**Performing the Iraqi-Jewish History on the Israeli Stage**

With the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 and throughout the 1950s, many Jewish communities from the Middle East and North Africa, including Iraqi Jews, immigrated to the new homeland. The legacy and history of these communities were marginalized by the Zionist meta-narrative in terms of which, through an orientalist perspective, they were viewed as primitive and insignificant. Consequently, representations and expressions of these Jewish cultures within the Israeli educational system and cultural domain were scarce. In 2016, following a prolonged struggle, the Biton Committee for the Empowerment of the Legacy of Sephardic and Mizrahi Jewry in the Educational System was formed. Led by Algerian born poet, Erez Biton, the committee stressed the urgent need to revise the curricula to include the hitherto conspicuously and vexingly absent Middle Eastern Jewish narrative, stating in its recommendation that “A student can complete their studies, from first grade to matriculation exams, without learning a single Mizrahi literary work; the situation is the same in history and all other subjects” (ibid, 5). As part of this struggle against the hegemonic Zionist erasure of the Mizrahi narrative, theater artists of Middle Eastern origin worked to reconstruct and present this historical narrative on the Israeli stage. These artists often dealt with the pre-state reality in the Middle East and with immigration to Israel. In this paper, I will focus on the historical narrative of Iraqi Jews by way of a comparison between two performances that deal with this community in the 1940s and its attitude toward Israel and Zionism: *Ghosts in the Cellar* (1983) by Iraqi-born playwright and author Sami Michael, and *The Father’s Daughters* (2015) by Gilit Itzhaki, an Israeli-born playwright of Iraqi-Jewish descent. The differences between Michael, who experienced the historical events of which he writes, and Itzhaki, who is familiar with them by way of her family’s recollections and history books, are evident in the performances and in the political attitudes that arise in them toward Zionism, the Arab world, and the highly conflictual and evasive communal memory of Iraqi Jews in Israel.

**Performing History**

Introduced by Hayden White (1973), the narrative approach in history studies demonstrated that every historical text is based on narrative organization and patterns, and therefore, that the same event can be told in different ways. History does not reveal and discover the past, but rather constructs and invents stories based on an integration of archival materials and aesthetic rhetorical conventions. Following White, Freddie Rokem (2000, 1–25) proposed the term “performing history” whose double meanings—depiction of past events and live performance—are represented by actors, in the “here and now.” Consequently, the theatrical performance validates history by way of the viewing experience, as opposed to a written history text. 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 amongst 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 because it is reminiscent of that which the hegemonic discourse attempts to disremember and exclude from the collective memory, or illuminates it in a new and different light.

Rotem argues that performing history is part of the political and social process of constructing collective identities, such as national and ethnical. 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 theater, 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.

Performing history is positioned within a broader discussion that deals with two important concepts: counter memory and community of memory. Cultural studies scholar, Yael Zerubavel (1995, 3–12) has shown how Zionism constructed a national collective memory through various means, including literature and culture. These, in turn, consolidated the official Zionist narrative of the state of Israel—from Holocaust to rebirth. Zerubavel calls this a “master commemorative narrative,” which constructs the national identity while marginalizing, disremembering, and subjugating other memories, or perhaps even appropriating them into the national narrative. On the other hand, as Zerubavel argues, counter memory is the creation of a historical narrative that rewrites and challenges the meta-narrative, while enabling a place for and recognition of groups whose history is not aligned with the national narrative. Israeli sociologist Yehuda Shenhav, who studied Iraqi Jews and the complexity between ethnicity, religion, and nation, develops this idea further with the concept “community of memory.” This concept underscores that the resistance to the meta-narrative is not homogenous, and that within the community itself different narratives, which challenge the official national narrative, emerge 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 (Shenhav, 2006, 142).

Following Rokem, Zerubavel, and Shenhav, theater scholar Shulamith Lev-Aladgem points to how community theater of Middle Eastern Jews in Israel is a theatrical practice for the formulation of an alternative historical narrative:

As such, community theatre is that form of performing history that has the potential to produce the counter-memory of the powerless, which contributes to the consolidation of that group into a significant community, a community of memory (Lev-Aladgem, 2006, 273).

