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## **ARTIST IN FOCUS: AVIVA SHEB'A**

As a small child, I suffered life-threatening asthma. Healing failures included de-carpeting the house, saying goodbye to the pets, numerous drugs, physiotherapy and swimming. All I'd ever wanted to do was dance and travel, and as a last resort, the family doctor encouraged classical ballet lessons. I remember my first time on stage at age nine, in 1961. I was hooked and dance saved my life. Three years later, I knew dance would somehow be my career.

I left school at age fourteen to study dance full-time. Studies included various forms of dance, anatomy, singing, some acting, teaching dance, and philosophy. The philosophy was couched under the class name, Theory. In Theory classes, I learned to think, to question and to experience the awe of dance and the world. Graduating in 1968, I scored Honours in my final classical ballet exams.

Late February, 1970, after a year of performing as a flamenco dancer (TV, cabaret, galas), I was offered a gig entertaining the troops in the Vietnam War – with a rhythm and blues band. I knew it would be life-changing, but was utterly clueless as to how it would unfold. One of the most common exclamations one heard as an entertainer in Vietnam was "This is a war zone, baby – improvise!" That's what I learned to do, and to love. I had no idea I was following the Agent Orange and other defoliant/chemical warfare spray trail through that amazing land. I had no idea about much except dance at all. In those days, teenagers were very sheltered; especially those from religious backgrounds.

Over the years I fulfilled my childhood dreams of dance and travel (twenty-one countries), as well as many more experiences I'd never had the imagination or knowledge to dream. I also fulfilled more than my worst nightmares, and have had many hurdles to leap. Improvising became a way of life, of teaching, and a way of performing. From 1970, I developed my own method of teaching voice, dance and breathing together, coining the term, vocal dance while living in Amsterdam in the 1970s. Solo-parenting my two children (now fantabulous adults) while maintaining as much as possible of my career teaching Vocal Dance, brought me huge fulfilment, though some of my dreams had to go on hold.

The first performances of *This is a War Zone, Baby – Improvise!* took place in the Adelaide Fringe Festival, 2000. Since then, I've kept working on the show, and with the assistance of Kiama Municipal Council, I performed another incarnation of it under the title, *Shebada!* in Kiama, 2008. In 2009, I moved to Wollongong. In 2010, Merrigong Theatre Company took me under its broad wing, enabling me to work on making the rest of my dreams come true. Anne-Louise Rentell, my director/dramaturge, has a way of drawing stories out of me I'd forgotten were ever there, stories I'd never thought of performing, and new ways of performing the ones from my previous shows. I love the way we're exploring the development of the show; I trust Anne-Louise and the process completely. This is probably the most exciting period of my life so far (and goodness knows, I've had so much excitement)!

Why do I perform? Because only onstage can I truly be myself, express myself, not get locked up for it, and have even been known to be paid for it! Performing is true energy exchange.

Aviva Sheb'a

Image credit: Aviva, Paris 1979. Photographer Leo Van Steensel