**Did Sobol, Levin and Evron Learn the Politics of Aesthetic Ethics from Brecht? Ethics of Political Aesthetics? USW**

Most plays produced in the northern world have a political component, largely due to theater’s public nature. Israeli theater, in particular, tends to be political, given the social and historical conditions underlying its development over the last century. Based on these two premises, I analyze a selection of works by three leading Israeli playwrights in terms of the complex relationship between the aesthetics of their artistic works and their social, political, and ethical messages.

Israeli theater is young, with a relatively short tradition. It emerged in Europe at the end of the nineteenth century, where it first strove to develop a distinctive artistic identity among the Yiddish-speaking audience there, and later in Israel’s Hebrew-language environment. The circumstances under which Israeli theater developed bestowed it with a valuable gift: a big bundle of conflicts that are dramatic in reality – and no less so on the stage. In this context, I wrestle with the question of whether and how the playwright Bertolt Brecht influenced the creators of Israeli theater, given that he was intensively engaged in the world of theater, and helped redefine it. Moreover, his works were extremely popular in Israel.

Yehoshua Sobol (born in 1939) is among the most well-known Israeli playwrights, both in his home country and abroad, especially in Germany. Among the approximately sixty plays he has written so far, some such as *Soul of a Jew*, *Ghetto*, and *The* *Palestinian Girl*, deal with three key markers of Israeli identity: Judaism, the Shoah (Holocaust) and Israel’s wars. In all three plays, Sobol uses the theatrical device of self-reference.

Brecht’s plays exhibit tension between emotional identification and the alienation effect. Brecht, as an artist, did not always avoid emotional identification, despite his advice as a theorist to do so. The alienation effect is thought-provoking, by laying bare the tactics of the dramatic medium through deliberate exaggeration in the set and actors’ gestures, which are used to shatter the illusion of the theater. Sobol also used tactics such as the play-within-a-play and meta-theater, but he links them to specific statements.

The *Soul of a Jew* (1982), a partially meta-theatrical play, deals with the conflict between Jewish identity and Zionism. The story, based on the life of Otto Weininger, a young Austrian Jew who converted to Christianity, takes place on the night before he committed suicide at the age of 23. It presents images from his life, his ideas, and memories, and addresses his problematic relationships with his Jewish friends, his uncompromising and strict father, his mother (who caused him to avoid women and sex), and his German teacher, Tietz. Otto carries on impassioned and dramatic philosophical conversations, including with people he never met such as August Strindberg and Sigmund Freud, and especially with his double, shadow self, doppelgänger, and imaginary soulmate. [4II]

Sobol examined what Judaism meant to Weininger by drawing on his book *Sex and Character.* Weininger described Jewish identity as essentially feminine, passive, and illogical, and said that even an alternative “masculine” ideology such as Zionism cannot overcome this. The Hebrew author Haim Hazez made an interesting distinction between Judaism and Zionism in his dramatic monologue, *The Sermon*, in which the hero, Yudka, asserts that Zionism begins where Judaism ends. Following this idea, Sobol applied the theatric technique of self-reference to the character of the young genius Weininger, and his mental and emotional problems. Sobol transposed the emerging question of Jewish identity versus Zionism onto the character, blending the issue and the character in a play that is explicitly aware of its own theatricality.

In *Ghetto* (1984), the theatrical techniques are linked to the ethical message. This play recreates a Jewish theater that operated in a ghetto before its inhabitants were annihilated. Through theatrical and psychological role-playing, Sobol alluded to a message: within every Jewish victim there could be a hidden Nazi, and in every Nazi there is, perhaps, a hidden Jew.

The technique of directly addressing the audience has been used since antiquity, from Aristophanes through Moliere and Shakespeare to Pirandello. Brecht frequently used this artistic device to discourage the audience from automatically identifying with the play’s heroes, and instead to exercise moral discernment. For Sobol, meta-theater was linked to a clear message, because he believed the artist owed the audience an authentic testimony. Further, Sobol thought that this artistic form protects the artist from the trauma of the subject being addressed.

