House and Home in Mizrahi Theater: Spatial Perspectives

# Abstract

The present article examines how four Mizrahi (Jews of Middle Eastern or North African origin) theaters in Israel have handled the question of establishing a permanent theater structure through the prism of theater and city. In theater, the concepts of house—the physical structure—and home—the sense of belonging and identity—are used as aspects of spatial design. It is my claim that the house, that is, the permanent theater used by the troupe for rehearsals and performances, creates the home. Its location in the city and the architectural design of a permanent structure or, conversely, the lack of one, affect the degree of belonging as well as the artistic and cultural identity of the theater and its audience in the urban space.

**Keywords:** theater and the city, Israeli theater, Mizrahi studies, theater space.

In an episode of the British sitcom, *Yes, Prime Minister*, the Prime Minister suggests selling the National Theater building in London and holding rehearsals and performances in hired halls around the country, in line with his conservative fiscal outlook. Alarmed at this prospect, the National Theater representatives try to dissuade him, emphasizing the importance of the physical site. The Prime Minister retorts that the National Theater people are always insisting that theater is about the meeting between the “stage and the actors” and not about “bricks and mortar” (BBC Comedy Greats, 2022).

This scene illustrates how neoliberal discourse has come to cynically mimic the theater discourse of the 1960s and 1970s regarding the importance of spectacle and the theatrical event. This discourse emerged from the new theatrical approaches seeking alternative performance spaces, emphasizing the connection between actors and audience, breaking the fourth wall, and showing that theater can take place anywhere (Schechner, 1973). These approaches also diminished the importance of the traditional physical structure of the urban theater building, now perceiving it as old-fashioned, conservative, and bourgeois.

In this article, I aim to highlight how important it is for a theater troupe to have a permanent physical structure, one identified with the troupe, located in the city, and constituting a part of the theater’s identity. This structure is even more critical for troupes from socially, economically, politically, and culturally disadvantaged segments of the population. I will focus on four theater institutions focused on Mizrahi (Jewish of Middle Eastern or North African origin) content and audiences, which are considered outside of the mainstream of Israeli theater: the “Frechot” Ensemble and the Shachar Theater, located on the outskirts of the Tel Aviv metropolis, and the Lod and Dimona Theaters, located in towns that are geosocially removed from the country’s central district. I examine what the presence or absence of a permanent building means to these theaters from the perspective of the relationship between city and theater.

The concepts of ‘house’ and ‘home’ are useful in describing the two aspects of spatial design in the theater.[[1]](#footnote-1) ‘House’ is the physical aspect of the space, that is, the theater building itself, while ‘home’ describes the sense of belonging, identity, and community generated by the theater. It is my view that the house—as a permanent theater building for the troupe’s rehearsals and performances—creates the home. The structure’s location in the city and its architectural design, or, conversely, the absence of a permanent structure, affect the degree of belonging and the artistic and cultural identity of the theater and its audience in the urban space.

The Israeli researcher Dan Urian expresses the close interconnection between house and home when he referred to the Israeli theater a “secular synagogue.” Bearing in mind that the Hebrew word for synagogue, *beit knesset*, literally means ‘house of gathering,’ the Israeli audience perceives the Israeli theater is a secular house of gathering, “which airs the various problems of concern to its audience” (Urian 1999: 231). The house of gathering facilitates the creation of a home for the community as the place where it celebrates its values and debates its problems. The theater, as a home, contains the past as a memory machine conjuring up bygone performances and events (Carlson 2003), creates *communitas*—a sense of belonging and solidarity—in the present (Turner 1969), enables the temporary realization of the future as the “utopian performative” (Dolan 2005), and even has the potential to effect transformation (Fischer-Lichte 2014). A theater without a house, on the other hand, may become homeless.

Nevertheless, Ric Knowles argues that theater companies “without a permanent home space” may actually have an advantage, in that nomadic theater can provide “a kind of healthy dislocation to ensure that in at least some of its senses space cannot be taken for granted, and it virtually guarantees, on some level at least, engagement with space” (Knowles 2004: 88–89). Nomadic theater is aware of the issue of how to create a home for itself under these conditions. However, more often than not, theater companies do not deliberately choose the nomadic path but are rather forced to move from hired space to hired space, or be hosted as guests by another company’s theater venue. Therefore, Knowles stresses:

There is a downside to this dislocation, too, that might better be called displacement, or perhaps homelessness. As most theater practitioners have learned, the problem for nomadic theater companies is the difficulty in finding the rental spaces that they want, and the reality that when such spaces are found (or more they often some compromise resembling them) they cannot always be controlled, and the company’s work gets pulled around by them in unanticipated ways. And, of course, there is little time to find ways of dealing with this problem because the company is often totally exhausted from the constant need to find or create new places to perform (Knowles 2004: 89).

The questions of house, home, and homelessness are a central preoccupation of non-mainstream Israeli theater. This article examines how four contemporary Mizrahi theater companies outside the mainstream on the house-home(less) axis deal with these questions. How does the house beget the home? What strategies does a Mizrahi theater company employ to create a home in the absence of a house? How does the repertoire of Mizrahi theater echo the concerns of the urban space in which it is located and with which it corresponds? How do material issues of budget, infrastructure, and organization shape the theater’s physical structure and, subsequently, its artistic choices and attitude towards the audience?

# Theater, Space, and the City

The house–home axis emerges from the field of Urban Performance Studies, which, in turn, arose out of the ‘spatial turn’ movement, informed by cultural materialism and human geography. As Kim Solga puts it, “cultural materialism offers theatre and performance studies tools for situating theatrical production and consumption firmly in lived space; human geography provides a theoretical backbone for understanding the relational quality of that space, and the often-uneven roles played by social actors in existing social spaces” (Solga 2019: 36).

To understand performance in the urban space we must first look to Henri Lefebvre who famously claims that “(social) space is a (social) product, […] [it] serves as a tool of thought and of action [and] in addition to being a means of production […] is also a means of control, and hence domination, of power” (Lefebvre 1991: 26). As a space with a physical, social, and symbolic dimension, a theater is thus subject to power relations within the city and within the theater field itself. Following Lefebvre’s political conceptualization, Benjamin Wihstutz points out the complexity of the politics of space in theater and performance:

Although every performance is inscribed in a place and space within a specific social order, as an artistic event it can just as well distance itself from this order, reflect it, or even endow it with utopian qualities. […] The history of theatre clearly speaks to the ambivalent potential inherent in the social space of performance to either transform it into a space of dispute, scandal, and rebellion or to serve the interests of (state) power (Wihstutz 2013: 3–4).

