*Shylock is Me: Aryeh Elias as an Immigrant Jewish-Iraqi Actor in the Israeli Theatre*

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Abstract

Aryeh Elias (1921-2015) was an Israeli theater and film actor who emigrated from Iraq. Since his Arabic accent was considered “problematic,” Israeli theater rejected him. His dream of performing classic roles like Shakespeare’s Shylock went unfulfilled. Even though he never emerged from Israeli theater’s margins, this chapter discusses how commercial cinema enabled Elias to reach an Israeli audience through performance of the “Likeable Mizrahi” role and to gain popularity. This test case is examined within the context of orientalist and Eurocentric casting politics that place barriers before actors whose accents and appearances do not fit “proper” Israeli standards.

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Aryeh Elias (1921-2015) was a famous and beloved Israeli stage and screen actor. Born in Iraq, he studied acting at the Institute for Fine Arts in Baghdad prior to immigrating to Israeli in 1949. Throughout his long acting career in Israel, he auditioned for roles in the artistic and prestigious public theaters, but, usually, he did not land a role. His prominent Iraqi accent was the primary reason he was rejected. Directors and theater managers viewed it as both “problematic” and “funny,” because it was an Arabic accent that evoked the Arab enemy and it diverged radically from the standard Hebrew accent that Zionism identified with the “New Israeli Jew.” This orientalist and Eurocentric outlook made it impossible for Elias to realize his dream of performing classical roles on stage, especially the role of Shylock in Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* that he had particular interest in performing. Therefore, he mostly performed in commercial theater, in film, and on television. In these productions, his accent and his Middle Eastern appearance constituted part and parcel of the characters that he played. These were mostly comedies in which he played Mizrahi characters, sometimes he performed them in a stereotypical fashion and sometimes he performed them other in complex and moving ways.[[1]](#footnote-1) These Mizrahi roles gained Elias many admirers. Over time, he became one of Israel’s most beloved actors and even won acting prizes. Nonetheless, the ongoing refusal to award him more than a few significant roles in Israeli public theater wounded him and it pained him throughout his life. I will employ Israeli theater’s casting politics to contextualize my analysis of Elias’s acting career, and I will show how a Middle Eastern immigrant actor responded to a Eurocentric theater.

The Zionist project aspires to create a Jewish nation-state that will be a home to every Jew, and efforts to realize this dream have made Israel into a society composed of Jewish immigrants from throughout the world and their descendants. This has made the connection between Israel’s cultural identity and the various Jewish traditions of Jewish immigrants a matter of debate. Zionism aspired to create a unified culture for all Jews through erasure of all Jewish traditions and cultures that did not accord with a secular and Eurocentric Zionist outlook. European nationalist images of a strong, powerful and brave light-skinned man served as a model for the “New Jew” Zionism sought to construct. This model is orientalist, because it treats the Arab world around Israel as inferior to it.

Israeli theater is centralized and largely publicly subsidized. Seven large public theaters, four located in Tel Aviv, constitute its core. These theaters constitute the central art stage and commercial theater proves marginal. In addition, since the end of the twentieth century, Israeli fringe theater, which is comprised of experimental, alternative and political troupes that received small subsidies from the state and whose performances are produced on shoestring budgets, has grown significantly; it proves aesthetically and politically fascinating (Shem-Tov, 2016). From its inception, Hebrew theater has been part of the Zionist project, and, in practice, it has adopted Zionism’s cultural values as its own. Hebrew drama and translated Western drama have been given favored status within its repertoire and its performative language has been influenced by Western theater. Although Israel is geographic part of the Middle East, its theater is Eurocentric, like Israeli culture in general.

As Jewish immigrants from Islamic lands, Mizrahim diverged from the Zionist model. Therefore, they were compelled to erase their identity and culture to adapt to a Western-oriented Hebrew culture. Those who had been involved in Arabic theater in places, such as Iraq, Egypt and Morocco, prior to their immigration to Israel were kept out of Israeli theater. Their accents, their physical appearance and a lack of faith in their professionalism contributed to prejudice and prevented them from achieving a place in Israeli theater. Even though Aryeh Elias encountered obstacles trying to find work in the public theater, he is a quintessential example of an immigrant Mizrahi actor that did not give up and he found different ways to perform on stage and screen.

