



**Raffaele ESPOSITO**

**Università di Napoli L'Orientale**

**[raffaele.esposito@unior.it](mailto:raffaele.esposito@unior.it)**

Raffaele Esposito is associate professor of modern and contemporary Hebrew language and literature at the University of Naples L'Orientale.

His research areas include contemporary Israeli fiction and the history of Hebrew and Yiddish theatre. He published a monograph on the origin of Hebrew theatre and is currently writing a history of Yiddish theatre.

Raffaele Esposito est maître de conférences en langue et littérature hébraïque moderne et contemporaine à l'Université de Naples L'Orientale.

Ses domaines de recherche comprennent la fiction israélienne contemporaine et l'histoire du théâtre hébreu et yiddish. Il a publié une monographie sur l'origine du théâtre hébreu et il rédige actuellement une histoire du théâtre yiddish.



## **Jewish Theatres and Jewish Languages. Intersections of the Yiddish and the Hebrew Stage**

### **ABSTRACT**

It is commonly understood that the two voices of Jewish national discourse in the early twentieth century, Yiddishism and Hebrew-based Zionism, reflected two separate, distant, and non-communicating worlds. Therefore, their artistic outputs are rarely explored as an interconnected whole. Despite the heated debate and the unbridgeable gap on fundamental issues such as homeland and language, it is nonetheless evident that these two contrasting worlds were intertwined. Besides sharing the same origins in Yiddish-speaking Eastern European communities, most people from both parties had cultural and political experiences in common.

In the artistic turmoil of the 1920s, Yiddish and Hebrew culture expressed similar experiences when two workers' theatres were established in New York City and in Mandatory Palestine, the Artef and the Ohel, respectively. Both companies were founded in the same year by former members of Habima Theatre from Moscow and were heavily influenced by the Russian revolutionary and artistic experience. As workers' theatres, they were both formed by non-professional actors who kept their day jobs in the factories or in the fields and were organised as collectives. Sharing an idea of politically committed high culture and art theatre, they offered similar repertoires, staging Western plays on the condition of workers as well as Yiddish folk heritage, which the Ohel translated into Hebrew.

Their parallel experiences are presented here and considered within the framework of Jewish politically committed drama and theatre beyond language and land boundaries.

**KEYWORDS:** Hebrew theatre, Yiddish theatre, Jewish theatre, political theatre, workers' theatre



## RÉSUMÉ

De manière générale, il est considéré qu'au début du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle les deux « voix » du discours national juif – le Yiddishisme et le Sionisme basé sur l'hébreu – reflètent deux mondes séparés et distants qui ne communiquent pas. Par voie de conséquence, leurs productions artistiques sont rarement explorées comme un ensemble interconnecté. Au-delà de l'origine commune des communautés de l'Europe de l'Est de langue yiddish, la plupart des gens des deux groupes partagent des expériences culturelles et politiques communes.

Dans la tourmente artistique des années '20, les cultures yiddish et hébraïque ont subi des expériences similaires, dans un moment où, à New York et en Palestine mandataire, deux théâtres ouvriers naissent : Artef et Ohel. Les deux compagnies théâtrales ont été fondées la même année par des anciens membres du Théâtre Habima de Moscou, tout en étant profondément influencées par l'expérience révolutionnaire et artistique russe. En tant que théâtres ouvriers, les deux ont été formés par des comédiens amateurs qui travaillaient dans les usines pendant la journée, et qui étaient organisés en collectifs. Partageant la même idée d'une « haute culture » et d'un art théâtral politiquement engagés, les deux compagnies proposaient des répertoires similaires. On mettait en scène à la fois des pièces « occidentales » traitant de la condition des ouvriers ainsi que des pièces inspirées par l'héritage folklorique yiddish, ces dernières étant traduites en hébreu par les membres de la compagnie Ohel.

Leurs expériences parallèles sont décrites dans cet article et considérées à l'intérieur d'un cadre théorique qui englobe un art théâtral et un théâtre juif politiquement engagés, au-delà des frontières linguistiques et territoriales.

**MOTS-CLÉS :** théâtre hébraïque, théâtre yiddish, théâtre juif, théâtre politique, théâtre ouvrier



## 1. Introduction

Scholarship about the Jewish world in the first half of the twentieth century, when secular Yiddish culture was still alive and well, generally treats Yiddish and Hebrew cultures separately, seeing them as the expressions of two separate worlds in opposition with each other, if not in contradiction.

Not seldom the choice of one language over another was indeed a choice of field in the heated debate about different ideas of Jewish nation. A distinguishing element was territoriality, that is to say the connection between nation and physical land and, more specifically, the relationship with the Land of Israel. The opposing views can be summarised in two slogans. On the one hand, the Yiddishist vision on an inherently diasporic Jewish nation was expressed by a famous claim of the Bund, the Jewish Socialist Party in Eastern Europe: *Dortn vu mir lebn, dort iz undzer land*, «There where we live, there is our country». On the other hand, a meaningful refrain from a Zionist pioneer song told of the process of identity building and its renewed bond with the ancient homeland: *Anu banu aršah livnot u-lehibanot bah*, «We came to the Land [of Israel] to build and to be built in it».

