**Haifa International Children’s Theatre Festival as Theatrical Event: Reception study – preliminary findings**

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## Abstract

The Haifa International Children’s Theatre Festival (Haifa Festival) is an annual event held in Israel since 1987. It is an artistic and festive event that constitutes a significant part of the field of Israeli theatre for young audiences (TYA), appropriate for family entertainment. The objective of this study as a whole, is to examine the Haifa Festival since its establishment until today as a major catalyst of theatrical-artistic quality. Thus, the research was conducted using two complementary methodologies: a historiographic study and a qualitative study. Scholars emphasize that the aesthetic quality of TYA performances influences modes of reception. To explore this issue, we conducted a qualitative reception study adapted to the festival’s audiences: children and adults. We rely on a model (Mor & Shem Tov, 2020) which presents three forms of “Cargo” that facilitate the child’s theatrical experience: the social-cultural 'cargo', the emotional 'cargo', and the cognitive 'cargo'. These three reception modes enable the young audience to interpret and enjoy the current performance while expanding their cultural-social load that will facilitate the experience and perception of future performances. We assumed that when a young audience is exposed to a wide range of performances and a festive celebration, these reception modes may expand more rapidly than usual, leaving an expanded load for the future. In the current paper, we will elaborate the preliminary findings of the qualitative study that examined the festival’s reception amongst young audiences and accompanying adults.

**Introduction**

This paper presents preliminary findings of one part of a thorough research of The Haifa International Children’s Theatre Festival. The Haifa Festival is an annual event held in Israel since 1987, that takes place during the Passover holiday and school break and constitutes an artistic and festive event for the entire family.

The Haifa Festival features dozens of performances in different styles and genres, held in diverse spaces, and with varying levels of audience participation. Moreover, the Festival’s outdoor complex offers street shows, food and beverage stalls, and opportunities to purchase children’s books and festival souvenirs, such as T-shirts and hats. Spending time in the complex after the performance enables the child to process the theatrical experience by engaging in dialogue with accompanying adults and other children.

According to the International Association of Theatre for Children and Young People (ASSITEJ), there is a global profusion of TYA festivals, However, research on TYA and TYA festivals is extremely limited (Seffrin, 2005; Van de Water, 2009). Writing about the development of TYA in Israel, Razi Amitai (2013) drew attention to a shift, beginning in the 1980s, in the field of Israeli TYA. The establishment of the Haifa International Children’s Theatre Festival (Haifa Festival) in 1987 is one peak in this transition. Until that time, a single professional subsidized theatre—the Orna Porat Theatre for Children and Youth—operated in Israel. Today there are many more.

TYA performances are mostly classified according to three categories: educational-didactic, commercial-popular, and artistic (Klein & Schonmann, 2009). These categories operate in varying degrees as three dimensions or parameters in the festival's performances; operate in varying degrees as three dimensions or parameters in the festival's performances; An educational-didactic play constructs and highlights educational messages or deals with topics taken from the education system’s curricula. A commercial-popular show makes conscious use of the available devices and conventions in order to create a spectacular show. An artistic performance is grounded in the development of complex, deep, and original theatrical language. When one parameter is emphasized excessively, the quality of the performance may be compromised: a didactic message stemming from an agenda-driven educational perspective may render a play superficial and one-dimensional. Excessive use of popular devices, such as loud rhythmic music and flashy design, may generate an experience of immediate satisfaction and amusement, but may be lacking in artistic or educational depth. Failure to sufficiently adapt the theatrical language to suit children’s ages may disrupt their ability to experience and decode the performance.

The Haifa Festival's vision is to raise the quality of the TYA performances in Israel. Festival regulations emphasize objectives that reflect the importance of the performance’s artistic and aesthetic value. Quality, as written above, is a "slippery fish", but the standpoint of the festival's artistic management towards the quality of the performances is a balance between these three categories. In other words, from the festival's perspective, a quality TYA performance properly balances the educational, popular, and artistic. The festival strives towards a performance with complex artistic language, which combines a profound pedagogic message as well as intelligent use of popular and entertaining devices. Therefore, the artistic management deals primarily with the question of the degree to which the three parameters are employed in structuring the festival’s performances. Given that is the intention of the Haifa Festival, the current study tries to find out if this also rises in reception.

