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Reut Shemesh. In "Leviah," (at right, above and bottom right). "Being in the army is somewhat like being in the jungle."

Ronni Shendar; Tomer Appelbaum

## Routine sexual harassment

The Israeli choreographer Reut Shemesh shaped her difficult experiences in military service into a dance piece; an accompanying short film premiered in Jerusalem Sunday

Gili Izikovich

A suffocating, synthetic-smelling, badly fitting army uniform is the subject of the first part of "Leviah" (Hebrew for lioness), a dance piece created by Reut Shemesh, and the short film by the same name that she made with Ronni Shendar. The piece begins with the immediate changes to a young woman's body as a result of putting on the uniform.

The experience erases the individual and presages the misery to come: for Shemesh, that meant depression, loss of appetite and an overall decline in performance. "Leviah" had its Israeli premiere Sunday at the Machol Shalem Dance House's Jerusalem International Dance Week.

"Leviah" brings to the stage the emotional problems and routine sexual harassment often experienced by women soldiers, who use black humor as a distancing device. In retrospect, this situation seems twisted and defective, Shemesh says.

"It took me time to understand that army service causes a distorted idea of male-female relationships. We grew up [thinking] that

it's quite normal that you're 18 and your commander looks at your ass, or that you have to make coffee for him; but that is not really normal.

"When you live this situation, you don't understand that there's something distorted about it. You don't see how thin the boundaries of your body are, and those thin boundaries endanger the way you see yourself and your ability to defend yourself."

Shemesh, 36, was born and raised in Yavneh, where she studied dance in high school. After serving in Military Intelligence, she studied at the Jerusalem Academy of Music and Dance for a year before moving to the Netherlands, where she earned a degree in choreography.

More than a decade has passed since then, and in recent years Shemesh has been living in Germany, at present in Hamburg. "Leviah" began as a leaflet she wrote after discovering that many of her acquaintances were interested in her army service. After completing it, she created a dance piece in collaboration with the dancer Hella Immler in 2015.

The film "Leviah," produced in 2017, is divided into five short, nightmarish

episodes based on Shemesh's experiences as an ordinary female soldier in the Israel Defense Forces. She describes a sense of transparency and misery, the desire to be liked and the need to turn a blind eye, to swallow her pride. Most of the series

**Shemesh: 'It scares me that there's self-censorship instead of all the artists taking to the street.'**

of incidents are minor (she hints at one that was terrifying, but doesn't explain). They happened over a year and nine months of military service — ordinary overall, but generally negative.

"Being in the army is somewhat like being in the jungle," she says. "Lots of

young boys and girls. I think the army has to do some homework about relations between men and women, in order to provide physical protection for young women. There's something about this jungle in which many bad things can happen."

*During your army service, did you feel to some extent that you were easy prey?*

"I felt there was no order. I don't want to talk about my private life, but we're all sexually harassed in the army, almost on a daily basis. Maybe there are some people who will say that I'm wrong, but that's how I see things. Maybe the situations I was in were more extreme, but in my opinion these situations are not unusual."

*In the generation before ours, they would say not to make a big deal of it, and to respond by slapping anyone who gets too familiar.*

"If you're young and

alone and you want to please people, you won't slap anyone. Our desire and our need for approval is different. The work speaks about that, the need for approval. The desire to please, which in the army happens even more, because it's a jungle of young people. Maybe things have changed somewhat since my army service, but when I was a soldier there wasn't much discussion of that."

**Not to feel**

In many senses "Leviah" suits the spirit of the times. It preceded the worldwide #MeToo movement, but it offers a glimpse into the soul of a young woman in a situation that contains elements of weakness and the need to please. That ties in well with ideas that have been reinforced over the past year. Shemesh speaks of an international audience in countries where there is no compulsory draft, where people are interested in the content and the experience expressed in her work.

*Perhaps the reason is that the work projects an extreme experience, but one that is common to young women during various periods in their lives.*

"That's possible. It's nice for me to see a lot of men who come to see it as well and are happy about the opportunity to see things from a woman's point of view. I don't know how they'll react to it in Israel; this is the first time

we've shown the film here." Maybe they'll ask why I am making a big deal of it, why am I inciting, giving us a bad name abroad, insulting the uniform."

Shemesh, who is now visiting Israel, speaks about [a segment of] the film that would probably have been condemned if the proposed "cultural loyalty" bill had been passed.

"I have the privilege," she says, "that I'm not budgeted by the Culture Ministry and I can permit myself to level criticism without thinking."

*It's possible that there would have been a problem regarding the honor thought to be attached to the army uniform.*

"Someone would certainly have had a problem. It scares me that we'll get used to that; it scares me that there's self-censorship instead of all the artists taking to the street together. We very quickly become accustomed to it and become inured, like the female soldier who gets used to an abnormal situation and becomes inured to it. A bit of cynicism, a bit of vagueness, and we put it behind us. We prevent ourselves from feeling. To refrain from doing, you have to refrain from seeing; in other words, to seal yourself off from things, not to feel.

"That's something that's rooted in us. If we were to feel the pain of living in a country that does things like this, they wouldn't happen. The pain would stop us."