**The Jewish-Iraqi Theatre - Ur Ensemble:**

*Majnūn Laylā* **as Interweaving Performance Cultures**

Immediately following the establishment of the State of Israel, the 1950s saw a mass emigration from Middle Eastern Jewish communities, including from the Jewish community of Iraq, to the new country. Among these emigrants were theatre makers who had played an active role in the growth of Jewish-Iraqi theatre in the first half of the twentieth century. After their immigration, these artists attempted to find their way in Israel’s European-oriented theatre field, which did not rush to embrace them. In 1955, these Jewish-Iraqi artists formed the Ur Ensemble (*Lahakat Ur* in Hebrew), an Arab theatre supported and subsidized by the government. The ensemble produced in Arabic the lyric play *Majnūn Laylā* (The Madman of Layla) by the Egyptian poet and playwright Aḥmad Shawqī (1932-1968) for an audience composed of Palestinian citizens of Israel—an astounding fact in light of the Zionist policy of melting-pot that required Jewish immigrants to abandon their native languages and to adopt Hebrew’s Western-oriented language and culture. In an Orientalist fashion, this ideology connected the Arabic language and Arab culture with inferiority and primitiveness, and demanded that Middle Eastern Jews “peel off” the “Arabness” from their identities, which was seen as a dangerous enemy culture (Shohat 1988; Shenhav 2006; Chetrit 2010).In light of these circumstances, why did the Ur Ensemble, an Arabic theatre created by Jews, perform for Palestinians?[[1]](#footnote-1) Why did the Zionist establishment subsidize and encourage the ensemble? How did the ensemble’s artists understand their role, and how did the Palestinian audience receive them? In this article, I will demonstrate how *Majnūn Laylā* constituted a theatrical event that moved between propaganda and subversion, and thus blurred the rigid boundaries between Jew and Arab—despite the intentions of the Israeli establishment—and created the possibility of a shared culture within the bounds of the theatrical event.

In articulating this argument, I will make use of the interweaving performance cultures approach of Erika Fischer-Lichte (2014), which addresses the connection between the aesthetic and the political in a performance that is rooted between cultures. For that reason, I will describe the growth of the Jewish-Iraqi theatre in which the Ur Ensemble’s artists developed and the professional knowledge that they acquired before their immigration to Israel. Throughout the article I will explain how the ensemble was established and the enthusiastic reception it received from its Palestinian audience. Finally, I will address the crisis in and dissolution of the ensemble as part of a debate over its meanings and goals.

To begin, however, I would like to refer to several historiographical points related to my work as microhistory. Peter Davis (2014) argues that theatre historians find the field of microhistory interesting given that their work largely involves the investigation of past performances, that is, performances that took place in specific physical spaces and involved specific artists and audiences. In Davis’s words, the study of theatre microhistory focuses on “the particular, the specialized, the everyday, even the ordinary, to understand the agency of life on a small scale” (ibid, 3). Giovanni Levi, a pioneer of microhistory, explains that micro-historians focus on “the contradictions of normative systems and therefore on the fragmentation, contradictions and plurality of viewpoints which make all systems fluid and open” (Levi, 1991, 107). Thus, microhistory stresses the active agency within social structures in an attempt to describe the tensions that reflect a complicated picture of the past. As I mentioned above, the very existence of the Ur Ensemble raised questions regarding the fact that, contemporaneously with a dominant, even aggressive Zionist melting-pot policy, the encouragement and subsidization of an Arab theatre for Jewish-Iraqi artists was even possible.

Another aspect of theatre microhistory, as Jim Davis *et al* (2011, 96-97) and Shulamit Lev-Aladgem (2010, 371-372) point out, is the problem of incomplete and fragmented sources, especially in cases such as the Ur Ensemble. In the Labor Party archives, I found materials documenting the founding of the ensemble as well as the financial crisis it faced. These materials include ensemble documents, correspondence with subsidiary institutions, and meeting summaries. In addition, I located a few short daily newspaper articles with references to the audiences’ reception plays,[[2]](#footnote-2) as well as ensemble funder Simon Ben-Omri’s (1987) autobiography, which includes several memories of the ensemble and a single photograph of the actors in costume (but not on stage). I interviewed the only surviving ensemble member, well-known singer and actress Lilit Nagar, however, her memory was limited to a few details. Only the show’s poster and program were preserved. Although the program summarizes the plot in each act in Hebrew, Arabic, and English, what is noticeably missing is a detailed and clear record of the performance itself (acting, directing, scenography etc.). Thus, a detailed description of the performance and its analysis was not possible.

**Interweaving Performance Cultures**

The interweaving performance cultures approach of Erika Fischer-Lichte (2014: 1-21) bridges the political and the aesthetic in a theatrical performance based on different cultures, and can be helpful in understanding the Ur Ensemble. Fischer-Lichte contends with two alternative approaches to a performance that is rooted between cultures: intercultural theatre and postcolonialism. She criticizes the weaknesses of both approaches and advances beyond them.

In his attempt to conceptualize “intercultural theatre,” Patrice Pavis (1996) suggests that “it might be more productive to speak of intercultural exchanges within theatre practice rather than of constitution of a new genre” (ibid, 1). This exchange, he argues, constitutes a “reciprocal influence of theatrical practice (acting, mise-en-scène, stage adaptations of ‘foreign’ material) (ibid, 2). Joerg Esleben *et al* (2016) provide a more extensive definition for this exchange:

Contact between different cultures in the theatre can occur on multiple, overlapping levels: within the dramatic text or performance script; during the planning, design, and rehearsal of a production; within the cast and production team; during the performance, between the performance and the audience or within the audience; and in the wider reception (critical, scholarly, viral, etc.) of a project. (14)

Employment of the term ‘intercultural theatre’ within theatre studies has increased since the 1970s, when the issues of colonialism and de-colonialism became central in the more traditional discourse on performances based on the materials and techniques of different cultures. The term is essentially grounded in the notion of “the West and the rest,” and focuses on performances which are clearly rooted in Western culture and adopted for other cultures. For example, a classic Western play presented in Japanese style (e.g. Suzuki’s production of Chekhov’s *The* *Three Sisters*), or a performance based on Indian mythology adapted to Western theatre (Peter Brook’s adaptation of the Sanskrit epic *Mahabharata*). Thus, intercultural theatre seeks to understand the cultural encounter primarily through its aesthetic and theatrical aspects.

In the wake of postcolonial criticism, Fischer-Lichte shows that underlying the term is a rigidly binary conception of the divisions between cultures that does not exist in reality:

The concept of “intercultural theatre” implies a sharp division between “our” and the “other” culture. It assumes that cultures are hermetically sealed, homogeneous entities[…]. But this is not the case. Cultures constantly undergo processes of change and exchange, which can become difficult to disentangle from each other. Yet, the aim is also not to erase difference. Rather, the differences in and between cultures are dynamic and permanently shifting (2014: 7).

