

'Like Alice meeting the Mad Hatter'

A video dance about the coronavirus era is the result of a first-ever collaboration between choreographer Inbal Pinto and author Etgar Keret. They talk to Haaretz about the need to be creative even in underground conditions during lockdowns and about an outrageous disregard of the world of culture

Shany Littman

Even the flourishing careers of the choreographer, director and designer Inbal Pinto and author and filmmaker Etgar Keret were brought to a brake-screeching halt by the coronavirus pandemic. Pinto was in the midst of work on "Pagliacci," Ruggero Leoncavallo's 1892 opera, which the Israeli Opera was to have mounted this year; she's in charge of the direction, the choreography and the design. In the meantime, the production has been postponed until 2022. Keret had been set to go on a tour of encounters with readers in Germany, which was cancelled.

"We had time and we looked for something to do," he sums up concisely.

Into the imposed time-out, about a month and half after the lockdown began, stepped Arieh Rosen, Israel's cultural attaché in Japan. Feeling that the now-available time should somehow be exploited for creative purposes, he contacted Pinto. She acceded to his rather vague suggestion that she do "something." Fifty-three year-old Keret, whose book of short stories "Fly Already" (originally published in Hebrew in 2018 with the title, "Glitch at the Edge of the Galaxy") had recently been published in Japanese, was also apparently of a similar mind.

Back in May, Pinto, 51, who's known particularly for the eponymous dance company she founded in Israel, had read a new short story by Keret, titled "Outside" – published in July in The New York Times as part of a project in which the paper asked authors to write short stories inspired by the moment of the COVID-19 pandemic – and she contacted Keret to arrange a meeting with him.

Says Keret, meeting with Haaretz, together with Pinto, at his Tel Aviv home, "I thought she was asking for permission to do something with my story, and I immediately said yes. During the conversation, I understood that she was actually suggesting politely and delicately that we do it together." They decided to adapt the story into a video dance work – a first experience for both of them with a project of this kind – featuring the participation of Japanese and Israeli artists, with shooting to take place in both countries.

The result is a seven-minute film starring two performers, Israeli dancer Moran Muller and Japanese actor Mirai Moriyama, with music by Umitaro Abe. The work, created with the support of the Israeli clothing chain Factory 54, under the auspices of the Foreign Ministry and Jerusalem's Mishkenot Sha'ananim cultural center, premiered late last month and premiered digitally via Mishkenot's Facebook page. (The online version also includes a conversation between the creators and Caitlin Roper, a producer from The New York Times, moderated by Israeli-American writer and translator Evan Fallenberg.)

At the start of the film, a young woman (Muller) is seen awakening from a deep sleep on a kitchen table. She tries to reacquire herself with a routine way of life after what feels like a very long slumber, perhaps lasting years. When she turns on the television, the announcer (Moriyama) speaks to her in Japanese in a severe tone of voice. The woman doesn't understand his language, but that's not the only peculiar thing that's happening in the house: It gradually emerges that the division between who is "imprisoned" and who is free, who dreads the outside and who is ready to re-encounter the world, is not self-evident.

Keret notes that when he wrote the story the video dance piece is based on, he wanted to look at the coronavirus and its impact on humanity in a somewhat different vein from what had emerged as the spirit of the time – namely, in the form of eulogies for the human species as we previously knew it.

"We were reading that people would no longer hug each other in the street, wouldn't invite anyone into their home – but my feeling is completely different," he explains. "A person who hugs now know it's dangerous, and he says, 'It'll cost me,' but I'll go ahead and hug anyway. The physical gestures will become more meaningful. I didn't like the half-victimized, half-nostalgic pose that says, 'Oy, we have parted from the world that once was.' The world that once was, wasn't all that wonderful.

"Coming out of isolation was pretty traumatic for me," Keret continues. "I didn't miss walking on Dizengoff and almost being run over by someone on an electric scooter, and then being shouted at that it's my fault. So I thought that the thing we were returning to wasn't necessarily such a bargain, and I wanted to deconstruct it. Coming out of isolation, my feeling in many senses was like that of a snail that emerges from its armor and wanders about naked. I'm naked and I hurt all over, but I tell myself it's not so terrible, I'll regrow the armor."

According to Keret, the first stage of the coronavirus crisis, last spring, was a moment that spawned a great deal of creativity.

"In order to create, you have to stop being passive," he observes. "At a certain stage in our career, we create projects that are commissioned from us. There were multiple projects that the coronavirus brought to a halt. And suddenly, when that passivity ends, you say, in fact, 'What am I? I am an artist, I get up in the morning and I need to invent something.' I would get up in the morning, and neither Hot nor Yes [cable and satellite companies, respectively] had commissioned anything from me, so what do I do now?"

