



From "Alma", Alma No. 3 with Franz Werfel. She once hurled "your degenerate Jewish seed" at Werfel, and Sobol took this further and has his Alma say, "What can come of your rotten seed?"

What made Alma Mahler such a magnet for geniuses? The Alma without whom Gustav Mahler couldn't live, the woman Walter Gropius couldn't refuse, the lover with whom Franz Werfel committed adultery before they married, the muse in whose image Oskar Kokoschka made a life-sized doll? An astonishing theatrical event, after Joshua Sobol's play, did not provide Sarit Fuchs with solutions, just the opposite. Small wonder it has become a cult production.

TO KNOW A WOMAN

by Sarit Fuchs

What made Alma Mahler such a magnet for geniuses? The Alma without whom Gustav Mahler couldn't live, the woman Walter Gropius couldn't refuse, the lover with whom Franz Werfel committed adultery before they married, the muse in whose image Oskar Kokoschka made a life-sized doll? An astonishing theatrical event, after Joshua Sobol's play, did not provide Sarit Fuchs with solutions, just the opposite. Small wonder it has become a cult production.

"Alma", a theatrical journey in the footsteps of Alma Mahler who was the lover (and in some cases also the wife) of four artists of genius in the course of the 20th century, is one of the wildest and most staggering artistic events you will ever have the chance to see. But perhaps I am not the most credible witness to report on the thrill evoked by the event written by Joshua Sobol and directed by Paulus Manker, because I was raped in its closing scene (women's organizations, hold your horses until you read all the facts). It happened in Semmering, a resort town in the Alps an hour away from Vienna, in a kind of sanatorium that had been abandoned for years and whose carved wood splendour was rotting amid a green and refreshing landscape, and whose name in German is "Kurhaus". The building was chosen as the site for a theatrical journey of an audience of 250 guests. For three hours they are invited to wander through a labyrinth of 13 rooms, with each guest choosing which room he will enter, and when, because "Alma" is not only a journey into the soul of a woman who enriched and destroyed men in her own mysterious way, but also a visit to the remains of a life that no longer exists. The setting of the rooms whose walls are crumbling and musty shimmers in the light of dripping candles in old tasselled candelabra, sometimes with the addition of the statue of a boy capped with a lampshade, just the way the adorned men loved it at the beginning of the 20th century, and still does. But now, after two world wars, its adornments are covered with a thick layer of evil. The furnishings, the carpets, the chaises longues and the velvet armchairs are threadbare and broken, junk like a rusted birdcage or an old gramophone, withered bouquets, old photographs on the walls and yellowing scores written by Gustav Mahler, Alma's first husband, are evidence that this place is an archive of a period that decayed in its own splendour and declined into the power of its lusts.

Here, that is, there, is where my rape took place. As I mentioned, it was in the closing scene, the orgiastic scene of Alma and the men in her life who, unlike in all the other scenes, now feel a need to abuse her, take her out of the domain in which she controls them, for only as a doll do her sparkling, proud blue eyes cease to mesmerise them. The men are musician Gustav Mahler, architect Walter Gropius, artist Gustav Klimt, director of the Vienna Burgtheater Max Burckhard, and composer Alexander Zemlinsky. I have quite possibly got the number wrong because after a few moments my senses became somewhat blurred. The figure they are abusing is a life-sized effigy of Alma, with full buttocks and thighs, a pudenda thick with greying hair, and erect red nipples on perfect breasts, looking as though someone had just finished suckling on them.

The doll is not a perverted invention of either Joshua Sobol or Paulus Manker, because there was such a doll in real life. Austrian artist Oskar Kokoschka, who Alma Mahler drove out of her life after a life replete with intercourse and mutual admiration, and which was thus too dangerous for her, lost his sanity. For years he wallowed in obsessive longing for her and gave the world several wonderful paintings depicting male helplessness at Alma's side. The most famous is "Bride of the Wind" in which a man and woman are floating in a bed of purplish leaves, in a kind of storm, with no grasp on anything, not even on one another, the woman lying somewhat remotely, and the man's face is turned towards an unseen point. After their separation, when he returned from the First World War in which he was wounded, Kokoschka sent a doll-maker a detailed nude of Alma, with her sharp, somewhat evil nose, her luxuriant hair and, of course, her full thighs and buttocks. He drove the doll in his carriage through Dresden, took it to the opera and the theatre until he had had enough of this ludicrous performance, which was also a kind of exorcism, and he asked some friends to a party where he invited them to have their way with it. They finally beheaded it and threw it away.



