**Contextualizing an Iraqi-Jewish Autobiographical Performance in Israel**

In the 1970s, at the height of the second wave of feminism, which declared “the personal is political,” feminine autobiographical performance arose in the West to model a feminist-political statement. From the 1980s to the 1990s, the autobiographical performance trickled down to other marginalized groups in the West—Blacks, Hispanics, LGBT, and others—as a political strategy, by means of which dominant identities were challenged and, in contrast, alternative identities were modelled and established.[[1]](#footnote-1) The Mizrahi (Middle-Eastern Jews) autobiographical performance in Israel is part of this global phenomenon. As part of a marginalized group, Mizrahi artists utilize autobiographical material to shape an ethnic identity and narrative, empower their group, and oppose mainstream stereotyping and cultural and social oppression.

In this article, I will focus on *One Way Ticket* (1991), an autobiographical performancewritten and directed by Yossi Alfi and performed by renowned Israeli actor, Ariyeh Elias, an Iraqi-born Jew. The performance presents, through Elias’s life story, the world of the Iraqi Jew prior to the Iraqi-Jewish community’s massive immigration to Israel in the 1950s, and actualizes, on the stage, a chapter in the history of Mizrahi Jews whose ideology Zionism attempted to erase.

In terms of the “theatrical event” model, the autobiographical performance as a theatrical form, is categorized as “contextual theatricality.” This includes aesthetic and theatrical conventions, such as genre, style, production process, etc., which artistically contextualize the performance and enable its aesthetic decoding. However, given that it involves the actor’s personal materials, which are embedded in social and political contexts, the autobiographical performance is a theatrical form that is also closely associated with the element of cultural contexts in the model. Likewise, the autobiographical performance constructs the element of “theatrical playing”—the actor-audience relationship. The autobiographical performance is oriented toward an acting mode that positions the actor’s self at the forefront, rather than a fictional character that is definitively different from the actor. This acting mode generates a different viewing experience, one that produces a more intimate link between the actor and the viewer, who recognizes that there is a close connection between what is presented and the actor’s personal life (even if the viewer is aware that the performance is based on material that has been adapted, edited, and reconstructed).

The purpose of this article is to demonstrate how the autobiographical performance constructs the cultural context through theatrical playing. Given that the theatrical event invariably takes place in the present, the personal and historical events presented in its cultural context are embodied in the event’s theatrical playing, and give rise to an experience that bridges between locations and historical periods . In *One Way Ticket*, this linkage between cultural context and theatrical playing enables the tangible manifestation of the there-and-then in Iraq within Israel’s here-and-now.

**Cultural Context: Mizrahi Identity**

Israeli hegemony is, for the most part, made up of Ashkenazi Jews—Jews of

 European origin—who, for the most part, are secular and members of the middle class. The Zionist ideology, which was led by this hegemony, forced the Mizrahi Jews to conform to the Sabra role model of the “new Jew,” styled according to Western-Caucasian criteria. The Mizrahi Jews were compelled to join the “Zionist melting-pot,” that is, to detach themselves from the Jewish traditions they brought with them from their origin countries and eliminate every element of Arab culture and language in their constructed identity. The abandonment of Judeo-Arabic elements in their identity accommodated the orientalist Zionist ideology, which viewed Mizrahi culture as inferior and primitive due to a prolonged history in the Arab and Muslim world, in addition to the conception of Arab culture as part of an enemy culture.[[2]](#footnote-2) Therefore, the Mizrahim were forced to shed this Arabness, and modify their language, accents, institutions, customs, religious beliefs, and aesthetic tastes in order to become “Israelis.”[[3]](#footnote-3) In critical terms, this process is referred to as Ashkenazification: the transformation into a new Jew/Israeli means becoming an Ashkenazi who meets Western standards.[[4]](#footnote-4) This same orientalist approach of the Israeli hegemony was at the basis of the social-economic policy which involved the relocation of Mizrahim in peripheral regions lacking sufficient employment, education, cultural institutions, and health services. Taken together, these factors rendered the majority of Mizrahim dependent on the welfare system, thereby perpetuating their inferior social position throughout the history of the state of Israel.[[5]](#footnote-5) These processes of cultural erasure or detachment, on the one hand, and social-economic discrimination, on the other, produced negative stereotypes of Mizrahi Jews in Israeli culture.[[6]](#footnote-6) As a result, these underpinnings of the Zionist ideological apparatus not only instigated feelings of shame, denial, and concealment in young Mizrahi Jews, but also brought about a tendency toward resistance and protest.[[7]](#footnote-7)