The postcolonial approach in theatre studies focuses on the power relations between Western culture, which until the 1960s had been the colonizer, and the colonized cultures. This approach has two complementary dimensions: 1. Criticism of the cultural oppression of the imperial West that positioned its cultural and dramatic canon as a theatrical standard superior to that of the colonized natives while dismissing the latter’s traditional forms of performance as inferior and unworthy. 2. Rewriting the historiography of native postcolonial theatre, which reflected the complexities involved in its unequal (disadvantaged) encounter with Western theatre. Khalid Amine (2006), for example, takes this approach in writing about the history of the modern Arab theatre. He adopts Edward Said’s conception, exposing and criticizing the Western Orientalism that has perceived Arab theatre through Europocentric eyes, regarding it as insignificant. To support this viewpoint, Amine applies Homi Bhabha’s concepts of ‘third space’ and ‘hybridity’ to analyze the politically complex negotiations that have occurred between Western and Arab theatres.

But Fischer-Lichte also criticizes that postcolonial approach that primarily focuses on the political aspects of the cultural encounter in theatre, and neglects the aesthetic dimensions of the mixing of elements from different cultures on one stage. This disregard for the aesthetic dimension in postcolonial criticism did not enable appropriate attention to be paid to the utopian-transformative potential that exists in the deep ties between the aesthetic and the political in performance.

Thus Fischer-Lichte seeks an alternative theoretical framework. On the one hand, one that dismisses the rigid binarism of intercultural theatre, without abandoning its deep analysis of aesthetics, and on the other, to adopt postcolonial criticism while advancing beyond it to consider the aesthetic in a political manner, and to see the close connection between these dimensions. In her opinion, interweaving performance cultures is a theoretical framework that can proceed further than the two earlier approaches. The meaning of the metaphor of interweaving is that the different cultural elements are woven together in the performance such that one can no longer return to the cultural source of every element. Similarly, the process of weaving is analogous to the process of producing a performance—it is not a simple, linear process of connecting two cultures, but instead one of trial and error, the weaving and unraveling of different elements.

According to Fischer-Lichte, every performance has a utopian dimension,[[3]](#footnote-3) meaning the potential to foster an aesthetic experience between the actors and the audience that can reflect or negate the social conditions outside the theatre, and to anticipate, in the political sense, a different, better future. It is a liminal experience, transformative and fleeting in its essence because the aesthetic and the political are interwoven:

In this sense, processes of interweaving performance cultures can and quite often do provide an experimental framework for experiencing the utopian potential of culturally diverse and globalized societies by realizing an aesthetic which gives shape to unprecedented collaborative policies in society (Fischer-Lichte 2014: 11).

The interweaving of performance cultures through the process of the fixing and unsettling of identities and cultures transfers the audience to a state of in-betweenness that allows them to fashion an aesthetic experience that anticipates the future, in particular in the globalized world that by nature weaves together traditions and cultures. These anticipations are not based on particular contents and a clear ideological vision, but rather are experiences that take place during the interweaving of performance cultures:

Here, moving within and between cultures is celebrated as a state of in-betweenness that will change spaces, disciplines, and the subject as well as her/his body in a way that exceeds what is currently imaginable (Fischer-Lichte 2014: 12).

As mentioned above, from the historical sources we can get a general description on the performance and there have not details on the performance such as acting, directing, and scenography, so the interweaving of cultures on stage cannot be analyzed. But there was a significant cultural interweaving in the performance between the Jewish identity of the actors, who embody Arab world on stage. Thus, I argue that the Ur Ensemble’s *Majnūn Laylā* is a theatrical event of interweaving performance cultures that forged a connection both between Jews and Arabs and between the aesthetic and the political. The embodiment of Arab characters on stage by Jewish actors in Modern Standard Arabic (*al-fuṣḥā*) on a high professional level undermines the two central premises of Zionist ideology: first, that Jews and Arabs are mutually exclusive categories and that it is impossible that a Jew could be part of Arabic culture, and second, that Middle Eastern Jews are uncultured, primitive, and inferior, and thus have no connection to the theatre, among other cultural institutions. *Majnūn Laylā* showed that Middle Eastern Jews are part of the Arabic language and culture, and the convincing embodiment of Arabic roles only emphasized that this potential can also be realized outside the theatre. Secondly, their artistic professionalism refuted the Orientalist conception that Middle Eastern Jews are uncultured and need to be Westernized and civilized. The performance demonstrated the knowledge—both broad cultural literacy and professional-theatrical know-how—of the ensemble’s artists, which was acquired already in Iraq. The professional embodiment of Arab characters was an aesthetic element that was interwoven with the political and created a utopian-transformative experience that signifies the possibility of a shared Jewish-Arab culture. *Majnūn Laylā* was often received with strong feelings of enthusiasm and joy because, in opposition to the reality outside the theatre, a Jewish-Arab encounter was formed between the performers and the audience as a complex aesthetic-cultural experience (beyond the usual stereotypes) that points towards a cultural alternative that can perhaps come to be in the future.

**The Growth of Jewish-Iraqi Theatre**

In what follows, I will elaborate on the growth and development of Jewish-Iraqi theatre to emphasize the following points: First, this history contextualizes the Ur Ensemble and its members: What was the milieu in which they were raised? And what did their theatre training and professional experiences entail? Second, presenting this history demonstrates that Middle Eastern Jews did indeed have a theatre culture, contrary to the unfounded Orientalist Zionist prejudice. Third, it is significant to present Jewish-Iraqi theatre because its history is unfamiliar and seems to have been forgotten.

Jewish artists were a part of the Arab theatre in the Middle East and North Africa (Moreh and Sadgrove 1996). In a pioneering study, Shmuel Moreh specifically shows and analyzes the growth of and the development of Jewish-Iraqi theatre (Moreh 1985a). Theatrical activity emerged in the Jewish schools in Baghdad, and served as a catalyst for the establishment of a professional theatre. The theatre ensembles in the Jewish schools were seen as an educational, social, and moral tool, and the performances were often part of fundraising evenings for various organizations. The repertoire was based on French (Molière, Corneille, and Racine) and English (Shakespeare and Marlowe) drama translated into Arabic, and Arabic plays, for instance by the popular Egyptian playwright Youssef Wahbi (1898-1982). There were also adaptations of biblical stories, in particular Joseph and Esther.

Original plays were also composed by Jewish playwrights. Among the first plays that were published were *Devotion and Betrayal* (1927) by Salman Darwish (1910-1982), staged at the Rachel Simhon School. It is a melodramatic love story between a boy and a girl who challenge and overcome the conservatism, tyranny, and corruption of the adult world. The play was published with introductions by the author and his friend Yitzhak Akhtaniyya dealing with the art of the theatre; these texts are indicative of the authors’ broad historical knowledge of the history of the theatre and of their desire for the Iraqi government to institutionally support artistic theatre. Nuri Menasheh, a lawyer and teacher at the Frank Iny and Alliance schools, wrote *Despair and Hope*. The play was staged in 1940 as part of a fundraising evening for the Students Aid Committee for orphans and the needy at the school, and the plot was made to fit the theme. An orphan boy is adopted by a man who had received help in past from the boy’s father. However, the man’s wife throws the boy out of the house and he remains destitute. The “Children’s Defense Society” appears as the delivering angel who saves the boy from further decline and gives him hope in the face of despair. The play was performed in the presence of King Faisal II (1935-1958), and Latif Elias, who embodied the boy, won the admiration of the king who invited him to the royal palace.

