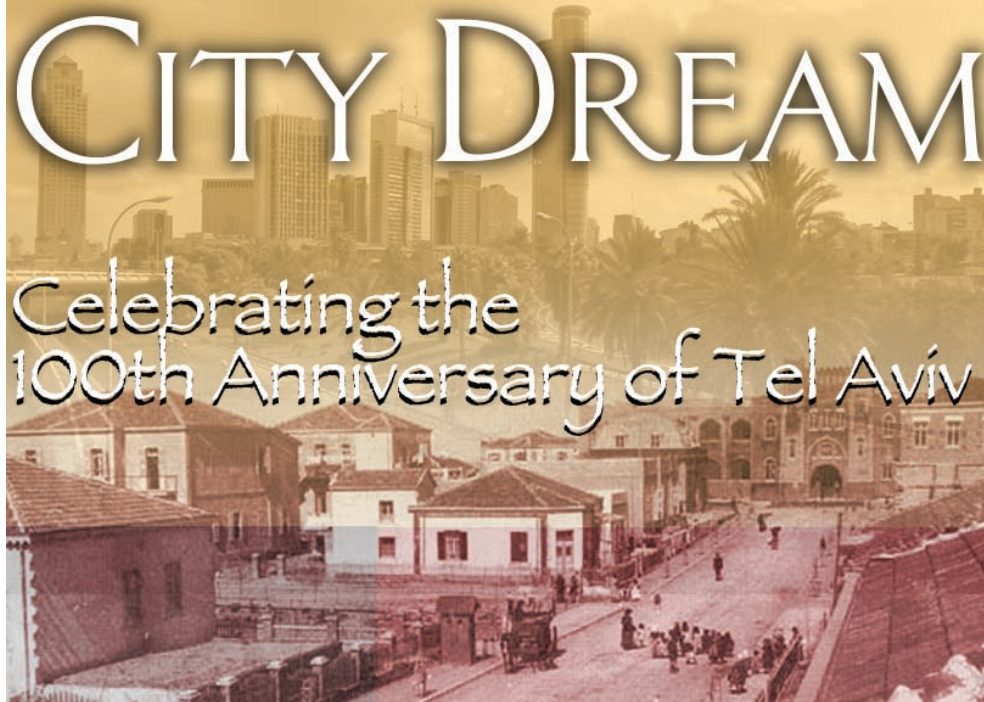


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A New Theatrical Cabaret

Professor Maoz Azaryahu, author of *Tel Aviv: Mythography of a City* sat in Tel Aviv recently and chatted with actress, singer, and playwright Rebecca Joy Fletcher about her new theatrical cabaret. He shares with us the results of their talk.

When Rebecca Joy Fletcher begins to talk about her new show in celebration of the 100th anniversary of Tel Aviv, her face lights up. “Tel Aviv is a miracle; the story of its flourishing is full of magic and myth.” Rebecca, a classically trained singer, actress, produced playwright, and ordained cantor has recently arrived in Israel for a month’s research in preparation for her new theatrical cabaret about Tel Aviv.

Her immediate research goals are to discover the little known music and comedic sketch material of Tel Aviv’s cabarets and use them as a theatrical window into the history of that great city.

“Particularly in the 30s and 40s, it was a time of ferment in Tel Aviv,” the playwright/actress explains, “a period before the founding of the State when the city was growing by leaps and bounds, when life was romantic, difficult, ideologically charged, and simply bursting with music.” Ideological, yes—difficult, certainly—but full of music? Who knew?



photography by Oori Noy Meir

“Why yes!” she exclaims with a delighted laugh, “even though there were no iPods, music, particularly popular songs, were an mainstay for people. One could even say that without Israeli folk, theater, and cabaret songs, this amazing country might not ever have been born. After all, songs enable people to dream -- and this whole country began as a dream.”



