

The Cruelty in "The Murder of Isaac"

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"The Murder of Isaac" was written after the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin – the Prime Minister of Israel in October 1995, after he had signed the Oslo Accord – the peace accord between Israel and the PLO. Isaac is actually the English pronunciation of Yitzhak. I was present at that demonstration for peace on Saturday November 5 1995 at the Town Hall square in Tel Aviv, when the assassination took place. The shock and the rage about it never actually faded. "The Murder of Isaac" is a play that must have been written. I couldn't run away from writing it. During the following years, Rabin's assassination was discussed and debated on every possible platform in Israel. It became very clear that the play has to offer a different perspective that was not presented in the media and in the academia. It took me about three years to digest the traumatic event and to find a perspective that felt potent enough. This perspective - or main metaphor – was inspired by the play Marat/Sade by the German playwright Peter Weiss. The two plays are similar in some respects but very different in many others.

"The Murder of Isaac" takes place in a mental hospital for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder patients in Israel, who have been hospitalized for many years, with very little chance to be cured and released. Twelve inmates in the hospital are performing a play that they wrote and one of them has directed in front of their relatives and the staff of the hospital. The play they wrote is mostly a cabaret piece with short sketches and songs, in which they describe their version of the events that led to the assassination of Rabin. This part of the play is the inner play. During its performance the actors lose control and they can't follow the lines they themselves wrote. Their tension and excitement and the dynamics among them create disturbances in the plot which lead to deep conflicts among them. These conflicts end when the actor who plays the murderer of the Prime Minister kills the actor who plays the Prime Minister.

The play was completed in 1998 and was not produced by the theatre in Tel Aviv that had commissioned it. The world premiere took place in the municipal theatre in Heilbronn, Germany, in 1999. Immediately after opening night there was a debate about the play in the Israeli Parliament – the Knesset. Representatives of one of the religious parties called the play anti-Semitic, and demanded that the Israeli Government would request from the German Government to close the play on grounds of it being anti-Jewish incitement. The minister of culture responded and said that he condemns the play and everything that's written in it, but he believes in the freedom of speech and he won't try to close it, certainly not when it is performed in another country. The play was later done in Center Stage theatre in Baltimore in 2006. The first production of the play in Israel will take place only this season – at the Tel Aviv University Theater.

Why is the play so threatening for the Israeli theatres? I think that the play is not only about these 12 post-traumatic inmates in that imaginary hospital. It is also a play about a whole society that is post-traumatic, but pretends to go on living normal life, suppressing its anxieties, fears, traumas, despair and helplessness, and therefore it is unable to have an accurate historical and political analysis of its survival. The characters of the play are autonomous individuals. They don't represent a society. But the play as a whole is a clear metaphor, which is somehow unbearable for the artistic directors of the theatres Israel, who suddenly forgot what the role of the theatre is, and they united to protect their audiences.

And yes – the play is cruel. It's cruel because it's about people who had suffered the cruelty of war, people whose life was destroyed by the cruelty of war, people who were transformed by the cruelty of war into desperate, panic-ridden, frustrated, violent and yes - cruel human beings.

Let's look at two example of this cruelty in the play:

Binder is the oldest of the inmates. He's 67 years old, and in the play within the play he plays the murdered prime minister. Binder was severely wounded in 1948 war and also severely traumatized. He has been in the closed ward of the hospital for about 50 years. He has maintained his intellectual capacity. However, he suffers from severe anxiety as he's afraid that somebody is going to assassinate him at any

time. The other patients respect him despite his limitations and accept his leadership because of his intelligence and compassion. He led them through the play's writing process and it is he who ensures it to ensure that it reaches its conclusion. Binder is aware of his mental situation, but he thinks that in the fifty years he's been hospitalized, he has discovered the true nature of the society outside of the hospital, its diseases, its faults and its failures. Now he knows how to rescue it, now he knows how to save the people in it from the catastrophe that he had experienced in his own life. Binder has led the writing of the play and directed it with huge commitment to his mission – to save the people among them he desires to live. This is more important to him than his own life. He leads the play to its end and nothing stops him, even if he has to be aggressive and cruel to the other characters. Binder is not cruel in a violent way. He doesn't beat, doesn't shoot, and doesn't use any physical force. He's more subtle than that. He forces his actors to continue the show by manipulations, by threats, even by taking on their roles if necessary – and sometime, as he knows their soft points, by inflicting unbearable pain on them. Binder is usually compassionate and tolerant to the other inmates, but every time one of them does something that might sabotage the show – he becomes insisting and demanding. Why do we forgive him for his cruelty? Because we empathize with his superior motivation: to heal himself from his trauma and use the insight he gains from it to offer salvation to the world. We want him to succeed in it, in spite of his cruelty.

Yudah is 51 years old and in the play within the play he plays the Leader of the Opposition, who tries to sabotage the peace accord. Yudah was wounded in a battle near Jerusalem in 1967 and also suffered a terrible trauma when a Jordanian soldier shot him from a close distance, although he lifted up his hands in surrender and begged for his life. His anxiety level is high. Weeping and shouting arouse terror in him. He is a dangerous patient who cannot be allowed outside the hospital for fear that he will harm those around him. Despite this he is convinced that he has been hospitalized by mistake. For years he has tried vainly to be discharged from the hospital and return to the army. He's sure that he was not discharged because of his radical right wing political opinions. Yudah's cruelty is apparent. He threatens other inmates and he beats them. He gives orders and punishes when his orders are not obeyed. At a certain moment when he realizes that he has no answer to Binder who argues that man can choose to do good, he threatens to set the theatre

on fire in order to prove to Binder that when people are about to be burnt they won't have any compassion for one another. But we forgive Yudah's cruelty too. We see how panicked he is, how he suffers constant fears and how he tries to overcome them. He also has deep realizations from his years of being hospitalized, and he also think that he knows the way to rescue his society. We pity him for his disbelief in mankind and the loneliness that he has imposed on himself because of it.

Why must both characters be so cruel? Both struggle for a vision that will ease their suffering. Both are desperate to offer their visions to their comrades inside the hospital and to the society outside of it. The more suffering they inflict on each other, the deeper is the empathy we feel for them. Since their suffering is caused by their cruelty, they must be cruel. If they are not cruel enough, they won't suffer enough suffering to go through a catharsis and they won't be able to create a catharsis for the spectator – which is the purpose of the play. But let's make it very clear – inflicting suffering on a character in the theatre makes sense only if there's a superior motivation for it, only when it results from a human urge that we can empathize with – as we saw in Macbeth, for example.

At the end of the play Yudah defeats Binder, who is being killed by a patient, incited by Yudah. At that very moment our empathy is completely with Binder. We see how he suffers because of his failure to bring redemption to the world through the belief in mankind, through his certainty that the human race will one day understand that the horrors of war can be avoided through empathy, through tolerance, through compromise and through reason. We condemn Yudah – not because of his cruelty, but because of the motivation for it. We reject his desperate violence, we reject his hatred, and we mostly reject his pessimism. On the other hand, in spite of Binder's failure we leave the theatre strengthened in his hopes and encouraged to continue and struggle for a better world, where man is more generous, more understanding, more forgiving, more moral and more committed to justice.