



**RECURRING ROLES: Avital Manor-Peleg on being Cultural Affairs Attache for the Consulate
General of Israel to New England by David Gardner
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Avital Manor-Peleg on being Cultural Affairs Attaché for the Consulate General of Israel to New England Interview transcribed by David Gardner, June 18, 2011

Preamble:

Meeting at Ted Miltenberger's villa in St. Jeannet, France, near Nice, to plan ISTA's forthcoming summer theatre programme (the Academy, formerly Encore!), Sally Robertson, David Gardner and Ted seized the opportunity to talk to dear-friend-cum-ISTA-staff-member-turned-diplomat, Avital Manor-Peleg. What follows is a transcript of the conversation in the best Warholian tradition (eat your heart out, Bianca Jagger!). Avital first began working with ISTA in 2001, in Hong Kong, where her husband had been posted as a diplomat. After returning to Israel and completing a Masters in theatre arts, writing on the role of mask work in community theatre, she was named director of The Puppetry Arts School in Holon, Israel. A year ago, she was appointed Cultural Affairs Attaché of Israel to New England and moved her family to Boston, MA. [Editors' note: Avital agreed the full interview should be 'on-the-record'; no portion is reproduced without her knowledge or consent.]

Interview

Ted Miltenberger: Now we're recording you!

Avital Manor-Peleg: Come on, you cannot record me because I can't see you yet, I just see David's picture [on Skype].

David Gardner: You see what? You just see me?

AMP: There is no video.

DG: There we go.

Sally Robertson: Can you see now?

AMP: Yes.

SR: Hello Boston!

DG: How the hell did you become the Israeli cultural attaché in Boston?

AMP: First, you know, I can only see you here and there, but you look so beautiful. Very nice. Nice visit in Ted's house.

DG/SR: Yes, it is!

AMP: Okay. This conversation is only going to continue on the condition that you promise one day to invite me...

TM: You are invited any day.

AMP: I know, but the problem is...

SR: But the promise is that we now make it happen...

AMP: It would be wonderful to see you all there.

DG: We promise to make it happen. The video image is kind of bad, so I think I'm going to kill the video alright?

AMP: Awww...

DG: You want me to leave it?

AMP: I want to see you guys...

DG: Okay, then we'll leave it, we'll just deal with it.

AMP: You aren't seeing me properly?

DG: Yeah, we are.

TM: You're beautiful!

SR: Yeah!!

TM: Oh, that's even better.

DG: Yeah.

SR: Look at you!

AMP: Yes, I'm ready.

DG: How is life?

AMP: Challenging as always. You can start recording now.

DG: How is life? How did you become the cultural attaché of Boston, Avital? How did that happen?

AMP: I will just remind you that fifteen years ago, my husband was a diplomat working in the [foreign] ministry, so the diplomatic life is not entirely new to me. Now we've changed the roles, since I did it once, being the diplomat's wife, now we've changed roles, and I am the diplomat and he is my...

DG: Diplomat's wife.

AMP: Yes. Last year I was assigned to the job here in the U.S. As you know, my previous job was a wonderful, great challenge as director of the puppetry school in Israel. It was a very, very intensive two years, and it was almost heart-breaking to leave that job. But it's not the first time that life has given me challenges and surprises, and once we decided that we were going to take this opportunity, traveling away from Israel, I sent my CV to the department of cultural diplomacy in Israel. They received my CV and the timing was perfect, because the cultural attaché who had been serving here was leaving, so the position was open. It was really nice timing.

DG: So you were ready to leave the school? It was hard, but you had made that decision? Had somebody approached you and said 'time to think about applying to the diplomatic corps'?

AMP: Yes. You know, when we discussed it, I told [my husband] Gal that if I was going to leave my previous job, either it would be to serve as a cultural attaché, or to pursue a PhD, or to devote myself to becoming the best cook ever – for me those were the three best options.

SR: What was the third?

DG: Cooking?

AMP: Yes – to really become a great chef – I mean chef at home, of course.

TM: Of course.

