**Conceptualizing Mizrahi Theatre**

**Book Proposal**

**Abstract (aims and central thesis)**

The book critically surveys, for the first time ever, Mizrahi theatre in Israel. Mizrahim are Jews originating from the Middle East and North Africa, and they constitute roughly half of the Israeli Jewish population – yet they are considered a non-hegemonic ethnic group and marginalized in many areas, including in the field of culture and Israeli theatre. Although Mizrahi theatre began to develop in the 1970s, the years since the turn of the millennium have seen an intense flowering of theatrical works by second- and third-generation Mizrahi artists dealing with issues of Mizrahi identity and narrative in a diverse array of forms. In fact, Mizrahi theatre is a cultural locus of self-representation, generally created by Mizrahi artists who deal with content, social experiences, cultural, religious, and traditional foundations, and artistic languages derived from the history and social reality in Mizrahi Jews in both Israel and their Middle Eastern countries of origin. This theatre developed outside the mainstream, although a small number of works have also appeared at the center of the field. This initial description functions solely as a working hypothesis; its boundaries are fluid and it can encompass various possibilities for Mizrahi self-representation onstage. The book will cover the conceptualization and typology of Mizrahi theatre in Israel, not along a chronological axis but rather through five theatrical modes:

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 apparatus 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.

**A description of the target market**

The book is targeted at an audience of researchers and students interesting in theatre and race/ethnicity, Jewish studies, Israeli studies, and Middle Eastern studies. The book is organized according to theatrical modes well-known in theatre studies, and they are likely to serve as a common denominator and comfortable basis of comparison for researchers studying theatre and race/ethnicity in other places around the world. Likewise, for those studying Judaism and Israel, the book offers a new reading of culture and theatre that runs from the margins to the center, in contradistinction to studies of Israeli theatre that covers the field’s mainstream, and unlike studies of Jewish theatre that mainly deal with the theatre of the Jews of Europe and North America and do not touch upon Mizrahi theatre.

This is the first book in the field; there is today no single English-language book covering the history of Mizrahi theatre. Two books on the topic have been written in Hebrew:

Dan Urian, *The Ethnic Problem in the Israeli Theatre*, (Ra'anana: The Open University of Israel, 2004) **[in Hebrew]**

This book mainly covers stereotypes of Mizrahim in the hegemonic mainstream, and devotes less attention to Mizrahi artists. It is likewise lacking important developments that have transpired in Mizrahi theatre since 2004.

Shulamith Lev-Aladgem, *Standing Front Stage: Resistance, Celebration and Subversion in Community-Based Theatre*, (Haifa: Pardes Press and Haifa University Press, 2010) **[in Hebrew]**

This book only deals with community-based Mizrahi theatre, which constitutes only one of the five theatrical modes that typify Mizrahi theatre.

Thus the proposed book has no competition in print in the English language, and even the two books available in Hebrew cover only certain aspects of Mizrahi theatre.

**This book can be part of the following series**:

A series on performance and theatre; a series on Jewish studies, Middle Eastern studies, or Israel studies.

**Probable Length of the Book**:

250 pages, 85000 words.

**Table of Contents**

**Introduction:**

The introduction conveys the complexity of defining Mizrahi theatre, integrates a comparison with the discussion of the problems and complexity of definition in African-American theatre, and indicates the fundamental complexity of the relationship between theatre and race/ethnicity. The introduction likewise discusses Ericka Fischer-Lichte’s concept of interweaving performance cultures as a theoretical framework for understanding that Mizrahi theatre is not a closed concept, but rather complex, dynamic, and inclusive of a variety of cultures and traditions. Furthermore, the introduction details the historical and sociological context of Mizrahim in Israel, specifies the processes that have marginalized them, and elaborates on their struggle for a change in their social situation.

**Chapter One: Community-Based Theatre**

Community-based Mizrahi theatre flourished in the 1970s. This theatre was 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 this chapter, I direct attention to the directors of community-based Mizrahi theatre and their theatrical and political perspectives over the years. “Collective directing” is central to community-based Mizrahi theatre. 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.” 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 centers on the limitations of the director when it comes to process – to what extent is he just a professional director, and to what extent is he also a facilitator, educator, and social leader; the second concerns the extent to which the director is faithful to the group and its goals, and to what extent he is obligated to the establishment that pays the bills, during disputes over performances’ content and message.

**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 that flourished in the 1980s formulated a Mizrahi narrative onstage (as it 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. 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. The category of Mizrahi social theater can therefore be arranged according to the following three forms: performing history, 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. 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. 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**

Mizrahi poetry performance has increasingly flourished in recent years. This performance distances itself from content drawn from reality, basing itself on and corresponding with Mizrahi poetry. 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 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 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* difficulties; 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. 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.

**Manuscript Status**

The completion of the manuscript is expected in June 2021.

**Short Bio**

Naphtaly Shem-Tov is a senior lecturer in the Department of Literature, Linguistics and Arts at The Open University of Israel. His research interest includes: Israeli Theatre, Festival Theatre, applied and educational theatre.

He has published two books:

*Acco Festival: between celebration and confrontation*, Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2016

*Improvisational Teaching*, Tel-Aviv: MOFET, 2015, [in Hebrew]

**Attached Documents**:

Two chapters:

Introduction, Chapter Five

CV and Publication List