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The Hegemonic Ashkenaziness of Hebrew Theatre

This article argues that Hebrew theatre is defined by a hegemonic Ashkenaziness that has been present from its beginning and which continues today. It identifies four main components of this hegemony, each of which is examined in turn. The first two components, Hebrew culture and Eurocentrism, are analyzed in relation to the repertoire of plays presented at such theatres as Habima, Ohel, and Cameri. This repertoire combines Yiddish plays and translations of European plays, while also reproducing Orientalist attitudes towards Mizrahi culture. The third component, privileged citizenship, centres on the privileges afforded to Ashkenazi artists and actors in the theatre when compared to Mizrahi actors, especially in terms of casting decisions. Finally, hegemonic Ashkenaziness is defined by membership of the middle class, which, in the theatre, leads to productions being targeted at an Ashkenazi audience and its cultural capital.

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IN ISRAELI DISCOURSE, secular, middle-class Ashkenazi Jews of European descent are widely perceived as the hegemonic core in many areas of culture and society. From its inception in the early twentieth century until today, Hebrew theatre produces and reproduces a hegemonic Ashkenazi identity, both in the mainstream and on the fringe. This reproduction is evident in the repertoire of performances, the identity of the artists, directors, and producers, the composition of the audience, and in the critical discourse. This privileged 'Ashkenaziness' is transparent, hidden behind an apparently 'generic' and self-evident Israeli identity in a way that is akin to the hegemonic white identity of western culture.

From the end of the twentieth century, the field of Critical White Studies has offered a perspective that breaks down the privileges of whiteness and white culture, including the representations, symbols, and narratives that are taken for granted.[1] Racial or ethnic identities (such as whiteness or Ashkenaziness) are not essential, but are social constructions related to historical processes and social power relations. Homi K. Bhabha argues that whiteness is a power whose existence remains invisible, leading to what he calls 'the tyranny of the transparent':

The critique of whiteness, whether from literary studies, labour history, autobiography, or sociology, attempts to displace the normativity of the white position by seeing it as a strategy of authority rather than an authentic or essential 'identity'. Since 'whiteness' naturalizes the claim to social power and epistemological privilege, displacing its position cannot be achieved by raising the 'gaze of the other' or by provoking the 'return' of the repressed or the oppressed. The subversive move is to reveal within the very integuments of 'whiteness' the agonistic elements that make it the unsettled, disturbed form of authority that it is – the incommensurable 'differences' that it must surmount; the histories of trauma and terror that it must perpetrate and from which it must protect itself; the amnesia it imposes on itself; the violence it inflicts in the process of becoming a transparent and transcendent force of authority.[2]

Raz Yosef explains that the concept of 'Ashkenaziness' is jarring to Ashkenazi Israelis, who tend to see themselves as liberal and who

experience their Ashkenaziness as 'invisible, transcendent, extending beyond the bounds of skin colour. They are astonished when Mizrahim, especially, turn a critical ethnographic gaze towards them, turning their attention to their Ashkenazi whiteness – an act that seems, to them, racist.'[3] He concludes that one should 'turn (or return) a critical look at that white Ashkenazi point in space, which is not indicated and is allegedly not racist, with which one tends to identify and to infer difference'.[4] Sara Chinski's pioneering work in unpacking Ashkenaziness in the visual arts in Israel has led to a similar trend in other fields, including Israeli cinema, Hebrew literature, and cultural history.[5]

This article uncovers and establishes the meanings of Ashkenaziness and examines the process by which it is produced in Hebrew theatre. It demonstrates that Ashkenaziness in the theatre is complex, contains contradictions, and is unstable. It draws boundaries separating it from other ethnic identities, while, at the same time, erasing its own particularity in order to become transparent. In Israeli theatre, this transparency not only occurs when confronted with the Mizrahi identity, or 'Mizrahiness', of Jews of Middle Eastern and North African descent, as seen both in performances that replicate Orientalist tropes and in critical Mizrahi theatre performances on the fringe of the field.[6] I show that it is rooted in the complex concept of hegemonic Ashkenaziness as a product of Zionism.

The hegemonic Ashkenazi identity developed out of the contrast between the anti-Semitic image of the Eastern European Jew as degenerate, parasitic, and miserable, and the image of the 'new Jew' who is secular, modern, and vibrant, which results in an identity that has a fluid foundation. Yet, as I argue below, the Hebrew theatre helps to establish a hegemonic Ashkenaziness through four main components. First, Hebrew culture and the Zionist doctrine of the 'negation of the diaspora', which I examine in relation to performances that deal with Ashkenazi diasporic culture. Second, Eurocentrism, as evident in the repertoire of western plays that form the basis of Hebrew theatre. Third, privileged citizenship, which, in the case of the theatre,

results in the greater accessibility to mainstream Israeli theatre, especially acting roles, afforded to Ashkenazi artists and theatre professionals in comparison to those from other backgrounds. Fourth, belonging to the middle class: the audience attending Israeli theatres is predominantly from middle-class Ashkenazi backgrounds, whose perceptions are analyzed here through the lens of cultural capital. Each of these four components is examined in turn.

