

Felix Stephan

American Colony Hotel

Now that it was all over, Mark and I were sitting in the lobby of the American Colony Hotel drinking the bottle of red wine set aside for us. According to our automatic booking confirmation, it was a special deal offered by the American Colony Hotel: booking our rooms through a particular hotel reservation portal entitled us to a free bottle of red wine. However, after talking to the other participants in the “Jerusalem Festival for Adventurous Art”, it turned out that the thing about the wine was a lie. The promotion was not limited to our hotel, but was in fact part of a concerted red wine campaign put on by the Israeli government. During that period every foreign hotel guest, and there were many foreigners in the city because of the festival, had a bottle of Israeli red wine put on their bedside table. We had been given a “Yarden Mount Hermon Red”.

In order to network myself internationally, I had written my first interactive play in English. The play was a subtle critique of our emotional disposition in the digital age, and Mark was the only actor. After the premiere our institute passed the play on to various international festivals for digital media art, in order to bring it into position for the highpoint of the season, the “transmediale” in Berlin. Rumour had it that my play stood a good chance of being chosen to fill the Friday evening slot. I was convinced that after this exciting climax I would fall into a deep emotional hole.

I was well prepared for it. At our institute, from the third semester onwards, we attended courses which prepared us for this crisis.

Consequently my nervousness was kept within bounds. Our professors told us a lot about these states of crisis, but still of course I had only a vague idea of what they were like. Although there were shelfloads of books about it, ultimately each individual experienced the crisis in their own way. As soon as we were affected by depression, we were asked to report to the secretary’s office in the institute. What happened then I had often experienced as a spectator: you were given access for the first time to the club rooms which were on the top floor of the institute building, and it was recommended that you never leave the club area again until the big party was held. This period lasted for about one to two weeks. Then the institute put on a party in honour of the depressed; everybody from that academic year and many graduates gathered there. And if the rumours were right and I actually got the transmediale slot on Friday night, I would soon have to report to the secretary’s office. Then it would be my turn, after years of preparation. My first real crisis.

Mark and I were the youngest participants at the “Jerusalem Festival for Adventurous Art”. Mark was in his mid-twenties, brown-eyed and curlyhaired. He had serious sex appeal, but had no real interests. In hotel lobbies like this he developed a strangely solemn magic. Generally, in any environment he had the gift of conveying the impression that he was thoroughly familiar with it, whereas I always took a long time to gradually get used to new situations. Mark was wearing a purple jacket, a red shirt, sand-coloured trousers and white loafers. On the plane it had occurred to him that here his curls could easily be mistaken for a Jewfro, whereas in Berlin they looked more French. He said that he wouldn’t stand out in Jerusalem and that seemed to make him very happy for some reason. I said that was well cool, and then we high-fived on the plane.

However, after we got off the plane in Jerusalem, Mark suddenly appeared insecure, because he didn't recognize himself at all in the faces of people on the street, even though from the outside many passers-by looked really like him. That seemed to isolate him strangely. "Tel Aviv is different," I said to him in the taxi, but I didn't really know whether this was in any way true – I had only heard rumours – and the information didn't seem to raise his morale.

The closing ceremony of the "Jerusalem Festival for Adventurous Art" was due to take place later in the evening on the rooftop terrace of the King David Hotel, only a few hundred yards from here. There were still a few hours to go. Jerusalem had been kind to us: my play had received several minutes of applause and Mark had called me onto the stage. The restaurant area, where we were now being served our last dinner as Festival Members – Mark opted for the international version, while I tried the kosher meal – was painted in a colour that resembled the flesh of a Charentais melon. Warm air blew in on us through the open window. From invisible speakers came music from the album *Moon Safari* by Air, which touched us agreeably, because it was an album from our past. We had never felt the summer melancholy that *Moon Safari* always triggered in us as intensely as now, although occasionally we had heard it again by chance in waiting rooms and restaurants.

