

# Community Theatre of Mizrahi-Jews and Arabs in Ramle: A Junction of Nationality, Ethnicity, and Gender

*Naphtaly Shem-Tov*

In 1998, in Ramle, Israel, directors Oshrat Mizrahi-Shapira, a Mizrahi<sup>1</sup> Jewish woman, and Yussef Swed, an Arab man, established a community-theatre group<sup>2</sup> of Jews and Arabs that created and performed three productions over the next five years. *Here? Now? Love?*, the first performance of the group, was constructed as a retrospective journey through the memories of Tamar, a Mizrahi woman and Amir, an Arab man, who meet after many years and remember their love story—cut short because of their different nationality and religion.<sup>3</sup> They meet again when Amir comes to inherit the abandoned house of his family and discovers that his ex-lover, Tamar, has moved into the house after running away from her oppressive and violent husband.

This particular play exemplifies the development and emergence of a social and theatrical site for dialogue between Arabs and Mizrahis about their social and political identities. The two other productions of this group are *Ramle Beach* (2001) and *The Rich Man Dies of Laughter* (2003). The former largely avoids dealing with the Arab–Israeli conflict, and the latter touches allegorically on political issues, but keeps away from definitive statements. The first play, on the other hand, attempts a realistic design, which signifies an attempt to cope with the political conflicts more directly.

My awareness of this ensemble group and its projects derives from my position as an Israeli-born Mizrahi man, whose parents immigrated in 1951 from Iraq and Iran to Israel. As a teenager, I joined the community theatre in my neighborhood in south Tel Aviv, which is considered to be socioeconomically disadvantaged. One of the significant experiences in this theatre community was the development of my sensitivity and consciousness to the connection between the social and political aspects of my life and their articulations in the theatrical event. Currently, as a theatre researcher, I have a personal, professional, and political interest in community theatre as bottom-up practice for empowerment of subordinated groups, which use it to express and challenge their marginalized identities.

Israeli community theatre is quite often a site that meets and confronts nationality, ethnicity, and gender (Lev-Aladgem 2003, 2008). This junction of identities is especially evident in this group that includes Mizrahi Jews and Arabs; the two communities live together in Ramle, an underprivileged city in the center of the country. This theatre group confronted three political and social conflicts that, from the Zionist viewpoint, are not normally discussed together: the national, the ethnic, and the gender-oriented. The Zionist discourse has two main arguments that are relevant to this analysis. First, the land of Israel (Eretz-Israel) belongs only to the Jewish nation, and it is an exclusive ownership. This means that Arabs have no national rights to the land. And second, the Zionist discourse has tried to constitute a new, uniform Jewish identity for all Jews who have immigrated to Israel, an identity designed according to Western secular cultural standards. This effort has largely erased many of the Jewish cultural traditions, especially the non-European ones that were developed over hundreds of years. As I detail later, these arguments promote rejection of

moral responsibility for the Palestinian demands and refuse to recognize a unique Mizrahi identity. Overall, they deny the association of the common root of these two subjugations: the prejudice of the “superior” Western culture.

Therefore the main question is how Arab and Mizrahi participants contended with the Zionist discourse: Do they challenge and subvert it, or maintain its boundaries? How did the community performance integrate different discourses and bring them together at one juncture,<sup>4</sup> and how did it relate to the taboo issues of the Zionist discourse? Despite the raising and integrating of these issues on one junction, in opposition to the separation of the Zionist discourse in dealing with these issues, I argue that the production does not confront taboo issues directly, but only “touches” them politically, without any attempt to deconstruct and break the boundaries of the Zionist discourse.

The Israeli theatre researcher Shulamith Lev-Aladgem, who examines the history of Israeli community theatre, argues that this cultural and artistic practice has mostly been used by Mizrahi communities, which have been placed at the margins of the theatrical and social fields, for empowerment, protest, and subversion against the Israeli hegemonic culture: “The community’s actors express, through theatre, life-experiences, thoughts, and memories which are mostly missing from the dominant cultural discourse, and they re-design their cultural and self history and identity” (2007, 111). Using the theories of Antonio Gramsci and Michel de Certeau, Lev-Aladgem argues that community theatre is a site where subordinates such as Mizrahis and Arabs rewrite the official history from the bottom-up, subverting it and trying to formulate their counter-narrative (2006a, 7–27), especially forbidden and silent memories that might be “doomed to eternal oblivion” (2006b, 271) without the community theatre as bottom-up practice.