Another significant contribution of this article seeks to make is its re-examination of critical studies conducted since the turn of the millennium, drawing upon examples and critical insights that have emerged from studies of Hebrew theatre. However, these studies rarely use the term 'Ashkenaziness' as a comprehensive concept for Israeli whiteness on the Hebrew stage, while there is only limited reference to the ways in which this Ashkenaziness has manifested throughout the history of Hebrew theatre. This article thus presents a reinterpretation of existing discourse, which typically uses terms such as 'Jewish', 'Hebrew', and 'Israeli' in a general sense, even when referring primarily to Ashkenazi experiences – both diasporic and hegemonic. Although these studies often adopt a critical approach, the omission of the term 'Ashkenaziness' means that the specificity of the phenomenon under investigation is neglected. Consequently, ethnic diversity among Jews is obscured and the ethnic power dynamics between them are disregarded.

Establishing Hegemonic Ashkenaziness

Orna Sasson-Levy proposed the term 'hegemonic Ashkenaziness' to denote the following shared characteristics: a connection between Ashkenazi ethnicity (which can be defined by origin, culture, or habitus) with having veteran status in Israel; being of the middle class or higher; secularism; privileged citizenship; and identification with the State of Israel.[7] There are Ashkenazi people who are not connected to this hegemonic identity, including immigrants from the former USSR who are not part of the middle class, and there are Israelis not from an Ashkenazi background

who have adopted the habitus of hegemonic Ashkenaziness.

Further, Sasson-Levy argues that there is a dual Ashkenazi discourse that marks the boundaries between who is 'western' and who is not while also erasing these boundaries. This dual discourse allows Ashkenazi Jews to remain a transparent, unmarked Israeli social group and thus maintain its privileged status as the universal norm, or the unmarked marker. Zionism created a unified Hebrew culture that blurred Jewish cultural heterogeneity, 'while it also created "equal and more equal" – social hierarchies that largely overlap with the ethno-cultural contours of Israeli society'.[8] It also produced a stratified citizenship, with an ethos built on principles that place the various groups into a hierarchy at the top of which is hegemonic Ashkenaziness:

The ethnic principle that differentiates between Jews and non-Jews, and gives a clear preference to the former; the principle of country of origin that differentiates between European groups with abundant cultural capital and non-European groups with little cultural capital; the principle of relative contribution that distinguishes between the larger contribution of the European groups and the smaller contribution of the non-European groups to the establishment and strengthening of the Zionist project; the gender principle that views the Zionist project as an ideological and political framework that enables the existence of an independent Jewish community that succeeds in shedding the 'feminine fragility' (characterizing the lifestyle of the Jews in the diaspora) and rediscovering its 'masculine qualities'. Therefore, the ethno-republican ethos sees Zionism as a European and masculine project, embodying a promise of national redemption for all Jews.[9]

Ashkenaziness is often presented in opposition to the oppression, discrimination, and struggle experienced by the Mizrahim due to their status and identity. Research has shown inequality between these groups to be the result of government policies, including the unequal distribution of labour, housing, education, and absorption resources.[10] The ethno-class structure was formed through such policies, with Ashkenazi Jews becoming the Israeli middle class. Further, such policies have been shown to be based on Orientalist

conceptions of the Mizrahim that shaped cultural hierarchies between these groups and created material inequalities.[11] Aziza Khazzoom goes further in arguing that Israeli ethnicity is rooted in a process of Orientalization that dates back to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when the westernized Jews of Central and West Europe regarded Jews of East Europe (the Ostjuden) as inferior and backward.[12] Most of the Zionists who migrated to Israel hailed from Eastern Europe and perceived their own process of westernization as integral to the nation-building ideology.

As such, hegemonic Ashkenaziness is, in part, a response to Eastern European diasporic Ashkenaziness, which was perceived as problematic and a barrier to the westernization of Jews in Europe. In the 1950s, veteran Ashkenazim from Eastern Europe barred Mizrahim from positions of influence in Israeli society because Mizrahi migration undermined their security, since they had not yet finished their own process of westernization. Ashkenazim in Israel thus acted in a similar way to German Jews in the late nineteenth century, who perceived their recently achieved status as westerners as being threatened by the mass immigration of Jews from Eastern Europe. The westernization of Ashkenazi Jewry was achieved through the rejection of Yiddish and religious tradition. Hebrew-language theatre was born and flourished in Eastern Europe and has been shaped by the same Orientalist attitudes as those outlined above; that is, it erases Mizrahi identity and presents European aesthetics and themes as the normative standard.

Hebrew Culture and Negation of the Ashkenazi Diaspora on the Stage?

Hebrew culture is based on the negation of Ashkenazi diasporic culture, which is also evident in the oppression of the Palestinian, Jewish-Mizrahi, and ultra-Orthodox Jewish populations.[13] This repression and negation – epitomized in the Zionist movement's concept of the 'negation of the diaspora' – is key in order to create a unified and hegemonic Ashkenazi culture. It is a reaction to the

179

Orientalization of the 'Ostjuden' and is intended to 'whiten' and reshape Eastern European Jews as 'new Jews' who are westernized, modern and secular.

Sara Chinski argues that the impact of 'negation of the diaspora' is two-fold: it represses and rejects diasporic culture, and it silences the act of negation itself in order to produce a transparent, universal, and authoritarian hegemonic Ashkenaziness.[14] However, the mandate of this negation is not absolute; rather, it is a lengthy negotiation between the requirement for such a negation and the complexity of applying the concept. From the end of the nineteenth century to the present, there has been ambivalence regarding representations of the diaspora, and these vary, from attempts to discard diasporic culture, to a desire to preserve parts of it as a source of nostalgia and identity building.

