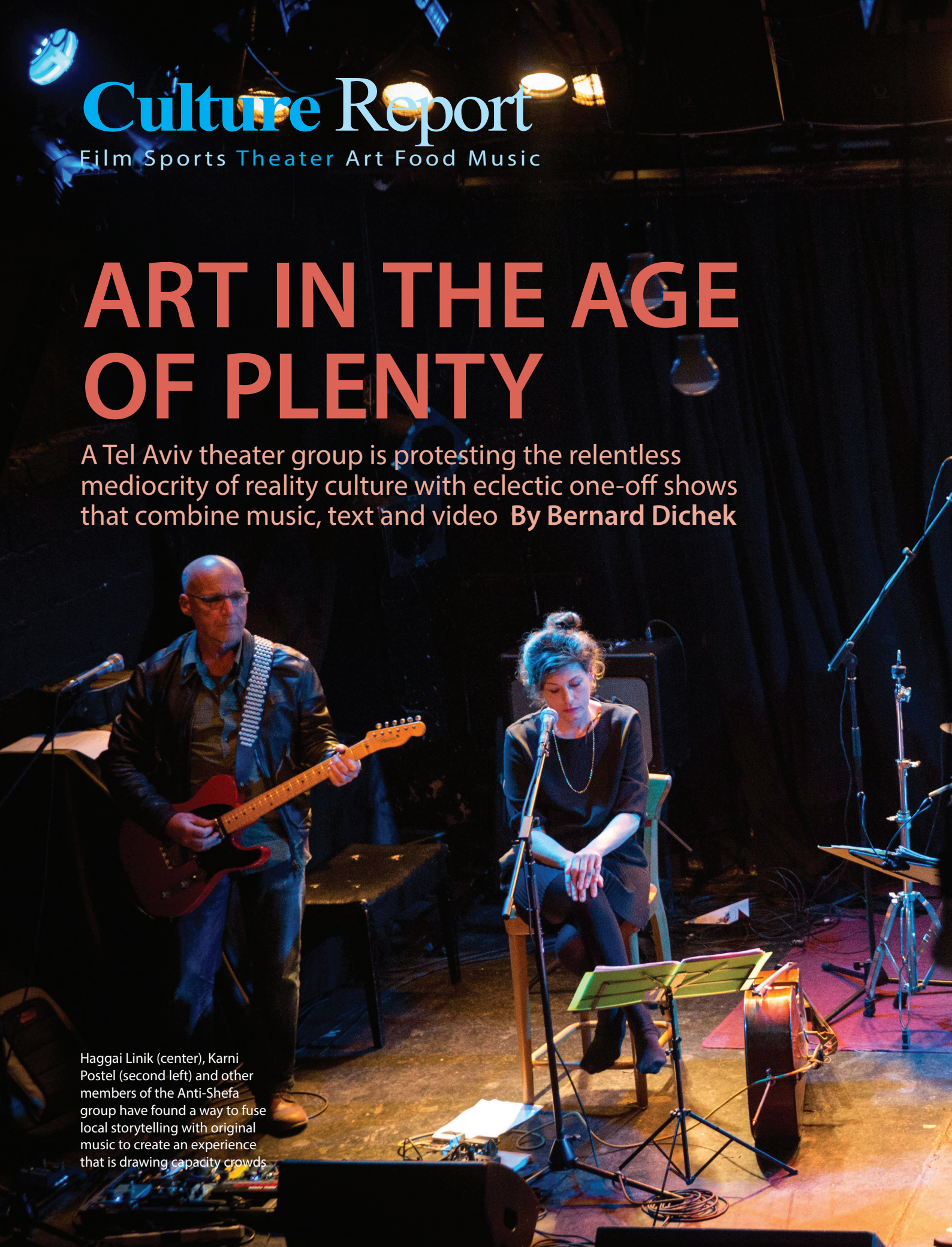


# Culture Report

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## ART IN THE AGE OF PLENTY

A Tel Aviv theater group is protesting the relentless mediocrity of reality culture with eclectic one-off shows that combine music, text and video **By Bernard Dichek**



Haggai Linik (center), Karni Postel (second left) and other members of the Anti-Shefa group have found a way to fuse local storytelling with original music to create an experience that is drawing capacity crowds.







The land in Tel Aviv is not suitable for living, says Vladimir Jabotinsky, speaking in Yiddish in a 1934 film clip that concludes with the Zionist leader suggesting that a plane take a survey of the land in the area. Cut to a scene from Alfred Hitchcock's 1959 film "North by Northwest" in which actor Robert Mitchum drops to the ground to evade a low-flying plane that is trying to knock him down. Then the video screen at Tel Aviv's Tmuna Theater fades to black, the lights go on and writer Haggai Linik, a guitar draped over his shoulders and accompanied by four musicians, walks onto the stage.