The majority of actors, directors, and theatre instructors made their living primarily from educational theatre performed in the schools and other social contexts, though they aspired to create professional theatre ensembles, and some even part of cooperative ensembles with Muslim and Christian artists. The process of professionalization increased after the establishment of the Institute of Fine Arts in Baghdad in the late 1930s, where the actors Aryeh Elias (1921-2015), Yitzhak Batat, Salman Abdallah al-Yussuf, Aharon Zibli, Yitzhak Zecariya, and Aharon Yaakov studied. These actors had already gained vast experience even before their studies at the institute.[[4]](#footnote-4) Part of the process of the professionalization of the theatre entailed changing its perception as “cheap and neglected” to “cultural and esteemed.” This change was achieved through the invitation of prominent political leaders, whose presence alone instilled theatre performances with recognition, legitimacy, and even prestige. For example, in 1926 the Jewish actor Kaduri Shahrbani directed Corneille’s *Le Cid* in the presence of King Faisal I, Prime Minister Abd al-Muhsin Al-Saadoon, and the country’s Jewish Finance Minister Sassoon Yekhskell. The play was highly praised and the elite audience granted cultural and political recognition to this Jewish theatre activity. The presence of senior Iraqi government figures at the performance expressed in practice the cultural flowering of Iraqi-Jews and even their increasing economic and social integration in 1920s in the wake of the open policy of King Faisal I (1883-1933).

Among these theatre types we can note three central characters who were important directors and teachers among the Jewish theatre circles in Iraq: Kaduri Shahrbani, Eliyahu Samira, and Simon al-Amari (Simon Ben-Omri). Shahrbani (1894-1982) was one of the first Jewish actors in Iraq. In 1908 he joined a Syrian ensemble that was visiting Iraq and went on to perform with Egyptian ensembles. In 1910 he studied theatre and directed performances in Jewish schools in Iraq. After the First World War, he established a professional ensemble that performed a repertoire of European and Arabic plays. Eliyahu Samira (1910-1960) was a director, actor, and teacher of theatre and stage design. At the beginning of his career he joined Egyptian ensembles who came to Iraq, led by Bishara Wakim (1890-1949) and the well-known playwright Youssef Wahbi, and thus learned stagecraft. In 1935 he established an ensemble with his most gifted students from the different schools and performed with them plays by Youssef Wahbi. The members of this ensemble included: Aryeh Elisas, Naim Aslan, Yitzhak Batat, and others. Simon al-Amari (Simon Ben-Omri) (1921-1988) was a playwright and director who was known by theatre professionals as “the backbone of Iraqi theatre.” He also directed plays in Jewish schools and even translated theoretical texts about theatre, acting, and makeup into Arabic. He directed amateur and professional ensembles from a repertoire including classical Western drama such as *Oedipus Rex* and *The Bourgeois Gentleman* and Arabic drama such as *Majnūn Laylā*.[[5]](#footnote-5) After immigrating to Israel, he founded the Ur Ensemble and performed *Majnūn Laylā* with many of the Jewish actors mentioned above (as I will explain in the following section).

One of the most important figures in the formation of the Jewish-Iraqi identity was the poet, translator, and journalist Anwar Shaul (1904-1984), who edited the weekly *al-Misbah* (The lantern) that was based on the conception that Arabic culture was the common ground shared by Jewish, Christians, and Muslims in creating the modern Iraq. This self-conception was in the spirit of the then-common slogan: “Religion is for God, the Fatherland is for everyone,” (Snir 2011: 41) meaning that every group has its own well-defined religious identity, but Arab identity is shared by all. This weekly also covered in depth the theatrical activities taking place in the schools and advocated for an artistic theatre as in Tel Aviv and Cairo. Shaul translated plays from French and English that were performed in the Alliance school, and even performed in them. His translation of *William Tell* included the following epigraph: “For every perplexed Arab searching for the right path, I present *William Tell* as a fitting lesson in true love of nation and eternal heroism” (cited in Moreh 1985a: 81).His words reflect the general conception of many Jewish theatre figures who saw Arabic language and culture as part of their identity, without any conflict with their Jewishness. For that reason, with their emigration to Israel they did not see any ideological difficulty to continue creating Arabic theatre for an Arabic-speaking audience—Jewish and Palestinian alike.

**Jews Establish an Arab Theatre: The Ur Ensemble**

The founder of the ensemble, the actor and director Simon al-Amari, Hebraized his name to Simon Ben-Omri with his emigration to Israel; such Hebraization was a widespread practice of Zionist ideology and an expression of emigrants’ desires to integrate in their new country. However, this integration was incredibly complicated. He tells in his autobiography of his great disappointment when the most important repertory theatres, Habima, the Cameri, and the Ohel, rejected him, and the inspiration this gave him to found an Arab theatre (Ben-Omri 1987: 277-286). Other actors in the ensemble were similarly rejected. Even the actor Aryeh Elias, who succeeded in being accepted by the Cameri Theatre and appeared in plays between 1951 to 1953, though only in minor and background roles. He recalls: “They threw me out like a dog. They said: ‘Your language is not good enough. Eastern’ […] the accent. For a long time after that I did not know what to do with myself.”[[6]](#footnote-6) The ensemble’s founding arose out of the actors’ need to deal with their rejection because of their Iraqi accent, which was considered exceptional and problematic by directors in the Israeli theatre, despite the fact that, ironically, at that same time many Israeli actors spoke with a no-less prominent Eastern European accent. The only framework in which these actors were able to find their place was with Voice of Israel radio in Arabic. They recorded radio plays in Arabic, but were not satisfied with this alone and wanted to perform on stage. Thus in 1955 Ben-Omri founded the Ur Ensemble. The members of the ensemble were actors Eliyahu Samira, Kaduri Shahrbani, Solomon Kakhila, Yitzhak Batat, Aharon Zibli, Meir Levi, Shaul Abudi, Lilit Nagar (b. 1935),[[7]](#footnote-7) and Dalia Kakhila; musicians, Naim Rejwan, Albert Elias, and Reuven Rahamim; set design, Ovadia Agassi; lighting, Nissim Batat.

Ben-Omri’s good connections with the Ohel Theatre actor Yehuda Shehori (1904-1966) enabled the establishment of the Ur Ensemble under the rubric of the Ohel. He chose *Majnūn Laylā* by Aḥmad Shawqī, which he had produced previously in Iraq, and directed two scenes that were performed as an audition for the management of the Ohel, Eliyahu Agassi (1909-1991,a native Jewish-Iraqi), who was the head of the Histadrut’s Arabic division Labor Federation,[[8]](#footnote-8) and the directors Menachem Golan (1929-2014) and Peter Frye (1914-1991). The professional performance was enthusiastically received and they decided to provide funding for the ensemble and to produce the play. At this stage, Ben-Omri relates that Aryeh Elias joined the ensemble and asked to direct the play. “After some negotiations with the members of the ensemble, I agreed to give over the remainder of the directing to him, on the condition that I would serve as the artistic manager of the performance” (Ben-Omri. 1987: 280). Ben-Omri does not explain why Elias came and who invited him, and why the members of the ensemble preferred Elias to him if there was so much satisfaction with the two scenes that he directed. One can presume that since Elias was already known to a degree in Israeli theatre circles as an actor at the Cameri, he was seen as someone who could be the ensemble’s “familiar face” for the establishment. The ensemble was subsidized by the Arabic Department of the Histadrut and the Foreign Ministry. The Ohel Theatre provided space for rehearsals, performances, public relations, and ticket sales.

