Josef Tal

MASSADA - 1967

OPERA IN 15 SCENES
FOR SOLOISTS, CHOIR AND
ELECTRONIC MUSIC

Libretto: Israel Eliraz

SCORE

ISRAEL MUSIC INSTITUTE (I.M.I.) P.O.B. 11253, TEL AVIV, ISRAEL
All rights of stage, radio and television performances, mechanical reproduction in any form whatsoever (including film), translation of the libretto of the complete opera or parts thereof are strictly reserved. Photocopying, quotation or reproduction in any form, without the publisher's written consent, are strictly prohibited.

Edited by: W. ELIAS

Commissioned by the National Council for Culture and Art - for the Israel Festival
DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Romans:
SILVA - Commander of the Tenth Legion
HISTORIAN
POET
THREE MERCHANTS (I, II, III)
THREE OFFICERS (I, II, III)
FOUR SOLDIERS (I, II, III, IV)
MERCHANTS (Merchant Choir)
SOLDIERS

Massada Survivors:
YOUNG WOMAN
OLD WOMAN
THREE BOYS (I, II, III)
TWO GIRLS (I, II)

Massada Dead:
ELEAZAR - The Jewish Comander
YOUNG REBEL
DEAD HUSBAND
DEAD FATHER
THREE WASHERWOMEN - Young (Washerwoman I)
- Very Young (Washerwoman II)
- Old (Washerwoman III)
CHOIR OF THE DEAD JEWS (Jews' Choir)

TIME:
The fifteenth of Nissan (the fifteenth day of the month of Xanthicus), 73 A.D.

PLACE:
Prologue - Silva's Camp at the foot of the Mountain.
All the other scenes - various places on the Mountain.

SCENERY:
The stage consists of steps, arranged in the shape of a semi-circular arena resembling a Roman stadium. The steps provide numerous action-platforms permitting the simultaneous, multi-dimensional performance of the various scenes. The entrances - as in a stadium. Down-stage, in front of the the steps, there is a wide proscenium area. A small number of stage-props are placed on the steps as the action unfolds.

Note: The faces of the Dead are covered with masks.

I.M.I. 240
PROLOGUE

Silva's camp. Midnight. A bonfire. The choirs of the Jews are standing in wordless prayer atop the mountain - on the upper steps. A spotlight picks out two soldiers, who are slowly dressing Silva for battle. The Historian, standing to one side, holds a jar of wine.
Herald-like, to the audience:

Historia

I

Tape

II

I.M.I. 240
Historian serves him

- GA- TOS BA- -68...

Drinks

I.M.I. 240
with an anguished scream

Historian pours him more wine

in the audience
Enter an officer on one of the upper steps. He runs down to the audience. A second officer runs in from a different direction.

Another officer runs in from yet another part of the stage.
He kicks the poet bundled up in his cloak by the fire.
SIVA is now fully clad in his military attire. The historian hangs the commander's chain of office on his breast.
Silva kicks the sand slowly over the bonfire to extinguish it. As his voice grows in strength, the rhythm of the kicks grows faster.
Silva

16

I

II

G' DO- LA VA - A - TSU- MA M' - - AN - SUI - YA E - RETS PRA - IM AD HAM - BA - RI - YOT BA - G' - DO -

I.M.I. 240
On the fifteenth day of the month of Xanthicos - the month of Nisan - following upon a twelve-month siege, after the fall of Jerusalem to Titus, Herodion and Machaerus unto the legate Justinus Bassus, the ten-thousand men of Flavius Silva's Tenth Legion burst through the double walls of Masada.

The fire goes out. Silva is no longer seen. In the dim light of dawn, the soldiers' choirs storm the ascending stepped areas. As they cover the steps in their red cloaks, the mountain seems to be ablaze with flames, whereupon they vanish into the spaces between the steps, as if swallowed up by a shattered ghost-town. All at once there is absolute silence.

A beam of light picks out the Historian, bundled up in his robe.

The lights go out abruptly. Darkness and silence as long as possible.
A spotlight picks out the "sun" - a huge copper sunflower carried up the steps by two soldiers. As it reaches the topmost step, where the Historian is revealed, the "sun" glows with a golden light: it is bright daylight. The Historian strikes the "sun" as if it were a giant gong, and vanishes behind it. After a pause, a Boy and a Girl appear from among the sunflower petals, the latter carrying a many-coloured ball in her hand. They look around, scared and apprehensive, their voices growing stronger as the daylight increases in strength. The Boy is the eldest in the group.
The Children go up and down the steps.
They search.
The children fall silent, bend down and hide beneath the step. Enter 2nd Girl, holding a sunflower. The boy leaves his hiding-place and crosses their path.
The boy wrenched the flower from 3rd Girl's hands. The girl burst into tears.