Another aspect emerges from the literature, concerning the position of accompanying adults in a TYA festival. As been said, the festival is a family event, and as such, the accompanying adults serve a role in children's' theatrical education. Schonmann (2000; 2006) regards accompanying parents and educators as theatre mediators whose role is to expand and enrich the children’s cultural world while spectating. This aspect is examined in this study, and the findings show the importance of the adults' role. Studies point to the fact that a home in which there is a fervent appreciation for theatre enriches the child’s cultural predisposition (Saldaña, 1995; Mor, 2015). Klein (2011), who observes children’s perception of the theatrical performance from a developmental perspective, reinforces the argument that adopting the children’s point of view will enable theatre professionals to enhance the theatrical language and aesthetic quality and adapt it to the young audience. However, as Klein and Schonmann (2009) demonstrate, young and adult judges in Haifa Festival evaluated the performances in opposite terms: The children’s choice of best play was considered by the adult to be the worst play in these festivals (and vice versa). Jeanne Klein (2011) explains this gap by the different criteria children use to evaluate theatre during and after performances from their psychological perspectives (“From Children’s Perspectives”). Shifra Schonmann explains this difference philosophically by how children perceive and respond to the playing rules of aesthetic distance that occur during performances (“Fictional Worlds”). In this paper we will show some preliminary findings that will present the different perspectives of children and adults.

**Research objectives**

The study described in this paper is located in the field of TYA in Israel, and its purpose is to examine the voices and perspectives of young audiences as significant participants in the festive theatrical event. The study as a whole examines the repertoire and the agendas of managers, producers, and theatre-artists, on the one hand, and of the reception of the festival by children and accompanying adults, on the other. This paper will present the part of the reception study in TYA perspective that took place on April 2022.

Our inquiry will look at whether and how the intense festival repertoire encourages the young spectators and accompanying adults to compare different artistic forms and, as a result, achieve a more complex understanding of TYA performances. Furthermore, we will analyze how such a celebration in the site constitutes a gratifying multi-sensory festival experience—an enriching event for children that may motivate them to return to the theatre in the future.

Another aspect we examined, was how the three categories that classify performances: educational-didactic, commercial-popular, and artistic, operate in varying degrees as three dimensions or parameters in the festival's performances, and expressed in children and adult's experience.

**Methodology**

The festival that took place in Haifa Theatre site, consisted of six indoor performances, original productions in Hebrew, created especially for the festival. Those performances participated in a contest, judged by theatre experts. In addition to the original performances, there were twenty-one Israeli guest productions that performed in small halls around the Haifa Theatre compound.

The fifteen outdoor performances were international, from six countries (Israel included), and were consisted mostly of non-verbal, acrobatic, movement, and physical theatre. Those performances were spread all over the complex. Some were positioned in a shadowed space, allowing their audience to escape the hot sun in 34°C, and some were located under the scorching sun. Along the three days of the festival, the audience filled the indoor and outdoor locations including the ones located in spots without shade.

Scholars emphasize that the aesthetic quality of TYA performances influences modes of reception (Hanson, 2012; Klein & Schonmann, 2011; Maguire, 2012; Reason, 2010; Van de Water, 2009, 2012). In order to explore this issue, we conducted a qualitative reception study adapted to the festival’s audiences: children and adults. We relied on Mor’s model (Mor, 2015; Mor & Shem-Tov, 2020) for understanding the young audience’s theatrical-experience: Social-Cultural cargo, Emotional cargo, and Cognitive cargo). The hypothesis was that when young audiences are being exposed to a wide range of performances and a festive celebration, as well as parents mediation, the reception modes may expand more rapidly than usual, leaving an expanded cargo for the future.

The qualitative reception research focused on the festival’s audiences. Sixteen young participants took part in the study. Their ages vary from 4-15 years old. Another seven accompanying adults (mostly mothers, only one father) were observed and interviewed. The families came from various places in Israel: Tel Aviv, Haifa, Hadera, Ra'anana, kibbutz Sasa (north of Israel), and Zur-Yitzhak. Other people from the audience were interviewed randomly during the festival.

Each family chose one or two indoor performances and were asked to explore the festival complex before or after the performance. Most participants attended at least one outdoors performance. They also toured around the complex and used the dining and sales facilities.

The qualitative study employed tools adapted for theatre research and research with children: qualitative observations in the festival halls and complex; 'Theatre Talks' (Sauter, 2000) with children, focus group discussions adapted for young theatre spectators, adding drawing during the talk by Mor (2015; Mor & Shem-Tov, 2020). Additional tool was semi-structured interviews with children and their accompanying adults (Shkedi, 2011).

**Preliminary results**

The research was conducted on April 2022. This paper contains only preliminary results, prior to analyzing the data with Atlas.ti software, using theme and categorical analysis. Reading the data raised a few major themes that repeated in interviews and theatre talks. We present some of them in the following paragraphs.

