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Extra strong

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At the age of 77 one could hardly call A.B. Yehoshua an angry young man. In fact, it is difficult to see him as a raging senior citizen either which, considering the subjects he has touched on in his long writing career to date, is a little mystifying.

Yehoshua has never flinched from controversial subjects. His large literary oeuvre, which began with his 1963 collection of short stories *The Death of an Old Man*, features a motley crowd of Israelis and Palestinians, religious and secular Jews, and Israelis on the Right and the Left of the political divide. His books and plays have highlighted issues of national identity and anti-Semitism, and now, in his latest tome, *The Extra*, Yehoshua has come through a doubly challenging test.

His central character is a single woman of 42 who has decided she does not want to have children which, in an Israeli society still living in the shadow of the Holocaust, is likely to be construed as contentious. And there is the by no means insignificant matter of telling the story through the eyes of a woman.

The *Extra* provides the thematic substratum for an intriguing event which will take place tomorrow, at the Mediatheque Center in Holon. Yehoshua needs no introduction to devotees of Israeli literature, both here or, for that matter, around the world. His works have been translated into close to 30 languages and he was once dubbed by *The New York Times* as "the Israeli Faulkner," referencing 20th century American Nobel Prize-winning man of letters William Faulkner. Yehoshua is also an Israel Prize laureate, as well as being shortlisted for the prestigious Man Booker International Prize, in 2005, and winning the Los Angeles Times Book Prize in 2006, for *Woman in Jerusalem*.

The grandfather-of-seven comes across as a mild-mannered chap and I ventured that his soft-spoken persona might have something to do with his across-the-board popularity, politically contentious views notwithstanding. Yehoshua sidestepped the suggested personality trait, instead focusing on what he calls a handy tool for conveying potentially abrasive messages.

"I am not a prophet of doom. That is part of my ideological approach to life. But, you know, I use humor in my writing and that helps a lot. That is one of the most important elements of writing. Authors who have humor enjoy a slightly longer shelf life than the ones who don't."

Yehoshua, who was born in Jerusalem and served as a paratrooper, invokes allegory to illustrate his point.

"After the soil is baked hard over the years, and becomes crumbly. Humor can help to add a little moisture and make things accommodating. [Israeli Nobel Prize winning writer] Shai Agnon also used humor, as did Kafka."

Yehoshua says humor often came to his rescue during his career as a teacher and university lecturer.

"If I had to teach [early 20th century Russian-born author Yosef Haim] Brenner, it was very difficult to hold the class, but as soon as I got into Agnon the students would come back to

life."

Yehoshua has breathed life into all manner of character in his novels and plays, and explored numerous areas, including his own personal history. In one of his most celebrated creations, Mr. Mani, he delved into five generations of his own family, in reverse chronological order, and adopted a daring literary approach.

"I took a character from each generation and left the position of the respondent empty, so the readers had to sort of complete the dialogues themselves," he remarks. "That was a bit brave and, thankfully, it worked." The novel, which covered over two centuries of life in Jerusalem, was subsequently turned into a TV drama series.

The writer has wide interests and grew up in something of a cultural discord. While his father hailed from a veteran Sephardi Jerusalemite family, his mother's family came from Morocco, and Mrs. Yehoshua Sr. was an ardent Francophile who never really accepted Israeli culture.

"My late mother only read my books in English or French. She never really got into Hebrew."

Yehoshua's literary path began when he was still at school.

"I used to write a 'feuilleton' - a sort of story pamphlet - for the class and I'd read out the stories to everyone," he recalls. That gave him the invaluable advantage of knowing how his writing efforts were appreciated. The world is full of closet writers, cloistered in their bedrooms not knowing if the world will appreciate the fruits of their blood, sweat and tears. The young man's "feuilleton" creativity also came in handy in the army.

"I'd be excused [from] taking part in the Friday parade so I could get the unit's stories written, and have them ready for the party in the evening," he recalls with a chuckle.

While there is some humor in The Extra, it is mostly a serious and soul-searching effort. It is also incorporates one of Yehoshua's greatest artistic passions - music.

"I love the opera, and I even had one book of mine [A Journey to the End of the Millennium] turned into an opera. And the central character of The Extra is a harp player."

Tomorrow's Mediatheque Center event will duly feature some musical interludes, with readings by Yehoshua, as well as a discussion between the writer and Hebrew literature university lecturer Nissim Kalderon. The two will focus on four women character types from Yehoshua's oeuvre - the dreamer, women that stray from the beaten path, combative women and liberal women. Typically, Yehoshua sees The Extra as a way of addressing a growing contemporary phenomenon.

"As Jews, post-Holocaust, we have an overriding need to have children, to keep the race going, especially as over one million Jewish children perished in the Holocaust," he says. "But there are more and more women, and couples, who are deciding not to have a family. It is an interesting issue."

Yehoshua may not be everybody's cup of tea, but he is certainly never boring.

For more details about tomorrow's event: (03) 502-1552 and www.mediatheque.org.il.

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NOTES: In his latest book 'The Extra,' Israeli author A.B. Yehoshua delves into the sensitive topic of choosing not to have children

GRAPHIC: Photo: 'I AM not a prophet of doom. That is part of my ideological approach to life. But, you know, I use humor in my writing and that helps a lot,' says acclaimed Israeli author A.B. Yehoshua. (Credit: Courtesy A.B. Yehoshua)

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