**The Issues of Repertoire Quality and Reception in Haifa International**

**Children’s Theater Festival**

Research Program

**Abstract**

The Haifa International Children’s Theater Festival (Haifa Festival) is an annual event held in Israel in the spring during the Passover holiday. It is an artistic and festive event appropriate for family entertainment and constitutes a significant site in the field of Israeli theater for young audiences (TYA). The festival was founded in 1987 on the initiative of Mr. Noam Semel, Director of Haifa Theater at the time, and Mr. Moti Perry, Director of the Education and Culture Division at Haifa Municipality, as a means to improve the artistic quality of children’s theater in Israel. The purpose of this study is to analyze the development of the festival since its establishment as a key catalyst in the domain of Israeli theater for the improvement of the artistic quality of children’s plays. The study will outline key aesthetic and educational issues in the field, and the means by which they are addressed in the context of the festival. In addition, we will explore how the festival became a site of interaction between producers and artists in the field, as well as between these professionals and the audience, and we will examine the impacts and implications of this encounter on the field. To this end, we will examine the festival’s repertoire, and the agendas of managers, producers, and theater-artists , on the one hand, and the festival’s reception amongst young audiences and accompanying adults, on the other. Given that Haifa is a mixed Jewish-Arab city, we will also examine the community aspect of the event. We will examine the degree to which the festival, since its inception, has engaged Arabic-speaking artists and audiences, as well as how it deals with linguistic, theatrical, and cultural issues in its performance repertoire. The objectives of the research are thus twofold and complementary: to conduct a historical study of the festival’s development and to explore the current reception of the festival. Accordingly, the research will be carried out using two complementary methodologies: historiographical research and a quantitative study adapted to young audiences.

Theater for Young Audiences (TYA) plays are generally classified according to three categories: educational-didactic, commercial-popular, and artistic. A didactic play constructs and highlights educational messages or deals with topics derived from the education system’s study programs. A commercial-popular play makes conscious use of the available devices and conventions in order to create a spectacular performance. An artistic play is grounded in the development of a complex, deep, and original theatrical language. In the context of the festival repertoire, these three categories operate in unison and in varying degrees as three dimensions or parameters in each performance for children. According to TYA scholars, when one parameter is excessively emphasized, the quality of the performance may be compromised: A didactic message stemming from an agenda-driven educational perspective may render the play superficial and one-dimensional. Excessive use of popular devices such as loud rhythmic music and flashy design may generate an experience of immediate satisfaction and amusement, without artistic or educational depth. Failure to sufficiently adapt the theatrical language to suit the children’s ages may disrupt their ability to experience and decode the play. This study will analyze the festival’s development with respect to the quality and reception of its repertoire, on the basis of a five-dimensional model of the festival, organized into the following categories: (1) Artistic direction; (2) Performance repertoire; (3) Organization, budget, and infrastructure; (4) Reception: critique, audience, and judgement; (5) The host community. These elements together shape the festival experience created by and between all festival participants.

**Scientific background**

The proposed research straddles two primary fields—theater festival studies and Theater for Young Audiences (TYA) studies. Although theater festivals are a widespread global phenomenon which has been studied from an economic-social perspective (Getz & Page, 2016; Pernecky, 2016), the research on festivals within the field of theater studies is scarce (Bardby & Delgado, 2003; Fricker, 2003). Recently, this trend has begun to shift and an interest in festival research has arisen also in theater studies (Zaiontz, 2018). While some scholars focus on the analysis of celebrated festivals—Edinburgh (Bartie, 2013), Avignon (Turk, 2011), and the Shakespeare Festival (Bennett & Carson, 2013)—the International Federation for Theater Research’s (IFTR) theatrical event working group proposes a theatrical framework that perceives the festival as a holistic theatrical event, rather than an accumulation of performances, at the core of which is “festivalizing”—the process of constructing a festival based on four components: politics, organization, experience, and environment (Hauptfleisch et al., 2007). Following this approach in his study of the history of the Acco Festival of Alternative Israeli Theater, Shem-Tov (2016) developed the five-aspect model for festival research (detailed below). In addition to this study, another was published on the Masraheed Festival of Arabic Monodrama in Israel (Abd Alraof, 2016).