In my opinion, this argument is valid as well for performing history amongst professional theater artists who construct a counter Jewish Middle Eastern narrative to the meta-narrative, which is consolidated in the theatrical event as part of a community of memory.

The performing history of the Iraqi-Jewish narrative is part of a comprehensive cultural effort to call attention to a blind spot, to rectify it, and to re-render present important chapters in the history of Middle Eastern Jews on the stage. As noted, this paper draws comparisons between two plays: *Ghosts in the Cellar* and *The Father’s Daughters*. Each play presents the historical narrative of Iraqi Jews in the 1940s, from the pogrom (Farhud) carried out against them by Muslims, which was encouraged by the Nazi regime, to their immigration to Israel in the early 1950s. The performing history in each play is presented from a different point of view: while *Ghosts in the Cellar* was written by Sami Michael, a well-known author born in Baghdad in 1926 who experienced the events presented in the play, *The Father’s Daughters* was written by Itzhaki, an Israeli born to Jewish Iraqi parents whose knowledge of the historical events stems solely from family memories and history books. These two vantage points form two different and even conflicting texts in terms of their ideological attitudes toward Israel and Zionism, and toward the Arab world and culture. However, despite the differences between these texts, they both introduce and render present an important chapter in the history of Iraqi Jews—the Farhud—and the significances and implications this severe crisis carried for these Jews. On the one hand, both plays refute the hegemonic-Zionist erasure, and on the other hand, they both demonstrate the differences and complexities of the community of memory of Iraqi Jews in Israel.

**The Farhud on the Israeli Stage**

The Farhud (literally, pillaging and plunder), a program carried out against the Jews in Iraq on the holiday of Shavuot in June 1941, marks a point of crisis in this community’s history.[[1]](#footnote-1) During the 1920s and early 1930s, Iraqi Jews benefited from the enabling and tolerant reign of King Faisal I until his death in 1933. The Jews were integrated in the economy, politics and culture, and members of the middle and upper classes acquired a modern Western education. As a result of Iraqi nationalism’s opposition to the influences of the British empire over Iraq and the intensification of Nazi propaganda by the German embassy in the 1930s, hatred and violence against Iraqi Jews, who were perceived as supporting British influence, increased. In 1941, Rashid Ali and a group of pro-Nazi officers overthrew the government in a *coup d’etat*. They ruled for several months until the British army defeated them and returned the Iraqi heir to government. The flight of the rebels from British forces left a political vacuum that was fruitful ground for Iraqi citizens, soldiers, and policemen to carry out the Farhud. The British army was outside of Baghdad and did not stop the atrocity. Approximately 200 Jews were murdered and 2000 injured, while substantial quantities of Jewish possessions were confiscated. As a result of the crisis, young Jews began searching for new paths. The educated majority turned to the communist underground, while the less educated minority turned to the Iraqi Zionist underground organization. The crisis accelerated questions of national and ethnical identity related to the complexity of the relationship between Jew and Muslim, Eastern and Western. As a historical event of significant consequence for Iraqi Jews, the Farhud gave rise to questions of identity and thus found its way to the Israeli theater of artists of Iraqi descent.

*Ghosts in the Cellar* (produced by Haifa Theater, 1983) and *The Father’s Daughters* (produced by Hashahar Theater, 2015) deal with the Farhud and with young Iraqi Jews’ responses to it, however in very different, and even contrasting, ways. Iraqi-born Michael presents a complex realistic depiction on stage of an Iraqi-Jewish family that is conflicted both internally and in its attitudes toward the Muslim world surrounding it. Contrastingly, in *The* *Father’s Daughters*, Izhaki, who was born in Israel to Iraqi parents, presents a family melodrama that involves a distinct division between a whole benevolent Jewish world and a surrounding malevolent Muslim world. Despite the differences between the works, they both expose the Israeli audience to an important and major chapter in the history of Iraqi Jewry, which can serve as a metaphor for questions of identity and ethnicity within Israel’s complicated contemporary present.