But I am in Semmering, in the closing scene, and in another moment I shall be raped. The room in which the last-but-one scene of this three-and-a-half hour journey, including dinner, takes place contains, like the other rooms, a few seats. The early-comers sit down, the others stand. It was the third successive evening I had been a guest at the play, and yes, I was definitely somewhat spellbound and also exhausted. The dank air imprisoned in the sanatorium is not clear mountain air, so I sat on a marble slab by the fireplace. I followed Kokoschka, who is played by Manker himself, a noted Viennese theatre and cinema director who is both admired and provocative, touching the doll with yearning and anger, stroking (or stirring) the grey pubic hair with impressive skill, asking the maid Reserl to part the doll's legs, dancing with the two women: Reserl moving the doll as the three of them merge. The next moment Reserl comes onstage embarrassedly naked, her body bent double, and offers herself as a substitute for the phantom Alma, "so she should no longer pursue you in your dreams and torture and depress you. It hurts me to see you suffer". But Kokoschka is captive to Alma's image that torments him and he rejects the groaning woman. I was making a note in my red notebook when suddenly Alma's lovers ran towards the fireplace, in gold masks and blackened eyes, the doll in their arms, and before I could move they laid the Alma doll on top of me and fucked her violently. This was where they do it every time, and as we know, order must be preserved. Theater über Alles.

Perhaps it was all intentional, a kind of staged accident demonstrating the degree to which their event is capable of nullifying the boundaries between actor and audience? The demonstration was without doubt total. And who knows, nobody ever apologized to me, perhaps their train of ecstasy was speeding so fast it didn't manage to stop in time? It made no difference to me. I didn't enjoy it at all. The blows



Alma No. 1 with Gustav Mahler. "My soul, I have kissed your tiny slippers a thousand times, and stood at your door filled with burning passion", he wrote to her when he learned of her affair with Gropius

hurt me. I was short of air. The minutes were like eternity, I sobbed quietly, my hat, a black velvet beret, shook under the doll's rump. To the side I could only see Gustav Klimt, played by an actor whose trance in the previous scenes had scared me, his arched body movements similar to those in Klimt's paintings, eagerly thrusting his pelvis at the doll, which by that time was me.

Yet from the depths of my post-traumatic situation, and out of a certain dignity, I again claim that "Alma", a production that has become an international cult show in Vienna, Berlin, Lisbon, Venice, Los Angeles, and is now on its way to Israel, is a sensational phenomenon in its transitions from human greatness to human weakness, its wonderful acting achievements with the quality of cinematic close-ups, its dark morbidity, its joie de vivre, its adventurousness, the risks it takes, its poking fun at the femme fatale myth, and in fact, at all and any myths.

Rocking Mahler's Heart

Alma Schindler, born in 1879, was noted in her native Vienna for her beauty at the turn of the century, during the Hapsburg reign. Who judged the competition? Apparently admiring men in stovepipe hats who visited her parents' home, or those who watched her strolling at the tranquil, glorious pre-world war Viennese pace, in a beribboned dress, a frilled collar around her neck, hips corset-bound, drinking in the admiring glances along Vienna's main streets with false pleasure. Or perhaps she met them when, with her parents and their friends, they went to Café Central and Griensteidl with their velvet couches, golden curtains, crystal chandeliers, ornamented cornices, and their selection of mouth-watering tortes.