An Italian architect once told me a story about the square in front of the great Al-Aqsa Mosque: under Ottoman rule it was primarily a Muslim square, although it had always been open to believers of all religions. Then the British had come and had decided for the sake of understanding between peoples to introduce a weekly schedule. Each religion was allowed to use the space only on certain days of the week. This was supposed to prevent conflicts from breaking out. In actual fact, as the Italian architect said, that had been the start of all the wars and conflicts. That is what set everything off, the fact that Muslims and Jews and Christians were not allowed to lie together in the sun on the square in front of the Al-Aqsa Mosque.

After dinner we were tired, and we decided not to go to the big closing party at the King David Hotel until after midnight and first to sleep an hour or two. We would show up late at the event, the way we always did in Europe. I liked the idea of having a little nap in the evening; we would be able to approach people with a fresher and more optimistic outlook, and then I like to sleep through sunset with Mark. The veal meatballs, the Arak and the heat had made him sleepy and gentle, but as I turned to enter his room with him, he put his hand on my chest, yawned and said, "This is my room, stupid".

Softly I said "of course" and remained standing in the corridor until he had closed the door. Then I went to my room, showered, put some lotion on and did forty push-ups. I wrapped the damp towel around my hips and smoked a cigarette on the balcony, where the warm wind slowly dried my hair.

Three weeks ago Mark had accepted an offer from Chandran Nair to join him in the fight to finally free Asia from the ideological chains of the West. Chandran Nair was an entrepreneur who had been born the child of Indian immigrants in Malaysia, and who had built Asia's biggest environmental consultancy out of nothing. His parents had lived in a mud hut, and now he was paying the fourth highest rent in the world for his apartment in Hong Kong. The programme Mark would in future be representing in public was called "100,000 PhDs". Chandran Nair would

pay 100,000 Asian students not to go to Harvard or Columbia. Mark's job was to bring home to the Europeans that a new era had begun.

Of course, Mark had to accept the offer. He had always been a great fighter. In a different decade, he would have become an outstanding soldier. This way he would become a determined visitor to adventurous festivals that took place in clearings in the area around Berlin. In four days he was due to fly Emirates to Hong Kong to take up his new job there. When he told me about it, he said he could no longer be an actor, he was tired of pretending. He wanted to feel reality.

"I'm also going to leave the institute."

"But you have no idea what awaits you outside the institute. Can you even remember life without the institute? "

"No. Not a bit. "

I ordered a half bottle of Arak from room service and smoked some of the grass Mark had brought back yesterday from a walk. I used the yellowed nacre cigarette holder which Mark had inherited from his grandmother and which I once nicked off him, because I saw how he ignored it.

I sucked over and over again on the cigarette holder, just like his grandmother, his mother and he himself had sucked on it and massaged myself as I did so.

I got to know Mark at one of our institute workshops, where introverted students were supposed to fight with each other in an Argentinean variation of boxing that combined the raw sport of boxing with the proud vulnerability of the tango. At its best, this martial art did without punches altogether. Many of these fights ended with the opponents never having touched each other even once. That was in fact the point of it, because it was assumed that the shared experience was all the stronger, the less contact there was between the opponents.

Mark was the workshop leader, not because he was very good at sport, but because he was so popular. For that's what the workshop was about: the idea was to learn to deal confidently with popularity. And that's why Mark went around during the course from one participant to another, praising them for the most unlikely things. He praised me for having good head posture. After just one semester, formerly introverted institute newcomers had learnt to receive encouragement confidently, perhaps even at a level that was slightly above average for our institute. After the workshop, we would always go into the sauna together and have cloudy, isotonic drinks. At our institute, it was also customary for instructors and participants to get changed together, and once, after Mark had come out of the shower, I asked him if he wanted to star in a short film I was planning and which later became the basis for my play.

"But I've never done a drama workshop."

"I just have the feeling you could be the right one."

He shrugged his shoulders and agreed. Later I kept on trying to explain to him what the film would be about implicitly, in other words on the level of inner meaning. During my explanations he would always watch me attentively, but I noticed that he was slightly absent, not quite with me. And this is actually the feeling I have with Mark all the time; the odd thing is that I have never stopped trying to bridge the gap between us.

