**Displaying the Mizrahi Identity in Autobiographical Performance: Body, Food and Document**

The autobiographical performance *Simply Yossi-Zabari* ends when Yossi Zabari sings a Yemenite Jewish liturgical song a cappela, dances a combined modern and Yemenite step, in this manner transforming his voice and body into a display and celebration of his talents and abilities. Hannah Wosna Greenwald opens her performance *Papagina* by chopping vegetables to prepare shakshuka --- a Jewish Morrocan dish. Preparation of the dish lasts the length of her autobiographical narrative and the appetizing smell attends the spectators to the conclusion at which point the dish is served to the audience. In the autobiographical performance *Inheriting Son*, Shlomo Wosna sits behind a desk and reads with an air of rebuke extracts from an academic article about the injustice committed by Israel toward Mizrahi citizens accommodated in public housing, as giant family photographs of his parents and brothers from housing projects are projected behind him. Alongside the autobiographical narrative underlying these three performances, they enhance the experience of the spectators by displaying concrete elements: physical virtuosity, preparation and serving of food and the use of formal documentation and family records in performance. The integration and blurring of the line between real and fictional is inherent to the autobiographical performance because the presented events are based, at least in part, on the personal experiences of the authors. I would argue that the acting modes and the display of the real in the autobiographical performance create an enhanced experience which puts the spectators in a liminal condition, betwixt and between due to its continual swing between fiction and reality.[[1]](#footnote-1) In the Mizrahi autobiographical performance this liminal experience raises questions and intense emotions: from identification and excitement to anger and denial, which are meant to lead to political discussions of ethnicity and how it is modelled in the performance.

But before I begin to discuss the theoretical context and analyze the performances I will briefly consider what Mizrahi identity is and what is the status of Mizrahi Jews is in Israel. Mizrahim are literally Easterners or Orientals, and the term refers to Jews and their descendants originating from the countries of the Middle East. Most of them immigrated to Israel during the 1950s and they make up about half the population of Israel. The Israeli hegemony is for the most part made up of Ashkenazi-Jews --- Jews of European origin for the most part secular and members of the middle class. The Zionist ideology led by this hegemony forced the Mizrahi Jews to conform to the Sabra role model of the “new Jew” styled to white-Western criteria. The Mizrahi Jews were required to pass through the “Zionist melting-pot” --- to detach from the Jewish traditions they’d brought with them from the Middle East and erase every Arab element of the culture and language that construct their identity.[[2]](#footnote-2) The detachment from Judeo-Arabic identity and its erasure derive from the Orientalist Zionist ideology which views the Mizrahi culture as inferior and primitive due to a prolonged history in the Arab and Muslim world, in addition to everything connected with Arab identity being conceived as part of the enemy culture. Therefore they had to shed this “Arabness”[[3]](#footnote-3) and discipline their language, their accents, their bodies and customs, their religious beliefs and their aesthetic taste and turn into “Israelis.” In critical terms, this process is referred to as Ashkenazification: to transform into a new Jew/Israeli means being an Ashkenazi meeting Western standards.[[4]](#footnote-4) That same Orientalist approach of the Israeli hegemony drove a social-economic policy which banished Mizrahim to conurbations far from the center, with no employment and no suitable educational, cultural or health services, which is what molded them into an inferior social position throughout the history of the State of Israel, and made them dependent on the welfare system.[[5]](#footnote-5) These two processes of erasure or cultural detachment and social-economic discrimination created negative stereotypes about Mizrahi Jews in Israeli culture.[[6]](#footnote-6) Likewise, these elements of the Zionist ideological apparatus created feelings of shame, denial and concealment among young Mizrahi Jews, but also sowed resistance, protest and struggle among them.[[7]](#footnote-7)

In the past two decades the Mizrahi autobiographical performance, based on the performer’s personal familial and cultural experience, has come to the fore. In the autobiographical performance the performer displays his Mizrahi identity and draws attention to it, in a gesture against shame, concealment, denial and the processes of Ashkenizafication which have been forced upon this identity. Display of Mizrahi identity means a range of performance possibilities from protest and defiance of the social-economic and cultural oppression to celebration and demonstration of the rich culture which has been repressed and erased. Likewise, occasionally the performance contains a meta-theatrical dimension because the performer’s biography is connected to the world of stage and screen, and the complex and problematic manner in which this culture addresses the Mizrahi identity of the artist.

In the 1970s at the height of second wave feminism which declared “the personal is political,” feminine autobiographical performance arose in the West to model a feminist-political statement. From the 1980s to 1990s the autobiographical performance trickled down to other marginalized groups in the West as a political strategy: Blacks, Hispanics, Latinos and others, by means of which dominant identities were undermined and alternative identities modelled and established in the performance in contrast.[[8]](#footnote-8) The Mizrahi autobiographical performance in Israel is in reality part of this global phenomenon, in which Mizrahi artists, as part of a marginalized group, utilize autobiographical material to shape an ethnic identity and narrative, emphasize their group and oppose the stereotypes and cultural and social oppression of the mainstream.

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The autobiographical performance challenges Eric Bentley’s classic formulation of “A impersonates B while C looks on” [[9]](#footnote-9) because, prima facie, the performer is on stage impersonating himself, recounting and enacting experiences from his own life. This is an assumption regarding the theatrical performer’s ability to reveal an “authentic” self which is stable and coherent and exists in the first place. But autobiography is merely a literary and theatrical genre and nothing more. It is a construction of memories and their subsequent stylisation to aesthetic, political, therapeutic and even commercial ends, and therefore it also contains shamelessly imaginary changes and additions. The autobiographical performance is a construction and modelling of the “self,” and in any event has no possibility of authenticity even if what is involved is a performer embodying herself. The performance takes precedence over and constitutes the “self” of the performer and does not express an existing a priori essence.