At the turn of the century Vienna's men of culture, and not only them, frequented cafés to earnestly discuss plays that had made headlines. They discussed Freud's new theories on human sexuality. Sexuality? How daring! In voluptuary Vienna they spoke only of erotica until the advent of Freud. And perhaps they mentioned Vienna's bestseller, *Sex and Character*, by the young Jewish philosopher Otto Weininger, who took his own life. In his book, the self-hate-filled Weininger claimed that Judaism resembled femininity: they were both weak and saccharine-sweet, lacked identity, character and will. The Viennese anti-Semites, who were still relatively well mannered, loved every word. And there can be no doubt that in those same cafés they talked about the tall, black-bearded "King of Zion", the eccentric journalist Theodor Herzl, who spoke about Zionism, and who knew if he wasn't bad for the Jews. For the Jews of complacent and sensual Vienna were so involved in intellectual high society - some even converted in order to integrate into it - they

were unable to even contemplate the approaching catastrophe. "They were content to be ministering angels in the splendour of the Viennese firmament", wrote Stefan Zweig with thinly veiled irony in his *World of Yesterday*. The Jews that shone in the skies of Vienna were musicians like Mahler and Arnold Schoenberg, writers like Arthur Schnitzler and Zweig, theatre people like Max Reinhardt and many others: painters, architects and journalists.

Although Alma Schindler-Mahler-Gropius-Werfel was an anti-Semite, she married two Jews: Mahler, who converted to Christianity in order to become director of the Vienna State Opera, but remained a Jew in Alma's eyes, and writer Franz Werfel, her third husband, with whom she lived for almost 30 years. Her second marriage, to architect Walter Gropius, made her happy by virtue of the Aryan purity of the match. If the stories are true, she once hurled "your degenerate Jewish seed" at Werfel, and Sobol took this further and has his Alma say, "What can come of your rotten seed?" In the Sobol/Manker event Alma says, "I can't live with them and I can't live without them".

Beyond the qualities that photographed so well only in rare portraits, Alma apparently carried herself proudly and possessed a hypnotic blue gaze. One of the reasons for her rare and flattering concentration on an interlocutor was mild deafness resulting from jaundice. Her father, who died when she was a child, was a famous Austrian landscape painter, while her mother gave up a singing career. After her father's death her mother married one of his pupils and her salon continued to be frequented by the cultural elite of the time. Alma revealed a prominent musical talent; she composed lieder and hoped to become a conductor.

Before she met Mahler there were apparently three men who were in love with her: the artist Klimt, her teacher the composer Zemlinsky, and the theatre director Burckhard. The short, bespectacled Mahler, with his open face, was 19 years her senior. Perhaps Alma imagined how she would develop as a musician in his company, but Mahler had a different delusion. He wanted a woman who would merge with him to such a degree that she would feel his music as well as her own. In other words, there is no room for two musicians in the same house, he told her, and Alma accepted his terms. Her relinquishment of her unique, intimate voice is, of course, a key to understanding her world.

They had two daughters, one of whom, Maria, died of diphtheria when she was five, while during that period Mahler was diagnosed with heart disease. He was immersed in composing and conducting (the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra and the Vienna State Opera Orchestra), travelling to concerts, sometimes without Alma, and he sent



Gustav Mahler, Alma's first husband, with their daughter Maria

Alma the diva shouts reprovingly: "I am filled with sperm, I am filled with sperm, and I'm proud of it. I'm filled to the top of my head. My brain swims in a sea of sperm. It oozes from my ears, my nostrils, leaks from all my orifices ... What do you want, I have lived a full life!" Ecstatic, Alma exits to the courtyard and there, on a kind of illuminated glass altar, she shouts that she is reaching orgasm.



Alma Schindler as a mesmerising young woman, 1900-1901

פניו: תמונת מנחם פרידמן, תמונת גוסטב מאהר: תמונת מנחם פרידמן



Alma with Walter Gropius, her second husband, and their daughter Manon



Alma No. 2 with Walter Gropius. She had never shown interest in his socialistic architectural revolution, which was designed to ease the lot of the masses, for the masses were of no interest to her



Alma with Franz Werfel, her third husband

her educational literary sermons devoid of emotion. For example, "A person must always make the best of what he has and become used to his attacks of melancholia by thinking of the disasters befalling the world. Had I not behaved in this manner, I would have wept and sighed all the time and come home as thin as a salted herring". How odd for a composer about whom one of his fellows, Karlheinz Stockhausen, said that his wonderful music encompassed the entire gamut of emotions of a man of this world, "from the most angelic, to the most bestial", and that Freud, too, was amazed by the depth of his knowledge of his psychoanalytical theory.

