Song of the Transparent [Woman] Conductor

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The exhibition “Requiem for the Conductor” juxtaposes two orchestras, two stages, and two conductors. To be more precise, one stage is the forefront and the second is in the rear; one orchestra is musical, the other domestic; there is a male conductor on the front stage and a woman conducting the “backstage” area.

The exhibition is a kind of collage of images, journal entries, and a film creating a kind of counterpoint forming an encounter between all of the aforementioned components.

The film opens with a trumpet solo from Mahler’s *Fifth Symphony;* in the background are the conductor’s hands in motion. This is an exciting moment of encounter between a musical solo and a movement solo: the conducting hands hold the same awe and deep sorrow that the trumpet carries in this passage. This solo concretizes the loneliness of the solo instrument more than any other solo I know. This is the loneliness of the conductor who stands alone, leading the orchestra, yet who always remains outside of, a feeling apparently shared by the male conductor and the female conductor – father and daughter.

Immediately after this “overture,” Orit Bertini Shavit enters the photographed frame holding a suitcase, seats herself on the floor inside of a painted circle, whips her father’s baton out of the suitcase, and waves it while in the background the Rinat Choir is singing. In the first row, Rosette Bertini, the artist’s mother, can be identified as one of the singers. This is the first parallel between daughter and father, between the woman conductor and the male conductor, each controlling his/her own orchestra, as well as constituting the negative of each other in many senses. “I came directly from Frankfurt to Leipzig, here I am conducting a famous orchestra…Watch over the home, I, of course, am counting on you,” he wrote her in one of the postcards she reads out loud.

The order dispatching the daughter to conduct the domestic orchestra in his absence reappears many times in the various images comprising the exhibition, many of them between father and daughter in the context of the status of the male conductor. This parallel is emphasized at a specific moment in the film in which the father’s movements as he is conducting are very similar to dance movements, followed by numerous images of Orit dancing which “invade” the picture frame. The variations include stills and video, her image made of paper cutouts. Throughout, the movements of father and daughter on the backdrop of the music are matching and astonishingly identical. The parallelism also stands out in the image in which the young girl is seen hovering in a dance movement underneath the figure of

the father conductor: their movements are similar, but one figure is in the forefront and the other is located underneath.

In one image, the father/conductor is dressed in a raincoat with the sea in the background; the daughter/conductor stands facing him, seemingly acting as his reflection as both are conducting. The story written by hand over one of the images describes an opera performance at which Orit sat directly behind her father as he was conducting. As usual, she gives priority to his music over her fatigue. Here what stands out is how she placed herself as “the conductor behind the conductor.” She is the one in whose hand the backstage conductor’s baton was deposited, the one who on one hand can be onstage but on the other hand must remain shaded and missing from the front stage applause.

“This is an enchanted world,” Gary Bertini states at one moment in the film. “Something artistic becomes a truth greater than actual truth. After all, this is the goal of art. It should arouse in us things that are greater, deeper, and more meaningful than day-to-day reality.” However, this enchanted world grabs hold of him with great force, a foreign power drawing him again and again from mundane reality towards what is beyond it.

At this moment, it is difficult to miss the similarity between Bertini and his statements with the character of Hananel the Violinist in Natan Alterman’s play, *Inn of Spirits,* for which Bertini himself composed the music in 1962. In one of the drama’s unforgettable scenes, the Innkeeper [a woman] turns to Hananel and states, “The monk’s power does not lie in his abstaining from something, but in his abstention for something.

Innkeeper: Now I know, Monk, to whom you belong [she points to the violin]. To it, correct?

Hananel: Correct, Innkeeper.

Innkeeper: Nevertheless, be very careful of it. It can take your life.

Hananel: I will give it my life, Innkeeper.

Innkeeper: What shall you receive from it in return?

Hananel: My life, Innkeeper

Innkeeper: And you are willing to suffer all of the suffering in the world on its behalf, correct?

Hananel: Correct, Innkeeper.

Innkeeper: And what shall you receive from it for this?

Hananel: Everything in the world, Innkeeper.

What is at stake is not the concrete world compared to the world of art, but life vs. death of the soul. Hananel, like Bertini, is willing to give his life for music since he receives his life from it. But the barter has its price. In one of the

postcards read out loud in the film, Bertini writes to his daughter: “The city is grey, the sky is low, the hotel large and foreign, and I am missing the atmosphere of home more and more. The work is quite good, there are moments of satisfaction, and actually one must not complain. But the price is too high.” Towards the conclusion of *Inn of Spirits,* the Impresario says to Hananel: “Say its name – ‘the world of art’- is that an invalid name?” Hananel responds: “No! Each of the two words holds a big truth, but together – the combination evokes the world of spirits…”

To a great extent, the film and the two rooms on each side with pictures do indeed engage in the difficulty of combining “art” with “the world,” but refer even more to the way they are split within the small nuclear family. “Meanwhile, use a bit of your psychological talents towards those who are close to you and around you…” Bertini writes to Orit. She does not read this line out loud, but the words hover in front of the picture frame as she reads the continuation: “These psychological skills are your conductor’s baton, your way to continue extracting your music from the orchestra I placed with you.”

“I learned very early on how to hover on my tiptoes like a ghost, not to make any noise, not to be seen,” writes Orit on one of the images appearing in her workspace. Indeed, Bertini himself writes: “The conductor’s baton does not make music, it is utterly quiet. The musicians make the music […] the baton is an extension of the conductor’s arm which in turn constitutes an extension of the conductor’s thoughts and heart, conveying the meaning of the music to the players and the listeners, thus assisting in creating the complicated, wondrous relationship of composer-performer-audience.” He therefore considers the baton as something which is simultaneously the most important element and the most transparent, within the performed musical composition: it is at once center stage and backstage. When it is at its best, the composer-performer-audience connection seems to take place by itself without effort and without any external intervention.

This is especially interesting in the context of the role he assigned to his daughter as conductor. According to her own testimony, she remains a conductor, but a secret, transparent one, connecting all of the instruments and the voices, bur remaining concealed within the fabric, unheard and invisible. In this sense, the exhibition can be seen not only as a requiem or a reference to the work of mourning, but as a gesture of resistance as well. It is impossible to fail to see the transition it facilitates through its contents and its very existence, enabling her to move from the position of the transparent [woman] conductor to the position of the “winner” – the identical word for “musical conductor” in Hebrew. She is the one who renews her demands. It is here that she creates her life, her ability to move and her voice by means of the rich counterpoint she forms in the exhibition.