These facts give rise to the question as to why the Ohel Theatre decided to sponsor the Ur Ensemble if, as mentioned above, the domain of Israeli theatre did not absorb Middle Eastern Jewish actors due to racist biases. After leaving Habima theatre, actor and director Moshe Halevy established the Ohel Theatre in 1925. Halevy, whose relationship with Habima was complicated, perceived Ohel as its competitor. Thus, as Dorit Yerushalmi emphasizes, the significance of the Ohel Theatre was as a theatrical and cultural alternative to Habima, “the favored national son” (2014, 355). Moreover, given that Halevy defined and advanced it as a proletarian theatre, the Ohel was subsidized by the Histadrut. This support took a unique turn when, in response to the economic difficulties the theatre faced in the 1950s (Feingold, 2005), Eliyahu Agassi, head of the Histadrut’s Arabic division and an Iraqi-Jew himself, channeled funds to the Ur Ensemble through the Ohel Theatre. In this way, the Histadrut “killed two birds with one stone,” increasing Ohel’s income while simultaneously advancing Iraqi-Jewish artists.

**The Love Story as Metaphor of Longing for the Arab World**

*Majnūn Laylā* is a lyric play whose plot is based on a Bedouin legend. It is a tragic love story of Qays and Laylā, whom the powers of tradition prevent from consummating their love, which even leads to their deaths. Qays, performed by Aharon Zibli, is a poet who composes love poems to Laylā, performed by Dalia Kakhila. Qays asks her father for Layla’s hand in marriage. But according to tradition, a man who publicly proclaims his love for a woman before marriage is considered to have violated her honor and that of her family. For that reason, her father marries her to another man. Qays undergoes many pangs of longing over her and expresses it in his poems. After Laylā’s marriage, Qays comes to her and proposes that they flee together, but she refuses. In the last scene, Qays discovers by chance the fact that Laylā has died and he takes his own life on her grave.

In the Director’s Statement in the program, Elias explains that “*Majnūn Laylā* is like an opera—what does that mean? Neither its content, nor even the performance of the play is the essence, but rather like the music and beautiful tones of an opera’s arias, so too in Shawqī’s play the emphasis is on the poetry and the beauty and clarity of the language.” Thus, in order that the audience not become lost in the maze of poetry, Elias decided to add a narrator, embodied by the singer Lilit Nagar, who framed the events performed. Nagar was already a singer who was well-known to the wider public whose Hebrew songs were broadcast on the radio, and she served as the familiar face of the ensemble. Between the scenes, Nagar as narrator, sang, explained and linked previous scene to the next scene. She stood at the front of the stage beside Naim Rejwan, who accompanied her on the accordion while the curtain behind them was closed.[[9]](#footnote-9) Elias declares that he did not want to depart considerably from the way that the play was presented in the past, and for that reason there was a Bedouin tent on the stage and palm trees, and the costumes (such as the *jallabiyeh* and the *kaffiyeh* and *igal*), the props, and the music and dance were made to fit the Arab-Bedouin tradition.

Theatre historian Thomas Postlewait perceives the theatrical event not only as a certain event that took place in the past, but also as an event that creates metaphors and images of the cultural contexts in which it is rooted (Postlewait 2009). The performance on stage reflect, consciously or unconsciously, cultural and social aspects of the participants in the theatrical event. The love story between Qays and Laylā can be interpreted as such a metaphor, as Dan Urian demonstrates how love stories between Jews and Palestinians in the Israeli theatre are mostly metaphors for social and political relations (Urian 1997).While the love story in *Majnūn Laylā* does not deal at all with local politics, following Postlewait I propose viewing the unrequited love story and the tormented longing of Qays as a double metaphor for Jewish-Iraqi and Palestinian longing for the Arabic culture that had been marginalized in the new Israel. Qays’s longing and the violent way in which he is torn from his lover Laylā can be a metaphor for the nostalgia for Arabic language and culture that Jewish-Iraqi emigrants feel in the face of the ideological demand to swiftly adopt Hebrew culture. The longing is also for the world of the theatre that is barred from the actors because of their Iraqi accent which, so it was claimed, is not suitable for Israeli ears. From the perspective of the Palestinian spectators, the longing is for the Palestinian world that was destroyed in 1948, the meaning of which is not only the physical destruction of villages and the expropriation of lands, but also an overall cultural collapse and continued repression by the military government.[[10]](#footnote-10) Qays’s love song not only expresses the longing for Arab culture, but is also an image for the role of the art of the theatre, which serves the actors and spectators as a reliable cultural frame in the face of an oppressive ideological reality outside the walls of the theatre.

**Reception: Surprise and Enthusiasm**

Elias explains in the program[[11]](#footnote-11) that this is an Arab legend, but at the same time “a depiction of the way of life of the Bedouin, a field that remains ‘uncultivated.’” The choice of a play by Aḥmad Shawqī grew out of his popularity among Iraqi Jews and the Palestinian public (Snir 2005), and, in fact, the performance generally received a quite enthusiastic response. The premier took place on September 12, 1956 at the Ohel Theatre, and afterwards the ensemble performed the play on tour throughout Israel for Arab audiences, for example, in Haifa, Acre, Nazareth, Ramla, Hadera, and Jerusalem. Generally, the performance was produced in an Arab community or in a Jewish towns nearby where there was a suitable performance hall. Palestinians with Israeli citizenship received permits from the military government to come to the performance as did Arabic-speaking Jewish immigrants living close to the performance space. Similarly, the ensemble also performed in Jewish communities such as Herzliya, Givatayim, Rishon le-Zion, Holon, and the Tel Aviv suburbs, where there seem to have been concentrations of Jewish immigrants from the Middle East. One of the exceptional performances was staged for Palestinians in the Gaza Strip at the Falastin School on February 21, 1957, immediately after the territory was conquered in 1956. The governor of Gaza, Haim Gaon, requested and pushed the performance, and the Palestinian audience received it with great excitement; there were even plans to stage it again in Gaza, but the plan never reached fruition because the territory was returned to Egypt.

