

Reaching for the sky in Jerusalem

The 17th annual Manofim arts festival launches a new venue with a view **BARRY DAVIS**



Veteran Oriental metal rock band Orphaned Land opens the new Bustana rooftop venue. (Zohar Ron)

The Manofim Festival has grown. That may not sound like a show-stopping item of breaking news, but quite frankly, given our present lamentable circumstances, with no end currently in sight, any cultural venture that chalks up 17 years of faithful service and continues to spread its wings is a boon for us all and a priceless fillip for the heart and spirit.

Manofim started life in 2008 as an independent enterprise. The fervent primary desire was to leverage the Jerusalem arts scene and, hopefully, provide locally based artists with an incentive to up their creative ante while, at the same time, drawing members of the public off the street to view the fruits of the artists' labors at dozens of galleries dotted around town.

It would be safe to say, all these years

later, that festival founders Lee He Shulov and Rinat Edelstein (the latter also serves as artistic director) have done a good job of establishing and nurturing the event as a major slot on the national culture calendar, bringing in people from all over the country, including – shock, horror! – folk from Tel Aviv.

The leaps-and-bounds trajectory comes across loud and clear from just the briefest of glimpses of this year's program, which kicks off on July 22 and runs until July 26.

In addition to the displays at exhibition facilities of varying sizes across the city, such as Hansen House, Hamiffal, the Ticho House offshoot of the Israel Museum, and festival hub Art Cube Artists' Studios (Artists' Studios) in Talpiot, the five-day itinerary features a

slew of live music shows, performance slots, and dance productions.

VETERAN ORIENTAL metal rock band Orphaned Land has been lined up to play at the brand new Bustana rooftop venue at the Artists' Studios building.

I was taken up to see the spot by Shulov. It made for pretty impressive viewing, and conveyed in no uncertain terms just how far Shulov and Edelstein, and the festival, have progressed. I also had a look at the open-air space, in its then-sorry weather-beaten state, in the run-up to last year's Manofim bash, and was told of plans to turn the bare roof into a bona fide cultural facility.

Fast forward to early July 2025 and a team of workmen were busily, and

noisily, applying the finishing touches to three metal structures that will provide visitors with shade from the unyielding Israeli summer sun. They will also serve as workshop spaces for students and adults alike, and house food and beverage dispensers while the likes of Orphaned Land go about their entertaining and, no doubt, powerfully amplified business.

The tar-covered surface of last year's building top spread has been overlaid with gleaming white tiles, the roof perimeter is now safeguarded by sturdy railings, and there are all kinds of ecological and botanical endeavors in the pipeline.

Bustana also offers a breathtaking panoramic view of much of the city, taking in Beit Safafa, the nearby Train Track Park, Katamon, Rehavia, Gazelle Valley, and beyond. Shulov says the idea is not just to look out across Jerusalem but also to feel part and parcel of the cultural, social, and ethnic urban mesh.

"We are going to install a building with a geodesic roof which, naturally, will echo the dome of the mosque in Beit Safafa," she enlightens me. The roof, for now, can only be reached via a relatively narrow staircase, but an elevator is due to be installed to make the site fully accessible to people of



The 'Tchellet' exhibition by Noa Yafe at Hamiffal examines the interface between material and spiritual life. (Noa Yafe)



Photographer Yael Meiri takes a close look at the olive tree in the 'Root of the Matter' exhibition. (Yael Meiri)

all ages and physical needs.

Edelstein and Shulov clearly intend to encourage us to stretch our aesthetic and sensorial horizons, as any good arts vehicle should. Manofim follows that ethos, and then some, and really lets its hair down on July 24 when pop singer Gal De Paz fronts the aptly named Drag De Paz extravaganza, when she is joined by former national Drag Queen Kay Long, leading light of the scene Celine La Divine, and popular showbiz personality Suzi Boum.