Rebecca has been doing her cabaret research alongside Dr. Naama Ramot, one of the leading experts in Tel Aviv cabaret. They met this past May when Rebecca lectured on cabaret and performed at the symposium *Politics and Culture in Musical Theater* sponsored by the joint departments of theater, music, and ethnomusicology at Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Rebecca lectured, in Hebrew, on Jewish involvement in cabaret, and performed her solo show, *A Little Yearning*, which features pieces by Jewish composers from around-the-

globe. Conversations at this recent symposium sparked her interest in Tel Aviv’s cabarets; once she heard a bit of the great music, and discovered Tel Aviv’s upcoming centennial birthday, she had a sudden vision: to create a show about the founding of the city of Tel Aviv, through the lens of its vibrant cabarets!

With the help of Dr. Ramot, Rebecca has begun her in-depth research at the theatrical archives at Tel Aviv University and Hebrew University, Tel Aviv’s Iriyah’s historical archives, as well as at the National Library music archives, located on the Givat Ram Campus of Hebrew University. “The first major cabaret to hit Tel Aviv was founded in 1928,” Rebecca explains. “It was called ‘*Hakumkum*,’ meaning the kettle, and it followed the tradition of European cabaret.”

In other words, it was political by nature, satirical by tone, and responded directly to the immediate news of the day. That’s why its Hungarian immigrant founder, Avigdor Hameiri, named it “The Kettle,” his goal was to create an theatrical forum where what was happening on stage would “boil over,” would really speak to people, instead of staying nice and respectful and always a low flame.

Hakumkum boiled over for only a year, though, due to infighting between Hameiri and his band of actors who soon left to found a rival cabaret, named ‘*Hametateh*,’ or ‘The Broom’ (again, the name signifies change—as the theme song for *Hametateh* states, this cabaret would “sweep away the old and bring in only the new!”). Asked if this vibrant cabaret music is still sung within Israel, Rebecca explains that some has made its way into the widely loved cannon of pre-State folk songs, including many songs by *Hametatah* lyricist, Natan Alterman. Other songs,



including lesser known songs from *Li La Lo* (another cabaret of the period) and Sambatyon (a very small review theater which ran for a few years) have been all but forgotten, except by a handful of academics.

In addition, it turns out there is a wealth of comedic sketch material written for the cabarets that also lies untouched. “The comedy was intensely topical and therefore difficult to update for today’s audience,” Rebecca tells me. “I’ve been reading literally hundreds of hand written comedic sketches; unfortunately, most would simply not strike the funny bone of today’s audience.

But then, after reading through pages and pages, low-and-behold, I discover a comedic gem—and it is brilliant and timeless.” Asked what topics they address, Rebecca’s eyes again take on that special light: “Everything! Hair styles, debates between immigrant groups, British cigarettes, illegal immigration, Hitler, Stalin, the new Tel Aviv port, the Arab riots of 30s, the advantage of German coffee houses in Tel Aviv—just everything! And imagine: it was all—the lyrics, the comedy, everything—it was ALL in Hebrew! Despite the fact that many of these writers and actors had not sung or written a word of Hebrew before they immigrated and that the language itself was still very much in flux, they managed, somehow, to create a new theatrical reality all in Hebrew.”



And why look to this cabaret material as a way to illuminate pre-State Tel Aviv? “It’s in the very nature of the beast,” states the playwright. “Cabaret is an immediate medium which flourished in inter-war Europe, a form that directly addressed its audience about everyday life—it was right up front and personal.” In addition to the cabaret material, Rebecca will be drawing from a range of other sources, including journals, poems, joke books, and in-person interviews with Tel Aviv old-timers. “Imagine this,” Rebecca continues, “Tel Aviv in the 30s was a city teeming with young people. Proportionately, it was a city of the young. It was vibrant and fascinating. In addition, it was a city literally built on sand; you can find that theme, and all the myths emanating from it, repeating itself in the poetry, visual art, and in the journals of immigrants living in pre-State Tel Aviv. Add to that the huge mix of cultures, the quantity of writers, bohemians, and intellectuals, the proximity of Arab Jaffa, the overarching presence of the British, and the city’s commitment to Hebrew at all times, and you’ve got the stuff from which great theater is born!”