The problem remains of how to portray atrocity in a “dramatic” way. In *Ghetto*, Sobol disregarded current conventions in Hebrew theater regarding portrayal of the Shoah. This play examines a question that begs to be asked: whether Jews also have aggressive personality traits that could become manifest as the horrific fascism of the German Nazis. The character Kittel, the German officer in charge of the ghetto, has a deep understanding of the Jews and even likes them, in his own terrible way. Opposite him is the Jewish character Weiskopf, who turns out to be a mini-Nazi. Kittel considers himself a cultured man and gives Gens, the chief of the Jewish police, permission to create a theater. This play deliberately blurs the boundaries between documentary and fiction. By describing the entertaining and artistic theater that was produced by the massacre victims, Sobol examines ethical problems regarding the price of survival. The existence of the theater enables the Jewish actors to continue to live in the ghetto. But Kroc, the ghetto’s librarian and a spiritual man, insists that the Jews must not collaborate with the Nazis in any way. He opposes creating a “theater in a cemetery”. At a party the theater troupe put on, the singer Chaya seduces Kittel, while the Jewish police conduct a “selection” in the Oszmiana ghetto. Gens bargains with Kittel about how many Jews will be sent to their deaths. Gens decides to close the theater and requests permission to set up a sewing workshop in the theater building, which will employ five hundred Jews, saving their lives. Weiskopf opposes this large number, because it would make the business less profitable. In the final scene, the actors put on a satirical show. Kittel enjoys the performance, after which he lines the troupe up against the wall, and puts white bread and jam on the stage. While the starving people eat, he shoots and kills them all.

*Ghetto* is more than simply a theatrical recounting of events that actually took place; it causes astonishment (among the real audience) at the reasons that the audience and actors in the play survived or were killed during that time. The meta-theater device calls into question the existence of theater itself and its essential role as a substitute for life. In one particularly shocking scene, Sobol includes a play-within-a-play which the theater troupe performs for the Nazi officer Kittel. The actors perform a technically and ideologically virtuosic piece, in which bodyless clothes dance on the stage, before being sent to be “laundered” in the gas chambers. This Clothes Trap recalls the Mousetrap in Hamlet.

*Ghetto* was highly successful in Germany. However, according to McCarthy‘s interpretation, its success can be attributed to Sobol’s implication that all people are actually similar: Nazi Germans, Jews occupying Palestine, etc. In my opinion, Sobol offered a brave psychological and humanistic perspective in *Ghetto*, according to which a person is obliged to wrestle with his or her own morality first and foremost. To do so, Sobol used self-reflection, an aesthetic device developed by Brecht, which negates the audience’s automatic positive identification with the heroes and requires moral discernment.

In *The Palestinian Girl* (1985), Sobol addressed the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The roles of the Jews and Arabs in this play are reversed. A highly skilled Arab acting troupe affiliated with Haifa Theater participated in the production of this play, making the exchanged roles seem natural and appropriate in terms of plot and design. In contrast to *Ghetto*, this play takes place on a film set, and is structured as a film-within-a-play. The story of Magda is based on the true story of a Palestinian named Samira, who is on the set, and a forbidden love between a Jew and an Arab. It is a story of coexistence. The Pirandellian technique used in this play becomes a catalyst for social, political, and humanistic considerations: a Jewish actress plays the role of an Arab girl, and thus both the actress and the audience get two points of view and avoid making judgments based on political and psychological prejudices. A sharply beautiful scene clearly reflects the issue, through an intense, sophisticated, and precise use of the play-within-a-play device:

**Samira**: Did you participate in the war?

**Udi**: No. I was in the entertainment unit, with two other actors from the theater. We had nothing to offer. None of us were entertainers. So, we performed excerpts from *The* *Trial* by Kafka for the soldiers. One day, we were sent to some remote hole. When we got there, it turned out to be a temporary facility for sorting detainees, a small enclosure surrounded by a wire fence. We performed on a tiny stage, improvised from ammunition boxes. Our audience consisted of a dozen strange guys, prisoner interrogators, who sat in front of the fence. Behind the fence, the prisoners sat on the ground, several dozen dirty, unshaven men, their hands tied and their eyes blindfolded. I can see the scene as if it is happening now: I was standing on the stage, telling the parable of the gates and the gatekeepers. The investigators were sitting in front of me, staring at me with eyes that were red and tired from lack of sleep. The fence was behind them, and behind the fence were the prisoners, their eyes covered with rags. And I stood there, and Kafka’s words flowed from my mouth...