Marvin Carlson’s (1989) seminal study indicates processes by which the theater building in the urban space gains meaning in the social and environmental context and becomes a cultural landmark in the city. Gay McAuley (1999) also sees the theater buildings as the fulcrum for understanding the theatrical event. Notably, she argues that fringe troupes without a permanent theater structure find it difficult to exist in the metropolis because of the high rental fees for rehearsal spaces and performance halls. As a result, young and alternative artists are excluded from the big urban cultural centers, which renders their theaters homeless. Ric Knowles (2004), as mentioned above, emphasizes the significance of the link between the theater’s location and its economic, creative, and productive practices.

Considerable research has been conducted on the theater in large, cosmopolitan cities. Michael McKinnie (2007), for example, focuses on the urban geography of theater through the lens of the relationships between civic planning, the city’s unique political economy, real estate trends, and regional and national attitudes to show their mutual influences on theater production in late twentieth-century Toronto. Another prominent research direction is that of ‘Theater in Towns,’ as coined by Helen Nicholson, Jenny Hughes, Gemma Edwards, and Cara Gray in the title of their 2023 book examining local theater, which is often removed from the metropolis and, thus, from mainstream theater. They focus on theaters in British towns and insist on the artistic, social, and economic complexity of local theater in its ability to tell the narratives of the town and its people. Their study constitutes one of the pillars for my understanding of Mizrahi theaters located in peripheral towns, and I will expand on it further on.

In terms of methodology, I draw on Jen Harvie’s proposal to focus on the threefold relationship between the urban space, the performative and dramatic activity, and the material conditions of the theater: “These features address where theater takes place in the city and what that place means; how its architecture signifies; what economies it participates in; and what its demographics are—who works in theater, in what conditions, and who spends their leisure time there” (Harvie 2009: 24–25). Therefore, for each of the four eastern theaters, I detail the various material conditions of the theater, as well as their relation to the structure of the theater and the company’s repertoire. It is important to note that in Israel, most of the mainstream and fringe theaters are subsidized at various levels by the Ministry of Culture, the local authorities, the Ministry of Education (for student tickets), and other public funds, making the involvement of the establishment critical to the existence of the theater. Therefore, the factor of whether the theater was established as a bottom-up personal-local initiative or as a top-down institutional decision has an impact, as we shall see further on, on whether, when, and to what extent the theater is subsidized.

# Mizrahi Jews and Mizrahi Theater

Most Mizrahi Jews immigrated to Israel in the 1950s–1960s from Arab countries in the Middle East and North Africa, and currently make up roughly half of the country’s Jewish population. Zionist Orientalism saw Mizrahi culture as inferior and primitive, not a far cry from the culture of the Arab enemy. The Mizrahim were forced to adapt to the ‘*Sabra*’ model of the ‘new Jew,’ which had been designed based on white-Western criteria. They were required to throw themselves willingly into the ‘Zionist melting pot’—to break away from their Diaspora traditions, and to discipline their language, accent, body, customs, religious practice, and aesthetic tastes in order to become ‘Israelis.’ Israel’s socioeconomic policy displaced the Mizrahim to outlying settlements far removed from the center. There they lacked access to quality employment, proper education, health, or cultural services, effectively shaping them into a distinct, lower class and making them dependent on the establishment (Swirski 1981; Swirski and Bernstein 1993). These two processes of cultural erasure and disconnection, on the one hand, and socioeconomic exclusion, on the other hand (Shohat 1988), shaped negative stereotypes about Mizrahi Jews in Israeli culture (Shohat 1989).

Uri Cohen and Nissim Leon (2008) show that starting in the 1980s, a Mizrahi middle class of second and third generation immigrants emerged due to political, economic, geographic, and educational changes. Guy Abutbul-Selinger (2022) is likewise cautiously optimistic in claiming that this population has become more integrated within the dominant Ashkenazi middle class, especially when it comes to the current generation of Mizrahi adolescents who manage to combine their Mizrahi identity with their middle-class positioning on the socioeconomic spectrum. He argues that Mizrahi identity has come to be associated with positive characteristics such as hipness and authenticity, serving, therefore, to improve Mizrahi adolescents’ self-confidence and social status among their peers (Abutbul-Selinger 2022). In contrast, Cohen and Leon underline that Mizrahi Jews still have difficulties integrating, and posit that the Mizrahi middle class is “frequently forced to contend with the strategies of isolation, opposition, and obstruction adopted by the hegemonic Ashkenazi middle-class elites” (Cohen and Leon 2008: 52).

Since the 1970s, Mizrahi community theater, critical of the oppression of and discrimination against Mizrahi Jews, has flourished in working-class neighborhoods on the outskirts of Tel Aviv and Jerusalem (Lev-Aladgem 2010b). Following the emergence of a Mizrahi middle class, from the 1980s on, Mizrahi theater artists, such as Sami Michael, Gabriel Bensimhon, Eli Amir, Razi Amitai, Daniel Lanzini, and Yossi Alfi, have presented Mizrahi Jewish history on stage in defiance of its institutional exclusion. In 1982, Yitzhak Gormezano Goren, Shosha Goren, and Rafi Aharon founded ‘Bimat Kedem,’ a Mizrahi theater that seeks to give a voice to Mizrahi artists and produce Mizrahi content for a Mizrahi audience. This theater did not have a permanent structure and moved around hired halls. The theater staged about sixty plays during its existence until its closure in 2013 due to budgetary issues arising from the harsh austerity funding policy exercised by the Ministry of Culture toward the theater (Shem-Tov 2021). Since the turn of the millennium, a young, educated, and activist Mizrahi audience with a keen interest in culture has emerged and become the core audience of contemporary Mizrahi theater, which is the focus of the present study.

# The ‘Frechot’ Ensemble: Integration with the Jaffa Theater and an Expanded Vision

Director Hannah Vazana Greenwald, who established Frechot Ensemble as a Mizrahi-feminist theater in 2010, explained her vision:

I see myself as a Mizrahi-feminist artist telling my story as well as the story of the collective to which I belong. I feel I have a responsibility to do this because it’s not something that happens in Israeli theater and, even when it does, it doesn’t include the complexities and dilemmas that concern me. That is why I’m responsible for representing myself, finding the means of expression, the symbols. My job is also to search the pages of history and prose and give voice to those from whom that voice has been taken away. Theater is both a means of telling a story and a means of activist and political struggle (cited in Elias, 2020).

The following three performances staged by the ensemble exemplify this artistic vision well. *Papa’ajina* (2010) is an autobiographical piece by Vazana Greenwald, delving into her adolescence as a Mizrahi girl in 1970s Jaffa. The narrative navigates the challenges of female puberty within the context of a work-weary Moroccan-Jewish family (Shem-Tov 2018). *Frecha shem yaffe* (Heb. “*Frecha* is a Beautiful Name” 2012) is a performance crafted from scenes inspired by Mizrahi protest poetry, offering a unique exploration of this rich literary tradition. *Yoldot* (Heb. “Maternity” 2017) is a docu-poetic performance that draws on poems and testimonies from Mizrahi mothers whose children were taken without permission by Israel’s health and welfare system in the 1950s (Shem-Tov 2019).

