, 15 of which found their way into the soundtrack. I ended up with Tsila’s voice and the voice of Prof. Avi Revkind

(head of the Trauma Unit at Hadassah Medical Center), who treated Tsila when she arrived at the hospital.

The images were born out of the text, and I started realizing what kind of world I wanted to build on stage, what the story needed. This is also how I understood I wanted to work with a paper artist and with dancers whose capabilities extend dance.

## “The Producer Duet”, or What Is a Dialogue

### **Where did you find the inspiration for the movement language in this piece?**

The artistic process was anchored in the story. The concrete story revealed the subtext – it raised questions and opened up a new dimension for interpretation, which may sometimes be abstract.

When I started rehearsing in the studio, I had an initial version of the play, images, and a few musical pieces, some of which changed as we worked. I brought the general idea, and together with Iris and Tal we tried to unravel it and understand what would serve the story. My partners were very experienced performers who are artists themselves, and we worked together in full collaboration and open discussion.

As movement was concerned, we tried to figure out where we wanted to lead, into which realm. We tried to translate it into feelings and movement, examining what worked dramaturgically. We translated the dramaturgy into principles of movement. For example, there’s a part we call “The Producer Duet”, which asks questions like “What is a dialogue?” and “What is listening?” We worked with a set of definite instructions related to dialogue and attentive movement – manipulations, leader, follower, entering and existing a personal space and so on. Another step was to accurately characterize the quality of action, out of endless possible properties – whether it was soft, aggressive, dominant, submissive etc.

I began meeting with Hadas, trying to find the language of paper. I knew I wanted to work with paper and I knew I wanted to work with Hadas; and I also knew I wanted Hadas to make paper clothes on stage, this is part of her art. But then there were endless possibilities: What kind of paper? What language should it speak? What character does Hadas play on stage, other than “dresser”? Just as a good dancer knows his or her body and can take it wherever is needed, so does Hadas know the qualities of paper, whose any manipulation requires complete attention and preciseness.

We tried working with different kinds of paper, and ended up using newspaper, the most accessible and common type, which also contains life. In its physical properties, it represents the fragility of reality: it is thin, easily torn, soiling, conveys life stories, printed. Everything that is created on stage is happening that same minute, it breathes and changes and attains new forms, and sometimes it does not last much longer than a minute. It is like creation ex nihilo, and in that way it is similar to the rehabilitation process. We use nothing but staplers and paper.

Hadas is a performer working in action art, and many things were born out of the concrete action she performed with the paper. There is something very clear and accurate about this action. While with movement we are accustomed to playing with time and dynamics, adjusting them to what is “needed”, working with paper is functional and requires time. This is part of Hadas’s language, movement is

created as a result of listening to the action and to its needs. Skill allows for greater freedom in time, but there's still the functional element. Listening to the time the action requires helped us achieve accuracy in our stage work and movement. Hadas's character gradually evolved as we worked.

The centrality of the story remained clear, yet it was still interesting to examine its relationship with dance and action art. The instances in which dramaturgy created a movement language, and the instances in which movement created a story. It was challenging to listen to these moments and identify what should be the leading element at that given moment.

### **What sort of research work was required here?**

Research is an important part of the work process – for me, it is the incubation stage, when I start delving into the content world of the piece. So I started by digging into the materials. I read books about brain architecture, stories of people who went through extreme situations, interviewed doctors and scientists – a pain specialist, a neuroscientist researching emotions. I had many conversations with Tsila and with some of the friends who accompanied and supported her. I watched movies that seemed relevant. The performance includes a reference to the movie "The Sea Inside", a movie discussing the question of life.

### **I read your artistic vision, in which you write about your desire to connect art to the society we live in. Can you elaborate?**

I believe my work does not end in the work of art, and my dialogue with the audience continues beyond their experience as viewers. I see art as an opportunity to open new horizons for discussion and raise awareness.

My work revolves around life stories. Usually, these are stories that carry social messages and implications. In my previous work, *Gila*, I addressed the personal and social aspects of old age. At the end of the performance we held a session with the audience, expanding the discussion of this topic.

There are social aspects in my current performance as well, like our responsibility for our lives, and raising awareness of rehabilitation. In this work I am trying to get in touch with different institutions dealing with recovery and rehabilitation.

My previous performance also led me to speak in front of different and diverse forums. In these lectures I speak about the work process in *Gila*, and also about my MA thesis, in which I analyzed Ruth Schloss's painting of old age, referencing theories of art history and psychological, sociological and philosophical theories of old age. This also inspired me to create the "Gila" Movement and Stage Art Workshops for Women of Mature Age.

## [An Ongoing Dialogue between Life and Art](#)

### **What are the physical, mental and cultural implications of living in the shadow of trauma, as they are expressed in *Tsila*?**

The main point as I see it is that coping with rehabilitation is universal, regardless of your nationality. Rehabilitation is rehabilitation, just as pain is pain. From the moment of injury, rehabilitation never ends, and each person must find his or her own personal path in this never-ending journey.

**What guided you in selecting the music?**

Most of the music in this performance are Spanish love songs. My parents are Argentinian, and we lived in Peru when I was a teenager, so I spent a meaningful period of my life in a Spanish-speaking environment. These songs are about love and the meaning of life. And the question they ask is, does life have a meaning without love? This touches the subjects of pain and coping with pain, which we discuss in *Tsila*.

**What do you think are the characteristics of your choreographic language?**

In addition to my research of the language of movement, there's a subject that is of no lesser importance to me, which is how to tell the story, which elements are required in order to tell it, and how to find the precise equilibrium between them.

**What fascinates you about the creative process?**

Everything – pregnancy and birth. The process and journey this baby goes through from the moment of conception until there is something tangible, with a name and a form. It requires listening, attention and accuracy, as in life. The challenge is to be.

**How much does your personal life affect your works?**

I live in constant dialogue between life and art. The questions that trouble me in my personal life find their way into my art. In the artistic process, those same philosophical questions about life join specific artistic questions, and the dialogue between them develops both the piece and me as a person.