***Ghosts in the Cellar*: Complex Realism**

The plot of *Ghosts in the Cellar* takes place in Iraq in 1943 when the German army threatened to conquer the Middle East, and two years after the Farhud undermined the safety of Iraqi Jews. At the center of the plot is a middle-class Jewish-Iraqi family, headed by the grandfather, Itzhak-Haim, a traditional and conservative patriarch. The family has a good relationship with its neighbors, a traditional Muslim family whose patriarch, Abu Reduan, saved the Jewish family during the Farhud. The story’s protagonist is Farid, Itzhak-Haim’s grandson, an educated medical student and atheist who dreams of a progressive and equalitarian Iraq, and who, in response to the Farhud, was driven toward political activism and joined the communist movement. Zahara, Abu Reduan’s daughter, is coerced into marrying an elderly husband against whom she rebels. Farid and Zahara are in love, and as members of the communist underground, they riot against the government and distribute leaflets. The central conflict is between their parents’ conservative generation and their own revolutionary and educated younger generation. However, Farid and Zahara’s story of clandestine love and friendship ends tragically. Farid is captured by the secret police and Zahara is murdered by her father for “desecrating the family’s honor,” in other words, for having an extramarital affair with Farid. Dan Urian argues that while the love story signals a vision of Jewish-Arab reconciliation and cooperation, and of a progressive and equalitarian life, the tragic ending signals its failure (Urian, 2011).

Zionism is also perceived as a problematic and unworthy solution. Baruch, Itzhak-Haim’s son and Farid’s uncle is a Zionist activist who, while immigrating to the land of Israel (which was under British mandate), returns to Iraq four times. He is portrayed in a ridiculous and parodic fashion, not as an idealist, but as an adventurous idler who steals money from his mother for his pointless journeys.

Urian (2011) claims that Michael’s preferred style in *Ghosts in the Cellar*, as in his fiction, is critical realism and therefore, the characters are complex and full of contrasts. This style enables Michael to shatter the stereotypes at the basis of the orientalist Zionist narrative. The relationships within the Jewish family are presented as a pungent contrast to the orientalist image of the “warm family,” and are replete with sarcasm and aloofness, particularly between Itzhak-Haim and his wife Simcha, and his children and daughter-in-law. This image is completely shattered when Itzhak-Haim cowardly reveals his grandson Farid’s hiding place to the secret police who invade his home in search of communists. This is despite the fact that Farid is the only member of the family who receives loving attention from his grandfather. Furthermore, the Muslims in the play are not presented in a frightening or demonic manner, but rather as complex personalities. The neighbor, Abu Reduan, is trapped between his love for his daughter and the social decree according to which he must murder her for escaping her aging husband. Farid attempts to convince Abu Reduan not to hurt his daughter and to defy the repressive social imperative like he did during the Farhud. “In the pogrom I was more scared,” Farid says to Abu Reduan and continues: “There were many knives like yours, they gleamed in the dark and I cried. You [Abu Reduan] protected us, you too were in danger...” Although Abu Reduan proclaims his love for his daughter, he subdues to the social pressure: “You saw them in the cafes. She has already been tried and sentenced to death...God is abusing us...has turned us into our children’s murderers.”

*Ghosts in the Cellar* is a performing history of Iraqi Jews that challenges the Zionist perception of Middle Eastern Jews as faltering and backward images. Nonetheless, Sami Michael does not create a harmonious picture as anti-stereotypical. On the one hand, a firm conservative and religious patriarchy is presented, while on the other hand, we witness a young educated generation with a progressive outlook and political boldness. Farid’s character is based on Sami Michael himself, a communist activist and educated student who acknowledges his own complex identity as comprising many cultures, languages, and ideas from both the West and the East, and which is grounded in a universal outlook (Michael, 2000). Similarly, Farid maintains a Jewish/ Arab viewpoint that integrates Western ideas of equality and liberty.