"And also, if reality is a huge ship that has suddenly stopped, then, when it sets sail again, might it also head in a different direction? The options open up. There are people who say that the coronavirus will prove that we can live without flying. Others say that the Shin Bet [security service] is connected to everyone's phone and that's working out just fine, so when the pandemic ends, it should remain connected. In other words, it's a place that creates a great many possible worlds. And that is what artists do: create possible worlds."

Pinto: "You put it very well."

Where did you feel that the story Etgar wrote [in which security forces move from home to home, forcing people to emerge from isolation] is similar to your experiences of the coronavirus, from the lockdown?

Pinto: "The first image I had was of people stuck between outside and inside. Precisely in the situation when you still want to stay in that nook, with the possibility of change – and at the same time there's a need to go out and create and do things and move ahead. Because there was something that devoured me against my will. I felt a sense of vacuum, in which I didn't know what I would do or where reality was going to take me and how long it would take. This story gave me a physical feeling of being stuck. In my initial conception, there were no other characters, only the woman, and she was frozen in the doorway of her home. I wanted her to remain alone. I saw her sliding down the stairs, abandoning herself.

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"At the end of the story, what's evoked is the softness that developed out of the lengthy stay at home, as well as the hardness to come, and that's the sort of thing that speaks directly to me, physically. Amid all this there was also a great deal of confusion for me, about what language I would speak now, even before the advent of dialogue, film and intentions [of the current project]."

'A basic need to create'

Pinto and Keret, each in their field, are both used to working on a large scale and with hefty budgets; but this time they committed to speedy work and a small budget. Some of the furniture for the set was brought from home, and family members served as production assistants.

"At the start, the screenplay was relatively grandiose," Keret relates. "But it wasn't long before we understood that even if everyone were to work on a voluntary basis and mobilize to help, we would still need some sort of budget that we didn't have. And then, in parallel, we changed the script, which originally had lots of locations; we simplified it and also approached a great many groups for help. I felt a sense of urgency. The coronavirus pandemic has forced a type of contraction on us. As a creative artist, I feel that it is robbing me of all kinds of freedoms. I'm being told, 'Now, stay home,' and 'Now we're not making films.' Well, I have this childish trait – when I'm told I can't, I want to even more. And that's why I didn't want to wait."

Unlike the budgeting problems, Pinto notes, the great advantage of this period is that artists who are usually too busy to take on quick jobs – in-demand musicians and dancers – are suddenly available for work together. Working on the project almost felt like being engaged in underground activity, part of which was a swell of resistance to the gloomy fate of the cultural world right now.

Keret: "On the one hand, people are on unpaid leave and can't work or can't make a living, which generates economic hardship. And on the other hand, culturally speaking, the systems are paralyzed. People are being exposed to a lot less culture, and far less new content is arriving. There's a feeling of stagnation. Cultural activity as such makes a statement. Short-term projects, like ours, are not a solution to the economic problem that has emerged in the world of culture, but it is an attempt to lay an alternate pipe in place of the pipe that burst in the backyard. To allow us somehow to create what we want to share and what people want to receive. The circumstances led us to do something that we would not have done otherwise."

Those challenging conditions also generated a surge of renewed excitement at the creative act itself, Pinto says, adding, "It's like what I remember feeling when I first started out [as a professional]. It was an expression of a basic need to create and to do something in this period, within this vacuum, and to respond to what's happening."

In the first versions of the screenplay, the idea was to shoot the film outside, per the story's title.

"The first thing that came to mind," Keret recalls, "was to show people who had been living with themselves for a long time, without human society, and had now been forced to venture outside. We talked about taking Dizengoff Street [in Tel Aviv], where suddenly a lot of people would come out in pajamas, flip-flops, a bathrobe, plucking their eyebrows, picking their noses – because that's what they're used to doing at home – but now they've been told: go outside. Their awareness of the private and the public has disappeared somewhat. But Inbal talked a lot about the being-stuck aspect, and in the end we came back to that. In fact, that was what guided us, in part because we didn't have the money to shoot outside."

Pinto: "We understood that there was something in this film that emerged during the coronavirus period, that we needed to remain within that experience, and that loneliness and insularity were part of it. The coronavirus turned the world into a small village. Films can be made by means of Zoom, too. The fact that the world was reduced to home and to that screen, created new options that hadn't existed previously. So, what is distant can suddenly be terribly close and intimate – and that's what we tried to create."

"Outside" is actually the first collaboration between Keret and Pinto. They'd almost worked together twice in the past – once at his initiative, once at hers – but somehow it was only the coronavirus crisis that brought them to the same table.