The premiere at the Ohel Theatre in Tel Aviv was staged for many invited guests among the Israeli leadership, such as the Speaker of the Knesset Yosef Sprinzak (1885-1959), Secretary of Labor Mordechai Namir (1897-1975), Jewish and Palestinian members of Knesset, representatives of the Histadrut, local Palestinian leaders, and cultural attaches and diplomatic representatives from around the world. Reviews show that the premier performance was very festive, and emphasize that the Palestinian audience “responded to the play with acclaim.”[[12]](#footnote-12) Regarding the members of the audience who were not Arabic speakers, it is written: “Despite the strangeness of the language, the audience followed the captivating performance of the members of the ensemble with rapt attention.”[[13]](#footnote-13) Another review emphasized in an Orientalist manner the presence of the Arab invitees and their strangeness in Tel Aviv:

The Arab and Druze eminences from the various villages stood out in the crowd, with their national dress of “*kafiyah* and *igal*.” Before the performance, the Arab guests wandered around Dizengoff Square, looked at the posters on the movie houses, and took seats at the grand cafes on the square. Passersby wondered at the Arabs’ “invasion” of the heart of Tel Aviv.[[14]](#footnote-14)

The review ends in an Orientalist manner that assumes that the Arab spectators possessed a limited capacity for aesthetic judgment: “The performance did not excel, but it seemed to satisfy the Arab spectators, on whose faces the marks of enthusiasm of could be seen at the end of the performance" (ibid). Unlike reviews of this kind, Shemuel Salmon, the Director of the Department of Arab Education and Culture at the Ministry of Education, describes frankly his low expectations and his great surprise:

The truth should be said that I went to the performance only out of feelings of obligation—as a public official—and expected a great disappointment, a lack of taste, and cheap, sentimental recitation. Without entering into a detailed critique of the performance, I want to say that the ensemble can congratulate itself on an amazing artistic effort. There were many aesthetic elements of the performance, the speaking was good and only very rarely was there empty recitation, and good taste was never impaired. I watched the performance with great interest until the end.[[15]](#footnote-15)

In my opinion, this description reflects in a not inconsequential way a process that part of the non-Arab audience underwent. From a preconceived idea and low expectations, as if Arab theatre cannot be high quality, to surprise and excitement at the capability represented on stage. These preconceived notions can even explain the exclusion of the ensemble’s performers from the Hebrew theatre, which from the first did not give them a chance to prove their acting ability. Salmon’s words also align with those of Lilit Nagar, who told me about the period of the rehearsals. According to her, the actors were entirely professional and experienced, and they emphasized the importance of clear pronunciation. The play was written in Modern Standard Arabic, in rhyme and meter, and it was very important to be particularly strict on this point.[[16]](#footnote-16) This fact is instructive of their professionalism and the breadth of their education in Arabic language and culture.

The reception in the Palestinian communities was also stirring and emotional. Newspaper reports describe the enthusiastic audience that arrived from Taybe and Umm al-Fahm to a performance in Hadera:

Dozens of buses and taxis brought hundreds of Arabs, young and old, to Hadera, including young girls and high school students […]. A successful phrase or witticism by one of the actors in the middle of the play was awarded with great applause, and sometimes even with encouraging cries. At the conclusion of the performance, which caused long and thunderous applause, Suliman Majdali, a young teacher from Baqa al-Gharbiyye delivered a speech of thanks and appreciation.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Another review described how “at the end of the performance the spectators refused to leave the hall” and “the members of the ensemble were honored with a fountain of sweets raining down on their heads”[[18]](#footnote-18) to express the audience’s joy, appreciation, and thanks to the performers.

**The Ensemble’s Goals: Between Fostering Culture and Propaganda**

The motivation of the actors from the Ur Ensemble to create and make a living from theatre is self-evident, but the idea of an Arab theatre being funded by the state is puzzling in light of the accepted policy in the 1950s. The founding documents and the identity of the funding bodies show a complex picture of tension between the goals of the different partners in the founding of the ensemble. The central and declared objective was founding an ongoing, permanent Arab theatre, as Simon Ben-Omri put it in a letter to the Arabic Department of the Histadrut in April 3, 1955.[[19]](#footnote-19) The goal of the theatre was to make overtures to “speakers of the Arabic language in Israel, especially the Arab citizens of the state. To cultivate the art of acting and the theatre among the Arab citizens of the state” (ibid). The aim was not only to produce plays, but also that the ensemble would serve as a framework for ongoing theatrical and cultural activities, including producing Arab plays; establishing drama groups; and theatre, music, and dance studies. The phrase “Arabic speakers in Israel,” meant to encompass Jewish immigrants from the Middle East as well, is removed from the rest of the correspondence. Later letters refer only to Palestinian citizens and the cultivation of culture and theatre for them as spectators and as artists. This is mentioned explicitly in the minutes of the meeting with the Ohel, the Histadrut, and members of the ensemble: “The play will be performed in places where there are Arab residents and will not be purely aimed at the Jewish audience.”[[20]](#footnote-20) This is not surprising because at this same time the Telem Theatre (*Teatron la-Ma‘abarot*, theatre for refugee absorption camps[[21]](#footnote-21)) was established for Jewish immigrants from the Middle East, whose role was to bring performances and plays in *Hebrew* to the absorption camp residents. Theatre was seen as part of the ideological state apparatus aimed at molding Jewish immigrants in the image of the sabra (“New Jew”) in line with Zionist values, among them the Hebrew language, and to peel away the “diasporic” Arabness that “clung to them.”[[22]](#footnote-22) Another goal of Telem was to consolidate a future audience among the immigrants for Israeli theatre. The establishment emphasized that an Arab theatre should primarily serve Palestinian citizens. In this way, a division was made between the Palestinian and Arabic-speaking Jewish audiences.

Despite intentions, the end of the ensemble came unpleasantly because of disagreements over funding. Receiving the budget involved an ongoing crisis. The ensemble waited for a long time a budget that was continually delayed, and only after a year, when the members of the ensemble threatened to stop performing, was the budget found. Similarly, after the performance in Gaza in 1957, the ensemble did not receive its wages and the director Aryeh Elias even turned to the courts to receive his payment. In the end, the budget arrived, but only to *Majnūn Laylā* performance. The Israeli establishment decided not to continue subsidizing the ensemble anymore and therefore, the project of an Arab theatre for the Palestinian minority was not realized and the ensemble dissolved.

In practice, the budget came from two central bodies: the Foreign Ministry gave 2000 Israeli pounds and the Histadrut 1000 Israeli pounds. In addition, according to different letters, even the foreign ministers at the time—Moshe Sharett and then Golda Meir—were personally kept up to date, and appointed Michael Elitzur as the Foreign Ministry representative charged with oversight and responsibility for arranging the budget. Why was the Foreign Ministry involved in funding this activity, which has no apparent connection with foreign policy, and not the Ministry of Education and Culture entrusted with fostering culture? The answer lies in the establishment’s other, more covert agenda, which comes to light in the following correspondence. In a letter written by Reuven Barkatt from the political branch of the Histadrut to Foreign Minister Moshe Sharett (February 28, 1956) he explains, among other matter, that “according to the plan, the ensemble will focus its activity on Arab communities. It will see one of its aims as bringing theatrical performances on a high cultural level and with a pedagogic-propagandic purpose to the Arab community in Israel.”[[23]](#footnote-23) Michael Elitzur from the Foreign Ministry asks Eliyahu Agassi from the Histadrut that for the premier performance “not to forget to invite the foreign correspondents and the cultural attaches from the foreign diplomatic missions […] I’m sure that in light of the *diplomatic-propaganda* *importance* of this project Mr. Landwer and Ms. Shapira will assist you to the best of their ability.”[[24]](#footnote-24) These letters give an impression that the state sponsored an Arab theatre so that it would serve as a hidden and clever propaganda tool to show the world Israel’s tolerant policy, even in a cultural sense, towards the Palestinian minority. As mentioned above, all areas of life in Palestinian communities were already controlled by the military government, and for that reason this activity was intended for propaganda purposes abroad in order to create a liberal image for the Israeli policy towards the Palestinian minority.

