**Celebrating of Jewish-Moroccan Theatre in Israel: Production, Repertoire and Reception**

In 2001, a surprising theatrical event took place on the margins of the Israeli theatrical field. For the first time, an Arabic-language performance by Jewish actors was performed for a Jewish audience that did not deal with the Israeli-Arabic conflict. A theatre troupe from Migdal Ha’emek, in northern Israel, raised Molière’s *The Miser*, which was translated into and adapted to Judeo-Moroccan Arabic[[1]](#footnote-1) by Asher Cohen and directed by Ronit Ivgi. The creators and actors were Moroccan-born Jews or second-generation immigrants, fluent in Moroccan as their mother tongue. An audience of Moroccan-descendant Jews and their offspring flocked to the performance. Its success brought about a noticeable change in the margins of the theatre field, and dozens of Moroccan-language productions followed it in appealing to that community. These productions, in turn, inaugurated a larger cultural shift, as more and more performances in other languages began being produced, such as: Iraqi-Jewish theatre, Buchari-Jewish theatre, Amharic theatre by Ethiopian Jews and more. The state of Israel had exerted substantial pressure to erase and marginalize Jewish languages and cultures in general, and those of Middle Eastern Jews in particular, as part of nation-building and the creation of uniform Israeli identity molded exclusively around Hebrew language and culture. In the last decades, there has been a withdrawal from this radical and oppressive policy, the emergence of non-Hebrew Jewish theatre representing a clear manifestation of this trend. In this paper I focus specifically on Moroccan-Jewish theatre which is the most pioneering and dominant in this field. It paved the way for theatres in other languages, which Zionist ideology demanded be erased and disappeared, and fashioned organizational, budgetary, repertory-building and community outreach strategies.

The paper’s aim is to discuss how Moroccan-Jewish ethnic identity is fashioned through Moroccan-Jewish theatre through three main aspects: 1) production and budget. Even though Moroccan theatre is positioned on the margins of the Israeli theatre field, as opposed to institutional and subsidized mainstream theatre, both operate on a similar neoliberal logic. While in the public theatre, this logic operates as an oppressive force, celebrating ethnic stereotypes, for Moroccan theatre it allows independence and the fashioning of an empowering ethnic identity on stage; 2) Repertoire. Moroccan performance tends to popular theatre stylistically and thematically. Popular and nostalgic themes and style fashion a ‘community of memory’ of Moroccan Jews as against the Zionist discourse’s erasing and suppression; 3) Reception. Reception of the performance by the Moroccan-Jewish audience is very active, pointing to a celebration of its identity, culture and language, as well as a protest against the hegemonic mainstream. Theatre is perceived in Israel as a ‘white space’ belonging to the middle-class, Ashkenazi Jewish hegemony. The viewers of Moroccan theatre ‘darken’ the ‘white space’ by transgressing received Western audience-behavior. However before analyzing these three aspects, I will briefly dwell on the history of Moroccan Jews in Israel and their cultural and ethnic effacement, treating pre-immigration Jewish theatre in Morocco to more broadly historically contextualize Moroccan-Jewish theatre in Israel.

**Moroccans in Israel**

The Jews of Morocco and their descendants make up the largest ethnic group among *Mizrahi* (literally ‘eastern’) Jews in Israel. *Mizrahim* are Jews descendent from the Middle East and North Africa, most of whom, immigrated to Israel in the 1950s and 1960s, and they comprise about half of the Jewish population of Israel today. However, Israeli hegemony is mostly comprised of Ashkenazi Jews – secular, middle class Jews of European descent. The Zionist ideology this group advances has forced Mizrahim to fit themselves into the model of the ‘Sabra’ – the ‘new Jew’ fashioned according to Western-white criteria. Mizrahim were demanded to pass through ‘the Zionist melting pot’ – to sever themselves from the Jewish traditions they had brought with them from the Middle East, and efface any linguistic or cultural Arabic component structuring their identity.[[2]](#footnote-2) This effacement and severing of Arab-Jewish identity flows from the Orientalist Zionist ideology, which regards the culture of Mizrahim as lowly and primitive both because of its long history in the Arab and Muslim world and because anything linked to Arabs is perceived as belonging to the culture of the enemy. Thus they must cast away this ‘Arabness’[[3]](#footnote-3) and discipline their speech, accents, bodies and conduct, their religious beliefs and their aesthetic tastes, and become ‘Israeli’. The Israeli hegemony’s same Orientalist conception also fashioned a socioeconomic policy that marginalized Mizrahim physically to peripheral cities and settlements, with no adequate employment, educational and health services, which positioned them as lower-class throughout the state’s history, making them dependent on the establishment.[[4]](#footnote-4) During those years, waves of Mizrahi dissidence and protest erupted, with Moroccan Jews often at the helm.[[5]](#footnote-5) Their cultural marginalization has been expressed in cultural stereotypes pointing mainly to the violence of Moroccan Jews, also manifest on the Hebrew stage, as Dan Urian has noted.[[6]](#footnote-6) As a function of these long-standing processes of marginalization, most of the older Moroccan Jews the theatre aims at live in working-class towns on Israel’s periphery, outside the large cities of the center. Throughout the years, cultural and theatre institutions disregarded the cultural needs of this older audience, and Moroccan theatre aims to fill some of the subsequent cultural vacuum.