Mahler noticed his lonely wife's distress but did not recognise the force of the warning. On the advice of a doctor who thought that living with such an intense character as Mahler was difficult for her, he sent her to the spa at Tobelbad. The same doctor was unaware that Mahler suffered from a lack of intensity in the region of his loins, or so Alma, the public relations officer of her own sex life, claimed in her memoirs.

Meanwhile, Alma left Gropius and attended her husband until his death. It would be easy to describe the death poetically as caused by heartbreak, and perhaps that is the way it was.

Burnt by Kokoschka's Fire

Then the Austrian painter Oskar Kokoschka, who was six years her junior, came into her life, and she invited him to her home to paint her portrait. The sensual, handsome Kokoschka, who believed that his genius had not yet been recognised, felt that the young widow had fallen in love with him at first sight. What seemed to be his enthusiasm for the mirror that reflected his self-love, that is, Alma as the mirror, became an obsession with theatrical hues. He quickly proposed marriage in the strangest way: "Offer me a sacrifice and be my wife", and also, "You must save me so I can be the one who will truly elevate you, not humiliate you". Interesting. Normal men offer wealth and happiness, artists speak the truth, and perhaps artists like Kokoschka in particular.

Kokoschka, whose sexual ardour was described as 'animal vitality', rebelled against the harmonious decorative refinements of his contemporaries and burned with his own unadorned truth, and so he never pretended when he came to his beloved. He was considered an expressionist artist who painted the soul rather than the body, and liberated himself in the ritual of his own creations. Viennese writer Karl Kraus said of him that whenever there is a fire, Kokoschka throws the safety net into it.

Alma, who was in love with him, could not withstand this force, the fits of jealousy, the physical possessiveness, the intermingling of life and art. With their relationship Kokoschka threatened her power, her upright posture, the shape of her rigid, upturned jaw. When she became pregnant by him she wrote in her diary: "He causes me to lose my momentum... he made me ill - for years... and yet he gives me so much pleasure, too much". In the First World War Kokoschka enlisted in the Austrian army, sought his death but was only badly wounded.

In her search for a worthy husband Alma remembered Gropius, even though she had never shown interest in his socialistic architectural revolution, which was designed to ease the lot of the masses, for the masses were of no interest to her. According to her diary, she wept for days and nights in Berlin until her intended husband fell in love with her again. It seems that Alma was not chosen, but chose.

Gropius spent most of their marriage at the front, they had a daughter named Manon (who died of polio at 18), and Alma felt neglected. The stormy passion of the Kokoschka

At Tobelbad, apparently wearing a pristine white scented robe, Alma met Gropius, the German architect who changed the architectural thinking of his time. He abandoned the ornate Prussian style and turned to more modest forms, the clean and simple style. He was a handsome man who would establish the Bauhaus movement. After several nights, or days, of lovemaking, then parting, Gropius sent Alma a love letter begging her to leave her previous life. But instead of addressing it to her he wrote on the envelope 'To Herr Gustav Mahler'. Mahler, stunned by the revelation (and the depth of artists' vision is likely to become blindness when their nearest and dearest are involved), went to see Sigmund Freud. It was an abridged analysis session of four hours, which is partially documented and enabled authors of books on Mahler or his wife to imagine it, and Sobol, too, makes it into an amusing scene in which some Yiddish is used, when Mahler says 'shmock' instead of 'shock', and thus matters are immediately clarified.

Mahler returned from his session with Freud with a certain insight, which made his wife miserable, because according to it he was only capable of loving a woman like his own tormented, sick mother, an insight that came too late, because his health was deteriorating. With his last remaining strength he enveloped his wife with declarations of love and sweet gestures (for example, a credit note for the purchase of a diamond nestling in a bed of roses). He left notes on her bedside table: "My soul, I have kissed your tiny slippers a thousand times". The sharp transition from controlling her to submission and dependence only heightened her longing for Gropius.