**Contextual Theatricality: Autobiographical Performance**

The autobiographical performance challenges Eric Bentley’s classic formulation of “A impersonates B while C looks on” because, *prima facie*, the performer on stage is impersonating himself, recounting and enacting his own life experiences.[[8]](#footnote-8) While this conception of autobiographical performance is based on the assumption that the theatrical performer is indeed capable of presenting a stable and coherent “authentic” rendition of his or her extant “self,” at the same time, it is a literary and theatrical genre. As such, its construction and stylization of memories are dictated by its aesthetic, political, therapeutic, and even commercial ends, and therefore involves fictional additions and modifications. As a construction and modelling of the “self,” the autobiographical performance is inherently inauthentic. The performance takes precedence over and constitutes the performer’s “self” and does not present his or her real-life “self.

Drawing on Derrida’s term *différance*, Philip Auslander deconstructs the stable “self” at the basis of conventional acting methods:

Theorists as diverse as Stanislavsky, Brecht, and Grotowski all implicitly designate the actor’s self as the *logos* of performance; all assume that the actor’s self precedes and grounds her performance and that it is the presence of this self in performance that provides the audience with access to human truths […] An examination of acting theory through the lens of deconstruction reveals that the self is not an autonomous foundation for acting, but is produced by the performance it supposedly grounds.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Auslander goes on to explain how the assessment and understanding of acting emanate from Derrida’s *différance*, rather than from a stable and extant entity:

We arrive at our perception of a performance by implicitly comparing it with other interpretations of the same role (or with the way we feel the role should be played), or with our recollection of the same actor in other roles, or with our knowledge of the stylistic school to which the actor belongs, the actor’s private life, etc. If our perception of the actor’s work derives from this play of differences, how can we claim to be able to read the presence of the actor’s self back through that performance?[[10]](#footnote-10)

Likewise, Auslander claims that even the Brechtian actor, who deliberately differentiates his or herself from the character they signify, and who is only supposedly his or herself on stage, is merely playing a “stage persona.”[[11]](#footnote-11) Following in the footsteps of this assumption, in his discussion of the autobiographical performance, Marvin Carlson argues that there is perforce a difference between the “I” who lived an experience and the “I” that narrates it to an audience.[[12]](#footnote-12) The character embodied by the actor, even if they supposedly identify it with their own self, is shaped, like any other fictional character, by way of imitation and representation. There is no overlap between the performer’s physically present “I” and the past “I” of the “then and there” in the autobiographical experience. Carlson argues that the latter is a constructed “stage persona” of the performer rather than a direct and authentic expression of his or her selfhood. The performer rehearses, shapes, and constructs their stage persona in the same way as when working on any other character.

Thus, the prevailing assumption is that autobiography is not a disclosing and realization of the “self,” but rather it stylizes, constructs, and even invents a “self” for the performance’s actor.[[13]](#footnote-13) In contrast, Heddon disputes the tendency to mark the autobiographical as nothing but fiction, and that despite the performance being constructed, mediated, and inauthentic, he claims:

[...] the fact that the performer is in this space with me might well have an impact on my reception of his/her autobiographical stories. That relationship between performer and spectator does set this mediation of experience apart from other modes. Though it is no less mediated, its different form of mediation enables a potentially different impact that can be capitalized upon strategically.[[14]](#footnote-14)

When the spectator is aware that the performance is based upon the performer’s life experiences, the performance’s political and social charge increases and transforms the personal stage narrative into a metonymy for the silenced and marginalized social narrative. Hence, the mediation and construction of the autobiographical performance from personal materials is indeed inauthentic, however it does not involve the same mediation and construction as fictional narrative.

Carol Martin explains why the “reality effect” is manifested in what she calls “Theatre of the Real”—performances based on real events, such as documentary and community-based theatre, and even autobiographical performance.[[15]](#footnote-15) She claims that despite this construction and blurring of boundaries between the real and the fictional, “factual” elements, such as history books, interviews, testimonies, family photographs, documentary videos, and archival and internet sources, serve, for the audience, as “evidence” of the “authenticity” of the on-stage experiences and events.[[16]](#footnote-16) In other words, there are signifiers on the stage that operate as “evidence” for the audience, despite their not being factual. Hence, such pieces of “evidence” mediate the source narrative differently, yet effectively on stage.