**Theatrical Knowledge**

The accompanying adults serve a role in children's theatrical education while in the festival. They mediate the Media to the children (Aram & Mor, 2009), and help them process the experience and turn it to knowledge: A child at the end of an outdoor performance asks her mother: *"why are you clapping hands?"* Mom: *"that's how they know we love the show"*. Child: *"Why are there such flags?"* Mom: *"because there are shows from many countries"*. A mother to her children at the age seven and ten: *"It is not 'just' a show. It has moral. Listen!"*

At the festival, as mentioned, a family event, all members of the family serve as mediators: Tamar, (6 years old), says to her brother who sits beside her in a performance: *"look at the lamps, like the colors of the rainbow". "They are called the lighting"* (Yotam, 7 years old)[[2]](#footnote-2).

The childrenshow high theatrical knowledge, when they associate names of repertoire theatres in Israel to a certain show: *"not long ago I went to a show called 'Seven dwarfs and Snow White'"* (Yahav, 8 years old in Theatre Talk). [His brother, Harel, 11 years old adds:] *"Of Orna Porat Theatre"*. This may be considered as professional knowledge, from an 11-year-old child. It is a fact that even adults may not be familiar with. As an example, when asked about the criteria for selecting a show from the festival's offering, and if it matters who does the directing, lighting, or décor, one mother said: *"oh God, no… I'm not bothered with that"*.

Although children have theatrical knowledge, Ophir, 8.5 years old struggled to verbally describe her favorites: "in 'Butterflies in the head' (the main Haifa festival's performance of 2022) I loved the actors, and the way it looked, but that I am not so good in explaining. Nevertheless, that (points to her drawing of the outdoor show 'Two of a climb'), it was simply cool! They climbed a post with a bottle and a baguette on their head". It may indicate that outdoor performances, consisted of acrobatic, physical, non-verbal features are easier for some children to absorb, and that way a festival enables children to absorb more than one performance and not be overwhelmed.

**Festive atmosphere**

It is not an everyday thing that children get to experience a festive atmosphere with their family. The children who participated in the research enjoyed the family atmosphere created by the Passover vacation and the trip to the festival. They talked about the members of the family who got together and enjoyed the experience. They also mentioned the members that did not come and missed it. Two of them added their fathers, who did not join them for the festival, to their drawing.

Some children emphasized the advantages of a festival: *"The most fun part was being with my family. I love them".* (Ophir, 8.5 years old). Or *"in general it is fun to see shows, I like it very much. But that has been a totally different atmosphere than just going and sitting and watching a show. It was like… well, let's start with this that we have watched two [performances], even more. So that alone is unique"* (shaked, 13 years old).

The fact that the festival takes place during the Passover holiday enables the parent or parents that usually don’t accompany them, to join the experience: *"it was fun to go with Mom. Usually, we go with Dad or Grandma"* (Sofia, 8 years old). Sofia's mother referred to it as well: *"it was fun. I haven’t been with them in a show for a long time. They don’t usually go with me".*

11 years old Abigail explained why she did not particularly enjoy the ambiance: *"I expected it would be more interesting, and there will be more to do… but maybe it is because I've grown since the last time I've been to a festival. There weren’t any particularly interesting things…Also the street shows… it wasn’t that interesting"*.

But then she adds: *"But* *there were very very bothering things like those large puppets. It was scary. Little children could be scared. It was so scary. My mother said she heard children scream…it is so frightening. You can't look at it. Their eyes and the way they moved, it looked too authentic. It is good that it is authentic, but it is like crazy scary. Less suitable for children".* In the second part of her answer, we might find another explanation to the "not interesting things" she encountered in the festive atmosphere. It was scary (she mentioned 5 times the word scary and even more with other synonyms), not just for younger children' but also for her. The atmosphere might be fun or scaring, but it shows that it was there, and made an impact.

**Outside-inside performances**

Although the weather in the first two days of the festival was extremely hot (34°C), the audience did not refrain from participating in the outdoor performances. People sat under the scorching sun, were fascinated and enjoyed the shows. Nevertheless, some children referred to them as an in between relieves: *"The role of the outside performances is to interest people in the times between the shows inside"* (Michal, 11 years old). *"The outdoor performances are built more on music, so they can interest the audience… they are supposed to go around and interact [with the audience]* (Dawn, 15 years old).