Propaganda is for the most part one-directional and manipulative communication, indifferent to the truth, aimed at achieving agreement and obedient cooperation by the addressee and to prevent skepticism and critical thinking (Ellul 1973).If the addressee sees the communication as propaganda and not as a realistic message, it is a failure. Propaganda can be direct, blunt, and obvious, as in totalitarian regimes, and it can be hidden and imperceptible as in democratic and capitalist regimes (Cunningham 2002). Propaganda is an important issue in the creation of political theatre. Naturally, most of the discussion centers on how ideological messages are formed in the performance. For example, to what degree is the obvious, propagandistic message in forms such as agitprop and the Theatre of the Oppressed (Boal 2005: 213-16) effective in convincing spectators, and, overall, what is the difference between propaganda and profound political art? (Szanto, 1978).

In *Majnūn Laylā* there are no direct and obvious ideological-Zionist messages, and there is not even an attempt to camouflage and conceal such messages. The propaganda is neither located in the signs of the performance, nor even in the relations between the stage and the audience of the theatrical event. The addressees of the propaganda are not the Palestinian spectators; they are not located in the theatre at all, but are instead outside the borders of the country. The international community is the Foreign Ministry’s imagined audience, and the ministry is making use of the very existence of the Ur Ensemble’s theatrical activity in order to demonstrate Israel’s “tolerant and enlightened” policy towards the Palestinian minority, despite military rule.

**The Ur Ensemble Interweaving Cultures**

How should we perceive the artists of the Ur Ensemble: Are they collaborators with the Zionist establishment or, alternatively, passive subjects exploited by the establishment? Intellectuals, writers, and Jewish-Iraqi poets played an active and dominant role in the rehabilitation of Palestinian culture, in particular Palestinian theatre after 1948 (Hamdan 2007; Zabik Hadad 1992; Snir 2005: 68). This occurred because of the constraints of the circumstances, on the one hand, the deep rift among the Palestinians, and on the other, Jewish-Iraqis’ eagerness to continue creating in Arabic. The Palestinians understood, among other things, that cooperation with Jews is essential under the existing political circumstances, in particular when Jewish-Iraqis were integrated to a significant degree in the mechanisms of supervision and control over the Palestinian minority in Israel. Nevertheless, some of the Jewish-Iraqi artists had a left-wing political orientation and supported the Palestinian struggle against Israel, for the most part in the framework of the Israeli Communist Party, whose official stance espoused Jewish-Palestinian partnership.

Reuven Snir examines these two opposed tendencies in the cooperation between Jewish-Iraqis and Palestinian citizens of Israel (Snir 1995). On the one side were artists of the “positive culture” who were supported by the establishment, and were mostly led by the Arabic Department of the Histadrut managed by Eliyahu Agassi. These writers avoided criticism of government policies in their works and emphasized the long-awaited peace and brotherhood between the peoples. Snir perceives the Ur Ensemble as an expression of the establishment strain of “positive culture” because the performance was funded by the establishment and avoided political subjects in accordance with official policy. The second tendency was that of the Jewish-Iraqi Communists, for example, the writers Sami Michael and Shimon Balas, who wrote articles criticizing the government’s political and cultural policies published in *al-Ittiḥād* (The Union), and *al-Jadīd* (The New), Arabic newspapers with a Communist orientation.

Snir’s distinction is too binary and I want to offer another option to perceive Ur Ensemble. Fischer-Lichte argues that interweaving performance cultures moves between fixing and unsettling identities in the theatrical event, and for that reason a liminal space is created where resistance and subversion go hand-in-hand with cooperation (Fischer-Lichte 2014:11). The Ur Ensemble moved between Jewish and Arab identities, creating ambivalence between cooperation and resistance and blurring the boundaries between the two identities. *Majnūn Laylā* inseparably weaves together the actors’ Jewish identity and the Arab world that they perform. While the performance did not deal directly with political contents, the display of Arab cultural capital[[25]](#footnote-25) by the Jewish-Iraqi artists emphasized their Arabness. This display was in direct opposition to the ruling Zionist conception of the necessity to erase the Arabness of Middle Eastern Jews.

Considering that few details about the performance emerge from the sources, it is not possible to conduct a detailed analysis of the performance and identify the cultural origins of its elements. Therefore, I choose to focus on the interweaving of the actors’ Jewish identity with the fictive Arabic world they created on the stage. Marvin Carlson (2003) argues that theatre operates like a memory machine by way of what he calls “ghosting,” that is, the knowledge that the audience has about the actors (their identities, personal lives, gossip, previous roles, etc.) which constructs the performance’s reception. In our case, this interweaving largely depended on the Palestinian spectators’ knowledge (ghosting) or their awareness of the fact that what they were seeing were Jewish actors embodying an Arab world on the stage. In the context of 1950s Israeli theatre, this was a politically unique situation.

As the establishment wished, the performance won positive media attention in Israel and the world, and was seen by various diplomatic representatives. However, at the same time, the audience in Israel and the world saw how Jewish-Iraqi theatre makers could produce professional Arab theatre. A double effect was created that underlined Zionist ideology’s official attitude towards Middle Eastern Jews: (1) The Arabness of the Jewish actors was stressed and evident in their embodiment and presentation of the Arab world on stage. This Arabness was performed directly and visually, as can only happen in theatre. Not only did the actors speak in the Modern Standard Arabic of a classic play, they also embodied in their bodies and voices the Arab world—through gesture, in dance, and in poetry alongside costumes and other props that strengthened the Arabic impression. The high quality of the performance was not only an aesthetic point, but also emphasized the ease by which a Jew could be Arab; their expertise is not only the result of skilled execution, but also part of the embodied Arab cultural capital that they acquired from a young age in their country of origin. (2) The second effect undermined the Zionist Orientalism that claimed that Middle Eastern Jews were primitive, uneducated, and uncultured subjects who need to be raised to the level of European Jews and brought in line with the image of the *sabra* (the New Jew). The performance emphasized the vast theatrical knowledge and rich professional experience of the actors and hinted at a well-developed theatre scene in Iraq in which these artists developed, in contrast to the stereotype of the Easterner as “culturally backward” that took shape in hegemonic Israeli discourse.

Thus, *Majnūn Laylā* represents a case of interweaving performance cultures despite that probably the theatrical signs pointed towards the Arab world alone. However, these signs were produced and created by the Jewish actors, designers, and musicians. The Jewish body and voice would represent the Arab world such that no gap or difference could be felt between the two. In the Israeli-Zionist context, their embodying and presentation of Arabness on stage means its aesthetic and political interwovenness. The corporeal interweaving of these identities unsettled the firm boundaries of Zionist discourse separating “Jew” from “Arab.”