**Theatrical Playing: How to Act “Yourself”**

To examine the manner in which the stage persona is enacted in the context of the portrayal of Mizrahi identity in the autobiographical performance, I will employ the three modes of acting posited by Bert States:[[17]](#footnote-17)

* The self-expressive mode: the performer calls attention to their own virtuosity, charisma, attractive and exciting presence, and mastery of nuance. Likewise, their physical abilities, performance aptitude in song and dance, and so forth, are demonstrated. The audience’s attention is directed more to the performer and less to the character or role he or she is playing on the stage. In States’s words: “In the self-expressive mode, the actor *seems* to be performing on his own behalf. He says, in effect, *‘See what I can do.’*”[[18]](#footnote-18)
* The collaborative mode: the performer addresses the audience directly and transforms them from passive observers (voyeur) to collaborators in the event. “[T]heatre says to the spectator, ‘Why should we pretend that all this is an illusion. We are in this together. We are doing this for you.’”[[19]](#footnote-19) The performer draws the audience in and sometimes even gives them a role in the fictional world in an attempt to turn transform this world into a community. The performer deliberately blurs the boundaries between their self and the spectator. While this blurring of boundaries may generate a sense of intimacy, it at the same time, is liable to provoke thought, on the part of the spectator, regarding the mechanisms of representation itself and the medium of theatre.
* The representational mode: the performer’s emphasis is on a fictional character, while the actor “disappears,” as it were, into the character, and the audience’s attention is focused mostly upon it. The stage illusion becomes the focal point of observation, and the audience’s experience is mainly affected by this illusion.

States emphasizes that these three modes of acting exist in the same performance to different degrees and on different levels of emphasis, so that the audience may be simultaneously impressed by the actor’s talent and expressiveness, become complicit in the actor’s direct address, and be moved by the fictional character’s actions on the stage. In the Mizrahi autobiographical performance, the stage persona mainly engages in the expressive mode given that the actor foregrounds his or herself by way of their bodily presence, skills and life experiences rather than a fictional world far and removed from them. The collaborative mode is highly prevalent in the Mizrahi autobiographical performance as well, given the actor’s direct appeal to the audience to recount and represent his or her life experiences, thereby rendering them collaborators. The stage persona enables a display of Mizrahi identity in the sense of “Look at me, this is my life, these are my memories and culture, and these are the conflicts that shaped me.” This predominant use of the expressive and collaborative modes highlights the notion that performed autobiography is no other than a metonymy for the collective narrative of many Mizrahi Jews, some of whom may be present in the audience. In this manner, an assertive Mizrahi identity is shaped, which neither succumbs to the “backward” Mizrahi stereotype, nor erased in favor of Ashkenazification by falling in line with the Zionist melting pot ideology that opposes ethnic identification.

**The Artists**

*One Way Ticket* (1991), by Yossi Alfi, is based on autobiographical events in the life of actor Ariyeh Elias, playwright Alfi’s family memories, and the collective memories of Iraqi Jews. Alfi was born in Iraq (1945) and immigrated to Israel at a young age. He studied acting in London and in the 1970s was one of the leading directors in community-based theatre, which became an important protest site for Mizrahim on the Israeli stage. Since the 1990s, Alfi has served as director of the International Storytelling Festival held annually in Israel in which panels are frequently dedicated to the history of the Mizrahim. Ariyeh Albert Elias (1921-2015) was born in Iraq, studied acting at the Academy of Fine Arts in Baghdad and performed world classics on the Iraqi stage. When he immigrated to Israel, Elias attempted to join the Hebrew theatre, but the repertoire theatres were not eager to hire him, defending their decision with the racist claim that his Middle-Eastern accent was not suitable for the Israeli ear. Interestingly, quite a few actors in Israeli theatre at the time, most of whom had immigrated from Eastern Europe, spoke with heavy accents. Elias became famous mainly for his work in film and commercial theatre comedies, and throughout his 60-year career, he acted in only six productions in the Israeli repertoire theatre. His dream was to play the part of Shylock in Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice* on an Israeli stage, however this never materialized. In the 1960s, Elias instructed and directed Palestinian (Israeli citizens) amateur theatre groups, and in the 1980s worked with prisoners on plays in which they performed. Although audiences that saw *One Way Ticket* were very familiar with Elias from his comic roles in film and television, they were unaware of his life story and of the Iraqi theatre scene in which he had developed his talents before immigrating to Israel.

