

The art of communication

Nalaga'at is much more than just a theater, restaurant and café. It is also about empowerment for deaf and blind people

• BARRY DAVIS

Adina Tal is a busy woman. For the past 14 years she has worked hard at her profession – that of theater director – which, as most will tell you, has its own particular demands.

You have to take a bunch of people, albeit professionals, and guide their talents and skills in the desired direction, constantly taking into account such matters as egos and temperaments en route to the end product, a bona fide show for the public.

Tal had done all that for some years when, looking for new professional and personal horizons, she found herself running what she thought was a short-term theater workshop for deaf and blind people. It was quite a challenge, which eventually became a passion – practically a way of life. And she is still, very much, at it today.

Around 10 years ago, I caught the first production of the Nalaga'at (Do Touch) theater company for deaf, blind and deaf-blind actors at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem. The show was called *Light Is Heard in Zig-Zag*, and it was a spell-binding experience. The show not only went on to become a hit here, it also went on the road, and was performed to rapturous response in such global cultural hot spots as New York, Toronto, Montreal, Zurich and Geneva.

Tal founded Nalaga'at based on that original short-term workshop group, and 10 or so years down the line she now stands at the head of a nonprofit with 120 employees based at expansive premises near the Jaffa Port, which incorporate rehearsal and performance spaces, a restaurant and a café.

As has become, by now, glaringly apparent, Nalaga'at is no ordinary enterprise. It is the world's first theater company for deaf-blind people, and Tal's pioneering work has been recognized by several prestigious institutions, including Tel Aviv University, which bestowed an honorary doctorate on Tal's broad shoulders; this week, the Ruppin Academic Center made her an honorary associate. The latter is a feather in Tal's cap, and she is justly proud of the award.

"They give this title to one person a year, and I am joining a very respectable list of recipients, which includes [Pres-

ident] Shimon Peres and a Nobel Prize laureate," she notes. "It is recognition of what we do at Nalaga'at, which is constantly growing."

Tal and Nalaga'at have, indeed, come a long way since the company's humble beginnings. Initially, director and actors – who had to be brought from all over the country by special transportation, each with an escort – met at all sorts of places, to rehearse to hone their acting skills and put together what eventually became *Light Is Heard in Zig-Zag*. Tal desperately searched for a permanent rehearsal berth and, after protracted wrangling and maneuvering, a space was obtained in a building in south Tel Aviv. But disaster struck just before the group moved in, when the building burned down the night before she was due to receive the key to the premises.

So the search for a home continued until, six years ago, Tal settled on an abandoned warehouse belonging to the Armenian Church, in Jaffa Port. "It was basically just a shell," she recalls. "It was in a dreadful state and didn't even have a roof – actually there was an asbestos roof which we had to remove, carefully, at night. We had to put so much effort and money into making it habitable, so we could start working on our new show *Not on Bread Alone*."

The company was going out on a limb. "It was the most expensive production in the world," Tal continues.

"We were investing so much in getting the building ready, and working on the new show. If the show failed, then what?"

Her plans had taken flight since that first failed attempt to set up a home base. The initial idea had been to establish a small studio, but the Jaffa premises are an altogether far grander enterprise. In addition to the theater and rehearsal areas, the building houses the BlackOut restaurant, where the public enjoys a unique culinary-sensory experience and dines in total darkness, served by blind waiters. And there is Café Kapish, which is operated by deaf and hearing-impaired people.

"You can communicate with the waiters in all sorts of ways," says Tal. "You can use your hands, or point at things. Anyone can manage."

Some of the waiters have also been drawn into the thespian side of the venture. In 2010 the *Prince Rooster* children's show opened for business, performed by some of the deaf and blind employees, and sign language workshops and a clay sculpturing workshop, in the dark, have been added to the Nalaga'at activity roster.

GETTING ON with things, regardless of sometimes bewildering logistical and other challenges, is something of a mantra for Tal. While she was involved in social theater before Nalaga'at, and

is passionate about generating social change and improving life here, she takes a no-nonsense approach to getting people to help themselves. She says she hates it when people come to Jaffa out of some sense of compassion or, worse, pity for the people who work at the company.

"You know it is easier to give charity than to accept it," states Tal. "We don't need or want that. This is a serious theater company that puts on quality productions for the public."

She demands respect and self-respect, from herself and everyone around her. "Deaf and blind people have to find ways to communicate and get on with their lives, too," she says.

For Tal, Nalaga'at is about much more than "just" the theater, restaurant and café. It is also about empowerment and communication. The company trained deaf-blind, and deaf and hearing-impaired people to work as waiters, and to earn a living by the sweat of their brow.

And the communication efforts don't stop there. There are cultural, political and religious divides to be spanned as well. Four years ago, Nalaga'at established a multicultural group of deaf-blind acting students of Jews, Muslims and Samaritans. The latter eventually left the group, but the Jews and Muslims continue to work together harmoniously.

Since the Jaffa center opened its doors, six years ago, over 200,000 people have come to enjoy the shows and the unique dining experiences, and despite constantly precarious financial conditions – "The authorities have not exactly embraced us," notes Tal wryly – Nalaga'at just goes from strength to strength. The company is currently preparing for performances in Perth, Australia, in February. Then Tal and the actors will have a three-week breather back in Jaffa, before departing for shows in the States.

Korean and British audiences have also been wowed by the Nalaga'at troupe over the years, and the shows have garnered rave reviews by critics the world over.

Tal has had offers to take her talents elsewhere, but feels the job in hand has some way to go before it can stand on its own two feet. "I was offered the opportunity to set up something similar in London, with a really nice budget, but I can't leave Nalaga'at yet. We still have so much work to do."

Tal believes that the Nalaga'at ethos can point us all in the right direction. "We need to communicate, all of us," she states. "I want our center to educate people. That is more important than anything." ■

For more information about Nalaga'at: (03) 633-0808 and www.nalagaat.org.il

To read a Jerusalem Post review of Nalaga'at's BlackOut restaurant: www.jpost.com/Arts-and-Culture/Food-And-Wine/BlackOut-the-ultimate-blind-date



NALAGA'AT IS no ordinary enterprise. It is the world's first theater company for deaf-blind people. (Courtesy: Dr. Avishai Teicher/Wikimedia Commons)