



## Seeing into the soul

The outside-the-mainstream Orto-Da Theater has been putting on acclaimed mime productions all over the world since 1996 – but it still lacks its own premises

• By BARRY DAVIS

It is a well-kept secret that one of our most successful theater companies across the globe is a small outfit that alternates between street performances and shows in “bona fide” indoor venues, with a generous dosage of festival appearances betwixt and between.

Orto-Da Theater has been putting on acclaimed and even award-winning productions, outside the mainstream avenue of theatrical endeavor, all over the world since 1996 but, as yet, does not have its own premises.

The Ramat Gan-based Orto-Da Theater – the name comes from an English combination of “orthodox” and “dada”; or, alternatively, a Hebrew amalgam of *or* (light) and *tsda* (thank you) – was founded by artistic director Yinon Tzafir, Yifat Zandani Tzafir and artistic advisor Avi Gibson Barel in 1996.

In the interim the company has put on a large number of productions, hundreds of times, garnering prizes at such events as the Acre Theater Festival, Pula Theater Festival in Croatia, Bat Yam Street Theater Festival and Ciudad Rodrigo in Spain.

Orto-Da’s long-running *Stones* production, for example, has been performed over 300 times in more than 30 countries, including Belgium, Holland, Germany, Brazil, the US, Canada, France and Switzerland.

“There’s a theater owner in Paris who wants to bring *Stones* there, [for us] to perform it every evening at the theater for three months,” says Tzafir. “We’ll see whether we can manage that.”

According to the company founders, Orto-Da aims “to investigate and access the hidden parts of the soul.”

The productions are based on a creative process that looks at human behavior and what drives peo-

ple, in as an unfettered format as possible, “showing the human image, in its beauty and ugliness, kindness and monstrosity, in order to delineate them within the boundaries of artistic creativity.”

THAT INTENT produces powerful productions, mostly based on mime, with Orto-Da’s latest offering *Via Dolorosa Now* having its indoor premier – after street shows in Croatia and in Acre – at Tzavta in Tel Aviv on March 19 (8:30 p.m.). A performance of *Stones* at the same venue scheduled for March 21 (8:30 p.m.). *Stones* will now be performed at Tzavta once a month. Outside the country, *Via Dolorosa Now* will be called *Monkey Business*.

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The 30-minute *Via Dolorosa Now* production initially portrayed the lives of four monkeys – three male and one female – who begin squabbling over a case one of them finds. The case contains a sacred book, which each of the three male monkeys uses to adopt a different religious identity – Jewish, Muslim and Christian. The female monkey is initially excluded from the religious shenanigans, but eventually comes up with a secular resolution to the conflict.

You don’t have to be a doctoral student to appreciate the possible religious-political-social ramifications of such a story line.

“It’s about how human beings developed after discovering faith, each religion’s faith,” explains Barel. “It is about how we use religion. We discover faith and we want everyone else to believe the same thing. It touches on religious coercion and how we justify all sorts of terrible acts, as a religion and a society.”

Tzafir and Barel are aware of the possible interpretations of such a work, but prefer to concentrate on the creative and entertainment aspects.

“There is politics in everything you do, including eating humous. But this is more a lyrical, moving and funny show,” observes Tzafir. Meanwhile, as with all Orto-Da projects, *Via Dolorosa Now* has evolved, and the characters have changed.

“Jesus is no longer in the play, and it incorporates evolution and religion,” says the artistic director. “As there are no words spoken in the show, the audience can bring its own interpretation to the play,” adds Barel. “If you have 100 people in the audience, because it is a visual show, there can be 100 different shows happening at the same time. And that’s perfectly OK.”

Typically, Orto-Da works start out life in a relatively limited format and evolve and expand over time. They can begin with just two or three characters and grow into much larger productions.

“We have been performing *Stones* for five years now,” says Barel. “We have a special work process. We start out with an open-air street performance, and then consider whether the show is ready to be moved into an auditorium. We develop our productions while they are being performed, and we continue with rehearsals the whole time. We don’t stop developing a work until we decide to stop performing it.”



ORTO-DA’S latest production “Via Dolorosa Now” is about how human beings developed after discovering faith. (Johann Segew)

That continuity, says Barel, offers a creative continuum. “It’s a pretty unique approach for Israel. Most productions are industrialized. They are performed for a specific period, and that’s that.”

Like much of what has happened to Orto-Da since its very inception, *Stones* came about serendipitously.

“We were touring in Europe and we had an unscheduled longish stopover in Warsaw,” recalls Tzafir. “So we took a trip into Warsaw, to see a few things including the site of the ghetto, and we saw the sculpture by Natan Rappaport called *Warsaw Ghetto Uprising*. We took some pictures of the sculpture and, when we got back to Israel, we started thinking about how to bring the figures in the sculpture to life.”

*Stones*, created by Tzafir, is described as “a poetic journey within spirits and memories, between the present day and history.” It tells the story of a rebel through a sculpture which comes to life.

“It is a bittersweet show where the laughter goes together with emotion,” says Barel. “It deals with the passion for life, the heroic myth and the victory of the spirit, within the modern world.”

“We often start from a visual idea,” Barel continues. “*Via Dolorosa Now*, for example, started from some Jesus masks which we saw at the festival in Italy. We performed it in Croatia after the director of the festival asked us to bring another show there after *Stones*.”

THAT CROATIA event also spawned an interesting Orto-Da project. “We ran a workshop there based on our acting technique,” says Barel.

Over the company’s 15 years of existence, Tzafir, Zandani Tzafir and Barel have kept the ideas coming, partly driven by the simple need for survival.

“The state obliges us to come up with at least one production a year,” explains Barel. “The Israeli capitalist method used in the arts means that you are judged by quantity, not quality,” adds Tzafir. “We have to put out a show a year to get some funding.”

In fact, the company received approval for substantial funding from the previous government, but the elections and change of personnel at the Culture Ministry put paid to that.

Tzafir and Barel’s paths first crossed 16 years ago at the first Bat Yam Street Festival.

“Yinon did a show from a made-up lifeguard’s station in the middle of the festival area. I taught, and still teach, theater at the Shazar High School in Bat Yam, and we put on a show at the festival. I began to put up signs about the show on Yinon’s lifeguard’s stand. Yinon took them down and we started arguing.”

A few months later, they ran into each other again, at a religious school where Barel taught. “Yinon told me he was putting a street theater company together, asked me if I wanted to join in, and that was that.”

Tzafir and Barel are delighted to have a berth in Tzavta, but say they would be even happier to get more of a helping hand from the powers that be.

“We represent Israel around the world more than any other Israeli theater company there is,” declares Barel, “and all without regular state funding.”

For more information about Orto-Da Theater see [www.orto-da.com](http://www.orto-da.com)