According to the International Association of Theatre for Children and Young People (ASSITEJ), there is a global profusion of TYA festivals, but research on TYA and TYA festivals is extremely limited (Seffrin, 2005; Van de Water, 2009). In recent years, TYA scholars around the world have noted a connection between the quality of plays offered to children and their reception by the young audience (Van de Water, 2012; Maguire & Schuitema, 2012; Reason, 2008; Klein, 2005; Schonmann, 2006). From the beginning of the twenty-first century, substantial attention has been paid throughout the world to performances that respect the child’s intelligence (Gattenhof & Radvan, 2009), the young audience’s theatrical experience, ways in which children construct meaning and their existent knowledge (Mor, 2015; Reason, 2010), responses to the needs of different audiences, and the perception of theatrical productions as a means to understand child development (Maguire, 2012).

Shifra Schonmann (2006), who deals extensively with the quality and reception of TYA in Israel and the world by way of aesthetic research, discusses the reception of the Haifa Festival and points to a gap between the children’s reception and the adults’ reception (detailed below). Israeli studies on TYA reception include Laor-Blasbalg’s (2012) work, which addresses reception from the perspective of “theory of mind,” a contemporary developmental approach; and Mor’s (2015) aesthetic study, which presents a model of three existent “charges” (cultural-social, emotional, and cognitive existent factors) that serve as modes of reception through which children experience and perceive a theatrical play (detailed below).

Writing about the development of TYA in Israel, Razi Amitai (2013, 192-216) drew attention to a shift, beginning in the 1980s, in the field of theater for children and youth. The establishment of the Haifa International Children’s Theater Festival (Haifa Festival) in 1987 is one peak in this transition. Until that time, a single professional subsidized theater—the Orna Porat Theater for Children and Youth—operated in Israel. In response to the demands of producers and theater professionals, the Ministry of Education began granting subsidies to other producers in the field through government institutions such as Omanut Laam and later, Sal Tarbut. Sal Tarbut is responsible for selecting performances in all art forms, planning a long-term program, and subsidizing tickets for pupils from kindergarten through high school. This institution had a significant impact on the standard of the criteria for artistic quality. It also directed funds to children’s theaters. In addition, educational departments were established in public theaters (for adults), which liaise with schools and run pre-viewing activities, but mainly produce and market plays for children and youth. In 1986, a Bagrut (matriculation) program was introduced. This program not only granted the theater professions substantial status within the education system; it was also instrumental in forming a young audience of theater enthusiasts.

**Research objectives and expected significance**

The purpose of the study is to analyze the development of the Haifa Festival since its establishment in 1987 as a major catalyst in the field of theater for the improvement of the artistic quality of children’s plays. The study will define the main aesthetic and educational issues in the field and the ways in which they are handled in the context of the festival. In addition, we will examine how the festival became a site that brings together diverse producers and artists, both physically and artistically, and creates encounters between them and the audience, and we will address the implications and impacts of these interactions on the field. This study will be facilitated, therefore, by an examination of the repertoire and the agendas of managers, producers, and theater-artists, on the one hand, and of the reception of the festival by children and accompanying adults, on the other. Given that Haifa is a mixed Jewish-Arab city, we will also explore the event’s community aspect. We will examine the extent to which the festival engages Arabic-speaking artists and audiences and how it deals with linguistic, theatrical, and cultural issues in its performance repertoire. Thus, this study has two complementary objectives which are examined both from a community perspective and through the models mentioned above: a historical study of the festival’s development and a study of its reception today.

**Detailed description of the proposed research**

1. Working hypothesis

TYA plays are mostly classified according to three categories: educational-didactic, commercial-popular, and artistic (Klein & Schonmann, 2009). A didactic play constructs and highlights educational messages or deals with topics derived from the education system’s study programs. A commercial-popular play makes conscious use of the available devices and conventions in order to create a spectacular performance. An artistic play is grounded in the development of a complex, deep, and original theatrical language.

In the festival repertoire, these three categories operate in unison and in varying degrees as three dimensions or parameters in each performance. According to TYA scholars, when one parameter is excessively emphasized, the quality of the performance may be compromised: A didactic message stemming from an agenda-driven educational perspective may render the play superficial and one-dimensional. Excessive use of popular devices such as loud rhythmic music and flashy design may generate an experience of immediate satisfaction and amusement, without artistic or educational depth. Failure to sufficiently adapt the theatrical language to suit the children’s ages may disrupt their ability to experience and decode the play.