The facts say that the artists who lived with her blossomed and flourished. How did she accelerate their spiritual metabolism? For example, she closed her doors in order to send them to work. She promised Kokoschka she would only marry when he had created his masterpiece. She sent Werfel to write a daily quota of pages before she would go to bed with him

Alma became pregnant by Werfel, and one night he visited her bedroom, when her husband Gropius was away at the war. She was seven months pregnant. Their over-stormy sexual union caused her to expel a premature baby next morning. A kind of human that was tormented for several months.

days was far too distant, until at the home of friends she met the portly Jewish writer Franz Werfel, a native of Prague and member of Kafka's coterie, and her life underwent a monstrous turnabout. Alma became pregnant by Werfel, and on one of those nights generally termed 'horrifying', he visited her bedroom in the Semmering house, when her husband Gropius was away at the war. Alma was seven months pregnant. In the room below slept her daughters, Anna and Manon. Their over-stormy sexual union caused her to expel a premature baby next morning. Martin was his name for the ten short months of his life. He was a kind of human that was tormented for several months, holes were bored into his skull in attempts to save him, and he apparently suffered from progeria, a premature, monstrous old man. The trauma of Martin pursues the audience in numerous forms throughout the theatrical journey I saw at Semmering, to which we shall return shortly.

Alma and Werfel, who was 11 years younger than her, lived together until his death in 1945, and it was Alma who initiated their flight to the United States with the rise of Nazism. It was during their life together that he wrote his masterpiece about the Armenian holocaust, *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*, and other works, for which he won several awards. He died of a heart attack; she lived to age 85, surrounded by pictures and mementoes of her lovers (there were other men, too, among them a biologist, and a theologian who was 37 when Alma was 53). In her last years she enjoyed the royalties from Mahler's works, whom she had not appreciated as a musician, and who became popular, inter alia, thanks to Maestro Leonard Bernstein. She never suffered neediness; she had homes in Venice, Semmering (which I never went to as I had been warned that the present occupants were sick and tired of Peeping Toms), Vienna, Southern Austria, and more.

Bewitching All Who See Her

What was Alma's power of attraction? What is attraction? Oh, if only we knew something of this attribute we would practice it. It was said that her body temperature was half a degree higher than that of a normal person. Perhaps it was a certain body scent? There is a Viennese man who Sobol and Manker met, but whose name they have forgotten, who grew up in an orphanage. When he was twelve he was given the task of presenting a bouquet to Alma Mahler who had come for a visit. The 53-year-old Alma buried the boy's head between her breasts, he got an erection, and since then has been bewitched. He collects items associated with her and does not stop thinking about her. Sobol put him into "Alma" under the name of 'Almaniac'. "We did not fall in love with Alma, but we did develop a little respect," Paulus Manker said in one of our conversations. And indeed, there is no point in looking for a moral stance in "Alma". It is grotesquerie that illuminates life from its beautiful ugly side, not the moral one.

We are, of course, entitled to argue that Alma was manipulative and immoral, attributes that act as a love potion on certain men, but the facts say that the artists who lived with her blossomed and flourished. How did she accelerate their spiritual metabolism? For example, she closed her doors in order to send them to work. She promised Kokoschka she would only marry when he had created his masterpiece. She sent Werfel to write a daily quota of pages before she would go to bed with him.

It may be assumed that Alma planted seeds of admiration in the garden of her relationships, hoed the ego bed, and stroked the plants with a surrendering body. Perhaps she knew the secret of the correct measure of surrender and abstinence, of giving without being a victim and maintaining boundaries, and that being so, she was a genius worthy of all her geniuses. And yet throughout her life she drank Benedictine, a liqueur based on brandy and French herbs, apparently to the point of addiction, which attests to distress, perhaps as a consequence of the gaping emptiness in her life from the day she gave up her voice as an artist. One of "Alma's" most beautiful monologues is the one on losing her voice: "I had a voice, a soft and delicate voice, I had a voice than sang within

me... But I did not protect my voice... To this day my voice is choked inside me, broken, torn, shattered. If I open my mouth, if I once should open my mouth, a cry will emerge from it such as the world has never heard. The cry of a woman, of millions of women whose voice has been stifled by weak men." And what does the fact that the male artists in Alma's life were particularly humanistic tell us? The way in which Mahler expressed the human instinct for destruction; Gropius' social democracy; Kokoschka's rebelling at decorative harmony in favour of life as it is, in all its nakedness; and Werfel's dedication to exposing the fate of the Armenians annihilated by the Turks. Alma's choice of men like them speaks for itself. Or perhaps it doesn't.