Given that the role of Farid is played by Palestinian (Israeli citizen) actor Yousef Abu Varda, it is charged with additional meanings from the Israeli present. Casting is significant for different reasons, beyond the actor’s physical suitability for the part and his or her ability to play the character. Both Quinn (1990) and Carlson (2003) have claimed that beyond these factors, the audience perceives the actor through his or her public image and previous roles. In Israeli theater, the casting of a Palestinian (Israeli citizen) actor in plays that are not related to Israeli politics, is invariably interpreted in political terms (Urian, 1997).[[2]](#footnote-2) The casting of Abu Varda for the role of Farid, an Iraqi Jew, points to the Arab element (in terms of culture and language) in the identity of Middle Eastern Jews in Israel, as well as to the complicated political situation of Palestinian Israeli citizens who straddle the boundary between Jews and Arabs. The political significance of this casting choice marks yet another historical option for cooperation. Just as in Iraq of the 1940s, Jews and communist Muslims created a common civil, social, and cultural space, so too a similar space may be created between Jews and Arabs in Israel.

The play premiered in 1983 following the political turmoil of the 1970s: The Yom Kippur War (1973) and the rise of the political Right to government (1977). These events, through which the governmental corruption based on the superficial Zionist rhetoric was exposed, enabled the representation of Zionism in a ridiculing and divisive light in *The Ghost in the Cellar*. In addition, in the 1970s, the leadership of Iraqi Jews in Israel constructed contrasting narratives on Iraqi Jewry. I propose viewing *Ghosts in the Cellar* as part of this public debate. Also in the 1970s, two institutions were established: The Babylonian Jewry Heritage Center, which was founded in 1973, and in 1975, the World Organization of Jews from Arab Countries (WOJAC). The founding of these institutions was initiated by Mordechai Ben Porat, born in Baghdad, who was active in the Zionist underground in Iraq in the 1940s and following his immigration to Israel, served as mayor of Or Yehuda,[[3]](#footnote-3) as a member of Knesset, and as a government minister. Located in Or Yehuda, the Heritage Center, which functions as a museum, cultural center, and research venue, constructs the history of Iraqi Jews in accordance with the Zionist meta-narrative, “From Holocaust to rebirth.” It presents the Farhud as part of the Holocaust era, the Zionist movement in Iraq as an appropriate response to it, and Iraqi Jews as longing to immigrate to Israel as Zionist pioneers. This narrative completely ignores not only the Iraqi-Jewish elite, which was an integral part of the Iraqi economy, politics, and culture, but also the considerable number of its younger members who preferred joining the communist movement out of a sense of shared Jewish-Arab identity.

WOJAC conveyed a different narrative. WOJAC was founded by Ben Porat together with politicians of Jewish Middle Eastern origin, and with the support of the Israeli government, for purposes of international propaganda. Shenhav (2006), who investigated WOJAC’s activities, demonstrates that the organization had three major claims:

1. that Jews were a deep-rooted historical presence in the Middle East (the primordialism thesis); (2) that there had been a de facto mutual population exchange of Arab refugees and Jewish refugees in the Middle East (the population exchange thesis); (3) that the lost property of these Arabs and Jews could thus be mutually counter-posed (the property exchange thesis).

(Shenhav, 2006, 144).

WOJAC portrayed the Iraqi Jews as refugees in compliance with its aim to include the issue of the abandoned and nationalized properties of Jews from Iraq and other Arab states in the international agenda as a bargaining chip vis-à-vis the question of Palestinian properties and lands seized by Israel with the establishment of the state.[[4]](#footnote-4) Thus, Jewish property seized by Arab countries could ostensibly be deducted from Palestinian lands and properties seized by Israel.

Shenhav highlights the contradicting viewpoints among Zionist Iraqi Jews in Israel. He argues that through WOJAC, they appealed to the international community and claimed that Middle Eastern Jews, although having been an integral part of the Arab states, were forced to leave for Israel due to the Arab-Israeli conflict, and became refugees. Thus, from this point of view, population exchanges did in fact occur between Jewish and Palestinian refugees. In contrast, by way of the Heritage Center, the Iraqi-Jewish activists communicate a completely opposite historical narrative—that the Jews in Iraq were motivated by their Zionist ideology to leave Iraq and were happy to immigrate to their historical homeland—the “promised land.”