Viewed in this light, the two voices of Jewish national discourse, namely Yiddishism and Hebrew-based Zionism, sound as the expressions of two separate, distant, and mutually exclusive worlds. Therefore, their artistic outputs are rarely explored as an interconnected whole.

Nevertheless, despite the heated debate and the unbridgeable gap on fundamental issues such as homeland or language, it is evident that these two contrasting worlds were closely intertwined. In the first place, most or nearly all people from both parties shared the same origins in Yiddish-speaking Eastern European communities. They were born in the same villages and cities, they were raised in the same language, namely Yiddish, and they were, at last, the same people. Secondly, their cultural and political experiences had much more in common than it appears at first sight, which calls for a new approach in the study of Jewish arts.

As a result of this intersection of identities, in the artistic turmoil of the 1920s and 1930s, Yiddish and Hebrew culture expressed much similar experiences when two workers' theatres were established in the same year in New York City and in Mandatory Palestine.



## 2. Yiddish workers' theatre in New York

On Tuesday, 27 October 1936 twenty-one theatres in the United States simultaneously premiered the same play. It was a stage adaptation of a dystopian novel, *It can't happen here* by Sinclair Lewis, which imagined a fascist dictatorship in the United States. The event was organised by the Federal Theatre Project (FTP), a programme funded by the government as part of the New Deal, and it consisted of different productions of the same play staged by different companies in several languages, including Yiddish.<sup>1</sup> According to the project director Hallie Flanagan, the Yiddish production in New York City was «a better show» than the original.<sup>2</sup> The Federal Theatre Project was shut down in 1939, accused of being communist propaganda. Flanagan was interrogated by the Committee on Un-American Activities and was notoriously asked by a conservative congressman if Euripides and Christopher Marlowe were communist.<sup>3</sup>

The Yiddish division of the FTP was closed too, but Yiddish political theatre in the United States, as an original and autonomous expression of the American Jewish community, had existed long before this project. At the beginning of the twentieth century, a life of hardships was common for the Jewish masses on both sides of the Ocean. Jewish leftist activism emerged exactly from this «salty sea of human tears», *zaltsikn yam fun mentshlekhn ttern*, as a poem by S. Ansky goes. The most popular form of entertainment for Jewish masses, the Yiddish theatre, had to be an expression of such activism.

In 1925, the Yiddish communist newspaper *Morgn Frayheyt* («Morning Freedom») called for the establishment of a radical Yiddish theatre as a reaction to the existing Yiddish scene of New York City. A group of actors from the communist youth movements formed an amateur

---

<sup>1</sup> Hallie Flanagan, *Arena. The history of the Federal Theatre* (New York: B. Blom, 1965, first edition 1940); Nahma Sandrow, *Vagabond stars. A world history of Yiddish theater* (New York: Limelight, 1986, first edition 1977), 284-285; John H. Houchin, *Censorship of the American theatre in the twentieth century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 131-144; Antonio Attisani, *Maurice Schwartz e i teatri d'arte yiddish* (Torino: Accademia University Press, 2018), 164; Jane DeHart Mathews, *Federal Theatre, 1935-1939: Plays, relief, and politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967); Joel Schechter, *Messiahs of 1933. How American Yiddish theatre survived adversity through satire* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2008), 105-111.

<sup>2</sup> Flanagan, *Arena*, 124.

<sup>3</sup> Benedict Nightingale, 'Mr. Euripides goes to Washington', *New York Times*, 18 September 1988, 14; Houchin, *Censorship*, 144-154.



company called Frayheyt Dramatishe Sektsye («Frayheyt Drama Section»), later Frayheyt Studio, and finally Arbeter Teater Farband, better known by the acronym Artef.<sup>4</sup>

The Artef was conceived as a proletarian theatre. It was aimed at proletarians and made by true proletarians. Actors-students worked their day jobs in factories and sweatshops. Then, in the evening, they attended their acting classes or rehearsed shows. They did not make a living out of the shows, whose revenues were used to self-fund study and productions.

After several performances at communist events, the company made its debut with a major production in 1928 staging a Soviet Yiddish play, *At the gate (Baym toyer)*, written by Beynush Shteyman, a young poet and playwright killed in the Russian civil war. An enthusiastic review appeared in the *Frayheyt*:

Our actor brings with him a new message—the message of a red sun on a pale horizon (...)  
I have seen him—our new actor, the carrier of the idea of the red Messiah.<sup>5</sup>

It was not exactly free of communist rhetoric. Other reviews anticipated the common attitude of the Yiddish press towards the Artef. Most of their shows were regularly criticised by non-communists for being too polemic and by communists for being too «artsy» or «bourgeois» and not enough revolutionary. Criticism from the radical circles was not baseless, because the Artef was much more than agit-prop or party propaganda. It aspired to be an art theatre, playing with literary drama and experimentation. And it did so with outstanding results, offering «something unique: a popular, amusing, and understandable theatre that was also radical in its content and sophisticated in its poetics».<sup>6</sup>

