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The Theater of War

Theater

By Lila Feinberg

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You don't have to turn on the evening news to watch live footage from the war zone. Instead, you can turn to the theater district. You'll find Navy nurses and sailors belting their hearts out to the backdrop of the Asiatic-Pacific Theater in "South Pacific." Or a three-and-a-half-hour crossfire — with bullets made equally of words and Wellbutrin — in the dysfunctional household of "August: Osage County." And did you preorder your ticket yet to see Mrs. Tom Cruise play the fiancée of a missing World War II pilot in the upcoming revival of "All My Sons"?

But when was the last time the curtain opened upon the day of the Yom Kippur War? Meri Wallace's new drama, "Yom Kippur," dares to begin with this historic, if untold, bang. Directed by Halina Ujda, the play's world premiere was July 16 at the WorkShop Theater, as part of the Midtown International Theatre Festival.

Israel, October 6, 1973: Two 20-something American couples — Ephraim and Sara, Yitz and Yael — now living in Jerusalem prepare to observe the Yom Kippur holiday. All of them free spirits, this could easily be a scene from "The Big Chill Goes on Birthright": Ephraim the Cellist still has feelings for now nine-months-pregnant Yael the Dancer, from whom Yitz the Artist supposedly stole during art school days. But as Egypt and Syria launch their attack — immediately sending Yitz off to war, while Ephraim chooses not to enlist — the soapworthy backstory becomes yet another devastating battle they must struggle to fight.

In a recent interview with the Forward, Wallace recalled when the first air raid siren sounded in Jerusalem, shattering an immobile silence that shrouded the country on its holiest day. She had already been living in Israel for five years, having made aliyah as an idealistic 18-year-old Brooklyn girl and passionate member of a Zionist youth movement.

"Some people went to Canada; we went to Israel," Wallace said, referring to the turbulent times of Vietnam War protest. She spent a year living on Kibbutz Galon, doing the "picking apple routine," but decided that "kibbutz life wasn't for a New Yorker." She moved to Jerusalem, got married and began to study dance at Rubin Academy before opening her own studio.

"It wasn't a passing of age, it was a commitment.... We got off the airplane and kissed the ground," she reflected during

downtime before rehearsal. “But we were not prepared to see the reality of it.” Wallace isn’t afraid to admit that her own private reality is fully fleshed out in the fearless character of Yael: Both were on the brink of giving birth when their husbands were sent off to the front lines. And both were forced to place birth announcements on the army radio in hopes of it reaching them. At the time, Wallace knew only one other woman besides herself who hadn’t heard from her husband since being “loaded onto the truck.”

It is only now that Wallace feels ready to weave the nightmarish experience of living alone as a new mother in a war-torn foreign city: fourth-floor walkup, no phone, no TV, barely any heat, blackouts at six o’clock every night. In desperate moments, a friend in the Magen David Adom would pick up milk for her and her newborn son in his ambulance.

“I wanted to write a play that asked, ‘What would bring an American to give up a comfortable, safer life?’” she said. Wallace eventually gave up the more volatile Israeli life, leaving behind both her surviving husband and her adopted homeland. In 1975, she returned to America with an 18-month-old son. But the memory of that year and a half — an exhaustive dance of sacrifice and strength no training could prepare her for — continues to linger on like the shrill ring of the first air raid siren.

However, “Yom Kippur” is not about the solitary spirit of survival. A surrogate, makeshift family has been crafted out of this intimate cast of friends, even if its stability is swiftly put under siege. As love triangles turn into love Stars-of-David, with confessional bombs dropping as fast as real ones, it is the women who remain fiercely loyal to each other. No stand-by-your-Jewish-man accusations here, and hence no “other woman” catfights. Wallace’s women are tethered by heroic capacities for suffering: The anguish of waiting and the grief of loss penetrate their lives deeper than the roots of a sabra cactus.

Of course, their tragic turns seem all the more hairpin after witnessing the naive invincibility and romantic idealism on which they once prided themselves — one that could be said to mimic the prewar State of Israel. After all, wasn’t it this false sense of security that made Israel all the more vulnerable to attack? (“Golda would never let us be attacked,” one character defensively declares.)

While Wallace said any parallels between her story and the history books are “unconscious,” she certainly has the authority to call it as such. When she returned to America in 1975, she built a career as a psychotherapist. And she believes it is these past 22 years “of listening to people — the choices they make, their patterns that repeat themselves” that compensate for any lack of formal study as a playwright.

Most recently, Wallace has made a name for herself as a published child-development specialist and TV personality — which perhaps explains how she was finally able to revisit her past. In the end, Yael must make the “excruciating decision” of whether to stay in Israel or return home to her family in Brooklyn. When her cantankerous mother-in-law, Bella, shows up for a surprise confrontation, Yael is caught off-guard: “Are you a mother or an Israeli first?” Bella asks insistingly. It’s a question that will stir up those all-too-familiar pangs of maternal Jewish guilt, causing her to re-examine sacrifice, for the first time, under the light of blood ties and not country ties.

And just as Yael’s future remains unwritten, Wallace has yet to return to Israel. Today, she enjoys the uncharted experiment of running a small theater production company with her second husband, also a playwright. But word of “Yom Kippur” has unexpectedly reached some old friends still living in Israel — reconnecting Wallace for the first time since leaving. And now, at work on a new play set in the Holy Land, Wallace is slowly mending an excuse to make aliyah once again. Perhaps, even to write there.

As Sara muses at the top of the play, only to repeat it at the end, “Yom Kippur is more about making amends than fasting.”

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