Viewing the film, one has a feeling that you were "intended" in some way [for one another], as though you were always meant to work together. Something in the style and the constellation of images looks very apt and connected.

Pinto: "I can understand what you mean."



Mathieu Amalric in "The Middleman," a new TV miniseries created by Keret and his partner, Shira Geffen.

Charles Paulevich



Keret and Pinto. "If reality is a huge ship that has suddenly stopped, then, when it sets sail again, might it also head in a different direction? The options open up. It's a place that creates a great many possible worlds. And that is what artists do: create possible worlds."

Meged Gozani

Keret: "That's there, but there is also a very large difference. In my view, a creative work actually tells the story of how it was created. For example, I made the film 'Total Love' with [director] Gur Bent wick. Gur told me: This is a movie about a guy who's roaming around the world because he's looking for something, and he drags all his friends with him. And that's also how the film was made: I was Gur's friend, and he said, 'Let's go to India to make a movie.'

"There's something very sophisticated in Inbal but innocent at its base, and in me there's something hyperactive that is all over the place. The encounter between us is like the meeting between Alice and the Mad Hatter. And when you view the film we made together, it's also a little like Alice meeting the Mad Hatter.

"It's natural from my point of view to collaborate with someone like Inbal," Keret continues, "because she has a very clear center, something extremely stable aesthetically and stylistically – and that gives me freedom to run wild. There's a feeling that a responsible adult is present. Someone is keeping an eye on the kid, so give me a drag. In the adaptation of the story I wrote, initially, I went in completely different directions, but in a collaboration you have to find the points of confluence. The goal is that after this you [the viewer] will say, 'It's so right for the two you to work together.' In any event, it's a whole that transcends its parts.

"I really like collaborations with women, because it forces me to distance myself from my default, which is a masculine hero figure. I started to write the story about a male protagonist, and during the writing I switched to a woman. I realized that made more sense, and it changed things a bit in the story."

Pinto: "I have that in dancing, too, when very often I tend to work with one side of the body, and then I decide this time to try the other side, to switch legs."

Keret: "And that really does spawn other things. My characters are very often anxious, or feel pressured, and that morphs into aggressiveness. And then, in a certain constellation I say, 'What if the anxiety doesn't turn into aggressiveness, but into something else?' What can it turn into? A pancake? A red flower? In a collaboration, you can find yourself traveling on paths you generally don't get to, that are more interesting. There's a type of goodness in Inbal that is not childish, but a sort of mature innocence. She succeeded in growing in her world while preserving that quality. I'm very connected [in my work] to childhood, too, but many times it turns into violence and frustration. So I say, maybe it's possible to embark on that route, and also to drag Inbal a places that are a little more edgy."

What did he bring to your world?

Pinto: "I don't see it in terms of innocence and lack of innocence. When I read the story, I immediately tried to understand where I would bring the movement from, and what the world described in the story is. In the rehearsals we did with the dancer in my home, Etgar went into all kinds of details that could be beautifully written, but that in practice, for me as a choreographer, didn't touch on a particular emotion. For example, he wrote that the woman puts on nail polish. I said, 'But where's the movement, how does that intersect with the body?' We had these kinds of disparities. I tried to enter into the nuances, into things that would open Etgar's imagination and have implications for body language: an attempt to forge connections into his worlds."

Israeli surrealism

On September 17, Cellcom TV in Israel will begin screening "The Middleman," an excellent miniseries that Keret and his partner, screenwriter and director Shira Geffen, created for the French channel Arte. The four-part series (in French, "L'Agent Immobilier") won the best screenplay award at the La Rochelle TV drama festival last year. In it, the French actor Mathieu Amalric plays a Parisian real estate agent who evokes Buster Keaton in his appearance and forlornness. His mother dies and leaves him a rundown and almost abandoned building in the city. Even though he has a whole building, with no money and being recently divorced, he is effectively homeless. His only friend is a talking goldfish but it isn't really useful as a fulfiller of wishes and he finds himself traveling back and forth in time to his childhood. It's an astonishingly creative, moving and original series, in which Amalric gives one of his best performances.

In fact, Keret relates, the production, especially the fact that the series was made in France and Belgium, was tailor-made for Amalric (perhaps best known for his performances in "The Diving Bell and the Butterfly" and "The Budapest Hotel"), because he was felt to be the perfect actor for the part: "From my point of view, to leave the country for a year, to live in France, to work with a crew that has a different

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mentality, that drinks bottles of wine at 10 in the morning according to union rules, with people speaking texts that I have to learn by heart because I don't know French and don't understand what they are saying – that was still easier than finding a different actor to do this part."