Welcome to a performance of Anti-Shefa, a group that is achieving the seemingly impossible – reviving interest in Hebrew writing.

At a time when readership of local authors is at an all-time low – nine of 10 books on the current Israeli best-seller list are translations of foreign, mostly American, authors – and, in an era of emoticon symbols and Snapchat images when reading and writing of any kind of verbal language is under dire threat, along comes a group of modern-day troubadours led by a 58-year-old intellectual that is drawing capacity crowds, including many young people, to performances that are essentially literary readings.

How can this be?

One reason may be the entertaining, often humorous, way Anti-Shefa fuses texts with music and visual images. Another explanation, perhaps, is the novelty of seeing a wide variety of writers, many of whom have never previously appeared on a stage, sharing their enjoyment of the written word with a live audience. But more than anything else, it could be that the group is simply providing something that is hard to find in the barrage of relentless mediocrity that pours over the Internet and TV – quality art.

"I founded Anti-Shefa as a response to the way almost everything done today is ruled by ratings. There is just so much being produced, and what people end up seeing is so heavily influenced by ratings that art stops being art; it just becomes entertainment," laments Linik, a novelist and playwright who was the 2011 recipient of the prestigious Sapir Prize for Literature.

*Shefa* is the Hebrew word for a large

quantity of something, explains Linik, "and if you are against quantity, the implication is that you seek quality."

Linik points out that when ratings replace the role that was traditionally provided by literary critics, "you no longer have a hierarchy. Nothing is good or bad anymore. Books have become just another commodity."

**RELATING TO** the phenomenon of foreign books dominating the shelves of Israeli bookstores, Linik points out that some Israeli writers such as Amos Oz and David Grossman, who can count on having their works translated into English and other languages, actually write with those readers in mind.

"When you have a situation where Israeli writers are writing for foreign audiences while Israeli readers are reading foreign writers, contact between local writers and readers is lost. Without a dialogue between writers and readers, writing loses its Israeli identity," he says.

An attempt to counter this trend can be seen in the March version of Anti-Shefa. The group has produced more than 20 monthly shows, each devoted to a different topic; recent shows were entitled "The Silent Movie," "My German Mother" and "Women." This time, the topic is Tel Aviv.

After the provocative opening of the Jabotinsky and Hitchcock film clips – the connection only becomes clear later on – about a dozen writers and artists take to the stage and read materials relating to Tel Aviv. Some of the readings are original works by the writers themselves, other texts were composed by Linik with the personal background of the presenter in mind, and some are poems or prose pieces written by well-known Israeli writers such as Yoram Kaniuk and Eli Mohar presented by actors.

Linik is quick to point out that Anti-Shefa is not a form of improvisation.

"All of the Anti-Shefa sketches are carefully scripted and backed up by original music, even if they do lack the conventions of a regular theatrical performance, as the connections are associative and poetic," he explains. "It's a bit like sharing the creative process with the audience, letting them see raw material, a work that is about 80 percent finished."

Linik leads off with a poem, accompanied by slides of the sprawling construction going on around Tel Aviv, in which he speculates in a surreal-mystical way about whether or not there is life beneath the surface of Tel Aviv.

He is followed by an eclectic mix of presenters. Itay Meirson, a sports columnist for the Haaretz newspaper, offering an extremely funny piece called "The Spontaneous Celebrator," satirizing the mass hysteria that grips Tel Aviv every time a local team wins a championship. Author Adi Sorek, who has written several novels set in Tel Aviv, follows with a piece based on observing life every morning over the course of a year at Habima Square. Graphic designer and publisher David Tartakover presents a children's book from the 1930s in which German-born illustrator Peretz Ruschkewitz makes Tel Aviv look oddly like Berlin and Tel Avivians resemble Berliners.

A skit performed by Linik and Vietnamese-born poet Sabine Huynh relates to the theme of Tel Aviv as being the first modern city where Hebrew was spoken. It also offers a bit of social commentary about the way many Israelis view people who look different than themselves. The skit is based on recordings made by Huynh while asking Israelis for street directions in Hebrew. Huynh, whose mastery of Hebrew is impeccable, inserts philosophical Hebrew comments into her queries, yet the respondents pay no attention to what she is saying and keep on talking to her in broken English.

By the time actor Michael Koresh has regaled the audience with a humorous account of the subtle differences of the Hebrew slang words for wow – *walla*, *achla* and *sababa* – and Tel Aviv Mayor Ron Huldai has made a cameo appearance, the meaning of the opening Jabotinsky segment has crystallized: look at how far Tel Aviv has come from the days when Zionists spoke Yiddish and doubted the viability of the first Hebrew city.

As carefully scripted as the Anti-Shefa readings may be, none would have the impact they do were it not for the original music that accompanies each selection. The melodies are all composed and arranged by Ovad Efrat, a music producer whose long

career includes working with leading Israeli singers such as Chava Alberstein, Ehud Banai and Rita, as well as composing the soundtracks of several feature films. Efrat, who plays the guitar himself, is also one of Anti-Shefa's onstage musicians.

