**Thoughts and reflections throughout the process of creating "Gila"
by Galit Liss**

**The article was published in:**

"Dorot Magazine" (Israel's leading publication for professionals in gerontology and related fields) September 2010.
"The Dance Magazine of Israel" 21, 2012. "Shirat Hamada" (The Poetry of Science), Weizmann Institute of Science, 2013.

**“You look at the face of a child or a young woman, it might be pretty, but they never tell you what they have been through. Only with old age you can see, almost graphically, what this person went through. By looking at the wrinkles, you can see and sense whether this character is happy or sad. With each person the wrinkles develop differently, the sensation is written within the face, expressing one's personality1”.**

I chose to open my article with this quote by the painter Ruth Schloss, taken from an interview I conducted with her at her house which is also her studio, while she was surrounded by huge portraits of old people. She was 84 years old at the time.

Her words were a source of inspiration for me in creating my performance *Gila*, or as I called it when I first began working on it, “I went searching for the beauty in old age”.

The participants in this performance are women in their 70's and 80's, some of them are professional actresses whom have appeared on stage in Israel and abroad – Hanna Rieber, Miri Lerman-Be'er, Miriam Gavrieli, and Ruth Geler – and some of them are women with no theatrical background, who were full of brave and curious enough to take this journey – Ruth Ben Israel (Israel Prize laureate for the Research of Law, 2001) and Thelma Dim (a piano teacher who decided to explore acting and movement in her mid-60's).

On the stage there are five women of impressive vitality and maturity. Through the use of movement, video, acting, music and life stories they touch and explore questions existentialism – How do we define ourselves? What is it that makes us old, or young? What is it, the feeling of old age? Do our social norms regarding old age and its esthetics still apply?

Whenever I talk about this performance, the same question arises - what led “a young woman like me” to choose such a subject. The answer is related to two people who are dear to me – my late grandmother and brother. My beloved grandmother - a strong woman who survived terrible hardships during the Holocaust, yet her face was always bright with optimism. She was a woman who chose life!
During my last visit to the nursing home, I found her in a wheelchair, her body and face inert. She looked like a lifeless object wrapped in skin, as if her soul were no longer there. It was suddenly clear to me that she had chosen to stop living.
I was ten years old then.

This memory returned in its entirety 10 years ago, when my younger brother died of cancer at the age of 30. It was meaningful to watch as he came to terms not only with his disease but with himself and the kind of life that he wanted to live. This made me question what it means to be alive. Are we responsible for the way we live? What does it mean, “To live”?

I felt that through the lens of old age these questions could be expressed.

Working with old age has helped me shed light on the question of “choice” and its effect on the way people choose to lead and spend their lives, including their old age. By dealing with the topic of old age, I am in fact dealing with the question of life. The challenge was to bring those issues to the stage and to represent them through artistic aspects.

I entered the studio with many questions and no clear path ahead. We watched, listened and let the body move and the stories flow. The materials evolved through working together with the women.

Throughout the artistic process I tried to remain as loyal as possible to the reality of the participants, by means of their personal stories. This reality, however, raises universal questions about coping with life and old age. I was interested in investigating the different energy that comes with old age, the depth and life experience of a mind which is mature and a body that is rich in years.

The performance begins and ends with a confrontation between life and death. They can be understood in the terms of a framework, the circle of life; or there could be no such framework, as death may not be the end. Old age is a point of connection between the two, and it can be tilted to either life or death – either way, they both have a crucial impact on one's behavior.

The multiple events that occur in this circle of life simultaneously reflect both the difficulties of old age and the possible ways of coping with it. The theatrical work alternates between building this framework and blurring it, offering a variety of perspectives which may be chosen by each individual as their personal coping mechanism.

Thus, on stage, in one part of the performance, one of the women goes on stage and dances to the Rebetiko music played in Greek Tavernas – a place full of lust, passions and desires. As she dances, she tells a personal story describing her passion for life. The piece ends with the following words: “My children are really embarrassed when I get up to dance. ‘Mother stop, sit down!’ But my grandchildren shout: 'Dance grandma, grandma dance!”

The grandmother chooses to listen to the grandchildren who ask her to go on dancing, and not to the “grownups”, the agents of rationality. She chooses to follow emotion, to follow life. The grandchildren represent pure internal attunement, free of social norms, the place from which also emanates passion – the desire for life.

Aging takes place within the social context. The old man must cope with his identity on two levels – in relations to himself on a personal level, and in relation to the identity which is constructed around him by society; the latter isn’t necessarily in accordance with his own feelings3. This confusion in identity is presented in "Gila" in the external manifestation – the aesthetics of the aging body; the physical manifestation – in its performance; and an internal manifestation – in the mature woman’s spirit and mind.

The dissonances between the various artistic elements that make up the full picture are illustrated on the stage.

During one of the segments of the performance, a woman is casually walking to the center of the stage, drawing a circle on the floor. She enters the circle to perform her daily morning exercises to balance the body, which require complex coordination.