Sobol and Manker's "Alma" is probably the last event that will provide answers to these enigmas. It is a journey of possibilities. What you see and hear about Alma in one room may be turned upside down in the next. Perhaps this is why people keep coming to see it again and again. I saw them queuing up in the Panhans Hotel in Semmering, a memento of the splendour of the good old days, carrying a small overnight bag, addressing the receptionist in a proud, erotic tone of voice, "We've come for 'Alma'!" One Viennese psychiatrist has seen it eight times, and he's not the only one. One legendary Austrian has logged 73 visits to the show. A myth that has definitely become an epidemic.

Each evening four actresses simultaneously play the role of Alma. Three Almas, in identical costume, who play her between the ages of 20 and 50, and the aged Alma, a diva, a 128-year-old ghost, who opens and closes the event, which is actually a kind of birthday party for Alma. None of the younger actresses looks like a femme fatale, and Manker (and costume designer Nina Ball) has intentionally dressed them in a simple, blue striped cotton dress, which is so banal as not to be perceived in the consciousness, so that we remain with the core of the exposed actress, with the actress playing Alma close to us, revealing all her dramatic power. And also every mark on her face.

The acting is dangerous for everybody. The actors have to fight for our attention to stop us running to another room. We, too, take risks. Have we come into the right room, or should we perhaps leave? But wherever you go you will always experience a random incursion into the heart of a human life at crucial moments, and the chain of events creates a scene taking place in psychic time, more real and fascinating than time itself.

At one and the same time "Alma" is a casino, surfing the Internet with the freedom of choice to change your source of information, and also a carnival in which order is disrupted, people dress up and change identities (Almaniac, yes, that maniac, changes costume and body language and becomes Sigmund Freud, for example). In the corridors connecting the rooms, young people are focused on their earpieces, which are perhaps also microphones, timing the events in the different rooms, telling the actors to either slow down or go faster, so that each audience will leave all the rooms together for Mahler's funeral, with its torches and fire, in the courtyard, and then re-enter the building for his wake. Thus, at the end of the evening, the audiences will flow from all the rooms for the final scene, virtually together.

So Afraid of Weakness

I can only report fragmentarily on this tour of the play. There were occasions when I intended following one of the Almas, but lost my way in the forest of milling guests, some even hobbling bravely on crutches, like pilgrims on their way to the light.

I categorized the three Almas thus: the sharp-nosed sexy one with the black hair, the young blonde one (who, incidentally, speaks English, not German) who is a tremendously powerful actress capable of changing her form: very young, aging, or a leather-clad lesbian. And the third Alma, mature, red-haired, who played Otto Weininger's



Oskar Kokoschka, the intense lover

My rape took place in the closing scene, the orgiastic scene of Alma and the men in her life. The figure they are abusing is a life-sized effigy of Alma, with full buttocks and thighs, a pudenda thick with greying hair, and erect red nipples on perfect breasts, looking as though someone had just finished suckling on them.

People keep coming to see it again and again, queuing up in the hotel carrying a small overnight bag, addressing the receptionist in a proud, erotic tone of voice, "We've come for 'Alma'!" One Viennese psychiatrist has seen it eight times, and one legendary spectator has logged 73 visits to the show.



Oskar Kokoschka, "Lovers", 1913. Alma and Kokoschka's love affaire on canvas



Director Paulus Manker.
Enjoying the role of Kokoschka

Sometime during the three days I saw Kokoschka in a frenzy of passion, in orange-gold, somewhat clownish clothes, trying to seduce Alma on the table. "Oh, Alma, you sweet bitch in-heat!" "No, don't touch me! You walk past me and I get pregnant".



Playwright Joshua Sobol. Surprising texts

VIVA THE DIVA

"Alma" is due to take part in the next Israel Festival. Dana International, they want you in the cast

Paulus Manker, the director of "Alma" who also plays the role of Kokoschka, directed the Viennese version of "The Soul of a Jew" in 1998 and played the role of Otto Weininger. His mother, Hilde Sochor, a prominent actress in Austria, played Weininger's mother and bathed him in the nude. Manker's father told him that his great-grandfather was Jewish, in other words he is one-eighth Jewish according to his calculations. During production of that play a friendship was forged between Sobol, the son of farmers from Tel Mond, who for years has been exploring in his plays the prospects of Israeli culture and Zionism competing against the tenacious force of Judaism, and Manker, son of the former director of the Volkstheater.