Efrat's friendship with Linik spans four decades, going back to the days when Linik himself was an aspiring musician playing jazz in Tel Aviv and later studying at Berklee College of Music in Boston. It was during his overseas musical studies that Linik first entertained the idea of becoming a writer.

"I kept getting strong reactions from people in Israel who were reading my letters. Then, when I came back to Israel, I worked on a play with my brother Doron who is an actor," recalls Linik. In addition to writing, Linik today also teaches at Jerusalem's post-secondary writing school known as Poetry Place.

**"WRITING ISN'T** really something that can be taught," says Linik, pointing out that he believes that serious writing is inextricably linked to memory and the ability to bring things out of it. "The question is how courageous you are going to be in dealing with your memories. Many people simply try to beautify their memories and the result ends up as nothing more than cosmetic makeup."

Utilizing the emotional attachment Linik has to his memories is an approach that has served him well in both his novel writing and in his choice of topics for Anti-Shefa.

His novel "Prompter Wanted" ("Lachshan Darush"), which won him the prestigious Sapir Prize for Literature in 2011, addresses how a bereaved family with six sons deals with the loss of the oldest, who is killed during his military service. Linik, as it happens, comes from a family of German descent with six sons. He is the youngest; the oldest died during his military service.

"My German Mother" began with light-hearted anecdotes from Linik's Tel Aviv childhood. "My parents spoke German at home, and when we wanted to hear another language, we went to the corner grocery store where they spoke Yiddish."

Another humorous sketch offered a fictionalized account of Linik inquiring about obtaining a German passport from the German Embassy. After Linik inadvertently

offends the embassy clerk, both he and the clerk outdo each other with politeness and feelings of accusation and guilt.

"Because of the way in which Haggai's stories touch upon emotions, there is always something universal in them," says Karni Postel, an Anti-Shefa member who is both a singer and cellist. "His 'German mother' was certainly a mother that I could relate to even though my family background is very different.

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Postel is a seasoned veteran of the Israeli music industry whose cello virtuosity is featured in the concerts and recordings of leading performers such as Shlomo Artzi.

"Haggai knows how to use Hebrew words in a deep way that sometimes make you happy and sometimes make you cry. The texts really give me a chance to bring myself into them and interpret them through music creatively," she comments.

When asked if she would categorize Anti-Shefa as fringe theater or avant-garde art, Postel is reluctant to use either label.

"It's more like something that opens up a window for people. I know it has for me. The written word may not be what it used to be and many people seldom open books anymore, but Anti-Shefa seems to be part of something new that is evolving."

One aspect of what makes Anti-Shefa a new art form, suggests Noa Segal, is the fact that each performance is a one-time event.

"We get the material a few days before each show and rehearse it. But every show is unique. It only happens once," says Segal, who is the group's percussionist. "I have to admit, though, that I sometimes wake up the morning after a show with the words and melody of something performed the day before running through my mind and it saddens me to realize that I won't have the chance to hear that combination again."

Segal, who is also a songwriter and is studying educational psychology, says

working with Anti-Shefa has helped widen her understanding of many topics.

"I remember when we did a show on the subject of women, there were some descriptions of feelings and ideas expressed that I had felt before but had never been able to put into words," says Segal, referring to a piece presented by Sigal Ben-Yair, the editor of the women's magazine *At (You)*. "She talked about the differences between working in a milieu that has both men and women and a work environment in which there are only women. This is something that I had felt before but only after Sigal put it into words did it sink in."

Like Postel and Segal, Anti-Shefa bass guitarist Or Edry is thriving on the exposure she is getting to new poetry and ideas.

"You never know what is coming from one show to the next," she says, adding that she has started to read more poetry.

Edry singles out the evening the group devoted to the poetry of Moti (Mordechai) Galili as having many poems that especially touched her.

"One of Galili's poems 'Kiviti Lemichtav' ('I Was Hoping for a Letter'), starts out as a seemingly romantic story. Later, it becomes very moving when you realize it is a letter he has been searching for that his mother left for him, after her death by suicide."

Edry is about to release her own first record album, a compilation of songs written over several years.

"Now, I'm eager to get started on my next one because the exposure Anti-Shefa has given me to so many new texts has given me the feeling that I don't need to be afraid to write about all kinds of new things."

Anti-Shefa has been running its monthly shows for more than two and a half years, yet, although it has created a faithful following, the number of spectators it attracts is dwarfed by those attending productions at larger venues such as Tel Aviv's Habima Theater. Linik, however, doesn't have his eyes on numbers.

"It's not just audiences that are getting a new experience, many writers have told me that engaging with the public through Anti-Shefa has also opened up a new experience for them."

He hopes to eventually take the show on the road. ■