

# *The Jewish Renaissance blog*

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## Review: Under the Skin ★★★★ – The story of a shocking, seemingly impossible love, vividly told



Anneliese (Ilisa) Kohlmann was a guard in Neuengamme concentration camp, said to have had liaisons with female prisoners. From the few facts that remain, playwright Yonatan Calderon has wrought a short play of shocking beauty, imagining a relationship between Kohlmann and a young Czech-Jewish prisoner, talented ballerina Lotte Rosner, feted in pre-war Prague.

The action takes place both in the 1940s in the camps and in 1991 in a Tel Aviv on lockdown during Gulf War air raids. With great subtlety Calderon has two women play the younger and older Lotte – and then tops this by requiring the actor playing Charlotte in 1991 to play Kohlmann in 1942, while ‘young’ Lotte plays an unwelcome visitor in 1991, seeking to reawaken Charlotte’s carefully-buried memories. A third actor is Lotte’s fellow prisoner and confidante as well as a pair of Nazis in the camp and a ghostly presence in 1991.

Director Ariella Eshed and choreographer Revital Snir build on this coup de théâtre to create a production of great theatrical beauty; scene changes are balletic dance sequences where the actors help each other into different garments to morph between characters and time periods on Joanne Marshall’s simple, versatile set.



From the moment the performers intertwine to the strains of the evocative Yiddish lullaby Raisins and Almonds (sound design Duncan Woodford), Eshed and her cast share their vision with the audience and

establish a style of physical theatre that literally fleshes out the themes of interdependence and control, the conflict of power and affection, where at first all the power seems to be Kohlmann's.

But I'm jumping the gun, because Calderon begins his tale in 1991, with that uninvited guest, apparently an intrusively insistent young journalist, who takes full advantage of being trapped in Charlotte's Tel Aviv apartment when the air raid sirens sound. She even has her gas mask with her. All its grim associations come into play as she pulls it on. Gradually old wounds are opened and there are revelations it would be a shame to share here, except to say Lotte's tattooed number plays its part, as the title suggests.

Adi Loya pulls off a telling double, moving between Charlotte – tight-lipped, seemingly unsympathetic, gradually revealing the damage, pain and regret she lives with – and Kohlmann. The camp guard it seems should be a figure of hate is of course human too – a sister under the skin. Natasha Lanceley's Lotte interacts so seamlessly with her that the young ballerina seems to emerge from her older self during those beautifully-choreographed scene changes and Lanceley clearly delineates the contrast with her pushy 1991 character. Batel Israel is touching as supportive fellow prisoner Ida, whose ghost is there for lonely Charlotte in 1991; and by contrast effectively conjures a Nazi doctor and malicious MC at an in-camp cabaret where Lotte must dance for her tormentors. This is a beautifully effective telling of a thought-provoking addition to Holocaust history.

*By Judi Herman*

*Photos by Lidia Crisafulli*

Under the Skin runs until Saturday 31 March. 7.30pm. £12, £10 concs. Old Red Lion Theatre, EC1V 4NJ. 020 7837 7816. [www.oldredliontheatre.co.uk](http://www.oldredliontheatre.co.uk)

Then running in Sussex Wednesday 16 & Thursday 17 May. 7pm. £10, £8.50 concs. The Warren: Theatre Box, Brighton, BN1 4GU. [www.brightonfringe.org](http://www.brightonfringe.org)