AMP: To serve my kids the best dishes ever. One of those three options had to happen.

DG: Who is making your hummus now that you're in the States?

AMP: I'm making it myself!

(*TM laughs*)

AMP: So now I'm combining all three of these together!

SR: So do you miss teaching? Do you miss the practical, hands on...

AMP: Definitely, oh my god. I do. Just a week ago I took the challenge of doing a workshop – in my position as diplomatic attaché, I'm touching all areas of the arts, which is amazing, because it's architecture, film, visual arts, dance and theatre of course, so there is something – the umbrella is much richer now, and even for me, over here, I have a new perspective of Israeli culture within this big umbrella, so it's wonderful. And what's happened here is that there were no connections between Israel and New England regarding puppetry, so I decided to search around a bit for what was happening locally, so I can still use my previous knowledge and experience to make these connections... oh my god, Ted.

TM: What?

AMP: You look gorgeous, how can I continue this interview looking at you, with your shirt open... you're flirting, come on... Anyway, I found a very nice small and unique theatre space here, and I approached them about different kinds of collaboration, bringing Israeli puppeteers here, and sending the artistic director from Boston to Israel, there is a great international puppet festival taking place in Jerusalem. Again part of my work is to do these exchanges, not just to bring Israeli culture here to the U.S. but also to make sure that there are exchanges on both sides, so that the roots will be stronger. Last year, with all the discussions interviewing for this position, I couldn't hide the fact that I have a background and interest specifically in theatre. So last month, I was asked to give a mask workshop. So I talked about my work and gave a one and a half hour workshop at a puppetry theatre to a group of local artists. And I received a beautiful letter from one of the actors saying this was the most valuable diplomacy he had ever experienced, from the moment I was there giving my personal artistic view from my position as cultural attaché, it came together beautifully for them as an idea. This is part of my advantage here, because I do have my practise here. I'm thinking about how to combine these aspects more often. Along with the fact that I'm bringing other artists to Boston, I can sometimes give my own personal artistic life experience, with workshops or talks. Another time, there was an opera that was scheduled, so I asked to go to the rehearsals, not just to the performance, because I have my own experience, I can offer a different approach or interaction, not just to come for

the nice cocktail parties.

[Skype connection cuts out]

SR: Did we lose her?

[Reconnecting]

DG: Are you there?

AMP: I'm here.

DG: OK. Let's keep it up without video. I think it was taxing our connection. Alright?

AMP: OK.

DG: OK.

AMP: Can you still see me, or is it just I can't see you?

DG: No, we can't see you either, alright?

AMP: OK. So it's equal, let's go.

SR/DG: It's equal, right.

DG: But we have a very good picture of you now. It's been fixed in our head. So you were saying, you weren't just going to these fancy receptions and dress-up cocktail events, you were actually getting involved in the process of the work...

AMP: Right, I was pulling up my sleeves and touching the arts. And it's nice. I'm thinking that this is what I can bring to this position from my previous artistic profession as a teacher, as a director. And what's really great about being the cultural attaché, whatever you are, it's such a dynamic position, you can really make it the way you think it should be. If you are not neglecting the other art forms, if you're dealing with all of them, you can always put your own personal touch into it, it's beautiful. And this has been my experience here. But definitely, again, the options are great. I'm trying just to think about the last project I was involved in, there was an architecture exhibition at Harvard. Here in Boston, the academic community is very strong and we are doing a lot of cultural exchanges with the universities and colleges present here, working with young people, young adults, and it's great. I can say that this is one of the unique aspects of Boston. All the things we can do with universities.

DG: How would you define your role, your job? What is it you do, in your view?

AMP: Listen, first of all, it's a unique branch of diplomacy because it's not political. I mean, of course it's political because art in its purest form is political, it's always connected to the time and the place and the people. Of course. But it's a great opportunity to show this place and these people other forms of theatre. It's not just cultural attaché, for culture, it's cultural attaché for Israel, so it's my country, how Israel is depicted in the media, I'm not saying it's good or bad, right or wrong, but it's black and white, and it can't begin to show all the colours of the fabric of life and arts in Israel, the community and the people and the place. So art offers the unique opportunity to see those aspects, to see the people and their life.

