A culture war has lately broken out in Israel, and in the center of this raging conflict stands Israeli theatre. Minister of Culture Miri Regev, of the right-wind Likud party, has leveled frequently scathing and direct criticism against cultural institutions, directing particular ire towards the public theatres subsidized by the Ministry of Culture. Her statements include, at the same time, arguments of a rightist-nationalist bent and accusations of a lack of social and culture justice. She claims that the public theatre conceals a subversive reportorial streak, unfaithful to the state and opposed to its values, and as a Mizrahi Jew (those Jews whose roots lie in Arab and Islamic regions), she has partially adopted critical Mizrahi discourse, arguing that the chief part of the repertoire is Western and secular, responding to the needs of the Ashkenazi hegemony (Ashkenazi Jews are those hailing from Europe and North America) instead of those of other communities, such as the Mizrahim and other minorities. She likewise points out that the majority of artistic directors and the central stage directors hail from this same hegemony, occupying senior positions for terms in excess of twenty years, denying access to the mainstream of creators from other cultural communities. Regev appointed various councils to examine artistic directors’ term lengths and the identity of lectors in various foundations, as well as review the budget criteria for artists in the periphery, but these councils have not yet presented their conclusions.[[1]](#footnote-1) Despite her statements on “multicoloredness” and criticism of the hegemonic dominance of cultural institutions,[[2]](#footnote-2) Regev’s main activity until now has been cutting off the subsidization of the Almidan Theatre – the sole Arab public theatre – which produced “Parallel Time,” a play about Palestinian prisoners that was perceived as a show of support for “terrorists.” Artist protests soon followed, with denouncements of Regev delivered during speeches at awards ceremonies and through unflattering impressions in the media. In an artists’ protest conference held in Tel Aviv, the stage director, artistic director, and veteran actor Oded Kotler called Regev’s voters “cud-chewing animals,” comments seen as patronizing to Mizrahi Likud voters that led to a widespread outcry.

In my opinion, it is still too early to analyze and explain the current state of this controversy over Regev’s internal contradictions, both on Regev’s own part and on the part of the gatekeepers of the hegemony, but this clash points to a certain erosion of the hegemony’s strength and dominance in the fields of culture and theatre. On the one hand, cultural institutions’ directors and artists struggle for freedom of expression and creation in the face of potential censorship and cessation of subsidies by Minister Regev. On the other, Regev struggles against the perpetuation of the status of the Ashkenazi cultural hegemony, a hegemony that has more than once rooted of its rationale for forestalling any change or inclusion of other cultural voices in problematic Orientalist characterizations. The perspectives, ideas, and interests comprising this clash are expressed in part throughout the course of this book, and serve to illustrate the complexity of Mizrahi theatre’s oeuvre and its difficulties in establishing itself in relation to hegemonic Israeli theatre.

The purpose of this book is to critically present, for the first time, the Mizrahi oeuvre in the field of Israeli theatre. Mizrahi theatre is a cultural locus for self-representation, one generally created by Mizrahi artists who deal with the content, social experiences, cultural, religious, and traditional foundations, and artistic languages relevant to the social reality and history of Mizrahi Jews in both Israel and their lands of origin in the Middle East. This theatre developed outside the mainstream, although there are a few works that appeared even in the heart of the field. This initial definition serves only as a working assumption and starting point. Its boundaries are fluid, and it can contain within itself other potential modes of Mizrahi self-expression on the stage. The book will detail the conceptualization and typology of Mizrahi theatre in Israel through five theatrical modes: *community-based theatre; professional social theatre; autobiographical performance; poetry performance; Jewish-Moroccan theatre.*

The repertoire of Israeli theatre is mainly Western-oriented and inclined towards centralization, and most of its gatekeepers and tastemakers hail from the secular Ashkenazi Jewish hegemony – and it is largely directed at this hegemonic audience.[[3]](#footnote-3) Thus, even in those rare instances in which Israeli theatre deals with Mizrahi issues, it does so from a hegemonic perspective and reproducing it.[[4]](#footnote-4) As such, the bulk of the public budget allotted to theatre, roughly ninety percent, goes to the seven largest repertory theatres comprising the mainstream of the theatrical field. A historical overview of the repertoire reveals the presence of stereotypes: from the “Moroccan knife” of the 1950s to the *tchakh-tchakh* of the 1960s and the `*ars* and *freha* of the 1980s and onward[[5]](#footnote-5) – stereotypes largely intended to evoke Orientalist images of violence and primitivity. Despite the rise of more critical tendencies and the changes undergone by Israeli theatre, Mizrahi stereotypes of varying intensity can still be found throughout the field. As such, theatre perceives the issue of Mizrahi identity according to the hegemonic discourse, as an anachronistic matter irrelevant to Israeli reality, and as such relegates it to the sidelines. Thus my examination of the flourishing of Mizrahi theatre is rooted in this context of simultaneous material and symbolic inequality.

Despite what I have written above, I am not interested in solely asking, “What is Mizrahi theatre?” Such a question is likely to lead to a static and essentialist answer that obscures the phenomenon’s social context and historical process. I prefer to ask: how, why, and under what circumstances did Mizrahi theatre come to be? These questions are aimed at revealing historical processes within social reality, as well as the unequal power relations in the field of Israeli theatre itself. How did Mizrahi theatre contend with inequality in the field, and which strategies did it adopt in the face of meagre material-budgetary infrastructure, before and within a hegemonic discourse that denied its ethnicity and, at the same time, signified it in a stereotypical, disparaging, and inferior manner? What are the primary modes through which Mizrahi theatre was expressed, and in which social-theatrical contexts did these modes come to be? What is the relationship between what is represented onstage in Mizrahi theatre and social reality generally and Mizrahi identity specifically, and is it possible to outline a theatrical language that grew out of the Mizrahi theatrical oeuvre over the years?

Thus Mizrahi theatre is indeed an interesting artistic phenomenon and a fascinating cultural locus for the examination of modes of constructing ethnic and class identities atop the myriad tensions and conflicts in their midst. Until now, researchers of Jewish and Israeli theatre have barely touched on Mizrahi theatre. Although Mizrahi theatre and Middle Eastern Jewish theatre artists are part of Jewish theatre, they have been ignored. For example, the anthology *Jewish Theatre: A Global View*[[6]](#footnote-6) unfolds diverse perspectives on Jewish theatre, but they mainly deal with plays and theatrical artists from Europe and America. *Jews and Theatre in an Inter-Cultural Context*[[7]](#footnote-7) (Nahshon, 2012) is another collection that attempts to analyze the problematic inter-cultural relationship between the Jewish minority culture and other majority ones. But again the focus is only on Jewish artists and ensembles and their relations with the European and American dominant culture.

The following are the only four researchers to publish on the subject thus far. The seminal research of Dan Urian[[8]](#footnote-8) covers Mizrahi representation in Israeli theatre, chiefly within the mainstream. Urian mainly focuses on the question of how the mainstream perpetuates Mizrahi stereotypes on the main stage, stereotypes based on typical, universal tropes whose chief contents are: violence, criminality, perversion and insanity, primitivity, degeneration, lack of education, subservience, and obedience, alongside pseudo-positive characteristics such as hospitality, warmth, and emotionality. As such, his research only spans the beginning of the twentieth century to the start of the new millennium, and does not cover the developments of the last two decades in the self-representation of Mizrahi theatrical artists. Shulamith Lev-Aladgem[[9]](#footnote-9) studied the history of community-based theatre in Israel, in which Mizrahim have and continue to play a dominant role, but her research does not deal with the professional theatrical output of Mizrahi theatre. Ofir Maman,[[10]](#footnote-10) in his doctoral dissertation, focuses on Telem (an abbreviation for “transit camp theatre”) – an organization founded in the 1950s whose goal was to produce and perform select mainstream plays for the new Mizrahi immigrants, in order to inculcate them with Zionist values and the Hebrew language. Maman demonstrates that in spite of Telem’s patronization and arrogance, the Mizrahi audience nevertheless forged a certain cultural relationship with the field of Israeli theatre, which might have been entirely ignored had it not been for the organization’s efforts. Sarit Cofman-Simhon[[11]](#footnote-11) published an article on theatre in Moroccan Arabic produced by the second generation of Mizrahi immigrants from Morocco. Her main thesis is that Jewish-Moroccan theatre solely celebrates ethnic identity, without any aspect of protest or opposition. For these four scholars, the concept of “Mizrahi theatre” does not exist, and naturally it is afforded no theoretical conceptualization whatsoever. The purpose of this study, then, is to characterize and define Mizrahi theatre as it came to be expressed from a historic, social, and theatrical perspective. The goal is thus twofold: both to organize a theorization and typology of the concept of Mizrahi theatre and to describe and analyze its historical development. In other words, to understand and discern the complexity of Mizrahi theatre through its various modes as they reveal themselves throughout the history of the Israeli theatrical field.

