

## Writing in a Country at War

By Boaz Gaon (Israel)

In Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*, the protagonist Dr. Thomas Shtockman is elated, ecstatic almost, when it is confirmed that the waters of the local baths are indeed contaminated and that no solution remains but to shut down the factories responsible and pay the necessary price - in resources, political gain or pride – to save the lives of the town's inhabitants. In the beginning, to Dr. Shtockman – the same Shtockman who ends the play on the verge of being lynched by a screaming mob – the mere possibility that his audience would much prefer to continue bathing in poisonous waters is unthinkable.

As a writer who's been writing in a country in a permanent state of war since I first learned to write, and as a playwright who took on the daunting task of adapting Ibsen's 19<sup>th</sup> century classic to the pollution-riddled Israeli desert of 2012 - I don't buy that.

There is no elation in delivering hard truths to audiences who "do not want to hear it", nor is there innocence. Writers in Israel, and I suspect elsewhere, know when they are crossing the line. The line beyond which lie danger, screaming mobs and potential violence.

Our duty as writers is to cross that line.

Our privilege as writers, is to do so not by being patronizing – as Dr. Shtockman did, eventually comparing his town's people to dogs who needed to be put out of their misery – but by entering hearts and inviting audiences to enter the hearts of others.

To me, that is our dual obligation as Writers at War: 1) To cross lines across which dangers lay, and 2) To touch hearts.

The first without the other is provocation. The second without the first is evasive, comforting and polluted, like the baths in Mr. Ibsen's play, which in our adaptation became drinking water. We did this to emphasize that in our town, at this time, no one was free – not even the writer – from committing daily rituals of conscious suicide. All under the pretext of "nothing can be done" and the "situation is insoluble".

Which brings us to the final question of "what should writing be", when "days are measured in units of life and death", especially when the writer himself is "safe".

In a country at permanent war, such as Israel, writers are seldom safe – nor should they be. They are part of their communities, "flesh within the same flesh" as we say in Hebrew, and it is my humble opinion that we should be exposed to the same dangers as our audiences. We should also be willing to pay the price of engaging with audiences who "do not want to hear it" since we, unlike other writers of the region, do not face immediate arrest, imprisonment or torture.

But there is another danger, which I must acknowledge – that of losing faith in the audiences' desire or ability to change for the better; which directly leads to a bigger danger which is losing the will to write, since there is "no meaningful audience to engage with".

"Words are meaningless", says Said to his wife Saffiyah in another adaptation of mine, that of Ghassan Kanafani's brilliant *The Return to Haifa*.

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I chose to believe the contrary.

I chose to believe it is my duty as a writer in a time of war and occupation to not lose hope and to always remember that there are people who stand to gain power or money or a polluted peace of mind if I stop crossing lines, or touching hearts.

The question of influence is not mine to judge, nor is it guaranteed that the desired change will happen in my lifetime. Or in the words of the Jewish *Perkey Avot*, in *Chapters of the Fathers*: "It is not incumbent upon you to complete the work - but neither are you at liberty to desist from it".