**The Likeable Mizrahi in Cinema**

When you say Aryeh Elias’s name, more than a few Israeli movie fans will smile and recall Bourekas comedies that he starred in and that have gradually achieved cult status.[[2]](#footnote-2) Bourekas films were considered to have low production value, but they were highly popular in the 1960s and 1970s. The films treated the extent tension between Mizrahim and East European Jews, or Ashkenazim, in a stereotype-laden and comical way. According to Ella Shohat (Shohat, 1989), Bourekas films reinforced the Orientalist stereotype of the Mizrahi Jew while frequently allowing Mizrahi figures to subvert the Zionist order and created carnivalesque inversions too. These comedies usually concluded with a wedding between Mizrahim and Ashkenazim that symbolically unified the groups and presented a societal melting pot as an effective Zionist solution to the extent ethnic tension between Jewish immigrants with disparate origins.

When the director Yosef Shalhin cast Elias in *The Boy Across the Street* in 1965, it was his film breakthrough. In this neo-realist Israeli drama, Elias plays an unemployed father, who is separated from his wife, addicted to alcohol, living in poverty and finding it difficult to connect with his son David, who is descending into a life of crime, and he demonstrates that he is a highly talented actor. “Since then, I stopped fighting to overcome my accent” (quoted in Peled, 2003), he explained. Following the film’s success, Elias found regular work in commercial theater and Bourekas films, but public theater still held him at arms’ length.

In his discussion of Black characters in the West, Stuart Hall offers two stereotypes of Blacks that correspond to the Boureka cinema roles that Elias was asked to perform (Hall, 1997, 251): The first, Uncle Tom, is the good Black. He is generous, kind and considerate. Regardless of the difficulties he encounters, he does not lose hope. Yet he never challenges white people. The second, the Coon, is humorous, ridiculous, lazy and drunk. He tells jokes and stories, and he is inarticulate. The figures that Elias plays in Bourekas films constitute variations on these stereotypes that can be uniifed under the rubric “The Likeable Mizrahi”—an adult, either an uncle or a grandfather, with a warm heart and a good sense of humor, who might sometimes drink too much, but who is popular and always has stories and tales to tell. Moshiko, a fisherman in *Kazablan* (Menahem Golan, 1973), serves as storyteller who helps advance the action of the film. Similarly, Yechezkel the Grocer in the series *The Children of Haim Neighborhood* (Yosi Alfi, 1973) has lots of stories and funny proverbs to tell. Zaki Ben Chanania in *Charlie and a Half* (Boaz Davidson, 1974) and Yaakov Halfon in *Snooker* (Boaz Davidson, 1975) are drunken lazy do-nothings who live off others and have self-deprecating senses of humor. In time, the famous lines of these various characters and the comic scenes they appeared in came together to fashion Elias’s image as “the Likeable Mizrahi” in Israeli cinema.

During the 1990s, when the politics of representation in Israeli cinema started to change, Elias began to play more complex characters on screen. In *Home* (David Ofek, 1994), Elias plays an Iraqi Jew living in Ramat Gan (near Tel Aviv), whose life in Baghdad during the 1930s and 1940s is revealed through images of the first Gulf War in 1991. In contrast with the Bourekas films’ Mizrahi characters who lack a history, Ofek’s film reveals the protagonist’s rich family history through a family picture album, stories, songs and even the television screen broadcasting images of an exploding Baghdad. Elias, who plays the father in the film, yearns and is excited to see his home through the bird’s eye view offered by the cameras mounted on the American bombers.

In *James’ Journey to Jerusalem* (Ra‘anan Alexandrowicz, 2003), Elias delivered one of his most successful Israeli cinematic performances and received critical acclaim. The film is a coming-of-age story that opens with its protagonist James, a naïve African Christian who aspires to lead a spiritual life in Jerusalem, getting sidetracked from his goal. Soon after arriving in Israel, an Israeli contractor takes advantage of him and forces him to work as an illegal foreign laborer. Through this contactor, James meets Sallah, the contractor’s elderly father, played by Elias. Sallah becomes James’s teacher and shows him how to make his way in a new reality. In time, James learns how things are done and becomes a shady businessman who exploits others. Elias received the 2003 Ophir Award (The Israeli version of an Academy Award) for Best Actor for this performance, a year after he had received an Ophir Award for Lifetime Achievements.

“Likeable Mizrahi” roles stood in opposition to Elias’s thespian aspirations. He wanted to expand his repertoire of roles and give the fullest possible expression of his talent on the stage and screen. Indeed, Elias’s later screen roles enabled him to play more complex Mizrahi characters, but they were not seared into the Israeli public’s collective memory in the same way that his characters from Bourekas cinema were. Furthermore, these complex characters were likeable Mizrahi grandfathers and uncles, and did not allow Elias to break free of the confines of “Likeable Mizrahi” performance.