My thesis distinguishes between five theatrical modes of Mizrahi theatre in Israel:

1. *Community-based theatre*

This mode arose in the 1970s in the Mizrahi neighborhoods of the major cities Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, organized by young amateurs who produced works of protest against the socioeconomic and cultural oppression of Mizrahim in Israel.

1. *Professional social theatre*

This mode arose in the early 1980s among professional Mizrahi artists who used the stage to formulate social plays reflecting the difficult present-day social condition of Mizrahim and presenting an alternative historical narrative of the Mizrahim before their immigration to Israel, and of their experiences of hardship and oppression during their migration.

1. *Autobiographical performance*

In the 1990s, Mizrahi stage performers recounted their own autobiographical narratives, which combined the personal and the political, and through which they fashioned their identity as Mizrahim while making use of epic methods that exposed the theatrical mechanisms of representation.

1. *Poetry performance*

This mode is based on the work of Mizrahi poets, who, alongside their formulation of a Mizrahi identity, establish an aesthetic-poetic dialogue that sustains itself within the tension between the written word and the physical and vocal performance, creating a new Mizrahi aesthetics.

1. *Jewish-Moroccan theatre*

Since 2002, theatre in Jewish-Moroccan dialects by second generation performers has flourished, with the repertoire including adaptations of the works of Molière and even original musicals based on nostalgia for Jewish life in Morocco prior to immigration to Israel. This theatre is mainly intended for veteran first-generation immigrants who had heretofore never been granted the opportunity to consume cultural works and theatre in their mother tongue.

Each mode is the subject of its own chapter in this book, and I go into further detail on each of them later in the introduction, in the section devoted to the five chapters. This research is decidedly theatrically-based, and thus its organization and analysis of Mizrahi theatre’s artists and performances are arranged according to theatrical modes and not, for example, chronologically as in Urian and Lev-Aladgem. Still, the historical axis and social context are part of the analysis of each theatrical mode, so that we might understand the social bonds linking Mizrahi theatre to social reality and its place in the wider field of Israeli theatre. The foremost parameter for examining these five modes is the various ways they are used to reformulate material derived from the real world into theatrical productions, which emphasize and construct particular expressions of Mizrahi identity and the Mizrahi narrative. The question is to what extent the representation of Mizrahi identity onstage is perceived as a direct and transparent mediation that guides the audience with a minimum of difficulty from staged fiction towards offstage social reality. And alternatively, to what extent does the language of the production possess self-awareness of the means of expression and representation through which Mizrahi identity and social reality are fashioned onstage? What I mean to suggest here is something occupying varying points on a continuum, rather than according to a rigid binary form. Along this continuum lie the five different theatrical modes. Community-based and social theatre lie closer to the end emphasizing identity and its direct and transparent representation, that is, close proximity between fiction and reality, while the other modes approach this with a more critical eye and emphasize, through the language of performance, the means of representation and their complexity in relation to the onstage construction of ethnic identity. The various appearances of the theatrical modes throughout the history of Israeli theatre is likely to explain the differences in their representations of Mizrahi identity, and inform as to the participation of Mizrahi theatre in the effort to formulate a Mizrahi identity in a climate of social and cultural struggle.

From a chronological perspective, community-based and social theatre first appeared and began developing between the 1970s and 1980s, while the autobiographical performance arose in the 1990s, Jewish-Moroccan theatre in the first decade of the new millennium, and poetry performance in the 2010s. This historical axis is likely to prove instructive as to the pendulum-like movement from a clear and transparent onstage emphasis of identity and its modes of expression to a continuously growing awareness of the central significance of the act of representation in the active formation of ethnic identity onstage. In the 1970s, which were characterized by profound Mizrahi struggle, there was a need to ground and formulate an assertive Mizrahi identity that rejected the racist perspective without doubt or hesitation, and strive to make a place for the alternative Mizrahi narrative sidelined by the Zionist super-narrative. Since the 1990s, following the rise of postmodern and multicultural discourse in Israel, it has become possible to express more complex insights, with the act of onstage representation itself and the various theatrical languages constituting a powerful aesthetic-political means for formulating “a social message and expressions of dissent.” Jewish-Moroccan theatre gives voice to a nostalgic staged celebration of Jewish life in the Arab world, and consciously divorces itself from the Hebrew language and Israeli reality. This artistic-cultural choice undermines, albeit in a roundabout fashion, the rigid Zionist distinction between Jew and Arab. Poetry performance diverts attention from the social message in favor of the verbal, visual, and aural imagery through which ethnic discourse in Israel is expressed, and by which social consciousness is often formulated. What we refer to here is not a distinct linear course, but rather a general historical trend in which can be discerned exceptions no less interesting than the central trend itself.

Since the beginning of the millennium, Mizrahi theatre has constituted part of a broad cultural wave which we might call a “Mizrahi cultural renaissance,” championed by Mizrahi artists and cultural figures who contend with Mizrahi identity and offer an alternative Mizrahi narrative from multiple perspectives in many artistic fields. Some of these artistic and cultural expressions have flourished outside the mainstream, often opposing it in a variety of ways, whether directly or indirectly, and offering a cultural alternative. This renaissance has blossomed, among other reasons, because of the critical Mizrahi discourse (detailed in the next chapter) that arose in the 1990s, which entered the public consciousness via new social and technological networks, successfully circumventing the gatekeepers and tastemakers of establishment public and commercial media. The significance thereof is not merely the sharing of knowledge and information between Mizrahi cultural figures and the Mizrahi audience, but also the formation of a shared cultural Mizrahi consciousness, neither diluted nor censored.

There are myriad examples to call upon, and I shall content myself with a brief and partial listing. Among the most prominent phenomena are the `Ars Poetica events organized by the poet Adi Keissar, which serve as a stage for pointed and biting Mizrahi poetry by young third-generation Mizrahim. The group engendered a lively public debate within Israeli media and online social networks, and its poems of protest, also published in the Israeli press, garnered responses that ranged from enthusiastic to harsh and even violent. These events attract many young people because of their integration of performative poetry readings, dance, alcoholic beverages, and tempestuous social interaction.