**Jewish Theatre in Morocco**

Sarit Cofman-Simhon, the only scholar thus far to deal with Moroccan theatre in Israel,[[7]](#footnote-7) perceives this theatre as a wholly-new phenomenon that sprung up in the early 2000s with the production of *The Miser* in Moroccan, and her writing seems to suggest that Moroccan Jews neither produced nor performed theatre prior to their immigration into Israel. In fact, as far back as the 19th century, Middle Eastern and North African Jews were dominant in the production of Arabic theatre combining European elements, such as: Algerian playwright Abraham Daninos, and famous Egyptian intellectual, playwright and director Yaʿqūb James Ṣanūʿ.[[8]](#footnote-8) According to Joseph Chetreet,[[9]](#footnote-9) most of Morocco’s theatrical activity took place in the Alliance chain of schools that French Jews had established in the Middle East, where Jewish material was taught alongside the sciences, languages and the arts. The performance repertoire included European and especially French classical drama, Arabic plays and plays from the Jewish tradition. Most of the theatrical activity, in Casablanca and Meknes, comprised performances by amateur troupes but some of those were professionalized over time and performed at well-known and important halls. Two main trends can be perceived within this activity: first, classical-Western, and especially French, repertoire; and second, repertoire from the Jewish tradition. These trends mirror the cultural understanding of Moroccan Jews in the first half of the 20th century, in constant tension between different cultural identities and influences: Colonial French culture, the Arabic-Muslim environment and Jewish tradition.

Chetreet enumerates rich theatrical activity, and I will limit myself to pointing out only central groups here. Activity in Casablanca began as early as the 1920s. In 1921, Abraham Hadida sets up the first troupe, which produced Rabbi Yehya Peretz’s *Joseph the Righteous*. This was an all-male troupe of a traditional orientation. The show enjoyed some success and was even performed in different Jewish communities in Morocco. Actors David Levy (1914-1993) and Ya’akov Ohana (1909-1975), of Hadida’s troupe, established **The Artistic Troupe**, which enjoyed fame and success for some 25 years, performing in Moroccan-Jewish and even raising its productions in the lavish metropolitan theatre hall. Most of its repertoire was penned by Rabbi Peretz, and was based on biblical stories: *Joseph the Righteous*, *Solomon and the Queen of Sheba*, *David and Goliath*, *Amnon and Tamar*, *Jacob and Esau* and *Daniel*. The repertoire in Meknes, by contrast, was different. After World War II, Morris Ben Hemo set up a dramatic circle with a more Westernized, French orientation: it included Molière comedies, Racine tragedies and Victor Hugo dramas. Following Morocco’s independence in 1956, all theatrical activity in the country was almost entirely cut off due to the anti-Israeli political climate, with many of the Jews, including the lion’s share of theatrical creators, immigrating to Israel, France and Canada.

Mordecai Ma’ayan (Marcus Abekassis), one of the stage artists who emigrated from Casablanca to Israel, even produced a play in Moroccan there in the early 1960s (as opposed to the widespread belief that the 2001 *Miser* was the first Moroccan-language production in Israel). Ma’ayan was born in Casablanca in 1929 and began studies at the Charles Netter Alliance school in 1937. As a boy, he set up a dramatic troupe with his fellow-students, staging *Joseph and his Brothers* in Jewish-Moroccan.[[10]](#footnote-10) The audience consisted of family members, friends, community members and several Muslim viewers. In 1949, he travels to Paris to study theatre, but having finished only ten months of studies had to immigrate to Israel. In the 1960s he arrived in Dimona and was appointed deputy director of the city’s education department. A peripheral working-class city in the Negev desert, the majority of Dimona’s residents are North African Jews. In 1963 Ma’ayan founded an amateur troupe for people of Moroccan descent, again staging *Joseph and his Brothers* in Moroccan. The show enjoyed great success in town, as well as in other working-class cities:

Guests were invited for this show [*Joseph and his Brothers*], which was held at the Dimona cinema theatre, from Kiryat Gat, Sderot and Ofakim. Following this success, the troupe may go out on a tour of Moroccan audiences in these towns. Council Chairman Amram Lardo said he regards this troupe as a way to bring working class town residents who do not yet know Hebrew closer to the world of the theatre. The Council has decided to aid the theatre financially.[[11]](#footnote-11)

This theatrical event was extraordinary for its time, as the Zionist melting pot policy, whose aim was to make Hebrew culture exclusive in public space, was at its zenith. Therefore the great excitement the production engendered in its Moroccan-descendant viewers in the southern peripheral towns is unsurprising. At a time when centralist institutional supervision was at its most oppressive, a performance in Judeo-Moroccan Arabic was both a celebration and a protest of an identity language that were supposed to be effaced and disappeared.

**Production: The Neoliberal Paradox**

Following the success of *The Miser* (2001), private artists and producers of Moroccan descent began producing for-profit Moroccan-language shows, which simultaneously filled a cultural and community vacuum of years. They were enthusiastically received, enjoyed dozens of runs and had a community-cultural impact. The Israeli Ministry of Culture subsidizes theatre along quantitative criteria, based in a neoliberal logic. The different Moroccan-language productions are not subsidized, under the claim that they fail to adhere to these criteria.

In the constant era, Neoliberalism is one of the dominant forces fashioning our lives, including culture and the arts. Usually Neoliberalism is rightly criticized for downsizing public subsidies and exacerbating socioeconomic inequality, creating social gaps, the atomization of society, undermining social solidarity,[[12]](#footnote-12) and hurting different identities and cultures,[[13]](#footnote-13) transforming the arts into so many consumer products. Will Kymlicka claims that though this criticism is right, sometime it is these very neoliberal processes that can be unexpectedly appropriated by ethnic minorities to protest social cohesion and the value of cultural identities.[[14]](#footnote-14) Among other things, neoliberal processes dismantle the centralist-national surveillance of cultural institutions, inadvertently allowing the multicultural expression and fashioning of ethnic and other identities oppressed by the national discourse. In other places in the world, theatre carries out a complex negotiation with neoliberal forces, veering between resistance and transgression to taking advantage of opportunities and creative use of neoliberal processes.[[15]](#footnote-15)