Following in the wake of Derrida’s *différance*, Philip Auslander deconstructs the stable “self” underlying conventional acting methods:

Theorists as diverse as Stanislavsky, Brecht and Grotowski all implicitly designate the actor’s self as the *logos* of performance; all assume that the actor’s self precedes and grounds her performance and that it is the presence of this self in performance that provides the audience with access to human truths.[…] An examination of acting theory through the lens of deconstruction reveals that the self is not an autonomous foundation for acting, but is produced by the performance it supposedly grounds.[[10]](#footnote-10)

He goes on to explain how assessments and understanding of acting emanate from Derrida’s différance rather than a stable and extant essence:

We arrive at our perception of a performance by implicitly comparing it with other interpretations of the same role (or with the way we feel the role should be played), or with our recollection of the same actor in other roles, or with our knowledge of the stylistic school to which the actor belongs, the actor’s private life, etc. If our perception of the actor’s work derives from this play of differences, how can we claim to be able to read the presence of the actor’s self back through that performance?[[11]](#footnote-11)

Likewise, Auslander claims that even the Brechtian actor who deliberately differentiates himself from the character he signifies and who supposedly is himself on stage, is merely playing a “stage persona.”[[12]](#footnote-12) Following in the footsteps of this assumption, Marvin Carlson in his discussion of the autobiographical performance argues that there is perforce a difference between the “I” who lived that experience and the “I” that narrates it to an audience.[[13]](#footnote-13) The character the actor is embodying even if it is supposedly identified with his own self, is shaped like any other fictional character through imitation and representation. There is no overlap between the physically “present I” of the performer and the “I” the performer was “then and there” in the autobiographical experience. Carlson argues that this is actually a constructed “stage persona” of the performer and not a direct and authentic expression of their selfhood. The performer rehearses, shapes and constructs their stage persona as they would while working on any other character.

To examine the manner of enacting the stage persona in which Mizrahi identity is displayed in the autobiographical performance, I will utilize the three modes of acting posited by Bert States:[[14]](#footnote-14)

* The self-expressive mode: the performer emphasizes the actor’s virtuosity, their charisma and conquering and moving presence and their mastery of nuance. Likewise their physical abilities are demonstrated, and their performance aptitude in song and dance and so forth. The audience’s attention is directed to the performer and less to the character or role he is portraying or filling on the stage. As States puts it:

In the self-expressive mode the actor *seems* to be performing on his own behalf. He says, in effect, “*See what I can do*.”[[15]](#footnote-15)

* The collaborative mode: the performer turns directly to the audience and transforms them from a passive observer (voyeur) to a collaborator in the event in various manners. “[T]heatre says to the spectator, ‘Why should we pretend that all this is an illusion. We are in this together. We are doing this for you.’”[[16]](#footnote-16) The performer draws the audience in and sometimes gives them a role in the fictional world and even attempts to turn it into a community. The performer deliberately blurs the borders between themselves and the spectator, which is liable to create intimacy but also liable to provoke thought on the part of the spectator regarding the means of representation itself and the medium of theatre.
* The representational mode: the performer’s emphasis is on a fictional character, and the actor “disappears,” as it were, into the character, and the audience’s attention is focused mostly upon that. The stage illusion becomes the focal point of observation and the audience’s experience is influenced mostly by that.

States emphasizes that these three modes of acting exist in the same performance to different extents and in different levels of emphasis, so that the audience can be impressed by the actor’s talent and expressiveness, become complicit in the actor’s direct address and be moved by the actions of the fictional character on the stage. In the Mizrahi autobiographical performance, the stage persona mainly emphasizes the expressive mode because the actor displays his body, skills and life experiences in the foreground and not a fictional world far and removed from themselves. Likewise the collaborative mode is highly present in the Mizrahi autobiographical performance because of the direct address to the audience to recount and represent for them his life experiences, and turn them into a collaborator. Also the performer’s address to Mizrahi spectators who are liable to identify and particularly recognize the contents and elements of the performance to transform them into a community. The stage persona enables a display of Mizrahi identity in the sense of “look at me, this is my life, these are my memories and culture, and these are the conflicts that shaped me.” The increasing use of the expressive and collaborative mode over and above the representative emphasizes that autobiography on stage is no more than a metonymy for the story of the many Mizrahi Jews present in the auditorium. In this manner an assertive Mizrahi identity is shaped, which neither succumbs to the “backward” Mizrahi stereotype on the one hand, but on the other is not erased in favor of Ashkenazification which falls in line with the Zionist melting pot and denies any ethnic identification.

The stage persona gives the audience an emotional and intense experience and is therefore also possesses political effect. But the prevailing assumption is that autobiography is not a revelation and realization of the “self,” but rather styles and constructs and even invents a “self” for the actor of the performance.[[17]](#footnote-17) This process renders redundant and meaningless the question of “is what’s happening really happening or is it fiction?” Or else the question arises of how an autobiographical performance is different from any other fictional play performed on a stage? What remains “autobiographical” about a performance?

Heddon disputes the tendency to erase the autobiographical and mark it as nothing but fiction, thus losing the political power of the performance. She claims that despite the performance being constructed and mediated and not authentic:

[...] the fact that performer is in this space with me might well have an impact on my reception of his/her autobiographical stories. That relationship between performer and spectator does set this mediation of experience apart from other modes. Though it is no less mediated, its different form of mediation enables a potentially different impact that can be capitalized upon strategically.[[18]](#footnote-18)

When the spectator knows that the performance is based upon the performer’s life experiences the political and social charge of the performance increases and turns the private stage narrative into a metonymy for the silenced and marginalized social narrative. Hence if a certain performance is considered autobiographical in the eyes of the spectator they assimilate the performance in a different emotional register, even if they do comprehend the complex relations between the real and fictional.