Mizrahi music and Mediterranean pop as a whole, excluded for years from Israeli media, have become part of the mainstream in the last twenty years, despite opposition from tastemakers and musical editors. Classical Mizrahi music, performed by Andalusian and Arabic orchestras, has also appeared on stages for the first time, alongside Mizrahi cantorial music and traditional liturgical poetry. Young singers freely mix Arabic music with Mizrahi elements, among them Dudu Tassa, who records songs written in Iraqi Arabic by his grandfather and great-uncle, the Al-Kuwaiti Brothers, once a household name in the world of Arabic music; the singer Neta Elkayam, who sings classical Moroccan music; and the trio A-WA, who integrate Jewish-Yemeni women’s poetry with contemporary pop. In film, two non-Hebrew-language Israeli movies have been produced. The veteran director Nissim Dayan directed *The Dove Flyer*, based on the book by Eli Amir, which concerns the Jewish community of Iraq before the mass migration to Israel, and features dialogue in Jewish Iraqi Arabic. Yuval Delshad directed the Persian-language *Baba Joon*, about a crisis within a Persian-Jewish family working in Israeli agriculture. Eyal Sagui Bizawe and Sara Tsifroni directed the documentary *Arab Movie*, which deals with the screening of the weekly Arabic-language film on Israeli television every Friday in the 1970s and 1980s, and the complex manner in which Mizrahim, Ashkenazim, and Arabs viewed it. Ron Kachlili produced the documentary series *`Arsim and Frehot: The New Elites*, which assertively and unapologetically deconstructs the Mizrahi stereotype. Maor Zaguri produces the television drama series *Zaguri Empire*, which follows a Moroccan family in Beersheva and includes a host of complex and nuanced Mizrahi characters who represent contemporary intergenerational dilemmas and struggles in the Mizrahi family. These examples and others like them locate Mizrahi theatre within a larger cultural trend, as the themes and aesthetics developed onstage correspond in various ways with a broader Mizrahi discourse, instead of merely acting in response to the Israeli theatrical field. Alongside enthusiasm, this cultural process inspires both consideration and reservation among Mizrahi intellectuals and activists, due to the manner in which the establishment exploits the Mizrahi renaissance for its own purposes. The pro-Mizrahi statements by Minister of Culture Miri Regev and the appointment of committees to foster changes in the cultural situation, as well as the appointment of the Biton Committee[[12]](#footnote-12) by Minister of Education Naftali Bennett, are seen as appropriation and division of the Mizrahi struggle. On the one hand, there is the emphasis on a certain Mizrahi cultural visibility in order to maintain Mizrahi voters’ support for the Israeli right; yet on the other hand, there is the continuous expansion of neoliberal economic policies that mainly harm Mizrahim (and other Israelis) from the lower classes.[[13]](#footnote-13)

**Mizrahim in Israel: Historical/Theoretical Axes**

*Mizrahim* literally means “Easterners” or “Orientals,” and the term is applied to Jews and their descendants whose origin lies in the countries of the Middle East, including Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Libya, Egypt, Yemen, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Persia, Turkey, and others. The older term by which such Jews were most widely known is Sephardim (literally, Jews from Spain), a religious term from the Middle Ages that distinguished the liturgical services and religious customs of the Ashkenazim (Jews of European origin) from those of the Jews of North Africa and the Middle East. This term remains the dominant one among religiously observant and ultra-Orthodox Jews in Israel. The establishment term is *Edot haMizrah*, the Eastern ethnic communities. According to Sami Shalom Chetrit, the objective of the establishment was to divide the Mizrahim into distinct sectoral groups, thus weakening their ability to collectively join together and agitate for their social rights, whereas Ashkenazim were seen as representatives of the nation and thus transparent, so to speak, from an ethnic point of view. Chetrit further asserted:

In the Israeli sociological context this term [Edot haMizrah] carries cultural prejudices that present Mizrahim as coming from non-European, other, underdeveloped, backward world, prejudices that are nothing more than copies of Orientalist and Eurocentric assumptions such as “the Oriental's degeneracy.”[[14]](#footnote-14)

The term Mizrahim was created in the 1980s with the appearance of a new Mizrahi discourse of the critical approach in Israeli sociology (which I will refer to further in due course). The term “Mizrahim” places less emphasis on ethnic origin and birth country, and aims at an assertive-political definition that demands transformation, that indicates a collective with political, socioeconomic, and social demands, in contrast to the Orientalist associations of the term “Edot haMizrah”:

The starting point for those calling themselves Mizrahim is a view of Israeli society in terms of economic and cultural oppression of non-Europeans by Europeans in general, and Mizrahim by Ashkenazim in particular.[[15]](#footnote-15)

The years since the 1990s have seen the rise of the term “Arab Jews,” which refers to the cultural and linguistic elements that characterize the Jews of the Middle East, in particular those from Arab countries such as Iraq, Morocco, and Yemen. Historically, there were Jews who used to the term Arab Jew to define themselves, such as Iraqi-Jewish intellectuals in the 1920s who, for national and cultural reasons, emphasized their Arab identity, following the example of Christian Arabs. In Zionist discourse, the term Arab Jew was seen an anxiety-inducing oxymoron, and academic use of the term emphasizes a once-valid historical possibility eliminated by Zionism. Ella Shohat[[16]](#footnote-16) was the first academic to declare an “Arab-Jewish” identity as the daughter of immigrants from Iraq, and delved into the dissonance created by such an identity as a conscious political act in defiance of the process of de-Arabization imposed on Mizrahim. Yehouda Shenhav and Hannah Hever[[17]](#footnote-17) argue that the de-Arabization of Zionist discourse was incomplete, and thus indications of Arabness are bound to remain among Mizrahim, never to be fully erased. In this sense, the term Arab Jew is an assertive identity established for the sake of social protest, extolling the Arabness of Mizrahim as an act of opposition to this erasure. In practice, very few Mizrahim adopted the term due to the Israeli establishment’s processes of oppression, but the presence of Arab cultural elements, such as music, film, linguistic expressions, and others, is quite apparent in works of Mizrahi theatre, and as previously mentioned, there even exists theatre in Jewish dialects of Moroccan Arabic (Jewish-Moroccan theatre).

The majority of Mizrahim immigrated to Israel in the 1950s and 1960s, and they constitute roughly half of the population. The Israeli hegemony is largely by and for Ashkenazim – mostly secular and middle-class Jews of European origin. The Zionist ideology championed by this hegemony forced Mizrahim to accord themselves to the model of the “sabra” – the “new Jew” defined according to white-Western criteria. The Mizrahim were required to pass through the “Zionist melting pot” – to divorce themselves from the Jewish traditions they had brought with them from the Middle East, and to erase any Arab element of the language and culture that structured their identity.[[18]](#footnote-18) De-Arabization, meaning the severing and erasure of Jewish-Arab identity, springs from Orientalist Zionist ideology that sees Mizrahi culture as inferior and primitive because of its long history in the Arab and Muslim world, and also because anything connected to Arabness is perceived as being part of the culture of the enemy. Thus it was incumbent upon Mizrahim to shed themselves of their “Arabness”[[19]](#footnote-19) and discipline their language, their accent, their bodies and customs, their religious art and aesthetic taste, and so transform into “Israelis.” This same Orientalist outlook on the part of the Israeli hegemony informed social-economic policies that relegated Mizrahim to settlements far from the Israeli center, without employment opportunities or appropriate educational, health, and cultural services, which left them an underclass throughout the history of the State of Israel, and made them dependent on the establishment.[[20]](#footnote-20) These two processes of erasure and cultural disconnection and social-economic exclusion led to the formation of negative stereotypes of Mizrahim in Israeli culture.[[21]](#footnote-21) Indeed, these Zionist ideological apparatus aroused feelings of shame, denial, and secrecy among young Mizrahim, but also sparked in them a desire for protest and struggle.[[22]](#footnote-22) The following is a brief survey of major events in the Mizrahi struggle, although it should be remembered that numerous local struggles and acts of opposition of varying degrees took place over the years.[[23]](#footnote-23) In 1959 the “Wadi Salib Revolt” broke out in Haifa among Moroccan immigrants under the leadership of David Ben-Haroush, who assertively and unapologetically demanded equality in the face of discriminatory policies adopted by state institutions, as well as solutions for employment and housing issues. The revolt was aggressively suppressed by the authorities with the imprisonment of its leaders as criminals. In the wake of the 1967 war and a marked improvement in the economic condition in Israel, the Mizrahim who had taken part in the war were not allowed to enjoy the fruits of the flourishing economy. In 1971, a group of lower class Mizrahi youths from the Musrara neighborhood of Jerusalem, influenced by the struggle of black Americans, founded the Black Panther movement, organizing impassioned demonstrations and protests. The police and courts responded to them with a heavy hand, yet they succeeded in putting the institutional oppression of Mizrahim in all areas of life on the Israeli agenda. They did not merely demand equality in the face of oppressive policies, but also full partnership in government and a just distribution of resources – as Saadia Marciano, one of the leaders of the movement, put it: “Either everyone gets a piece of the pie, or there shouldn’t be a pie at all!”