DG: You're adding colour to the picture, in a way – adding depth to the perception and experience of Israel that people have...

AMP: Yes. Exactly. And again, it can be very political, because in the arts, in Israeli culture, we are criticizing ourselves. You can see through the arts the diverse debates coming out of Israel.

DG: That's true, there are very ambivalent films coming out of Israel. I don't know about the theatre scene... but a lot of self-critical

cinema. I'm thinking of *The Band's Visit* or *Paradise Now*, *Waltz with Bashir*, films like that.

AMP: Exactly. If you're familiar with the recent Israeli cinema, that's exactly what I mean. I was able to initiate a video art collection which was a pet project of mine, selecting 19 video artists for an exhibition. Sometimes I can be just a facilitator, to help with a production, for instance when things are happening already, and I will just sponsor them, or support them. So sometimes we initiate things, and we are more proactive about what we want to see and promote, other times people are already bringing Israeli arts to the fore, and we just make sure they have the publicity, the exposure, the support and audience. Sometimes you are just providing options to things that are already happening, you just give them a better frame. And sometimes you are building the frame and what goes into it. There is more work to that, but there is an unbelievable variety of things we can do. You can do an intimate artist's talk, or a director comes and talks to a class, or you can do a huge concert with hundreds of people. And for me both of those things are equally interesting in their opportunities to meet the people and the art. Israel is a beautiful place for the arts, it's unbelievable what's happening there. It's great.

DG: Right. Are you ever frustrated by your official capacity, obviously you've had some experience because of your husband's diplomatic experience, but has that been a shock or an adjustment for you? Or do you feel that you have a certain amount of latitude to express yourself?

AMP: Listen, I will have to admit it's much easier to be in the artist's position, when I'm not obliged to censor my words or actions at all. Here I do need to take a second thought about what I should say, what I shouldn't say. There is definitely, I can find myself in a situation where the best thing is to say nothing at all, but as you all know me...

[General laughter]

AMP: ... Even in my professional, artistic life it can be better to say nothing, I do know how to be quiet. So I haven't found myself in the position where I really wanted to shout something but had to shut my mouth. For now, it's okay. Let's see how I feel in two years. It's still fresh enough, and challenging enough just to do this job well enough, according to my standards. So regardless of everything else that may be happening, I'm focused on doing it professionally, and putting my heart into it, even if it's not my art, it's someone else's art. This is something you all know as ISTA people, working behind the scenes, giving your heart to the art of others, giving other people the opportunity to do their art. I know I can definitely share this feeling with you. I also first began feeling it in my previous position as a [school] director, placing my own art... it's putting your ego in a different position as an artist, and I feel good about it, I feel wonderful about it.

DG: About enabling or facilitating other people's artistic expression.

AMP: Yes. Then again, I know a lot of people, a lot of artists already, so I know that with my work I can count on them to go the extra mile

to expose themselves to the international scene – I think that's great. Because as you know, it's not easy to break through boundaries, and I can definitely help with my position, bringing fringe artists and arts I'm familiar with in Israel, I can do my best to help them out of the boundaries of Israel and onto the international scene.

DG: What you're saying is it's a combined effort. You can do something, but they're also making that effort to make a connection, to get out in the world. You were talking about this when you mentioned that you got to teach about masks the other day, have you felt like you've changed hearts and minds a little bit, have you made a difference?

AMP: Do you mean with the workshop I gave?

DG: For instance. But in general, I assume it's also your job to promote Israeli culture, artists' exchanges and an understanding or better understanding between artists on both sides of those boundaries.