As part of the debate on the historical narrative of Iraqi Jewry, *Ghosts in the Cellar* gives a voice to the many Iraqi Jews who did not identify with Zionism. The beginning of the play portrays the Jewish activists in the Iraqi communist underground in a positive light, particularly the Arab-Jewish camaraderie which is constructed around the Jewish-Muslim love story and the casting of a Palestinian actor in the role of Farid. Likewise, Sami Michael holds members of the Iraqi Zionist underground accountable for joining the Labor party, which ruled from 1948 to 1977, by depicting them in a parodic and ridiculing manner in the image of the parasitic Zionist uncle. This unflattering portrayal was possible only after the political turnover of 1977, the downfall of the Labor party, and the severe public criticism of its corruption, including the systematic repression it exercised toward Middle Eastern Jews. Michael condemns the Zionist stereotyping that portrayed Middle Eastern Jews as primitive and lacking history and culture, and their Muslim neighbors as blood-thirsty anti-Semites. He attempts to present a more complex picture in which Jewish and Muslim characters are trapped in stringent life circumstances and restrictive social perceptions. At the same time, however, the play’s protagonists attempt to fight, courageously, for a more egalitarian and enlightened future. Michael’s vision regarding the Israeli present is embodied in Farid whose identity contains all of the worlds that nourish him: Jewish, Arab, and Western, at a time when in Israel these worlds are still often perceived as opposites or contradictions.

*The Father’s Daughters*: a Family Melodrama

*The Father’s Daughters* (2015) is the first play to be produced by Hashahar – Multicultural Theater, founded by Gilit Itzhaki and Uri Gavriel. The theater’s stated aim is to create a theatrical tradition that deals with the legacy of the Jewry of Arab countries, and it aspires to create a fruitful dialogue with a cultural legacy that mainstream theater does not recognize and which it excludes.[[5]](#footnote-5) Uri Gavriel, a renowned veteran actor, sheds light on his complicated relationship with mainstream theater:

I stopped [acting in repertoire theater] because I was not offered the roles I wanted. Rather, the roles I was offered were in the limited framework of the ludicrous and stereotypical Middle Eastern Jew. It was precisely from this standpoint that I want to make a change. I do not want to talk about discrimination, but I come with my own agenda and truth, and with the desire that has been burning in me for years. After being absent from the theater for years, I feel that perhaps this is my big comeback.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Contrary to the complexity of *Ghosts in the Cellar*, *The* *Father’s Daughters* is a family melodrama, which enables the construction of the relationships between Jews and Muslims in Iraq in shades of black and white. It also enables the organization of the plot in terms of the “From Holocaust to rebirth” Zionist narrative, which is seemingly opposed to the theater’s stated multi-cultural objective. At the same time, the play brings to the Israeli audience an important and less familiar chapter in the history of Iraqi Jews, while offering a gendered point of view communicated through the characters of three brave, ambitious, and activist sisters who were members in the Zionist underground in Iraq and who came to Israel for idealistic reasons. Although the Zionist narrative is the basis for the play, it contains “fissures” through which one can glimpse the Arab (culture and language) element in the identities of the characters on stage. The characters miss the Arab world left behind, a longing that is largely expressed in the music that marks a tension between Israeliness, Western-ness, and Arab-ness. On the one hand, *The Father’s Daughters* presents an ambivalent standpoint that views the history of Iraq’s Jews as part of the Zionist narrative and which is proud of their integration in the Israeli melting pot. On the other hand, in the text, Arabic elements constantly arise, which allude to the complexity of the ethnic (Jewish-Iraqi) and national (Zionist-Israeli) identity.

The play shifts between two points in time: a sealed room in an apartment in Ramat Gan[[7]](#footnote-7) during the First Gulf War (1991), and the home of the Eliyahu family in Baghdad in the 1940s. During the Gulf War, Saddam Hussein attacked Israel with Scud missiles, and there was a genuine fear that he would use chemical weapons. As a result, during attacks, Israeli citizens wore gas masks and confined themselves to sealed rooms. Itzhaki’s choice of timeframes is not coincidental—these are two moments in time in which Iraq takes aggressive and violent measures toward Jews. Befitting a melodrama, the dramatic events take place in the family’s living room in Ramat Gan, while the larger events of pogroms and war occur offstage. The transition from the living room to the house in Iraq is marked not only by a slight change in lighting, but mainly by way of a combination between the siren, which signals the family to enter the sealed room, and the cries of terror during the Farhud—a deliberate audial signal that links Saddam Hussein’s aggression and the Farhud, which occurred half a century before.