In the late 1970s, Mizrahi youths from the Katamonim neighborhood of Jerusalem founded the Ohalim movement, which, unlike the Black Panthers, was based on local, neighborhood-level action. This was a unique movement, as its activists and leaders were fostered in the community theatre “Ohel Yosef,” one of the first community theatre groups in Israel. The theatre staged productions that protested the social, educational, and cultural oppression of the Mizrahi youth, and after being so empowered, its actors became local leaders, active throughout various Jerusalem neighborhoods. Lev-Aladgem explains that Ohel Yosef’s protest plays flourished in the wake of the Black Panthers, as well as how this symbolic opposition expanded into social activism. Per her argument, this was a rare historical moment in which community theatre managed to transcend the limits of protest on the stage and become a political force within social reality itself.[[24]](#footnote-24)

These events and other like them led to the Upheaval of 1977, in which the Labor Party lost control of the government to the Likud Party after having been in power since the founding of the state. Mizrahim constituted one of the decisive factors in the diminishment of the Labor Party’s electoral strength, a phenomenon that would be dubbed the “Ballot Rebellion.” This rebellion was followed by a number of significant transformations: the establishment of the Shas movement of ultra-Orthodox Mizrahim from a largely lower-class background, and the rise of the Mizrahi middle class and social justice movements led by Mizrahi intellectuals and activists. The Shas movement was founded in 1983 as a party opposed to the discriminatory attitude of the Ashkenazi ultra-Orthodox establishment towards ultra-Orthodox Mizrahim, particularly in ultra-Orthodox Mizrahi educational institutions. In practice, Shas largely concerns itself with the political and socioeconomic interests of the ultra-Orthodox Mizrahi public, even though a large percentage of its voters are non-ultra-Orthodox Mizrahim (whether mainstream religious or “traditional”) who see it as a party that affords them representation and a voice. The Shas movement has not infrequently engendered racist reactions on the part of the secular Ashkenazim, such as the Shinui (“Change”) Party, led by Tommy Lapid in the 1990s, or the Yesh Atid (“There Is a Future”) Party led by Yair Lapid in the 2010s, which refused to be part of the same coalition as Shas. According to Yoav Peled, the success of Shas among lower-class Mizrahim stems from the integrative message it directs towards Ashkenazim. Shas seeks to replace secular Zionism’s discourse of citizenship, which relegated Mizrahim to the margins of society, with an ethno-nationalist discourse that would grant all Jews (and to Jews only) equal rights, and thus provide Mizrahim with both a material and spiritual solution.[[25]](#footnote-25)

Uri Cohen and Nissim Leon[[26]](#footnote-26) demonstrate that since the 1980s, a Mizrahi middle class, composed of second- and third-generation Mizrahim, has flourished in the wake of political, economic, geographic, and educational changes. Yet Cohen and Leon argue 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.”[[27]](#footnote-27) Thus it comes as little surprise that the phenomenon of *hishtaknezut* (“Ashkenazification”) has spread among middle-class Mizrahim, who adopt a variety of practices in their daily lives in order to pass as Ashkenazim, such as insisting on technically correct Hebrew without Mizrahi-identified slang, embracing aesthetic and musical tastes identified as middle-class Ashkenazi, and others.[[28]](#footnote-28) But these processes of assimilation often encounter obstacles, as well as the identification of such Ashkenazifying Mizrahim as “inauthentic,” impersonators and adopters of an identity they have no right to construct for themselves. In other words, the accusation of Ashkenazification is a discursive means of symbolic violence adopted by the Ashkenazi middle class in an effort to establish clear ethnic boundaries.[[29]](#footnote-29)

Parallel to and following these processes, as well as political transformations connected to the Oslo Accords in Israel and the rise of multicultural discourse in the West, Mizrahi intellectuals, academics, activists, artists, and students have established various Mizrahi organizations since the 1990s. Their goal is the fundamental transformation of Israeli society, not just the accidence to “ethnic-sectarian” demands. 1996 saw the establishment of the “Mizrahi Democratic Rainbow Coalition,” whose founders were imbued with a consciousness and memory of earlier Mizrahi struggles, as well as a complex political perspective. Its demands were for equality and social justice for society as a whole, with its chosen projects on a practical level tightly connected to the Mizrahi population: support of the Public Residence Law, which would allow Mizrahim from development neighborhoods and towns to own the apartments in which they had lived since their immigration to Israel; and a demand for a fair distribution of state lands leased from *kibbutzim* and *moshavim*. The Rainbow Coalition’s strength lay not only in this political activity, but also in the creation of a new Mizrahi discourse – eloquent, complex, pointed, and assertive – that helped to formulate in the media a new Mizrahi consciousness that could be neither disparaged nor ignored.

The year 2000 saw the establishment of the Ahoti (“My Sister”) organization of Mizrahi feminists, which set itself in opposition to the disregard and patronization of the Ashkenazi-dominated Israeli feminist movement.[[30]](#footnote-30) The movement’s goals are to advance and empower dark-skinned women at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder – Mizrahim, Ethiopians, Arabs, and others – fight for economic, social, and cultural issues related to marginalized women, and challenge white feminist discourse and intersectionalize it with categories of class and ethnicity.[[31]](#footnote-31) In 2009, feminists from Ahoti founded Heart in the East: The Coalition for Equal Distribution of Cultural Funds in Israel, whose goal is distributional equality in the public subsidization of artistic and cultural institutions, with an especial focus on fair subsidization for Mizrahi artists and others outside the mainstream. The coalition has two main avenues of activity: it publishes reports on unfair distribution of public subsidies that favor established institutions and artists connected to the Ashkenazi hegemony; and it produces a yearly festival dedicated to all the arts – theatre, music, dance, sculpture, and poetry – in which Mizrahi artists take part, with a special emphasis on the content and aesthetics of Mizrahi culture.

There are three central approaches that were and continue to be, in my opinion, the main perspectives competing with one another in the public discussion of the dominance of ethnicity in Israeli society, which together constitute a summary of this brief historical survey of Mizrahi status and identity:

1. *The theory of modernization and the melting pot approach*. As I explained previously, the “melting pot” was the main policy for the erasing the prior identity of Mizrahim and transforming them into “Israelis” according to white-Western standards. The Israeli academy of the 1950s and 1960s, under the leadership of Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt,[[32]](#footnote-32) was mobilized in support this policy via adoption of the Eurocentric theory of modernization vis-à-vis ethnic relations in Israel, which became the rationale for oppression and discrimination in the name of supposedly scientific ideas. This theory was built on a binary and hierarchal division: modern over traditional; developed over developing; advancement over primitivity; science over preconceived notions. When the non-modern side is part of the equation, it must be cultivated and advances and brought to a higher level in the eyes of the establishment that perceives itself as modern. In practice, this theory justified oppressive policies targeted at Mizrahim, who were always perceived to be the lesser part of the dichotomy, and paradoxically made them a permanent lower class in all aspects of life.
2. *The critical (neo-Marxist) approach*, championed by Shlomo Swirski and Dvora Bernstein,[[33]](#footnote-33) which flourished in the 1970s against the backdrop of the Black Panthers’ struggle, opposed the more dominant theory of modernization, and explained the low status of Mizrahim through the prism of power relations and dependence. According to their argument, the ethno-classist stratification in which Ashkenazim belong to the middle class and Mizrahim to the lower class is the clear result of state social-economic policy. While the theory of modernization sees Mizrahim as essentially inferior, thus explaining their lower status, the critical approach analyzes the history of class formation in Israel and explains how Ashkenazim and Mizrahim were intentionally funneled into different classes via a variety of means at the state’s disposal.
3. *The postcolonial approach* seeks to examine relationships not just as a result of social and economic power relations, but also as a product of cultural practices and practices of ethnic inequality. This approach seeks to integrate economic explanations with social ones, as part of the idea that ethnic identity cannot be fully reduced to economic class, and that there are cultural expressions of inequality and power relations that cannot be explained solely by socioeconomics. This approach adopts the postcolonial outlook, which views ethnic and national relations in Israel through the categories of colonizer and colonized, and points to the colonialist foundations of the Zionist movement as a means of understanding the latter’s relationship to the Mizrahim. In her establishing article, Ella Shohat[[34]](#footnote-34) adopted Edward Said’s view of the West’s Orientalism towards the East, demonstrating how Mizrahim became the Jewish victims of Zionism and the essentially Orientalist policies it directed at them. Members of the Forum of Culture and Society Studies expanded on Homi Bhabha’s view of the hybridized identity created between occupier and occupied, relating to Mizrahi identity:

as if to a locus of establishment, as if to a fluid phenomenon, allowing one “to be and not to be,” which has on the one hand economic and political characteristics, yet on the other hand independent cultural ones as well. Most of important of all: Mizrahiness is not a phenomenon defined as the opposition of “Ashkenaziness”; rather, it is a phenomenon that, among other things, contains Ashkenaziness within itself, due to relations of inclusion and exclusion, of mimicry and assimilation. These assertions of ours are of a kind with, for example, the theoretical concepts of Homi K. Bhabha, one of the central scholars associated with the postcolonial school. This school provides us with a theoretical and intellectual fulcrum with which we can extract the discussion of Mizrahiness from the rut it finds itself in, particularly because it holds that it is impossible to understand “ethnicity” and “subjugation” without also understanding the context in which they came to be: colonialism and nationalism. Rather, instead of fixing our critical perspective within the bipolar opposition of “East” and “West” […] (or, alternately, of “margins” and “center”; “weak” and “strong”; “exploited” and “exploiter”; “colonized” and “colonizer”), we suggest a more complex formulation which sees in identity a socially initiated and constructed locus, without binding ourselves at the outset to one or more of its poles.[[35]](#footnote-35)

This complex and fluid definition of Mizrahi identity paradoxically emphasizes the tension between the construction and invention of social identity and its dominant presence in and decisive influence on social and cultural life. Similarly, it does not see the relationship between Mizrahim and Ashkenazim, and between Mizrahi identity and Ashkenazi identity, in rigidly binary terms; instead, it points to this relationship’s inherent complexity, hybridity, and dynamism. Furthermore, this approach does not content itself with the socioeconomic explanation, but expands its perspective to encompass charged concepts in Israeli discourse: the colonialism and nationalism that reveal the various apparatus serving Zionist ideology in the establishment of its ethnic hierarchies. This approach is also appropriate for the field of Israeli theatre, and for the establishment of a Mizrahi theatre on the basis of productions that make it possible, through their apparatus of representation and especially through acting and roleplaying, to expose hierarchical structures and relationships as political in nature, rather than natural or obvious.

**Ethnicity/Race and Theatre: The Problem of Definition**

Theatre in the Western world has seen an ever-increasing level of activity by non-hegemonic ethnic and racial groups who contend with a reality characterized by inequality, oppression, and discrimination.[[36]](#footnote-36) One of the most significant issues in research is the thorny problem of defining theatre by ethnicity/race. The problem of definition is not only a theatrical-aesthetic one; rather, it is largely political: what are the complex affinities that exist between theatre and the issue of ethnicity/race within society, and what is the place of this theatre in the field, especially as concerns its relationship with the dominant mainstream? I have chosen to go into more detail and illustrate this issue via African-American artists’ and intellectuals’ discussion of how to define black theatre. By observing the complex theoretical and practical discussion held over the long history of black/African-American theatre on the subject of its definition, content, style, and intended audience, we can identify the fundamental issues that crop up in the interaction of theatre and performance by non-hegemonic ethnic/racial groups, such as Mizrahi theatre, and learn how these issues are addressed.

A special issue of the *Theatre Journal* entitled “Black Performance” (December 2005) included a discussion of the problem of defining black theatre, particularly when it comes to writing and acting: “What is a black play/or what is playing black?” Sixteen black playwrights and intellectuals took part in the discussion, addressing these questions with a diverse range of responses. As one might expect, the question of definition is an old one indeed; as far back as the 1920s Harlem Renaissance, the black intellectual W.E.B. Du Bois, who founded and led the *Krigwa Players Little Negro Theatre*, argued for four fundamental principles of black theatre: “About Us, By Us, For Us, and Near Us.”

The plays of a real Negro theatre must be: 1. “about us.” That is, they must have plays which reveal Negro life as it is. 2. “By us.” That is, they must be written by Negro authors who understand from birth and continued association just what it means to be a Negro today. 3. “For us.” That is, the theatre must cater primarily to Negro audiences and be supported and sustained by their entertainment and approval. 4. “Near us.” The theatre must be in a Negro neighborhood near the mass of ordinary Negro peoples.[[37]](#footnote-37)

These principles resound throughout the participants’ discussion as they deconstruct them and expose their inherent complexity. The question of definition leads to a complex dilemma: the very category “black play” makes a minefield of the discourse because of the racist reality of the white mainstream contended with by black creators. On the one hand, as Du Bois and others understood, because of the racist foundation of the (white) mainstream, black artists and actors struggle to create and perform, and thus an independent black theatre rooted in the African-American community alone is likely to be a platform for the artistic and productive development of black artists, as well as for communal empowerment. On the other hand, however, the category “black play” is liable to become a restrictive label that reduces the material to a single black experience, becoming essentialist and, ultimately, deepening the stigma of black theatre and reinforcing black stereotypes.

James V. Hatch asserts that he has never heard questions like, “What is a white play, and what is playing white?”[[38]](#footnote-38) because the adjective “white” is dominant and thus implied. Following him, David Krasner argues that were it not for racism, the question “What is a black play?” would never have been asked at all.[[39]](#footnote-39) He likewise challenges the boundaries of the concept “black play,” asking whether, for example, racist productions like blackface minstrelsy are part of the history of African-American theatre, or whether a production like Shange’s *For color girls* that cast white instead of black actresses would still be considered part of black theatre. Hatch suggests the inverse: “if the cast of Tennessee William’s *Glass Menagerie* is black, it becomes a black play.”[[40]](#footnote-40) Hatch concludes that the search for a definition of black plays and black acting ultimately stems from racism: “American racism gives art its color.”[[41]](#footnote-41)

Paul Carter Harrison argues that although American culture sees black and white as polar opposites:

…in fact, the presence of both has the complementary effect of affirming the integrity of the other until fused into an artificial confluence that shifts consciousness toward visions of gray and confusion. Such might be said to be the problem of assessing the paradox of Black Theatre performance in the American cultural firmament.[[42]](#footnote-42)

Thus in place of the concept of “black theatre,” he suggests the concept of diasporic African theatre, emphasizing culture and territory along the lines of “German/French/Japanese theatre” and the like.

The scholar Sandra Shannon concludes the discussion of the dilemma by referring to two approaches employed by the well-known African-American playwrights August Wilson and Suzan-Lori Parks. Parks is concerned about the reductive nature of the term, and so deconstructs it, wishing instead for the openness and creative flexibility enjoyed by white artists. Shannon asserts that Parks is not the only one:

Also, now more so than ever, a surprising number of playwrights who happen to be African Americans have taken to defamiliarizing, deconstructing, and even outright rejecting traditional notions of blackness in their work.[[43]](#footnote-43)

On the other hand, August Wilson argues that its cultural uniqueness and complex racial history, as well as the racist foundation of the mainstream, obligate black artists to develop black theatre. He adopts Du Bois’ four principles, adding an additional one: black aesthetics. One of the most well-known public debates in this context was led by Wilson, who protested the unfair subsidization of black theatres by mainstream agencies, which caused said theatres to shrink and even close. He similarly came out against the integration of black actors into the white mainstream through colorblind casting.[[44]](#footnote-44) Theoretically, such casting would allow black actors to play a wide variety of classical and other roles without regard to the color of their skin, but in Wilson’s view, this approach erased the historical and cultural uniqueness of black people, which was best expressed in an independent and separate framework. Thus, in productions of his plays, he demanded that all the creators – actors, directors, designers, and even producers – be part of the black community, because their processes of socialization imbued black people with cultural sensitivities not generally shared by whites, sensitivities necessary, in his opinion, for a creative process dealing with the black world.