There were conflicts, obviously, between the different souls of the company, but the most enduring influence came from its second director Benno Schneider, who was a former member of Habima, the first Hebrew-language professional theatre established in 1918 as a studio of

---

<sup>4</sup> On the history of the Artef, see Edna Nahshon, *Yiddish proletarian theatre. The art and politics of the Artef, 1925-1940* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998). See also: Sandrow, *Vagabond stars*, 278-284; Stefan Kanfer, *Stardust lost. The triumph, tragedy, and mishugas of the Yiddish theater in America* (New York: Vintage, 2009), chapter 11; Edna Nahshon, 'Yiddish political theater: the Artef', in *New York's Yiddish theater. From the Bowery to Broadway*, ed. Edna Nahshon (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 174-191; Joshua E. Polster, 'A new approach to revolution. Artef and Hirsh Lekert in the Third Period', in *To have or have not. Essays on commerce and capital in modernist theatre*, ed. James Fisher (Jefferson, NC and London: McFarland, 2011), 157-170.

<sup>5</sup> Polster, *A new approach to revolution*, 163.

<sup>6</sup> Antonio Attisani, *Tutto era musica. Indice sommario per un atlante della scena yiddish* (Torino: Accademia University Press, 2016), 192 (translation mine).



the Moscow Art Theatre.<sup>7</sup> Besides having worked at Habima with Evgenij Vachtangov and Konstantin Stanislavskij, Schneider was familiar with the Soviet avantgarde, such as the theatre of Mejerchol'd, and the Yiddish art theatre companies, such as the Goset (State Yiddish Theatre) of Moscow and the Yung Teater of Warsaw.

Under Schneider's direction, the Artef moved away from naturalism and developed a constructivist style made of stylized poses, choreographed mass scenes, and an economy of movements in which the group prevailed over individuals. For example, in the company's first great success, *Aristocrats* (*Ristokratn*, 1930), the class differences between the characters of the servants and of the masters were marked stylistically: lower-class people moved in a natural way whereas the rich acted as grotesque figures with mechanical movements. The show was based on *People* (*Mentshn*), a one-act play by Sholem Aleichem. Another classical Yiddish author, Mendele, was brought on stage in the same season with his *Travels of Benjamin III*, adapted by Moyshe Nadir. In a different adaptation, it had been a success of the Goset in Moscow in 1927.

The following season included a couple of plays written by Soviet Yiddish authors. *Diamonds* (*Brilyantn*), written by Avrom Vevyorke and based on *The government inspector* (*Revizor*, 1836) by Gogol', is a comedy set in post-Revolution Russia. It is about a trickster who arrives in a *shtetl* and introduces himself as a government official from Moscow on a mission and is welcomed as a sort of messiah. In fact, he runs an illegal business and smuggles diamonds in *tefillin*, the leather boxes worn during the prayer. It is noteworthy that this anti-heroic comedy acknowledged the existence of corruption in Soviet Russia and went as far as to satirise the revolutionary jargon and rhetoric.

A more orthodox play was *Jim Copperhead* (*Dzhim Kuperkop*) by Shmuel Godiner, about a sort of mechanical golem who unites the workers against the bosses. The sets by Boris Aronson and the oppressive futuristic atmosphere are remindful of the famous, and then recent, *Metropolis* (1927) by Fritz Lang.

---

<sup>7</sup> Habima («the pulpit» or «the stage» in Hebrew) was founded by Nahum Zemach and Menahem Gnessin, pioneers of the Hebrew-language theatre who had performed both in the Russian empire and Ottoman Palestine, with Hanna Rovina, a schoolteacher who would become the iconic face of the Hebrew stage. In 1926 the company left the Soviet Union for an international tour and never went back. In 1931 it finally settled in Tel Aviv, where it is still operating today as the National Theatre of Israel. On the history of the company, see Emanuel Levy, *The Habima. Israel's national theatre, 1917-1977. A study of cultural nationalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979).



The season 1931-32 opened with *Drought (Trikenish)*, about the farmers in the Central United States affected by the ecological disaster of the Dust Bowl. Jewish themes and the call for revolution in America returned with another Yiddish Soviet play, *Hirsh Lekert*, about the Jewish socialist martyr who was sentenced to death and executed in 1902 for the attempted assassination of the czarist governor of Vilna.