Considering that the performance included texts and liturgical poems familiar to Iraqi Jews, and intertwined personal materials with historical events in Iraq’s Jewish community, it drew the audience into the here-and-now of the theatrical event and by means of the historical context interwove theatrical playing and cultural contexts.

**The Storyteller and Documentary Photography**

The play is written as a maqāmah, an Arabic form of rhymed prose, which germinated in the common tradition of Jews and Muslims in medieval Spain. Elias plays the storyteller, named Albert (his original name), who presents to the audience the life of the Jewish community in Baghdad from the 1920s up to the immigration to Israel in the 1950s. Beside him are two musicians: Albert Elias (flute) and Meir Levy (darabouka). They accompany the narrative with Arabic music and Iraqi-Jewish liturgical poems of the period. The stage design simulates a typical Baghdad street. Right stage are café stools and a nargila (waterpipe), while on left stage is a wide domed opening through which the musicians are seen. This set constructs a place and atmosphere that invites the audience to participate as guests in a café engaged in listening to a story. The storyteller’s collaborative mode is most dominant when the separation between the stage and theater hall dissolves.

At center stage is a domed arch, and upstage is a screen on which a variety of photographs are projected: ordinary people, unique characters, and well-known people in the community, as well as photographs of sites, such as the Euphrates and Tigris, synagogues, and marketplaces, all of which correspond with Elias’s narration. The photographs affect the audience on two primary levels: 1. They communicate information about Iraqi Jewry’s culture and history. 2. They evoke emotions of pleasurable nostalgic remembrance, and at the same time, painful and traumatic memories. Roland Barthes coined terms for this double effect: “studium” is the decoding of the photograph in terms of cultural and political codes. Studium occurs mainly by the mediation of cultural knowledge and is dependent on the viewer’s competence. The “punctum” is a different point of view with a radical-emotional dimension. The photographs in *One Way Ticket* function on both levels. As studium, they are a type of historical knowledge that validates what the narrator is conveying on stage. They complement his words and concretize these verbal descriptions. His words are not only perceived as a folk story, which tends toward the exaggerated and fictional, but also function to authorize the story. At the same time, at least for Jewish-Iraqi viewers who remember the photographed places and events, observing them functions as a punctum. The photo “pricks and bruises,” it evokes strong feelings of longing, love, excitement, and traumatic pain in the viewer given their uprooting from the familiar childhood landscape. This is the memory screen upon which pictures from the playwright’s and actor’s family albums serve as “evidence,” in Carol Martin’s terms, which in turn, renders the community’s life present, providing both private and collective narratives with a specific visage and tangible space.

**Tension Between Narratives: Zionist versus Jewish-Iraqi**

The performance is constructed according to the Zionist meta-narrative, “from holocaust to rebirth,” in other words, it is a narrative pattern that expresses Jewish history as a linear continuance, beginning with traumatic anti-Semitic events, which peaked during the Holocaust, and as a result, the consolidation of the Jewish-national consciousness, through sovereignty and the establishment of the state of Israel. The play’s plot is partially constructed on a similar axis. At the beginning of the performance, the presentation of the Jewish way of life is underlined with humor and nostalgia, including focus on Elias’s private life as a child, teenager, and student of acting. However, this nostalgic aura dissipates when the performance turns to deal with the Farhud—a violent pogrom carried out by Muslims against the Jews during the holiday of Shavuot in June 1941, which was encouraged by the Nazi regime, and in which over one hundred Jews were killed and Jewish property looted and destroyed. The last part of the performance deals with the establishment of the Zionist underground following the Farhud and the immigration to Israel.

Elias’s collaborative acting mode as a storyteller addressing the audience, is abundant in humanity, humor, and nostalgia, and he affectionally unfolds the rich cultural past of Iraqi Jews, which was inconsistent with the Zionist meta-narrative. This meta-narrative viewed the diasporic past as dark and malevolent. The performance also includes theatrical elements drawn from Arab culture as well as influences of European colonialism, both of which undermine the performance’s Zionist narrative. Arab components, such as music and costume, emphasize the extent to which Arab culture was interwoven in the Jewish-Iraqi identity, while the Western components underscore the modernization processes this community underwent prior to their immigration to Israel, processes which stood in contrast to the orientalist stereotype of the Zionist discourse. Thus, the performance contains an inner tension between its underlying Zionist narrative and the manner of acting and additional theatrical elements that undermine this narrative. To explain the complexity and tension in the performance, I employ two terms: Shenhav’s community of memory and Rokem’s performing history.