The show blurb invites us to "witness a theatrical summit that will liberate the body and the reins, and celebrate the freedom to be who we are, in all our color, power, and beauty." Regardless of your politics, social standing, or, perhaps, religious leanings, that sounds like a sentiment worth taking on board.

CASTING A seasoned eye over the program, the first notion that springs to mind is that Manofim is adding increasingly sexier – in marketing terms – fare to its rollout. I wondered whether there may be a danger of going too far down the commercial road and losing sight of the core artistic content.

Edelstein takes the open skies,

inclusive, cross-fertilization approach to that. She believes that spreading her artistic directorial wings over a range of disciplines not only enriches the program's bottom line, but it also offers rewards in terms of getting the Manofim word out as far and wide as possible, as well as enticing culture consumers to dip their feet in areas of creative pursuit they may not otherwise have considered.

"I think the combination brings a lot of people who would not normally just come to see an exhibition of artworks. But they will come to see a show, and then they'll take in an exhibition."

That, Edelstein states, is not a matter of mere wishful thinking. "I have seen that happen." The patrons also get a guiding hand in the desired direction. "On the tickets, we have texts explaining what the Artists' Studios is, and we invite them to come to see the exhibitions we have here."

She adds that this has been bubbling under for a while. "This year we may have leaned more toward the show element, as we don't have a central exhibition this time round – we do that every other year. But, for the past few years, we have married art exhibitions with shows."

Is that part and parcel of the festi-

val growth continuum? "I think so," Edelstein responds. "We also want to try out art that is interdisciplinary, to open up. We don't want to just stay within the realms of exhibitions; we want to turn [the festival] into something wider, bigger."

That, she hastens to add, does not mean following the big bucks. "It is not a capitalist way of thinking. That is about the concept, about the interfaces we can create."

Even so, Manofim, Edelstein assures me, will not stray too far from its disciplinary anchor. "The plastic arts are, of course, the basis.

But there is also music, performance, dance, and looking at art in the broader sense."

AS THE first quarter of the 21st century draws to a close – who remembers the year 2000 bug, aka Y2K? – technology continues to take on an increasingly expansive share of creative processes and artistic end results.

Edelstein and Shulov are keenly aware of advances being made in the field, and Manofim duly provides the public with a number of opportunities to enjoy the fruits of synergies



Late Israeli pop icon Zvika Pik and megastar rapper Ye get it together, with the help of Deepfake virtual reality technology, in 'The Jackal' installation. (Efrat Galnoor & Alona Friedberg)



Reut Asimini presents an interactive art-performance work. (Reut Asimini)

between original thinking and the best that contemporary technology has to offer.

Front and center this year in that regard is *The Jackal* installation, which will be on display for the duration of the festival at the Hazira center for interdisciplinary arts, around the corner from the Art Cube Artists' Studios in Talpiot.

The outsized work was created by longtime pals Efrat Galnoor and Alona Friedberg, who come from ostensibly contrasting ends of the creative spectrum. Galnoor engages in site-specific painting of the Israeli landscape, incorporating elements of nostalgia, memory, stereotypes, cultural convention, and fantasy. Friedberg works in new media, video, and sound, deconstructing and piecing back together cultural images from contemporary, historical, political, social, and pop culture realms.

The two do share an incisive and critical approach to the reality around them, and they are more than happy to take a stab or two at accepted wisdom and shake matters up. That comes through in *The Jackal*, which takes the physical form of a cyclorama – a large, curved backdrop employed in theater, film, and photography to create an illusion of depth and open space.

There is an intriguing double-pronged storyline behind the installation that conjoins two seemingly unconnected events and distills the manifold facets of the events through a Deepfake-assisted artificial intelligence (AI)-designed platform.

The two tales involve Avera Mengistu, an Ethiopian-born Israeli who climbed over the fence separating

Israel from Gaza in 2014 and spent over a decade in Hamas captivity before finally being released earlier this year. The other relates to the sad end of Canadian tourist Elisa Lam, who disappeared from her Los Angeles hotel in February 2013. A few days later, her body was found in a water tank on the hotel roof.