At the center of the plot are three sisters: Julie, the eldest, Miriam, and the youngest, Mazal. Other characters are the sisters’ father, Eliyahu, and Daud, who works with Eliyahu and who is in love with Julie and Sigal, Mazal’s daughter, who was born in Israel. The plot begins in the Gulf War, following the death of Eliyahu. There is a dispute among the sisters regarding their father’s will, in which he bequeathed his apartment to Mazal as an act of reconciliation for his past injustice toward her. She refuses to accept the apartment, however, given that she had not spoken to either Eliyahu or Julie for 40 years. To understand the root of the family dispute, the action is transported back to the 1940s in Baghdad.

The Farhud took place on the holiday of Shavuot. The daughters are preparing for the holiday, but the festive atmosphere is arrested when their mother, who has been severely injured, is brought home. The violence is communicated mainly through the anxiety of the family, which is now confined to their home in fear of what will happen next, and the only thing left to do is pray. In the aftermath of the Farhud, the family leans toward Zionism. The father understands that they cannot remain in Baghdad. The injured mother requires medical treatment; therefore, she and Julie are the first to illegally immigrate to Israel prior to the establishment of the state. Miriam joins the Zionist underground, against her father’s will and despite his Zionist outlook. She is captured, tortured, and raped before being released for a ransom. Consequently, Eliyahu and Miriam escape to Israel before the Iraqi secret police manage to arrest them. Mazal stayed behind with Daud, who, despite his love for Julie, marries her, and they have a son. Mazal escapes Daud with the baby, but the baby does not survive the arduous journey to Israel. Two years later, Daud also immigrates to Israel where he marries Julie with whom he has four sons. Mazal marries Naim, an ex-member of the resistance who facilitated her escape to Israel, and they have a daughter, Sigal. Mazal was enraged by her father’s abandonment, and therefore did not speak to him for the rest of his life.

Seventeen-year-old Sigal wants to be a musician, and her aunts support her decision to study in England, against her mother Mazal’s judgement. In the last scene, we return to Ramat Gan during the Gulf War, where each sister recounts the suffering she endured in her youth, from the Farhud to the immigration to Israel, and the consequential difficulties in the relationships between the sisters. The young Sigal becomes aware of these events for the first time and begins to understand the complexity of the relationships between the sisters. An opportunity for reconciliation arises.

The epilogue is a monologue by Sigal that takes place in the 2000s, following the deaths of the older generation. She talks about her travels around the world, and introduces the third generation of her family, which contains ethnic combinations, including marriage to a Chinese woman: “Three of them are half Iraqi and half Chinese, five are half Iraqi and half Ashkenazi (Jews of European origin), six are half Iraqi, a quarter Romanian and a quarter Moroccan, and one is half Yemenite.” The presentation of these ethnic blends is a proud demonstration of the success of the Israeli melting pot. Consequently, the sisters’ suffering, as a result of their activities in the Zionist resistance, attains new meaning. The suffering that the previous generation endured for the sake of their Zionist ideology facilitated the unification of all parts of the Jewish people in their historic homeland—Israel.

In this context, the Arab-Muslim characters in the play are anonymous, perilous, and remain offstage. Muslims are largely extreme nationalists who despise Jews, and represent a corrupt and evil regime. In absolute contrast to *Ghosts in the Cellar*, the physical absence of Muslims on stage creates the illusion that Jews and Muslims lived in complete separation from each other, contrary to historical reality. The point of view from which the play is presented is that of the Israeli-born second generation that views the Arab-Muslim in terms of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Therefore, similar to plays from the beginning of the Hebrew theater of the 1920s and 30s, the Arabs are positioned offstage, and represent an anonymous threat (Urian, 1997). Moreover, the majority of the characters immigrate to Israel illegally in the 1940s and not as part of the large immigration after the establishment of the state. Thus, there is no reference to the traumatic experiences of most Iraqi Jews in the Israeli transit camps (ma’abarot) during the early 1950s.

