A Letter To My Friends

Sometimes, when I'm weary of the intifada, the occasional terror attacks, the stumbling economy or the political scandals that seem to dominate the public agenda in Israel, I look at the weekend's newspaper magazines and start to breathe again.

Take this weekend. If you are a theatergoer, and you live in Tel Aviv, you can choose one of the 38 plays now running (and I'm not counting the fringe theaters). It could be Edward Albee's A Delicate Balance, The Vagina Monologues, Camus' The Fall, Streetcar Named Desire by Tennessee Williams and many others, all played in Hebrew to full houses.

Dozens of plays in Hebrew attract nice crowds, as well, not to mention plays in English, Russian, Arabic, Yiddish and even Moroccan. If you are a music lover, Israel this weekend is your paradise. You can listen to Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 3 with the Israeli Camerata Orchestra, Mozart's 40th Symphony, sacred music, Baroque music, gospel music, Russian folk songs, gypsy quartet, medieval drums, funny concert pieces for Purim, French chansons (complimentary glass of wine), music in a convent in the Judean hills and even Irish hunting songs.

Dance is a different area. There is Nutcracker for the whole family, a dance workshop of the Negev, a one- man show in a cellar in Rosh Pina, a picturesque township in the north, and more. Museums offer a wealth of exhibitions, from 19th Century Turkish clocks at the Museum of Islam to Jewish rituals at the Israel Museum or Japanese etching in a small museum in Haifa.

Book lovers can listen to Sayed Kashua, an Arab-Israeli writer, reading from his new book at a literary cafi or join a guided walk in the alleys of Jerusalem, in the footsteps of the heroes of Shay Agnon, Israel's literary Nobel laureate.

This is only the tip of the iceberg. This weekend, hundreds of thousands of Israelis will flock into the national nature reserves. I bet that on Saturday, by 9 a.m., the radio will be alerting people to stay away from certain areas because the parking lots are filled. Many will go gliding, fishing, surfing.

Is this the same country that has been under relentless terrorist attack? The country whose economy has been suffering and its morale beaten by condemnations in The Hague and elsewhere? Is this a way for Israelis to escape from the grim realities of their lives?

Not necessarily. Cultural life in Israel has always been rich and vibrant, even in times of crisis. When the Jewish state was born in 1948, young Leonard Bernstein came to conduct the Israeli Philharmonic Orchestra, bringing music to the soldiers in the battlefields. During the first Gulf War, Isaac Stern, wearing a gas mask, played his violin to full house in Tel Aviv. This is not simply a boost to the morale; it is something Israelis need.
The same with the Israeli cinema, which has always expressed in celluloid the experiences that we have endured. While films still deal with the existential challenges that Israelis face collectively,

more are now starting to focus on the experiences of the individual. This is a vibrant, life-affirming community. When pressed to the wall, it can give a good fight. At the same time, it cherishes those things that make it worth fighting for.

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