The subsidies of the Israeli Culture Ministry allow public theatre an easy existence. But these subsidies operate under a neoliberal logic, justifying government market intervention as based on profit motivations and less on cultural-artistic motivations. First, subsidy criteria are usually quantitative:[[16]](#footnote-16) the more productions of a high degree of complexity a public theatre stages, the more tickets it sells and the more places in Israel it reaches, the more subsidy volume grows. Second, subsidies are contingent on deficit sanctions. Deficits bring subsidy slashing, thus cyclically exacerbating theatres’ budgetary difficulties. Therefore public theatre undergoes objectification and commercialization and is managed with profit and deficit-reduction motivations taking center stage, and its repertoire leans towards commercial theatre, such as: comedy, melodrama and musicals, reproducing existing ethnic stereotypes.[[17]](#footnote-17) Moroccan theatre, on the other hand, is mostly private, independent theatre and is therefore not subsidized by the state, and therefore also operates under an economic logic. Its repertoire is similar to that of public theatre (comedy and musical), to maximize profits. However its performances stress the cultural and linguistic complexities of a pre-Israeli Jewish-Moroccan identity, thus establishing a unique, empowering socio-communal experience. The private producers of Moroccan theatre come from the community, identify with the production and its cultural-ethnic aims, as opposed to public theatre administrators’ alienation to the ‘commercial’ repertoire they offer. Furthermore, as opposed to public theatre’s high cost of ticket (around NIS 200-300), ticket prices that private producers offer is accessible (NIS50-70).

Paradoxically, the same neoliberal logic creates an inversion of the roles and aims of commercially-operating public theatre and private, socially-minded theatre. Subsidized public theatre, which is in principle supposed to relate to the public in all its complexity,[[18]](#footnote-18) in fact perceives it as an amalgam of so many consumers, thus marketing popular and stereotype-rich texts. Moroccan theatre, which also operates under the profit principle, by contrast, structures theatrical events that shape a communal ethnic identity. In other words, the public that funds public theatre is perceived by it whole cloth as an audience of consumers, while the consumers of Moroccan theatre becomes a community that expresses, produces and celebrates itself as a public of challenging Jewish-Moroccan identity. This development happens similarly elsewhere in the world, as Kymlicka notes – while neoliberal reforms weaken the state’s power, minorities use these reforms to combine and empower their civilian rights through their market activity.[[19]](#footnote-19)

**Repertoire**: **Nostalgia as Political Leverage for the Creation of a Community of Memory**

The efflorescence of Moroccan theatre 50 years after the immigration of Moroccan Jews to Israel attests to the cultural suppression and an extreme thirst and longing. Cultural expressions could still have been found in traditional context and under the heading ‘folklore’ as an opposite of ‘high culture’. However here for the first time, the Judeo-Moroccan tongue arrives and conquers a space in the theatre. The two dominant genres in the repertoire are comedy and musical, some of them adaptations of well-known plays by Molière, and some original plays. The setting of the fictional world is usually Morocco, but sometimes also Israel. It is a repertoire celebrating Jewish-Moroccan ethnic identity and shying away from direct representation of any ethnic clash in Israel, and has no ‘protest theatre’. The theatrical events created following this repertoire are part of a community of memory, in Yehuda Shenhav’s term.[[20]](#footnote-20) He explains that a ‘community of memory’ is opposed to Pierre Nora’s ‘site of memory’, in his debate on the construction of Israeli Middle Eastern Jews’ memory, as opposed to national Zionist memory. A site of memory is the product of a national project that simultaneously freezes in time and coherently fixes dominant national memory while making other narratives and evidence forgotten. As opposed to this, the community of memory is a dynamic and spontaneous process of different, sometimes contradictory, memories and narratives, which supply an alternative to the community of memory. Therefore

[t]he existence of communities of memory obliges us to rethink the connection between a historiographic project, which aspires to a totalization of the past, and collective memory, which is splintered and fragmented.[[21]](#footnote-21)

I claim that Moroccan theatre is a community of memory that rewrites historical narrative as against the site of memory of Zionism’s super-narrative, doing so mainly through nostalgia. Its political dimension hinges on real and imagined nostalgic remembrance, created on stage and within the audience through language and the pre-Israeli cultural load. This nostalgia heals and allows a space of Moroccan-Jewish identity alongside Israeli-hegemonic identity.

The literal interpretation of nostalgia is suffering and yearning for home while knowing there is no way back. And a critical conception views nostalgia as a conservative and escapist action that perceives the past as harmonious and perfect, and the present as lacking and deficient. Super-narratives, such as nationality and religion use nostalgia to create a myth-based memory that is perceived as truth and concretized through objects, texts and actions supposedly ‘authentically’ representing a harmonious past. In the postmodern age, with uncertainty and the undermining of different truths on the rise, nostalgia is a flight to a stable identity that existed in the past for exactly lack of the ability to deal with the complex and threatening reality of the present. Late Capitalism uses nostalgia as raw material in the production of goods, lifestyles and images of the past, under the heading ‘retro’.[[22]](#footnote-22) But in the context of ethnic minorities, nostalgia can also be critical, transgressive and dissident in nature.[[23]](#footnote-23) Some differentiate between conservative, uncritical restorative nostalgia and reflective nostalgia, which has a degree of distance and irony vis-à-vis the nostalgic act itself, as well as self-awareness of the fact that remembrance blurs real and imagined, and that it is an action linked to the complex and problematic situation of the present.[[24]](#footnote-24) Yochai Oppenheimer claims that nostalgia is

[a] means of defining values and cultural values in danger or under threat, as a channel of shared sociocultural memory and basis for critique of cultural hegemonies. This kind of politically-meaningful nostalgia may especially accompany the viewpoint of ethnic immigration groups which live inside established cultures that subject its immigrants the policy of a melting pot […] Nostalgia is absolutely not naïve.[[25]](#footnote-25)