Sobol and Manker collaborated on the production of a play after Niklas Frank, son of the Nazi governor-general of Poland who was prosecuted in the Nuremberg trials and executed, who loathes his father with alarming intensity. In the play, which was staged in 1995, the audience was seated in a huge gallery on a revolving stage that went up and down. Manker once honoured the anti-Semitic mayor of Vienna, Jörg Haider, with the epithet "Fascist Swine". Haider demanded that the trashy production about Frank's son be taken off, and he was vociferous and tempestuous, just the way Manker likes it.

Manker is now headed for Jerusalem. He is raising funds for "Alma" to come to Israel next spring. A tribute to Israel's 60th anniversary celebrations. The Israel Festival has already booked the play. The production will be performed in Hebrew and English, and perhaps in Yiddish as well, and will be partially recast. In Manker's wild fantasy Yosef (Tomy) Lapid will play Freud, Dana International will be Alma the diva, and Itay Tiran one of the men in Alma's life (probably Mahler).

doppelgänger in Sobol's "The Last Night of Otto Weininger" that was staged in Vienna in 1989 (and which was called in Israel "The Soul of a Jew").

On the first evening I found myself in one of the event's most moving scenes. I was in a room with a small bed, a small wooden cot, with teddy bears and withered shrubs in pots. The third Alma, the mature one, played Alma's daughter Anna. Anna confessed to her mother's third husband, Franz Werfel, that she heard the nocturnal noises on the night he had sex with her mother and Baby Martin was prematurely expelled from Alma's womb. "You actually gave me my freedom when I was fourteen," the 40-year-old Anna tells him as she sits on the bed like a child. She means that it was on that night she realized that she was allowed not to love her mother, and that there are impossible situations in the world. Anna recalls, "And then I woke up in the middle of the night. I heard strange sounds and voices coming from Mama's bedroom. I didn't recognise her voice, it was hoarse, throaty and wild. I thought she was calling for help, but something in her voice sent me a different message. Then I recognised your voice, that warm velvety tenor... and then she called out your name again, 'Oh, Franzl, this is a crime, you're a murderer, Franzl, oh, God...'" and more poetry like that. It went on for an eternity, over and over, and each time I thought it was over it began again ..." (My translation, here and throughout this piece - S.F.).

Anna goes on to tell him how she finally fell asleep with her young sister Manon, who was with her, how in the morning the maid called her to her haemorrhaging mother, how Werfel was running around hysterically and how it was she who called the doctor to the house in Semmering, and also calmed Werfel down. "Poor little Martin. He never had a chance; it was as if he'd been knocked out into the world. He was such a piteous baby... always crying in his tiny weak voice. When he died ten months later, she didn't even come to his funeral from Berlin. She is so afraid of weakness".

As I left the room, past the dry shrubs, I discovered a transparent white coffin with a wooden baby doll, one of its legs amputated, inside. On the coffin was a white ribbon bearing the legend, "Auf Wiedersehen, Martin".

On another day and at a different time I was inside a bus waiting outside for passengers for Palestine. Franz Werfel and Alma did indeed travel to the region in 1925 and 1929, following Werfel's interest in the Jewish pioneers there. Throughout the journey, Alma, the mature red-haired one again, berated and reprimanded her Franzl, who vanished momentarily as the howls of hyenas emerged from the shrubs. We got off the bus and saw a scene of ridiculousness and sadness: Paul, a Jewish pioneer in his twenties, was making a pass at the almost 50-year-old Alma without really meaning it. She is no longer a human being, but an object. Alma senses that he is making fun of her, they stand facing one another in a kind of empty hut, each grasping a torch, and Alma almost goes crazy with her own emptiness: "Stop it, you madman, I want to get out of this insane country... leave me alone, you babe... I want to die, I disgust myself... I don't want to be a woman... I hate being a woman. I'm a monster". You can understand her. Paul explains that all he hoped for was to fall in love with her in order to fill the sense of emptiness he feels in Palestine, to stimulate himself anew: "I so much wanted to come to this country. I told myself: If you do such an important deed, in the end you'll be a man, with great ideals, a history, morals. And here I am, and it didn't happen...so when I saw you I said to myself: Yes! Fall in love with Alma, it will finally fill you up with something".