Rebecca is not a newcomer to archival research or European cabaret, nor to long-neglected Jewish music. Her most recent show *Kleynkunst! - Warsaw’s Brave and Brilliant Yiddish Cabaret*’ about two performers in inter-war Warsaw’s cabarets, enjoyed a 7-week run off-Broadway this past winter to full houses and across-the-board great reviews. *The New York Times* critic, Lawrence Van Gelder praised *Kleynkunst!* and Rebecca in his review entitled ‘*At a Yiddish Cabaret, Hope, Despair and Song*’: “Across an emotional spectrum from saucy irreverence, high spirits and nostalgia to the bitterest despair and back to hope... Ms. Fletcher delivers a richly rounded and eventually heartbreaking performance... illuminating, ultimately touching.”

Will the creative process for the Tel Aviv show be similar to her development of *Kleynkunst!*? “In *Kleynkunst!*, our artistic team was committed to making the archival music fresh and timely; we wanted to be sure it would “pop” for today’s audiences just as it did for people in 1930’s Warsaw. For the Tel Aviv show we will also create new arrangements and new English lyrics.” Rebecca’s light-filled eyes suddenly shift and turn serious: “I am not interested in nostalgia,” she states emphatically. “I want this new theatrical cabaret to come alive, to bring the 30s and 40s back to life for today’s audience, without kitsch, without easy answers.”

The first version of Rebecca’s new show, which will be performed in the US and Europe, will contain about 75% English. As with *Kleynkunst!*, “I want the audience to be able to enter inside the world of the show without a language barrier, without the need to peer down at their programs or gaze up at a translation on the wall.” “But, don’t worry,” she assures, “the Hebrew in the songs, poems, jokes, and sketches is just so gorgeous that I am *compelled* to keep a fair amount of the original language in the show, too!”



What are her immediate plans? After Rebecca returns to New York, she will begin a close examination of the huge piles of music, journal entries, recorded interviews with Tel Aviv old-timers, comedic sketches, historical articles, and photographs she has amassed—and she will collect her thoughts, sing and write down her own dreams—and then, and only then, will she begin to actually write the script. “I am thinking of calling the show *City Dream* because so much of what was going on around Tel Aviv involved dreaming, visioning, living inside a world that could be but wasn’t yet—and what could be more theatrical than a dream?” After the script is written, next comes the task of assembling a great artistic team—director, music director, English lyricist—and casting the show (she anticipates a cast of four, including herself, a pianist, and two male actor/singers)—then rehearsals and finally opening night!

There is already considerable fascination with *City Dream* in the US, including interest on the part of Kabaret Kollektiv, (the Bistro Award winning production company that premiered *Kleynkunst!*) to premier the Tel Aviv show in the spring of 2009 in New York City. “I also hope to bring the show back to Israel during the course of 2009 as part of the festivities happening here for Tel Aviv’s 100th anniversary. It is such a perfect time for me to bring this new show to Israel; I am eager to apply my creative talents towards honoring Tel Aviv!”

Asked who else might be interested in *City Dream* and who she intends to create it for, Rebecca explains: “According to my research, there has never been another English language play or theatrical cabaret, or a Hebrew play translated into English that served to illuminate what Tel Aviv felt, smelt, tasted, and sounded like in the 30s & 40s. Additionally, this fantastic wealth of cabaret music is unknown to audiences outside Israel. So, who’s my audience? People around the world, Jewish and non-Jewish who want to enter into a romantic period in history and experience it come alive before their eyes, people who want to know what it felt like to wander across the edges of Tel Aviv by night with a lover, seeking that perfect sand dune for a tryst, who adore

cabaret but never imagined it could exist in Hebrew. Who's my audience? People inspired by stories of the past, intoxicating music, the revival of the Hebrew language, and great theater—and by that miraculous, sexy city of Tel Aviv.”

This writer can't wait to see Rebecca's dream become a reality on stage. Until that day, we can learn more about Rebecca and follow her Tel Aviv dream as it unfolds by going to her website at <http://www.rebeccajoyfletcher.com>.

Maoz Azaryahu, an associate professor of geography at the University of Haifa, is a cultural historian and geographer who specialized in the public construction of memory. His seminal book on Tel Aviv, *Tel Aviv: Mythography of a City*, was published by Syracuse University Press in 2006 and deals with the underlying myths of the city, from its founding to the present. He also explored Berlin's landscapes of memory and published the book, *State Cults Celebrating Independence and Commemorating the Fallen in Israel 1948-1956*.

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