Following the establishment of the state of Israel, Iraqi nationalism intensified, and the Iraqi regime viewed the Zionist activity in Iraq as representing Iraqi Jewry in its entirety. The Iraqi government eventually permitted Jews to immigrate to Israel, however only after it confiscated their possessions and money and retracted their Iraqi citizenship. Destitute, Iraqi Jews arrived in Israel and were relegated, in transit camps, to economic, social, and cultural hardships. The audience is well aware of the hardships endured in these camps, and the absence of any mention of them on stage is conspicuous and significant. Therefore, the harmonious ending about integration in the Israeli melting pot is all the more striking in its deliberate avoidance of these tremendous difficulties, including the prejudices, racism, and discrimination against Jewish immigrants from the Middle East perpetrated by the Israeli hegemony.

Music, however, is a prominent motif through which the Arab element in the characters’ identity is glimpsed. While the sisters are in the living room in Ramat Gan, Mazal listens to Western classical music and her sisters tease her:

Miriam: What are you listening to?

Mazal: It’s Mozart, they say its relaxing.

Miriam: Oh, the guy with the wig and stockings? I know him.

Julie: Whose stockings?

Miriam: Mozart, the one with the – ta, ta, ta, ta (hums a tune).

Mazal: That’s Beethoven.

Miriam: Right, Beethoven.

Julie: I get it, there’s no one like Abdel Wahab.[[8]](#footnote-8)

On the one hand, the ridiculing of classical music in terms of “wig and stockings” contrasts it with classical Arabic music and with the resolute statement that “there’s no one like Abed el Waahab.” On the other hand, Mazal loves classical music, does not apologize for it, and demonstrates a cultural choice different from her sisters.

The “radio scene,” in which we hear Arabic music warrants attention. Between sirens in the living room in Ramat Gan, Miriam cleans the house. Her niece Sigal is with her. Arabic-Iraqi music is playing on the radio.

(Miriam is listening to the song “Sah el Habieb” (A Love Song for Mother) while organizing the stage, and cleaning the house, singing along. Sigal enters).

Sigal: What are you listening to?

Miriam: What?

Sigal: They’re shooting missiles at us and you’re listening to their music?

Miriam: 40 years after we escaped from there, that Saddam: chasing us all the way here...we were born Iraqis and we’ll die because of Iraqis.

Sigal: So, why are you singing in Arabic?

Miriam: We were raised on these songs.

Sigal: What is the song saying?

Miriam: Darling lady of loves...you are dearer to me than my soul and blood...oh merciful and you are all goodness...may god protect you, oh mother.

Israeli-born Sigal perceives Arab-Iraqi music as a cultural aspect of the Arab enemy, and therefore, Israelis are forbidden to listen to it. This is a dichotomic perception that is congruent with the Zionist narrative, which differentiates and erases the Arab component in the identity of Iraqi Jews. Miriam’s response is that music is part of the cultural foundation upon which she was raised and grew and therefore it affects her emotionally, particularly a song that deals with the love and longing for a mother. Although Miriam was a Zionist activist in the underground and suffered immensely as a result, she does not deny the Arabic music and culture, and thus causes a “fissure” in the Zionist narrative that underlies the entire plot.

The “radio scene” is a type of recurrent cultural scenario in different autobiographical narratives of Israelis of Middle Eastern origin, particularly those that tap the discomfiture of the second-generation Israelis whose parents immigrated from the Middle East. For example, in her poem *Zikaron Matzhik* (Funny Memory), Vicky Shiran describes her own degrading attitude, as a child, toward her Egyptian-born father who listens to radio broadcasts in Arabic:

Because he wanted to hear songs in Arabic, ugh / and news in Arabic, ich, he annoyed/ us, telling us that he knows how to read and write / literary Arabic. Funny man, since when do the Arabs have / anything literary other than ya habibi -i-i-i / half an hour ya habibi in the throat. (Shiran, 2005, 27).

There is, however, no sense of shame in *The Father’s Daughters*, but rather amazement at the gap between the characters’ Zionist ideology and the Arabic element in their identities. The scene in the play does not address this complexity beyond the “psychologistic” explanation that it only has to do with childhood memories of songs. In so doing, it unconsciously hints at the deep connection between Jews and the Arab world, which cannot be easily detached. Although the play is underlined by a distinctive Zionist thesis—from the Farhud to the Gulf War, Iraq has persecuted its Jews, therefore Israel is the only safe place for them—its representations of Iraqi cultural heritage, especially the sounds of its music and songs, strike a profound emotional cord in Iraqi Jews. This in turn, underscores the indissoluble Arab element in their identity. In this sense, although the play responds to the Zionist narrative, it manages to produce, to some extent, fissures and ambiguity in its attitude toward the Arab culture that is part of the identity of Iraqi Jews.

