

Working Paper

The "Dawn Multicultural Theater"-Documentary Theater and Shared Heritage

A case study by Sigal Peres

1. Migration of Babylon Jews to Israel

Since the establishment of the state of Israel, we have heard mostly from and about its European Jews (Ashkenazi). Numerous books and articles have depicted the State of Israel as a country which has successfully managed to bring together people of different ethnic origins. Unfortunately, these publications have created a perception that is far from the realities non-Ashkenazi groups have had to endure. Mizrahim (Jews of Asian and African origins, and Arab Jews, commonly referred to as Sephardim) who have written extensively about the discrimination against Mizrahim in Israel, and who have documented the history of Mizrahi resistance, have been censored and criticized (Adler 2011).

Meir Gal is an Israeli artist. The book shown in the photograph, is the official textbook of the history of the Jewish people in recent generations, which have been used by high school students in the 1970's. The nine pages are the only pages in the book that discuss non-European Jewish history.¹ Hence the title: Nine Out of Four Hundred (The West and the Rest). There are several ways in which the Sephardic Jews tried to bring their heritage alive. One of them is through theater.

2. Shared Heritage and Documentary Theatre

Shared Heritage has been constructed and can be re-constructed. Theatre and arts can challenge the values of authorized and hegemonic heritage. In Israel, some cultural organizations have started using different forms of theatre and performances to represent their multiple histories and negotiate their hybrid cultural identities through projects and showcases (The "Al-Karma" Theater,² Inbal Dance Theater,³ Gesher Theatre).⁴ Among these praxes, drama has been widely used for audiences

¹ <http://meirgal.squarespace.com/nine-out-of-four-hundred-the-w/>

² <https://beit-hagefen.com/BeitHagefenCategoryId.aspx?BeitHagefenCategoryId=2&lang=2>

³ <https://www.inbal.org.il/> "The way to breathe life into heritage, to adapt it and turn it into an artistic raw material"

⁴ <http://www.gesher-theatre.co.il/he/>

to reconstruct their own interpretations of historical events through carefully chosen historical fragments often neglected and even forgotten. These dramas are a way to recompose a new understanding of multifarious and multicultural histories. I will assume that these process drama projects help elders and youngsters reconstruct their own everchanging cultural identities, which are under changes.

In a country with diverse cultural identities and a history of political complexity, the "Dawn Multicultural Theater" was founded in order to create a theatrical experience, that deals with the culture and heritage of Arab and Middle Eastern Jews, and to promote cultural awareness and identity within the Israel society.⁵ Through documentary theater plays, it presents the culture, the language, the stories, the music, the singing of the Jews of Asian and African origins, and Arab Jews. It tells the stories which had not been told before.

3. The "Dawn Multicultural Theater"

My research focuses on "The Dawn Multicultural Theater" and more specific on its first show; "Daddy's Girls". The Dawn Theater was born out of a desire to address, in theatrical way, the life stories of Jews from Arab countries and to become acquainted with their unique legacy. Its first play "Daddy's girls" deals with a story of an Iraqi Jews family in the years about the years leading to their immigration to Israel. In 1941 during the rise of Nazism in Europe, a brutal pogrom broke out in Iraqi Jews that lasted for three days and has since been called "Farhood". This incident eventually caused the final understanding that the life of Jewish community of Iraq is over. 50 years later, in Israel, during the Gulf War, the parents and their daughters revealed secrets that bring them to the understanding how much the family past haunts them to this day.

These stories about their great complexity have so far not been properly expressed in the field of theater. There is a strong desire and thirst to hear the story of parents who migrated to a new land whose voice is almost silent. The theater aims to promote awareness of cultural heritage and appreciation of the arts. Due to the current situation of coronavirus pandemic the "Dawn Multicultural Theater" had to shut down without knowing when and how it will reopen. There are hardly any compensation from the government for their lost and the theater is looking for new

⁵ <https://shachartheater.com/>

ways to stay active. Digital interviews and different workshops are held to keep the existing audience and to reach out to new crowd of supporters.

4. Research question

In order to understand the phenomena of recovering the marginalized communities and their stories in the framework of shared heritage and through process of documentary theatre, the main research question is

- If and how theatre -and more specific a documentary theatre-, as a cultural, artistic, and educational site can be a tool to understand, widen and re-constructed collective memory and shared heritage?

Other research questions will follow the above:

- What were the motives, goals, political positions, social ideologies that formed the establishment of the "Dawn Multicultural Theater"?
- Are the plays solely dealing with stories about the homeland and the heritage left behind, or do they also deal with the contemporary reality of the Mizrahim Jews?
- Is the founders mission statement, declare the use the theater as a memorial institute or as conservation of legacy and heritage?
- Is there an intent to reformulate a collective legacy and shared heritage through storytelling and theater productions?

I would also like to explore how these educational praxes can translate the marginalized historical narratives buried in heritage storytelling, historical artefacts, private community narratives and intangible cultural heritages (ICHs) into contemporary dramatic enquiry and performances.

Further questions to explore may be:

- Why are they interested in this type of praxis?
- What cultural and social meanings do these practices carry?
- What are the aesthetic and pedagogical strategies these performances use?

In the context of re -constructing heritage by documentary theatre:

- What was the process of writing, and how authentic is it?
- How does the audience react to the play?
- To what extent did the play affect the Israeli narrative?
- Who are the actors, what is their origins, and How do they feel about the play?

5. Methodology

Visual analysis: visual analysis of the theatre digital site; documents, videos

Interviews: Depth interviews and Photo - Elicitation Interviews will be conducted with Gilit- The founder of the theater and the playwright

(<https://shachartheater.com/%D7%92%D7%99%D7%9C%D7%99%D7%AA-%D7%99%D7%A6%D7%97%D7%A7%D7%99/>)

Actors (<https://shachartheater.com/%D7%94%D7%91%D7%A0%D7%95%D7%AA-%D7%A9%D7%9C-%D7%90%D7%91%D7%90/>)

Audience

6. Theoretical framework and Key concepts

- **migration of Babylon Jews to Israel**
- Adler, 2011; Gat, 2002. Meir-Glitzstein, 2002, 2007, 2020; Tsoffar, 2006; Nissan, 2016)
- **Shared heritage and Documentary Theater**

Bulger, 2011; Roberts-Smith, 2012; Stefanie and Alderman, 2018; Wang, 2017; Wang, 2014

- **The "Dawn Multicultural Theater" and the play "Daddy's Girls"**

<https://shachartheater.com/>

The last part of my research will be carried out together with my tandem partner, Sophia, who is planning to research the project "Young Muslims in Auschwitz", initiated by Burak Yilmaz. we would like to combine our gained insights, the different perspectives and summarize our results.

7. References

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The "Al-Karma" Theater

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The "Dawn Multicultural Theater"

<https://shachartheater.com/>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W7bFTwV7R1E>

<https://shachartheater.com/%D7%92%D7%99%D7%9C%D7%99%D7%AA-%D7%99%D7%A6%D7%97%D7%A7%D7%99/>

<https://shachartheater.com/%D7%94%D7%91%D7%A0%D7%95%D7%AA-%D7%A9%D7%9C-%D7%90%D7%91%D7%90/>

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