Israeli sociologist Yehuda Shenhav, who studied Iraqi Jews and the complex interplay between ethnicity, religion, and nation, developed the concept “community of memory.” This concept emphasizes that resistance to the meta-narrative was not homogenous, and that within the community itself, different narratives, which challenge the official national narrative, emerged spontaneously:

The term “community” presupposes memory that is embodied in living groups and, as such, is constantly developing, being produced, and challenged, and is amenable to a continuous dialectic of remembering and forgetting. Memory in community is nourished by a variety of sources, some blurred, which are interconnected, comprehensive or tenuous, private or symbolic. Memory in communities of memory reacts to all forms of transmission, to all the screens on which it appears, to censorship or to implications. This is a convenient arena for rendering memory controversial, for the challenge and contestation of its component parts and its sources. The difference between communities and official memory is that within the former, memory can be updated and exist within history.[[20]](#footnote-20)

Freddie Rokem[[21]](#footnote-21) proposed the term “performing history” whose double meaning—depiction of past events and live performance—are represented by actors, in the “here and now.” Consequently, the theatrical performance, as opposed to a written history text, validates history by way of the viewing experience. The “present-ness” of the theatrical event is confronted with represented history, while exposing analogies between the two, both of similarity and difference. Therefore, according to Rokem, performing history quite often touches upon traumatic experiences and arouses awareness among the audience to alternative “lost” histories, to what cannot return. In this sense, performing history is therapeutic because it is part of a process of grieving for what is lost, what cannot be regained. However, at the same time, it is political given that it is reminiscent of that which the hegemonic discourse attempts to disremember and exclude from the collective memory, or illuminates the lost history in a new and different light.

Rokem argues that performing history is part of the political and social process of constructing collective identities, such as those of national and ethnic groups. Given that these identities stem from the past, forms of writing and presenting history are subject to dispute. Thus, performing history may compete with the hegemonic narrative or conversely, strengthen and ratify it. In any case, the unique nature of theatre, which presents and enacts the event through the body and matter, not only through words, enables a viewing experience and understanding, as well as political awareness and communal therapy, in a manner that is different and far more powerful than written history.

*One Way Ticket* is a theatrical event of “performing history,” which simultaneously butresses and undermines the Zionist meta-narrative, and by means of the collaborative acting mode, the viewers consolidate into a community of memory, in which there is a multiplicity of voices and testimonies that enable dynamic memory. The performance presents a split memory: on the one hand, identification with the Zionist narrative, and on the other hand, an Iraqi-Jewish identity of which Arabness is part. Support for this claim arises from the words of director Yossi Alfi, who sees himself as a “Zionist against his own will” and at the same time as an “Arab-Jew,” despite the tension involved in these two definitions of identity.

Throughout the entire performance, Elias appears on the stage dressed in a Tuxedo, while in certain scenes, he adds an accessory to either accommodate a simulated location—a tallit in the synagogue—or to mark a character, such as the tarbush and cloak indicating King Faizal. In this performance the choice of tuxedo as costume is surprising. Elias explains that he and others emigrated from Iraq wearing respectable suits in anticipation of “greeting” the new land. However, the tuxedo also becomes an antithesis to the stereotyped signifier of “Iraqi pajamas,” which in time became a ridiculing image denoting Iraqi immigrants as idlers and slackers. There is a deliberate hybrid between the tuxedo as Western attire, and its proximity to the traditional costumes of the gabaliyas and tarbushes worn by the musicians on stage. These, and other visual markers, present life in Iraq as an amalgamation and hybridization between Arab and Jewish traditions and the European colonialist influence, a representation that undermines the dichotomic-Israeli perception of Western, modern Israeliness as opposed to the traditional and faltering Eastern tradition.

The creation of a community of memory is partially achieved by way of the collaborative acting mode, which in turn, renders the audience part of the Jewish-Iraqi way of life. In the “café” and “circumcision” scenes, a celebration evolves both on stage and among the audience. Elias says:

The café was where the men met/they sat there together—the Christian, the Muslim, the Hebrew/Here the parliament of the folk were welcome/authors and poets and all the who’s who.