The theatrical event created a temporary utopian-transformative moment pointing towards the alternative of an Arab culture shared by Jews and Palestinians. Fischer-Lichte’s approach highlights the utopian-transformative dimension created between the aesthetic and the political in the theatrical event. Utopia, in this context, does not refer to an orderly political program for the future, which may be oppressive, but rather indicates that the utopian-transformative experience of the theatrical event occurs only during the performance, which temporarily realizes social possibilities that do not exist outside the theatre and which may be realized in a future society. According to accounts of the Ur Ensemble’s theatrical reception, a utopian-transformative experience of transcendence and excitement was generated based on the celebration of an Arab theatre culture shared by Jewish performers and Arab spectators. In *Majnūn Laylā*, the participants experienced, albeit temporarily, something that was not feasible under the social and political conditions, but which could be possible in the future. This temporary experience was, and still is, an option that contradicts the dominant policy of suppressing Arab culture and separating Jews from Arabs.

\*\*\*

In recent years, the world of Israeli theatre has been in turmoil due to the Ministry of Culture’s ultra-nationalistic orientation, which culminated in the closure of the Al-Midan Theatre, the only public repertoire Arabic theatre subsidized by the state. This situation was exacerbated when the ministry blatantly intervened in the Acco Festival’s repertoire, censoring plays that dealt with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict from a radical perspective (Shem-Tov, 2016). In this politically tense cultural context, Ur Ensemble’s theatrical event invokes the long forgotten possibility of cooperation between Jews and Palestinians in Israeli theatre. It is a cultural and theatrical manifestation of an alternative dialogue within a problematic political situation.

The unique Jewish-Palestinian partnership in the theatrical event of Ur Ensemble was the transgression the boundaries between the two identities. This is a different partnership than Jewish-Palestinian theatrical projects of coexistence were founded only from the 1970s on (e.g. Alon 2013). Those projects all shared a left-wing political agenda of personal connection and political change for both peoples. While in those projects resistance and protest are present directly in the content and messages, their binary structure testifies to a division that preserves the clear cultural and linguistic differences between Jews and Palestinians. These two categories are mutually exclusive; even if they can be reconciled, each one preserves its own clear identity boundaries. The Ur Ensemble created a different cultural option based on shared Arab cultural capital. This is a subversive option because it transgresses and blurs cultural and national boundaries, and even founds the dialogue on the “primitive, enemy culture,” as the establishment sees it, thus subverting the hegemonic Zionist conception. This cultural option was relevant in its day and perhaps can serve as a signpost towards a different dialogue in our time, in an Israel split by an ongoing bloody conflict in general and the ultra-nationalist atmosphere in the Israeli theatre in particular.

‏

REFERENCES

Alon, Chen. 2013. Polarized Theatre of the Oppressed: The Israeli-Palestinian Case. PhD Diss. Tel-Aviv University [Hebrew].

Amine, Khalid (2006). Theatre in the Arab World: A difficult Birth. *Theatre Research International* 31(2): 145-162.

Ben-Omri, Simon. 1987. Hashed Tantal. Herzelia: Havazelet [Hebrew].

Boal , Augusto. 2005. Legislative Theatre: Using Performance to Make Politics. New York: Routledge.‏

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1986. “The Forms of Capital.” In Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education, edited by John Richardson, 241-58. New York: Grennwood.

Chetrit, Sami Shalom. 2010. Intra-Jewish Conflict in Israel: White Jews, Black Jews. London and New York: Routledge.

Cunningham, Stanley. 2002. The Idea of Propaganda: A Reconstruction. Westport, CT: Praeger.‏

Davis, Jim, Katie Normington, Gilli Bush-Bailey and Jacky Bratton, "Researching Theatre History and Historiography", in *Research methods in theatre and performance,* eds. Baz Kershaw, and Helen Nicholson, (Edinburgh University Press, 2011).‏ pp.86-110

Davis, Peter, "Asking Large Questions in Small Spaces." *Theatre Survey* 55.1 (2014): 3-5.‏

Dolan, Jill. 2010. Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theatre. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Elias, Aryeh. 2005. Dvash Tamarim. Ramat-Gan: Shlomi Hizki Ot Le-Mofet [Hebrew].

Eliav, Lova and Yossi Alfi. 2006. On Both Sides of the MAABARA. Tel-Aviv: Maariv [Hebrew].

Ellul, Jacques. 1973. Propaganda: the Formation of Men's Attitudes. New York: Vintage.‏

Esleben, Joerg, Rohmer, Rolf, John, David Gethin. *Fritz Bennewitz in India : Intercultural Theatre with Brecht and Shakespeare*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press/Scholarly Publishing Division, 2016.

Feingold, Ben-Ami. 2005. “Ohel – The Rise and Fall of a Workers’ Theatre.” [in Hebrew] *Iyunim Bitkumat Israel* 15: 349–337.

Fischer-Lichte, Erika. 2014. “Introduction: Interweaving Performance Cultures—Rethinking Intercultural Theatre: Towards an Experience and Theory of Performance beyond Postcolonialism.” In The Politics of Interweaving Performance Cultures: Beyond Postcolonialism, edited by Erika Fischer-Lichte, Torsten Jost, and Saskya Iris Jain, 1-12. London: Routledge.

Hadad, Abir Zabik. 1996. “The Arab Theatre in Israel from 1948 to 1992.” In Theatre in Israel, edited by Linda Ben-Zvi, 327-30. Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press.

Hamdan, Mas'ud. 2007. “Palestinian Theatrical Activities in a Jewish State.” Zmanim: A Historical Quarterly 99: 54-62 [Hebrew].

Lev-Aladgem, Shulamith. "Public theatre, community theatre, and collaboration: Two case studies." *New Theatre Quarterly*26.4 (2010): 369-382.‏

Levi, Giovanni “On Microhistory,” in *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, ed. Peter Burke (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), 93–113.

Maman, Ofir. 2007. Telem – Theatre for New Immigrants: The Dynamics Between Center and Periphery in the Field of Production of a National Culture. PhD Diss., Hebrew University of Jerusalem [Hebrew].

Moreh, Shmuel. 1985a. “The Jewish Theatre in Iraq in the First Half of the Twentieth Century.” Pe'amim: Studies in Oriental Jewry 23: 64-98 [Hebrew].

Moreh, Shmuel. 1985b. “With Shimon Ben-Ormri: An Artist of the Theatre in Iraq and in Israel,” Bamah: A Theatre Journal 101-102: 96-101 [Hebrew].

Moreh, Shmuel and Philip Sadgrove. 1996.Jewish Contributions to Nineteenth-Century Arabic Theatre: Plays from Algeria and Syria - a Study and Texts. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Morris, Benny. 2004. The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem Revisited. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Pavis, Patrice, (ed.). *The intercultural performance reader*. New York: Routledge, 1996.‏

Postlewait, Thomas. 2009. The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Historiography. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.‏

Shenhav, Yehouda. 2006. The Arab Jews: A Postcolonial Reading of Nationalism, Religion, and Ethnicity. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Shem-Ṭov, Naphtaly. (2016). *Acco Festival: Between Celebration and Confrontation*. Boston, MA: Academic Studies Press

Shohat, Ella. 1988. “Sephardim in Israel: Zionism from the Standpoint of its Jewish Victims.” Social Text 19-20: 1–35.