I don't feel this desire with other people, although I did have this feeling of a painful difference very early on, even as a child. The older I got, the more I got used to the feeling, however, until eventually I barely noticed it. It was perhaps a bit like having tinnitus. Today when I sit with my parents at Christmas, we laugh about what a strange child I was, and what a good

thing it is that I've grown out of it.

Of course, I didn't grow out of it just like that. The transformation took place during my first year at the institute. The stranger I appeared to my parents, the more comfortable I felt at our institute, the more similar I became to all the others. After my A-levels I applied to several institutes, but I had never got beyond the interview and had always returned feeling depressed and hopeless to our house on an estate on the outskirts of town. During the interview with the institute that finally gave me a place, I was already so depressed that I talked openly about my problem. Later I learnt that this was the reason they had taken me on. We were all like that here.

In the first few weeks after I moved into the hall of residence, I felt nervous and helpless. My hands would shake constantly, which meant I could barely brush my teeth, and pathetic scenes in films that previously I had tended to see as insidious audience manipulation now moved me to tears. I had no more defence mechanisms, and when I saw that other freshers were going through something similar, I asked our film professor about it. He replied that it was quite normal. At first, every new student had difficulty adjusting to an environment where there was no need to put up any resistance. The emotional armour that we had put on over the years now fell away. It was painful at first, but later we would reach a stage of great ease and naturalness that would get us invited to lavish parties at remote locations. For this reason, the first semester party always took place at the beginning of the second semester. He was already looking forward to meeting me there.

On the roof terrace of the King David Hotel, white-clad waitresses ran around carrying silver trays with green drinks in test tubes. Small black stones floated in the drinks. They looked like candy and stuck in your teeth, as if they really were rock candy, but if you ran your tongue over it, this black mass tingled pleasantly in the mouth. The tingling went on all night.

We ran into a group of young graduates from a London institute we had close relations with. One of them was Gregory, a dark-skinned sculptor with narrow eyes. He had just won a prize at Sundance for the sets he had built for the movie *Great Ambience*, which in turn had been produced by our institute. Two years ago – while I was attending one of our joint festivals – I had visited him in his small studio in London, where he made a plaster cast of my right hand. Incidentally, while he was doing it *Moon Safari* was playing in the background, I believe, and I may be wrong – perhaps I am just adding details now as I look back – because now that I see Gregory, I am as touched and nostalgic as I was earlier in the restaurant area of the American Colony Hotel. At the time I constantly stared at the white plaster patches on Gregory's black skin, those dried little speckles on his cheeks and his neck. I had never seen black skin so close up before, there had been no blacks either at our institute or on our estate. Now we kissed each other on the cheek in greeting; he wore pale pink shorts, a very casual, yellow T-shirt and white sandals.

We stood together in our group and drank green drinks. Just before we clinked glasses, I tried to detach a small piece of skin from my upper lip, but I couldn't quite remove it, so it was hanging from my lip while I was happily saying "Cheers", and of course all the time I had the feeling that that everybody could see it. I also felt how the first sip washed this piece of skin into my mouth, but it still hung on my lip and was washed out again by the small residue of fluid that always flows back into the glass when

you put it down. Because of this little incident I said nothing for a while, until Gregory asked if I was okay. And then as I turned to Gregory, out of the corner of my eye I saw Mark rubbing his nose against the nose of one of the London professors as part of some drinking game. That was the last time I saw Mark. That was the image that I would keep forever in my memory, alongside the other intense moments of our relationship. This was immediately clear to me, even as it was happening. Gregory and I then went to the edge of the roof terrace, where the music faded a little into the distance and you could imagine you were smelling the Dead Sea or possibly even really were smelling it. "That way lies the Gaza Strip," said Gregory, indicating with his head towards the south. Then he smiled and pulled a French letter from his pocket; apparently he had just arrived from Switzerland. I remember that when we were in his studio he had asked me if I had ever been to Switzerland, which was his favourite country. He was nineteen years old at the time and I suspected a hidden reproach to his parents in this remark – for emigrating to London and not to Zurich. We looked over the city, which was now somewhat quieter and had taken on a duller hue. "Everybody should be allowed to try out this life," Gregory said softly. "They should serve Moët & Chandon in the slums of this city; then it would be something."