



The Aristo classical dance troupe performs, Tel Aviv, 2005. Should Teo give the performance of a lifetime?

Daniel Tchetchik

## FICTION

# Staying alive

What should take precedence, life or art? This is the question at the center of Evan Fallenberg's new novel, which ranges convincingly from a performance stage in Berlin in September 1939 to a coffee shop in contemporary Tel Aviv.

### When We Danced on Water

by Evan Fallenberg. HarperPerennial, 256 pages, \$15 (paperback)

### By Ruth Margalit

It's September 1, 1939, and the dancers of the Royal Danish Ballet are getting ready for a gala performance at the opera house in Berlin. A few minutes before eight, just as the ballet "A Proposal of Marriage Through the Newspaper" is about to begin, Germany's vice-minister of culture steps onstage to welcome the visiting Scandinavian troupe and, at the Fuehrer's request, to announce the invasion of Poland earlier that day.

Teodor Levin is backstage preparing for his first grand solo when he hears the news of the attack on his homeland. His mouth drops. Will he freeze in place? Will he dance poorly in protest? Or will he, at age 17 and a half, give the performance of a lifetime in front of a gaping crowd of Nazi sympathizers?

Does life prevail, or does art? This question is at the center of Evan Fallenberg's powerful new novel, "When We Danced on Water." Featuring Teodor, now 85, and Vivi, a 42-year old waitress whose life has veered off course, this unlikely love story is set in present-day Tel Aviv with frequent throwbacks to the characters' checkered past. Yet bouncing as it does between both characters, and across time and countries, the strength of the novel – a second for Fallenberg, who has also translated some of the finest Hebrew writing into English – clearly lies in Teo's wartime history.

When the curtain at last falls on the

Danish ballet that long-ago night in September, Teodor is introduced to Freddy, a high-ranking German officer who is clearly infatuated with the handsome Jewish dancer. For the next six years,



Fallenberg

Aliz Noy

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while a war will tear apart Europe and the continent's Jews will be gathered up and gassed, young Teo will survive by becoming essentially a sex slave to the sadistic Freddy. His is an untold aspect of the Holocaust: the story of Jewish prisoners providing sex in order to stay alive.

Fallenberg thus ventures into largely taboo territory. Roman Frister, author of "The Cap: The Price of a Life" (and a former Haaretz columnist), a 2001 Holocaust memoir that proved controversial because of its inclusion of "non-Holocaust" issues such as sex and love, wrote this in his book: "What would I say if asked to write a handbook on staying alive in a concentration camp, would I have any practical advice to give? ... None. None at all. All my experience is worth nothing for the simple reason that there can be no similar situation."

Those are wise words; perhaps there are no similar situations. In the novel, Teo's singular situation is that of a young man who is secreted away by a Nazi officer to a lavish countryside villa in Germany and made to service the demands of his captor. Fallenberg skillfully manages to describe the humiliation, self-loathing, despair and even a misguided sense of love – of the Stockholm syndrome kind – that are interwoven with such a fate.

### Slackened muscles

"Teo began to fancy himself a ghost," Fallenberg writes. "Where once his physical presence, his dancer's physique, had been the focus of his world, now he paid no attention to his body at all. His solid muscles slackened, his pliancy waned. He glided lightly from room to room, even dust lay undisturbed in his wake."

After the war, Teo arrives in Palestine, where in time he becomes a celebrated choreographer, though never the dancing legend his teenage years had promised. In fact, he is a quintessential Polish Jew with an attitude, who frequents Vivi's cafe on Ibn Gabirol Street, next door to his dance studio, and taunts her with such Jewish-Polish classic kvetches as: "A little makeup wouldn't kill you." What Vivi sees

in him, though, is not a bitter old man, but rather the artist he had always strived to be; the true professional, for whom "Interdisciplinary" is just another word for taking the easy way out."

If Teo is the committed artist – with the drive and determination of a Bosch power drill – Vivi is the "dabbler." She tells Teo: "I whittle, I sculpt. I photograph. I sketch, I bead, I weave. I do video art. And right now I'm learning glassblowing." Fallenberg really drives the point home when the two artists confront one another over their difference in strategies early on in their acquaintance:

"Look," she says, "I know what you see when you look at me is a waitress. Somebody who just has to manage to get your coffee on the table when it's still hot. But can you even conceive that that's not all I am? That maybe I'm an artist, too, but a different kind?"

"What does that mean, a different kind?" he asks, now irritated. "All artists – true artists – know that their art must become their passion." He settles back in his chair.

"But there's so much out there," she says. "So many ways to create. I don't like cutting off my options."

"Ah, but then you cut off your chances of creating something important. You're only left with mediocrity, and mediocrity is the true enemy."

And Teo's right, in a way: With all of Vivi's endeavors, nothing seems to have materialized from her art. Sadly, neither does Vivi herself truly materialize through

Fallenberg's writing. He does gift her

with certain quirky qualities that make her rather endearing, like her habit of going on Tel Aviv "theme walks" ("scent walks," "Jewish walks," "graffiti walks"), and attempts to give her more weight by reconstructing a crossroads period in her life and giving her an ex-settler gay man as flatmate (whose mother, we're told, "spearheaded efforts against the Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip and lives the Disengagement and the loss of the family home like

a second skin"), but large chunks of Vivi's background and motivation ultimately remain too vague. How did she end up waiting tables for a living? Why has she forsaken any chance to have a meaningful relationship or career path? If we are to believe that this is all the product of a failed love affair in her early 20s – the only time in her life about which we learn anything – then she deserves more credit than that.

We are also made to believe that Vivi is an independent spirit who speaks her mind, a point further emphasized when she entertains the thought of becoming a single mother. "What do you think about these women who have babies by themselves? Career women, I mean, who get pregnant through a sperm bank or a friend," Vivi asks her mother, hesitantly, toward the end of the novel. ("I've come to think that husbands are a highly overrated commodity," her mother surprises her by saying.) Yet with Teo, Vivi is at times frustratingly meek, more of a dutiful student than a potential lover. Even when she finally earns the artistic recognition she's been craving, her accomplishment is once again mitigated by – and focuses on – Teo.

And just when it seems as though art has prevailed in the novel, Fallenberg provides an epilogue that suggests that life has triumphed after all. Either way, much like that fateful night in September, it's Teo who ends up stealing the show.

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