These and other performances center on Mizrahi women, showcasing their resistance to oppression and their unique voices. The ensemble’s repertoire draws on Mizrahi feminism—an intersectional discipline combining ethnicity, gender, and class criticism—and focuses on empowering Mizrahi women while challenging Orientalist, patriarchal, and economic oppression, including that faced by upper- and middle-class white women (Hashash 2022). The overarching theme of this repertoire is its opposition to Orientalism and patriarchy within the wider Zionist narrative while offering a new image of Mizrahi culture as part of the Middle East and North Africa.

The Frechot Ensemble functions both organizationally and artistically as a feminist devising theater, adhering to a democratized work process. The actresses and directors, alongside designers and other collaborators, contribute ideas, share personal and social materials, conduct research, write, and actively collaborate in the creation of the performance (Heddon and Milling 2015). ‘Devising theater’ emerged as a part of the counterculture during the 1960s and 1970s, providing an alternative model to the theater of the patriarchal mainstream (Aston, 1999). Vazana Greenwald further elaborates on her concept:

My emphasis on the cast focuses on their personal and historical experiences. It also stems from my profound understanding of the responsibility to narrate this story. Our collective group is driven by solidarity and mutual responsibility, firmly believing in the justness of our cause. We aim to discover a theatrical language that effectively expresses our message, presenting an alternative perspective. Our productions are not meant for mere entertainment, and thus, they may not be easily digestible. Throughout the play’s development, we all become partners in a political struggle. When we invite you, the actor, to participate, we urge you to tell the political story and recognize your inherent biases. Once you put on your political glasses, you cannot help but see beyond your past blindness (cited in Elias 2020).

In 2019, the Ministry of Culture recognized the Ensemble as an independent theater group, offering minimal support of approximately NIS (New Israeli Shekels) 30,000 annually, a relatively small amount compared to the NIS 250,000 required to mount just one production in a repertory public theater. Consequently, the Ensemble is forced to continually seek out additional sources of support from public foundations. Due to these financial constraints, female artists receive modest compensation and their involvement in the Ensemble is not their primary source of livelihood but rather a platform for creativity and personal and social expression. Despite its limited budget, the Ensemble has gained recognition. Vazana Greenwald was awarded the 2022 Rosenblum Prize for ‘Outstanding Artist’ as her work challenged the homogeneity typical of Israeli theater, giving voice to a unique female perspective and empowering the audience to become part of a transformative community. In 2023, she was awarded the Yitzhak Navon Prize for encouraging creators in the field of theater. Furthermore, the Ensemble received financial support and backing from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to showcase their play *Yoldot* for a month at the Edinburgh Festival in 2022. Consequently, they were invited to and did perform in Italy and Hungary.

The ensemble’s limited material resources do not allow it to purchase and maintain of its own theater building, yet it enjoys artistic success, institutional recognition, and a regular audience. This begs the question of how the Frechot Ensemble has managed to create a home for itself when it does not have its own house. The solution the Frechot Ensemble has found to its predicament is to be regularly hosted at the Jaffa Arab-Hebrew Theatre and in this way create a feeling of home, that is, a feeling of belonging and identification. As a result, the Frechot Ensemble has integrated and expanded the cultural-political vision of the Jaffa Theatre.

The Jaffa Theatre was established in 1998 with the mission of fostering cultural cooperation between Jewish and Arab artists who put on plays in the Arabic and Hebrew languages, often with political content and messages reflecting this ideological agenda. The directors of the theater are Yigal Ezrati and Rauda Saliman. While the Frechot Ensemble rehearses and stages its shows at the Jaffa Theatre, the ensemble is financially independent and actually rents the venue. Nevertheless, there are close professional and social ties between the ensemble members and the Jaffa Theatre and its staff. In fact, Hannah Vazana Greenwald is employed by the Jaffa Theatre as a publicist as well as the director of the educational department, and she is a member of the theater’s repertoire committee. Ensemble actress Eden Uliel wrote a play for the Jaffa Theatre, and the ensemble initiates social events in which all theater employees and their families take part. These professional and recreational collaborations indicate that the Jaffa Theatre is a meaningful space for the ensemble. Furthermore, the Frechot Ensemble has expanded the cultural vision of the Jaffa Theatre, which was previously focused on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, by incorporating repertoire pieces centered on familiarity and integration with the Arab culture in the Middle East.

The Jaffa Theatre building is located in the Old Jaffa neighborhood, in the Old Saraya House on Mifratz Shlomo Street. Contrary to the large theaters in central Tel Aviv, the Jaffa Theatre was not designed as a theater building but was converted into one (McAyley 1999; 2013). The structure consists of two main spaces: a small lobby with a drinks bar and a theater hall that holds only one hundred seats, with a particularly deep stage area framed by Ottoman arches that creates an intimate space. The building was erected by the Ottomans in the 18th century on the ruins of a Crusader fortress and was initially used as an inn for merchants. In 1811, the building became the offices of the Ottoman governor Muhammad Abu Nabbut and at the end of the 19th century, the building was purchased by the Palestinian Damiani family and was used as a soap factory. During the 1948 Arab–Israeli War the factory was closed and the property was seized by the State of Israel. In the 1970s, a Jaffa Antiquities Museum was established in part of the building, and in 1998, the Jaffa Theatre took over the other part. Therefore, this structure contains within it a chain of the different functions it played in the past, producing a “ghosting” effect for the audience and the artists (Carlson 2003).

The Old Jaffa neighborhood of the theater is near the Mediterranean Sea and the port of Jaffa, south of Tel Aviv. It is part of a complex of ancient buildings from the days of the Ottoman Empire that have been preserved (and become quite the tourist attraction), including galleries, restaurants, a church, a mosque, a square, and a garden. The complex is geographically removed from both the big and the fringe theaters of the city. Old Jaffa was founded in the 1960s on the ruins of Palestinian houses left after the 1948 war and the establishment of the State of Israel. Jaffa had been a large and important Arab city until 1948, when most of its Arab residents fled or were expelled following the war. Jaffa then became a district of Tel Aviv, inhabited by mostly Arabs and working-class Mizrahi Jews. In recent decades, however, Jaffa has undergone rapid gentrification and has become a sought-after residential location for upper-middle-class and nouveau-riche Jews. Nevertheless, the district still sees eruptions of violence during periods of political tension (Monterescu 2015).

The theatrical event includes the spectators’ experience of preparation for the event, including their arrival at the theater (Bennett 1997). Thus, the experience of the urban Tel Aviv audience going to the Jaffa Theatre is fundamentally different than that of going to a theater in central Tel Aviv. The Jaffa Theatre is an ancient, small, and intimate building that creates an unmediated experience between the spectators and the stage. In addition, its location in Old Jaffa provides spectators with a myriad of options for additional entertainment before and after the show.

