Mizrahi Theatre as an Interruption in Westernized Israeli Theatre

The term Mizrahi Jews, or Mizrahim, refers to Jews of Middle Eastern and North African descent, who make up nearly half of Israel’s Jewish population. Over the years, Mizrahi Jews were excluded from Israel’s social and cultural centers of power in all spheres of life, having been considered a lower class. This exclusion finds its roots in Zionist ideology, which internalized Eurocentric and orientalist worldviews. Nevertheless, during the past two decades, Mizrahi Jews have enjoyed the beginnings of socioeconomic mobility. The growth of a middle class among them has led to a burgeoning of culture and the arts known as the “Mizrahi Renaissance.” Mizrahi theatre, as part of this renaissance, was founded mostly by Mizrahi Jews whose works focus on the history of Mizrahi culture and tradition and who address social issues of particular importance to Mizrahi Jews (Shem Tov 2018).

Eurocentrism and orientalism are well-entrenched in Israeli theatre in terms of content and style, acting and directing, design conceptions, casting of actors and addressing audiences, as well as in the widespread use of stereotypes depicting Mizrahim as inferior, primitive, ludicrous, violent, and threatening (Orion 2004). True, there are differences between Israel’s mainstream theater, which follows the hits of the West End and Broadway, and its alternative theatre, which admires the theatrical innovations taking place in Berlin, Paris, and London. However, both share a common focus on and attraction to the West. Basically, Israel is in denial about being part of the Middle East, and Mizrahi theatre reminds Israel of this reality. While Israel’s Mizrahi theatre views Western theatre as an additional source of interaction and inspiration, it does not consider it a either a standard or a source of attraction. Therefore, the category Mizrahi theatre serves as an interruption in Israeli theatre, which has viewed itself as a part of the West ever since it was founded by Jewish artists from Europe.

Hannah Vazana Greenwald is currently one of the outstanding directors of contemporary Mizrahi theatre, whose language of performance intentionally distorts Orientalist conceptions, and who creates a Mizrahi-feminist alternative on the Israeli stage. “Freicha is a Beautiful Name” (2012) is a poetry performance that disrupts stereotypical representation. It was created as feminist-collective theatre by Vazana Greenwald together with the actresses Sally Arkadas, Eden Uliel, and Avital Michel-Meyer. The performance is a collage of poems by Mizrahi poets that deal with the stereotype of the *freicha*. The term “*freicha*” means “joy” in Arabic, and quite a few older Mizrahi women actually have this as their given name. But with the migration of the *freicha* to Israel, the joy was mangled. The word *freicha* (pl., *freichot*) in Israel became a synonym for an orientalist stereotype that negatively labels the Mizrahi woman as someone of low socio-economic status. It connotes a cheap, “easy,” sexual woman, vulgar and crass in her behavior. Her language is non-standard, she is uneducated and her aesthetic taste is gaudy and overdone, lacking restraint, colorful, and ostentatious.

The title of the show is taken from the poem of the Mizrahi poet, scholar, and activist, Sami Shalom Chetrit, “Freicha is a Beautiful Name,” which serves as a leitmotif throughout the show, and appears already in its opening:

 When Perachia was born in Dar El Beïda,

Her mother called her Freicha,

So that her life would be filled with joy.
“Freicha is a beautiful name,” she said.

Freicha is a beautiful name.

The poem tries to restore the original positive meaning of the *freicha* as joy, but is this possible? If so, how? This is the complex question that the show sets out to answer.

Israeli theatre generally offers two possibilities for dealing with a stereotype. The first involves presenting an anti-stereotypical character that is entirely at odds with the audience’s expectations, while the second involves presenting a highly-detailed and realistic character to demonstrate the complexity of the character as a human being and an individual (Orion). In contrast, Hannah Vazana Greenwald proposes a novel third option. Instead of moving away from the stereotype as do the two more traditional approaches, her show actually reinforces the stereotype, in an ironic, parodic, audacious and antagonistic style, to the point where the stereotype becomes completely distorted and emptied of its negative content. Instead, it becomes a source of empowerment and protest for Mizrahi women. Instead of seeking distance from the negative imaging that is threatening them, the performers on the stage adopt it as their own and transform it into a source of empowerment. The inspiration for this disruptive reclamation comes from LGBTQ discourse, which appropriated the slur “queer” and transformed it into an empowering epithet. The intensifying and satirical reuse of this derogatory term creates a subversive effect that is powerful enough to change the original meaning.

Although this performance is a collage of poems, they are organized within a narrative framework of a journey story (*nostos*) of three Mizrahi women — *freichot —* who return from the big city to the distant Mizrahi periphery. The three women present a visualization of the *freicha* stereotype — loud, colorful clothing, weighed down with jewelry and heavy makeup. Their gestures are large, impulsive, and deliberately lacking in restraint. Their voices and speech are distinctively Mizrahi. The mise-en-scène entails matching movements for the three actresses, which heightens and amplifies the stereotype. Yet, they present poetry. It is Mizrahi poetry — defiant, political, and sophisticated, that flows with ease between high and low linguistic levels, and blurs the distinction between high and low art. The texts make a statement that attests to the high level of political awareness of the three women, countering the stereotype. These antitheses blur the conventional understanding of the term *freicha* and rebuild it afresh, from a common, cheap, and crude woman to a critical, sharp, woman who powerfully opposes the accepted hegemonic codes.

“Freicha is a Beautiful Name” as Mizrahi theatre disrupts accepted hegemonic norms on a number of levels. First, the show situates itself in the Middle East and its content emerges from the region, in contrast to westernized Israeli theatre. Second, the show deals with the Mizrahi-feminine experience in a positive manner and turns a critical eye on the orientalist and patriarchal Israeli conception, thereby subverting it. Third, the show blurs the distinctions between high and low culture by means of Mizrahi poetry. Fourth, the show distorts the representation of stereotypes, not by distancing itself from them, but rather, precisely by using them in an intensified satirical manner, to the point that they become devoid of any negative connotation. This performance is an example that illustrates how, since the turn of the millennium, Mizrahi theatre has become a locus of interruption and challenge to the self-evidently westernized approach of Israeli theatre, and it shows that the East, like the *freicha* herself, is a complex place, fascinating and beautiful.