**Trials in Theater: From the Center to the Margins**

Behind the “Likeable Mizrahi” persona stood an actor and creator who wanted to emerged from the confined area that Israeli culture had designated for him. Aryeh Elias dreamed about performing classic theatrical roles, just as he had done at the Institute for Fine Arts in Baghdad, where he learned theater and he performed in the 1940s (Elias, 2005; Moreh, 1985). In Israeli theater and cinema, Elias never performed different types of role. For example, he never played characters with sexual passion, courage and valor, or tortured characters who thought deeply about human existence. Complex characters of classic drama that he played in Baghdad, such as evil Iago and Faust, who sells his soul to Satan, were radically different from the “Likeable Mizrahi” characters that had shaped Elias’s career. Theater directors, who argued that Elias’s Iraqi accent was too thick for the Israeli ear, denied his dream of Elias playing Shylock from *The Merchant of Venice*. This claim proves ironic, because most of the Hebrew theater’s founders and early actors immigrated to Israel and they had recognizable East European accents. In her discussion of Mizrahi actors’ casting, Ella Shohat argues that the refusal to cast Elias as Shylock was unfortunate, “because a talented director might have used the ‘marginal’ accent as a way to underline Shylock's own marginality within Christian Venice," (Shohat, 1989, 55). Shohat notes that accent was something used to barred quite a lot of actors, as it had blocked Elias, and commercial theater and Bourekas cinema were the only frameworks in which they could appear. Yet, even there, they were quite frequently called upon to reproduce Mizrahi stereotypes.

One can use Elias’s Iraqi accent to tell a life story of missed opportunities and pain. Scholars (Yana Meerzon, 2012; Emma Cox, 2012) stress that a foreign accent, like the body itself, characterizes the actor as a foreigner whose belonging is cast in doubt. Yet this fact can sometimes become a source of strength that immigrant actors exploit for different and alternative types of performance. Acknowledgement of this allows us to look at the story of Elias’s place in Israeli theater differently. It can be understood as one of movement from a lack of belonging and rejection based on his accent towards belonging, excitement, and precocious mutual understanding that began with his rediscovery of Arabic theater in Israel.

Elias explains how he auditioned at the national theater Habima soonafter immigrating to Israel. His career shocked the casting panel: “For years, that was the way they responded to me. They laughed at the very idea that I was going to perform a Shakespearean monologue in Arabic translation. After they finished laughing, they would start asking questions. Did you come to Israel on a donkey? Is there really a drama school in Baghdad?” He concluded, saying “Hamlet could have a Russian accent, but he could not have an Arabic one,” (quoted in Peled, 2003). The inability to even believe that Baghdad had an academy for the arts and the way that the casting panel poked fun at the very idea of a Shakespearean monologue delivered in Arabic, as if it was an oxymoron, testify to the Orientalist character of Israeli casting politics.

In the 1950s, Elias succeeded in getting work at the public Cameri Theater. After two small roles, he played the muezzin in *The Pranks of Nasir al-Din* (Yosef Milo, 1953). Since this was a play about the Islamic world, Elias’s Iraqi accent helped him landed this central role. He received positive reviews. Yet after the production closed, he was let go due to budgetary problems at the theater. Only forty years later would he return to work at the Cameri theater when he played the role of a Mizrahi rabbi and spiritual leader in *Midnight Rite* (Rami Danon and Amnon Levi, 1996). In fact, these were the only two meaningful roles that Elias played in the Israeli public theater.

Arabic theater was the only place in Israel that Elias could perform. He and other immigrant actors from Iraq created Arabic radio plays to perform on Kol Yisrael (Israel’s public domestic and international radio service). Together with the others, he formed the Ur Ensemble that went on to produce the play *The Mad about Layla* by the Egyptian playwright Ahmed Shawqi (Shem-Tov, 2020). The play had a triumphant run in Arab settlements and places in Israel with large pockets of Mizrahi Jews. The production succeeded and it received excellent reviews. Due to their prejudices, members of the Israeli establishment were surprised to learned that there were talented theater personnel amongst the immigrants from Islamic lands. For example, this is what Shmu’el Salmon, the director of the Ministry of Education’s Department for Arab Education and Culture, had to say after going to see the play free of expectations and coming out surprised:

To tell you the truth, I went to the show, because, as a public official, I felt obligated. I expected to leave a tasteless, cheap and sentimental performance disappointed. Without getting into details, I want to say that the ensemble should congratulate itself on an amazing artistic effort. Many elements of the performance were artistically wrought, the speaking was good and only very rarely was there empty recitation, and good taste was never impaired. The actors kept my attention throughout the performance, (ibid, 393).

