



The show that finds laughs in a suicide bombing

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By Anne Sebba

‘Just imagine, paying someone to make a document saying you are Jewish. When in history is this happening? Never, never,’ says Svetlana, a blowsy Russian prostitute.

‘But in St Petersburg we pay a guy to make document that says we are Jewish. Is funny.’

Is very funny. So funny in fact that Svetlana has amused 100 diplomats at a special appearance at the United Nations headquarters in New York. So funny that she is coming to Edinburgh’s Fringe Festival next month.

Svetlana is one of the characters in a one-woman show called *Dai (Enough)*, written and performed by the extraordinarily multi-talented Israeli-American, Iris Bahr. Bahr is a writer, actress, stand-up comedian and former medical student currently enjoying huge success with her first book as well as her solo show.

Originally scheduled for four performances only, *Dai* was immediately snatched up for a five-month off-Broadway run. The production was nominated for two 2007 New York Drama Desk awards, including best solo performance, only to be beaten by Vanessa Redgrave.

‘Well, she needed recognition,’ says Bahr compassionately.

Bahr’s talent is to observe carefully and then to extract humour and humanity in the most dire of situations. *Dai* is set in a bustling Tel Aviv cafe just before a suicide bomber enters. The audience gets to understand the fears, eccentricities, hopes and failures of each of the characters in what turns out to be their final moments of life. Even the American evangelist or the right-wing settler has redeeming features. Bahr won’t be drawn as to which character is her favourite and insists she likes playing them all, which she does with the help of nothing more than a different shirt and hat and an amazing array of voices.

The one that most closely resembles Bahr herself is Rebecca, a young American orphan who came to Israel, volunteered for the army and eventually finds two long-lost relatives. But the most important character of all is, of course, the splintered psyche of Israel.

‘This is not about trying to make a political statement,’ Bahr insists. ‘But of course it is political,’ she admits in the next breath, just by virtue of it being set in Israel.

‘I cannot bear over-simplification, just because it is easier for people to digest. I am trying to explore humanity and explain the complexities of the situation. But there has to be humour and entertainment too, otherwise you might as well go to a lecture.’

One of Bahr’s most successful creations is Svetlana, who has emerged from *Dai* to develop a new, independent life. She explains that she came to Israel from Russia ‘because the men don’t smell like vodka and the coffee is fantastic... I hear under the macho bullshit the men are very tender.’ She gets a big laugh when she describes how her Russian husband, Maksim, refers to her vagina as a highway. The rest of the

act is unprintable but very funny.

The effect Svetlana and the other characters have on an audience is so powerful that Gilad Cohen, spokesperson for the Permanent Mission of Israel to the United Nations, arranged for Bahr to give a special performance of Dai in front of an invited audience of diplomats last month, hosted by the Israeli ambassador at the UN. "It's a non-traditional means of addressing the fight against global terrorism," he explained. "The UN is the main arena for discussions about terror. It's where resolutions are formed. But although we have dozens of speeches on the subject, how much do we really understand about the root causes or how ordinary people get caught up in killing?" No Arab diplomats attended the show, although they were invited, but representatives from Indonesia and Pakistan, which do not have diplomatic relations with Israel, were there.

"This was very important for me," says Bahr. "Israel doesn't exactly have a lot of friends in the UN and I was nervous of the reactions. One of the characters in the play is a German furniture designer who pitilessly states how tired he is of everyone in Israel 'going on' about the Holocaust.

"I was a bit worried about how the German ambassador would take this, but he told me afterwards he was really moved by Dai."

Bahr was born in New York and went to an Orthodox Jewish school in the Bronx where she learnt Hebrew. But her parents — her father is a banker, her mother a university registrar, both originally Bulgarian — were not Orthodox. "So I guess that's where my own splintered identity began. I'd be a devout believer by day and go to McDonald's in the evening."

When she was about 12, her parents divorced and Bahr moved to Israel with her mother. "And that was strange, too, because I spoke Hebrew with an American accent and found all the Israeli kids hated God."

Settling in a new country was just one challenge she had to face. Another involved her brother. "My older brother was severely autistic so I have been around mentally challenged people all my life. I guess this motivated me without my realising it. It keeps you grounded."

Bahr did two years' military service in the Israeli army, as a sergeant, then travelled around Asia (a journey that provided the subject for her recently published book, *Dork Whore: My Travels as a Twenty Year-Old Pseudo-Virgin*).

After Asia, she went to Brown University, in the United States, where, in addition to theatre, she studied neuro-psychology. She moved on to do cancer research at Tel Aviv University. But after graduating, she moved to New York and focused on acting and writing. No longer as devout as she once was, she says she still goes to synagogue occasionally. "But I keep my religion inside me now. It's become more of an internal thing."

Single and in her early thirties, she leads a crazy life shuttling between New York and LA, where she has a small house, cats and what she calls a mini-kibbutz. "I grow tomatoes, have an herb garden and apricot tree and I do my writing here. It's the most productive place for me, like a retreat. I'm less distracted than in New York. Israel, although I haven't lived there for 10 years, that's home."

Most days she works as an actor in a variety of television and film roles. She has a film in development in New York, based on an earlier solo show. She is writing another book. As if that is not enough, she says she would like to direct her own play. "It gets kinda lonely doing a one-woman performance as there's no one else to talk to in the dressing room. Emotionally, this is a very big show for me. Every performance I give my heart out to it."

Dai will run from August 1-27 at the Pleasance Courtyard (0131 556 6550) as part of the Edinburgh Fringe

Snapshot Iris Bahr

Born: New York. Also known as Iris Bar-Ziv

Career highlights: Appeared in the off-Broadway musical *Jews and Jesus* in 1998. Television appearances include *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, *Friends* and *Star Trek Voyager*. Her short film, *The Unchosen Ones*, which

marked her directorial debut, was screened at the Cannes film festival in 2005

On growing up the Orthodox child of secular Jewish parents: "The hardest thing was missing the Young Israel Jewish Centre weekly Shabbas event because my family was too busy dragging me to Manhattan to eat pork"

On the possibility of co-existence between Israelis and Palestinians: "I hope so. Otherwise you get a defeatist attitude that can be a self-fulfilling prophecy. It only takes a few extremists to ruin it for everybody"