Richard Schechner speaks at length of the importance of the ‘gathering,’ ‘dispersal,’ and ‘intermission’ elements of the theatrical event in shaping the social interactions of spectators, who are also involved in designing the event space (Schechner 2003: 195–196). The plaza next to the theater building serves as a central spot for the spectators to gather and disperse. Due to the strong political agenda of the Jaffa Theatre and the Frechot Ensemble, the plays often provoke vigorous discussion. In fact, sometimes a discussion is held after the play, and even after the discussion is over, spectators linger at the plaza to continue conversing and debating.

The history of the theater building and its location in Jaffa may evoke complex collective memories of the historical changes undergone by Israel/Palestine, which imbue the repertoire of the Jaffa Theatre and the Frechot Ensemble with different political meanings. The touristic atmosphere that encompasses the theater goers, on the other hand, may conceal the complex history that is revealed in the repertoire. As such, the Jaffa Theatre is a heterotopia—one place in which contrasting spaces intersect (Foucault 1986 [1967]). The Jaffa Theatre is, thus, a heterotopic bubble of Jewish-Arab cooperation in a space marked by bloody conflict, which tries to create a model for Jewish-Arab partnership through courageous artistic confrontation. It is no wonder then that the Jaffa Theatre has become a “cultural landmark” (Carlson 1989) in the Tel Aviv cityscape as a unique Jewish-Arab site and as a cultural alternative to the polarized political reality.

Over the years, the Jaffa Theatre has staged plays dealing with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, appealing mainly to the politically left-liberal-leaning public in Tel Aviv. The Mizrahi agenda of the Frechot Ensemble, however, has expanded the repertoire of the Jaffa Theatre, broadening its horizons beyond the conflict, and placing it in the Middle East, on the imaginary line between Cairo and Beirut. For example, the play *Umm Kulthum*, written by the Frechot Ensemble actress, Eden Uliel, together with director of the Jaffa Theatre, Yigal Ezrati, dramatizes the life of the great diva of the Arab world. Following the success of the show, the Jaffa Theatre staged a similar play about the well-known Egyptian singer Farid al-Atrash. These shows about the giants of 20th-century Egyptian music brought in an older Mizrahi audience, some of whom had been brought up and educated in Arab countries, and for whom Arab music and cinema are part of their cultural heritage. Under the influence of the Frechot Ensemble, the Jaffa Theatre has embarked on explorations of culture and history that are not only rooted in wars and pain, of Arab culture as a common denominator for Mizrahi Jews and Arabs and an opportunity for other Jews to become acquainted with this culture.

The integration of the Frechot Ensemble in the Jaffa Theatre as a multicultural site has fostered a community of Mizrahi activists, students, academics, and cultural figures, as well as a critical audience, most of them of Mizrahi origin, who recognize the cultural and artistic vision of the ensemble and appreciate its significant place in Israeli culture. This community regularly participates in the ensemble’s performances and even financially supported one of the ensemble’s projects through crowdfunding.

The influence of the Frechot Ensemble on the Jaffa Theatre’s repertoire not gone unnoticed in the Arab world. Following the Abraham Accords, the Jaffa Theatre and the Frechot Ensemble received an invitation to perform in Morocco at the Royal King Mohammed V Theatre in Rabat. During this engagement, the Jaffa Theatre presented *Umm Kulthum* and the ensemble presented *Papa’ajina*, a play inspired by Vazana Greenwald's autobiographical experiences as the daughter of a Jewish-Moroccan family in Jaffa (Shem-Tov 2018). The play was translated into French, leading to a compelling and emotionally charged interaction between the artists and the local audience, particularly young Moroccans with a keen interest in the history of Moroccan Jewry.

# The Shachar Theater: From Non-Place to Community

In 2015, actress Gilit Yitzhaki founded the Shachar Theater which aims to present Mizrahi history in opposition to its “structuring absence” from Israeli culture and educational system (Shohat 1989):

The purpose of the theater is to create a theatrical tradition that deals with the cultures and heritage of Middle Eastern Jewish communities while developing a unique artistic language inspired by these cultures [...] and to provide a response in the Israeli theater field to the growing desire of many to get to know the life stories of Jews from Arab countries and to get to know their unique and multifaceted fabric of life that began in their countries of origin and continued for many years after their immigration to Israel (Gilit Yitzhaki year?).

The theater’s first play, *Ha-banot* *shel* *abba* (“Daddy’s Daughters”) (2015), penned by Yitzhaki, draws inspiration from her family’s involvement in the Zionist underground in 1940s Iraq. Other plays similarly draw on historical events marked by grave injustices. *Chamesh* *dakot* *arukot* (“Five Long Minutes”) (2021) unveils the hardships endured by Egyptian Jews during the Six Day war, where many were detained without trial. *Tzeva* *ha-mayim* (“The Color of Water”) (2020) depicts the expulsion of Yemenite Jews from the Sea of Galilee region by Kibbutz Kinneret in the 1920s.

This repertoire is in line with Freddie Rokem’s concept of “performing history,” encompassing both the representation of past events and the live performance of these narratives in the present (Rokem 2000). The live performance enhances the viewers’ experience, distinguishing it from a written historical account. Consequently, the performance of Mizrahi history prompts a contemplation of the relationship between the Mizrahi and Zionist narratives. The Shachar Theater disapproves of the orientalist aspects of the Zionist narrative but aims to expand it and integrate the Mizrahi narrative. For example, the theater seeks to portray the fighters of the Zionist underground in Iraq, the settlement of Yemenite Jews near the Sea of Galilee, and the suffering of Egyptian Jews as integral components of the national ethos, acknowledging their significant participation in the Zionist enterprise.

The theater was initially established without any public funding. It was only in 2019 that the theater started receiving subsidies from the Ministry of Culture, amounting to an average of NIS 150,000 per year, owing to its ability to attract large audiences, such as the 80,000 viewers who attended *Ha-banot* *shel* *abba*.

The Shachar Theater currently has a small rehearsal studio in south Tel Aviv, and its performances take place in rented theater halls in diverse Israeli cities and towns. Consequently, the theater reaches audiences across the country. However, it still lacks a permanent building that would be identified with the theater, and which would create a definitive sense of belonging and identity.

A company that lacks a permanent theater structure and has limited resources is forced to deal with the disparities between the rehearsal space and the diverse stages on which it performs. The show is developed in a rehearsal space, which is often small and intimate, but presented in a different performance space, which is often large and foreign (McAuley 1999; Knowles 2004). The Shachar Theater conducts its rehearsals in a small studio and rents theater halls, usually in cultural centers throughout the country, for single, one-time performances, thereby not leaving enough time for the actors to rehearse the show sufficiently on the performance stage, a factor that may adversely affect the level of acting and the general energy on the night.