Carol Martin explains why the “reality effect’[[19]](#footnote-19) occurs in what she terms “Theatre of the real,” meaning performances based on factual elements such as: documentary theatre, community theatre and even autobiographical performance. She claims that despite this construction and blurring between the real and the fictional, factual elements such as history books, interviews, testimonies, family photographs, documentary videos, archival and internet sources serve the audience as “evidence” for the authenticity of the experiences and events on stage.[[20]](#footnote-20) Hence such pieces of “evidence” legitimize a different and effective experience of being accepted by the audience. Following in Martin’s footsteps, Jenn Stephenson (2016) analyses autobiographical performances and claims that indeed the audience has no access to any authentic truth, rather the “real” in a performance increases the uncertainty of the spectator and draws their attention to the processes of creating reality:

Reality-based performances […] are not about accessing the real as such, but about how we understand these contingent substitute constructions we take to be real, how they are created, and how they are consumed. Without a firm originary referential foundation, we are invited to consider how to live without certainty.[[21]](#footnote-21)

Essentially Stephenson is relying on the view of Erica Fischer-Lichte, that the spectator alternates between two orders of representation: 1) The perceptual order of representation, in which the spectator concentrates on the actor as fictional character and the other elements as representations of a fictional world. 2) The perceptual order of presence, which means perceiving the actors’ bodies and other elements as they are phenomenologically and whatever different associations they raise for the spectator independent of the fictional world. In an autobiographical performance, there is an unceasing motion between these two perceptions which is not under the spectator’s control and from which the meaning of the performance derives. Following Victor Turner, Fisher-Lichte refers to this as a liminal experience --- between the audience’s awareness of the actors’ physical presence and physicality of the other stage effects, and their representation of a fictional world:

From such oppositional pairs different frames can be deduced, such as ‘this is theatre’ or ‘this is reality’. Such frames imply that there are norms for appropriate behaviour in the situation they refer to. By letting such frames collide, by collapsing the dichotomy, these performances transferred the spectator between all fixed rules, norms and orders. They established and affirmed a new understanding of aesthetic experience. [[22]](#footnote-22)

This aesthetic experience of the liminal disturbs the laws and norms of behavior regarding how one relates to a real situation as opposed to a fictional one and therefore is a transgressive and essentially political experience which provokes the audience to question the rules and boundaries which seem self-explanatory.

**The Display of the Mizrahi Body**

“I have always wanted to be a dancer,” thus opens the performance **Simply Yossi Zabari** (2004), where Yossi Zabari skillfully narrates, sings and dances the story of his life as the son of a Jewish-Yemenite family. He humorously described how, from when he was a young a child, he wanted to be a performer, and the hardships that stood in his way having to do with his Mizrahi identity in the theater field, especially in casting as a racially-discriminatory professional practice.

His desire to be a dancer and actor stood against the conception of the Mizrahi body within the Zionist conception of the body, as Yochai Oppenheimer explains:

The Western Ashkenazi body continued to serve as a normative model of health and hygiene and of social and sexual functionality, while the Mizrahi body, in Ashkenazi fantasy, was defective and menacing because it exhibited the precise opposite of these traits. […] the Mizrahi male body was associated with an outmoded, religious culture, while the Ashkenazi body belonged to a young, vital, strong culture.[[23]](#footnote-23)

The body in theater is a site of power[[24]](#footnote-24) since the body is presented with its powers and disabilities; therefore, the ways the body is presented in a performance can assert or undermine received worldviews.[[25]](#footnote-25) Susan Bennett claims that in the autobiographical performance, the performer’s body is transformed into a body politic, signifying social identity.[[26]](#footnote-26) Therefore it is unsurprising that the performance’s self-expressive mode is a counter-reaction through which Zabari celebrates and showcases his body, voice and performative abilities in writing, acting, singing and dancing. The celebration of the Mizrahi body acts against the shame, denial and suppression as effects of the Zionist melting pot, which demands that “backwards” Mizrahi identity be discarded.

His body is taut, his skin very dark, and his guttural speech production[[27]](#footnote-27) are conclusive corporeal and vocal signification of his Mizrahi identity. On an empty stage with a screen as a backdrop, Zabari appears in black pants, a white shirt and tap shoes, accompanied by a pianist when singing. His childhood Purim[[28]](#footnote-28) pictures are projected onto the screen: one is of a Yemenite dancer in a jalaba clutching a tin box, the other of a female Gypsy dancer. He tells of his dream of being “Margot Fonteyn --- and they made me into Margalit, the butcher lady,” when he was dressed up as a gypsy dancer, rather than a ballerina, in Purim --- as opposed to all the boys who dressed up as soldiers, cowboys and superheroes. During the performance, he dances two dances---one during and one at the end---in both combining tap with Mizrahi rhythm. The first dance is to the tune of Ahinoam Nini’s (Noa) Nocturnal Hymn, which depicts a transformation from darkness to a ray of light. It is in fact that dark body that celebrates the light, displaying its Mizrahi identity while virtuously dancing a combined tap and Yemenite Step, choreography seemingly untied to gravity. The second dance ends the performance. The image of a Yemenite man, dancing with a tin box in Purim, the image he had tried to escape, recurs in a more sophisticated manner at the end of the performance. Zabari gives thanks for everything that happened to him throughout his life, singing the liturgical poem *Odeh le’eli* byRabbi Shalom Shabazi (1619-1686), one of Yemenite Jewry’s most celebrated poets and religious leaders. Zabari sings in a Yemenite drawl, afterwards tap dancing---an ending tying together the different strands of his contested identity to a powerful utopian-performative moment, as Jill Dolan has observed:

Utopian performatives persuade us that beyond this “now” of material oppression and unequal power relations lives a future that might be different, one whose potential we can feel as we’re seared by the promise of a present that gestures toward a better later. The affective and ideological “doings” we see and feel demonstrated in utopian performatives also critically rehearse civic engagement that could be effective in the wider public and political realm.[[29]](#footnote-29)

The end of the performance symbolically combines a future option containing the cultures and differences of East and West, Mizrahi and Ashkenazi. It also points to the great cultural and artistic potential of such a combination of materials---materials perceived as incongruous and even culturally and hierarchically opposed. Singing and dancing corporeally illustrate a new Israeli future beyond ethnic divisions and hierarchies.