**Performing the Memories of the Community**

Both plays are performing-history of a significant and difficult chapter in the past of Iraqi Jewry and therefore they constitute a counter-memory to Zionism’s meta-narrative that marginalized the history of Middle Eastern Jews. These two performances are part of a community of memory that, as mentioned, is neither linear nor homogeneous, and which often generates contradictions and tensions. Michael, who experienced the historical events, depicts them in *Ghosts in the Cellar*, by way of a critical realism that criticizes Zionism. He points to a different cultural, civil, and political Jewish-Arab option, albeit implicitly, in the conflictual Israeli present. Israeli-born Itzhaki, whose memory of the events is mediated, portrays a family melodrama in *The* *Father’s Daughters* in tones of black and white. The characters’ Zionist activism and the absence of Muslim characters on stage signify the appropriation of the history of Iraqi Jews in the Zionist narrative. However, fissures surface in this outlook when the characters, despite their adoption of the Zionist ideology, identify with Arab culture, music, and language. This complexity demonstrates the extent to which a community of memory is a dynamic sphere, which contains tensions and creates new alternatives for observing the past.

**References**

***References***

Bashkin, Orit. *New Babylonians: A History of Jews in Modern Iraq*. Stanford University Press, 2012.‏

Carlson, Marvin. *The haunted stage: the theatre as memory machine*. University of Michigan Press, 2003.‏

Lev-Aladgem, Shulamith. "Remembering forbidden memories: Community theatre and the politics of memory." Social Identities 12.3 (2006): 269–283

Meir-Glitzenstein, Esther. *Zionism in an Arab Country: Jews in Iraq in the 1940s*. Routledge, 2004.‏

Michael, Sami. *Unbounded Ideas: Ruvik Rosenthal Talks with Sami Michael*. Tel-Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad Publishing House, 2000. [in Hebrew]

Quinn, Michael L. "Celebrity and the Semiotics of Acting." *New Theatre Quarterly* 6.22 (1990): 154–161.‏

Shenhav, Yehuda A. *The Arab Jews: A postcolonial reading of nationalism, religion, and ethnicity*. Stanford University Press, 2006.‏

Urian, Dan. *The Arab in Israeli drama and theatre*. Routledge, 1997.

Urian, Dan. "Sefrou and Baghdad." *Israel Affairs* 17.4 (2011): 542–562.

White, Hayden. *Metahistory: The historical imagination in nineteenth-century Europe*. JHU Press, 1973.‏

Zerubavel, Yael. *Recovered roots: Collective memory and the making of Israeli national tradition*. University of Chicago Press, 1995.‏

1. Details of the Farhud and its aftermath are based on Meir-Glitzenstein, 2004, 10–12 ; Bashkin, 2012, 100–140; Shenhav, 2006, 113–117 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. A well-known example is the casting of Palestinian actors Makram Khoury and Yousef Abu Varda in the roles of Didi and Gogo in Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, directed by Ilan Ronen (Haifa Theater, 1985). This existential play became an allegory for the Palestinians oppressive and unresolved situation. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Or Yehuda was founded in 1955 by Jews who immigrated from Iraq. It is located near south Tel Aviv. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The 1948 war between Israel and the Palestinians ended with 700 refugees, the destruction of approximately 400 Palestinian villages, and Israel’s expropriation of Palestinian property and lands. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <https://www.headstart.co.il/project.aspx?id=18179> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. http://www.israelhayom.co.il/article/328023 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. A city adjacent to Tel Aviv. In the 1950s many Iraqi Jews settled there. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. An Egyptian singer-songwriter (1902–1991) renown throughout the Arab world. The dialogue between the sisters is ironic because Abdel Wahab was influenced by classical music, particularly Beethoven, which is evident in the combinations between West and East in his music. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)