One should not overlook the fact that the activities of workers' theatres around the world were affected by political decisions taken in Moscow. This also applies to the Artef. Since 1928, the Stalinist doctrine of the so-called Third Period—which posited the imminent fall of capitalism—had led to the self-isolation of the radical Left. According to the doctrine, non-communist leftists, such as socialists and social democrats, were an obstacle to the dictatorship of the proletariat. They were defined «social fascists» and communists were forbidden to ally with their parties, not even to form a common front against fascism. Conversely, by the mid 1930s, following the failure of the ultra-leftist model and the rise of Nazism, Moscow adopted the Popular Front strategy. The choices of Artef and the reception of its public were affected in both cases. At the end of the 1920s, the company followed the guidelines of the Comintern for a militant theatre aimed at educating the workers on the doctrine and promoting class struggle and revolution. Subsequently, from the mid 1930s, it benefited from a greater openness and could extend its audiences. The Artef even attracted the attention of non-Jewish theatre experts, such as the *New York Times*' critic Brooks Atkinson. In 1934 he watched their production of *Recruits*, an anti-hassidic play written in the 19th century by Haskalah author Israel Aksenfeld, and he highly praised their work.<sup>8</sup> Although it may come as a surprise, the shows of the Artef were attended by many spectators who were not Yiddish speakers. They could not understand dialogue in Yiddish, yet they could follow body language, choreography, and a highly stylised acting that made the visual show «well worth the attention of the Broadway playgoer».<sup>9</sup>

In 1934 the company had moved to a new house in the Theater District, Broadway, and went through a process of semi-professionalisation, starting to pay an equal salary to all members. Other successes followed, such as *200,000, or The jackpot* by Sholem Aleichem and *The good soldier Schweik*, from the novel of Jaroslav Hašek. The former production was defined by the *New York Times*'s reviewer «one of the most genial events in the Broadway and

---

<sup>8</sup> Brooks Atkinson, 'The Artef in Yiddish', *New York Times*, 12 March 1935, 24.

<sup>9</sup> W. S. [William Schack], 'Artef opens uptown in noteworthy play', *New York Times*, 13 October 1934, 10.





Times Square sectors of the city».<sup>10</sup> Apparently, however, the box-office takings could not cover expenses and payroll. Ironically for a workers' theatre, economic pressure came from the trade unions, which required that stagehands be hired by the Artef even for tasks that could be fulfilled by the actors themselves. At the end of the decade, the Artef was in crisis, as other workers' theatres, and interrupted its activities for a season.

The final blow came from Moscow. Once again, a decision in Soviet politics taken far away had an enormous impact on the activities and the reception of a workers' theatre in New York City. In August 1939 the infamous Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact was signed, defining the non-aggression treaty between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. News of the pact shocked the American Jewish community, which was concerned for the fate of European Jewry. It heavily affected American Jewish communists, who could no longer boast of being the vanguard of antifascism and were looked upon with hostility by their community. And it had a fatal impact the Artef, which did not survive a spontaneous boycott from those who saw Moscow-aligned communists as enemies of the Jewish people.

That autumn, the Artef opened again for the new season with a pre-booked show, but the following production was a failure. Their last show was staged on the 18th of February 1940.

### **3. Hebrew workers' theatre in Tel Aviv**

During the 1920s and 1930s, the same years that saw the birth, success, and fall of the Artef, a theatre scene was developing in the Land of Israel. It was a very different scene, in the first place for the numbers. Yiddish theatres in New York City in one season could sell one and a half million tickets, which is more than the entire population of the Land of Israel at the time.<sup>11</sup> The other main difference was language. The Zionist enterprise was much more than a mere project of immigration to an ancient homeland. It was a project of nation building with its own founding myths. It envisaged a reconnection with the ancient cultural roots, including the Land of Israel, the Hebrew language, and an entire set of attitudes and moral qualities. In brief, it envisaged a process of identity building.

The result of such a process was the prototypical and semi-mythical New Jew, expression of a Jewish identity defined by the rejection of the Diaspora with its cultural heritage and the return

---

<sup>10</sup> William Schack, 'Three now resident off the Avenue', *New York Times*, 29 November 1936, X, 3.

<sup>11</sup> Attisani, *Tutto era musica*, 191.



to the alleged purity of a pre-diasporic past. The Diaspora, with its history of oppression, was heavily loaded with negative connotations, such as a perceived weakness. Whether it be the obscurantism of ultra-traditionalist *shtetlekh* (Eastern European Jewish villages) or the intellectualism of secular, assimilated Jews of Central European cities, traits of the diasporic Jewish identity were rejected in favour of an ancient-new Hebrew identity, reconnected with a biblical-historical golden age of heroes. The new identity was embodied by the Sabra (from *šabar*, «prickly pear»), the native Israeli, whose character had to be shaped by physical labour, collectivism, self-sacrifice, and secularism. This New Jew, a peasant and a soldier, was defined by a few traits: he lived in the Land of Israel and was familiar with its soil and landscape; he had a new attitude expressing strength and self-confidence; he spoke Hebrew, and did it through a concise, straightforward way of speaking called *dugri* (from Arabic, «straight».<sup>12</sup> Theatre in the Yishuv (the Jewish settlement in pre-State Israel) was affected by the process of nation and identity building in two ways. On the one hand, Yiddish language was the object of fierce attacks from the Zionist establishment, which saw it as a symbol of the Diaspora.<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, artistic expressions in Hebrew, including drama and performances, were strongly encouraged as a fundamental part of the national revival in the Land. Theatre in Hebrew was thus held in high esteem. Nevertheless, original drama in Hebrew was still scarce and Hebrew-language troupes had to resort to translations, which often happened to be translations from the Yiddish.