In accordance with this sense of bottom-up practice, the community theatre of Ramle constructed the play from the personal experiences of the participants—experiences such as divorce from a violent husband, a breaking off of an engagement, and Mizrahi Jews living in abandoned Arab houses. Through theatre workshops, the participants brought life experiences and improvised them as dramatic scenes. For example, each participant was asked to bring to the workshop a significant object such as a family picture, jewelry, a special collection, a book, and so on. Each of them presented and performed the experience and story behind the object. Mizrahi-Shapira and Swed rewrote the improvised scenes by consulting and sharing with the group their artistic and political selections. The play was performed three times in the Ramle Community Center auditorium in June 1998, in front of Mizrahi and Arabs audiences that included relatives, friends, and neighbors of the participants, as well as municipal-establishment representatives.<sup>5</sup>

After a synopsis of the play, I analyze the production from two perspectives. The first perspective is the ethnic–national conflict that deals with the Mizrahi–Arab “love story.” In this part, I historically and politically contextualize the Mizrahi and Arab identities and their role in the production. In the second part, the oppression of Mizrahi and Arab women by Middle Eastern men is demonstrated through two scenes.<sup>6</sup>

### ***Here? Now? Love? Synopsis of the Play***

*Here? Now? Love?* is built as a “frame story.” A frame story is a main narrative that provides the structure within which a number of different and smaller stories, which may or may not be connected, can be performed. The play has in it scenes from the past of Tamar and Amir, who meet again after twenty-three years of separation. They remember their love story and tell each other what happened to them since the separation. Tamar tells about her abusive husband, and Amir tells about his disappointing marriage to his wife Sana. In the end, it is made clear that Tamar ran away with her children and inherited the abandoned house, which belonged to Amir’s family. Scenes 4, 6, 8, and 9 are further analyzed in later sections of this essay.

- Scene 1: By coincidence, Tamar and Amir meet each other twenty-three years after they broke up. They sit on the same bench where they saw each other for the first time and remember this episode.
- Scene 2: A younger Tamar tries to pick a peach from a tree near the bench. The young Amir comes to help her, and they begin to talk and know each other and realize that Tamar is a Mizrahi Jew and Amir is an Arab, and despite the stereotypes they have of each other at first, they discover the uniqueness of each other beyond their prejudices. This starts their love story.
- Scene 3: Back to the frame story: Tamar and Amir try to understand why they broke up. She tells him that her conservative father forbade her to meet any man and she gave in to him. Amir says the reason was their different nationality and religion. Tamar regrets she did not marry him, telling him about her violent husband.
- Scene 4: After many years of suffering from her husband's abuse, Tamar and her children leave him.
- Scene 5: Back to the frame story: Amir tells Tamar about the problems in his relationship with his wife Sana.
- Scene 6: The wedding of Sana and Amir; soon after the wedding ceremony, Sana tells Amir that she does not love him, that her family forced her to marry him.
- Scene 7: Back to the frame story: Amir asks Tamar where she and her children went when they ran away and how she contends with the complicated situation of being homeless. She tells him about her entry into an Arab's abandoned house.
- Scene 8: The entry into the abandoned house. Tamar and her children break into the Arab's abandoned house and meet the ghost of the Arab owner.
- Scene 9 (epilogue): Back to the frame story: it turns out that Amir is the legal heir to the abandoned house in which Tamar and her children are now living. After discussing it, Tamar and Amir decide to marry and thus the ownership problem is solved.

## **The Ethnic-National Oppression**

### *Arab-Jewish Identities and Their Role in the Production*

One of the surprising directing preferences was to mix the cast: Mizrahis portrayed Arab characters and vice versa. The audience's implicit expectation was that Jews embody Jewish characters and vice versa, thus the mix casting created a surprised and confused impact. I present a historical background of the Arab and Mizrahi communities to explain this preference, and also other unexpected selections that intertwined Arab and Mizrahi participants.