Shohat, Ella. 1989. Israeli Cinema: East/West and the Politics of Representation. Austin: University of Texas Press‏.

Snir, Reuven. 1995. “Palestinian Theatre: Historical Development and Contemporary Distinctive Identity.” Contemporary Theatre Review 3, 2: 29-73.

Snir, Reuvin. 2005. Palestinian Theater. Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag.

Snir, Reuvin. 2011. “Between Arabness and Zionism: Iraqi-Jewish writers in Arabic in the 20th century.” Al-Karmil: Studies in Arabic Language and Literature 32-33: 28-73.

Szanto, George H. 1978. Theater and Propaganda. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Urian, Dan. 1997. The Arab in Israeli Drama and Theatre. Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers.

Yerushalmi, Dorit. "Toward a Balanced History:“Ohel,” the “Workers Theatre of Eretz Yisrael” as a Cultural Alternative to Habima (1935–1946)." *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 13.3 (2014): 340-359.‏

1. I use “Palestinians” and “Arabs” interchangeably and mostly refer to those with Israeli citizenship. The adjective “Arabic/Arab” describes a linguistic and cultural element of Arab identity or civilization depending on the context. In this sense, aspects of the Middle Eastern Jewish identity can be described by this adjective. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. I only read Hebrew and English so I do not have access to Arabic sources, such as newspapers. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The description “utopian” does not indicate a closed and well-articulated utopia that actually be realized, but rather the intention is a different and alternative experience from an aesthetic perspective that exists for a finite time only in the theatrical event. This experience anticipates the possibility of a shared life that is different than the current social reality, and which will perhaps exist in the future (Dolan 2010). ‏ [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Aryeh Elias (2005) in his autobiography, describes his professional development and that of his fellow actors mentioned above, from how they independently established a theatre as teenagers until their shared experiences as students at the Institute of Fine Arts. These descriptions allow one to understand the blossoming, excitement, and dominance of Jewish artists in the formation of the developing theatre scene in Baghdad in the first half of the twentieth century. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. He describes his rich theatrical activity in Iraq (Ben-Omri 1987:255-76; Moreh 1985b). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. From the Oral History Division, Hebrew University, interview 93(11). Elias succeeded in integrating in commercial theatre and film. His comic roles gave him great publicity among the Israeli public. At the same time, over the course of his career in Israel (1947-2001), he only performed in six repertory theatre productions. His dream was to play Shylock, but he was rejected with the claim that his accent was comic. Ella Shohat argues that this was a miserable refusal: “Since a knowing director might have used the ‘marginal’ accent as a way of underlining Shylock’s own marginality within Christian Venice.” (Shohat 1989: 55). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The only member of the ensemble who was an Egyptian Jew. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The General Organization of Workers in Israel is the largest professional union in Israel. During the first decades of the state’s existence, the union provided social, medical, and social services, and was a very important player in Israel’s economy. The Ohel Theatre was subsidized by the Histadrut. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Author’s interview with Lilit Nagar, February 3, 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. From 1948 to 1966 Palestinian communities in Israel were under the control of a military government. The military government ruled over all areas of life: movement and transportation, property and land, education, health, employment, and more. Unlike Jewish citizens, the civil rights of Palestinian citizens were systematically violated. The military government was inaugurated in the 1948 war, which 700,000 Palestinian became refugees, some 400 Palestinian villages were destroyed, and Israel appropriated private property and land. These events, known in Arabic as the Nakba (catastrophe), caused a deep crisis in Palestinian society in all aspects of life (Morris 2004). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Labor Party archives, files 214-219 IV [in Hebrew]. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Anonymous, “Premiere Performance of the Arab Play *Majnūn Laylā*,” *Al Hamishmar*, September 14, 1956 [in Hebrew]. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Anonymous, “Success for Arab Performance by Iraqi-Immigrant Ensemble,” *Davar*, September 13, 1956 [in Hebrew]. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Anonymous, “The Arabic Theatre Ensemble Ur,” *Herut*, September 16, 2956 [in Hebrew]. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Letter from Shmuel Salmon to Eliyahu Agassi from September 12, 1956. Labor Party Archives, Files 214-219 IV [in Hebrew]. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Author’s interview with Lilit Nagar, February 3, 2019 [in Hebrew]. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Anonymous, “Hundreds of Arabs Watch Play *Majnūn Laylā*,” *Davar*, July 15, 2957 [in Hebrew]. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Anonymous, “Arabs from the Triangle at the Ur Ensemble Performance in Hadera,” *Davar*, July 17, 1957 [in Hebrew]. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Labor Party Archives, Files 214-219 IV [in Hebrew]. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. “The Play *Majnūn Laylā*: Meeting Minutes,” June 17, 1956, Labor Party Archives, Files 214-219 IV [in Hebrew]. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. *Ma‘abarot* were refugee absorption and transit camps where Jewish immigrants lived throughout the 1950s. At the beginning they were housed in tents, and later in barracks in very harsh living conditions. For more details on Telem, see Ofir Maman (2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Iraqi-born Israeli director Yossi Alfi illustrates the attempt to culturally mold Jewish immigrants from the Middle East in the following story. In 1952 Mordechai Ben-Porat, a well-known Iraqi Zionist activist, brought singer Lilit Nagar to the Amishav Ma'abara to perform for Jewish immigrants from Iraq. The performance was held in a barracks packed with people who expected to hear her sing in Arabic, but to their disappointment, on Ben-Porat’s instructions she sang Hebrew Zionist folk songs. One of those present answered Ben-Porat, “Zionist Folk songs? What’s left for us?” and out of frustration struck the wall and the barracks collapsed (Eliav and Alfi 2006: 88). Lilit Nagar claims that the barracks did not collapse, and that in general these performances were election rallies for the ruling Mapai Party. Mordechai Ben-Porat, a member of the party, would give a speech and Nagar would accompany him as an artist who would sing at the rally and gather a crowd of listeners. She would sing only in Hebrew despite the requests by Middle Eastern Jews to sing in Arabic. This story is instructive, again, of the establishment’s cynical use of artists for propaganda purposes among Middle Eastern Jews in the Ma'abarot. Author’s interview with Lilit Nagar, February 3, 2019 [in Hebrew]. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Labor Party Archives, Files 214-219 IV [in Hebrew]. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Letter from Michael Elitzur to Eliyahu Agassi, August 29, 1956. Labor Party Archives, file 214-219 IV [in Hebrew]. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Cultural capital includes various forms of knowledge, cognitive abilities, aesthetic taste and preferences, practical skills related to the production, creation, and deciphering of cultural products and artistic works. It is important to emphasize that this knowledge is not only broad education but also embodied knowledge connected to practical performance, such as acting in the theatre. Cultural capital is connected to a certain social group and allowed different groups to distinguish themselves from each other (Bourdieu 1986). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)