Moroccan-Jewish theatre is not conservative, reconstructive or escapist nostalgia, as it is does not desire the effacement of the Israeli present and its exchange for an ‘original’ pre-Israeli past. This theatre, as a community of memory, uses reflective nostalgia with the aim of reconstructing Jewish-Moroccan identity as another cultural option challenging and expanding Israeli identity. In the theatrical event, nostalgia for a language and a culture who were usually placed only in private or traditional spaces is amplified and given public voice. As opposed to the Zionist apparatus, which demanded assimilation, the community of memory in the theatrical event uses the materials of nostalgia, such as language and its many strata and sayings alongside bodily gestures and cultural and social conventions; music; everyday and ritual apparel, home furnishings etc., to rewrite what was forbidden and effaced in the name of Zionist ideology, and suggest a broader Israeli cultural option that also includes Jewish-Moroccan identity.

Ronit Ivgi is a Morocco-born director, actress and theatre teacher who immigrated to Israel at a young age, and in 2001 founded **The Israeli Moroccan Theatre** in Migdal Ha’emek. She says she had always dreamed of creating theatre in Moroccan for her parents’ generation.[[26]](#footnote-26) Asher Cohen, a Morocco-born educator who is fluent in Jewish-Moroccan, was contacted to translate and adapt Molière’s *The Miser*. The final production was done with Ivgi and included actor improvisation. The show had two versions. In the first version, the show did not include songs. In 2002 the group split, and Cohen set up **Al Maghreb** **Theatre**, raising the second version that also included songs.[[27]](#footnote-27) Both groups received no funding from any public body.

The new version was a ‘global transformation’,[[28]](#footnote-28) a noticeable adaptation of the play’s signification systems and their cultural adaptation to a Moroccan-Jewish audience. The fictional world is set in Casablanca ‘with its living folklore, concepts and tongue – including the names of the characters and the food – and its many sayings. The plot takes place during the golden age between the reigns of Muhammed V and his son, Hassan II’.[[29]](#footnote-29) The house in which the plot takes place is realistically fashioned as a Jewish-Moroccan home, with tapestries on the walls and two large pictures, one of king Muhammed V and one of Rabbi Haim Pinto. The two patriarchs ‘oversee’ the residents of the house. The king represents the sociopolitical order and the rabbi represents the Moroccan-Jewish tradition and its ‘representative’ in the home, Danino, a miserly shopkeeper dressed in caftan and beret hat. Lower-class characters are also decked in traditionally Moroccan garb, while higher-class characters are dressed in a Western-European style.

Linguist Aharon Maman analyzed the text, claiming that Cohen ‘abstained from linguistic bluntness; the curse words are sophisticated and formulated as ironic allusions […] and subtle humor’.[[30]](#footnote-30) And no intimate touching was presented on stage, despite the plot’s love stories, as the story is aimed at a traditional audience. Maman goes on to illustrate how the play’s humor-filled language are addressed at all social strata and has many creative sayings, and he even finds the influence of Israeli-Hebrew in the literal translation of Hebrew-Israeli slang into Jewish-Moroccan.[[31]](#footnote-31)

The scenography and characters’ speech is historically based on the life of the Jewish community of Casablanca, and is geared to create a nostalgic experience for the audience. While first-generation viewers regard it as actual nostalgia to a life experience marginalized from Israeliness now receiving venter stage, for Israeli-born viewers this is an imagines nostalgia, recognizable from family stories visually, linguistically and bodily recreated on stage, making up the dynamics of a community of memory. This motion is unique not only in recreating the past but in that memory is also aimed at the present. Therefore in my mind miserliness is not only a quality reviled in the hospitality-based Middle Eastern tradition, but is also an allegory of the complex relation between Israeli identity and the Jewish-Moroccan cultural load. ‘Miserliness’ as an image raises the question of how tradition should be conserved. Who is the miser, and what riches does he guard? In his traditional garb and pictures of the king in his house, *The* *Miser* represents a rigid side miserly and punctiliously trying to guard cultural capital – up to obsession. This miserliness is represented derisively, as there is no real possibility of adhering to tradition without flexibility and change. Nostalgia is only a political tool to deal with the effacement of memory. Therefore the show, fittingly, offers a flexible approach combining the Israeli and Moroccan-Jewish identities represented on stage, without the need to choose between, give up on or efface either.

Global transformation became one of the main strategies following *The Miser*, and since its production many adaptations of well-known plays, especially Molière comedies, have been produced. Cohen adapted and directed *Scapin the Schemer* (2002), transporting the plot to a Casablanca market, between a coffee shop and a spice store. Cohen also raised an adaptation of *Monsieur de Pourceaugnac* (2008), whose plot was similarly moved to Casablanca. Ivgi adapted Goldoni’s *The Servant of Two Masters* (2004). Yigal Peleg of Be’er Sheva says that after seeing the audience’s excitement watching a showing of *The Miser* in town, he decided to produce an adaptation of Molière’s *The Imaginary Invalid* (2003). Similarly, actor Arik Mishali also raised an adaptation of Molière’s *The Doctor in Spite of Himself* (2008).