On an evening of May 1926, in Tel Aviv, a new company staged the Hebrew version of six Yiddish texts by Yiitskhok Leybush Peretz, one of the fathers of modern Yiddish literature and one of its main supporters from his house in Warsaw. The name of the company, which had been established as a studio of acting one year earlier, was Ohel, «tent» in Hebrew. Its actors were not professionals. They were all workers who studied acting and rehearsed shows while keeping their day jobs in factories and farms. Its director and founder was Moshe Halevy, a former founding member of Habima in Moscow.

---

<sup>12</sup> On *dugri* talk, see Tamar Katriel, *Talking straight. Dugri speech in Israeli Sabra culture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986). On the process of identity building see Oz Almog, *The Sabra. The creation of the New Jew*, trans. Haim Watzman (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2000).

<sup>13</sup> Shortly after the independence, in the late 1940s and early 1950s, Israeli government went as far as to impose an official ban on Yiddish performances. See Rachel Rojanski, *Yiddish in Israel. A history* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2020), 104-105.



After he left Habima and moved to the Land of Israel, Moshe Halevy turned to the Histadrut, the General Organisation of the Workers in the Land of Israel. From the powerful Zionist socialist organisation, he sought support and sponsorship to establish a Hebrew workers' theatre in the country. Actors were only selected in kibbutzim and other workplaces, since the concept of Halevy envisioned a theatre made by actors who came from the working class and possessed a class consciousness. It was regarded as a requirement for staging the struggles of the working class. Applications from professional actors were therefore rejected.<sup>14</sup> The company was organised according to collectivistic principles on the kibbutz model. It was, in Halevy's words, «a kibbutz like all the other kibbutzim».<sup>15</sup>

To summarise so far, the following main points about the origins of the Ohel should be highlighted: it was established as a drama studio in 1925; it was made by workers and organised as a collective; it was directed by a former member of Habima. As shown above, the same points also apply to the Artef. Another point in common was the original intention to stage plays about the struggle of the working class, but this posed a challenge for a Hebrew-language company.

The first major production of the Ohel was *Dayagim (Fishermen)*, adapted from a play by Dutch Jewish playwright Herman Heijermans. It was an openly social play on the exploitation of fishermen by ruthless shipowners. The original play, quite popular at the time, was a small-scale naturalistic play. But the Ohel's version was something completely different. Translated by poet Avraham Shlonsky, adapted and directed by Moshe Halevy, with music and songs by Yoel Engel, it was a monumental show involving thirty actors in expressionistic mass scenes. As it happened with the Artef, the emphasis on the group, on mass movement rather than on individual introspection reflected onstage the collectivist ideology of the troupe, aligning the aesthetic with the political orientation. The show premiered in March 1927 and was a great success with audiences and critics. The big stage and bulky sets made it difficult to perform in small places, yet it was popular with members of the kibbutzim, who organised trips to Tel Aviv to watch it.

---

<sup>14</sup> Mendel Kohansky, *The Hebrew theatre. Its first fifty years* (New York: Ktav, 1969), 97-106; Ben-Ami Feingold, 'Ohel'. 'Aliyato u-nfilato šel teatron po'alim', *Iyunim Bitkumat Israel*, Vol. 15 (2005): 349-372; Dorit Yerushalmi, 'Toward a balanced history: 'Ohel,' the 'Workers Theatre of Eretz Yisrael' as a cultural alternative to Habima (1935–1946)', *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies*, Vol. 13, Issue 3 (2014): 340-359.

<sup>15</sup> Moshe Halevy, *Darki aley bamot* (Tel Aviv: Massada, 1955), 102.



The second production was a biblical play, *Jacob and Rachel* (*Ya 'aqov ve-Rahel*, 1928), adapted from Russian. This should not come as a surprise. A secular approach to biblical stories, heroes, and landscape was consistent with the Zionist ideology and experience. In those formative years, the process of nation building was also founded upon a connection to the ancient homeland. Even the suggestive name of the company, «Tent», was not only inspired by the precarious life of the pioneers and by the project of a movable theatre that brings art to workers far from the city. The Hebrew word *ohel* was reminiscent of ancestral stories, biblical landscape, wanderings in the desert, and the Tabernacle (*ohel mo'ed*, «tent of meeting»), the movable sanctuary described in the book of Exodus (26:1-37, 36:8-38).