Despite the differences between the complex and multifaceted history of black theatre and the relatively brief history of Mizrahi theatre, Mizrahi artists working in theatre encounter the same issues detailed above. While the issue of race is a clear and present one in American society, despite the changes that have occurred since the 1960s, the ethnic issue in Israel is still subject to denial and exclusion by the hegemony under the ideological assertion that “we are all Israelis,” making ethnic identity no longer relevant.[[45]](#footnote-45) Thus Mizrahi theatre, both as a concept and a cultural artistic phenomenon, continues to encounter many difficulties as it makes its way through the Israeli theatrical field. On the one hand, the theatrical mainstream adopts a colorblind attitude and meritocratic outlook[[46]](#footnote-46) supposedly based on ability and talent alone. But in practice, this approach intentionally ignores the fact that most of the gatekeepers and tastemakers at the center of Israeli theater come from the ranks of the hegemony, and the repertoire of plays is based on Western culture. This is, in fact, colorblind racism,[[47]](#footnote-47) as it intentionally ignores the repressive and discriminatory history of Israeli theatre (and beyond) as it relates to Mizrahi artists. On the one hand, the concept of Mizrahi theatre is likely to restrict and negatively label Mizrahi artists as “ethnic theatre,” and fail to view their work as sharing the diversity and complexity of other theatres whose ethnicity is more transparent (even the largest public theatre in Tel Aviv is not defined as “Ashkenazi theatre,”[[48]](#footnote-48) instead being perceived as generally “Israeli”). On the other hand, Mizrahi theatre is an independent locus capable of creatively fostering Mizrahi identity and addressing the Mizrahi narrative with sensitivity and with an “insider” understanding of the different experiences of Mizrahim. Doubtless the Mizrahi renaissance of the last two decades provides a supportive and empathetic context for Mizrahi theatrical artists, and allows them to assertively present political statements formulated within a complex aesthetics. Likewise, though Mizrahi theatre generally lies outside the mainstream, a small number of Mizrahi artists have created and continue to create within the mainstream, putting on plays in which ethnicity constitutes a central axis, despite the complexity of Mizrahi self-representation in the heart of the hegemony. One cannot speak of a single Mizrahi experience, and Mizrahi theatre is not obligated to any specific agenda; rather, it represents a diverse array of social experiences and various possibilities for social action and response to the issue of ethnicity in Israel.

**Mizrahi Theatre as Interweaving Performance Cultures**

Mizrahi theatre is not a “cultural ghetto” or a closed and fixed essentialist concept; rather, its cultural content and creative inspiration are consciously based on a diverse array of cultures: Middle Eastern Jewish traditions, Arab culture, the Western world and, of course, Israeli art, including that of the mainstream. As we have seen, the meaning of “Mizrahi” is not diametrically opposed to that of “Ashkenazi”; instead there exists a complex relationship between them that encompasses rejection and inclusion, mimicry and assimilation, both within theatre and outside it. The interweaving performance cultures approach of Ericka Fischer-Lichte,[[49]](#footnote-49) which stems from a similar point of view, bridges the political and the aesthetic via theatrical performance based on different cultures, and it is likely useful to understand Mizrahi theatre as constituting interweaving performance cultures. Fischer-Lichte contends with two different approaches, intercultural theatre and postcolonialism, and attempts to integrate and move beyond them.

Intercultural theatre is a term that has become common in theatre studies since the 1970s, when awareness of issues of colonization and decolonization came to the forefront, as there had always been productions based on the content and methods of different cultures. The term is in fact built on the idea of “the West and the rest,” and refers to productions explicitly based on a combination of Western culture and other cultures – for example, a classic Western play staged in the Japanese style (Suzuki’s production of *Three Sisters*), or a production based on Hindu mythology adapted to Western theatre (Peter Brook’s *Mahabharata*). This is a term that seeks to comprehend intercultural encounters mainly through their aesthetic and theatrical aspects. Following postcolonial criticism, Fischer-Lichte demonstrates that the basis of the term is a rigid binary distinction between cultures that does not exist in reality:

The concept of 'intercultural theatre' implies a sharp division between “our” and the “other” culture. It assumes that cultures are hermetically sealed, homogeneous entities […]. But this is not the case. Cultures constantly undergo processes of change and exchange, which can become difficult to disentangle from each other. Yet, the aim is also not to erase difference. Rather, the differences in and between cultures are dynamic and permanently shifting.[[50]](#footnote-50)

This term also implicitly assumes the existence of a hierarchy between the West and the rest. While the aesthetics and theatrical practices familiar in the West are seen as universal and in possession of a validity that transcends time and place, content derived from other cultures is seen as particular and linked to highly specific contexts. As such, “intercultural theatre” raises ethical questions of ownership, belonging, and cultural appropriation, especially when it comes to Western directors who insensitively make use of other cultures’ content.

Yet Fischer-Lichte criticizes the postcolonial perspective that mainly focuses on the political aspects of intercultural contact in theatre, while overlooking the aesthetic dimensions of mixing together the components of different cultures onstage, as the theoreticians of “intercultural theatre” demonstrate in their research. The disregard of the aesthetic dimension in postcolonial research did not allow for the appropriate amount of attention to be paid to the transformative and utopian potential inherent in the deep bond between the aesthetic and the political in a theatrical production. Thus Fischer-Lichte seeks an alternative theoretical framework – one that, on the one hand, rejects the rigid binarism of “intercultural theatre” without missing out on the opportunity for profound aesthetic discussion, and on the other, adopts the postcolonial critique while also transcending it, discussing the aesthetic in a political manner and being able to see the close connection between these dimensions. In her opinion, interweaving performance cultures is a theoretical framework likely to move beyond these two earlier approaches. The metaphor of interweaving implies that different cultural components are woven together in the production to such an extent that it is impossible to return to each component’s source. Likewise, the process of interweaving is analogous to the process of production – it is no simple and linear process of connecting two cultures, but rather one of trial and error, of weaving together and unraveling different components.

According to Fischer-Lichte, each performance includes a utopian dimension,[[51]](#footnote-51) meaning a potential to create an aesthetic experience between performers and viewers, one that is meant to reflect or negate the social conditions outside the theater, and politically anticipate a different and better potential future. This is a liminal experience, transformative and temporary in essence due to its interweaving of the aesthetic and the political:

In this sense, processes of interweaving performance cultures can and quite often do provide an experimental framework for experiencing the utopian potential of culturally diverse and globalized societies by realizing an aesthetic which gives shape to unprecedented collaborative policies in society (11).

Via a process of the fixation and subversion of identities and cultures, interweaving performance cultures transfer viewers into a state of in-betweenness that allows them to fashion an aesthetic experience that anticipates the future, especially in the globalist world that, by its very nature, interweaves different traditions and cultures. These anticipations are not based on specific content, some clear ideological vision, but rather they are experiences that occur within the interweaving performance culture:

Here, moving within and between cultures is celebrated as a state of in-betweenness that will change spaces, disciplines, and the subject as well as her/his body in a way that exceeds what is currently imaginable (12).

In my view, Mizrahi theatre can be seen as interweaving performance cultures. A not insignificant percentage of theatrical events in the five theatrical modes (community-based theatre; professional social theatre; autobiographical performance; poetry performance; Jewish-Moroccan theatre) interweave different cultures and traditions, and have the potential to anticipate and point to a different Israeli future from an ethno-classist point of view. A utopian-transformative experience can be found in more than a few productions of Mizrahi theatre, which often arouse powerful feelings of enthusiasm and joy alongside anger and dissent. This intensive reception stems from, among other things, the fact that unlike the reality outside the theatre, onstage Mizrahi identity and Mizrahi performers dominate the event, bestowing on the audience a complex aesthetic-cultural experience that transcends common stereotypes and points towards a social alternative that may one day come to be.