Festival regulations emphasize objectives that reflect the importance of the performance’s artistic and aesthetic value. The ideal toward which the festival strives is a performance with complex artistic language, which combines a profound didactic message and sensible use of popular and entertaining devices. Therefore, we argue that the artistic management deals primarily with the question of the degree to which the three parameters are employed in structuring the festival’s repertoire.

The Haifa Festival features dozens of performances in different styles and genres, held in diverse spaces and with varying levels of audience participation. Moreover, the festival’s outdoor complex offers street shows, food and beverage stalls, and opportunities to purchase children’s books and festival souvenirs, such as T-shirts and hats. Spending time in the complex after the performance enables the child to process the viewing experience by engaging in dialogue with the accompanying adult and other children. We argue that the quantitative and qualitative density of the repertoire encourages the young viewers and accompanying adults to compare different artistic forms, and as a result, achieve a more complex understanding of children’s plays than that attainable by viewing a single performance. Furthermore, the celebration in the complex constitutes a gratifying multi-sensory festival experience—an enriching event for children that may motivate them to return to the theater in the future.

1. **Research design**

This study will analyze the festival’s development with respect to the quality and reception of its repertoire, on the basis of a five-dimensional model of the festival, organized into the following categories: (1) Artistic direction; (2) Performance repertoire; (3) Organization, budget, and infrastructure; (4) Reception: critique, audience, and judgement; (5) The host community. These elements together shape the festival experience created by and between all festival participants.

*Artistic direction*

The artistic management is comprised of an artistic director who heads a committee responsible for the festival’s artistic content—selecting play and performance proposals for the competition, booking guest productions, and organizing street performances. The main question is how to construct a quality repertoire based on a complex theatrical language, a profound didactic statement, and the intelligent use of popular devices. A significant part of festival regulations deals with this issue, for instance: “to develop the field of children’s plays in Israel; to improve the level of plays and performances for children in Israel; to develop a new theatrical language.” To this end, the artistic management employs a number of strategies drawn from the model formed by The Acco Festival of Alternative Theater (Shem-Tov, 2016): a competition framework of ten debut plays, carefully selected from dozens of proposals, in the context of which members of the artistic committee support and advise the theater-artists. On some occasions, a “flagship play” is produced outside the competition, which is perceived as being of a particularly high standard and usually based on canonical materials. For example, *Uncle Max’s Journey* (2014), a theatrical adaptation of Hanoch Levine’s children’s book, directed by Ran Bechor with music by Yoni Rechter. The adjective “international” in the festival’s title mainly refers to the street performances by artists from around the world—experts in various types of physical and visual theater, which are not based on verbal text. Over the last six years, the festival has also included a competition for street performances. By way of this strategy, the festival not only enriches the young audience with different concepts of theater, but also exposes local theater-artists and producers to a wide range of original and creative forms of expression designed for children.

*Performance repertoire*

According to Dan Urian (2002; 2008), repertoire is evaluated in terms of two principle parameters, theme and form, but also in terms of what it lacks. In the Haifa Festival, the artists employ various strategies to establish a high-quality standard—of both theme and form—in their work. Thematically, the repertoire includes pedagogical topics related to the children’s world and development, as well as social and national topics with which the education system is concerned: for instance, accepting the ‘other’ or celebrating the seventieth anniversary of the state. In terms of form, the repertoire ranges from fantasy, allegory, and adventure narratives, to realistic drama and, sometimes, synergies of several forms. In addition, the playwrights often adapt canonical Hebrew literature for the stage: Bialik, Miriam Yalan-Shteklis, and, in the 2011 festival, a tribute to Leah Goldberg on the occasion of her hundredth birthday. The repertoire grants the artists relative autonomy, which enables space for innovations in form and attention to unconventional subject matter. For example: *Chocolate* (2006), a play for five to six-year-olds by Ronit Chacham and Abir Zibak Chadad, which deals with sexual exploitation through story theater, dolls, and slides, and which won the award for best design as well as commendation for playscript and direction; *The Rain and the Wind* (2016) by Howard Rip, dance-theater and multimedia for teenagers based on Bob Dylan’s life and songs; and *Olives* (2017) by Ruby Kissos, a musical monodrama for adolescents about eating disorders. However, as Schonmann (2016, 198) notes, TYA in Israel, including the festival’s repertoire, barely engages with political issues such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or burning social issues such as ethnicity and racial tension, most probably due to marketing considerations and a fear of reprisal on the part of institutional subsidizers.