**Samira**: And what did you do?

**Udi**: Nothing. What did I do? ... I finished and got off the stage. What could I do?

This conversation between Samira and Udi took place after their rehearsal of a scene in which Udi speaks as if he is in Lebanon, and she helps him. The rehearsal is interrupted and Udi tells Samira about an incident that “really” happened to him in Lebanon. This scene is also a play-within-a-play, but different and more authentic than the one previously described. It portrays a situation in which there are two audiences: the audience for the show (the guards who will interrogate the prisoners), and the prisoners, who are peeking out from behind them in the enclosure. The internal and external plots are interwoven. Reflecting the relationship between the prisoners and the guards, the real-life audience for *The Palestinian Girl* is also comprised of people who are essentially prison guards. The performance space shapes the meaning, by integrating this element with the literal content of Kafka’s parable about the gates and gatekeepers.

In *The Palestinian Girl*, the character Udi is an actor with extreme left-wing views. In the film-within-the-play, he takes on the role of David, a member of an extreme right-wing Jewish organization, who is aware of the situation he has gotten into with Samira. Samira wrote the script that the two of them were working worked on. She fully understands that the dialogue and situation portrayed in the film-within-a-play is fundamentally incompatible with what happens in “real life” within the play, as well as in the real life outside of the play. Samira says: “...now that I sit here and see the result, I know that the whole story has changed, and the truth is not coming out...”

This expresses Sobol’s feelings, in what is a political play at its best. But if the story of the oppression, ideology, and futility of war (Israel’s war with Lebanon, in this particular case) cannot really “come out”, why bother? Is there any moral benefit to saying that nothing can actually come out of it? This is a fascinating piece of theater, expressing awareness of its reason for existing and the discomfort and pain that it intends to convey. It asks the audience to play a self-reflective game, and succeeds in getting them to do so.

The *Soul of a Jew* deals with the tensions between Judaism and Zionism, and the doppelgänger character helps with this. It has been noted that Brecht’s plays included many split characters. Theatricality is simultaneously a subject and a method in *Ghetto*, which addresses the Shoah as another important marker of Israeli identity. *The Palestinian Girl* uses theatricality as a tool to address the unavoidable link to Israeli identity, as seen through the filter of the wars with the Palestinians.

In his subsequent play *Jerusalem Syndrome* (1987), Sobol radically changed the structure but maintained and even intensified the element of meta-theater. In this play, he created 52 video clips showing dramatic, fast-paced, and violent “sequences” that link the three markers of Israeli identity. This format and dramaturgical structure help mitigate the apocalyptic trauma of the subject: ostensibly the destruction of [the Second Temple in ancient] Jerusalem, although it was actually a moral warning about the First Intifada, which was erupting the week that the play opened.

Sobol commented: “That play was everything I was looking for in theater during those years… The play was rejected outright by most of the critics. This let some audience members hate the show and riot. I wasn’t interested in what was in Israeli theater in those days, and felt that I didn’t belong here.” Following this negative reception, Sobol and the director Gedaliah Baser were “fired” from the Haifa Theater and Sobol moved abroad. The political is also personal.

Playwright and director Hanoch Levin delivered his theatrical messages through elaborate and refined aesthetics on the stage. It is possible to differentiate between three sub-categories of this plays: his early works that were distinctly and explicitly political satires, his domestic comedies, and his myth-based tragedies. In all three categories, he crossed boundaries regarding taboos against sex and violence. Further, he often used an intentionally obscure style of “outside the stage” (*hutzbima*) hinting that, in his view, there is “something beyond” the reality of the world and the stage. In some of his plays (such as *Hefetz* and *Schitz*), Levin deliberately blurred the “domestic” and the “political”.

As noted, Brecht often directly addressed his audience in his plays and writings. In *Mouths Agape,* Levin brings his audience onto the stage as a character, reflecting them to themselves. Before the main curtain in the theater is raised, another curtain is raised, showing the seated audience a second “theater hall”. On one side, sits a mother and child, on the other an elderly man. They represent an audience waiting to watch a play, just before the curtain is raised. Levin designed the stage as a theater in which the play-within-a-play will be performed. This is the first play in which the audience is the real protagonist: they are simultaneously the subject under discussion and the people who are having the discussion.