Due to budgetary problems, the ensemble disbanded. Elias went to Paris to study for three years. While there, he worked with Marcel Marceau and performed at the Comédie-Française. He returned to Israel in the early 1960s, and, despite his studies and the recommendations that he received, he did not find work in the public theater. Again, he was told it was his accent.

During the 1960s, Elias produced Arabic theater with amateur actors in northern Israel. Following this, some of these actors, such as Adib Gahashan and Yussuf Perah, studied to be professional actors and became well-known actors in Israeli theater. In practice, Elias’s work contributed to the rehabilitation of Palestinian theater that had suffered a devastating blow during the 1948 war, just like other areas of Palestinian culture (Snir, 2005). Elias’s work preceded theater projects promoting co-existence between Jews and Arabs by a decade or more and his approach proved innovative (Shohat, 2017; Shenhav, 2006): a Jew by religion and an Arab by culture and language, Elias employed Arabic culture as common denominator and he produced theater with Palestinian actors that blurred national boundaries. Elias had this to say about that period in his life: “Hebrew theater rejected me due to my language and I suddenly discovered the Arab villages. It gave me and them food for the soul,” (quoted in Peled, 2003). Even after his movie roles made him famous, Elias continued this work. He established a theater in East Jerusalem and produced a number of Arabic-language performances with Palestinian actors. In the 1980s, he ran a community theater program for inmates at Maasiyahu Prison and they produced a number of dramas that dealt metaphorically with issues of subjugation and oppression. For this work, Elias received the Presidential Award for Volunteerism.

In 1983, Elias was cast in a role that had him playing a character quite different from the “Likeable Mizrahi,” and it testifies to his range as an actor. The theater director and Israel Prize laureate Nola Chilton was staging a theatrical adaptation of A. B. Yehoshua’s novel *A Late Divorce* at the Neve Tzedek Theater. Although it was a fringe theater, it employed some of Israeli theater’s best artists. The producer Miriam Etzioni suggested that Chilton cast Elias as Calderon, an aging homosexual banker with a young lover. Elias said about the following about the role: “I almost never reject a film or theater role, because I know how to offer what a role needs. Look at *A Late Divorce*. I played a homosexual in it. In the play, I arrive home and I see my young man with somebody else. I began to cry on stage,” (quoted in Zilkha, 2002). Elias received critical acclaim for this role and he won an acting award. Since this figure was a radical deviation from the “Likeable Mizrahi,” Elias amazed the critics. Yet he responded ambivalently: “At the age of sixty, I am sick of getting discovered. I would like a meaty role in a repertory theater. Why do they not give me the role of Polonius in one of the productions of *Hamlet* that will be staged in the theater?” (quoted in Noy, 1983). Following his success in *A Late Divorce,* Elias turned to Habimah and proposed the idea of adapting one of the novels of Sami Michael (an Israeli author of Iraqi descent). He received the brush off. Furthermore, the theater manager insulted him, proposing that he emigrate from Israel and try his luck elsewhere.

**The Politics of Casting in Israeli Theater**

Elias’s case points to a central problem in a society that has immigrant actors and culturally distinct minorities (Shem-Tov, 2013). Casting, as we know, is not just a question of type-casting where one checks to see how well the actor matches the physique of the character and how much talent he brings to the role. Casting is connected to an actor’s public image, to the memory of his previous roles and his social identity (Carlson, 2003). Sometimes identity is marked or embedded in the body. Therefore, skin color, accent and diction, for example, mark ethnic identity and a whole host of cultural makers, stereotypes, and prejudices associated with it. Hence, casting does not just have artistic meaning. It also carries social and political meanings.