Plays related to diasporic culture have emerged throughout the history of Hebrew theatre. Translations of plays and adaptations of Yiddish texts representing Jewish life in Eastern Europe were undertaken for several reasons. First, the Ashkenazi audience members were interested in subjects from the European homeland and Yiddish culture, which were especially important for the Israeli-born secular Ashkenazism as they formulated their own relationship to Judaism. Second, in the act of creating theatre, artists draw on the materials, contents, and associations that are related to their own culture. The people involved in Hebrew theatre were well rooted in Yiddish culture, and so it was almost impossible for them to ignore this world and to create a Hebrew theatre out of nothing.

In Hebrew plays about the life of the *shtetls* (Jewish townships) of Eastern Europe, an ambivalence arises that moves between the desire to be 'whitened' and westernized and an identification with the *shtetl* (Figure 1). Lea Goldberg best describes this tension in her critique of the play *Fishke the Lame, a*n adaptation of Mendele Mocher Seforim's novel of the same name, which was directed by Moshe Halevi and performed at the Ohel Theatre in 1939:

Why? First and foremost because Mendele's merciless talent has long sought its way on to the stage, and we should not rob ourselves of the treasures of the Jewish spirit in all their forms. Why? Maybe because it is pleasant now to sit in the theatre hall and see the distance between us and this experience, to see, with all the pain we are still suffering about Fishke and his environment, the road we have travelled, and that we are far from this whole farce, and we see it . . . almost as exoticism, as something that belongs to a world other than ours. And that's good. A bit of objectivity in relation to this experience that is no longer ours. After all, there is some consolation in this as well.[15]

The complex relationship between maintaining proximity and distancing compels artists to address various representations of the diasporic culture. People in the theatre arts tend to disapprove of Yiddish theatre and perceive it to be cheap popular entertainment that recalls traits of the 'negated diaspora'.[16] As hegemonic Ashkenaziness became transparent, and the connection to diaspora culture weakened, performances that pointed to the Eastern European origins of the culture could 'stain' this transparent ethnicity and jeopardize the westernization of Ashkenazim. Symbols of diasporic culture on stage, such as Hasidic clothing, linguistic expressions, and the design of the *shtetl*, are thus problematic, and so these performances are designed to maintain an artistic distance from Yiddish theatre. Artists and the audience will be able to empathize and identify with what is happening on stage, while clearly distinguishing themselves from the Ashkenazi diasporic culture (Figure 2).

Dorit Yerushalmi notes a historiographical blind spot in the study of Hebrew theatre, which ignores the affiliations of Hebrew theatre troupes such as Habima and Ohel with popular and artistic Yiddish theatre, as well as the personal connections between Habima actors and Yiddish actors and theatre professionals.[17] Habima staged plays translated from Yiddish that became iconic, including S. Ansky's *The Dybbuk* (1922) and H. Leivick's *The Golem* (1925), and put a meaningful Ashkenazi Jewish world on the stage that formed a bridge between the image of the diasporic Jew and the 'new Jew'. Yair Lipshitz argues that the central national image in *The Dybbuk* is not the strong male body of the new Jew, but a hybrid image – a virginal, white female body

180

Figure 1. *Fiddle Strings.* Habima Theatre. Photographer unknown. Photo and permission from The Israeli Center for the Documentation of the Performing Arts.

that is an obsession of the masculine.[18] The character of the golem, as designed by Aharon Meskin, was strong and sexually masculine, but also infantile. Thus, the 'new Jew' embodied in the golem, who protects diasporic Jews from a pogrom, does not reflect the heroes of the Hebrew Bible, but is a hybridized figure who is powerful and clownish at the same time.

Actor and director Barukh Chemerinsky directed and sensitively adapted Shalom Aleichem's works for the stage in Israel, including *The Old Country* (1933, with Zvi Friedland), *The Magic Tale* (1934), *Fiddle Strings* (1935), *Kasrilevke* (1939), and *Tuvia the Dairyman* (1943). Chemerinsky emphasized visual elements, moved away from a realistic representation of the *shtetl*, and formulated 'a dictionary of folk language that is a medium for theatrical creation'.[19] The luckless buffoon-jester at the centre of the plays is

not a diasporic Jew because 'the stage adaptations did not force a judgemental or negative image on the characters . . . In [Chemerinsky's] plays, the "old Jew" is portrayed as an "artist of survival" and being a jester as an "experience of existence".'[20] Yerushalmi claims that the plays created a celebratory atmosphere between the audience hall and the stage, between Shalom Aleichem's fictitious town of Kasrilevke and the Ashkenazi immigrants' 'New Kasrilevke' in Tel Aviv, a 'provincial-universal town'.