Elias depicts cultural tolerance, an exchanging of ideas, and a good social atmosphere.

Next, the musicians in the café play a famous Iraqi song—“Hadri el Chai” (Steep the Tea) originally sung by Jewish-Iraqi singer Salim (Pasha) Morad. Elias comes on stage holding a tray of glasses filled with Iraqi tea and offers them to members of the audience who are singing and clapping. In a similar mode, when Elias performs the circumcision ceremony, celebratory liturgical poems in Hebrew and Arabic are played, as the audience joins in and Elias, once again, goes down into the audience offering them traditional Iraqi sweets. Elias transforms viewers in Israel’s here-and-now, first into café dwellers and later into guests at a circumcision ceremony in the then-and-there of Iraq, thereby constructing them as part of the community of memory formed on the stage. The food and music render this nostalgic experience tangible and sensory, however more than it elicits a fond remembrance of an ideal past, it mainly channels a common social-cultural memory that subverts the Zionist narrative, which views this “diasporic” tradition superfluous and erasable.

The colonialist cultural influence is expressed through attire and first names (such as, Georgia, Albert, and Bobby—for the family dog) within the contexts of culture and academic education. Elias tells of his desire to be an actor from a young age and his studies at the Academy for Fine Arts while fully aware of the stereotypical Israeli perception:

And we meet again in the Academy of the Arts in Baghdad/does this **strike a grating chord**?Like a sharp note?/**Academy of the Arts in Baghdad?!**/ We were many Muslim and Jewish young men/[...] and the teachers did everything to appear “English”/They went out of their way to look like Londoners, /We worked on plays ranging from the Western classics to the local melodrama.

Elias’s life path in Iraq as a young actor, proficient in the culture of Arab and European theatre, is clearly an autobiographical fact in the performance, however, it may be perceived by the Israeli viewer as fictional, inauthentic, and even extremely irritating given the orientalist perception toward Middle Eastern Jews. Therefore, Elias calls attention to the prejudice and deconstructs it.

Next, the theatrical experience is presented ambivalently as pluralistic and containing, but also as heralding the horrific Farhud. In 1941, Elias was chosen to play the lead role in Christopher Marlow’s *Faustus* (1620) in which he performed Faustus’s monologue—on the brink of his descent to hell—in Arabic, while enveloped in an glow of red, threatening light. Looking back, he summarizes the experience:

Faust, the product of Western thought/on stage in Baghdad in Arabic/and the renowned director holding the text in English/I speak in Arabic and the assistant director hears German/the gates of hell open, and smoke rises/and Faust wrapped in his cloak, sells his soul to the devil.

This “hell” turns out to be a foreshadowing of the next part of the performance, which deals with the Farhud—the pogrom carried out against the Iraqi Jews led by anti-British Iraqi nationalists with the support and encouragement of Nazi Germany. In the Farhud scene, Elias describes the looting and killing of Iraqi Jews by the mob, then concludes by quoting Shylock’s famous monologue:

Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions […] If you prick us, do we not bleed?

[…] if you poison us, do we not die? and if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?[[22]](#footnote-22)

The answers to Shylock’s questions, as it were, become evident in the next scene which deals with the Iraqi Zionist underground’s activities and the immigration to Israel. The performance effectively communicates the notion that the Farhud spawned the need for self-defense, the consolidation of an autonomous national identity, and the desire to immigrate to Israel and join the Zionist movement. However, as Reuven Snir, a scholar of Arab literature and theatre, has shown, there were tensions and complexities between the cultural partnership of Muslims and Jews and the isolationalist Muslim-Iraqi nationalism.

During the first half of the twentieth century, the Jews of Iraq saw themselves as part of the consolidating Iraqi nation. This national ideal was epitomized in terms of the notion that “Religion is for God, and the Fatherland is for everyone,” that is, for each group its religious faith, while Iraqi identity is shared by all. Although some did not see a contradiction between Arabic nationalism and Zionism—as a result of an agreement signed in 1919 by King Feisal and Chaim Weitzman (the Zionist representative), whose principle objective was to attain a compromise between the Arabs’ and Zionists’ national aspirations following World War I–this Jewish-Arab identity did not last long. In light of the immigration to Israel, it was wedged between two competing meta-narratives: Zionism and Arab nationalism. According to Snir, between these two rival national movements there was a rare commonality of interest, which produced a definitive identity binary in terms of which a Jew could not be an Arab and vice-versa. *One Way Ticket* challenges this binarism, shifting between multiple identities: Jewish, Arab, and colonialist, while creating an experience of a community of memory, which does not comply with any one particular narrative.

