

# The common thread

By ROCHELLE FURSTENBERG  
IN THE NEW Habimah production, *The Workshop*, the biographies of its Israeli director, Michal Guvrin and its French playwright Jean-Claude Grumberg come together in a confluence of Jewish identity and the theatre.

The play, whose title in the original is *L'Atelier*, is about a Jewish woman who works as a seamstress in a small garment factory in Paris, one of the many set up by Jews in little apartments after World War II. The mother of two children, she still nourishes the hope that her husband will return from deportation.

The workroom becomes a microcosm of life in France after the war. It portrays the traumas of Jews coming back to piece their lives together much as they piece together the lining, the sleeves, the buttons for the jackets they produce. It reflects the web of guilt and misunderstanding with which Jews receive their fellow survivors and the difficulties of Jews and Frenchmen working side by side again. But it also embraces the humour, warmth and conflict of all human situations. It is the story of playwright Jean-Claude Grumberg's mother.

Grumberg, who was in Israel for the previews of the play, described his background.

"My father was taken away by the Germans in 1943, while my brother and I were smuggled by a nun to the south of France. My mother hid in Paris. After the war we were reunited with my mother, but my father had died in a Nazi transport. I don't remember my father. Mother rarely spoke of him and possibly the play is a way of dealing with his absence. He is not on stage; he exists only in his

absence. Perhaps the play is also a way of grappling with, and trying to understand, my mother's situation in those determining years of our lives.

It portrays the workroom where she lived, for it was there, at work, that she lived more than anywhere else. There she could talk about her children, her husband's absence, her desires, her sexual privations. As a child I was always aware that this was the most important place for her."

THE MILD, scholarly-looking Grumberg has an intimate knowledge of these tailors' workrooms, and not only through his mother's experience. From the age of 14 to 18 he himself worked in such places to help the family make ends meet.

"Because he was a child of the Holocaust, Grumberg's personal story is integrally tied to that of the Jewish people.

"The memory of Jewish genocide," he said "is becoming the common bond between Jews. It is replacing Israel as the focus of identity. All Jews have recently been made to share in European history. But it is hard to write authentically about the Holocaust itself." It is because of this that Grumberg's plays about the Holocaust deal with either the advent of the catastrophe or its aftermath, but never with the horror itself.

MICHAL GUVRIN, director of the Habimah production, is a tall, blond, highly intellectual and versatile woman. A lecturer on the history of the theatre at the Hebrew University, she is the author of a recently-published volume of poems *That Hour*, and has translated and directed many works, including

Mirosek's *The Immigrants*, Beckett's *Marciel and Camiel*, and an adaptation of *Shaharit*, the morning service. Like Jean-Claude Grumberg, she is a child of Holocaust survivors.

We met at her parents' home in Tel Aviv after a gruelling rehearsal.

"My mother," she said, in her deep-voiced direct way, "was my model for the heroine of *The Workshop*. I used to hear a great deal about the period after the war when my parents came to Israel. Even here they were received with suspicion and bitterness. They weren't able to relate what had happened. No one wanted to hear what they had experienced.

"This period after the war particularly interests me, this grey period. It helps me understand why people are the way they are and not otherwise. I think it is also important to expose Israeli audiences to what the Jews of the Diaspora experienced, to the complexities of the Diaspora.

The family backgrounds of the Israeli, Michal Guvrin, and the Frenchman, Jean-Claude Grumberg, have sent both of them in quest of Jewish historical perspective, in search of self-definition.

For Grumberg, as a Diaspora Jew, the sociological definition seems primary, the Sartrean definition of Jewishness as imposed by the outside world, by the somewhat uneasy situation of Jews in France, and, most important, by the memory of the Holocaust.

As an Israeli, Michal has no problem of socio-political identity. But she has been driven by a parallel need to take her congenital self-definition and follow it through to a deeper understanding of Judaism. She has, in her own words, "gone in quest of meaning and structure in



Yael Drunayov, Miki Kamm and Shmulik Segal in "*The Workshop*."

exploring Jewish sources."

And like Grumberg, she has done it through theatrical creativity. In contrast to some of the theatre people, who turned their back on the theatre as they became more involved in Judaism, Guvrin has used her understanding of the meaning of theatre to delve into the investigation of Jewish sources.

Having studied theatre at Tel Aviv University, Michal Guvrin perceived Judaism in generalizations applicable to the dramatic arts. Why did Judaism have no theatre in the Western sense? How were Jews able to express their pent-up emotions?

She began to study the matter. Because she received no encouragement in Israel, she went to Paris to do her doctorate on contemporary religious theatre, the connection between ritual and modern theatre with emphasis on the theatrical aspect of Hassidism.

Michal Guvrin can be seen as part of the new movement in Israeli drama which seeks to return to Jewish sources.

Rooted in the defining memory of the Holocaust, the French playwright and the Israeli director have joined sensibilities in *The Workshop* to create a memorable experience.