The boy picks up a flower, then picks off its petals - while, at the same time, the petals of the "soul flower" are plucked off by two Roman soldiers, until only a bright metallic disk remains.
The children assemble over a corpse, and crouch down beside it.
The children "dig" him a grave, then carry his body to it, deposit it there and vanish the next moment.
After a short pause, three Soldiers run down the steps. Then, two more Soldiers enter, from another part of the stage. They search.

Soldier: Have you found?...
Soldier: Not a soul!
Soldiers: Zeus, what has happened?
Soldier: The Jews.... where are they gone?

They scatter and search, but find nothing. They return in a group.

Soldier: All ghosts!
Soldier: To hell with their ghosts!
Soldier: To the Palace!

First group of three Soldiers exit, to the right.

Soldier: To the Palace!

Second group of Soldiers exit, to the left.
SCENE

3

The Historian is discovered at the top of the steps.

Historian:

There was plenty of water, in the water-pits, and in the stores - mountains of grain, oil, dates, wine... and carcasses.

He calls out his words, herald-like, as he descends the steps. To accompany each statement two or three corpses are made to emerge from between the steps, rolling down to the steps beneath him.

Carcasses in the Northern Palace! Carcasses in the Southern Palace! Carcasses in the house within the wall! Carcasses in the bath-house! Carcasses in the food stores! Carcasses in the courtyards! Carcasses in the house of prayer! Carcasses in the water cisterns, in the cellars...

He reaches the last steps with an effort and in a state of agitation.

A mountain of slaughtered carcasses - nine hundred and sixty - not a body more! A contemptible handful of rebels!

It is only now that the two soldiers flanking the "sun" turn it sideways - and reveal it to be a gigantic, dazzling Roman eagle. From behind it, enters Silvia. He paces about among the corpses, in a daze. As he advances towards the Historian, he turns over one of the corpses, then another - ad lib. - with his foot.

I.M.I. 240
Stunned silence, Silva is dead.
Historian:
You're an army commander Silva - not a philosopher. They have perished - we are alive.
You've added to the military map a tenable desert causeway. Legate, the rebellion of the Jews is finished, and history is ready for your campaign to proceed. When will you issue the order for the advance?

He steps aside.
SIlva lifts up a corpse and looks at it.
He flings the body away.

Enter the Poet, with an armful of scrolls.
The officers leave together with the Post, bearing the scrolls.
Now the Merchants rush in from all directions like black carrion-birds. Their ululation accompanies the whole of the scene, as they strip the corpses.
I.M.I. 240
I

II

I.M.I. 240
They strip the corpses of clothes, shawls, colourful head-gear — and go wild. The shawls form gaudy streams — red, yellow, black. After a short while, all the corpses are naked, white-only their faces covered by masks. The spollores leave. There is awful silence. Pause.
Scene 5

Silva, who has observed the whole of the previous scene, is about to leave, when the 3rd Boy enters, running. The Boy, seeing Silva and the Historian, stops short. Recovering from his shock, he runs off.

Historian:
Nine hundred and sixty-one!

Enter the Poet, chasing 1st Boy, who runs in from a different direction. The Boy manages to elude him. The Poet runs off, still trying to catch him.

Historian:
Nine hundred and sixty-two!

Enter Children, running in from various directions and at different heights on the steps—chased by Soldiers, Officers and Poet. They run about, dodging their would-be catchers, and occasionally stumbling—until, finally, they all stop below Silva and the Historian. The five children bundle together.

Historian:
Nine hundred and sixty-five!

Silence. Silva pokes at 1st Boy with his staff. The boy grinds his teeth and makes for him. Two Soldiers seize him, and Silva laughs. As he does so, the Soldiers release the Boy. Silva groges at him, as at a beast. Then suddenly he falls upon him and pinions him in his arms—the boy attempting to resist the while, and hitting out at his tormentor with ineffective fists. Silva cradles his head on the Boy's chest. There is a wordless, thrilling silence, as all look at the Commander; then Silva releases the Boy.

Officer:
A couple of women, sir.

Silva:
Women!

Officer:
They came from the water cisterns.

Historian:
They were looking for the children.

Exit Silva, followed by his men. The Roman eagle is also removed. Only the Historian and the Children are left on stage.
SCENE

6

Historian:
From whom shall I start, my little desert mice?

Cracks whip

From you!

1st Boy steps out. The Historian acts like an animal trainer. The Children are in constant motion

Historian:
You fled into the water cisterns

1st Boy:
Yes, my lord

Historian:
From there you saw everything

1st Boy:
Yes, my lord

Historian:
What, then, boy?

