

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Entertainment for the soul

By HELEN KAYE

No wonder the audience falls in love at once. He's a gorgeous hunk with green eyes and a dimple. She's stunning with a sheaf of blonde hair and a heart-melting smile. They are Eliran Caspi and Irena Shulman, the stars and only actors in the Nephesh (Soul) Theater English-language production of Yitzhak Meshel's *Make Yourself at Home* directed by Howard Rypp. And the credit for hiring this toothsome two-some also goes to him.

Rypp is the founding artistic director of the independent Nephesh Theater, and he has been producing plays locally almost from the day he immigrated from his native Canada in 1983. Currently, Nephesh is running 12 shows employing some 35 actors. Some of the shows are already in their sixth or seventh season and all play countrywide.

"We've come to the point where I'm either going to have to downsize, or expand and get some funding," he smiles, half ruefully.

We're sitting in the pleasant Tel Aviv apartment that he shares with his life-partner, actress Beatrice Hall, and which also serves as the theater's office. What he doesn't say is

that he's a quiet revolutionary. Nephesh has pioneered the "pluvie," or movie play, in which live action interacts with a film as in the takeoff on the Bogart type private-eye movie called *The Last Trick*, or *Only in the Movies*, a "pluvie" based on the murder of cabbie Derek Roth by teenagers.

Altogether, Nephesh has done about 50 shows and "only two of them didn't take off." About 80 percent of the theater's NIS 1.2 million budget is income from various productions.

He established the theater in Toronto, 18 years ago, when "I had a play called *Children of the Night* about Janusz Korczak and his children. It needed 30 child and 10 adult actors, and nobody wanted to touch it. Nobody in Canada knew about Korczak."

The play was a huge hit all over Canada, and "we went on doing plays with a Jewish content. But I've always been a Zionist. Before I came I worked as an assistant director at Habimah for a year to see if I could work here."

"I reconstituted the company after I made aliya and our first show was *Einstein* at Habimah in 1985. Since then, we've changed. The plays we do now have a social and educational value, but they have to be good theater first."

Make Yourself at Home epitomizes educational theater with a social conscience, and is also a charmer from curtain to curtain. Eliran plays Aviv, your typical post-combat-unit upwardly mobile Israeli. Shulman plays Natasha, a violinist from the USSR. She lands on Aviv's doorstep at 2:30 in the morning straight from the airport. It's the right address, but the wrong person, and Aviv makes no bones about wanting her out there, and now. Welcoming, he isn't.

Woebegone, she leaves and seconds later is back. Her luggage has been stolen. Well, from that minute the happy end is almost a foregone conclusion but playwright Meshel's script takes you there with wit and intelligence.

"I was very suspicious of the play because of the new immigrant from Russia aspect," says the delectable Shulman, "but when I read it, I have to confess I cried because it reached something in my memories."

Shulman is 24 and immigrated from her native Kiev in 1990 where she had been working as a professional mime since the age of 15. Here, stuntman friends told her a movie company needed a stuntwoman.

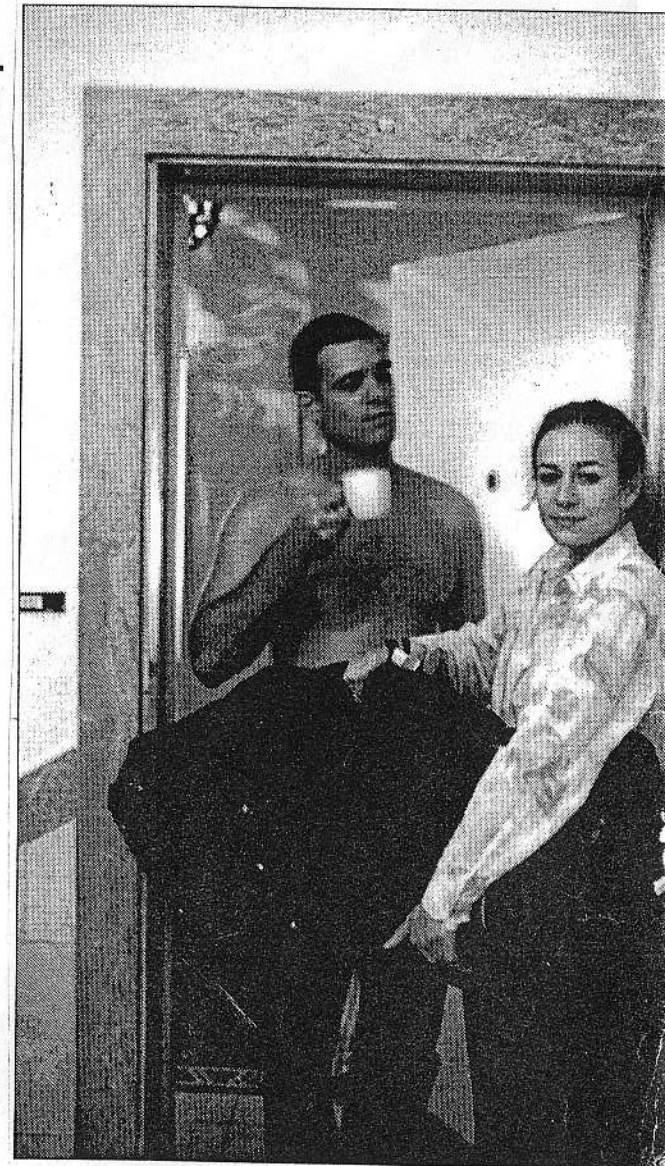
With nothing to lose, she applied, was accepted, and has

done stunts in more than half a dozen movies, not to mention commercials and TV shows. She also managed to graduate last year from the Nissan Nativ Studio, is working on a street-theater project for the Haifa Children's Theater Festival on *Hol Hamo'ed Pessah*, and has a guest-star role as a Russian prostitute on Channel 3's *Deep Blue*.

Caspi, 29, is also guest starring in a couple of *Deep Blue* segments, as the bad guy. He graduated from the Seminar Hakibbutzim theater department in 1993 and "chose not to go into repertory theater." He and his actress wife Ronit have their own small theater company "and that's why I was so attracted to Howard because he does things his way."

The original version of *Make Yourself at Home* premiered in Hebrew in 1991 and ran for 350 performances. Author Meshel, himself an immigrant from the US, did the English version of course.

And Rypp, who has only done one other English-language production with Nephesh (Wolf Mankewitz's *The Irish Hebrew Lesson*), decided to do it in English "because it's ideal for people who want to feel at home here. And you can. If you're patient."



Eliran Caspi and Irena Shulman appear in Yitzhak Meshel's "Make Yourself at Home", an Israeli romantic comedy now in English, Saturday night at the Geshur Theater.