Starting in the 1980s, a conversation about casting began in the West. Black and Hispanic actors pointed out discrimination and how they were being cast less and less for roles on stage and screen. The expression “traditional casting” refers to the assigning of roles to actors based on their social identities and in accordance with the expectations of the mainstream hegemonic audience such that the default choice is white. In contrast, non-traditional casting is casting in opposition to these expectations and the granting of equal opportunities to actors at auditions. One can distinguish four different approaches to non-traditional casting (in the following explanation, my examples are drawn from Israel theater):

1. Colour-blind casting – an actor can play any character without connection to his/her ethnic identity. This approach works best in plays where the character’s identity is not explicitly stated. Hamlet and King Oedipus, for example, can be dark skinned. The actress Ruti Asarsai, who is an Ethiopian Jew, was cast in the role of Lady Macbeth in performances of *Macbeth* directed by Omri Nitzan (The Cameri Theater, 2013).
2. Conceptual casting – an actor is intentionally cast for a specific role, so that their ethnic identity can aid them in providing a complex and unique interpretation of the play. In 1987, Gdalya Besser staged Strinberg’s *Miss Julie* and cast the Palestinian actor Yussuf Abu-Warda in the role of Jean, the servant and lover of Ms. Julie. The complex relations between Jean and Julie which play out against the background of class and gender also take on a political dimension due to inequality between Jews and Arabs. In other words, Abu-Warda’s Palestinian identity offers the Israeli audience a political message that is not inherent to the original play.
3. Societal casting – every actor plays a role that is suited to him/her based on his/her social identity. For example, a Black actor plays a Black figure. Until the 1970s, Ashkenazic actors also played the roles of Mizrahim and Arabs in Israeli theater. Today, in most productions, Arabs play Arabs and Mizrahim play Mizrahim.
4. Cross-cultural casting- the fictional world of the play is transferred to a different culture. Therefore, all the characters undergo cultural modification. In 1985, Ilan Ronen directed *Waiting for Godot* (Haifa Theatre) and employed cross-cultural casting. The Arab actors Makram Khoury and Yussuf Abu-Warda play Didi and Gogo as if they are Palestinian constructions workers waiting either for the Palestinian revolution or a just peace that is slow to arrive.

Since the beginning of the millennium, battles have been waged and changes have begun in the field of Israeli theater that have again raised issues related to multiculturalism in general, and critical Mizrahi discourse in particular. Mizrahi artists have staged performances and plays that touch upon their Mizrahi identity, such as autobiographical performance (Shem-Tov, 2018), historical plays (Shem-Tov, 2019a; 2019b), and plays performed in Judeo-Moroccan Arabic (Shem-Tov, 2019c). Yet despite these changes, non-traditional casting still remains relatively rare in mainstream Israeli theater. Sarit Cofman-Simhon argues that even when such casting is employed today, for example in the case of Jewish actresses of Ethiopian origin, the stereotype of the “exotic black woman” is used to frame it (Cofman-Simhon, 2109). As someone who has managed the Khan Theatre, Jerusalem’s public theater, and, as a director with unique political and artistic vision, Ofira Henig sharply criticizes the politics of casting in Israeli public theater:

Israeli theatre favors white Israeliness. It is a generation behind television and cinema. Most of the cultural managers continue to cast according to color, race, religion, and sex, not noticing that Peter Brook had already started the revolution when he cast a black man in the role of Hamlet, and that for quite some time now, even in the English theatre, which is very popular here—actors of African or Indian origin are cast in the role of Henry V—the ultimate English king. In most cases, my casting choices are met with mumbling and hushed opposition if only to avoid accusing me, God forbid, of the very same racism. (Henig, 2013, p. 7).

As an immigrant actor, Aryeh Elias was one of the first actors who dealt with the white default choice advanced in the casting politics of Israeli theater and fought for “non-traditional casting.” Elias almost realized his dream in 1986 when the Beit Lessin public theater decided to cast him in the role of Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*. Unfortunately, after a month of rehearsals, budgetary problems led the theater not to mount the performance. In an interview towards the end of his career, Elias summed up what happened as follows:

The Jew Shylock is my greatest disappointment. This is because Shylock is not a role. Shylock is who I am. Shylock is a person who looks for honor and wants to get what he deserves, and I, an Arabic-accented actor in Israel who wants to perform, felt like Shylock in my soul. “If you prick us, do we not bleed, and if you poison us, do we not die?’ (quoted in Peled, 2003).

If you prick us, do we not bleed? […] If you poison us, do we not die? (Act 3, Scene 1)

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1. Mizrahi, an adjective meaning eastern in Hebrew, is also used as noun referring to Jews whose family origins are in the Middle East and North Africa. Mizrahim is the masculine plural noun form. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Bourekas are a popular Israeli pastry of Balkan origin. The films of the Bourekas genre got their name, because they are a “light and tasty ethnic treat.” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)