**Israel: Televised/Postdramatic/Vernacular Theatre**

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Summarizing the Israeli attitude toward Europe, Hanoch Levin, one of Israel’s most prominent playwrights, said, “God, give us one more month of good, real, Swiss boredom! Because we no longer have the strength for Asia’s fascinating life” (1999, 115). In light of the 2008 financial crisis, the refugee crisis, Brexit, and the current Corona pandemic, unfortunately, Europe is now no less fascinating than the Middle East. Still, Europe’s image as a developed, cultural, and peaceful entity is deeply embedded among Israelis. Over the past two decades, a significant number of them have acquired a European passport. This enthusiasm for Europe is a paradoxical Zionist aspiration—to physically leave Europe (to establish the State of Israel), and then culturally return to the continent and be like all nations (European). It is, therefore, not surprising that as Jews who immigrated from Eastern and Central Europe, the founders of the Hebrew-Israeli theatre perceived themselves as part of the European theatre culture.

Since the turn of the millennium, both neo-liberalism and nationalism are two forces that construct Israeli culture, in general, and the theatre, in particular. Based on a neo-liberal quantitative logic, the funding of theatre in Israel is largely governmental. The higher the number of productions and ticket sales, the higher the subsidization. In contrast, a theatre’s budget deficit results in financial penalties which in turn decrease its subsidization. Paradoxically, this system increases the proclivity for commercial productions, especially in mainstream theatres.

Although censorship on plays was abolished already in 1989, the Ministry of Culture takes steps to undermine artistic free speech, mainly by way of reducing, and even stopping, the provision of public funding for cultural-artistic activities that do not coincide with its nationalist agenda. In 2015, the Al-Midan Theatre, Israel’s only public Arabic-speaking theatre, which produced political and critical plays, was persecuted by the state, and as a result, no longer received government funding, was fined, and eventually closed. Since its founding in 1980, The Acco Festival of Alternative Israeli Theatre produced numerous political and socially oriented plays (Shem-Tov, 2016). However, in 2017, as a consequence of the Ministry of Culture’s pressure and threats to cease financial support, the festival’s board of directors prohibited the production of Einat Weizman’s *Prisoners of the Occupation*, a play dealing with Palestinian prisoners. Consequently, artistic director Avi Gibson Barel resigned, and all of the festival’s participating artists decided to cancel their participation.

These two significant events are evidence of the detrimental combination of the neo-liberal logic behind government funding and the promotion of nationalistic values through culture. This ominous combination is the dominant context in which Israeli theatre currently operates, reacts, and strives to survive. It is against this background that I distinguish between three major trends in the theatrical field: (1) Mainstream televised theatre that is influenced by television’s structural and aesthetic devices and operates as an industry in compliance with neo-liberal parameters; (2) fringe theatre’s elitist-artistic approach, mainly manifested as postmodern theatre, which is determinedly anti-television; and (3) the vernacular approach, which deals with the local space and predominantly with the ethnic identity of Middle Eastern Jews and Arab culture.

**Televised Theatre**

Dan Urian coined the term “televised theatre” to describe television culture’s seepage into mainstream Israeli theatre as a consequence of the advent of commercial television in Israel in the early 1990s. Having acquired television viewing practices of fast-paced, fragmented, and realistic drama deeply imbedded in the social and day-to-day reality, the Israeli theatre audience’s engagement with theatre is framed in terms of a “television-oriented” horizon of expectations. In response, the theatre adapts its own genres, such as melodrama, comedy, and musical, according to the conventions of television’s soap opera, sitcom, and reality and music TV shows. In most cases, the set design is realistic, and often features cameras and screens. The narrative is linear, rhythmic, and fragmented. The mainstream casts entertainers, models, and singers while obscuring the distinction between their public image and the fictional characters they play. Following multiple television singing competitions and inspired by *Mama Mia*’s Westend production in 1999, the Israeli mainstream produced several jukebox musicals based on a repertoire of songs performed by popular Israeli singers, such as Tzvika Pik, Shlomo Artzi, Danny Sanderson, and Eyal Golan.