The standout production in the context of this strategy was *Ourika* (2003), written and directed by Hani Elimeleh and inspired by Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*. An alumna of Tel Aviv University Drama Department and Uta Hagen’s acting school in New York, Elimeleh is a teacher and amateur theatre director in Ashkelon, and she used Beckett’s main template to fashion a critically-nostalgic play. The plot takes place during the 1950s in Ourika, a river valley south of Marrakesh in Morocco. Albert and Elerte, a childless married couple, are planning their illegal emigration to Israel. Elerte has lost the note they were given by the Zionist emissary from Israel, noting the exact time and place to arrive at, but she vaguely remembers where and when they are to wait. Throughout the play, they wait for an emissary that may arrive to take them to the Promised Land. The couple is fashioned as a binary of contradictions, exacerbating the comic aspect of the relationship. Albert is punctilious and ostentatious in his European-style best, befitting his stature as textile shop owner, while Elerte, a maker of potions and general advisor, is scattered and vulgar. As in *Waiting for Godot*, the emissary fails to arrive but they still wait. The play ends with the two listening to Edith Piaf’s famous *Non, je ne regrette rien* on Albert’s transistor radio/ The nostalgia of classical comedy in the earlier productions is undermined in this production. Though the plot is situated in Morocco, it does not deal with family relations but in fact unharmoniously with the issue of emigration to Israel. The Israeli emissary is absent, and the interminable wait for his arrival is supposedly the opposite of the historical event of immigration itself. This is because Elimeleh is uninterested in a purely nostalgic experience, but fashions an allusive social message regarding the social and cultural position of Israelis of Moroccan descent within the Israel present. Ourika as a region symbolizes a liminal space between Morocco and the Promised Land, pointing to the Moroccan members of the audience as if perhaps still inhabits it, as if forgotten by the (hegemonic) Israeli emissary in the far-out periphery. The ending, with Piaf intoning that she regrets nothing, is ambivalent and even ironic. From the point of view of the characters waiting for the Promised Land, they are happy to leave their memories and past behind, like the words of the song. But from the viewpoint of the older audience members who experienced cultural schism and oppression since immigrating to Israel, the song’s complete lack of remorse is transformed into discordant irony.

The original plays written by these creators veer between family comedy and musical. Avner Dan raised *Al-Familia* (2005) as a family comedy dealing with a couple’s entanglement. Similarly, Mishali has raised *Marati* (2007), a comedy presenting a romantic triangle involving a cobbler, his wife and their neighbor. Cohen raised the family comedies *Woman Builds Woman Destroys* (2007) and *Umm al Aroussa* (‘Mother of the Bride’) (2012) starring singer and actress Raymonde Abekassis, which combined songs related to the plot. Cohen’s musical *Munira* (2011) is a tribute to genius singer Salim Halali (1920-2005), one of the leading lights of the Shaabi style and one of the early formulators of Raï. During the 1960s, Halali managed the Golden Cockerel Café in Casablanca, where the plot takes place, during which his well-known songs are sung as befitting the different dramatic situations. It is a musical show based on a yearning for the old, moving songs, and therefore the soundtrack amplifies the nostalgic experience. Elimeleh’s musical *Café de Marie* (2006) takes place in a Casablanca café in the 1950s. The plot revolves around owner Marie and her romantic relations with the make characters at the café. Famous singers Haim Ouliel and Mike Carucci play the café musicians and fashion a nostalgic soundtrack for the audience.

**Repertoire: Popular Theatre and Artistic Quality**

Critic Shai Bar Ya’akov is the only one thus far to have published a critique (as differentiated from an article or review) of Moroccan theatre. He wrote of *Ourika* (Elimeleh’s *Waiting for Godot* adaptation):

Considering ongoing successof *Yiddishspiel*,[[32]](#footnote-32) which presents its audience with a combination of familial tribalism and sentimental yearning for the past, it’s hard to criticize a commercial Moroccan theatre doing the same, as long as it does so on a decent level. This is in fact perfectly well-made comic theatre, although free of pretense to any more complex artistic message. It’s only a shame they decided to frag Beckett’s name into it…[[33]](#footnote-33)

Though praising it as good comic theatre, Bar Ya’akov suggests that popular theatre will to be of low quality and at any rate should not touch on such canonical texts as Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*. His understanding signifies what most taste makers and gate keepers in the theatre filed think about Moroccan theatre. Artistic quality and performance level are perceived as low, and therefore there is hardly any theatre critique and adequate institutional funding. These agents of the theatre field underplay the importance of this theatre, and they miss its community and cultural importance, which is an immanent part of the art of theatre. I think repertoire should be examined according to the genre into which and out of which Moroccan theatre creates, rather that sidle it with external parameters.

The performances of the Moroccan theatre fall under the category of popular theatre. Popular theatre comes from the community and is made for it, touches on themes and issues on its agenda,[[34]](#footnote-34) and uses direct, simple and attractive practices, such as: comedy, physical theatre and musical,[[35]](#footnote-35) which are meant to bring pleasure, joy laughter and pleasure alongside social and consciousness change. Because popular theatre is connected to a specific community, claims Jason Prince,

[t]he term [popular theatre] may thus be applied sweepingly to theatres intended for all subordinated peoples within a society, as in the lower classes, or marginalized social groups, like ethnic minorities or lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people.[[36]](#footnote-36)

Moroccan theatre is popular theatre not simply because it presents mainly comedy and musical, but because its themes are linked to Jewish-Moroccan history, culture and language, effaced and marginalized by the Israeli hegemony. In other words, the creators and viewers come from the same community and together shape social experience that is an alternative to the hegemonic discourse.

