

Forget What You Thought About Sign Language

The show "It's Not About Ebisu" is a unique event in the local theatre scene. Almost all of the actors of the show are deaf and the show is presented in Israeli Sign Language, without any interpreting, but is directed at deaf and hearing alike. Sign language and body movement constitute the essence of the show's plot and set, a show which describes a hero's journey in a mythological way. Nena Bar, an activist and publicist, and a lecturer in the field of deaf culture and sign language, shares her impressions of the show.

The show "It's Not About Ebisu" presents a new and intriguing genre in theatre, a combination of physical-visual theatre and sign language. Sign language and body movement constitute the essence of the show's plot and set, describing a hero's journey in a mythological way.

This is a journey that shatters the myths about deaf culture and sign language with the use of different genres, from Greek mythology to fantasy, comedy, film noir, dance, and goth. Like Lewis Carroll's Alice in Wonderland, through the show, the audience experiences metamorphosis, from low to high, from narrow to wide, from obvious to mystifying, to cunning and twisted.

Good art is meant to confuse us, to make us pause and reevaluate our opinions and beliefs about people and society. In this case, the ignorance and prejudice of hearing people regarding deaf culture and sign language is the subject at hand.

The deaf body is still perceived by the dominant culture as flawed and lacking, and is compared to the "healthy", "proper" entity, the one with a voice. The show "It's Not About Ebisu", in a way, defies this misconception. It creates an independent kind of content, while breaking the boundaries of sign language in space.

Then this show comes along and reveals a whole "other" reality

Like other communities that have experienced oppression (e.g. the LGBT community), the deaf community still struggles for acknowledgment of its identity and language, and its self-worth. As a result of inherent social conceptions, the deaf minority is labeled from birth as inferior and outcast. The community has been forced to abandon sign language in order to be seen with fewer abnormalities, but then this show came along and revealed a whole "other" reality, which celebrates the existence of sign language and frees the body.

To create this kind of show under difficult political and social constraints is a form of rebellion against the ruling order that invalidates the deaf body. In fact, Ebisu goes farther, truer, freer. It generates a new theatre language, and tells stories through body and movement.

Through movement and physical expression, the show conveys meaningful messages that cannot be interpreted into spoken language. This is a show not willing to bend, giving the body presence with the following echoing message: I will not play in your field, my body is not negative, I will take you to my playing field – a different field with different rules of the game and a different means of expression.

A unique journey for every audience

In this field, you (hearing people) will realize what you lack. You are the ones who will be in an "inferior" position, or more to the point, in a position of challenged wonderment, of understanding and not understanding. It evokes a unique journey for every audience. We too, as a deaf audience will experience what is lacking in our lives, which is the existence of Ebisu: A deaf entity which signs spaces, without comparing itself to other entities, and not through negation. One can interpret this creation from different perspectives which might provoke discussions on the body in general, the deaf body in particular, and how it is marked negatively by a monolithic society.

As a deaf viewer, I experienced a very complex feeling of release, freedom, and enjoyment. I use sign language in my everyday life, but this show aroused my body completely. The show is exhilarating, it moves organs in the body, drives you to break the boundaries of the mind and body.

This talented group of actors expresses the show's content and form in a way that's sensual, original and exciting. The body in motion, its throbbing and racing, creating a new body inside me, one that wants to sign more compositions about the world, our body and this life we are living, in sign language. Do not expect to gain only one insight by the show's end, because it leaves many questions about what is "obvious" and built into our social and cultural lives, and about what the eye does not see outside of the theater. What you thought about sign language before the show will not be as it was.

Nena Bar

YNet, October 26, 2016

Translated from Hebrew by Shiri Barnhart and Rose Stamp.

The Ebisu Sign Language Theatre Lab was established as part of a research project, directed by Professor Wendy Sandler, Director of the Sign Language Research Lab at The University of Haifa. The director of the Ebisu theatre group is Atay Citron, Professor of Theatre at The University of Haifa. The research project is supported by the European Research Council



Photo: Yair Mehyuhas.

