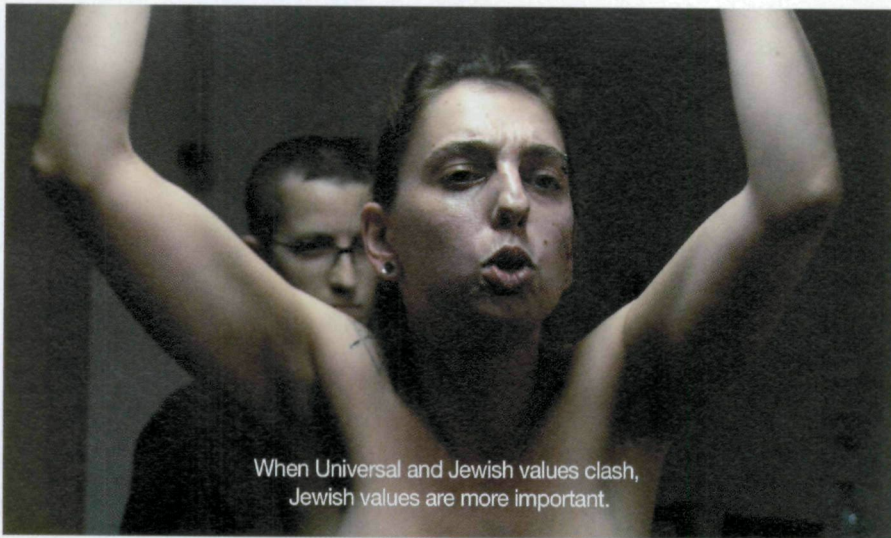


## Hurts So Good The patently provocative Roe Rosen



When Universal and Jewish values clash, Jewish values are more important.

### Out

ONLY A HANDFUL OF ARTISTS CAN BOAST that their work is so politically offensive that it warrants a parliamentary debate. Roe Rosen, über troublemaker, is one of them. His 1997 Israel Museum exhibition, *Live and Die as Eva Braun*, had its day in court on the strength of the title alone. It was, to many, an open invitation to outrage, and some knew just how to use it for their own ends. Indeed, Rosen's 16-minute film *Two Women and a Man* (05) contains footage of Zebulun Hammer, a former Minister of Education, and Tomy Lapid, then soon-to-be Minister of Justice, fuming about the exhibition on television, with Lapid proudly admitting that he hadn't even seen it.

In a way, the political hubbub surrounding *Live and Die as Eva Braun* made Rosen what he is today. The (usually) mild-mannered, soft-spoken, yet casually guarded forty-something is rightfully regarded as one of Israel's finest contemporary artists-cum-sociopolitical provocateurs. The problem is this: how can one be a provocateur in a worldwide cultural climate that thrives on the contrarian?

*Out*, Rosen's latest, also made the Venice Film Festival programmers a little nervous, since the ever scandal-hungry Italian press—reputable and tabloid alike—lives to jump on anything of a sexually

explicit nature. The film certainly leaves little to the imagination, even if Rosen was prudent enough to refrain from being completely graphic. After all, some audience members might have found the sight of buttocks whipped and paddled black and blue somewhat distasteful.

LIKE MOST OF ROSEN'S FILMS, *Out* IS A vexing mix of fiction and documentary. The two protagonists, Ela Shapira and Yoana Gonen, were cast as who they are in real life: a straight right-wing extremist who works as a dominatrix but prefers being a submissive in her private life, and a dominant lesbian left-wing activist who's had a few dissatisfying experiences as a sub. The monologues in the film's first half are distilled from interviews with both women and so are essentially of a documentary nature. Everything said is based on fact (if Rosen is to be believed).

As these monologues unfold, a third figure slowly emerges, namely Avigdor Lieberman, Israel's ultra-right-wing Minister of Foreign Affairs, and the *bête noir* of choice for everybody from leftists to garden-variety reactionaries posing as old-school conservatives. Shapira believes herself to be possessed by Lieberman's evil spirit; Gonen accordingly sets about performing an

exorcism. This fictional scenario has been subtly foreshadowed in the monologues; in the background during the slightly wider shots, a few strange-looking paintings show faux medieval scenes of torture mounted on the wall of the living room where the action plays out. What follows in the film's second half contains what may be two of the most stunning performances in modern cinema. Shapira shouts, moans, yelps, and whispers some of Lieberman's more choice quotes (prompted by Rosen off screen) while getting ever higher on endorphins from Gonen's expert maltreatment of her derriere. Where acting ends and actual passion begins—who can say? In addition, Rosen intercuts the thrashing with brief shots of the aforementioned paintings, some lasting no longer than a frame or two.

The big question, obviously, is why the thrashing has to be real. One possible answer: why not? What's a little consensual violence compared to what all the Liebermans of the world make us consent to, if not enact, on a daily basis? "Consensual" is the operative word. Both Shapira and Gonen discuss the power dynamics of BDSM: the master is by definition in control of the slave. But who's the top and who's the bottom in the Israeli body politic? Boundaries are blurry and often nonexistent. What can be said with some certainty is that our lives are defined by the reality of violence, and so the thrashing had to be real to make the point hit home. To insist that Lieberman forces us to condone violence is nothing more than a self-delusion. We believe and accept because it's often easier and cozier to regard oneself as a victim.