In contrast, for the Cameri Theatre's 1950 production of *Wandering Stars*, based on a Shalom Aleichem novel about a travelling Yiddish theatre troupe, director Zygmunt Turkow created a play-within-a-play, and moved from the conventions of Yiddish theatre to create a metatheatrical distance. The production was unpopular among the Ashkenazi audience in Tel Aviv. Turkow blamed

181

Figure 2. *Fiddle Strings.* Habima Theatre. Photographer unknown. Photo and permission from The Israeli Center for the Documentation of the Performing Arts.

the Cameri actors for their alienating portrayal of 'diasporic' Yiddish:

The Cameri troupe consisted of several veteran actors from German and other theatres, for whom Jewish theatre was synonymous with poor taste, and mostly young actors, who dismissed anything that came or everything that belonged to the 'diaspora'. . . . More than once I had to force the actors to say their roles not as a 'Jew', which meant a mocking 'Jewish accent', but to act as they do when they play roles of English, French, or any other people . . . nevertheless they acted specifically as Jews . . . of course it was not malice on their part, just simple ignorance.[21]

Another director, Yossi Izraeli, dealt with Jewish-Eastern European material in plays such as *There Was a Righteous Man* (1968), *The Bridal Canopy* (1972), *A Simple Story* (1979), *The Seven Beggars* (1979), and *The Dybbuk* (1985). He saw Jewish-Ashkenazi theatre as a site for refining this medium of expression and as a type of experimental theatre, outside of mainstream entertainment.[22] Izraeli moved

away from a realistic representation of the symbols of the Jewish settlement and disapproved of '*shtetl* plays' that were perceived as entertaining. In *There Was a Righteous Man* and *The Bridal Canopy*, for example, most of the actors wore regular clothes, which the critics labelled 'Hasidic Judaism in jeans'. Yerushalmi notes that programmes for *The Bridal Canopy* included pictures of Chemerinsky's plays with captions labelling them 'Yiddishkeit' plays, thus ignoring Chemerinsky's unique theatre language.[23] It was important for Izraeli to distinguish himself as a director who had moved away from Yiddish theatre and to emphasize his 'western and white' image as an experimental theatre artist.

In the 2000s, Ofira Henig revived the works of Shalom Aleichem with *The Town of the Little People* (2006), a collection of stories that take place in Kasrilevke, at the Jerusalem Khan Theatre. Henig stated in the programme that she examines the concept of memory and forgetfulness and opposes the erasure of diasporic-Ashkenazi culture. She dedicated the play 'to all those who have lost their mother tongue [Yiddish], voluntarily or involuntarily'.[24] Meticulously directed and with an empty stage, Henig sketches a secluded, ugly, immoral town with none of the humour of the original work. One of the harshest images is the 'creature', a mentally retarded girl who is sexually exploited by the town's boys. Henig positions Kasrilevke in contemporary Israel and presents it as ugly, immoral, and alienated. Yet inadvertently, and contrary to her intention, she uses the anti-Semitic image of the Ostjuden. The assertion that Israel has not left the *shtetl* behind confirms the underlying premise of the concept of 'negation of the diaspora'; that is, that diasporic culture is degenerate and should be erased. Despite her intentions, Henig finds it difficult to empathetically shape a diasporic-Ashkenazi world as part of hegemonic Ashkenaziness.

Eurocentrism: 'A Villa in the Jungle'

Playwright Hanoch Levin phrased Israel's fascination with Europe as follows: 'God, grant us one month of good, real, Swiss boredom! Because we no longer have the strength for the

fascinating life of Asia.'[25] This desire to be part of Europe was formulated in Theodor Herzl's 1896 Zionist manifesto: 'We should there form a portion of a rampart of Europe against Asia, an outpost of civilization as opposed to barbarism. We should as a neutral State remain in contact with all Europe, which would have to guarantee our existence.'[26] Israel has built a political, cultural, and social wall between itself and the Middle East because it sees itself as a branch of western civilization, a 'villa in the jungle', in the words of former prime minister Ehud Barak. Israel's eagerness to join the West is paradoxical – to leave Europe physically to establish the State of Israel yet to return to Europe culturally and to be affiliated with all the (European) nations.

The concept of Eurocentrism spread during centuries of colonialism, with Europe positioned in the collective imagination as the cultural and historical centre of the world.[27] Allegedly, the best thinking and writing in all spheres of life were created in the West, and so Europe seemed to offer the source of meaning and wisdom, as a symbolic centre that had universal appeal. This perception was accompanied by a sense of superiority, as if this culture held essential virtues that offer political and moral justification for colonial violence against the occupied peoples. After the end of the colonial era, Eurocentrism continued to spread in people's consciousness and is well embedded in public discourse. It normalizes power relations and shapes worldviews through images and representations in media, education, and culture. As Robert Stam and Ella Shohat explain: 'Since Eurocentrism is a historically situated discourse and not a genetic inheritance, Europeans can be anti-Eurocentric, just as non-Europeans can be Eurocentric.'[28]

Zionist Eurocentrism is fully present in Hebrew theatre, whose founders emigrated from Europe and saw themselves as part of the culture of European theatre. The Habima Theatre was founded in 1919 in Moscow under the auspices of Stanislavsky's Moscow Art Theatre, and its expressionist style was one of the innovations of modern theatre. The Cameri Theatre was influenced by Central European and American styles. In the 1950s and 1960s,

Israeli-born actors of Ashkenazi descent travelled to the United States, England, and throughout Europe. Today, acting schools in Israel teach western methods, from realism to physical acting styles. The field of Israeli theatre was and still is clearly Eurocentric.