In this play, many people’s mouths “hang agape” in childlike astonishment and bewilderment. Towards the end, there is a forced and false smile at the experience; and in the actual ending, mouths hang open in horror at the convulsions of death. The “real” audience members in the actual theater – like their representatives on the stage – reach the end of the play with their mouths agape. The mother, child, and elderly man are actually the audience, and they serve as a cushion between the fictitious events on the stage, the reality in the theater, and the reality in the outside world. They represent the audience “out there” and the same is true for us.

*Mouths Agape* is essentially a play with two acts, a prologue and an epilogue, two threshold situations between the not-yet and the no-longer, between being and not being. In the prologue, there may be some slight hint of a chance for compassion, but in the epilogue, the theater is presented as absolutely pitiless. In Levin’s slow-motion theatrical struggle about love, death, and the close yet terrible relationship between them, the true drama takes place in the audience’s minds. However, a series of curtains must be opened in order to reach what is seen on the inside of their eyelids. According to Levin, theater, like life, is an illusion between two states of darkness, a veil that cannot hide death. Brecht did not seem to reach this level of pessimism.

The beginning of the play makes an allusion to Shakespeare’s “To be or not to be” monologue that describes the sleep that should bring rest: “And how much rest there will be then, with eyes closed in sleep. Sleep. Sleep. Sleep.” The continuation overturns what has been created. The poetic longing for death turns into a grotesque clinging to life. A gaping mouth has no sleep, no rest, no vision. This, too, recalls Shakespeare’s “All the world is a stage” monologue that ends with the line: “Sans taste, sans everything.” At the end of *Hamlet*, Fortinbras orders the dead to be removed. Levin, in contrast, ends his non-Hamlet play as a macabre extension of the cemetery scene in the Shakespearean play, but in this case, it is the dead who remove the living from the stage.

The queen in this play is a parody of Ophelia, who debates whether or not to go to the convent. Both acts in *Mouths Agape* open with the first words of Hamlet: “Who’s there?” Levin’s answer, to both the sighted and blind characters, seems clear and obvious. There have been countless interpretations of the answers to Shakespeare’s question “Who is there?”: it may be the ghost of Hamlet’s father, or what is rotten in Denmark, or some other idea of what lies beyond. For Levin, the answer is as sharp as a dull knife: death is there. But in this case, the character will not die, because in the theater no one actually dies. The only ones who will really die are the audience members. Self-reflection and the dramatic means of expression used in this play intensify the audience’s awareness of this. *Mouths Agape* is not only a performance about something; it is also the thing itself. Because it deals with “itself” and the act of viewing, the audience cannot hide behind intentionally unbelievable fictitious events on the stage. We are required to watch the arbitrary artificiality of death in the play through the fleeting vitality of death in our lives: not only through what is shown on the stage, but also by observing our own act of watching. Doesn’t this recall Brecht?

The epilogue of *Mouths Agape* is a gem, and less didactic than what Brecht generally did. It inverts the traditional use of an unrealistic scene used in many plays: the summarizing epilogue. The epilogue imparts the true meaning of the entire play. It first calls us (the audience) “Scarecrows at night in a bed of sweet peas,” then implies that we are lust-filled sentries created by a fictitious queen. In the epilogue, the representative of the audience goes onto the stage and presents the audience’s opinion of the play to his colleagues in the play’s fictitious audience: “Friends, people gave their good time and money to sit here in the dark for two hours, and to watch more darkness on the stage, so either do something surprising, like resurrect the dead, or lower the curtain and let them go home.” His head bows in agreement. “There is nothing to say, justice is with the audience.” The representative asks the old man if he happens to be the Messiah. It turns out that he is, and the old man restores sight to the blind and life to the dead. It already became clear that death itself is the play, and now we learn that play itself is death. Levin uses hope to torture the characters, the audience on the stage, and the audience in the theater hall.