*Organization, budget, and infrastructure*

The initiative for the festival, its structure, budget, and infrastructure determine the material conditions of its production and the constraints associated with these conditions. The festival was founded in 1987 on the initiative of Mr. Noam Semel, Director of Haifa Theater at the time, and Mr. Moti Perry, Director of the Education and Culture Division at Haifa Municipality, as a means to improve the artistic quality of children’s theater in Israel. It is produced by the Haifa municipality and Haifa Theater, and its organizational structure is centralized and hierarchal: from festival management led by the mayor of Haifa, through general manager, artistic director and artistic committee, to the competition jury. The festival takes place in several theaters in Haifa, but the Haifa Theater building and its surrounding complex are the main venue where outdoor performances take place as well. The festival budget is NIS 2-3 million, which is subsidized by Haifa Municipality, the Ministry of Education and Culture, public institutions, private donors, and commercial sponsors. The budget allocated to each one of the competing plays is relatively low compared to plays in the repertoire theater, and may negatively affect the festival’s stated objective of creating plays with high aesthetic value. In fact, the theater-artists work for very low wages in the hope that they will be able to promote their plays after the festival.

*Reception: Critique, Audience, and Judgment*

In this section, we will address three factors involved in the festival’s reception: 1. Criticism in newspapers and the media. 2. The young audience’s and accompanying adults’ experiences. 3. Judgement in the framework of the competition.

Over the years, newspaper reviews have praised the festival for its contribution to the improvement in the artistic quality of TYA in Israel, and for exposing local artists and audiences to developments in TYA throughout the world. In addition, reviews note that the festival, which takes place annually during the Passover holiday and school break, is an artistic and festive event for the entire family.

Scholars emphasize that the aesthetic quality of a TYA play influences modes of reception (Hanson, Klein and Schonmann, 2001; 2012; Reason, 2008; Van de Water, 2009). To explore this issue, we will conduct a qualitative reception study adapted to the festival’s audiences—children and adults. We will rely on Mor’s model for understanding the young audience’s experience while viewing a play. This model presents three modes of reception, which are three existant factors or “charges” that facilitate the child’s theatrical experience: the cultural-social charge, which comprises the child’s existent knowledge resources upon which he or she relies for interpretation; the emotional charge, which is activated during the first stage of the viewing experience, prior to the theatrical event itself; and the cognitive charge, which enables every child, according to their developmental stage, to describe, compare, analyze, combine, draw conclusions, think critically, and achieve a comprehensive view of the event. These three factors enable the young audience to interpret and enjoy the particular play they are viewing, while expanding their cultural-social charge that will facilitate the viewing of plays in the future. We hypothesize that when a young audience is exposed to a wide range of performances and a festive celebration, these three charges may expand more rapidly than usual.

Schonmann (2000; 2006) regards accompanying parents and educators as mediators whose role is to expand and enrich the children’s cultural world while viewing. Other studies point to the fact that a home in which there is a fervent appreciation for theater enriches the child’s cultural charge (Saldana, 1995; Mor, 2015). Thus, we will also examine the parents’ perception of the play and their role in mediating it to their child.

In the first years of the festival, a competition jury was assembled, comprised of both adult and young judges—sixth-graders from schools in Haifa. The decision to include young jury members reflected the festival management’s view that it is important for adult TYA artists to be attuned to the young audience’s reception of the live theater performances. Klein (2011), who observes the children’s perception of the theatrical performance from a developmental perspective, reinforces the argument that adopting the children’s point of view will enable theater professionals to enhance the theatrical language and aesthetic quality and adapt it to the young audience. However, in actual fact, as Schonmann and Klein demonstrate, young and adult judges evaluated the plays in opposite terms:

In both cases, the children’s choice of best play was considered by the adult to be the worst play in these festivals (and vice versa). Jeanne explains this gap by the different criteria children use to evaluate theater during and after performances from their psychological perspectives (“From Children’s Perspectives”). Shifra explains this difference philosophically by how children perceive and respond to the playing rules of aesthetic distance that occur during performances (“Fictional Worlds”). (Klein & Schonmann, 2009, 62).

