

Sleepsville —A masterpiece

By Hila Aharon Brick

The precise stitching of the show is not only apparent on the outside, but also along the hidden seams. Highly recommended.

Let's start from the end: I highly recommend that you go and see "Sleepsville" at the Haifa Theater, a play for children (ages 3–8) carefully put together by its creators to present a multi-sensory experience that is rich and meaningful.

The story begins and ends in a workshop that produces pillows. The two puppeteers, already present on the stage when the audience enters the theater, are sewing pillows on the long, wooden worktops. Their casual presence (casual to the point where I wonder if they're actresses at all) forms the poised and calm basis for the world of dreams that is about to take shape from threads and buttons.

A crimson string that is real and metaphorical at once

Nightmares haunt one of the seamstresses and the heroine of the play, Princess Sleepyhead, who will soon take shape from one of the snow-white pillows placed on the worktop. Every child knows the struggle of falling asleep and nightmares, so already at the start, opinionated 3-year-olds can find themselves identifying with the situation that drives the plot forward.

Princess Sleepyhead does not want to go to sleep, despite the attempts of her nanny (who also takes shape as a puppet from one of the white pillows) to put her down to sleep. When a cloud monster arrives to haunting Sleepyhead's dreams, a night lamp comes to her rescue, like a guardian angel, and the little princess decides to go on a quest to find the Dream Tailor.

During the journey you will encounter Sleepyhead (brought to life by Revital Grich) as well as a number of characters worked/portrayed by Orit Leibovitz Novitch, who conceptualized and designed the puppets. The pleasant and delicate presence of Grich as Sleepyhead complements and balances out the more eccentric characters played by Leibovitz.

One of the first stops along the way is "The String Puller," who provides the crimson string (both real and metaphorical) on which Sleepyhead moves on to the next stop. This figure is given a vibrant design, both through a giant wig made entirely out of colorful spools of thread, Marie Antoinette-style, and the actresses' body language that is acerbic and stifled, in addition to an abundance of linguistic brilliance. Phrases such as "I lost my thread of thought" and "hanging by a thread" are used to describe what happens on stage, and it's very entertaining.

Another character whom Sleepyhead meets is Mr Buttons, who leaves a visual as well as an aural mark, through his dreadlocks made of buttons that make a blaring noise, the mountains of buttons spilling on the worktop, and the hip-hop music that plays in the background.

A cross between a sewing machine, hand, and a puppet

The play, made up of mental layers and linguistic richness, was written by Itzik Weingarten and inspired by the story by the renowned Michael Ende, "The Dream Eater."

Although it's apparent that the play was "borne out of the material" (as evidenced by director Galya Fradkin), it was a joy to discover that the strict visuals don't come at the expense of the verbal and musical elements (the music was composed by Eldad Lidor). The lighting also deserves praise, as it works to bring out the beauty in the white-on-white pillow puppets, all the way to the deepest corners of the theater hall.

The precise construction is evident not only in the external, eye-catching presentation, but also the neat, tight stitching that is not visible to the eye.

At the end of the journey, Sleepyhead learns to create a good dream out of a bad one for herself with the Dream Tailor, a character who is an expressive cross between a sewing machine, a human hand, and a puppet. This ending doesn't just reflect the psychological truth of the story but also the act of creation itself.

"I had a great time," says the 3-year-old at the end of the show, with a great deal of seriousness, and so he reports throughout the day to everyone he knows. Before falling asleep, he points out to me the light of the night lamp that will watch over him, a reminder of the power of prop theater.