On another day at another time, or perhaps it was the same day, I was in the lobby with its bar, when Lilly Lieser, the wealthy lesbian who was in love with Alma and tried to seduce her, and is played by the blonde, English-speaking Alma, screams at the aged Alma, the glamorous blonde diva. She mocks Alma for throwing away her

mind onto the garbage heap of every passing genius and turning her body into a toilet, a container for the sperm of every fucking genius. The aged Alma protests and delivers the speech of the Don Juan who is capable of loving several men at the same time: "I wish I had a thousand hearts", she says, "no, I cannot freeze my heart in the face of a young star that appears in my firmament". Alma the diva, whose red lipstick is smudged on her face, shouts reprovingly: "I am filled with sperm, I am filled with sperm, and I'm proud of it. I'm filled to the top of my head. My brain swims in a sea of sperm. It oozes from my ears, my nostrils, leaks from all my orifices... What do you want, I have lived a full life!" Ecstatic, Alma exits to the courtyard and there, on a kind of illuminated glass altar, she shouts that she is reaching orgasm. I remember the conversation I had with Josefina Platt, the red-haired Alma, in her dressing room before the show: "When I look at Sobol, this guru filled with tranquillity, I can never believe that he writes texts like these", she said. I can't believe it either.

Sometime during the three days I saw Kokoschka in a frenzy of passion, in orange-gold, somewhat clownish clothes, trying to seduce Alma on the table. "Oh, Alma, you sweet bitch in-heat!" "No, don't touch me! You walk past me and I get pregnant". When Alma tells him she is going to terminate her pregnancy he goes crazy and throws a chair.

Paulus Manker, who plays Kokoschka as a man in his own element, takes extremely dangerous risks with himself. It seemed to me that he is never sure whether he will lose control. When he runs around waving a lit candlestick, I take to my heels and find myself in an empty room. This is where Kokoschka lay wounded when he came back from the war. His helmet is on the table. On a white enamel plate there is a blood-soaked wad of cotton wool. They say that for years Kokoschka kept the cotton wool soaked with the blood of his aborted baby. Manker has kept the blood. And again the baby doll with its amputated leg, the aborted child is on a stand, the exact replica of the unfortunate Baby Martin who is yet to be born.

In the corridor in which hang pictures of Alma and her men, and some Kokoschka paintings, my attention is caught by a picture of her in her old age with Werfel, at the door of their Beverly Hills home; a fat, satiated couple, without a hint of beauty, a harridan with a hard, fallen face, together with a Humpty Dumpty with a huge egg-shaped paunch. Not a vestige of the sex appeal, just the desperate closeness of aging people. Once, when Alma claimed in the company of friends that she didn't believe that the Jews of Europe were being exterminated, Werfel shouted, "What do you expect from this cow!"

A Nostalgic Journey to a Golden Era

This how I wandered, haunted, for three nights in the Semmering sanatorium that once hosted the elite of Vienna that included numerous Jews, like the Rothschilds. And with the same generosity it later hosted Nazi VIPs until it began dying, until the arrival of "Alma" this summer to recall its past splendour.

During the meal a small orchestra played "Bei Mir Bist Du Schejn" ("You are Beautiful To Me") and an Israeli melody, "Od Nashuva El Nigun Atik" ("We Shall Return To The Ancient Melody"). My neighbours at the table were a dignified Viennese doctor and his beautiful wife. The doctor told me, "You must understand that for us this is a pilgrimage to what Austro-Hungary once was. It was a melting pot of cultures, and to this day we live in the cultural heritage of Jews like Mahler, Werfel, Freud, and Schnitzler. It is a nostalgic journey to an unrepeated golden era".

I think I understood him. Vienna misses its Jews. I thought about this quietly as I fell upon the layered cream cake swimming in blueberry sauce. Next day I walked along Berggasse where both Freud and Herzl once lived. The street gleamed with noble beauty on a sun-drenched day. I shed a few tears of humiliation.

Translated from the Hebrew by Anthony Berris and Margalit Rodgers