The 1948 war between Arab nations and the newly established state of Israel followed the declaration of the state. During and after the war, most Palestinians were banished or fled from their lands and properties and became refugees. The Israeli historian Benny Morris describes the conquest of Ramle and Lydda, which are close to each other, as intensive and aggressive in order to cause panic and the retreat of Palestinian residents. As a result, most of Ramle's Arabs are living in houses that legally are owned by the state, in spite of the fact that they were originally owned by Palestinians before 1948. Furthermore, the Mizrahi immigrants were also settled in these abandoned Arab properties, which the state had captured and expropriated.

As a result of the formation of Israel, the old Jewish communities in the Middle East became unacceptable within Arab states. Multitudes of people from these communities immigrated to Israel during the 1950s. Their mixed identity, which includes both *Arab-ness* and *Jewish-ness*, has troubled the Zionist state that, for political and cultural reasons, perceives this dual identity as bad. Politically, Arab-ness has signified the “enemy” identity, therefore most of the Arab elements in the Israeli public sphere have been excluded and forbidden. Culturally, Zionism, as a Eurocentric and colonialist project (Shohat 1988),<sup>7</sup> has captured the Arab-ness in “orientalist glasses” (Said), which means that European Jewish-ness has been imagined as superior to non-European Jewish identities, and these Jews have been coerced to shed their “primitive” identities and adopt the “modern” Israeli-Zionist culture.

According to Homi Bhabha, this hybrid identity creates an ambivalent and complicated site that pollutes the “clean” categories, blurs the hierarchy among them, and corrodes the imagined essentialist national unity. Hence, according to Zionist discourse, the term Arab-Jew has been a threat to the imagined unity of the Jewish nation. It was thus replaced with other terms such as Sephardim (a medieval religious term) and Mizrahi (literally, the East Jews). These Zionist terms try to hide and erase the Arab-ness, but they do not completely succeed, and Zionist discourse continues to identify these Jews as the Other. Recently, “Arab-Jew” has been used in the Mizrahi postcolonial discourse as an analytical concept and as ideological opposition by scholars such as Ella Shohat (1999, 2003a) and Yehouda Shenhav, who have rehabilitated and recombined the hyphen between the Jewish-ness and Arab-ness in the disrupted Mizrahi identity.

During the 1950s Mizrahi immigrants arrived in Ramle, and today it is a city of 65,000 residents, with 82 percent Jews (Mizrahi and others) and 18 percent Arabs, living in separate neighborhoods. Ramle is considered, socioeconomically, a low-status city.<sup>8</sup> The Mizrahis and Arabs are marginalized communities (Shohat 1999), but they are not on the same level in the hierarchy. The Israeli establishment situates the Arabs at the bottom of its priorities; in contrast, the Mizrahis as Jews, although they are underprivileged in general, are more preferred than the former. Shohat (2003b) has discovered the connections of the Mizrahi and Palestinian narratives, which the Zionist discourse separates and denies. She noticed that historically, these communities became immigrants/refugees, uprooted from their homelands as a result of the 1948 war and the establishment of Israel. Israel and the Arab countries actually made a population exchange and transfer (Palestinians and Mizrahis) without admitting it.

Despite the separation and denial of the Zionist discourse, there are historical, cultural, and socioeconomic connections between Arabs and Mizrahis, which were expressed in the Ramle community theatre. The hybrid identity of the Mizrahi participants enabled an expression of cultural similarity and common marginal experience with the Arabs in the rehearsals and in the performance itself, in contrast to the distinction of Mizrahis and Arabs in Israeli society. There is almost no physical difference in the depictions of Jewish and Arab characters, an effect created from the mixing of the cast (Arabs representing Jewish characters and vice versa). The similar appearance of Mizrahis and Arabs increases the confusion, which Mizrahi-Shapira notes:

In the rehearsals the Mizrahi actors identified with the Arab characters that they embodied and vice versa, the Arab actors identified with the Jewish characters. So they could see the viewpoint of the other, feel his pain and be aware of difficulties and be closer to each other. In the performance, some of the spectators, who personally knew the identities of the actors, were surprised how their relatives and friends convincingly act and embodied the “enemy.” At first some of them were embarrassed and laughed but during the performance they got used to it and accepted it “naturally.” (Mizrahi-Shapira interview)