**The Chapters of the Book**

**Chapter One: Community-Based Theatre**

Community-based theatre is largely based on personal and social experiences that coalesce into a theatrical performance via a workshop process carried out by amateur participants hailing from subjugated Mizrahi communities. Its content is often connected to injustice, discrimination, and social oppression. In other words, the documentary genre is dominant in this branch of theatre, in both its creative process and its social worldview. Shulamith Lev-Aladgem, who wrote the history of community-based Mizrahi theatre in Israel, distinguishes three significant waves: the protest performance of the 1970s; the establishment celebratory performances of the 1980s; and since the 1990s, essentially subversive performances. Lev-Aladgem’s research has focused largely on group processes and on Mizrahi participants, emphasizing their creative and productive processes. Following Sheila Preston’s discussion of the complexity of the facilitator’s role in applied theatre, in this chapter I direct attention to the directors of community-based Mizrahi theatre and their theatrical and political perspectives over the years.[[52]](#footnote-52) “Collective directing” is central to community-based Mizrahi theatre.[[53]](#footnote-53) The director and the actors create together from their personal and social world on the basis of a shared political ideology that endeavors, in the creative process as well, to minimize and undermine the professional hierarchy existing between director and actors, and to fashion a more equitable process, usually called “devising or collaborative performance.”[[54]](#footnote-54)

The place of collective directing in community-based Mizrahi theatre has led, over the course of its history, to the development of two central dilemmas, the first of which centers on the question of process, and the second on relations with the establishment that funds the activity:

* In the first wave of community-based Mizrahi theatre, most directors were Mizrahi men who held radical social views and were seen as role modeling social leadership for Mizrahi youth, the process was simply a rehearsal for the performance, and the performance itself was only a rehearsal and means of gaining experience for effecting social change in reality itself. The director was a captivating leader who pointed towards the proper ideological path. In the second and third waves of community-based Mizrahi theatre, feminism began to assert itself, and many female directors are seen less as leaders and more as therapists and groups moderators who guide, reflect, and ask questions of the group’s creative process. The process is not merely rehearsal for the performance and gaining experience in effecting large-scale social change in reality; rather, it constitutes an end in and of itself. The process includes reflection and personal transformation of the self, which at the same time constitutes a political transformation in a broader sense. Following the feminist idea that “the personal is the political,” this process can be called “political therapy” through community-based theatre.
* The second dilemma is connected to the tension over theatre’s goals that exists between the public institutional body funding community-based Mizrahi theatre (the municipality, the Ministry of Education, Department of Welfare, and so on) and the director and group participants. The establishment sees community-based theater as a tool for “rehabilitating” lower-class Mizrahim, in order to transform them into “normative Israelis” who see the values of the Ashkenazi middle class as a standard to aspire to. Contrary to this, the group sees theatre as a space for investigation, subversion, and the construction of an assertive Mizrahi identity that grants legitimacy and consciousness to Mizrahi culture, rather than erasing it. The director finds himself in an especially sensitive place between the establishment subsidizing the activity and paying its bills, and the group with which he ideologically identifies and to which he feels ethically obligated. In the history of Mizrahi theatre, directors have invented various strategies for coping with this conflict, from resigning in protest and disbanding the group to employing subversive methods, creating a performance with multiple layers of meaning.

**Chapter Two: Professional Social Theatre**

Israeli hegemonic discourse relegates Mizrahim to the margins of Jewish history and subsequently points to their meager contribution to Israeli culture. Thus the social theatre of first- and second-generation Mizrahi artists formulated a Mizrahi narrative onstage (as they did in other Mizrahi cultural loci) out of the hegemonic confrontation that placed Mizrahim outside history. These artists often depict the pre-Israeli reality in the Middle East and the period of immigration to Israel, and there are even those who have gone as far back as the era of the Sephardi *anusim* and the Spanish-Jewish Golden Age. Likewise, political questions of social-economic oppression in Israel are sometimes presented through stage characters’ protest and struggle against the Israeli establishment and its neo-liberal perspective. Female Mizrahi artists often interweave their dual oppression as women and as Mizrahim, reading the Mizrahi narrative through the lens of this duality. Unlike community-based theatre, these shows are produced in a professional framework that lies largely outside the mainstream, although some have been staged in public theatres. In the majority of instances, this theatre is typified by artists of Mizrahi origin with a unified worldview who formulate a Mizrahi narrative in opposition to the hegemonic and stereotypical perspective that demands Mizrahim be “without culture and history,” and assimilate into Western-oriented Zionist discourse. The category of Mizrahi social theater, then, can be arranged according to the following three forms: performing history,[[55]](#footnote-55) social realism, and feminist realism.

**Chapter Three: The Autobiographical Performance**

The years since the 1990s have witnessed the flourishing of Mizrahi autobiographical performance based in the personal, familial, and communal experiences of the performer. In autobiographical performance, the performer displays and draws attention to his Mizrahiness as an act in defiance of the shame, concealment, denial, and processes of Ashkenazification to which his identity has been subjected. The display of Mizrahiness encompasses a variety of performance possibilities, from defiance and protest against social-economic and cultural oppression to celebration and showcasing of the rich culture subject to such repression and erasure. Likewise, the performance sometimes has a meta-theatrical dimension, since the performer’s personal biography is connected to the world of stage and screen, as well as to the complex and problematical way in which the cultural field relates to the artist’s Mizrahiness. In the 1970s, with the rise of second-wave feminism and its declaration that “the personal is political,” the female autobiographical performance was developed in the West as a means of making a feminist-political statement. Since the 1980s and 1990s, the autobiographical show qua political strategy has seeped into other marginalized groups in the West – blacks, Hispanics, LGBT persons, and others – who make use of it to subvert dominant identities and establish, through performance, alternative ones.[[56]](#footnote-56) Mizrahi autobiographical performance in Israel is actually part of this global phenomenon, with Mizrahi artists, like other marginalized groups, making use of autobiographical material in order to formulate an ethnic identity and narrative that empowers their group and opposes the stereotypes and cultural and social oppression of the mainstream.

Because they often relate to past memories and stories and their present ramifications, artists adopt techniques from epic theatre that correspond with the political-aesthetic perspective of Brecht. In the autobiographical performance, then, there is a growing awareness of the means of representation and the active construction of Mizrahi identity and actual historical reality onstage. For example, in monodramas, the actor plays his stage analogue as well as his parents and other characters, thus emphasizing the rootedness of these characters and the experiences they represent in his consciousness, his body, and his ethnic identity.

**Chapter Four: Poetry Performance**

Poetry performance distances itself from content drawn from reality, basing itself on and corresponding with Mizrahi poetry, particularly that written between the 1970s and the present day by second- and third-generation Mizrahi poets. Intertextuality becomes the focal point of the artistic work, rather than the reflection of reality or the construction of memory as in the aforementioned modes. Stereotypical characterizations, along with descriptions of social experiences, are examined with an explicit meta-theatrical consciousness of the complex relationship between the poetic word and the staged characterization as expressed through movement, costume, props, sound, and light. Thus the movement from the literary medium’s means of representation to that of the theatrical medium clearly occupies center stage. The representation of the Mizrahi world is elucidated through a poetic-theatrical language that attempts to outline an aesthetic option and theatrical statement in which there exists a Mizrahi dimension, instead of merely conveying a “social message” about reality. Likewise, there is an additional apparent intertextuality between poetry performance, world phenomena, and poetry genres drawn from the Mizrahi Jewish past, thus establishing a correspondence with performance art as high art, with popular music such as hip hop and rap, and with the Sephardic Jewish art of liturgical poetry, generally heard and composed in a religious and communal framework.

