



Searching for Stern

A new play in English seeks to honor the memory of the Lehi founder

Ayala Shiftan (playing Roni Stern) and Steven Schub (Avraham 'Yair' Stern) bring the husband and wife to life. (Mel Brickman)

• By ORIT AREA

On February 2, 1942, in a small room in an apartment building on 8 Mizrahi Bet Street in Florentin, Tel Aviv, an event took place that some historians suggest may have triggered a chain of events that drove the British out of the Land of Israel, leading to the establishment of the Jewish state.

Avraham "Yair" Stern, founder of the Jewish Freedom Fighters Movement (Lehi), also known as the Stern Group, was shot three times from behind by British police. Dead at age 35, he left behind a pregnant widow, Roni, and a band of young Jewish warriors who could now rely only on Stern's poetry, vision and force of personality for continued inspiration in their fight for the Jewish homeland.

It was a moment Stern had prophesied and even glorified in his 1932 poem "Anonymous Soldiers," the eventual anthem of Lehi, ending with the line "discharged from the ranks with our last breath."

How and why one individual would so willingly sacrifice his life in the fight for Jewish independence is explored in the first English stage play about Stern, *The Ghosts of Mizrahi Bet Street*, which premiered at the Jerusalem Theater on January 20 in the presence Stern's son, Yair, and Lehi survivors.

Lehi was formed in 1940 by fighters who split from the Irgun Zva'i Leumi Zionist militia when it decided to stop fighting the British at the outbreak of World War II. Stern, wanted by both the British and Jewish establishment in Mandate Palestine, rejected the Irgun's offer for safe haven, so that he could stand by his revolutionary idea that the British foreign occupier was in fact the Jews' public enemy No. 1.

TO LITERALLY "throw" himself into the starring role, Los Angeles actor Steven Schub mischievously entered the small closet where Stern had hidden in his failed attempt to elude his assassins. The hideout room and its furnishings – including the shaver that gave Stern's presence away – are preserved in the building that has since been converted into the Lehi Museum.

"It was an opportunity any actor would have to take, and so I took it," said Schub, who seems to have developed a niche playing Zionist renegades. "It gave me a sense of Yair's world closing in on him."

From 2007 to 2009, Schub starred in the critically

acclaimed production *The Accomplices* at the Fountain Theater in Hollywood as Peter Bergson, born Hillel Kook (and the nephew of first chief Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook), an Irgun activist in the US who faced opposition from the American Jewish establishment as he lobbied the US government to take action to save the Jews of Europe.

Schub recently completed a screenplay on Menachem Begin, *The Revolt*, while *The Accomplices* is in preproduction as a film produced by actor Edward James Olmos.

Schub was born in New York into a Zionist household, and his mother and sister made aliya to Jerusalem over 20 years ago. He has played singers Dee Dee Ramone and Phil Ochs in films, but his roles as Zionist fighters resonate with him most personally.

"I've literally been in the underground longer than the underground was underground," Schub joked at a café in

Jerusalem after a rehearsal. Schub even resembles Stern, judging from pictures.

The playwright is an American-born Jerusalemite, historian Zev Golan, author of *Stern: The Man and His Gang*, which Schub handed to this reporter filled with his copious highlights and notes.

Schub had flown to New York from Los Angeles to meet Golan in the early stages of production, and both found they shared a common interest in philosophy, particularly an admiration for the individualistic ideas of Ayn Rand, best-selling author of the *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged*.

A string of "coincidences" and omens brought Schub to the role. He had been in Israel to read *The Accomplices* screenplay for the Kook family and also to surprise his fiancée, actress Kirsten Kollender, with a proposal at Masa-



A string of coincidences and omens brought Schub to the role of Stern (left: Bruce Mitchell; right: Lehi Heritage Society).

da. In a casual conversation with the playwright, Boaz Arad, director of the Ayn Rand Center in Israel, recommended Schub for the role after having just met Schub for the first time.

"It wasn't until I read Zev's play that I realized that Avraham Stern chose the nom de guerre and nom de plume 'Yair' based on Elazar Ben Yair, leader of the Jews on Masada," Schub recalled. "Having just gotten engaged on Masada, I took it as a sign that both Elazar Ben Yair and Yair Stern were making me an offer I couldn't refuse."

Schub and Golan saw in Stern an individualist who clung to his independent judgment, even at the risk of death, supported only by young idealists willing to die for their future country – the Stern Gang, as their foes called them.

"He didn't want uniforms. He didn't want people who thought alike. He wanted individuals," Golan told *In Jerusalem*.

TODAY, IN discourse about Palestinian terrorism, Stern Group operations are often cited as examples of Jewish "terrorism." Schub and Golan reject the analogy to Palestinian terrorism. In his book, Golan counted only one possible terrorist attack against civilians among the hundreds of assassinations and military-style Lehi operations. Stern specifically avoided targeting civilians and non-British politicians.

"The terrorists of the 1940s were not the terrorists of today," Golan said. "Today, the terrorists seek civilians – men, women and children."

Ironically, Schub delved into the mind of Arab terrorists as well, having played a terrorist who blasted Valencia in the sixth season of the hit television show *24* and also the character based on Nezar Hindawi in *The English Bride* about the infamous Jordanian who attempted to blow up an El Al plane.

Schub believes that in drawing a distinction, one must recognize and identify what kind of country the fighters are attempting to establish. "Are they attempting to establish a free state that protects individual rights, or theocracy or dictatorship?"

Contrasting the image of a terrorist, the play reveals Stern's personality as a poet, actor, and intellectual – a "prodigy" according to Hebrew University professors – who studied toward his doctorate in Greek poetry at the University of Florence, Italy. The play focuses on his tortured romance with his sweetheart/wife (played by actress Ayala Shiftan), a relationship Stern resisted out of fear his political activities would prevent him from being a good husband, assuming he'd live long enough to marry.

The Freedom Fighters of Israel Heritage Association produced the play to memorialize Stern and Lehi fighters so that they are not "anonymous soldiers." Chairman of FFI-Lehi Yair Stern "Jr." read the play in its early stages, and at press time had not yet seen the final product.

"It's an experiment," he told *In Jerusalem* between board meetings at the Lehi Museum. "If it'll be good we could move this play forward to schools, community centers and also to the US and other countries."

Golan hopes that the play will renew interest in Stern's life and solidify his place as a founding father of the State of Israel.

"In 1942 when he was killed, he was perceived as a gangster, a traitor, a fifth columnist, but I think that has changed over the past 10 years... I think the magnetism of his personality, which the people who knew him felt at the time but which people in the country did not, lasted the test of time."

If there's any indication that Stern has been accepted into the mainstream, Mizrahi Street, located near Tel Aviv's trendiest bars and cafes, has long been renamed Avraham Stern Street.

Showtimes: January 27, 28 at 8 p.m.; January 27 matinee at 6 p.m. at the Mikro Theater Hall, Jerusalem Theater.

The play was originally directed by Leah Stoller, who due to a car accident injury mid-production, asked her former protégée, S. Kim Glassman, to replace her. Actor Simon Shocket will play Stern for the January 27 matinee. Box office: (02) 560-5755.