Moreover, cultural centers in Israel tend to resemble each other in terms of their architectural design. Most of them are symmetrical, rectangular, white buildings erected in the 1990s, which are divided into a lobby with a bar and a 400-seat theater hall with a proscenium stage. Contrary to the Western tradition of unique theater buildings whose architecture speaks to a specific period and place, viewers in Israel do not get a sense of uniqueness when they visit these cultural centers. Usually, the centers are used to host existing productions from all over the country and function as receptacles for shows, rather than featuring a permanent company. Such hired halls can be referred to as a ‘non-place’—an anonymous and functional space, reproducible and lacking any identity, and which does not establish a stable and unique relationship between its components. It is a site that has no memory and no history; it has no story to tell those who enter it, just like a mall or an airport (Augé 1995).

The question thus arises: how does the Shachar Theater deal with the challenges of performing in non-places and the lack of a permanent theater structure? In other words, as a ‘homeless’ theater, how does it manage to create a home? The Shachar Theater addresses communities defined by the content of the plays—Iraqi Jews, Yemenite Jews, and Egyptian Jews. Mizrahi organizations for the preservation and cultivation of the memory and culture of Jews from the Middle East and North Africa market tickets at discount prices to members of these organizations who have a cultural interest in seeing Mizrahi history performed. Schechner sees the theatrical event as a ‘nest’ created thanks to relationships of proximity between the audience members. It is, therefore, the random conversations, the closeness and the looks exchanged among the audience of the Shachar Theater that turn the rented and random space, the ‘non-place,’ into a home. A defined ethnic audience that comes to watch its historical narrative, and whose communal element is reinforced through relationships of proximity, shapes the theatrical space. It overrides the generic nature of the cultural center as a ‘non-place’ and gives the space a sense of home for the Shachar Theater.

# Local Theaters

In the section that follows, we shall discuss the Lod and Dimona Theaters, two local theaters with permanent buildings on the geo-social periphery of the State of Israel. These two theaters are not Mizrahi by definition; however, their vision is focused on the respective towns in which they are situated. As a significant part of these towns’ population is of Mizrahi origin, the companies’ repertoire performs the Mizrahi narrative in a variety of ways.

Helen Nicholson et al. (2023) claim that local theater in small towns in Great Britain tells the story of the place and participates in shaping the town and its people as part of its history and the local cultural and socioeconomic life. Theater buildings are rich in memory, and performances in city squares, high streets, and other public spaces influence the way cities are lived, felt, and perceived. In other words, “if locality is performed—as spatial, affective and material practice—theater is one way to understand how narratives of place and identity become produced, challenged and embodied” (Nicholson et al. 2023: 38). Yet localism is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, localism is connected to an environmental ideal in which the economic, social, and cultural aspects of the place are interlaced for the well-being of the residents. On the other hand, localism can make towns isolated, complacent, hostile, and resistant to change. How does local theater deal with this paradox? According to Nicholson et al., “on one hand, localism is associated with cultural conservatism and resistance to change. On the other, localism fosters agency, resilience, hope, and communities of care. Theaters in towns negotiate this contested space, and performances often balance localized place-based identities with artistic repertoires that invite alternative ways of seeing” (Nicholson et al. 2023: 37). In fact, since local theaters are “sites where stories of place and identity are constructed and told,” they are forced to deal with this tension and become “complexly entangled in the political ambiguities surrounding localism” (Nicholson et al. 2023: 14).

This paradox of localism is a challenge for local theater. While it must be open and inclusive, lest it reproduce existing power relations instead of challenging them, it must also take into account and showcase local traditions and ways of life. This tension is at the heart of local theater as part of its production of urban space. The paradox of localism is articulated in different ways in the Lod and Dimona Theaters in relation to their respective urban spaces. In essence, although each of them has a house (permanent structure), the paradox of localism presents an obstacle to the construction of the theater as a home for all its residents.

# The Lod Theater Center: A Shelter in a Wounded Town

Lod is a small city in the central district of Israel, located about thirty kilometers east of Tel Aviv. It has a mixed population of approximately 86,000, roughly 70% of whom are Jews and 30% of whom are Arabs. Until the establishment of the State of Israel, Lod was an Arab city, but during the 1948 war, most of the Arabs were expelled from the city after bitter battles, leaving only a small and impoverished minority behind. Today, most of the Jewish residents of the town are working class Mizrahim. Lod is positioned at the lower end (four out of ten) of the Israel Central Bureau of Statistics’ (CBS) socioeconomic scale. Racist policies discriminating against and neglecting both Arabs and Mizrahi Jews have led to problems of housing, unemployment, poor education, crime, and violence in the city. Since the 1990s, Lod has been subject to ideological gentrification, whereby middle-class Jewish-orthodox residents arrived in the city and established educational institutions and a community with a right-wing political orientation aimed at “Judaizing” Lod and further marginalizing the Arabs (Shmaryahu-Yeshurun 2021).

In May 2021, following tensions in the West Bank and an escalation of fighting in Gaza, there was a violent clash between Jews and Arabs mainly in Israel’s mixed cities. In Lod, the violence was severe: both Arabs and Jews suffered injuries, public institutions and shops were burned, and property was destroyed and looted. The situation became so severe that one night a curfew was declared for all the residents of the town. Socioeconomic neglect and right-wing national-religious gentrification in the town added to national political motivations to fuel the violence.

The existing research on mixed Jewish-Arab towns focuses mainly on policies in the areas of urban planning, employment, education, and national and religious identities (see, for example, Yacobi 2009). However, recently, there has been growing interest in the role and locations of cultural institutions and artistic activity in these towns. For example, Naphtaly Shem-Tov (2016) delved into the history of the Acco Festival of Alternative Israeli Theatre, situated in Acre, a mixed Jewish-Arab peripheral town in Israel. He concluded that for most of its existence, the festival’s artistic policy effectively resulted in it operating as a separate entity from the town and its local residents, and focusing primarily on artists and audiences from Tel Aviv. Sharon Yavo-Ayalon et al. (2020) have also examined the socio-spatial relationships between five local theater frameworks in Acre, including the Acco Festival for Israeli Alternative Theater, the City Theater Auditorium, the high school theater program, and the local college’s community theater department. Their findings indicate that, the town’s physical and social structure constrains these theatrical activities from exerting more than the minimal influence on its immediate urban surroundings (Shem-Tov 2016).