The common denominator between the two disturbing occurrences, which took place in different geographic and political milieus, is the inexplicability of their actions. Mengistu's family, at the time, said he was not emotionally stable, so perhaps that sheds some light on his decision to walk into enemy territory. But Lam's case is even more mysterious and remains unsolved to this day.

There is another, albeit extraneous, aspect to the Mengistu-Lam thematic confluence: Both characters were caught and documented on surveillance cameras, adding drama to the mystery. Not that, in this security-sensitive day and age, there is anything particularly remarkable about it, but that coincidence gave the artists a solid launching pad for their joint venture.

Galnoor and Friedberg targeted and ran with it, every which way, with *The Jackal*. "There is documentation of the stories, but what are the actual stories?" says Friedberg. "We looked at these two cases and how they break through the boundaries of reasonable thought through political

imagination."

The latter is a concept of political philosophy that encompasses the full range of possibilities available to a person trying to understand political reality, as well as their ability to plan a course of action that can enhance the position of the individual or the collective.

That suggests social interaction, and joining forces to first comprehend the situation and then act on that understanding to improve the given state of affairs. To that end, in the context of *The Jackal*, the artists produced a video art piece with an imaginary consortium of minds and personalities to examine the two incidents and see what they could come up with.

The members of the improbable "laboratory of consciousness" crew include Israeli-American political scientist Prof. Avshalom Schwartz, who specializes in political imagination; Israeli bank robber Ety Alon; outspoken megastar rapper Ye (Kanye West); and Zvika Pik, the late convention-challenging Israeli pop music icon and TV personality.

That combo certainly raises the real-virtual dissonance bar, and the cast of celebrities serves to bring a host of dome scratchers to the fore, such as how images can be used as means to control, conceal, or disclaim. Plenty to mull over there, in terms of content, aesthetics, and presentation format, which, when you

think about it, is a fundamental tenet of the arts.

LIFE MEETS art, meets regional disputes, in the aptly named *The Root of the Matter* exhibition, which opens at the Artists' Studios on July 25, running way past the festival time slot through to October 14.

The main bulk of the display takes the form of charred pieces of olive trees culled from Latrun near the Trappist monastery following the fire that swept through the area in April. When I popped by, interdisciplinary artist Ronit Mirsky was busy arranging the arboreal fallout on one of the white walls of the display space, together with curator Yarden Stern.

The shards of velvety-looking black wood had been garnished with drops of gold paint that accentuate both the sumptuous color mix and create an oxymoronic context that catches the eye and shifts the gray matter. The team outing also includes works by visual artist Rotem Bides, Gal Leshem, and photographer Yael Meiri.

The contrasting colors and textures of the tree parts follow the idea of the Japanese kintsugi discipline, whereby the cracks in broken pottery are repaired by applying lacquer mixed with gold, silver, or platinum.

"The idea is to emphasize the breakages, rather than concealing them, in order to make them stand out and be repaired or healed," Mirsky explains. She adds political context. "The olive tree is a political element that symbolizes ownership of the land. Whoever owns an olive tree owns the land it is on."

Elsewhere in the multifarious Manofim program, members of the public can encounter artists in the throes of creation, in their studios in Talpiot, and catch more quality musical entertainment at Ticho House, where wind instrument player Idit Mintzer oversees a performance by a topnotch lineup that includes internationally renowned bassist-producer Yossi Fine, jazz pianist Stav Achai, and celebrated indie-electronic-dance-music artist Yehezkel Raz. The festival itinerary also features guided tours and family-oriented hands-on slots.

Seventeen years after its inception, Manofim is clearly heading for bigger and better things. ■



Pop singer Gal de Paz fronts a drag queen extravaganza. (Shai Henseb)

For more information, visit manofim.org/program.