In 1930, Habima mounted a production of Shakespeare's comedy, *Twelfth Night.* Habima members chose Michael Chekhov as director because they wanted to develop artistically. The choice of Shakespeare was 'different from their repertoire choice up to that time, which had focused only on Jewish issues'.[29] The setting of the play was not related to Israel or the Jewish *shtetl*, but had expanded:

A space that has no source of non-artistic reference: a stage space of the pure realms of art . . . The actors of the troupe celebrated their great artistic achievement – expanding the artistic range of Habima members as actors. Their longing to huddle in the hall of universal art seemed to them perfectly natural and self-evident. Their western affiliation did not conflict with the Jewish or Zionist one.[30]

As Shelly Zer-Zion argues, this was a Eurocentric artistic approach:

From [their origin as] a Jewish troupe that uses the theatrical language of the Soviet avant-garde to reveal the language of Jewish art that is inherent in the mind and body of each of the actors, they sought to become a theatre troupe operating according to universal European aesthetic standards; and in the language of Homi K. Bhabha according to 'white' artistic standards. . . . Habima sought to 'whiten' itself and erase the 'dark' Jewish hue that had previously been so present in the troupe's performance language. When Chekhov described the process of working with the troupe, he described how he helped the troupe 'whiten' itself and dim the Jewish presence.[31]

Under Chekhov's guidance, the actors got rid of the exaggerated expressionist style identified with Eastern European 'Jewish' gesticulations. As Zer-Zion concludes, 'the "whitening" process is successfully completed, above expectations. The troupe has learned the secret of Shakespearean comedic lightness. The grotesque, Eastern European Jews can completely encompass the western world.'[32]

In 1945, the Cameri actors, some of whom emigrated from Central Europe and some of

whom were native Israelis, staged their first production, Carlo Goldoni's *The Servant of Two Masters*, directed by Joseph (Pepo) Milo, founder of the Cameri Theatre. The production was heavily influenced by Max Reinhardt, who had directed the same play in the 1930s and with whom Milo corresponded; German-Jewish spectators testified to the similarities between the two productions.[33] Leah Gilula explains that, during his travels, Milo was regularly updated on activities in the world of theatre, made connections with artists, and was exposed to new plays for the Cameri. The choice of *The Servant of Two Masters*, a light-hearted classic comedy with no connection to the Zionist message, heralded a turn in the Hebrew theatre repertoire away from Jewish materials and towards European and American dramas. This shift is still reflected in the contemporary repertoire of Israeli public theatre and the staging of translations of Greek classics, Shakespeare, Molière, and modern drama.[34] It is rare to stage Arabic plays, and such productions are usually only done in fringe theatre venues such as the Acco Festival or the Arab-Hebrew Theatre in Jaffa.[35]

Milo's belief in the role of Israeli theatre echoes Hertzl's Eurocentrism, with the theatre serving as a 'rampart' against the 'barbarism' of the peoples of the Middle East. In 1954, at the celebration of the first decade of Cameri, he wrote:

We strive for high-quality theatre, which will be free from all manifestations of provinciality and the Levantine, which are, to a large extent, a hallmark of several areas of our spiritual lives today. These discoveries are our lot because we are a small, new, non-traditional country, far from cultural centres that can serve as a source of inspiration and influence, and we sit on the border of countries whose cultural backwardness gives us a sense of superiority, though not due to our cultural level advantage.[36]

Despite the development of a more critical perception in Israel and around the world, Milo maintained this Eurocentric view, arguing in 1989:

Even before [Israel's] War of Independence, and even more so after it, I always preached . . . for the establishment of public theatres . . . throughout the country: in Jerusalem, in Haifa, in Safed, in Kiryat Shmona, in Beer Sheva, etc. There were arguments against me, that my ideas were fanciful and unrealistic: the country is small and the audience is barely large enough for the existing handful of theatres. I thought that precisely because the country is small and isolated – geographically, politically, and culturally – it must develop an intensive cultural life, in order not to sink into provincial mediocrity, and so it would be resilient against Levantine influences of the uncultured societies of the Middle East.[37]

Milo argued that 'shedding provincialism' in the theatre will help all social strata in Israel because it will help them 'acquire cultural experiences through quality entertainment, and, in short, to be – as they say today – a factor in social and cultural integration'.[38]

Milo's words resonate with a Eurocentrism that is built on hierarchical contrasts: nation/tribe, religion/superstition, culture/folklore, security/terrorism, progress/backwardness, and centre/provincialism. The theatre attributed to Mizrahi Jews living in peripheral cities shared many of the traits that were attributed to the surrounding Arab nations, such as being underdeveloped, backward, and degenerate. While Milo's remarks in 1989 were written in a different tone to earlier comments, he maintained the belief that integration meant the complete assimilation of Mizrahi Jews into a hegemonic Ashkenazi culture, and that the theatre could help to bring this about.

Today, Eurocentrism is still found in the world of Hebrew theatre. For example, Miri Regev, Israel's Minister of Culture, affiliated with the right-wing Likud party, ignited an inflammatory discourse with theatre-makers over her various provocations and censorship via budget cuts. However, legitimate criticism against her soon escalated into problematic statements. Veteran director and actor Oded Kotler, for example, declared: 'Imagine your world, Mrs Regev, as a quiet world, with no book, no music, no poem, a world with no one to disturb . . . the nation, in its celebration of thirty mandates, followed by a marching herd of beasts chewing straw and stubble.'[39] In this statement, which was made at an artists' conference opposing Regev's cultural policy, Kotler is referring to the people who voted for the Likud party, many of who are identified as Mizrahi Jews living in peripheral areas

of Israel. Kotler is here echoing the contrast between the 'progressive' hegemonic Ashkenazi artists and audience, and the 'uncultured and backward' Mizrahim, whom he compares to animals. Such remarks in the current cultural climate, have caused great controversy and accusations of arrogance and racism.