Dorit Yerushalmi (2023) investigates the interrelationship between the urban environment and the Hebrew and Arabic theater institutions in Haifa, revealing the political power relations between these identities and the urban space throughout history. Her research focuses on the art of theater as a participant in politics and its relation to the space in Haifa as a mixed Jewish-Arabic city. Building on the work of Karen Till (2012), Yerushalmi (2022) proposes the term “wounded city” for mixed urban centers such as Haifa in Israel. Therefore, we can ask, how do you create a local theater in Lod as a politically and socioeconomically wounded town? To what extent should the theater contain and integrate different and even conflicting local stories and to what extent should it challenge and expand upon them? The paradox of localism poses a complex challenge to the Lod Theatre Center in terms of its approach to the issue of how to relate the stories—some of which are traumatic, and some of which are conflicting—of the communities in the town. In other words, how does the house become a home for all the town’s residents?

 The Lod Theater Center, led by Pnina Rintsler, is a devising theater that produces professional performances as well as community-based theatrical activities with and for Lod residents—both Jews (most of whom are Mizrahim) and Arabs. Unfortunately, in 2022, Rintsler passed away prematurely and today the theater is looking to find its footing. Rintsler was born in Jerusalem into a religious family, her father being of Ashkenazi origin and her mother of Iraqi origin. In 2014, she founded the Lod Theater Center, modeled after the Shlomi Theater Center and the Acco Theatre Center, where she collaborated with Dudi Maayan and Smadar Ya’aron. Inspired by Artaud, Grotowski, and Barba, the Lod Theater stands as an alternative/devising theater alongside the Acco and Shlomi theaters. Its social engagement manifests itself in active involvement with the local community. The Lod Theater Center is not a distinctly Mizrahi theater, but its theatrical method of devising performance is inherently linked to the town and its population. Therefore, since Lod is mainly populated by Arabs and Mizrahi Jews populate Lod, the main part of the repertoire consists of content that reflects their stories.

The Lod Theater Center is a non-profit organization that is budgeted per project and per production. It does not yet have regular support from the Ministry of Culture or the Lod municipality. While in 2019, its budget was NIS130,000, in 2020 the budget dropped sharply to NIS20,000, and in 2021 it stood at a mere NIS4,000. This budgetary volatility prevents any long-term planning: there is no fixed salary for ensemble actors nor is there the possibility to plan the size of productions. Rintsler had to apply for funding to the Lod Municipality for each ad hoc project and production. In effect, then, the theater budget was set retrospectively at the end of the year. Unreliable budgetary circumstances create significant challenges for sustaining continuous artistic endeavors, leading to a perpetual struggle for economic survival and the specter of the imminent risk of closure.

On the other hand, the Lod Theater Center has a permanent theater building in the shape of a neighborhood shelter converted into a black box theater space through what McAuley terms ‘adaptive reuse’ (McAuley 2013). Although the performance space is constructed as a black box, it is not an empty space in Peter Brook’s terms (1969) or “a phenomenological ground-zero” (Carlson 2003: 133). According to Carlson, an interpolated space used for theater also reflects the building’s past uses and may resonate as ghosting on stage and in the memory of the viewers (Carlson 2003: 133). The Lod Theater Center’s modest premises accommodate approximately thirty people. Moreover, the theater building consistently doubles as an emergency shelter, which means that its artistic activities are disrupted in times of crisis. This dual role underscores the building’s simultaneous function as both a theater and a shelter, with the potential for these two roles to resonate in the context of theatrical events.

Situated in a neighborhood marked by dilapidated public housing, not an uncommon sight in Lod, attending the theater might be an unpleasant experience for audiences coming in from outside the town. Nevertheless, Ric Knowles contends that establishing a theater in “ethnic or working-class neighborhoods” is a cultural intervention with the potential to foster good citizenship, a positive city atmosphere, and even a better civilization, particularly for local audiences (Knowles 2004: 66). McAuley, however, holds a slightly different view: “Locating a theater in a working-class area does not mean that it will attract a working-class audience, as numerous experiences have shown, but the location nevertheless makes some kind of statement about who is expected or encouraged to participate and who might fell discouraged from attempting to do so” (McAuley 1999: 45).

Let us reformulate the localism paradox of theater through the specific paradigm of this particular space. How can a theater building that also serves as a shelter relay and display the narratives of the different communities in Lod, especially the often-conflicting narratives of Jews and Arabs? To what extent can the theater give voice to each narrative and to what extent does it challenge these voices? How can such a small space be used to create a place for all the communities of the town? With what meanings does the space’s parallel function as a shelter charge the theater’s repertoire?

The Lod Theater deals with the paradox of localism through the adoption of the devised theater model, which weaves content from the vocabulary of the local communities and tells the different narratives of the town. These stories often arise in an intimate space before local viewers. The shows usually recount the narratives of Mizrahim and Arabs separately, a separation that delays the confrontation between narratives precisely because the tensions are so high in Lod’s urban political reality. This choice only exacerbates the complexity of the localism paradox in a wounded town. On the one hand, separation allows one to “take a breath” and give voice without conflict. On the other hand, it may preserve the status quo rather than finding ways to forge a direct dialogue between the parties. However, it appears that the time is not yet ripe for a joint creation that would attempt to challenge the conflicting narratives of the two groups.

*Asirei toda* (“Grateful”) (2017) is a prime example of performing Mizrahi history (Rokem 2000) dealing with the Holocaust of North African Jewry. The actors filmed the testimonies of Holocaust survivors from North Africa residing in Lod. They also studied the subject at the Center for Documentation of North African Jewry in World War II at the Ben-Zvi Institute in Jerusalem and at the Center for the Heritage of Libyan Jewry in Or Yehuda. The Holocaust of North African Jewry has been omitted from the discourse on the Holocaust in Israel, making *Asirei toda* a pioneering play that gives voice to this suppressed subject. The audience is seated around a spacious round table, with the testimonies projected on a screen. The actors use the table as a stage to present the scenes, treating it like a family table where the difficult past can be revealed, while the shelter itself echoes the hiding places used by some of the witnesses on the screen (Guedj 2022). The actual shelter, as a safe hiding place, and the family table create a home in which the painful testimony that was pushed to the margins of the Holocaust discourse, which focused mainly on Eastern European Jews, can be told. A deep intimacy develops between the participants, intensified by the audience’s familiarity with Holocaust survivors and their descendants on the screen, amplifying the visibility of this Mizrahi narrative in the Israeli Holocaust discourse.

One of the partnerships Rintsler formed to promote the Lod Theater Center was with Fatan al-Zinati, who served as Director of Informal Education for the Arab population in Lod and Director of the Arab-Jewish Chicago Community Center. This partnership allowed Arab residents to access theater activities such as a community-based theater group for Arab women that dealt with painful women’s issues in Lod. These involve the intersection of patriarchal religious conservatism among the men in their community with the racism and discriminatory policies implemented by the state.