Moreover, this show was quite different from a traditional biblical play. It is said that Halevy, to prepare *Fisherman*, had the actors rehearse at night on the beach in the cold, so they could experience the hardships of life at sea. For *Jacob and Rachel*, actors visited a Bedouin tribe in the Negev to study their movements and facial expressions, based on the assumption that the ancient Hebrew way of life could be found among them. But the purpose was not naturalistic acting. Rather the opposite. The geometric, cubistic sets and costumes designed by Boris Poljakov in Russia, where Halevy had first conceived this show, the heavy makeup, and the stylised movements that made actors look like living statues contributed to an impressive, constructivist show.

Still, it was no proletarian play. Neither were many of the subsequent productions. On the one hand, finding Hebrew plays posed a challenge. On the other hand, proletarian plays and the call for class struggle appeared irrelevant to the reality of the Land of Israel. Also, class struggle was foreign to the ideology of Labour Zionism, which valued national unity much more, considering the end of the British Mandate and the looming conflict. The Histadrut went so far as to cut its funding to Ohel when the company staged *The bread mill* (*Reḥayim*) by Dovid Bergelson, a Soviet Yiddish author who would later be killed on the Night of the Murdered Poets. The play, which had already produced in the original Yiddish (*Di broytmil*) by the Goset in Moscow, insisted on class struggle, which infuriated Labour leaders.<sup>16</sup> At the time, the Ohel had already gained international reputation, after its 1934 tour in Europe, where it staged with great success, in Hebrew, both biblical-national plays and proletarian plays. It also overcame a first crisis in 1930, when the organisational model was revised and it

---

<sup>16</sup> Yerushalmi, *Toward a balanced history*, 344-345.



turned into a professional theatre, with actors receiving a salary and devoting themselves entirely to acting. Seventeen of the forty members did not accept the change and quit in protest. Anyway, it remained a collective. For example, the decision to produce *The good soldier Schweik* was a matter of discussion among its members. Objections were not about the content: it was anti-war satire whose eponymous anti-hero, a non-violent soldier facing military absurdity, embodies the oppressed who resist tyranny. But some members feared that such a character could make an actor a star, which would be a problem for the collectivistic nature of the troupe. *Schweik* was staged in 1935 with actor Meir Margalit, a construction worker immigrated from Poland, in the lead role. The production was a great success, staged for many years, and saved the troupe after the recent disagreements with the Histadrut and the funding cuts. Actor Margalit indeed became a star, bringing an ironic anti-hero to a Hebrew scene dominated by solemn acting and heroic models of self-sacrificing fighters.

The first original Hebrew play staged by the Ohel was the historical drama *Sabbatai Zevi* by Nathan Bistrizky (Agmon), directed by Halevy in 1936. Next came the translation of a Yiddish classic, *The travels of Benjamin III*, a text already seen on the Artef stage. When Halevy attended a London performance of *Yoshe Kalb*, adapted and directed by Maurice Schwartz from a novel by Israel Joshua Singer, saw the commercial potential of a Hebrew version.<sup>17</sup> In 1937 Schwartz personally directed Ohel's production of *Yoshe Kalb* in Tel Aviv, followed by *The brothers Ashkenazi*, adapted from another novel by I. J. Singer. The two shows were a success with the public and brought to the local scene some innovations from the American theatre, such as light effects, singing, dancing, and improved acting. Hardly a coincidence, also Habima soon afterwards produced the Hebrew version of a Yiddish classic, *Mirele Efros* by Jacob Gordin, which also proved a box-office success. In an unexpected intersection, Hebrew popular theatre in the Land of Israel developed from the Yiddish theatre. In 1940, the Ohel moved into its permanent home in the heart of Tel Aviv, a new building in Beilinson Street. Around the same time, Habima had its building too. Since then, the fate of the two theatres diverged. In 1958, Habima was awarded the title of national theatre, whereas the Ohel lost support from the Histadrut. It never recovered and permanently closed in 1969. Still, it is noteworthy that in a seminal place and time, during the formative decades of the Israeli nation and of the Hebrew theatre, a major role was played by a workers' theatre.

---

<sup>17</sup> Halevy, *Darki*, 192-193.



## 4. Jewish political drama across continents

Even before the experience of workers' theatres, political commitment was relevant to drama written by Jewish authors in the Eastern European *alte land* and in America. Later, it would play a role beyond its original milieu, shaping American English-language political theatre.

A clear political line is recognisable in much of the dramatic production by one of the most prominent Jewish playwrights in the interwar period, Yiddish author H. Leivick (Leyvik Halpern, 1888-1962). Born into an impoverished family near Minsk, he «was a dramatic hero in his own life».<sup>18</sup> Today, he is best known for *The golem (Der goylem)*, which is no political play, even though, when it was staged in Hebrew by Habima in Moscow, the audience read a revolutionary subtext in the show and welcomed it by singing the Internationale. But other plays by Leivick were openly politically engaged. Plays such *Rags (Shmates, 1921)* or *Shop (Shap, 1926)*,<sup>19</sup> for example, dealt with the condition of the working class as well as with conflicts inside the Jewish immigrant community. Both plays staged the exploitation of immigrant workers in a textile factory in New York. The recurring setting is not accidental, since appalling working conditions were common in the garment industry at the time and the memory was still alive of the 1911 fire of the Triangle Shirtwaist Company's factory.<sup>20</sup> *Shop* opens with an argument between Wolf and Leyzer, who once were fellow convicts in Siberia, where they had been exiled for their political activities. Now, in New York City, Leyzer is a lowly cleaner in a factory, whereas Wolf is a boss in the same factory. The latter claims to be «from here», shuns allusions to life in the old country, and does not want to be called *khaver* («comrade»). He keeps his distance from the old life by addressing the former comrade in the second-person plural, which denotes formality, and asks him to do the same, at