In this context, we will also examine whether there are gaps between the children’s reception and the adults’ judgement and criticism, and we will attempt to explain these gaps in terms of the two perspectives proposed above (psychological and philosophical-aesthetic).

*Host community*

Host community is a term that examines the relationship between the event and the community in which it is held (Derrett, 2004). We will explore the festival’s attitude toward the Arab community in Haifa, which is a mixed city. It appears that over the years, the festival rarely offered plays in Arabic and did not address a young Arabaudience. However, more recently, the program was partially translated into Arabic, and one or two plays were produced in Arabic, usually outside the competition framework. Moreover, Arab theater professionals have not been involved in the artistic management, with the exception of the 2014 festival. In that year, the festival’s artistic director, Arab actor Norman Issa, emphasized the fact that Haifa is a multi-cultural city. Yet, even in 2014, the festival featured only two non-competing guest performances in Arabic.

**Methods**

The research will be conducted using two complementary methodologies: a historiographic study and a qualitative study. The historiographic study relates to the theatrical event on two levels: as a one-time, transient historical event, and as a cultural metaphor with aesthetic codes and artistic language (Postleweit, 2009). By way of this approach, we can learn about the festival as a theatrical event from various documents: programs, posters, protocols, reviews and articles in the media, internet sites, plays, video documentation of plays, etc. As a theatrical event that reoccurs annually, the festival enhances the participants’ ghosting experience, memories from previous festivals (Carlson, 2003), and constructs their horizon of expectations regarding the quality of the event. Accordingly, documents will be analyzed with regard to the development of the festival as composed of worldviews and agendas and their implementation over the years. It is important to emphasize that the event cannot be reconstructed as it “really” was, but rather the archival material facilitates different and various constructions of the same theatrical event (Schneider, 2001; 2011; Taylor, 2003).

The qualitative research will focus on the festival’s current theater-artists and audiences. It will be based on the assumptions of qualitative researchers who define the phenomenon based on the words and actions of subjects who are close to the situation in its natural location (Maykut & Morhouse, 1994), combined with the researcher’s observation point in order to find meaning for the phenomenon (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). The qualitative study will employ instruments adapted for theater research and research with children: observations of young audiences in the festival halls and complex (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Spradley, 1980); interviews with theater-artists and managers (Shkedi, 2011); and theater talks with children and their accompanying adults (Sauter, 2000). Theater talks with children are a development of qualitative focus group discussions adapted by Mor (2015) for young theater spectators. All the data collected will undergo content analysis. The combination of these two methodologies will enable a broader view of the festival from its establishment to the present.

**Preliminary results**

This study is based on the five-aspect model developed by Shem-Tov in his previous study on the Acco Festival, which provides a complex and deep understanding of how a festival operates and develops (Shem-Tov, 2016). In addition, Shem-Tov has broad knowledge in the field of theater and education: he has published articles on educational and community theater (Shem-Tov, 2010; 2011; 2013; 2015; 2018), and teaches courses related to educational theater (pedagogy for teaching theater; improvisation and creativity in education). This study is also based on a reception model for children’s plays developed by Mor using a unique qualitative methodology for the study of children (Mor, 2015). In addition, Mor conducted a qualitative study on pre-viewing preparation amongst young audiences (Aram & Mor, 2006). She is widely knowledgeable in the field of TYA, and has twenty years’ experience as a theater teacher for young children and has written Ministry of Education theater curricula for young ages (2011). She currently teaches courses and seminars related to children’s theater and creative education (practical knowledge for teaching theater, creativity in teaching and education, theater for preschoolers), and is a pedagogical coach in the creative track of an academic teacher training program. In addition, Shem-Tov and Mor both served on the theater committee of Sal Tarbut, which selects performances for schools. In this framework, they viewed hundreds of children’s plays, including those in the Haifa Festival, and participated in committee debates which mostly concerned issues of aesthetics and reception.