McAuley (2013) highlights the adaptively reused building as an intimate space that fosters a fluid relationship between performers and spectators, engaging all participants in the theatrical event. The Lod Theater, as a shelter that has undergone adaptive reuse, has become an image of a protective space that temporarily separates the participants of the theatrical event from the turbulent political reality outside. Through the healing power of the theater, Pnina Rintsler has found a way to tell local stories, such as the marginalized Mizrahi history of the Holocaust of North African Jewry and the hardships of Arab women at the intersection of gender, national status, and religion. Although the shelter, as a house, imposes physical constraints, such as the small number of spectators, which may limit creation, it has the advantage of affording an intimate and protective space that successfully creates a home in a complex urban space mired in bloody ethnic and political conflict.

# The Dimona Theater: Tel Aviv Bubble or “Dimonaian” Theater

Dimona is a town of 35,000 inhabitants in the Negev, which, like Lod, is socioeconomically situated in the lower CBS stratum (four of ten). Established in the 1950s as part of a plan to develop towns in outlying areas further removed from the country’s center, in 1955, it was settled by an influx of Jewish immigrants from North Africa and India. Subsequent waves of immigrants from the Soviet Union arrived in the 1970s and 1990s. Today predominantly populated by individuals of Moroccan-Jewish origin, Dimona is closely associated with this community. As a southern town, it is considerably distant from Tel Aviv (approximately 140 km), resulting in limited access to material and cultural resources. Over the years, the town has suffered from discriminatory government policies, leading to challenges in employment, housing, and education that have significantly affected both the founding generation and their descendants.

In 2009, Israel’s state lottery (*Mifal ha-pa’is*) established the Dimona Theater as part of a project to set up five cultural laboratories in Israel’s geo-social periphery. Situated in the Kovshei Eilat neighborhood, this local theater is housed in a newly constructed building that accommodates 120 spectators and has a black box performance space, allowing for flexibility in reconfiguring both the performing area and the audience for any given performance. This new theater building, constructed thanks to NIS six million in public subsidies, is a notably uncommon development within the realm of non-mainstream Israeli theater, one that opens alternative theatrical opportunities to the artists working within it.

The theater is supported by the Ministry of Culture, which brings its budget up to NIS one–two million a year. The actors, who have relocated to Dimona from Tel Aviv, receive a salary. Throughout the week, certain days are dedicated to rehearsals of the theater’s repertoire, while others are allocated for teaching drama in the community and pursuing personal creative projects. Within the realm of non-mainstream Israeli theater, these enhanced material conditions are regarded as significant, enabling an extensive and in-depth artistic process, with a dedicated eight-month rehearsal period for each performance.

Noa Raban and Ohad Knoller managed the Dimona Theater from 2009 until 2016 and, since then, it has been run by Ori Vidislavsky. These artistic managers hail from Tel Aviv and are of Ashkenazi descent. However, some of the actors and board members are Mizrahi residents of the town. Like the Lod Theater Center, this local theater is not explicitly defined as Mizrahi. However, a substantial portion of its repertoire, particularly since the beginning Vidislavsky’s tenure, resonates with the Mizrahi audience in the town. Of the four Mizrahi theaters examined in this paper, the Dimona Theater is the only one established from the top down, highly budgeted, and run by artists from Tel Aviv. Therefore, its theatrical and social orientation is built around tensions related to center-periphery dynamics and south/east–north/west disparities.

The localism paradox faced by the Dimona Theater is articulated spatially in the relationship between the town and the metropolis (center-periphery). If we follow the southeastern critical approach that combines socioeconomic criticism with cultural criticism, the ensuing questions arise about the artistic management of the Dimona Theater in relation to the space (Tzfadia and Yiftachel 2021). What space does the theater address? Does it perceive itself as peripheral/Southern/Mizrahi as opposed to central (Tel Avivian)/Northern/Western and try to resemble the fringe theaters of Tel Aviv while ignoring the local stories in Dimona? In terms of the house-home dynamic, is the Dimona Theater building perhaps a ‘white elephant’ that is detached from the community and serves the company alone, creating work that could take place in Tel Aviv? A house that does not strive to create a home for the local audience may strengthen the town’s feelings of inferiority in relation to Tel Aviv—an elitist view that accepts the center-periphery model as real and the cultural superiority of the center over the periphery as self-evident.

Or, conversely, does the theater challenge the center-periphery model and try to shape the local as unique and alternative, with its center of gravity being the town and its stories, without comparing itself to Tel Aviv’s theater as an absolute benchmark for evaluation? This would reflect a localist approach, which sees the house as containing and allowing local stories to take shape in the performance space and creating a home of belonging and local pride. In practice, both of these approaches have been characteristic of the Dimona Theater. The first years of the theater, under, Raban and Knoller’s management, were marked by the elitist approach, while Widslavsky's management, to this day, is much more inclined toward the localist approach.

In the early of Rabban and Knoller, the approach was that of a theater only *physically* *located* in Dimona but functioning as a bubble of fringe Tel Aviv theater. Their vision saw the Dimona Theater as artistic and anti-commercial, a view that is typical of the Tel Aviv fringe, which that perceives itself as ‘high-quality’ compared to commercial public theater (Shem-Tov 2023). Accordingly, they managed the Dimona Theater as a space of high culture in contrast to Tel Aviv mainstream theater, which focuses on entertainment. Raban and Knoller have said: “We had the privilege of having been told—go ahead, make art for art’s sake [...] Go and explore your soul and do it in Dimona. [...] The goal is for the theater to become a national cultural center, to which people flock from all over the country and find the kind of theater they want to consume, for us to be able to make art without compromising on quality” (“I View Myself as a Dimonaian” 2011). This attitude ignores the local in order to appeal to audiences from across the country, similar to the Tel Aviv theaters. In other words, the Dimona Theater was a heterotopia—a place in which opposite spaces intersects (Foucault, 1986 [1967])—a Tel Aviv fringe theater physically located in Dimona, with a repertoire that was almost entirely unrelated to the town and its inhabitants. The themes and aesthetics of the plays were similar to those produced in Tel Aviv, such as the production of *Director’s Version* (2012) about a failed pair of entertainers in Hollywood in the 1920s and *Nobody’s Nowhere* (2011) about a clown who discovers that his world is the product of his imagination, with no special reference to Dimona, its residents, its history, or its future.

Another example is *Dunaliella* (2013), a realistic drama created by Raban and Knoller about four from Tel Aviv who arrive at a hotel on the Dead Sea and the relationships between them. Ron Schwartz’s review of the play sums up the problematic nature of the Tel Avivian fringe approach rather accurately: “One would be hard pressed to say that what is produced is […] a very different theater experience. […] [It is] a very communicative play, one that is efficiently acted, include a few very charmingly staged moments. As for the vision of ‘other voices’? Perhaps it is our expectations that are unrealistic” (Schwartz 2014). Thus, while the play may be quality theater in and of itself, it lacks any specificity or the expression of voices coming from Dimona as opposed to Tel Aviv theater.

