**Epilogue**

**Mizrahi Theatre: Between the Personal and the Political**

This book pivots around the question of how theatre makes Mizrahiness in seven different theatrical forms. Retrospectively, four main issues arise from the repertoire which, independent of the theatrical form in which the plays are cast, deconstruct the question reverberating already in the Introduction: How does it feel to be a “problem”? And how can individuals in this situation be given a voice? In fact, these issues are nearly indistinguishable, and are interwoven in many of the performances.

1. Socio-economic protest is an issue manifested in the forging of a critical statement on stage against the socio-economic oppression of Mizrahim in the contexts of working conditions, unemployment, housing, land acquisition, etc.
2. The issue of assimilation/Ashkenazification pertains to the Mizrahi individual and their coping with the Zionist melting pot, which calls for cultural erasure and the full assimilation of Mizrahim in the Ashkenazi hegemony.
3. Performing history of the culture and language of Middle Eastern and North African Jews on stage is an act of resistance and celebration against the orientalist-Zionist perception, which expunged the narrative, culture, and language of these Jews.
4. The intersection between gender and feminist ideas and the three previous issues is the emphasis in plays that focus on gender as scaffolding for the rationalization of socio-economic oppression, the struggle against Ashkenazification, and the presentation of history.

What is the significance of these four issues? Why do they recur in Mizrahi theatre, and what does the encounter between theatre and Mizrahiness indicate? These topics are distinctively political. Political theatre critically reveals what appear as obviously natural, comprehensible, and justified power relations, products of constructed historical processes and ideological justifications (Shem Tov, 2016). Mizrahi theatre is political because it politicizes the ethnic power relations in Israel, problematizes them, and destabilizes them. Likewise, Mizrahi theatre undermines the dominance of Hebrew theatre, which from its beginning was part of the Zionist project; despite the fact that, since the 1970s, Hebrew theatre has increasingly included critical voices, they largely remain within the bounds of the dominant discourse. In this sense, Mizrahi theatre also reveals and criticizes the ethnic representation in mainstream theatre, which internalized the dominant discourse’s perspective. This discourse positions Mizrahiness in a catch-22 predicament. On the one hand, it is marked as an irrelevant category that belongs in the past and which has no meaning in the present, and as a result, Mizrahi criticism is ostensibly emptied of its meaning. On the other hand, the dominant discourse perceives Mizrahiness as both orientalist stigma and stereotype which point to essentialist inferiority as a way to explain the inequality between Ashkenazim and Mizrahim in all areas of life. The four dominant issues in Mizrahi theatre disclose and criticize this discursive dead-end.

Social protest is a theme easily expected to be found on stage given that, since the Wadi Salib (1959) and Black Panthers (1971) uprisings, Mizrahi protest continues to resurface. Therefore, protest often shapes the context of the Mizrahi theatre. Community theatre performances (Chapter 1) and social realism (Chapter 2) construct protest on the stage that resounds the cry and need for social changes outside the theatre. They give shape, narrative, and image that are the opposite of engrained negative images and arouse the spectators’ consciousness. Protest theatre exposes the staunch linkage between ethnicity and class in Israeli society and undercuts the essentialist explanation for the inequality.

Assimilation/Ashkenazification becomes a focal point on stage, mainly since the rise of the Mizrahi middle-class in recent decades. The question of integration into the hegemonic Ashkenaziness, of which one characteristic is the middle-class, becomes critical for these Mizrahim who strive to maintain their Mizrahi identity and culture. Autobiographical theatre (Chapter 5) and poetry performances (Chapter 6) on stage are based on biographical experiences of Mizrahi artists, which often pivot around the question of Ashkenazification. The artists construct this as a political issue that destabilizes the ideological mechanisms that attempt to erase Mizrahiness, on the one hand, and mark it stereotypically, on the other. In other words, these performances construct the personal as political.

Since the last quarter of the twentieth century the voices of Mizrahi intellectuals and activists have claimed a presence in the Israeli political and social spheres. These individuals largely deconstruct the Zionist meta-narrative while pointing to its blind spots in regard to Middle Eastern and North African Jews who have been erased from the pages of Israeli history in the education system, academia, and culture. Mizrahi performing history is part of this political process. In performing history plays (Chapter 2) and in the Jewish-Moroccan theatre (Chapter 7) historical events and elements of culture and language are depicted with outstanding effectiveness on stage. The Israeli audience is exposed to the extent to which this historical and cultural narrative is rich and unique as opposed to the orientalist perception according to which Mizrahim supposedly lived outside of history.

Mizrahi feminism and its onstage intersection with ethnicity and class point toward the impressive presence of female Mizrahi artists in theatre. Of the twenty-eight performances highlighted in this study, thirteen were created by women in all seven theatrical forms, including Feminist-Mizrahi theatre (Chapter 4). The shaping of the oppression and struggle of Mizrahi feminists on stage exposes not only the complexity of the ethnic power struggles, but also the simultaneous struggle of Mizrahi women positioned at the bottom of the social ladder against Ashkenazi and Mizrahi men, as well as Ashkenazi women, in cultural and class contexts. This is one of the most significant innovations in the Mizrahi theatre since the turn of the millennium in that it is correlated with the vast and varied political activity of Mizrahi women. At the same time, the marginal positioning of Mizrahi theatre in the field of Israeli theatre is indicative of the difficulty these female artists face in attempting to penetrate the mainstream and benefit from its many material resources and symbolic capital, which enable creative development under far more convenient conditions.

These four issues have been the most dominant in Mizrahi theatre up till now. Today, this theatre is a growing phenomenon, and it is possible that in the future, Mizrahi artists will develop new theatrical forms and better the existing ones to construct topics and themes related to the Mizrahi world on stage.

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To conclude, a few personal words. This study is a personal, social, and theatrical journey. For me, Mizrahi theatre was, and still is, not only a cultural phenomenon but also an opportunity to dive into the depths of my soul to understand and reiterate to myself who I am while communicating with the powerful experiences of the theatre. The question of my identity is not only autobiographical matter but is always enmeshed in familial, social, and historical contexts. It is a matter of inter-generational relationships between grandparents, parents, and grandchildren. Life stories that became staged performances often reminded me of my own life story and its steadfast ties to my parents’ immigration story. A story which, in fact, never ended. *Aduma [Red]: An Anthology of Class Poetry* features a poem of mine about my mother and her arduous work as a housekeeper for female academics. Since its publication in 2007, the poem has been quoted on different social media sites, in books, articles, and exhibition catalogues, and was performed on different occasions, for instance in *Freha Shem Yafe* by Hannah Vazana Greenwald and Sally Arkadish mentioned in this book. It has also aroused arguments and controversy. The poem touches the sensitive nerve between ethnicity, class, and gender, and sheds light on my complicated attitude toward the Israeli academic world, of which I am a member, but at the same time, view through my parents’ eyes. This poem summarizes the entire journey, including the sorrow, the satisfaction, the irony, and the excitement it evokes while concluding this book.

**Mom**

My mother cleans

The toilet

Of the eminent scholar

Whose studies on gender

And post-structuralist psychoanalytical approaches

Led her

To the amazing achievement

The first woman

To be appointed

Full Professor

Another feminist success at the highest level of academia.

Naphtaly Shem Tov. 2007. “Mom.” in *Red – Anthology of Class Poetry*, Tel-Aviv: Atgar, Maayan and Hakivun Mizrah, p. 92