AMP: It would be ignorant to say that I could see any changes in so small a period of time, I think that process of change is so slow, there is a continuity and you need to keep it going, it's almost Sisyphean, it's not something that you can see, necessarily. But there is a feeling, it's very fragile, and it takes time. But I'm a big fan of process, so it's not something I need to see immediately, as you do in commercial work. It suits my identity as a person, things in art and culture, things happen at a slower pace, over time. Seriously, I'm talking with you, and now I'm celebrating my ten year anniversary with ISTA, and it's unbelievable, okay, you're working hard all the time, but you look back and it's unbelievable to see what's happened in ten years with this organisation. I'm part of it, and I'm giving, it's slow, but I'm part of this big picture.

DG: Right. You're absolutely right.

AMP: So it takes time. And when I'm there, or when something is happening, I'm 100% in the moment with it, and it's great to take a walk and suddenly see in the shops an Israeli author who has been newly translated into English, it's a great feeling. Sometimes, I'm part of it, sometimes things happen without us, but we can then celebrate it more, and make sure the lights are there to shine on the work of others or the change. Things happen slowly in diplomacy. The most important thing is continuity. That it will not break. Those things will always be there in place. It's the same with friends.

DG: What's been the biggest adjustment or surprise or shock about leaving Israel and living in the United States?

AMP: Definitely the biggest shock is the change for the family life, rather than for my career. That I can manage, but the big shock was relocating with children. They needed to start over, and learn a new language. They will be finishing their first year of school next week, and they did it. They did it. They worked so hard.

DG: Are they in local schools?

AMP: Yes, local public schools. Yes. The public schools here are great.

DG: What part of town are you in?

AMP: Brookline.

DG: Very nice!

AMP: Yes. Again, the education is at a very high level in the public schools here. This was the biggest shock. Being once again so far from friends and family and your own language and culture, everything is in a big mix. I have to salute all the children that come to ISTA Festivals with their lifestyle of change, of being uprooted, it's unbelievable the challenges they face every time they have to move. And again, sorry to mention it again, but I've really come to see with new eyes the work of the ISTA organisation – it's also diplomacy. It's a global diplomacy. No one is promoting one country, but it's an idea of the world. This is what this organisation is doing, bringing the opportunity and idea of openness, listening, expressing things. It's on the table there. And this is my job, what I need to do, and I need to work hard at this. But the people in ISTA, it doesn't matter if it's the students or the teachers, the directors, the staff or the families, what they are all doing is global diplomacy, without working on that mission as such, it's just happening, and it's beautiful.

DG: I agree, that's a wonderful way of thinking about ISTA.

SR: Mm. I hadn't thought about it like that, actually.

AMP: Now that I think about it, because I have the time now to think about it this way, but I never had in the past, I'm coming to ISTA as an artist, not an Israeli artist. But still, wherever I am, I can't help also bringing my country with me, it's part of me, it's part of my identity, my identity is full of complexity and paradoxes. Part of me is always saying "I'm from Israel." And when I do a workshop, I'm not thinking about it, it's easy because it's me who is there, but suddenly I realize that it's all about focus. What side of your identity are you putting the light on? It's a question with so many layers, your gender, other things, but also the nation you come from.

[DG mumbles inaudibly to SR]

AMP: WHAT??

[TM laughs]

DG: I'm just looking to see if there's anything else I wanted to ask you...

AMP: Ted. Ted, I cannot see you but I can hear you laughing.

DG: Let's see if I can get the picture back up quickly... Can you see us? We just wanted to see you. Avital, that was wonderful. I'm just going to transcribe this, then let you see it, then we'll put it in Scene.

AMP: If you have more questions, don't hesitate to ask. And just continue to do what

you are doing, guys, because again, this is the best diplomacy, and I'm proud to be a tiny part of it. I just want you to know it. Especially from my position now, where I see it. I'm so happy I'm part of your world.

DG: So you have another two years? Is it a three year posting?

AMP: It's a three-to-five year position. Who knows? Who knows where life will take me?

Come on. I don't know, but I know that at least next year I can do one event with you. This is the stability of my life, I always know that I can do one ISTA Festival a year.

SR: I have one question, Avital.

DG: I'm going to kill the video again.

