



Sleek and fashionable ... the dresses make it to the catwalk

Turning the tables

By Pamela Peled

IN THE 1940 movie “Waterloo Bridge”, a luminous Vivien Leigh finds Cinderella-happiness with the dashing, rich army captain played by Robert Taylor. World War I is raging, he is about to be dispatched to the front; after one ecstatic night of (chaste) love, he proposes.

The black and white movie was made decades before I was born; when I was ten my mother took me to a rerun. I

remember every scene: electric attraction, desperate goodbyes, a tragic mistake that propels the gorgeous Leigh into prostitution before she eventually jumps off the very bridge on which she had first met her hero.

And then, with impeccable timing, he returns unharmed from the war, his presumed death merely a case of

mistaken identity.

He is home, he is safe, he is burning to marry her, but he is just, just, just too late to save her from suicide.

I learnt a lot from that movie. As a child I couldn’t conceive of any despair deep enough to enforce ending one’s life, prostitution was a profession I’d never encountered, even in books; I wasn’t actually sure if a ‘fallen woman’ only applied to someone who had toppled off a bridge.

“There but for the grace of God go I,” said my sage mother, as we ate ice-creams on the way home; that new expression was something else I learned on the same dramatic day.

I had cause to think of that movie last week as I actually spoke, for the first time ever, to women who pay their rent by selling their bodies. Over and over again.

It was a life-changing experience. To state the obvious: nobody wakes up one morning needing cash, and decides to walk the streets.

“Prior abuse is a precondition for



Some of the staff at Turning the Tables

prostitution,” says Leemor Reiner-Segal, psychotherapist and social worker in the field.

“Only someone who has been physically, emotionally or sexually battered will turn to this sad profession; only someone with a warped sense of self can do this work.”

I tried to imagine this accumulation of pain as I chatted to some of the prostitutes, but the words of Gerard Manley Hopkins got in my way. “No worst, there is none,” he agonizes, as he deals with depression pitching him past pitch of grief.

“Oh the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs/ of fall, frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed.” All he can do is heave his herds-long cries. All I could do was wonder how the women in front of me could smile, and drink coffee, and sew and hem and pleat.

This is the background: Some years ago Lilach Tzur Ben-Moshe, a young fashion editor at Ma’ariv, married a man with an apartment in South Tel Aviv. Each day as she walked past the sad humans who litter the sidewalks around the old central bus station, she averted her eyes.

“Eventually I got over my wish to run away, and began to feel an urgent need to help,” she recalls.

In 2012 she turned to Ido Recanati, a fashion designer; he agreed to teach a weekly workshop to prostitutes staying in a safe house. And “Turning the Tables” was born.

Today, Ben-Moshe oversees a sewing/design center of her own in the heart of South Tel Aviv, catering to 50 prostitutes a year; some still working,



Busy designing in the Tel Aviv workshop

some in rehabilitation. The programs are free; the only requirement is that participants are not on drugs.

Here, from 10am – 4pm they can come in from off the streets, have a hot meal, feel safe, and literally stitch their lives together again.

The women, aged between 20 and 70, get a year of vocational training in design, sewing and pattern making as an alternative way to make some money.

A Business Hub, in collaboration with Tel Aviv University, provides the basics in business consultancy, marketing and micro-business to enable them to become seamstresses or to manufacture pillows or clothes.

Periodically, they present their

collections in high-end homes; customers in Herzliya Pituach and Savyon host evenings where models strut the catwalk in clothes created by women who have been to hell and back.

Turning the Tables teaches the rudiments of social business skills and studio production; graduates and students work at the ten sewing machines and cutting tables provided.

The room buzzes with activity: mannequins draped in colorful clothes in various stages of completion, racks laden with creative ensembles, tape measures being unfurled, scissors snapping.

Bursts of laughter punctuate the hum of the electric needles; I listen to the

1/3

1/2

background stories of some of the women bending diligently over their creations, and feel awed.

One obvious reason for respect is the quality of the garments: dramatic black dresses that could stand on any red carpet with confidence, tailored trousers, flowing skirts.

I couldn't help remembering my own brush with sewing lessons; when my third daughter was born I decided to take a beginners course. After a month of failure after failure, my teacher approached me gingerly.

"In every thousand," she told me, gently, "there's one who can't. You are the one." And she handed me back my money.

But the clothes are only part of the intricate pattern that constitutes Turning the Tables.

Tzur Ben-Moshe and Reiner-Segal provide constant empowerment and therapy, and teach women who have never experienced success how to enjoy it.

And there are certainly successes: Jennifer Kim, a graduate of the studio, is now a thriving designer in her own right. "We provide the space in which our students can develop themselves in their own time," says Segal.

Ben-Moshe estimates that there are some 15,000 prostitutes in Israel, of whom 10,000 work in Tel Aviv.

She aims to open branches of TtT in Eilat, Jerusalem and Beersheva with the help of the National Council of Jewish Women, Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), Hadassah, the Good People Fund, Yad Hanadiv and other donors.

"Whoever saves a life, it is considered as if he saved the entire world," says the Mishna. By this reckoning Turning the

Tables has saved galaxies.

Visiting the studio and talking to some of the new designers who live in a world of which I can't even conceive, hugely rocked my equilibrium.

To be in a room with women who have endured so much pain, to imagine the depths that brought them to such degradation, and to see them actively rehabilitating themselves was something that recalibrated my outlook on everything.

Two-and-a-half years after my gorgeous husband died, I still miss Martin on my skin, still find it hard to believe he's



not here to share the joy, ease the load, cuddle up to as I fall asleep and smile at me in the good morning.

But as I stepped past prone bodies lying on the South Tel Aviv pavements, and mulled over the stories that I had just heard, all I could think of was my mom's gentle voice saying "There but for the grace of God go I."

And despite the challenges that time has thrown at me, all I could feel was gratitude for my life well lived. Things are so much worse for so many.

Where is the Messiah? Come on already, baby - we are waiting for you to fix things up. In the meantime, how lucky is the world to have angels like Ben-Moshe and Segal-Reiner, who are doing God's work.

To save a life, feel free to visit www.yotsrot.org

■ *Dr. Pamela Peled lectures at IDC and Beit Berl.*

Reprinted with the permission of The Jerusalem Post