At the same time, televised theatre often presents artistic complexity. In order to preserve its long-standing patrons while appealing to different audiences, the theatre takes a midcult approach. On the one hand, it appeals to a more seasoned audience interested in Western classics, and on the other hand, it accommodates the tastes of a younger audience through television aesthetics. In his attempt to spawn an appreciation for *Hamlet* (Habima, 2016) among young viewers, director Maor Zaguri modified the classic play significantly. Of these many changes, Zaguri’s replacement of the ‘Murder of Gonzago’ scene in the original play with a parodic take on Disney’s *The Lion King* exemplifies his awareness of the audience’s television-based horizon of expectations. In an interview with Dan Urian, he explains:

My generation, which was born in the 1980s...saw *The Lion King* way before it read *Hamlet*. The significance of this film for my generation is sacred, no less than Shakespeare, because it is a masterpiece of animation that shaped our artistic and emotional consciousness...*The Lion King*’s plot and brilliant text are based on *Hamlet*. [...] When I read *Hamlet* for the first time at age 27, I said to myself: “hey, it’s like *The Lion King*” and not the other way around. (Urian 2019, 25)

The government subsidy system, which operates in accordance with a neo-liberal logic, employs televised theatre to facilitate and increase theatre’s commercial appeal. In the 1970s and 1980s, part of the mainstream produced quite a few political and critical plays about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and reacted against social injustices. Today, however, the televised theatre takes an apolitical and conventional approach in its dealing with the Israeli political and social reality, while avoiding the aggravation of government policy makers responsible for theatre subsidies.

**Postdramatic Theatre**

The elitist-artistic approach is characteristically anti-television, experimental, and alternative. Hans-Thies Lehmann’s term “Postdramatic Theatre” (2006) not only describes most performances that take this approach, but is also perceived as a European cultural ideal that should be imitated. *Theatre: A Quarterly for Contemporary Theatre* published in Israel and edited by theatre scholars Gad Kenar and Haim Nagid, steers the discourse and documentation of this approach in Israeli theatre, while exhibiting fervent opposition and ridicule toward televised theatre and near disregard for the vernacular approach:

The journal *Theatre* aims... to provide visibility and voice to alternative work

in Israeli and international performance art, which deviates from the mainstream and conventional—which, at best, “is considerate” of the audience, and at worst, flatters it. In so doing, *Theatre* supports action against the theatre’s repugnant enslavement by public relations and celebrity. (Kenar 2014, 3)

Tmuna is a fringe theatre based in Tel Aviv known for creating postdramatic theatre, which often imagines itself as part of the ‘global’ world for which Berlin serves as a kind of code name. Lilach Dekel-Avneri, a former Tmuna manager, was one of the editors of a Hebrew translation of an anthology of contemporary German plays (Dolav et al., 2010). This prompted her to produce the 2010 German Season Festival at Tmuna in the framework of which she directed Dea Loher’s *Adam* *Geist* and won first prize for the play’s stage design at the Fringe Theatre 2010 Awards. The majority of the festivals’ productions created a quintessential, thought-provoking theatre language, however with little reference to Israeli reality. These are works geared toward international avant garde festivals that strengthen the symbolic capital of young playwrights, producers, and directors.

Such a postdramatic orientation is particularly prevalent in *New Voices in Israeli Drama* (Levy, 2006), an anthology of works by young Israeli playwrights, most of which were produced by Israeli fringe theatres. These playwrights take a largely deconstructive and meta-theatrical approach, and their themes deal with emptiness, meaninglessness, violence, relationships, sexuality, homosexuality, and transgender issues while hardly touching upon the Israeli political reality. For example, in Sivan Cohen’s play, *Or, Ma?*, the heroine watches her life on a television screen as her thoughts are narrated by a male narrator in voice over: “Today, she lives in Germany. Strangely, of all places, it is where, even if not always easy, there is a place for a young Israeli woman, and a stage for the music she plays” (2006, 192). This excerpt epitomizes the manner in which the space, plot, and characters in the entire anthology are mostly located in an estranged Western urban world for which, paradoxically, the playwrights yearn.