Although both the new series and the dance video focus on the subject of the home, Keret explains that the use of this motif derives from completely different origins in each case.

"In 'The Middleman,' real estate is a way to talk about history and the past: When you go to look at apartments, and you say, 'Who lived here? What actually happened here?' Sometimes you come to a place and see a broken window and try to understand who broke it," he says.

The series really isn't like any Israeli series I've seen, but also not like any French series.

Keret: "That's funny, because when they wrote about the series in France they talked about a 'surrealistic world' – and that surrealistic world is actually Israel. For example, when people say terribly blunt things to each other's face. They said it was a kind of radicalized reality. Now, what is 'radicalized reality'? Try going to city hall to take care of business here. Because the characters are French and it's set in France, it looks like an artistic choice, related to the type of relationship between the characters. They didn't grasp that the script was written by people who live in a slightly different culture. There's something in these syntheses that can often create a singular effect."

From his perspective, Keret notes, the series deals with an attempt to close a circle, even when that's impossible. "It's a story about a person who wants to close the story with his mother, but his mother is already dead. One of the most powerful motivations for creativity, I believe, is the search for closure. I was in a certain situation and I wanted to say something, or I wanted to hug someone, but I didn't do it. So what do I do? I'll write a story about it. In the story, I can open the door that was shut in real life. I can understand things about my father by writing about him. In 'The Middleman,' what replaces this creative process is traveling in time. You can get to the past, and then understand something that you didn't understand at the time, because you were a child."

Many creative artists have become more political under the aegis of the pandemic. What do you think about the "Balfour Street" protests [against Benjamin Netanyahu]?

Keret: "There are those who claim that the protest is not well planned. The image I have in my mind is of an arch-fraudster who stole a little money from this widow, conned that guy, hoodwinked another fellow – and then they all gather in front of his house and say: 'Man, you screwed us all.' One says, 'I want a prime minister who's not a racist,' and someone else says, 'My business has been closed for five months and you're producing guidelines for distributing compensation.' We're all coming and saying to him, 'Listen, we don't want you. For different reasons.' I actually think that makes the case stronger. People say that the protest is personal. Of course it's personal. If someone hit me, I'd have a problem with him, because he did something wrong. It's not that I have a problem with people who have purple hair, in general."

Pinto, for her part, says she's upset because there is almost no discussion of the fact that the cultural world has been shut down for almost half a year: "This is an incredible phenomenon, and I don't know how it came to this. There's a lot of talk about the religious community and the [dangers of their] congregating [for prayer], but I don't hear discussions about the world of culture at all. Its absence is shocking. I don't mind it if people talk about the Haredim and deal with all of the issues related to [public] prayer – but this has to be solved, too."

"Alternatives have to be created, and not alternatives of shutting people up, or of [permitting only] 20 people in an auditorium. Things need to be opened, or at least solutions offered to artists who have nothing to do at the moment. Most of the cultural types are gentle and tolerant people who are waiting and believing, filled with hope. They're trying to find all kinds of alternatives, like making films at home. But at a certain stage, a genuine outcry emerges that derives from despair and from outrage over how it is that no one is talking about us."



Dancer Moran Muller in "Outside." "Keret wrote that the woman puts on nail polish," says Pinto. "I said, 'But where's the movement, how does that intersect with the body?'"

Ziv Berkovich

Keret: "I keep thinking about how people who once watched 'The Chamber Quintet' [a 1990s satirical TV show] now watch 'Savri Maranan' [a Hebrew family sitcom]. As far as they're concerned, it's fine. If you do give people something good, they'll be happy to take it. But if you don't give, they won't necessarily rise up in protest. There's the Ministry of Culture and the minister of culture, and they're supposed to ensure that there will be culture there on the table, along with the other things, and if someone so desires, if he's interested, he can – the way you take a snack – take a little culture."

"As an artist, I have the side that wants to make a living, but I also have a far more basic side: that I want to create. The cow wants to feed more than the calf wants to suckle. My need to create and to bring things into the world is a basic need that I struggle for, and I think it also serves society. But even if it didn't, I would go on doing it."

Where will the grounded ship of culture sail when it starts to move again?

Pinto: "I don't think things will change substantively. When culture returns, we will return. You can't replace the human encounter between audience and stage. I believe there will be great fervor both among audiences and among creative artists. The reason an attempt is being made to suppress it is due to a fear of culture; people think it has a great deal of power. There is a deliberate attempt to liquidate culture. It's a mountain. You can't put a curtain up next to a mountain and say it's not there. The mountain is culture; it's impossible simply to erase it. It's part of the way of life, of the landscape. Culture, like water, will find its way between the cracks."