There are two wonders in the theater, one small, the other great, bordering on the miraculous. The small wonder is when an actor comes onto the stage with a lit candle, and the candle does not go out. (...) And the second wonder? (...) A skinny bald old man with a fringe of thinning hair on the back of his head sits in front of us (...) and it amazes us that we don’t suddenly hit the wrinkled back of his neck, giving him a terrible blow with an audible smack (...) How does even one word of anything said on the stage reach our consciousness? How do you watch a play? Indeed, this the wonder of the theater, the second, great miracle.[[1]](#footnote-1)

In this brilliantly humorous meta-theatrical piece, Levin refers to himself as part of the audience. Because he does not exclude himself, he apparently avoids making an aesthetic or moral judgment of the play or the act of viewing. The first wonder is that the candle flame does not go out, especially on the large and open space of the stage, meaning that it is sensitive to the world around it. This is a reflection on a physical reality – the very existence of theater within the surrounding social environment. The second wonder he described is an arbitrary, almost uncontrollable, and casually evil desire to hit the person sitting in front of you. This exaggerated description of the desire to hurt someone corresponds to dozens of similar passages in Levin’s works. He wonders how even a single word of what is said on stage reaches our awareness, how we even watch a play. Levin overturned the history of catharsis: not only do we not come to the theater to be comforted; our innate evil inclination prevents this from the outset. This is the wonder of theater.

**Gilad Evron (1955-2016): The Personal is Political**

Gilad Evron suffered personally from government persecution. His highly imaginative plays showed his commitment to a humanistic ethic, not necessarily a specifically Israeli one. He left to his readers and viewers the task of interpreting his works, which had explicitly political and personal messages to varying degrees. For example, I offer his following description of his play *Ulysses on Bottles*:

A literature teacher, crazy about classic Russian literature, builds a raft out of large, empty water bottles, climbs on it with a pile of books, and goes out into the sea towards the Gaza Strip. Gaza, which has about two million inhabitants, has been under siege for years. It is one of the most crowded places on Earth, with no hope. You cannot leave. You cannot come in. It is the largest prison in the world. The man on the raft is caught and imprisoned. His interrogation and trial are at the core of the play. He is ironically named Ulysses, after the hero in *The* *Odyssey*. Ulysses sailed to Gaza to teach Russian literature there. Why literature? they ask him. Because every human being deserves to learn literature, he says. But why Russian? Because I love it, he says. Is this man completely sane and serious? Ulysses does not argue politics. He talks about art, the power of art. At one point, he asks the security officer who is talking to him: What are you so afraid of? Stories? Russian literature? Ulysses was originally a Jewish character, but during rehearsals he was played by an Arab actor. With him, the whole play changed: it became a show with Arabs making up half the audience. It became a meeting between Arabs and Jews. ‘I sat with an Arab who held my hand through the entire play.’ Juliano Mer [Khamis], an actor and theater manager from Jenin came to see the play, and I spoke with him to assess whether he would possibly translate it and bring it to his theater. Two weeks later, he was murdered. To this day, no one knows who killed him. He was a special man. This was the first play in Hebrew that was commissioned for the Arab Theater in Haifa. It was fascinating just to be with the audience there. And sometimes it was very tense, like during the shows we performed in Tel Aviv in the middle of another war, another attack on Gaza. I stood off to the side in the theater and we were all afraid that someday people would attack the actors. We were ready to run onto the stage. It did not happen.

Even though the real situation in Israel is full, complex, and fascinating, according to Evron, this reality is usually portrayed in a unidimensional, journalistic style. He said this gives an impression of a rapid series of events creating a wall of noise: intensity, harsh criticism, cruel occupation, manipulation, zealousness, subjugation, hopes, self-righteousness, living in a bubble. Almost nothing is experienced, except as noise. Theater does not need to reproduce this reality. Evron offers an alternative. Brecht would have approved of this.

Theater is meant to resist this chaotic noise, which does not allow for thought or emotions. Evron asks how it is possible to remain human in such a reality. Distancing allows for an intensive, intimate exploration of the “Israeli experience”, not as noise, but as a meaningful form and structure. This medium can express the violent nature of life in Israel. Violence is at the heart of many plays, meticulously designed in a such a way that they are transformed into rituals of violence. These rituals attempt to convey the horror, alongside the temptations inherent in it.

Most theaters in Israel put on “political” plays. The situation in the country, and its talented directors, ensure that is the case. These plays range from sycophantic and unquestioning overly-sweet kitsch produced by the mainstream repertory theaters to angry defiance, which may be superficial and shallow, in the fringe theater. Evron never abandoned his image as an artist for whom the personal is truly political. He is a creator who bridges intelligence and emotion, identity and thought: sailing on air-filled water bottles towards a spiritual freedom that is reached by reading books - a true, authentic, and valuable type of escape for a population suffering under siege.