Zabari narrates his fierce desire to be a performer while singing a Hebrew translation of the Danny Kaye song Joker from the 1956 move, *The Court Jester*. Humorously and at a high pace he sings of the fact that despite his parents’ opposition he became a “joker,” i.e. a performer with a hard life, because “being ridiculous is a very serious thing / and a clown has to work doubly hard for bread and water / It’s very hard to be a jester.” Between stanzas, he pauses and narrates the difficulties of acceptance, how Ashkenazification was an oppressive tool wielded by teachers and directors who tried to fashion him differently. Ashkenazification is in fact hegemonic performance to assimilate into the dominant culture. However it is a very fragile process which often fails, as the signs of Mizrahi identity may bubble up at any given time and signify the Mizrahi identity of he who was taken for Ashkenazi.[[30]](#footnote-30) In Zabari’s case, with his skin color and guttural speech production as visible and sharp signifiers, failure of this process was a forgone conclusion, also acting as a barrier to his advancement in the Israeli theater field.

Elvira Kohanoff, his voice coach at Beit Zvi Drama School, was very unhappy with his accent, which also included guttural consonants:

Kohanoff orders me: “you cannot sing with a *Khet* and *‘Ayin*. Why. Because air must be free to float around the larynx. The sounds, these guttural vocalizations, stop the air from flowing, barring good voice production.” I never asked her, but in my heart I thought, how come Umm Kalthoum and Zohar Argov[[31]](#footnote-31) had such good voice production despite the fact that the air did not flow freely though their larynx […] at the end of the class she added: “even in the yard, during recess, don’t speak with a *Khet* and *‘Ayin*, have you ever heard an actor speak so, and what kind of thing is it anyway…”

Kohanoff was just the introduction, as his visible background was a hindrance for casters for stage and screen. Zabari tells of his excitement when important Israeli director Omri Nitzan invited him to act in *Murder* by canonical Israeli playwright Hanoch Levin, and his disappointment upon learning that it would be the almost-textless role of an Arab youth who undergoes abuse and lies dead on the sand for the entire production. Thus it is unsurprising that  **Simply Yossi Zabari** is a spectacle of his acting, singing and dancing abilities. The performance itself is in fact a kind of “audition” showcasing Zabari’s abilities, which may open casting possibilities in institutional theater. Heddon claims that nowadays there is a move from the political to the commercial in autobiographical performance, as young actors use it to showcase their abilities and talent.[[32]](#footnote-32) However the commercial aspect of **Simply Yossi Zabari** derives from the refusal to cast him because of his dark features and speech production. Therefore the spectacle of talent in this autobiographical performance is a form of political protest against the casting racist discourse of the mainstream.[[33]](#footnote-33) Yossi Zabari, then, displays and celebrates Mizrahi identity that constitutes not merely a novel social representation but also concrete political action within the field of theater itself.

**Food and Memory as Mizrahi Display**

The smell of appetizing cooked food wafts through the air as one enters the hall of Jaffa Theater to watch **Papejeena: Fictional Autobiographical Narrative Theater** (2010) by Hannah Vazana Greenwald. The subtitle's oxymoron is present in the flavorful cooking standing between fiction and reality and between the semiotic and the phenomenological. Preparing and displaying the food, as well as inviting the audience to eat is the breaking of a boundary between all participants of the theatrical event, and a move of focus to the performance’s materiality and phenomenological aspect. We find a family of Moroccan descent in Jaffa in the late seventies. The plot takes place during one event-packed Friday in the home of 12-year-old Yemimah, a naïve and slightly clumsy girl. She undergoes an “accelerated” puberty process where she deals with her complex relation to her own body, discovers her sexuality and is exposed to her parents’ murky relationship. Throughout the performance, the mother is stressed with preparations for the Sabbath, working busily on the pots to prepare Jewish-Moroccan food for the Sabbath. Food preparation takes place ceaselessly throughout the show, even when the focus of the events and lighting is elsewhere on stage. The smell of food accompanies the audience, whetting its appetite, and at the end of the performance the spectators are invited to eat.

As mentioned according to Fischer-Lichte, the spectator moves between a perceptual order of presence and a perceptual order of representation, and exists in a liminal state as the real and fictional elements of the performance are in flux. Therefore in **Papejeena**, the focus is pointed to the heightened presence of food preparation, taste and smell, and the bifurcation of the protagonist into Hannah the narrator, on whose childhood the performance is based, and the actor playing her character, who bears no physical resemblance to her. These are real elements whose strong presence fashions a liminal viewing experience.

The collaborative mode of acting is dominant as this is narrative theater in which Hannah, as a stage persona, acts as narrator of her childhood for the audience, “representing” herself and thus heightening the perceptual order of presence, with actress Moriah Bashari playing the role of young Yemimah, Hannah’s counterpart. The bifurcation allows the grown woman to look back at the girl she was, but also to steer and in fact write and direct the dramatic scene, blurring actual present and autobiographical past. Hannah also preferred to change her name, in the performance, to Yemimah. However this is not a completely fictional character, since it is clear to the audience that she is Hannah’s counterpart and based on her life experiences. Marvin Carlson states that it is a continuum[[34]](#footnote-34) with several possibilities veering between the pole of completely fictional character and an actor playing themselves. Therefore, this is an interim case that expressly blurs the autobiographical and the fictional, shaping a liminal experience for the audience.