1st Boy:
I cannot remember...

Historian:
Your name was called out. You did not answer

1st Boy:
I wanted to, but I couldn't

Historian:
To live - you wanted to live

1st Boy:
To live?

Historian: (cracking whip):
Remember!

1st Boy:
I cannot remember - I cannot remember...
And then the sun burst out - all at once, just like a jumping toy clown when the lid is opened.
I jumped outside - nothing but silence. It was like God giving out the Law

A crack of the whip. Silence. The boy huddles back into himself.
Historian: (to 2nd Boy)
And you, too, ran off to the water cisterns,
from where you saw it all. They searched
after you - you came out!

2nd Boy

shocked

No!

Historian:
Yes, you did. And you met your father, didn’t
you?

He cracks the whip

2nd Boy

No - no - no!

Tenen atence. The Children watch the Histor­
ian. The 2nd Boy moves back, huddling within
himself, as if absorbing the “information.” He
bends down over one of the corpses, which rises
to life in order to play the part of the Father.
Boy

Embraces him

I

Tape

II

I

Tape

II

I.M.I. 240
The embrace tightens
The Historian cracks his whip. The corpse collapses between the boy's arms, and the latter falls over it. The Children close around them like petals at sunset.
The spotlight picks out a corner of the stage where Three Washerwomen are crouching. They launder and hum, wordlessly. Some time passes. Young Washerwoman spreads out a shirt. The other Washerwomen admire it.
I
Wash Woman

II

III
Wash Woman

I

ME - LECH

ME - LECH

ME - LECH

VAsh

MI - LACH

I.M.I. 240
Spotlight over Washedwomen fades out.
The Children lament

I.M.I. 240
All this the children told me, and a great deal more.
The lights go up to show the Jewish Choir at various levels on the steps. The Choir is moving in prayer, which grows in intensity to become ecstatic. From time to time his movement mimics the last hours on the mountain. Eliezer emerges from among the Choir. His words, herald-like, are addressed to the audience as well as to the men of Marrakesh.
A Young Rebel emerges from among the Choral. He approaches Eleazar.
Embracing him, Eleazar stabs the Young Rebel to death.
The Young Hebel falls. Eleazar stoops over his body with fatherly love.

The Jews' Choir repeats the Young Hebel's words.
He rejoins the choir.

Darkness then the Children are picked out by a spotlight. The Choir vanishes. The Children sway in ecstatic motion - then, suddenly, stop.
Boy I and Girl I:

At last there were ten that remained. And no wind blew, and no new birds arrived. There were nine, then eight, and then seven. The sea did not dry, the desert did not crack. There were six, then five, and then four. The mountains of Moab did not cross the Jordan, and from the skies there were no ladders sent down. There were three, then two, and then one... And not a Voice was heard, and neither was a Hand stretched out...

Boy I:

You'll write that down... Historian?
Another part of the stage. The Historian is shown holding a jug of wine. Not far from him Silva is seen with the Young Woman at his feet.

Historian:

In the audience

What does a Roman commander do with a lovely young Jewish woman left alive after the storming of an ill-starred torturer?

Pause

He will be thirsty.

He pours two cups and serves them, then moves aside.
One of the corpses approaches the Young Woman.

"BA MA VI."

"BA MA - SM IM SNEI VE - LA - SHE - CIA AD TEA - WAR EN LI DA -"

"HEI - CHAN BA - YT"
Silva splashes the wine into her face, which reddens as if blood has poured out all over it.
Tears one of her sleeves.

Tears her second sleeve. Silva laughs. They echo her laughter.
Silva splashes wine all over them - then leaves nauseated. The Historian claps. Enter two Soldiers, who put up a screen between the group on stage and the audience.

Exit Historian. The lights dim over this part of the stage. The Soldiers vanish. The Young Woman lies on stage, motionless. Enter the children - all in black, raven-like. They converge on her body, which is picked out by a spotlight. As the Old Woman enters, they fly aside, closing in upon themselves, to witness the following scene.

Histortan:

A la guerre comme à la guerre!
Enter an Old Woman. She kneels beside the Young Woman and wipes her tortured face. The light focuses on the Old Woman.

מופע 10

סצנה

Enter an Old Woman. She kneels beside the Young Woman and wipes her tortured face. The light focuses on the Old Woman.
She stoops over the young woman and tends her.
In SCENE 11.

The Historian descends the steps towards the two Women but stops at some distance from them.

Historian:

angry, crying out

To write? To write of what?

He pulls out a blank scroll, tears it up and throws it away

How to present what has taken place thus; that people may find it believable? Who'll believe?

To the audience

Who of you'd believe me if I wrote ...  