The performance seems to end on a heroic and optimistic note when the plane lands in Israel to the sounds of the Zionist march “Seu Tziona Nes VaDegel” (Carry to Zion a Standard and Flag). In line with the Zionist meta-narrative, the ending heralds the ostensible detachment of the Jew from the Arab world. Elias concludes the performance with a description of disembarking the plane after landing in Israel as imbued with a Zionist pathos, which combines the immigrants’ exhilaration upon arriving in the holy land and the ancient Jewish prayer “Shema Israel” (Hear O Israel):

In the vast darkness, crying, and reciting songs of praise/the silenced engines, the door opens, outside – the land of Israel/Shema Israel, Shema Israel/we have arrived in the land of Israel/the entire family/each and every one/and we are ten/parents-two/and grandmother/God our Lord, God is One” (Alfi, 1994, 66-67).

However, coinciding with Elias’s words and the Zionist march music, photographs of the tents to which the Iraqi Jews were sent upon their arrival, are projected on the screen. Although referred to as *ma-abarot* (literally, transition camps), the immigrants lived there for several years, at first in tents and later in wooden shacks. The physical conditions were extremely difficult, and there was high unemployment and poverty. Food was distributed by way of state-issued rations coupons in accordance with the number and ages of family members. Hygiene was inferior and the dense living conditions caused a rise in infection and disease, such as polio. The level of education was low and many youths went to work instead of spending time at school. The photographs of the tents evokes mixed feelings, especially among viewers who had lived in these camps. In Barthes’s terms, these photos function as punctum, they “prick” and arouse traumatic pain. The images call to mind the many hardships of immigration, racism, and the orientalist orientation of state institutions. According to Batya Shimoni, in Hebrew literature, the image of the *ma’abara* was expropriated from its historical meaning and became a metaphor for the experience of the repression and cultural and social marginalization of the Mizrahim. Thus, the simultaneity of the photos of the tents and the Zionist march music makes for an ironic ending, which undermines the Zionist narrative and marks the ambivalence between Jew and Arab, East and West, characteristic of the entire performance.

**Conclusion**

Elias’s character shifts on stage between Albert, the personal, his “self,” and the storyteller, a representative and historian of the community who reveals an unknown chapter in history. The collaborative acting mode connects between the theatrical autobiographical and communal material as a performing history and the viewers in the audience thereby creating a community. In terms of the “theatrical playing” model (i.e. collaborative acting) together with contextual theatricality (i.e., the genres: autobiographical performance and performing history), cultural contexts (i.e. memory community) are constructed and formed. However, at the same time, the viewers’ communal memory enables the decoding of the performance’s autobiographical and historical materials, and they respond to the storyteller’s invitation which stems from his collaborative acting. Thus, what one witnesses here is a reciprocal circular process of inspiration, formation, and construction between the context and theatrical text, which lack a clear distinction or boundary between them, and which together constitute the theatrical event.

1. See the historical development of autobiographical performance in the West: Deidre Heddon, *Autobiography and Performance* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) 20-52. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ella Shohat, “The Invention of Judeo-Arabic,” *Interventions*, 19, no.2 (2017): 153-200. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Yehuda Shenhav. *The Arab-Jews: A Postcolonial Reading of Nationalism, Religion and Ethnicity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Orna Sasson-Levy and Avi Shoshana, “‘Passing’ as (Non) Ethnic: The Israeli Version of Acting White,” *Sociological Inquiry* 83 no. 3 (2013): 448-472. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ella Shohat, “Sephardim in Israel: Zionism form the Standpoint of its Jewish Victims,” *Social Text* 19/20 (1988): 1-35. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See for example: Ella Shohat, *Israeli Cinema: East/West and the Politics of Representation* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989). Dan Urian, *The Ethnic Problem in Israeli Theatre* (Tel Aviv: The Open University of Israel, 2004) [in Hebrew]. Shulamith Lev-Aladgem, *Theatre in Co-Communities: Articulating Power* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
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