Privileged Citizenship: Whiteness as the Default

Privileged citizenship is expressed in the distribution of material and symbolic resources for the benefit of those affiliated with the hegemonic Ashkenazi culture in such fields as housing, healthcare, employment, education, and culture.[40] The justification for such privileges lies in the real and imagined contribution of hegemonic Ashkenaziness to the Zionist enterprise.[41] Ashkenazi Israelis often do not perceive themselves as having privileges. They see their lives as normative and neutral, and that their privileges are a natural and necessary result of their abilities and talents.[42]

Ashkenazi Jews involved in the theatre have greater access to its material and symbolic resources. The field of theatre is centralized, created by Ashkenazi Jews, and its repertoire of performances appeals to Ashkenazi audiences.[43] Most gatekeepers, including directors, producers, members of award committees, those designating budgets in the Ministry of Culture, and so forth, come from this hegemonic background. The dominance of Ashkenazi males can be seen among playwrights and directors. Throughout a hundred years of Hebrew theatre, for example, only four Mizrahi artistic directors have been appointed to the seven major theatres, three of which were appointed only in the last fifteen years. This domination by Ashkenazi males impacts the development of the profession and leaves an imprint on the art, encouraging young actors to reproduce this hegemony.[44]

My focus here is on how the hegemonic Ashkenazi privilege manifests in the politics of casting in the theatre due to its salient visibility. Actors' bodies, voices, and public images are part of performances, so ethnic identity is a consideration in casting. Theatre roles are cast in accordance with the Eurocentric values that underpin westernized Hebrew culture. While the whiteness of Ashkenazi actors becomes transparent, allowing them to play almost any role, dark-skinned actors with a non-standard pronunciation of Hebrew often encounter various barriers.

An ethnographic study conducted between 2007 and 2012 shows that veteran Ashkenazi actors benefit from (and thus illustrate) the elitism and Eurocentrism of Israeli mainstream theatre due to three key reasons: being 'pioneers', acting work, and classic roles.[45] The pioneers and veterans who played a vital role in the long and difficult journey of constructing a Hebrew theatre are granted a seal of approval and various privileges. Their acting work, public image, and the accumulation of significant roles they have played in the past gives them an image of being larger than life. Likewise, their ability to perform classical roles from western dramas gives them, and Hebrew theatre more broadly, the image of being artistic and 'cultured' in the Eurocentric sense of the word.

Despite various changes during the history of Israeli theatre, actors who do not come from the hegemonic Ashkenazi community have difficulty passing the gatekeepers. Up until the 1960s, the Habima, Ohel, and Cameri theatres were organized according to a collective method: the founding group was involved in artistic management, division of roles, and acceptance of new actors and artists. This method limited the director when casting actors, which means that casting decisions were not always based on talent, age, or physical appearance, but stemmed from power relations in the collective. Veteran actors were often granted lead and other roles over young and Mizrahi actors, who were (and still are) excluded from even minor roles, denying them the possibility of professional development.

Yerushalmi examines how this method functioned in Habima, specifically in the case of the superstar actress Hanna Rovina and the actresses whom she overshadowed (Figure 3).[46] Rovina did not take advantage of her status to support a political-feminist struggle, but accepted and strengthened her

Figure 3. Hannah Rovina in *The Dybbuk.* Habima Theatre. Photographer unknown. Photo and permission from The Israeli Center for the Documentation of the Performing Arts.

Figure 4. Shoshana Duer and Shimon Finkel in *Peer Gynt.* Habima Theatre. Photographer unknown. Photo and permission from The Israeli Center for the Documentation of the Performing Arts.

status as a symbol of the Zionist-Ashkenazi hegemony:

In this sense, not only was her consistent casting for lead roles a silencing factor for Habima actresses, but also the fact that the characters she played were reviewed by theatre commentators and critics using different scales than those for ordinary actresses. Her unchallenged position at the top of the pyramid, which largely dictated the plays that provided her with appropriate roles, left limited space for other actresses, within which their activity was at the level of theatre practice, i.e., their struggle for roles and work.[47]

One of the actresses whom Rovina over-shadowed was the Syrian-born Mizrahi actress Shoshana Duer, who immigrated to Israel in 1925. Duer was accepted into Habima in 1932, but was only accepted as a member of the collective in 1947. She predominantly played supporting roles, and it was not until the mid-1950s that she was given the chance to prove herself in major roles and receive critical

acclaim (Figure 4). This effort involved struggle and hardship for her as a Mizrahi woman: 'Shoshana Duer's struggle was different from that of the actresses from the first circle because she had to both become an actress and also go through a process of assimilation into a group, all of whose members were from Eastern Europe.'[48]

The Habima, Ohel, and Cameri were created by Ashkenazim, and, despite the tensions, competition and personal rivalries within this group, non-Ashkenazi actors found it very difficult to secure a place. The accent of Mizrahi actors who immigrated to Israel in the 1950s was perceived to be an obstacle, especially at a time when the prominent Eastern European accent of many theatre actors was taken to be the norm.[49] Such Orientalist views have continued to block the acceptance of Mizrahim. As Aryeh Elias says of his repeated rejections at auditions:

Through the years, there have been these reactions to me: laughing at the very idea that I was doing a

186

Shakespearean piece in Arabic. After they laughed, they would start with the questions: Did you come to Israel on a donkey? What, is there a drama academy in Baghdad? . . . Hamlet may have a Russian accent . . . but not an Arabic accent.[50]

The mockery of Shakespeare in Arabic, ostensibly an oxymoron, testifies to the bias in casting politics, which, in turn, has led to Elias working mainly in commercial theatre, film, and television.