He addresses the Women.

In our days it is not enough to die for men to think you're right. We live in the year seventy-three, and not in the Age of Darkness. Who, in our days, is impressed by tales of terror and slaughter?

Screams at the audience

Who? Are you ... ?

To the Women.

How explain,

pointing to the audience

To those that there were people capable of drawing lots for who should slaughter whom?

Smashes an earthenware jar to pieces - red wine flows out on the steps.
The tale of Kypros the river!
The tale of Kypros the river!
I could still have been telling you more and more:

About Vespasian at Trókh, in the districts of Timna and Antipatros, or Polibades at the Tower of Nania, or Caesarus Gallus at Lod and at Jaffa...

About the town of Gamla, where the infants were smashed on the rocks, and where hundreds of Jews leapt from the peak. Yes, if blood could blaze with roaring flames, the torch of this land would be burning for two thousand years!

He moves away from the Women. The light over them dims, as they vanish. He moves towards Silva’s group.
SCENE

12

The lights go up on Silva. He is screaming. Around him stands his military company. At his feet, a sand-model of Masada has been placed by two Soldiers. The voice of the Old Woman is heard from time to time between his words.
He kicke at the sand model, defacing it.
Kneels and scrabbles among the ashes.
He almost chokes on his breath. The Soldiers and Officers stare at him in amazement.
His screams echo and re-echo.
He remains kneeling, helpless. Exit all the company - except for the Poet, who remains standing near him.
The Poet starts walking among the corpses. To the left a wooden cart is pushed by some Soldiers gathering up the bodies. At various levels on the steps, more Soldiers enter, carrying bodies, and then move off. It is a macabre harvest.
Historian: to the audience

Will it all be forgotten? What will be left?

He spots the various objects around himself, as he names them in the following speech.

Some cataa, some rag-threads of quilting, a skeleton of two.

Tearing a scroll up and scattering the pieces.

Some pieces of scroll, a phial, a comb, a mirror, a make-up palette, a candle, a flute, a sandal, maybe a woman’s mesh of hair...

He steps aside, but watches the proceedings.

Three Soldiers have found Eleazar’s corpse. They fall upon it savagely and strip it of clothing, belt and sandals. They quarrel, even jest on the clothing in grotesque playfulness. Finally the corpse remains stretched out on the ground, naked. The Poet voices no protest at what the Soldiers have been doing. As they leave, he kneels beside the body.

Meanwhile, all the other corpses have been carted off.
Enter Silva, stripped to the waist like a gladiator. He carries a brace of tridents and nudges the Poet with his foot. The Poet rises.
Silva exchanges glances with him, gestures with his head and the Poet leaves. The Historian leaves, too. The wind sighs.
Silva tugs at the corpse, and descends with it into the procession - arena.
He gazes at the corpse with apprehension.
Eleazar draws his sword and throws it at the corpse, which rises to grasp it. The whole scene that follows resembles a gladiator contest. Eleazar's face is covered by a mask.

He throws Eleazar a dagger plucked from his belt. The Choir continues its supporting chant.
Silva succeeds in making his opponent fall, and sets his trident on Eleazar's neck. Silva moves aside.
The fight continues - it grows in fury and is carried on all over the steps.
The Voices of the Jewish Dead are now heard: "O, God, throw open your gate to us!"
Bliva allows him to rise.

The trident duel

I.M.I. 240
Eleazar all of a sudden stops fighting and falls on his sword. All the Voices are cut off. Sliba gazes at him in total shock, throws down his trident and hurries out.
At the top of the steps, as if descended from or high, the giant Roman eagle now stands displayed. The five Children enter from different directions. They seek one another and band together. After a pause, the Historian enters. He climbs up the steps and turns the eagle over, so that it once again becomes the huge "sun" scene at the beginning of the play — but it is now purple in hue. The children climb up and slowly pluck the petals of the sun-flower, to the beat of a muffled drum. Then they swarm down the steps and kneel by Eleazar's body. The sun slowly turns into a silver-grey moon. Night falls. The wind sighs. The Historian casts away his whip and wraps himself in his cloak. The spotlight focuses upon him and upon the "moon".
On the fifteenth day of the month of Xanthinos - the month of Nisan - and following upon a twelve-month siege, after the fall of Jerusalem to Titus, Herodion and Machaerus unto the legate Lucillius Bassus, the ten-thousand men of Flavus Silva's Tenth Legion burst through the double walls of Massada ...

As he speaks, two Soldiers enter, pick up the "moon" and carry it down the steps. As they descend, the lights fade out until, finally, the moon goes out as well - and the whole of the stadium is left in darkness. The wind still sighs in the distance - then utter silence descends.