Dorothy Chansky and Anne Folino White claim that food preparation on stage links the real, the symbolical and the political, among other things by linking smell and taste to personal and communal memory in the audience.[[35]](#footnote-35) Therefore I claim that the display of Mizrahi food fashions a here-and-now experience with a critically ethnic meaning, through its placement in autobiographical memory, presented by the bifurcation of the protagonist into Yemimah the narrator and Yemimah the young girl. The bifurcation strengthens the blurring of actual cooking time and its representation as tumultuous, stressful Friday afternoon cooking, combining the actual experience and fictional representation. This combination is done mainly through the spectacular display of food preparation, with the very real smell and taste whetting not only the appetite but also personal memory, which is simultaneously communal-Mizrahi memory.

On stage is a large kitchen table with a gas range, pots, a variety of different vegetables, eggs, oil and spices, as well as different kitchenware. Under the table is a surface with a blanket acting as Yemimah’s bed. In the back are two movable white screens adorned with Arabesques. The performance opens with Hannah cutting different vegetables and beginning to cook. She narrates how, as a young girl, she tried to skip teacher Tal Butshtein’s gym class, an Ashkenazi teacher fitting “the chosen body” of Zionist and Western conception, as Meira Weiss calls it, paraphrasing “the chosen people” which now selects and idealizes certain bodies and stigmatizes others.[[36]](#footnote-36) Immediately after the performance begins, the discord between the rich food and its central place in the Mizrahi-Jewish tradition, especially its preparation for the Sabbath, and the plodding, problematic body, is established. Shulamit Lev- Aladgem and Anat First have shown how Mizrahi communal theater often deals with Mizrahi women in a cultural bind between the patriarchal message that women’s place is in the kitchen---and therefore preparation of this food is how they structure their relations to husbands and children---and the message of the dominant culture, demanding a svelte and skinny body, a catch-22 that creates disorder and body shame.[[37]](#footnote-37)

Hannah moves one of the screens and the girl Yemimah enters, narrating her plan to make her sweat pants disappear. The moving of the screen is the possibility of entrance of autobiographical memory and its visiblization on stage. The refusal to work out originates in body shame. Yemimah’s feet need orthopedic shoes and she feels clumsy. Her dress is disheveled, her laces are untied, her collar is rumpled. She says of her sweat pants: “This elastic suffocated my fat feet.” The lighting is focused on narrator Hannah, who slowly lifts her dress to reveal full legs, as opposed to the slender feet of Bashari, the actress playing Yemimah. A stark irony between Bashari’s slender body and what Yemimah thinks of herself is established, and Hannah’s corporeal exposing of her full thighs also signifies self-acceptance as an adult. The derisive Moroccan term “papejeena” strengthens the links between food and the body:

**Yemimah**: Papejeena is my second name

**Narrator:** Dough girl

**Yemimah**: That is, my moniker

**Narrator:** Dough woman

**Yemimah**: My hated pet name

**Yemimah**: That reminds me of everything I’m not

**Mother**:(defensively/compassionately) Not so fast

Not so responsible

Not so alert

Not so organized, not so…

**Yemimah**: (Justifying) When Mother says

**Mother**:Papejeena

**Yemimah**: I know she means that this girl will come to

**Mother**:Nothing

**Mother**:(Mother takes Yemimah to a chair, puts the pants on her and sends her to stage left) Her hands are dough her feet are dough everything falls from her hands, you forgot the pants, hurry up you’re already late for school, and tie your shoelaces, how many times have I told you that when you walk around like that you can fall, pick up your hair, you’re late for school, quick. Papejeena it’s a good thing your head is screwed on.[[38]](#footnote-38)

The epithet “Papejeena” --- unrisen dough in Moroccan --- for clumsiness, is a culinary image differentiating the fresh dough that becomes nourishing bread at the end of the day and dough that cannot grow and develop; between the rich food cooked quickly and skillfully by the mother and the daughter’s heaviness and lack of bodily wherewithal. Yemimah’s shame in her real body is in fact a shame of Mizrahi femininity, which she perceives as lesser-than and unfitting. Yemimah can neither fit herself to the dominant demands of gym class that signifies the Zionist-Ashkenazi conception nor to the Mizrahi-traditional demand to be a quick, skillful cook.

Yemimah’s mother is a quick and sexual woman, as opposed to her strict husband, who tries to discard his Mizrahi identity and educate her to Zionism and Israeliness. He demand she read a Hebrew newspaper aimed at new immigrants, but rather than read she uses it to clean her house for the Sabbath. The mother’s sexuality is expressed with Arab itinerant salesman Bulbul, who is in love with her. After he carries her home when she sprains her foot, he passionately courts her. He stands behind her, passionately caressing her hands while she prepares the food and sings an Arabic love song. The mother enjoys the touch and gives in to him, until she notices the daughter looking on and shrugs Bulbul off. This scene also allows Yemimah to get to know herself. Towards the end, she ravenously eats of all the delicacies on the table, and then, her hands oily from the salads, she discovers her sexuality and masturbates.