At the same time, while also taking a postmodern approach, more seasoned women Israeli directors, such as Ofira Henig, Rina Yerushalmi, Noami Yoeli, and Smadar Yaaron, confront Israeliness and Zionism and use biographical and literary materials, both in documentary and classical dramatic form. However, as mentioned, the younger playwrights of the postmodern theatre distance themselves from the local and biographical, as Ira Avneri, a young director identified with this group, claims:

Today, the young generation in Israel is constantly pondering the question of its horizon: where to, if at all, are things going?... A consciousness of absence, a lack of possibilities, a hazy horizon... a tone of despair envelops what is being done in Israeli fringe... it is understandable why so many young theatre artists seek an artistic alternative overseas, far away from the dialectical and cultural space which is supposed to be their home. (2014, 6-7)

**The Vernacular Approach**

In their seminal work on relations between Israel’s socio-economic center and periphery, anthropologists Jean and John Comaroff (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2016) offer an alternative to the conservative center-periphery model in which the global North perceives and treats the global South as its periphery in political, economic, and cultural terms. Put differently, the center perceives itself as original and significant, and the periphery as a pale simulacrum, a counterfeit, or ghost that will never manage to bridge the gap. In contrast, Comaroff and Comaroff propose the vernacular approach in which the local-regional space is perceived as an autonomous entity. The Middle East is neither Europe’s margins nor a pale version of it.

Israeli theatre artists, particularly Jews of Middle Eastern origin, who adopt this approach, aim to display their ethnic identity as part of the Middle Eastern space and Arab culture. These artists frequently employ social, cultural, and historical autobiographical materials closely related to the Middle East and North Africa, and to their own history of oppression and struggle against Israel’s characteristic Eurocentric and orientalist outlook in all areas of life (Shem-Tov 2019a). The vernacular approach applies to fifty percent of Israel’s Jewish population as well as an Arab audience. Part of the plays are even performed in Judeo-Arabic dialects (Shen-Tov 2019b). This approach relativizes Europe in that the continent is not perceived as a cultural ideal to be imitated or subjugated by, but rather as another source for communication and dialogue alongside other cultural entities.

Spearheaded by Igal Ezrati, the Arab-Hebrew Theatre (Jaffa Theatre) is a space for collaboration between Jews and Arabs which not only produces political plays dealing with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but also constitutes a Jewish-Middle Eastern space. Director Hannah Vazana Greenwald, who is of Jewish-Moroccan descent and works at the Jaffa Theatre, takes this approach. She creates devising theatre that combines the autobiographical, historical, and cultural with a unique theatre language. In her autobiographical performance, *Papejeena*, an adolescent girl from a low-class Moroccan family is torn between the Jewish-Moroccan culture of her home and the dominant Western-Zionist code of her school. Throughout the performance, Moroccan food is cooked, and later served to the audience as a symbolic bridge between the past and present vis-à-vis the heroine’s cultural inner conflict (Shem-Tov, 2018). In *Yoldot*, Vazana Greenwald deals with the 1950s affair of the kidnapping of Jewish babies, mainly of Yemenite origin, which was facilitated by Israeli health services. Vazana Greenwald’s docu-poetic theatre interweaves testimonies by the mothers and by representatives of the establishment that whitewashed the affair with Iris Eliya Cohen’s poem that presents giving birth in an Israeli hospital as an oppressive experience. Consequently, the children’s kidnapping is perceived not as an anomalous event but rather as stemming from an oppressive health system (Shem-Tov, 2019c).

Other typical examples include Yizhak Gormezano Goren, Shosha Goren, and Rafi Aharon’s Bimat Kedem theatre, which between 1982-2013 was a pioneer in this approach, until it no longer received government funding and was forced to close (Shem-Tov, 2019d); Pnina Rintzler, founder and director of the Lod Theatre, directed *Asiri Toda* (*The Grateful*) a play that calls attention to the holocaust of North African Jews of which the Israeli audience was largely unaware; and Dimona Theatre sounds the complex and unique voice of Israelis from Middle Eastern origin who live in Israel’s southern region, far from Tel Aviv and Jerusalem.

To summarize, Israeli theatre, which operates under dire financial circumstances and extreme nationalist policy, responds in diverse ways that can be organized in terms of three main trends. Televised theatre eagerly follows Broadway and Westend hits, while postdramatic theatre is highly influenced by contemporary, young German theatre. Despite the differences between commercial oriented televised theatre and postdramatic theatre that appeals to a more discriminating audience, they both yearn for the West, while leaving the East behind. In contrast, the vernacular approach displays on stage content and forms related to the Middle East where, as mentioned, half of Israel’s Jews have their origins, and aims to construct a local and regional theatre that imagines itself between Baghdad and Casablanca.