---

<sup>18</sup> Nahma Sandrow (ed.), *God, man, and devil. Yiddish plays in translation* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1999), 16. Leivick was arrested by czarist police at the age of eighteen for his political activism and sentenced to forced labour and perpetual exile to Siberia. After years in chains, he managed to escape and to arrive in America in 1913. In New York he earned a living with physical labour until Maurice Schwartz's Yiddish Art Theatre began to produce his plays.

<sup>19</sup> The latter was directed by Jacob Ben-Ami and starred a twenty-five-year-old Stella Adler, daughter of legendary Yiddish actor Jacob Adler and founder of the renowned Stella Adler Studio of Acting, which trained many stars of Broadway and Hollywood.

<sup>20</sup> One hundred and forty-six garment workers, mostly Jewish and Italian young women, had been killed in the fire of the Triangle Shirtwaist Company, in the Greenwich Village neighbourhood of Manhattan, on Saturday, 25 March 1911. Since the proprietors locked the exit doors during working hours, many of the victims jumped to their deaths from the upper floors of the building to escape flames. For a detailed account of the tragedy, see Leon Stein, *The Triangle fire* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011, first edition 1962).



least in the presence of *biznes-layt* («businesspeople»<sup>21</sup>). Several characters in the play show a dichotomy in their identities, split between the life before, in the old country, and after, as immigrants. This tension may be inherent in the immigrant condition, especially for marginalised groups. Yet the efforts of some characters to reconcile their pre-existing identities with the current loss of dignity should be read as a symptom of internalised oppression, and therefore within the framework of capitalist exploitation that is central to the play. The immigrant condition, as well as the Jewish transnational identity as a permanent minority, is reflected in the frequent language switching.

The Hebrew version of *Shop*, translated by Avraham Shlonsky, was staged in 1932 by Ohel under the direction of Moshe Halevy and severely criticised by some newspapers. In the words of one reviewer, «I thought I was not in Tel Aviv but in Moscow».<sup>22</sup> As seen above, plays exposing capitalist exploitation and calling for class struggle were not welcomed by the political and cultural establishment of the Yishuv.

A Jewish anti-capitalist play in a comedy key had been produced in New York earlier, already in 1919, when the Naye Yidishe Teater presented *Bronx Express* (*Bronks Ekspres*) by Osip Dymov. The first act shows the protagonist, a poor Jewish immigrant worker, in a subway car whose interior is entirely covered with advertising posters (real adverts of real companies, some still extant, such as Nestlé). Later in the play, characters from the same advertisements come to life as tempting devils and try to seduce the protagonist. For a while, he is persuaded to become a greedy capitalist, but he finally wakes up from what he realises was only a bad dream.

Even before, in 1907, Sholem Asch's *God of vengeance* (*Got fun nekome*) premiered in Berlin in a German version directed by Max Reinhardt and was later produced in the original Yiddish in New York City. This is not a political play in the strict sense. The conflict is private, and the plot follows a tragic structure founded on guilt and inescapability. Yet it was politically significant because it challenged what was acceptable in its time. The action is set in a brothel and in the house on the upper floor, two settings that significantly appear on stage at the same time, as required by the script. The owner of the brothel lives in the house upstairs with his wife, a former prostitute, and his young daughter. The man has commissioned a Torah scroll for his house, since he wants to be respected by the community, both for his wealth and for a

---

<sup>21</sup> H. Leivick, *Shap. Drame in fir akt* (Vilne: B. Kletskin, 1928), 9.

<sup>22</sup> Kohansky, *The Hebrew theatre*, 132.





supposed bourgeois respectability. Everybody seems to overlook the fact that a Torah scroll, the most sacred object in Judaism, will be kept in the house of a pimp just one floor above his brothel. To make it even more scandalous, the daughter is in love with one of the girls downstairs.