Prince also distinguishes between popular theatre and mass culture. Mass culture refers to theatre performances as mass consumer products created in formulas by professional production teams, such as Broadway musicals. This theatre has high production values but does so to sell its wares at the highest price, as alienated from community and social questions. The main difference as that whereas popular theatre springs from below and has social and community goals, mass culture is well planned and executed from above and geared mainly to financial gain.[[37]](#footnote-37)

The field’s gate keepers and taste makers disparage the importance of popular theatre, seeing it as lacking in aesthetic taste and amateurish, but in fact its very roughness, in Peter Brook’s terms, produces the one-time-only community experience so lacking on the mainstream. The roughness of popular theatre

takes on its socially liberating role, for by nature the popular theatre is anti-authoritarian, anti-traditional, anti-pomp, anti-pretence. This is the theatre of noise, and the theatre of noise is the theatre of applause.[[38]](#footnote-38)

Brook also mentions the importance of popular theatre as a source of inspiration for avant-garde and alternative theatre artists, because it is not beholden to stylistic unity, and it transgresses artistic conventions. Moroccan theatre is popular theatre both in its themes and styles and in its enthusiastic reception, and even the lack of critique and institutional funding point to its uniqueness as such. The intentions of Moroccan theatre creators also qualifies it as popular theatre. Brook explains:

What is this theatre’s intent? First of all it is there unashamedly to make joy and laughter, what Tyrone Guthrie calls ‘theatre of delight’.[[39]](#footnote-39)

The motivation of Moroccan theatre creators is to delight the audience, and especially give first-generation immigrants a place and voice, to hear its own language and draw the second and third generations nearer to their ethnic identity. Asher Cohen has said, ‘I’m not trying to bring some grand annunciation to the theatre, but to delight the audience and make them laugh. The audience of Moroccan immigrants didn’t have theatre, and now they do. That’s all.’[[40]](#footnote-40) Ronit Ivgi says that for her, Moroccan-language theatre is ‘a gift to my family, to the uncles who immigrated from Morocco decades ago and since then have not gone out on a single outing.’[[41]](#footnote-41) However creators are also keen to stress the seriousness with which plays are produced, as Hani Elimeleh says: ‘Moroccan theatre is important to me. The play is shown at the performing arts center and are legitimate’.[[42]](#footnote-42) Therefore Cohen explains that although these are comedies, it is important to maintain a level of good taste, in both language and bodily gestures, as the audience is traditional.

**Reception: Enthusiasm and Excitement**

Moroccan theatre is received with much enthusiasm and excitement. Most of its target audience lives in peripheral working–class cities and neighborhoods. Alongside first-generation immigrants, the second and third generation also come, and get simultaneous translation from their parents. Erez Ruimi, who was born in the peripheral southern town of Kiryat Gat, has written extensively of his experience viewing *The Miser* with his father, a native of Morocco. This reception speaks to the complexity with which Jewish-Moroccan identity is fashioned in theatre. I have chosen to quote him at length as I feel like his words attest to the reception of the genre at large. Ruimi’s description is built on a time axis of entry into the lobby, reception of the show and the audience dispersal after it:

At the entrance to the lobby we stood there, my father and myself, with about 400 other people, most my father age, in their fifties to seventies, very few young people, all well-dressed and smelling good, speaking the most adequate Hebrew they could muster, perhaps a sentence in French here or there, but they all looked like ‘real Israelis.’ There was no sign of Mizrahi language or character […]

We sat in the hall and the show started, and from that moment on I had a very strange feeling, I remember the first sentence in Moroccan, although everybody knew in advance that the show is Moroccan-language, it was strange for everybody sitting in the audience, it was as if people wouldn’t believe it until the play started, that it would really be in their mother tongue, the language of their mother and father’s house, which you only heard in family events, in a theatre hall it was rare to hear the Moroccan tongue with all of its sayings and euphemisms. The first sentence was definitely embarrassing for everybody, out of sorts, even the first joke told on stage by the excellent actors got no laughs from the audience, just polite slight laughter.

Slowly, what happened around me was a process of unbuttoning […] As the show went on, I saw their eyes glisten with joy, the old guys translating loudly to the younger ones […] the waves of laughter grew and grew, there was an amazing feeling that everybody sitting in the audience is a member of one big family, everybody loving everybody, no one telling their neighbor off, even if they were translating an especially juicy sentence spoken ten minutes before, and in a loud and obstructive tone.

‘Brothers sitting together’ is an understatement for what I witnessed that evening, a wave of liberation I had never seen before, my father and everybody around him looking at the play while I couldn’t stop looking at the performance, which touched me and showed me the size and power of the tragedy.

The hardest, but also most moving, part for me was the end of the show and existing the hall, everybody talking with everybody else, hugging each other, really just refusing to leave the theatre hall, and it just got worse as they moved from the hall itself to the entrance lobby, I saw the 400 ‘somewhat European’ Israelis I had met at the entrance to the show, speaking loudly in the most eloquent Moroccan tongue interspersed with phrase too long and too complicated for me to comprehend, and I don’t think there is a plastic surgeon alive who could remove the smiles from their faces, or anything that could adulterate the pure joy and enjoyment that these dear people derived from the experience they had just undergone, my father can’t stop talking about this show and to this day has not settled down, until all his brothers watched it, and I am sure the same was true for each and every person sitting in the audience that evening.[[43]](#footnote-43)

The tripartite description: gathering, reception and dispersal, is similar to the stages of Victor Turner’s rite of passage:[[44]](#footnote-44) 1) separation from daily reality; 2) a passage characterized by liminality and the creation of a *communitas* of brotherhood and community; 3) incorporation – a return to reality after transformative change. According to Ruimi, the transformation that the theatrical event wrought was from Western-Israeli identity, suppressing any Middle Eastern characteristic by the mostly Moroccan-descendant viewers, to a process of beginning to be liberated from that restrictive hegemonic identity and the reception of the Moroccan-Jewish identity with its language and culture, displayed so prominently on stage. The gathering at the lobby signifies the viewers’ hegemonic Israeli identity, as they are well dressed and speaking in Hebrew. Trepidation fills the viewers as they sit in the hall and the show starts. The first sentence uttered in Moroccan on stage is accompanied by a shock, as if the transgression of a taboo, and therefore there is very little laughter when hearing the jokes. In Israel, Moroccan is allowed only in private, familial or traditional spaces, such as the synagogue. The Moroccan present on the theatre stage, perceived as a respectable medium and a hegemonic space, seems incongruous to the viewers, an oxymoron. Elija Anderson claims that a ‘white space’ is one not only uninhabited by blacks, or that their role there is only as service-givers, but one that is phenomenologically perceived as such by both whites and blacks, such as: gated communities, university campuses and cultural and theatre institutions.[[45]](#footnote-45) Therefore at the beginning of the show, the audience perceives the theatre as a ‘white space’, in the sense of a hegemonic Israeli space that disciplines restrained behavior, explaining the dissonance when Moroccan is heard on the stage. Only after a while is there a loosening that can be termed a ‘blackening’ of the white space. The viewers laugh with delight, and the elders, who speak Moroccan, translate its special sayings and euphemisms to the youngsters. Cofman-Simhon specifies four groups in the audience in relation to language: the first generation, for which it is a mother tongue, the second generation that understands it, the third generation that knows very little, and others of non-Moroccan descent, such as partners and friends accompanying Moroccan-descendant viewers.[[46]](#footnote-46)