SR: Okay. So Avital, what was your perception, on arriving in Boston, of the local artistic community, what was your reading of that.

AMP: I have to say... Listen, now I will say something that you are not going to write, it's completely...

DG: Off the record...

AMP: Off the record. We'll see. Maybe you can say this. On the surface you see one thing. Now what I'm doing, like with the puppetry group, I'm trying to peel the first layer back, and then to go deeper and see all the options, the deeper forms of art that exist here. And some of them are great, but the commercial aspects are strong, you have to work hard to peel back this first layer. Which wasn't my experience in Israel. Of course, fringe will always be fringe. This is part of it, by definition, not to be in the centre. But in Israel I was more immediately aware of the variety of the arts scene. Here it takes me more time, because the commercial culture is strong, to let go of it and see smaller things rise in small, gorgeous spaces in the universities, in the community. It's part of my job, though, and this is why I decided for example to send this artistic director to Israel. When I met her, I immediately felt she was a diamond – we need to do something with these valuable people. I don't want to sound like I'm overstating my position, but there is power to diplomacy, if you are using it properly, when you're honest about the power that you wield. You can make changes.

TM: You just keep peeling that onion, young lady. Because there's a very sweet centre and you're at it.

DG: Well the United States very much has official culture, high culture, low culture and then just 'culture.' You need to grapple with the culture, it seems to me. The high culture is promising, the low culture is quite disconcerting. I'm sure you can't help but find that.

AMP: Yep.

DG: But you are in an exciting city, in many

respects.

AMP: Listen, I can't emphasize that enough, Boston, in my position, it's heaven. Heaven. The people here are marvellous, the things that are happening, with the combination of academia, the arts, it's wonderful. And people are so kind and they are open and this is, regardless of the commercialism of America, here in Boston you can find so many ads where the style and design are like handwriting, you feel like you're in a little town, in the desert, it's unbelievable. It's beautiful, sometimes you feel like you're going to a small-town local high school graduation, and it's this great, wonderful piece of art. So I think in Boston, there's a very charming combination of old-fashioned style with the new, of course there is a touch of Europe in Boston that doesn't happen often in America. For me, it's very soothing, because I'm closer to the European culture. But the layers here are endless. There is a reason, though, that they call it New England. You feel it, definitely. It's a wonderful part of America to be in. You get this combination of Europe in America, and the old and new, with the academic community. Just to have a meeting in the morning at Harvard University, you are there, and touching history, and being inspired. You're drinking your coffee there in this very old building. There is so much inspiration to this city, the historic and academic sides to this city, it is very inspiring.

SR: Avital, thank you.

DG: Unfortunately we have to get going. I would like to sit and talk with you for another hour.

SR: Yes, I would too.

DG: I miss you. I miss you terribly, actually.

AMP: Well we need to make sure that for the next festival we will be together. Guys, come on!

SR: And actually, I just had an email from a teacher at Soto Grande School in Spain who is moving to a public school in Boston.

AMP: Oh!

SR: Asking how can I get an ISTA Festival happening in Boston. So, you never know...

AMP: Wow!

DG: That could be your second Festival...

AMP: Sally, let's do it.

SR: So I think I've just found another job for you...

AMP: Wonderful. Guys, I miss you, I'm happy to see you and it's my pleasure to have an international chat with you guys. And off of off-the-record, for sure – I miss my family, my friends and colleagues back home and I just hope that I'm representing my country with much love and honesty, despite the complexities.

SR: Take care. Happy Saturday!

"I had a fantastic time and I'm definitely going next year!"

Jenny Dewhirst, 17, Calderdale Theatre School, West Yorkshire

"July 31st 2011 – that was the day I opened myself up like a tea pot and Jesus poured himself in. Majesty. I loved it. Thank you!"

Jessyca Baker, 16, Jigsaw Youth Theatre

"Thank you ISTA for a wonderful time. It was definitely worth travelling about 400 miles!!! I am almost definitely going next year!!!"

Livvi McNee, 13, Jigsaw Youth Theatre, Chester