*God of vengeance* was staged for many years in Yiddish. Then, in 1923, when an English version was staged in Broadway, the police raided the theatre and arrested the actors, the director, and the producer. They were brought to court on charges of having staged an «indecent, immoral and impure drama»; months later, they were acquitted.<sup>23</sup> A much more open attitude could be found instead in the Land of Israel, where the play was produced in 1922. The Hebrew version (*El nekamot*) was successful with the public, was met with favourable reviews in the local press with a few exceptions, and was not caught in the web of censorship.<sup>24</sup>

It should be noted that *God of vengeance* was hit by censorship in America only when it was staged in English, sixteen years after its debut in Yiddish. Shows and publications in Yiddish were less likely than the English ones to be hit by censorship and repression. For that reason, Yiddish publications and theatre could more easily address issues that were—and still are—controversial, such as sex or abortion. It is no coincidence that many American Jewish men and women were forerunners in the civil rights movement.<sup>25</sup>

## 5. Conclusions

The parallel stories of the two major Jewish workers' theatres in the first half of the twentieth century appear strikingly similar. Both were established in the same year, 1925, as drama studios. Both were directed by former Habima members from Moscow. Both were heavily influenced by the Russian revolutionary and artistic experience. Both put an emphasis on the group as a collective, which was reflected in their aesthetic. Both promoted an idea of politically committed high culture and art theatre, and therefore offered similar repertoires. Both clashed on several occasions with the local cultural establishment for political reasons.

---

<sup>23</sup> See *New York Times*, 7 March 1923, 6; 24 May 1923, 1; 29 May 1923, 2; 11 January 1924, 21.

<sup>24</sup> Kohansky, *The Hebrew theatre*, 73.

<sup>25</sup> Josh Lambert, *Unclean lips. Obscenity, Jews, and American culture* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2014), 102-103.





Both struggled to survive in the show business until they could not. It could be said that the only difference was language: Artef was a Yiddish troupe, whereas Ohel productions were in Hebrew.

The experiences of Artef and Ohel intersected and overlapped because they moved from the same starting points, initiated by people who shared the same origin and were engaged in the same struggle. Both troupes were the prosecution onstage of a Jewish tradition that, throughout the twentieth century, was particularly responsive to revolutionary ideology. A tradition that could be summarised in one phrase: the pursuit of justice. Jewish political radicalism, which emerged in Eastern Europe from that «salty sea of human tears» and was imported to the United States and Israel, had its expressions in Yiddish and Hebrew. In the study of Jewish arts, one should not see these two expressions as the voices of two worlds apart and in contrast with each other, but rather as two voices of the same transnational Jewish world.



## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Almog Oz, *The Sabra. The creation of the New Jew*, translated by Haim Watzman, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2000.
- Attisani, Antonio, *Tutto era musica. Indice sommario per un atlante della scena yiddish*, Torino: Accademia University Press, 2016.
- Attisani Antonio, *Maurice Schwartz e i teatri d'arte yiddish*, Torino: Accademia University Press, 2018.
- DeHart Mathews, Jane, *Federal Theatre, 1935-1939: Plays, relief, and politics*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967.
- Feingold Ben-Ami, "‘Ohel’. ‘Aliyato u-nfilato šel teatron po‘alim’", *Iyunim Bitkumat Israel*, Vol. 15 (2005): 349-372.
- Flanagan Hallie, *Arena. The history of the Federal Theatre*, New York: B. Blom, 1965 (1940).
- Halevy Moshe, *Darki aley bamot*, Tel Aviv: Massada, 1955.
- Houchin John H., *Censorship of the American theatre in the twentieth century*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- Kanfer Stefan, *Stardust lost. The triumph, tragedy, and mishugas of the Yiddish theater in America*, New York: Vintage, 2009.
- Katriel Tamar, *Talking straight. Dugri speech in Israeli Sabra culture*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986.
- Kohansky Mendel, *The Hebrew theatre. Its first fifty years*, New York: Ktav, 1969.
- Lambert Josh, *Unclean lips. Obscenity, Jews, and American culture*, New York and London: New York University Press, 2014.
- Leivick H., *Shap. Drame in fir aktn*, Vilne: B. Kletskin, 1928.
- Levy Emanuel, *The Habima. Israel's national theatre, 1917-1977. A study of cultural nationalism*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1979.
- Nahshon Edna, *Yiddish proletarian theatre. The art and politics of the Artef, 1925-1940*, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998.
- Nahshon Edna, 'Yiddish political theater: the Artef', in *New York's Yiddish theater. From the Bowery to Broadway*, ed. Edna Nahshon, New York: Columbia University Press, 2016.
- Nightingale, Benedict, 'Mr. Euripides goes to Washington', *New York Times*, 18 September 1988.



Polster Joshua E., 'A new approach to revolution. Artef and Hirsh Lekert in the Third Period', in *To have or have not. Essays on commerce and capital in modernist theatre*, ed. James Fisher, Jefferson, NC and London: McFarland, 2011.

Rojanski Rachel, *Yiddish in Israel. A history*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2020.

Sandrow Nahma, *Vagabond stars. A world history of Yiddish theater*, New York: Limelight, 1986 (1977).

Sandrow Nahma (ed.), *God, man, and devil. Yiddish plays in translation*, Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1999.

Schechter Joel, *Messiahs of 1933. How American Yiddish theatre survived adversity through satire*, Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2008.

Stein Leon, *The Triangle fire*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011 (1962).

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*, Vol. 13, Issue 3 (2014): 340-359.