Furthermore, according to other evidence,[[47]](#footnote-47) the audience not only is not quiet, but in fact it breaks the Western convention of the ‘fourth wall’, i.e., that the characters on stage should not be addressed to maintain ‘aesthetic distance’. Viewers answers the characters and joke with them, giving them advice and maintaining a real and vibrant dialog, and after the show viewers approach the actors, congregate around them, hug and kiss them. I do not accept Cofman-Simhon’s hypothesis that this is because the viewers are older and thus untrained in Western-Bourgeois theatrical conventions, by which she alludes to their cultural inferiority.[[48]](#footnote-48) I believe the genre of popular theatre invites this kind of spontaneous reaction from the hall to the stage.[[49]](#footnote-49) Dennis Kennedy’s ‘audience gestures’ are bodily and vocal activity from the audience during the theatrical event, such as: whistling, clapping, interjections etc., through which the audience constructs is social identity.[[50]](#footnote-50) The comic performance, as Ruimi describes it, created ripples of laughter that in fact constituted a community-based brotherhood similar to a *communitas*, temporarily suspending rigid social hierarchies and characterized by participants’ equality and brotherhood. This experience allows and beckons audience gestures, making the convention of the fourth wall irrelevant. Ruimi describes how, during dispersal, the audience spoke loudly and proudly in Moroccan, citing the sayings and euphemisms of the show as conjuring up a pre-Israeli cultural world and refashioning a marginalized Jewish-Moroccan identity. The event signifies a new, alternative possibility of a wider Israeli identity that contains the Jewish-Moroccan ethnic identity.

The *communitas* created in the theatre hall is not complete. Ruimi describes an ambivalent experience between the comedy on stage and ‘the depths of tragedy’ outside the theatre hall. The show’s reception raises the question for him, why is institutional Israeli theatre isn’t his own, his family’s and his community’s:

That night I asked myself why Grandma Aliza and grandma Masudah never left the Be’er Sheva performance arts center hand in hand with Grandpa Eliahu and Grandpa Avraham, having enjoyed a good show by the Moroccan theatre?

The suppression and barring of Jewish-Moroccan language and culture from the cultural-public space was transgressed in Moroccan theatre, signifying the 50-year missing of a meaningful cultural experience by this large cultural community. In other words, enthusiastic reception of Moroccan theatre also paradoxically exacerbated the frustration of a cultural possibility oppressed and suppressed throughout the years, at least as far as the first generation was concerned.

**The Celebration of Moroccan Theatre**

Jewish traditions, histories and languages were marginalized in Israeli culture up to their actual effacement. Israeli Moroccan theatre signifies a cultural shift seeking to expand hegemonic Israeli identity that had demanded a unified, Western-oriented Hebrew identity. This theatre springs from below, offering enjoyable popular theatre dealing with nostalgic themes of the pre-Israeli past in Jewish-Moroccan. However cultural oppression has not faded completely away, as up to now Moroccan theatre has not been subsidized, ostensibly because it is amateur theatre. Moroccan theatre challenges hegemonic Israeli identity and Zionist ideology. The very existence of Jewish theatre in Arabic (of a Jewish dialect) created by Jews for Jews on the nostalgic past in Arab lands, especially in light of the ongoing bloody Israeli-Palestinian conflict, is a unique and extraordinary phenomenon on the cultural scene. The existence of Moroccan theatre in Israel challenges traditional distinctions in Israeli theatre historiography, which differentiates between Jewish-Hebrew-theatre and Arabic-Palestinian theatre. Furthermore, this Arabic-language theatre does not deal with ‘coexistence’ and peace, but literally springs out of Arab-Middle-Eastern culture itself. The intentional cutoff from the themes of both contemporary social reality and the Hebrew language in Moroccan theatre stress the desire to establish an autonomous cultural site. While this theatre offers no direct social critique, its use of nostalgic material becomes a lever for the empowerment of Jewish-Moroccan identity. The use of popular theatre in constructing the repertoire is not just a marketing tool to reach the largest number of viewers, but also an invitation to a celebration between the hall and the stage, a protest of the conservative hegemonic mainstream’s theatrical and cultural conventions. This special, enthusiastic and excited reception, and the connection established in the hall between three generations renewing their link to their own language and culture, tangibly and physically signifies a future political and cultural possibility of an Israeli identity containing ethnic Jewish identities in a complex identity free of oppression, suppression and effacement.