Dror Harari, discussing Tamar Raban’s Dinner Dress, claims:

Food, like sex, is the uncanny element that is physically and psychically connected to sensual arousal and restrain. Both are driven by impulses that are often restricted or suppressed and are mastered by social rules; both are associated with pleasure, fantasy, and transgression (Harari, 2016, 248).[[39]](#footnote-39)

In **Papejeena** the dinner table is also a bed, and the link between Mizrahi food and explosive feminine sexuality ties to an Arabness whose touch is soft and light, allowing the daughter temporary sexual release, as well. This is a double transgression, both against the patriarchal order and the Zionist order, and therefore it is rhythmic, short and fashioned with red lighting as a kind of fantasy of the mother to fulfil her personhood as a woman and as an Arab-Jew. Yemimah’s sexual pleasure also ends abruptly as the smell of burning seeds reaches the nose of the father, who bellows into the room. A fight erupts between the father and the mother as the former is angry that the latter has left her cooking, and he finally throws the tray seeds in her face, refusing to sit down and eat. Yemimah, the mother and Hannah as narrator sit down to watch an Arabic movie as distant melodrama, the way many Mizrahim in Israel watched these films every Friday during the seventies and eighties. The mother weeps in sadness in front of the television. A gulf opens between her problematic relation to the father, which represents the problematic relation to oppressive Israeliness, and the charming Arab romanticism displayed on the screen, but so removed from consummation. After the end of the performance, the audience is invited to eat the Moroccan delicacies that were cooked throughout the performance, as well as converse with the actors and get to know them.

The Display of Mizrahi identity through food in the performance is in a liminal state, like its state in Israeli society. Mizrahi cuisine has become popular, perceived as tasty in the Israeli kitchen, but is also cheap and classless. It is one of the allegedly “positive” signifiers of Mizrahi identity, but simultaneously reproduces the Orientalist stereotype of “warm, hospitable people.” Liora Gvion claims that Mizrahi food forms part of women’s labor in the kitchen and perceived as self-evident. “Despite differences in staple accessibility, first-generation immigrants tend to reproduce their foods and conserve familiar eating routines, both due to habit and due to a desire to assuage feelings of alienation and assimilation hardships,” as well.[[40]](#footnote-40) In practice, these women are agents of practical feminine knowledge that is a part of communal and historical memory. In the performance, food behaves in a dual fashion as both guarantor and transgressor of the gender and national status quo. True, the mother works and cooks as usual throughout the performance to please her husband and household, but this is also where her Jewish-Arab culture is expressed, and therefore also where the temporary romantic relation to Arab itinerant salesman Bulbul.

**A Document of Protest**

Shlomo Vazana’s *Inheriting Son* (2002) displays Mizrahi identity through the combination of the personal and the historical. The performance deals with social protest and the oppressive history towards Mizrahim from their immigration to Israel to our days through the prism of public housing. Vazana uses documentary theater, which veers between testimony theater and verbatim theater, which is unsurprising as he is a n artist who came up in the pioneering community-based theater of the Katamonim neighborhood of Jerusalem in the seventies.[[41]](#footnote-41) The performance is based on his personal struggle with Amidar --- the largest public housing company in Israel --- which tried to evict him from his parents’ apartment after they died. He subsequently led wide social protest with a coalition of NGO such as *Kol Bashchunot* and The Mizrahi Democratic Rainbow Coalition to change Israeli public housing law, with the Israeli High Court of Justice granting his petition regarding injustices in land distribution in Israel. While dealing with the threat of eviction from his parents’ apartment, Vazana stumbled upon the legal status of Inheriting Son, prompting him to conduct in-depth research that exposed clear public housing inequality between residents of urban neighborhoods, mostly working-class Mizrahim, and the land privileges of the sons of Kibbutz and Moshav residents.[[42]](#footnote-42) While the state recognized the right of “inheriting sons” to inherit his parents’ land on Kibbutzim and Moshavim, even though the land is owned by the state, it perceived the offspring living with their parents in public housing as “interlopers” following their parents’ death.[[43]](#footnote-43) The struggle Vazana headed managed to change the law, and allowed public housing residents to inherit the rights of deceased parents, as well as a possibility of purchasing the apartment at a lower price.

The performance combines official documents, letters and academic papers alongside pictures and video art. Therefore set designer Eitan Levy designed the stage as an archive with cardboard boxes stacked one on top of the other, creating the image of a crowded, uniform working class housing project. Family pictures and video art recreating some of the events and relating to the death of Vazana’s mother and his partner’s pregnancy are projected onto the cardboard boxes. The image of the archive and the image of the housing project unite, presenting the gulf between the classified and classifying bureaucratic documents which exude power over the Mizrahi residents of the project. Alternately, every box is a painful family story relegated to the margins of the national narrative. The other axis combines life and death, as expressed in the video art. Family pictures of Vazana with his parents and siblings as children in the fifties are projected onto the screen, while contemporary pictures of the recitation of a *Kadish* (a Jewish mourning prayer) and farewell from the mother, represent the silence of the first Mizrahi generation. The soundtrack composed by musician Shushan is based on Moroccan elegies, not only on the death of the mother but also on the injustice and oppression experienced by the parents’ generation, and about its inability to cry out its pain. A nude dance by his partner, dancer and choreographer Yael Haramati, who is seen in the late stages of pregnancy with his son, representing the third Mizrahi generation, which thanks to his struggle may achieve recognition and legitimization as an “inheriting son,” is also projected. Furthermore, the mere projection on screen, in extreme magnification, of his family members, and especially his mother, in itself harbors a political meaning, concretely visiblizing those missing, marginalized from and suppressed under the national narrative.