**Chapter Five: Jewish-Moroccan Theatre**

A surprising theatrical event took place on the margins of the Israeli theatrical field in 2001. For the first time ever, a production was staged in the Arabic language, by Jewish actors for a Jewish audience, that did not deal with the Arab-Israeli conflict. A theatre company from Migdal HaEmek in norterh Israel staged Moliere’s *The Miser*, translated and adapted to Moroccan-Jewish Arabic[[57]](#footnote-57) by Asher Cohen and directed by Ronit Ivgi. The creators and actors are Moroccan Jews, whether born in Morocco or Israel, who spoke Moroccan Arabic as their mother tongue. A large audience of Moroccan Jews and their descendants came to view the production. The success of the performance brought about a significant transformation in the margins of Israeli theatre, and in its wake appeared dozens of Moroccan-language productions aimed at this audience. The State of Israel employed a massive Zionist-ideological steamroller in order to erase and marginalize Jewish cultures in general, and Middle Eastern Jewish cultures in particular, as part of its efforts to build a nation and create a unified Israeli identity around Hebrew culture and language alone. Since the 1980s, there has been a retreat from this radical and oppressive process, exemplified by the development of Jewish theatre in the Arabic language.

The chapter focuses on Jewish-Moroccan theatre and how it has developed strategies for organization and budget, for building a repertoire, and for reaching the community: 1) *Production and budgeting*. Although Moroccan theatre is located on the margins of Israeli theatre when compared to subsidized public theatre, they share a similar commercial logic. While in the public theatre this logic acts as an oppressive force that reinforces ethnic stereotypes, in Moroccan theatre it allows for independence and the construction of an empowering ethnic identity onstage; 2) The *repertoire* of Moroccan-language performances tend towards popular theatre in style, and nostalgia in content. The combination of the popular and the nostalgic in the construction of the repertoire creates a Moroccan-Jewish “community of memory” that stands against the dismissal and erasure carried out by Zionist discourse; 3) the *reception* of these productions by the Moroccan-Jewish audience is quite enthusiastic, and indicates a celebration of this audience’s identity, culture, and language, as well as an act of protest against the hegemonic mainstream. Israeli theatre is seen as a “white space” belonging to the hegemony of Ashkenazi Jews from European and middle-class origins. Viewers of Moroccan theatre “darken” this “white space” by violating the accepted conventions of audience behavior in the Western mainstream. Jewish-Moroccan theatre, by the very fact of its existence, challenges the binary division of the historiography of Israeli theatre into “Israeli-Hebrew-Jewish theatre” and “Palestinian-Arabic theatre,” and resurrects, at least within the bounds of the theatrical event, an Arab-Jewish identity.

1. See Yair Ashkenazi, “Still Waiting for Miri Regev to Keep Her Promises,” *Haaretz*, 6 August 2017 [Hebrew]. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Regev advertised her approach as “multicoloredness.” On one hand, this model diverges from the “melting pot” approach, which demands Western-oriented cultural consolidation and the simultaneously erasure and repression of any other culture; on the other, Regev’s model rejects the multicultural model, which minimizes the common denominator to civic values alone, without nationalist-Zionist values. The multicolored model seeks to provide a means of cultural expression to the diverse groups in Israel while preserving a common nationalist-Zionist denominator.

   Miri Regev, “The Israeli Coat of Many Colors: Many Voices – One Nation,” *Haumah,* September 2016, 1-4 [in Hebrew]. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Dan Urian, “Israeli Drama: A Sociological Perspective.” *Contemporary Theatre Review* 12.3 (2002): 67-95. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Dan Urian, “Mizrahi and Ashkenazi in the Israeli Theatre.” *Arabic & Middle Eastern Literature* 4.1 (2001): 19-36. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Dan Urian, *The Ethnic Problem in Israeli Theatre* (Tel Aviv: The Open University of Israel, 2004) [in Hebrew]. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Edna Nahshon, ed. *Jewish Theatre: A Global View* (Boston: Brill, 2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Edna Nahshon, ed. *Jews and Theater in an Intercultural Context* (Boston: Brill, 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Urian, *The Ethnic Problem in Israeli Theatre*. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Shulamith Lev-Aladgem, *Standing Front Stage: Resistance, Celebration and Subversion in Community-Based Theatre* (Haifa: Pardes/Haifa University Press, 2010) [in Hebrew]. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ofir Maman, "Telem – Theatre for New Immigrants: The Dynamics Between Center and Periphery in the Field of Production of a National Culture" (PhD diss., Hebrew University, 2007) [in Hebrew]. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Sarit Cofman-Simhon, "African Tongues on the Israeli Stage: A Reversed Diaspora." TDR/The Drama Review 57.3 (2013): 48-68. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Bennett appointed the committee “for the strengthening of Sephardi and Mizrahi Jewish heritage in the educational system” within the Ministry of Education, under the leadership of the Israel Prize-winning poet Erez Biton. The committee’s main goal was the intensive integration of the history of Middle Eastern Jews and their cultural and artistic output into the educational curriculum in literary and history, but a budget has not yet been allotted to realize the committee’s recommendations, presented in 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Smadar Lavie, (forthcoming), “Afterword(s): Gaza 2014 and the Mizrahi Predicament.” In *Wrapped in the Flag of Israel: Mizrahi Single Mothers and Bureaucratic Torture*, Second Edition. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Sami Shalom Chetrit, *Intra-Jewish Conflict in Israel: White Jews, Black Jews* **(**London and New York: Routledge2010), 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid., 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
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38. James V. Hatch, "The Color of Art", *Theatre Journal*, 57.4 (2005): 596. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
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44. 1996 saw a fierce debate between Wilson, who took a separatist and critical stance towards the white mainstream’s assimilation of black artists, and the critic Robert Burstein, who saw colorblind casting as a way of expanding black actors’ opportunities to create and move beyond the narrow confines of black theatre.

    See: Jocelyn A. Brown, *Assessing color blind casting in American theatre and society*. (PhD Diss. University of Colorado at Boulder, 2007), 26–27; Brandi Wilkins Catanese, *The Problem of the Color [blind]: Racial Transgression and the Politics of Black Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011), 32–71; Angela Chia-yi Pao, *No safe spaces: Re-casting race, ethnicity, and nationality in American theater*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 9–10. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. For example, the Central Bureau of Statistics stopped checking the ethnic origin of third-generation Israelis, creating a unified “Israeli” category in place of the former categories of “Asian and African descent” for Mizrahim and “European and American descent” for Ashkenazim. This approach implicitly assumes that ethnicity is no longer relevant to social, economic, and cultural issues in the present generation. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. During an academic panel in which I spoke about Mizrahi theatre, one of the students forcefully argued that there was no such thing as Mizrahi theatre, but rather only “quality or non-quality theatre,” a common point of view among tastemakers in the theatrical field. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, "The structure of racism in color-blind, post-racial America", *American Behavioral Scientist,* 59.11 (2015): 1358-1376.‏ [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. I mean “Ashkenazi” in the sociological sense, meaning hegemonic – not Yiddish theatre. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Erika Fischer-Lichte, "Introduction: Interweaving performance cultures – Rethinking Intercultural Theatre: Toward an Experience and Theory of Performance beyond Postcolonialism,” in *The Politics of Interweaving Performance Cultures: Beyond Postcolonialism*, ed. by Fischer-Lichte, Erika Torsten Jost, and Saskya Iris Jain (London and NY: Routledge, 2014), 1-21.‏ [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Ibid., 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. The adjective “utopian” does not refer to a closed and well-formulated utopia that can be accessed, but rather to a different and alternative experience from an aesthetic perspective that only briefly exists within the theatrical event. This experience anticipates a life shared in a manner different from that of social reality, a life which one day may come to be.

    See: Jill Dolan, *Utopia in performance: Finding hope at the theater*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Sheila Preston, *Applied Theatre: Facilitation* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Jean Alter, *A Sociosemiotic Theory of Theatre* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), 246-257.‏ [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Deirdre Heddon and Jane Milling, *Devising performance: a critical history* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Freddie Rokem, *Performing History: Theatrical Representations of the Past in Contemporary Theatre* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2002). [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. See the historical development of autobiographical performance in the West: Deidre Heddon, *Autobiography and Performance* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) 20-52. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Most Jews in the Middle East spoke Jewish dialects of Arabic, such as Iraqi-Jewish, Moroccan-Jewish, and Yemeni-Jewish. Following the mass immigration to Israel, these languages now face cultural extinction. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)