1. Most Middle Eastern Jews spoke Arabic in Jewish dialects such as Jewish-Iraqi, Jewish-Moroccan, Jewish-Yemenite. Following immigration to Israel, these languages are on the verge of cultural extinction. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ella Shohat, 'The Invention of Judeo-Arabic', *Interventions*, 19.2 (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. Ella Shohat, 'Sephardim in Israel: Zionism from the Standpoint of Its Jewish Victims', *Social Text*,19/20 (1988), 1–35. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. 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-5)
6. Dan Urian, 'Mizrahi and Ashkenazi in the Israeli Theatre', *Arabic and Middle Eastern Literature*, 4.1(2001), 19-36. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Sarit Cofman-Simhon, 'African Tongues on the Israeli Stage: A Reversed Diaspora', *TDR: The Drama Review,* 57.3 (2013), 48-68. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Shmuel Moreh and Philip Sadgrove**,** *Jewish Contributions to Nineteenth-Century Arabic Theatre : Plays from Algeria and Syria - a Study and Texts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); Khalid Amine and Marvin Carlson, *The Theatres of Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia: Performance Traditions of the Maghreb* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).‏ [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Jospeh Chetreet, ‘Jewish Theatre, A Chapter in the Convoluted Story of Moroccan Jews’ Modernization’, in: Haim Sa’adon (ed.), *Jewish Communities of the Orient in the 19th and 20th Centuries: Morocco* (Jerusalem: Yad Ben Zvi Publishers, 2004), pp. 213-226. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Interview with Ma’ayan, 7.6.2016 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Anonymous, ‘Moroccan Language Theatre Troupe’, *Ma’ariv*, 05.11.1963, p. 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Carrie Lane, *A Company of One: Insecurity, Independence, and the New World of White-Collar Unemployment* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011); [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Wendy Brown, 'Neo-liberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy', *Theory and Event,* 7.1 (2003). doi:10.1353/tae.2003.0020. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Will Kymlicka, 'Neoliberal Multiculturalism?' in *Social Resilience in the Neo-Liberal Era*, ed. by Peter Hall and Michele Lamont (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 99-126. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Lara D. Nielsen, 'Introduction', in *Neoliberalism and Global Theatres Performance Permutations*, ed. by Lara D. Nielsen and Patricia Ybarra (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 1-21. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. http://mcs.gov.il/Culture/activities/Theatre/Pages/modelim.aspx [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Dan Urian, *The Ethnic Problem in Israeli Theatre* (Tel-Aviv: The Open University of Israel, 2004) [in Hebrew],243-250. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Yossi Yonah and Naphtaly Shem-Tov, 'The Whole World Onstage: National Theatre in Multi-Identities Society' in *Public Policy and Multiculturalism*, ed. by Bashir, Guy Ben-Porat and Yossi Yonah (Jerusalem: Van Leer Institute, 2016), 193-224 [in Hebrew]. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Kymlicka, 'Neoliberal Multiculturalism?', 116 [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Shenhav, *The Arab Jews*, 141-143. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Shenhav, *The Arab Jews*, 142. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 145-169. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Fred Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia* (New York: The Free Press, 1979); Linda Hutcheon, 'Irony, Nostalgia and the Postmodern' in *Methods for the Study of Literature as Cultural Memory,* ed. by Raymond Vervliet and Annemarie Estor (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), 189-207; Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Book, 2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Yochai Oppenheimer, *Diasporic Mizrahi Poetry in Israel* (Tel-Aviv: Resling), 44. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Varda Horwitz, ‘Inside I’m Sad And Outside I’m Funny’, *Shavu’on La’isha*, 16.02.2004 [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Aharon Maman, ‘Jewish Mougrabhi Identity from David Bouskilah to Asher Cohen – Rebirth or Swan Song?’, in Yossef Touvi and Dennis Courzon (eds.), *Studies of East and West: Languages, Literatures and Historical Chapters Volume 1* (Haifa and Jerusalem: Haifa University Press and Carmel, 2011), 112, 109-134. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Semiotics of Theatre* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1992), 200-201. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Aharon Maman, ‘Jewish Mougrabhi Identity’, 112. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Ibid., 119. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. A subsidized, Yiddish-language (the language of Eastern European Jews) public theatre. Its repertoire comprises popular and entertainment shows. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Shai Bar Ya’akov, ‘Waiting for the Emissary: Ourika’, *Yedioth Ahronot*, 03.12.2003 [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Tim Prentki, and Jan Selman, *Popular Theatre in Political Culture* (Bristol: Intellect, 2000). [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Joel Schechter, 'Back to the Popular Source: Introduction to Part I', in *Sourcebook: Popular Theatre*, ed. by Joel Schechter(London and New York: Routldge, 2003), 3-11. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Jason Prince, *Modern Popular Theatre*, London and New York: Palgrave and Macmillan, 2016, 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Ibid., 13-16. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Peter Brook, *The Empty Space: A Book about the Theatre: Deadly, Holy, Rough, Immediate* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968), 81.‏ [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Ibid., 83-84. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Interview with Cohen, 24.09.2016 [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Orna Kadosh, ‘Soul Play’, *Ma’ariv*, 18.01.2002 [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Interview with Elimeleh, 21.09.2016 [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Erez Ruimi, *The Cultural Genie* (unpublished, courtesy of the author) [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Turner, Victor. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (New York: Transaction Publishers, 1995), 94-130.‏ [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Elija Anderson, 'The White Space', *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity*, 1.1 (2015), 10-21. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Cofman-Simhon, 'African Tongues', 54-55. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. During the run of Shmuel Hasfari’s *The King*, which presented the life of famous Yemenite-descendant Israeli singer Zohar Argov, Mizrahi youngsters called at the stage, sand the hits and even kissed and tore down the show poster. In this instance, too, I have claimed that the show’s style invited reaction from a young crowd that must be cognizant of the ‘fourth wall’ convention, as opposed to stunned theatre critics, who eschewed this behavior in disgust, signifying it as uncultured. Naphtaly Shem-Tov, 'Audience gestures and horizon of expectations in Israeli theatre', *Israel Affairs*, 23.1(2017), 167-181. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Dennis Kennedy, *The Spectator and the Spectacle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 1-25. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)