Vazana’s acting is collaborative, as a witness or courtroom prosecutor. At center stage are a chair and desk and on it different documents, from which Vazana reads the central thesis of the essay “The National Home and the Personal Home.”[[44]](#footnote-44) The foundation of public housing in Israel was meant to transfer the Mizrahi immigrants of the fifties, who had been living in temporary camps (tent and hut refugee camps) to housing projects. But public housing was also a control mechanism, as these structures were built on the periphery and meant for defense. Therefore the state preferred to rent the apartments to Mizrahi immigrants (rather than sell them to them), with ownership remaining in the hands of the state. In this way, Mizrahim were unable to sell the property and leave the periphery, and their housing was under the exclusive control of the state. They were also unable to bequeath the apartment to their children, even though for many years they paid rent equivalent to the apartments’ worth. This stood in stark contrast to the “inheriting son” policy allowing transfer of state land rights by Kibbutz farmers and their children.

Vazana’s document reading is powerful, crisp and clear, and he fixes his accusatory gaze at the audience, afterwards deconstructing the text into some hundred key words, with every word uttered in a strong, resounding voice, such as: “roof, sovereignty, state, dispersal, settlement, enemy, colonization, historical circumstances, architecture, the fifties, mass immigration, stratified structure, poor state, capitalists, backwardness, fantasy, Orientalism, regime, occupation, public housing.” The deconstruction of the Zionist discourse becomes the literal deconstruction of key terms which do not need to be formulated into sentences as these gulfs are well completed in the consciousness of the Israeli spectator. They also signify how Zionist ideology constructs the Israelis sitting in the audience as subjects of this narrative.

The performance was raised in the context of the Israel Festival, a prestigious international performing arts festival that showcases first-tier troupes and artists from Israel and the entire world. Vazana says:

"Ofira Henig's [the Festival director] invitation both surprised and moved me," because "In recent years, I have moved away from work in the theater because I realized that Israeli theater is entirely Ashkenazi" and Israel Festival, is "the bastion of the bourgeoisie and the bourgeois event."[[45]](#footnote-45)

Reception of the performance veered between reservation, anger and excitement. Well-known Israeli theater critic Michael Handelsaltz saw it as a socially effective play, “but [Vazana’s] righteous social protest becomes a show of ego with no boundaries,” concluding that it is a “headline-like, dark and rough” performance.[[46]](#footnote-46) Reacting to this harsh criticism, Nurit Cohen-Evron, art lecturer at Beit Berl, wrote a personal letter to Vazana, stating that “after reading the newspaper critique, I felt the need to react.” She claims that

the intimate and general touch fiercely, woundingly, disjointedly and associatively. Neither are easily digestible […] Vazana shouts. He is not “nice” […] He courageously uses unusual juxtapositions, using the language of the contemporary visual art and dance worlds. Apparently it takes a festival to see things even slightly defying the conventions viewers and critics have grown accustomed to staged in the theater.[[47]](#footnote-47)

Another critical response was made by spectator A. L., a farmer from a Moshav in central Israel, after watching the performance. He complained that the festival gives one-sided purchase to “a very fierce and socially charged debate and allows the lambasting of a very specific group in society,” He claims that “the words ‘oppression’ and exploitation’ [in the performance] are incitement pure and simple,” adding that “such incitement has exacted a blood price […] and most importantly, the Rabin assassination.”[[48]](#footnote-48) Israel Festival Manager Ofira Henig wrote him that “the way you define a daring artistic project as ‘incitement and racism’ is unacceptable to me,” concluding that “it is a moving personal work, it is a cry, a shout, it is [Vazana’s] world, and as such its place is in the Israel Festival.”[[49]](#footnote-49) The responses of Handelsaltz, who saw mainly “ego without borders” and A.L., who saw incitement that may lead to murder, illustrate how collaborative acting protesting inequality and demanding justice from a real audience (the imagine Ashkenazi audience), shapes Mizrahi identity as a demonstration and protest exceeding received political and aesthetic boundaries and raises debate about the ways it is displayed.

\* \* \*

**Simply Yossi Zabari**, **Papejeena** and **Inheriting Son** are autobiographical performances displaying Mizrahi identity while amplifying the real element of the performance, creating a real political effect on the audience. Yossi Zabari displays his body’s virtuosity, celebrating and protesting the mainstream’s racist discrimination against Mizrahi actors. The preparation of flavorful food in **Papejeena** combines the here-and-now and many Mizrahim’s childhood memory of Sabbath preparations while pointing to the catch-22 of conflicting Eastern and Western body and food perceptions that undermine Mizrahi women’s self-image. **Inheriting Son** displays protest by confronting official documents with personal narrative, giving voice to the parents’ generation and eliciting angry responses. The Mizrahi autobiographical performance displays, celebrates and protests Mizrahi identity and narrative by heightening the real, which strengthens the political effect on the audience.