The Dimona Theater, in this iteration, was a peripheral replica of Tel Aviv theaters, exemplifying the ‘copy-original’ approach. This approach is one possible expression of the center-periphery relationship, where the hierarchical structure from the center to the periphery is accepted as a given. In this context, the only perceived means of escaping the margins is by emulating the characteristics of the center (Comaroff and Comaroff 2015). Rabban and Knoller’s ‘copy-original’ approach drew criticism from residents who saw the Dimona Theater it as an exploitative venture that benefited artists from Tel Aviv rather than the Mizrahi residents of Dimona. Amit Butbul, a critical Mizrahi activist and teacher sarcastically argued:

The theater was established in the town with the goal, among other others, of teaching Dimona residents what culture really is […] that the way to make a change in Dimona consists of bringing in a ‘quality’ population from the outside, perhaps out of the assumption that the problem is the local population itself. […] The new settlers [artists from Tel Aviv] are privileged and self-important (Butbul 2012).David Peretz, a musician and cultural essayist, asks critically:

What is the purpose of a theater parachuted in from the sky to a peripheral town? To civilize the locals? To bring visitors in from Tel Aviv to be amazed by the fact that there can be theater even in the heart of the desert? Or as one of the residents of the city who opposed the theater once put it to me, “In the end they give a lot of money to Tel Avivians, who do us a favor and come to Dimona to put on plays for empty halls and call it culture. If they gave us the money, we would make much better and more interesting theater.” The debate about the essence and character of the Dimona Theater has been raging for years. Does it have to be, first and foremost, a good theater and only then a Dimona theater, or vice versa? Its former artistic director, Noa Raban, moved to Dimona and put on great shows in Dimona, such as Oren Nahari’s *Af echad be-shumakom* [“Nobody Nowhere”] but the question remains the same—is the story of a clown, as interesting as it may be, the theater that residents of the periphery need? (Peretz 2019)

According to critics, then, the Dimona Theater failed in making its house into a home for the town’s residents. The main beneficiaries of the financial and symbolic resources invested in the establishment of the theater were Tel Aviv artists. The management’s adoption of a copy-original approach meant that the theater repertoire was geared toward a Tel Aviv audience, while residents of Dimona remained alienated. This approach assumes, as a matter of course, that Dimona is mired in a state of cultural inferiority and must receive high art from the cultural center because the locals, ostensibly, have nothing to offer culturally or artistically.

By the end of her term as artistic director, Raban realized the error of her ways in adopting the model of the Tel Avivian fringe: “I, too, came here with a patronizing, Tel Avivian attitude. It took some time for me to integrate and produce content that dealt with the painful issues right under my nose. That is what’s happening now, with the new play *The Concrete Boxes*” (cited in Olivier 2015).

Indeed, the theater’s artistic policy began to change in 2015 with the production of *The Concrete Boxes,* based on Pnina Mutzafi Heller’s book about Mizrahi women socioeconomically struggling and surviving in Yeruham, a town similar and located very close to Dimona. This play points to a turn toward what I call ‘Dimonaian’ theater, a theater that grows out of the town and brings with it a locally oriented artistic direction.[[2]](#footnote-2) The activity of such a theater focuses on residents as well as the theater artists and looks for creative ways to articulate unique themes and aesthetics that voice the story of the place. In 2016, Ori Vidislavski formulated the Dimona Theater’s new vision thus:

The theater is home to local work that tells the local story. A story that allows viewers to identify themselves and produce change. This is a theater [...] that kicks and moves the viewer away from his comfort zone. A theater, in which every visit is an event that accompanies the viewer, resonates, and evokes a discourse of pluralistic social thinking reflective of the reality that surrounds us (Author Year).

By definition, the Dimona Theater is a local and not exclusively Mizrahi theater. However, Mizrahi content now dominates the repertoire. In accordance with the vision formulated above, the theater’s repertoire has included plays such as: *Dimona ahuvati* (“Dimona, My Love”) (2019), based on poetry written by residents about their experiences of the town; *Sack shena* (“Sleeping Bag”) (2017), based on a painful autobiographical experiences of Avi Besser from Dimona when he was a pupil in the Kibbutz Sde Boker High School; *Dina* (2019) by Hanna Azoulay Hasfari, about a childless female Mizrahi worker who gets cancer because of her work and who is trying to break free from the oppression of her three brothers who control her and are now interested in her money and future inheritance; and the comedy *Fifty, Fifty, Fifty* (2020), about three young people from Dimona who want to create an artificial sea as an attraction to bring to tourists to their distant and dull town.

Vidislavski’s approach has given the Dimona Theater back to the town. The repertoire corresponds with the local content. It now incorporates the residents’ creative expression and experience and highlights the importance of the house, situated in the center of the town, as shaping a cultural and artistic home for the local public.

In conclusion, Raban and Knoller wanted to “put Dimona on the national cultural map in order to shorten the mental distances that exist between the center and the periphery” (cited in Yudilovitz 2012). But how can we hope to shorten this distance? Is it by bringing the culture of the center to the periphery as a standard to be imitated, as Raban and Knoller did, or by choosing to focus on the local and designing the theater as an independent-unique creation in Dimona that renews the center, as Vidislavski has done? The latter approach, which now dominates the theater’s management, is consistent with Damon Galgut’s well-known paradoxical quote: “The only way you can be universal is to be sure you are very specifically local.”

# Conclusion

Apart from the Dimona Theater, the other three theaters we have looked at were founded from the bottom up as personal-local initiatives, which means that they face considerable funding limitations, and the issue of the house (permanent structure) in which to create a home, is a complex challenge for them. The Frechot Ensemble is regularly hosted at the Jaffa Theatre, integrating and even expanding the theater’s repertoire from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to other aspects of Middle Eastern culture and fostering an activist Mizrahi audience around it. The structure-less Shachar Theater turns hired halls around the country, which are considered non-places, into a home through a repertoire focused on performing Mizrahi history that appeals to the historical memory of specific ethnic audiences. The Lod Theater Center, which uses a small neighborhood shelter converted into a theater, can reach only a very small audience for each show, and lacks a predetermined annual budget. However, it creates shows geared toward the Mizrahi and Arab communities separately and provides a home for all the city’s residents. The Dimona Theater, which receives the largest budget of the four and has a permanent professional theater structure (house), underwent a fundamental change in repertoire, from a heterotopic Tel Aviv bubble disconnected from the local audience, to a theater that uses local elements to build its unique home.

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1. Ric Knowles (2004) uses this pair of concepts, ‘house’ and ‘home,’ in his analysis of permanent theater structure. I owe a debt of thanks to Ruth Tsoffar from the University of Michigan for the idea to examine the space and structure of the Mizrahi theater through the prism of the tension between the two. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Motti Gigi (2015) makes a similar observation about the artistic direction the Cinematheque in Sderot—a Southern development town like Dimona—through the question of whether it has a local social and cultural orientation, or conversely adopts the ‘copy-original’ approach. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)