In his play *Horribly Human* the hero is “horribly human” but underlying the narrative, the characters, confronted by their violent history, show indifference, pull down the blinds, build a wall, ignore suffering, deport refugees. Addressing the reality outside the theater, Evron’s story refers to a place near the Syrian border, across which an entire society is collapsing. He wanted to “discuss the fears in depth and not underestimate or minimize them.” Evron used a classic and effective theatrical tactic, that of the silent character. Abu Samir watches quietly, without speaking. He artfully used theatrical silence as the essence of the (aggressive...) moral authority of the “mute”. This recalls the Greek character Cassandra, and Catherine in Brecht’s *Mother Courage and Her Children.*

In many of Evron’s plays, the characters’ essential nature and the tension between them is not due to family and marital obligations or blood relations. Rather, their class, socio-economic status and political positions are much more decisive. This is a distinctly Brechtian trait in Evron’s work. His plays are political in the broadest sense of the word. The political aspect is not necessarily expressed in terms of a narrow partisan or even ideological position, but in the sense that people operate in complex fields. This dramaturgical treatment of the subject differentiates Evron’s plays from the “Israeli family” plays that have become popular (even if they are ridiculous, because we like to see ourselves on stage). Too often, these plays offer a refuge from reality that requires moral decisions: you can attack someone within the family, then cry about it; outside the family, you have to pay a price for the attack.

Is the personal political? Gilad Evron told this story:

My son, Omri, refused to serve in the Israel Defense Forces, knowing that he would be tried and jailed. He refused to wear an IDF uniform in prison, which he was informed was also a crime. He was tried again and put into solitary confinement, naked, except for his underwear (conforming to their rules: either wear a military uniform or go naked...) He received permission to make one phone call and was able to tell us about his situation. The conditions in a solitary confinement cell are completely different from a normal prison. He was alone, with cameras on him all the time and constant light, so he didn’t know when it was day and when it was night. Apparently, there is a restriction against putting someone in this dungeon for more than a few days, for fear that he would lose his sanity under these conditions. My son was sentenced to a month. Of course, they threatened to rape him and intimidated him in every way. But something was more important to Omri than clothes – he wanted books to read. [...] It was clear to us that this request was extremely important to him, but the army declared that he could only read a prayer book. Not even a Bible? What could that hurt? Let him pray to God. We knew that reading was essential for him. Without that, we feared for his sanity. We tried as hard as we could to change the situation. We contacted the army’s chief attorney, Knesset members, army commanders. We wrote letters to everyone, explaining why it is important to read, what being a reader means. We tried everything, from every angle. Nothing helped. We were powerless, but Omri didn’t give up. At some point, it became clear to the army that he would continue to refuse to wear a uniform or serve. Afraid that the conditions would destroy his health, they decided to release him. Omri was released. Yes. He is a stubborn type. ... Years later, I came across an old folder on my computer and opened it, and found the letters I had written to all kinds of people about why it is important to read. Why is it essential to read. What reading does to the imagination. Why person who reads can be a free person. I discovered that these are the exact same things, sometimes word for word, that Ulysses says in the play. I didn’t write about someone else. I wrote to free my son from prison. In the play, it says: “I object to the attempt to find psychological reasons for everything.” And I (Evron concludes) sympathize with Ulysses. The personal has an influence. It is in the structure of the creative work. But not in order to remain there, in the personal realm. In a play, as in any work of art, the proof is in the material itself. In the language of the play. Not by simply choosing the right material, but in what you have to say about your reality, through the structure that you build. Often, psychology takes over and eliminates the political, the legitimate anger, and the ability to act. [Here, Brecht would have applauded.] The psychology, the emotion, have to be there. But to act, you need the ability to think and dream and imagine. [And his ability to dream and imagine, Brecht may need some of his loyal female assistants].

1. Hanoch Levin, *The Two Wonders of the Theater: A Man Standing Behind a Sitting Woman*, Kibbutz Ha’Echad, Tel Aviv 1992; pp. 183-182. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)