Children who preferred indoor performances explained that *"you can sit, and everything is more spacious and more comfortable, there is better lighting and probably there will be more props and breathing space. Yes. Everything will be better"* (Lia, 13 years old). Older children point out the logic of an outdoor performance: *"that kind of show, it is important that it will be outside. Because basically it tells about something that takes place outside and not inside a person's home"*. (Lia, 13 years old).

There were children who enjoyed both indoors and outdoors performances, and couldn't tell which they enjoyed most: *"I don't know which I enjoyed most – the street shows or regular shows".* The quote indicates that children conceder outdoor shows as "unusual" or irregular. In addition to that, they describe the similar features of both performances: *"you can compare between the two, cause in both there are actors and they are both interesting (…) In the regular show we sat in a closed theatre hall full of people and actors, and it was rather crowded, and one girl clung to me (laughing)"* (Harel, 11 years old). I wonder if children before Covid.19 were aware of crowded places as children are today…

**Quality: commercial, educational, artistic**

The "golden triangle" one seeks to find in a festival as a whole, the right proportions ofcommercial, educational and artistic features, can be found in parents perception of the event, especially those who do not come with theatrical background. They are obliged to choose performances in advance, in order to reserve seats in the indoor performances. One father said he is attending the Haifa Festival every year with his whole family, mother, wife and three children. He claims that in order to refrain from unsuccessful choices, they choose to watch outdoor performances only. They come from a town, an hour drive from Haifa, and spend a whole day moving from one outdoor performance to another.

Other parents, especially those who do not have a theatrical education and cannot choose according to artistic features, will refer to the Media in different ways: *"I don’t choose a performance for the children according to the playwright or the director. I don’t have sufficient theatrical knowledge to take it under consideration. I'd rather choose a show that contains moral or appropriate content, so if we are already wasting our time and money, it will not be in vain and will not contradict our home values"*. This mother adds, that a festival is an event worth the investment: *"we will not drive two hours for a one hour show… it has to be a 'wow' event: Longer, high quality in terms of content, invested. Like the show we went to. It was impressive in its quality, really really beautiful" (...) "We choose the plays according to availability, age, and eventually - the children chose because they know the book".*

Some parents relate to the social dilemmas appear in the original plays that were chosen for the festival: *"I read the information on each performance, in order to make the right choice, and I had a lot of doubts. There were shows that dealt with issues that I had to pause for a moment, and ask myself if I'm supposedly 'forcing' my children to deal with issues they may not be ready for…".* On the other hand, another mother referred to the issue differently: *"I chose the show because I thought they will be engaged… we have gay people in our family… it can make a good impact. It is not like oh my god they will be exposed… it is not new to them".* The words of these accompanying mothers may present the dilemma of the festival management as well as the adult audience, regarding cultural social and emotional issues in the plays. The festival seemed to touch on contemporary social and emotional issues such as LGTBQ parents, divorcing parents, socially rejected children or children with learning disabilities. Parents who seek for educational appropriate content in a performance, may be attracted by a show that presents *"sensitivity, educationalism, progressiveness, inclusion",* as one mother explained. They are looking for more of the educational element of our triangle.

Young audiences' preferences have to do with various aspects, different from adults. For instance, social-emotional aspects: *"I had more fun in the show 'the wrong Ron', because they approached me! Also in the street shows they approached me! Gave me high five!"* (Yahav, 8 years old).

Elder children, or those who come with theatrical background, from home or school, are looking for artistic features, and relate to them when they are gone: *"In the show we went to, there were the musical parts, and I thought to myself – Oh dear! What am I doing here?? It is the kind of acting I don’t like"* (Dawn, 15 years old).

A few of the children referred to the age-related recommendation mentioned in the program. When they were asked to choose a performance they would like to attend, Harel, 11 years old said: *"the show, I thought it would be more for younger children. But when I arrived I understood that it was not just for very young although it was written 8-12, I thought it would be more like 8-10. To tell the truth, I think it was one of the performances I enjoyed the most".*

Quality, preferences, atmosphere, or knowledge are preliminary themes that rise from the data collected. Nonetheless, to conclude with another aspect that emphasizes the advantages of a festival, especially after Corona time, here are the words of a mother for two young children: *"so we took a day off and we made a full vacation out of it. In the morning we went to the show, and then to a restaurant, and then some shopping. So, the whole event of a day of fun, was great and special for them. They were not use to it. For two years they were closed. They hardly have memories of these experiences: a large mass of people, children. I think, from this perspective, it was a fun experience".*

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1. The study was conducted under the auspices of the Israeli Science Foundation in partnership with **Prof. Naphtaly Shem-Tov,** Open University**,** Israel [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. All children's quotations are freely translated from Hebrew by the author. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)