Victimhood is a major component of Israeli's cultural fabric. Almost the very first things Hammer evokes in *Two Women and a Man*, apropos *Live and Die as Eva Braun*, are the Shoah, the generation of victim-survivors, and their dignity. One of the things Rosen constantly ponders is when exactly this became an argument to end all arguments. And is it a magic spell—or a sledgehammer?

THESE DAYS, ROSEN RARELY MAKES stand-alone works. Usually, he embarks on a massive project that consists of, say, a film, a number of related paintings (for *Out* he made the torture paintings), and possibly other artifacts. Take for example “Justine Frank (1900-1943),” his project about the Belgian Jewish painter, writer, and associate of the Surrealists—whom Rosen, as it happens, completely invented. This fabricated biographical enterprise entailed painting dozens of pictures, writing Frank’s sole novel (*Sweet Sweat*), and making *Two Women and a Man*, a fake TV documentary about her troubled life, in which Rosen also plays Johanna Führer-Ha’sfari, *Sweet Sweat*’s mysterious Hebrew translator, who’s unhappy about the way that the dubious artist, Roe Rosen, has taken control of Frank’s legacy.

For his “Confessions” project Rosen made not one but four films. Besides the main feature, *The Confessions of Roe Rosen* (08), there’s a trailer (*Confessions Coming Soon*, 07), a music video (*I Was Called Kuni Lemel*, 07), and a gag reel (*Gagging During Confessions: Arms and Names*, 08). Several paintings were also created to be displayed in the main exhibit. To date, *Hilarious* (10) and the early, slightly apocryphal *Dr. Cross* (94) are Rosen’s sole works that are straight-up films with no art-exhibition component—even if Rosen quietly links *Hilarious* to the gallery-bound “Confessions” project by featuring the Confessions of Roe Rosen Ensemble, an all-female band that performs the musical interludes in both films. In similar fashion, through a Justine Frank catalogue glimpsed several times in a pile of books on a table behind which his performers sit, Rosen links the “Confessions” with the earlier project.

Like *Out*, *The Confessions of Roe Rosen* is based on an allegedly indecent idea: Rosen asked three non-Hebrew-speaking (probably illegal) female guest



*The Confessions of Roe Rosen*  
Below: *Hilarious*

Rosen identifies and tries to “become one” with those whom official culture deems of secondary importance—in all their states of anxiety, angst, shock, fear, and despair.

workers to recite a Latin transliteration of relatively unpleasant Hebrew using a teleprompter. The first line reads “Hello. I’m Roe Rosen. My days are numbered.” None of the women understood what they were reciting and what the Roman-salute gesture they were asked to make would mean in context. Through this act, Rosen ostensibly takes possession of the women. They relate his life of debauchery through his whiny, self-pitying confessions (which sound like a trashy take on St. Augustine). Between chapters, the Confessions of Roe Rosen Ensemble perform a selection of classical “death music” including the aria “When I Am Laid in Earth,” from Purcell and Tate’s *Dido and Aeneas*, and Albert E. Brumley’s “I’ll Fly Away.” In *I Was Called Kuni Lemel* (08), the Ensemble sings, to a rather different tune, a song from Israel Becker’s 1966 classic *The Flying Matchmaker* that tells the tragicomic story of a teacher who exchanges identities with

his look-alike Orthodox Jew cousin.

To demonstrate that he’s unafraid of making sacrifices, Rosen used the same device in *Confessions Coming Soon*, making his little son Hillel recite English although he doesn’t understand the language. So far Hillel is Rosen’s only male protagonist, but as a child, he nevertheless fits into the artist’s predilection for siding with the weak and powerless. Rosen identifies and tries to “become one” with those whom official culture deems of secondary importance—in all their states of anxiety, angst, shock, fear, and despair. If he works with female foreign workers, he does so to give a voice and a presence to a group of people effectively invisible to many Israelis.

While *The Confessions of Roe Rosen* plays with the concept of “shocking behavior” and *Out* might be a bit too much for the faint of heart, *Hilarious* is just plain terrifying. The setup is simple enough: a mediocre comedian appears on a late-night show and starts telling jokes that aren’t funny. Whenever the audience fails to laugh, she starts playing with her ear and wiggling her ass—and then the crowd cracks up. But the jokes steadily get more disgusting, offensive, and depressing—sexism, anti-Semitism, you name it. The audience gradually becomes unsure how to react, and the woman’s performance concludes when she announces that she’s been diagnosed with cancer.

*Hilarious* can be regarded as Rosen’s only true fiction film to date (*Dr. Cross* notwithstanding) because it involves no documentary element. Everything down to the tiniest laugh is staged—even the T-shirts were tailor-made. As the comedian, Hani Furstenberg gives a devastating performance: all the confusion and pain is there in her forced smile, her need to please, her often puzzled, disturbed, and despairing expressions. *Hilarious* hurts. Here, it’s the soul, not the ass, that’s black and blue at the end. □



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