1. Erika Fischer-Lichte, "Reality and fiction in contemporary theatre," *Theatre Research International* 33, no. 1 (2008): 84-96.‏ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ella Shohat, "The Invention of Judeo-Arabic," *Interventions*, 19, no.2 (2017): 153--200. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Yehouda Shenhav. *The Arab Jews: A Postcolonial Reading of Nationalism, Religion, and* *Ethnicity*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Orna Sasson-Levy and Avi Shoshana, "'Passing' as (Non) Ethnic: The Israeli Version of Acting White," *Sociological Inquiry* 83 no. 3 (2013): 448-472. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ella Shohat, “Sephardim in Israel: Zionism from the Standpoint of Its Jewish Victims,” *Social Text* 19/20 (1988): 1--35. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See for example: Ella Shohat, *Israeli Cinema: East/West and the Politics of Representation* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989). Dan Urian, *The Ethnic Problem in Israeli Theatre* (Tel-Aviv: The Open University of Israel, 2004) [in Hebrew]. Shulamith Lev-Aladgem, *Theatre in Co-Communities: Articulating Power* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Sami Shalom Chetrit, *Intra-Jewish Conflict in Israel: White Jews, Black Jews* **(**London and New York: Routledge2010). Smadar Lavie, *Wrapped in the flag of Israel: Mizrahi single mothers and bureaucratic torture* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See the historical development of autobiographical performance in the West: Deidre Heddon, *Autobiography and Performance* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) 20-52.‏ [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Eric Bentley, *The Life of the Drama* (New York: Applause Theatre Books 1964), 150 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Phillip Auslander, "Just Be Your Self: Logocentrism and Difference in Performance Theory,” in *Acting (Re)considered: A theoretical and Practical Guide*, ed. Phillip Zarilli (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 53-61, quote on 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid, 56. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Marvin Carlson, "Performing the self," *Modern drama* 39, no.4 (1996): 599-608, quote on 604. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Bert O. States, "The Actor's Presence: Three phenomenal modes,” in *Acting (Re)considered: A theoretical and Practical Guide*, ed. Phillip Zarilli (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 23-39. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid., 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid. 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. See for example: Kristine Langellier M., "You’re marked: Breast cancer, tattoo, and the narrative performance of identity,” in Narrative and Identity: Studies in Autobiography, Self and Culture, ed. Jens Brockmeier and Donald Carbaugh (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2001), 145-186. Liz Tomlin, *Acts and Apparitions: Discourses on the Real in Performance Practice and Theory, 1990--2010* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Heddon, *Autobiography*, 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Carol Martin, *Theatre of the Real* (New York: Springer, ‏2013), 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Ibid. 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Jenn Stephenson, "Winning and/or Losing: The Perils and Products of Insecurity in Postdramatic Autobiographical Performance," *Theatre Journal* 68, no.2 (2016): 213-229, quote on 215. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Fischer-Lichte, "reality and Fiction,” 95. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Yochai Oppenheimer, "On the Becoming of the Mizrahi Male Body," *Orbis Litterarum* 69, no. 1 (20114): 23--56, quote on 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Colette Conroy, *Theatre and the Body* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Simon Shepherd, *Theatre, Body and Pleasure* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Susan Bennett, “3-DA/B,” in *Theatre and Autobiography*, ed. Sherrill Grace and Jerry Wasserman (Vancouver: Talon books, 2006), 34-47, quote on 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Guttural consonants that characterize Hebrew and Arabic, which Ashkenazim find it hard to produce and are therefore perceived by them ironically as a non-standard accent worthy of derision. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. A Jewish holiday where children dress up, similar in its carnavalesque nature to Halloween. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Jill Dolan, *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Sasson-Levy and Shoshana, "Passing,” 449-450. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Oum Kalthoum, a famous female Egyptian singer beloved throughout the Arab world. Zohar Argov, Israeli singer of Jewish-Yemenite descent who became a Mizrahi-cultural icon in Israel, was known for his charismatic, virtuous voice. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Heddon, *Autobiography*, 160. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Naphtaly Shem-Tov, "Black Skin, White Pioneer: Non-Traditional Casting in an Israeli School Pageant," *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance* 18, no.4 (2013): 346-358, 349.‏ [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Carlson, "Self,” 603. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Dorothy Chansky and Folino White, "Introduction: Culinary theatres," in *Food and Theatre on the World Stage*, ed. Dorothy Chansky and Folino White (New York and London: Routledge 2016), 1-18. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Meira Weiss, *The Chosen Body: The Politics of the Body in Israeli Society* (Stanford: Stanford University Press 2002). [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Shulamith Lev‐Aladgem and Anat First, "Community theatre as a site for performing gender and identity, *Feminist Media Studies* 4, no.1 (2004): 37-50, 46 [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Unpublished text, courtesy the writer. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Dror Harari, "Dinner Dress --- Tales about Dora: Tasting the limits of Semioticity, Consuming Autobiography, Contesting Israeliness" in *Food and Theatre on the World Stage*, ed. Dorothy Chansky and Folino White (New York and London: Routledge, 2016), 237-252, quote on 248. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Liora Gvion, “Hummus-Couscous-Sushi: Food and Ethnicity in Israeli Society.” In: Aviad Kleinberg (ed.), *Full Stomach: A Different Look on Food and Society* (Jerusalem/Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Press, 2005), 32-78 quoted 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Vazana participated as actor and then director in the first wave of Israeli community-based theater characterized by Mizrahi protest of Ashkenazi hegemony. Performances mainly dealt with Mizrahi youth and its oppression by the education system and the military. See: Shulamith Lev-Aladgem, *Theatre in Co-Communities Articulating Power* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 79-83. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Forms of agricultural settlements based on economic and social communalism created by the Zionist movement. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. For a discussion of the Public Housing Law struggle, see: Chetrit, Sami Shalom. *Intra-Jewish Conflict in Israel: White Jews, Black Jews* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 220-222. And an analysis of Kibbutz and Moshav land policy change and the struggle over it, see: Haim Yacobi, "The NGOization of Space: Dilemmas of Social change, Planning Policy, and the Israeli Public Sphere," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 25, no.4 (2007): 745-758.‏ Ravit Hananel, "The End of Agricultural Supremacy: The 2009 Reform of Israel's National Land Policy." *Israel Studies Review* 27, no.2 (2012): 143-165.‏ [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Rachel Kallus and Hubert Law-Yone, "National Home/Personal Home: The Role of Public Housing in the Shaping of Space," *Theory and Criticism* 16 (2000): 153-180 [in Hebrew]. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Aryeh Dayan, "Blocked Arteries at an Ashkenazi Festival," *Haaretz*, May 23, 2002, http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/culture/leisure/blocked-arteries-at-an-ashkenazi-festival-1.44363 [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Michael Handelsaltz, “Headline-like, Dark and Rough,” *Ha’aretz*, June 3, 2002. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Nurit Cohen-Evron, A. L. and Ofira Henig letters given to me courtesy of Shlomo Vazana. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)