



Looking back, looking forward: The 2018 Israel Festival

I SHAKE the dust off the program catalogue of the first Israel Music Festival, as the Israel Festival was called back in 1961, and I read the preface of the organizers, then the Government Tourist Corporation and the Festival Committee:

“With this event Israel joins that family of cultured nations who, through this Festival, have enriched their own musical life and have through the medium of music, made a priceless contribution towards the strengthening of relationships between nation and nation.”

Jump cut to my own preface to the 57th Israel Festival in 2018:

“The program presents art that is in search of its own expression and independence in the face of the present zeitgeist in which we live: the ever exacerbating social and economic divide, national extremism and terror, the erosion of fundamental democratic values and of artistic freedom of expression...”

Some 57 years and hundreds of outstanding performances later, we have moved from holding a festival to join the family of cultured nations, to holding a festival to uphold the values these nations embody.

Indeed, since its establishment by Aharon Zvi Propes, the Festival stood as an extraordinary cultural event that strives for outstanding excellence, while fulfilling other goals such as promoting tourism and cultural exchange diplomacy. These goals are well reflected by the dignitaries who were engaged in the endeavor: Minister of Foreign Affairs Abba Eban was chairman, the honorary Festival presidium included legendary Mayor of Jerusalem Theodore Kollek, Minister of Development and Tourism Moshe Kol, and Minister of Education and Culture Zalman Aranne. Advisers abroad were American violinist and conductor Isaac Stern; Russian-British social and political theorist Sir Isaiah Berlin; Russian-born composer, writer, and cultural figure Nicolas Nabokov; and Swiss composer and music administrator Rolf Liebermann.

The list of artists who supported the Festival in spirit and in music included all the greatest musicians of our times, Leonard Berenstein, Pablo Casals, Itzhak Perlman, Pinchas Zuckerman, Daniel Barenboim, Gregor Piatigorsky, and many, many more.

These were the early days of Israel, as the country celebrated its bar mitzvah, and the young country still basked in the miracle of its being. The art design of the program book is impeccable. The Judeo-Christian Middle Age theme will be the style of the program books for the next dozen annual editions. The ads too are classics: “El Al, the airline of the people of Israel.”

From the outset, the Festival distinguished itself by presenting high-quality, ground-breaking performances by renowned and

emerging artists, introducing Israeli audiences to artistic fare they would not otherwise have a chance to experience. People didn’t travel as much abroad in those days, other cities in Israel were yet to establish their own festivals and impresarios were strictly focused on mainstream fare. The Festival opened a rare and exciting window to the world.

Presenting shows from all corners of the world became the Festival signature and the public attended it en masse, hungry for a peek into other worlds, their music, theater, stories and traditions.

Today, the Festival’s artistic lineup is less a window to the world and more of a window to the soul of our society.

This year, in honor of Israel’s 70th, we specifically turn our attention to the individual, personal identity, definitions and barriers. Are the tools with which we examine and define individualism relevant? How can individual transformation be imagined?

We explore the journey of the individual through both internal and external structures, as they are drawn and immersed into wider contexts devoid of social and political hierarchy. These social and cultural ideas are contemplated through new theatrical languages that often blur the boundaries between disciplines and offer new and surprising viewer perspectives that encourage a spirited dialogue.

Like many festivals around the world, beyond enriching the cultural landscape, the Festival serves as a social and economic catalyst, advancing education and empowering community, encouraging tourism and energizing the economy. But its most important role remains that of “using” culture to create encounter and dialogue, and to highlight universal values of tolerance and understanding.

In the program book of the ninth Festival in 1969, Pablo Casals writes in a heartfelt message of peace: “Music, that wonderful and universal language, which is understood by everyone, should be a source of communication among men. I once again exhort my fellow musicians throughout the world to put the purity of their art at the service of mankind in order to unite all people in fraternal ties.”

These words resonate strongly today, as the Festival continues to present challenging, sometimes provoking materials from around the world, holding strong to the universal principles of artistic freedom and to the role many artists play in dissolving stereotypes of “the other” and breaking down political barriers.

The Festival runs from May 23-June 16 in Jerusalem. I hope you’ll join us. ■

Eyal Sher is CEO of the Israel Festival