

Will a New Play on October 7 Change the Way We See the War?

Avshalom Halutz | February 23, 2025 | Haaretz :תאג

Israeli theater has been slow to respond to the atrocities of Hamas' attack and the war in Gaza. Yehoshua Sobol and Asaf Hameiri seek to change that – with a new play set in a tunnel, featuring a hostage Israeli musician, co-produced at Hameretz 2.

A couple of months ago, an unusual message landed in the inbox of Asaf Hameiri, a young Israeli theater director and founder of the alternative cultural center Hameretz 2 in south Tel Aviv. It wasn't just another pitch for a party at the venue Hameiri runs with a team of partners, a space that operates as a true chameleon, seamlessly transforming into a theater, cinema, concert hall and, mostly, a dance club.

For Hameiri, who grew up in a creative household and spent nearly two decades studying and working in the theater in Germany, such an email was nothing short of astonishing. After all, it's not every day that a 36-year-old director is invited to collaborate with celebrated Israeli playwright Yehoshua (Joshua) Sobol, best known abroad for his seminal work "Ghetto" on the travails of members of the Vilna Ghetto's theater.

Over his long career, Sobol, now 85, has earned a reputation as one of the most prolific and influential Hebrew playwrights. He harnesses the medium's unmediated connection to its audience to reflect on Israeli society, often linking contemporary issues with historical events. His works have addressed themes ranging from the destruction of the Temples to the Yom Kippur War and Jewish life during the Holocaust.

Not long after Hamas' attack on October 7, 2023, Sobol began writing a new play on Israel's current war, tentatively titled "Resha Ve'pesha" (Evil and Crime). He soon found himself at Hameretz 2 to meet with Hameiri, a draft of the script tucked under his coat. Since then, the two have been collaborating on the project alongside composer and singer Ayala Asherov, with Hameiri directing.

The young director is reluctant to reveal much about the play, saying only that "it's still a work in progress." The play will feature original songs, and its main setting will be a tunnel where an Israeli musician is being held hostage. The narrative explores not only his struggle to survive but also his imagination and contemplations, which include encounters with his girlfriend, whose fate remains uncertain.

Hameiri acknowledges the weight of the subject matter. "It's sensational material. Sobol's bravery is incredible, as is his modesty: to take events that nobody knows how to deal with – not personally and not artistically – and that we don't even know how to name. It's a very explosive and dangerous thing. But we need to confront it. I told him, 'You've rolled a barrel bomb into my office with your play.'"

Israeli theater has been the slowest of all cultural fields to respond to the atrocities of October 7 and the

ensuing war. Aside from "A Place to Live," a production based on testimonies from October 7 survivors at the Otef Hanegev Theater, most playwrights have avoided the painful subject altogether. That hesitation isn't necessarily a flaw; art doesn't need to be rushed or shaped by immediate events. But since the war broke out, most Israeli theaters have stayed apolitical, commercial and noncontroversial.

Contrary to that, this isn't the first time Hameretz 2 has challenged its audience. Another production currently showing at the venue is "Seared in Light," based on a novel by Israel Hameiri (Asaf's father) and starring George Iskandar (Fauda). The play, about a Druze art student and a Jewish teacher caught up in a Shin Bet investigation, examines burning issues of nationalism, racism and identity in Israel.

In an age where cultural consumption is largely dictated by algorithms on phones, the influence of Israeli theater has never been weaker. Their collaboration could mark a turning point not only for Israeli theater but also for Hameretz 2, which has so far fallen under the critics' radar. Can this duo breathe new life into the Israeli stage and attract a different kind of audience, one that wouldn't be scared to look into Sobol's poetic mirror?