Mizrahi actors who attended drama schools in Israel in the 1960s and 1970s also recount how they were given minor roles and few lines so the audience would hear less of their pronunciation of the letters ḥet and ayin. They were often excluded from performing in classic dramas: 'She [a well-known director] sits in a rehearsal hall in my presence, and says she will never take an actor from the Mizrahi world to act in a Shakespeare play.'[51] Actor Moshe Ivgy, a native of Morocco, shares a similar account of his start in theatre in the 1980s: 'In my auditions, they kept accepting incompetent people just because they were Ashkenazi.'[52]

Another dark-skinned actor of Jewish-Yemenite descent describes the casting difficulties he faced in the 1990s in his 2004 autobiographical show, *Simply Yossi Zabari*.[53] Zabari says that his voice coach demanded that he stop speaking with the bold guttural consonants typical of a Mizrahi and Arabic accent. As a young actor, he felt encouraged when the well-known director Omri Nitzan invited him to act in the play *Murder*, written by prominent playwright Hanoch Levin, to be performed at the Cameri Theatre. But he was disappointed when he was offered a small role with almost no lines and no opportunity to demonstrate his talent for singing and dancing. Today, Zabari gives spoken-word-performances of his poignant political poetry and has become a prominent figure on social media networks as an artist outside the mainstream.

Since the end of the twentieth century, a critical discourse has developed on the politics of casting in the western world.[54] Dark-skinned actors note the discrimination against casting them on stage and screen. The Actors' Equity Association in the United States identified the problem of discrimination on the

basis of racial identity, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or health problems, noting the phenomenon of 'traditional casting'; that is, casting actors for roles according to hegemonic audience expectations in which white actors are the default. Non-traditional casting, by contrast, rejects this white default and allows equal opportunity in auditions, which has led to an increase in such characters as Antigone, Oedipus, Romeo, and Juliet being played by black or Asian actors. Similarly, the practice of white actors performing in blackface is generally taken to be racist.

In Israel, such critical discourse is almost non-existent. For example, when the actor Mickey Leon played Othello at the Gesher Theatre in 2015, Israeli theatre critics made no mention of the fact that he performed with his face and body darkened. The director Ofira Henig, who directed the Jerusalem Khan Theatre, sharply criticizes the politics of casting in the mainstream:

Israeli theatre favours white Israeliness. It is a generation behind television and cinema. Most of the cultural managers continue to cast according to colour, race, religion, and sex, not noticing that Peter Brook had already started the revolution when he cast a black man in the role of Hamlet, and that for quite some time now, even in the English theatre, which is very popular in Israel, actors of African or Indian origin are cast in the role of Henry V, the ultimate English king. In most cases, my casting choices are met with mumbling and hushed opposition, if only to avoid accusing me, God forbid, of the very same racism.[55]

Despite the desire of Hebrew theatre to perceive itself as part of the West, it is not up to date in discourse on non-traditional casting, and continues to insist on casting white actors, which strengthens the privilege of Ashkenazi actors. Just as the actress Hanna Rovina became an early symbol of national-Zionist-Ashkenazi identity, today the famous actor Itay Tiran serves as a central image of hegemonic Ashkenazi. Yerushalmi analyzes the Cameri Theatre's 2005 production of *Hamlet*, directed by Omri Nitzan:

Does not Hamlet, as played by Tiran . . . resonate with the collective image of the dream hero: Israeli, Ashkenazi, beautiful, sensitive, talented, successful,

undecided, hesitant, socio-politically active, who still believes all paths lead to a stable centre, against which normative values are defined? From this, one can ask whether one day Hamlet will be able to express our existence as a multicultural society. This is not only a question of casting, but also, and above all, of consent to multiplicity and heterogeneity.[56]

Belonging to the Middle Class: The Ashkenazi Audience

Belonging to the socio-economic middle class is part of hegemonic Ashkenaziness, which means earning a relatively high income, having a western education, and living in an urban area and choice geographical location, all which are translated into cultural capital.[57] 'Cultural capital' refers to a world of content and knowledge, ownership of which confers social superiority in the form of preferential status and even dominance in the social structure. Ashkenazi cultural capital makes it possible to be an 'apparently natural member of the complex cultural concept known as "Israeliness"' and includes such cultural attributes as mastery of standard Hebrew pronunciation, familiarity with canonical Israeli literature and music, knowledge of Judaism and Zionism, and so forth.[58] The Ashkenazi audience has greater economic access and geographical proximity to the theatre. Their cultural capital differentiates them from other groups and allows them to claim the unifying Ashkenaziness of the theatre performances, to attribute to themselves a refined and unique artistic taste, and to perceive themselves as the cultural elite.