While doing this, the audience hear the following text in the background:

“Old age comes to us from the outside. We are brainwashed by society and we accept the verdict, we do not fight. I am fighting, you don’t know how hard. I feel like Don Quixote. It happens at the grocery store, when they look right through as if you were thin air and they don’t serve you. The same things happens at the greengrocer as well as other shops. It happened to me more than once that some blond-haired, big breasted knockout came in, and the shop assistant left me with all the products in my hands, and went to serve her. I walk out from those and never went back in there again.

 There was this one time I almost beat the hell out of a cab driver. I gave him such a scolding, I don’t even remember what I said to him. It started when he commented on something when I entered the cab and I did my best not to respond. But when I finally did, he said: ‘Oh, so you can still hear?’”

The text describes the gap between society’s stereotypical negative attitude toward old people, and its disregard to their existence, and the old person’s inner feelings while confronting society. As opposed to the text, the woman’s movement, however, expresses acceptance. She seems to say – I am here just as I am, either I fall or I manage to remain on my feet. The balancing exercises and movement reveal the woman on stage in all her glory, on account of her humanity and fragility– it is a moment of physical honesty, as we see her legs shake and the expression of concentration on her face. She does not give up, she fights for her honor; the circle she draws on the stage is an act of setting boundaries and marking her territory, as if to protest that old people are denied their rights, the rights for a dignified life4.

The language of movement in "Gila" consists of structured sentences, composed of daily gestures, movements, and improvisation. Parts of the improvisation are derived from the participants’ inner sensations, while parts of it are based on an extensive imagery world of emotions, moments in life, physical images and more.

This language accentuates each woman’s identity as an individual, especially as none of them are professional dancers, so each has a dance vocabulary that is entirely her own. Furthermore, the way these allegedly old women move on stage demonstrates their physical abilities, which is my way of doubting the physical limitations generally attributed to old age.

Towards the end of the performance, the participants advance in a way which is resembling a fashion show’s runway in pronounced slow motion, but this fashion show does not display the normative ideal of beauty; it exhibits the mind and spirit of these older ladies, paying full respect to their wrinkles.
Side-by-side with the physical process of the body’s betrayal there is a psycho-physical aesthetics. What inspired me here were Schloss’s depictions of the elderly age and Gideon Ofrat’s book, *"Patterns of Beauty:* Conversations with a Dwarf". Ofrat examines the concept of beauty and defines it as a combination of physical features and an internal spiritual energy5. In the book, a woman tells her elderly companion: “As you age, you become more beautiful”, and continues to speak of the “spirit” or the “inner light”, an “inner harmony” or “wisdom” illuminating his character and contributing to its beauty6.

This approach led me to a similar point of view towards old age, while I added the kinetic dimension. Schloss states that emotions are written in the face; I claim it is not just the face but also written in the body and movement. The face, body and movement constitute an assemblage which together expresses the individual’s personality. Strengthening this approach can be found in Moshe Barasch’s book, "Imago Hominis: Studies in the Language of Art", which claims that life experiences and personal traits are not definite, but transient; still, while experienced, they fill the man up and are manifested in each movement and reflected in each expression. These experiences are often the hallmarks of the character. According to Barasch, the art that wishes to express such experiences must set itself aesthetic values that are different from those obeying pure harmony within clear and normative rules and relationships7.

The perspective through which I chose to respond to old age in "Gila" reflects the way each of these women, as an individual with her own wealth of experiences, leads her life. Their personal history is written into their faces and bodies; their beauty derives from it. This is a basic pattern of observation that this performance wishes to offer.

This artistic process would not have been possible, without the full involvement of the women. It was a highly emotional road, filled with personal and interpersonal challenges. I discovered their immense passion for creating art. For more than a year, they attended rehearsals three times a week. They were exposed to a new language – the language of movement, and I could follow the improvement in their ability to learn movement, as well as to adjust to changes; their range of motion also increased. As an ex-dancer, I am well familiar with the spiritual elevation which takes place when the body and mind are in tune, but on this artistic journey I had a chance to witness an amazing process, in which the mature body elevates the mind, charging it with vitality.

I am deeply thankful for these wonderful women, my creative partners, for their presence, for their vitality, for their wisdom, for showing me the power of choosing life and for showing me the true nature and beauty of old age. They taught me a new perception of time, they taught me to value the patience, attention and honesty that allowed me to give birth to "Gila".

I will end this article with the big question: Can art make a difference? I do not know the answer. I can only say that from the very beginning of "Gila", the audience alternates between laughter and tears, responding with strong emotion and empathy to the women moving on stage and to what they represent. In Hebrew, the name "Gila" is derived from the word "Gil", meaning "Age" thus reflecting the spirit of those who choose to dance life at any age. Gila is also the Hebrew word for “happiness”, and contains the same root as the word “discovery” (Giluy) – which are fundamental elements for a vital life.