As early as 1910, before the crystallization of Hebrew theatre, Eliyahu Hardon criticized the repertoire of 'fans of Hebrew theatre' that appealed to Ashkenazi cultural capital:

The Jaffa Association . . . does nothing to create shows for the greater part of the population of the Settlement – the Sephardim [Mizrahi Jews]. . . . the main thing is that it lacks a suitable repertoire . . . and the reason is very simple. The content of the shows is far from the heart of the Sephardim. All those comedies of Chekhov or Gogol dramas . . . and the like, are for the good of the Ashkenazim coming from Russia.[59]

The development of Israeli theatre took place in Tel Aviv for an audience mainly comprised of Ashkenazi immigrants, who were familiar with Eastern European and Yiddish theatre.[60] Immigrants from Germany and other European countries brought with them a tradition of the contemporary modern Central European theatre of their time.[61] Further, Hebrew theatre troupes went on tours in Europe until the outbreak of the Second World War and directed their performances towards a European audience. Such factors challenged the creation of a repertoire, which did not always suit the two audiences, Israeli and European.[62]

At the beginning of the development of modern Hebrew culture, most of the Jews in Israel were immigrants and their mother tongue was not Hebrew. The theatre set nationalist goals as part of the revival of the Hebrew language and the creation of a Zionist culture. To a certain extent, Hebrew theatre did not represent reality, but, rather, created and produced images that served as a role model for reality. Hebrew theatre demonstrated, in a tangible, physical, and intimate way, how the Ashkenazi audience could communicate, love, argue, reconcile, and more, in Hebrew alone.

The Ashkenazi audience resides mainly in the major cities in the central part of Israel, especially in Tel Aviv, where Habima, Cameri, Beit Lesin, Gesher, Ohel (in the past), and fringe theatres are located. Tel Aviv is the cultural and intellectual centre of Israel, and the place where cultural tastes are created, regulated, and directed. Since the 1920s, it has also been shaped as a bourgeois centre, with the theatre being a key institution through which the Ashkenazi audience establishes its self-image. Yerushalmi notes that in the 1950s, the Zionist ideological message was to settle the frontier, rather than live in a materialistic culture.[63] Tel Aviv, on the other hand, strove for bourgeois leisure, recreation, and culture. Going to the theatre represents active participation in urban culture, especially those places geared towards consumerism and entertainment, which existed despite the Zionist message. Yerushalmi, again, explains that recent marketing campaigns have emphasized the fact that the plays performed in Tel Aviv are also being performed in major cultural centres in the West. Thus,

188

Ashkenazi audience members can see themselves as partners in a sophisticated urban culture, alongside residents of Paris, London, and New York.

Various surveys conducted from the 1960s to the 1990s show that 'a significant part of the audience of the Israeli theatre . . . is of Ashkenazi descent, with an academic education and . . . engaged in a "middle-class profession"', while at the same time, 'the group with the highest proportion of non-theatregoers is religious people with low education of Mizrahi descent'.[64] This situation has not changed, even in the new millennium.

Data from the Israel Ministry of Culture show that most theatre performances appear almost entirely in localities with a high socio-economic level, compared to a small number of performances in localities at the lower end of the socio-economic scale. Hence, Israeli theatre still appeals to a middle-class Ashkenazi audience, 'which was once the central core of Israeli hegemonic culture, and today, against the background of cultural multiplicity, is a narrow and sectoral segment'.[65] Dan Urian concludes that 'theatre as an institution – as a meeting place and as a place where plays are presented – still serves the Ashkenazi-secular population, which clearly has problems with itself, in terms of the changes that have taken place within it, and in its conflicts with other groups'.[66]

Towards a Middle Eastern Ashkenaziness

Multicultural ideas are beginning to enter Israeli discourse about theatre. Yossi Yonah and I formulated three criteria for a critical multicultural policy.[67] The first is representation of various cultural groups among the decision-makers of theatre institutions, including as members of the board, CEOs, artistic directors, and creators. The second is providing culturally and aesthetically diverse content in the repertoire of performances, as well as equal opportunities for creators from different cultural groups who have previously been excluded. The third is that the theatre must appeal to diverse audiences, outside hegemonic Ashkenaziness, allow for economic accessibility, and provide a repertoire that matches the cultural capital of the various groups. Today, most of the theatre activity of groups that are not part of the hegemonic Ashkenaziness is located outside the mainstream – works such as Mizrahi theatre, religious theatre, and Arabic theatre.[68] These troupes work on a low budget with little public support and outside the view of the media and academic discourse.

Is it possible to imagine a non-hegemonic Ashkenaziness in Israel? Can there be a 'Middle Eastern Ashkenaziness' that is able to give up its Eurocentric aspirations and cease striving to be a 'villa in the jungle'? Can a Middle Eastern Ashkenaziness contain the Ashkenazi diasporic tradition, yet look 'at eye level' at the diasporic traditions of non-Ashkenazi Jews (from the Middle East, Ethiopia, and other backgrounds) and of the surrounding Arab culture? The realization of this potential option would necessitate a sharp transformation that would dismantle privileged citizenship and its ideological justifications.

Theatre may produce utopian moments, which are not a simplistic representation of utopia, but an ethically and aesthetically significant experience.[69] The utopian-performative indicates a transient experience between the participants in a theatre event. This experience raises sensitivities and emotions, and offers social and political possibilities that do not exist in the present. The utopian-performative moment is transformative because through aesthetic realization, a real collaborative experience is formed in a theatre event that does not exist in current reality, but which has the potential to materialize in the future.[70] I wonder whether, and to what extent, Hebrew theatre is capable of producing utopian-transformative moments that would imagine and embody a Middle Eastern Ashkenaziness and would mark the beginning of the long awaited change.

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