Furthermore, different pairs of actors play the main characters, Tamar and Amir, in each scene, thus exploring the mechanism of the representation and demonstrating the essential fluidity

of the Arab and Jewish identities. This unique casting is in opposition to the Israeli hegemonically produced reality, because the cultural and external similarity leads to distinction and alienation. As Azmi Bishara<sup>9</sup> explains, the Mizrahi often adopt extreme Zionist opinions, because he or she tries to distinguish from and denies the Arab elements of his or her identity (see Chetrit 173). A counter-dynamic took place in respect to the complex Arab identity in the process of rehearsing the performance. The Mizrahi purposely emphasized the common Arab element, while the Arabs expressed the Israeli elements in their identity. Mizrahi-Shapira explains this exceptional dynamic:

A lot of times, some of the Jewish Morocco-born participants emphasized the Arabic dimension in their identity—they sometimes spoke Arabic with the Arab participants, they brought Middle Eastern music as material for the workshops, and spoke nostalgically about their good Arab neighbors in Morocco. Some of the Arab participants expressed their Israeli-ness. Fuad,<sup>10</sup> an Arab man, spoke about his Jewish girlfriends and that he wished to volunteer for the Israeli army. Saida, an Arab woman, spoke about her desire to be released from the Arabic patriarchal family, and she saw the feminist Jewish woman as a role model. (Mizrahi-Shapira interview)

Thus a paradoxical process was created in opposition to the dominant constructed reality, subverting and deconstructing the dichotomy of a rigid and unambiguous line between Jew and Arab and offering an alternative hybrid identity.

### *The Entry into the Abandoned House*

This scene (scene 8) tries to deal with the abandoned properties of Ramle's and Lydda's Palestinian refugees in which Mizrahi immigrants were settled by the state. The scene of the entry starts with an Arab man dressed in traditional garb—a *galabiya* (dress for men) and *keffiyah* (shawl that men wear on their heads)—and two young men as helpers holding his *nargila* (a pipe for smoking). Tamar and her children come in after them. In their hands are boxes and other possessions taken when they ran away from their violent father and husband. It is understood from their gazes that the house is dirty and also that they do not notice the Arab's presence. During the scene, it is made clear that the Arab characters are ghosts. These ghosts disturb the Mizrahi family, and Tamar understands that they are the ghosts of the Arab family who previously lived there. She negotiates with one of the ghosts and he permits her to stay there until she finds another solution.

According to Israeli theatre scholar Dan Urian, who has researched the historical representations of the major Israeli conflicts on the Hebrew stage, the presentation of an Arab's abandoned house and Arab refugees is almost nonexistent in Hebrew drama. The few productions that dared to present these themes were almost always Jewish-Arab performances on the margins of the theatrical field. This present ensemble is no different, because it includes Jews and Arabs and, as community theatre, is also situated on the margins. Thus it is possible to present the Arab refugees and their abandoned property. But these themes are blurred in the performance, because there is no mention of why the house is abandoned and where the owners are. The directors preferred not to deal directly with these problematic questions and to avoid open confrontation, as Mizrahi-Shapira says: "I and Yussef preferred to decontextualize this scene and blur the political issue, because it was the first production and it was not easy to create a dialogue and consolidate the group, so to open directly a taboo issue like the abandoned property of the Palestinian refugees was too much. We preferred to only hint at it" (Mizrahi-Shapira interview).

The blurring of the refugee problem is also created by the depiction of the Arab characters in the scene. The decision to present them not as flesh-and-blood human beings, but as ghosts, weakens their representation as a real entity with authentic demands. This blurred representation of the complicated issues continues in the way Tamar convinces the Arab ghost to provide her with a home for her children. The creators preferred a symbolic solution that avoids getting into real details of

territories, division, and history. Tamar simply starts to dance an oriental dance,<sup>11</sup> which leaves the ghost shocked and full of desire, therefore he permits her to remain in the house with him.

This symbolic dancing can be interpreted in several different ways. From a feminist point of view, the dancing functions as an erotic-feminine seduction.<sup>12</sup> The woman becomes a sexual object to the male gaze enjoying her body and its erotic movement, and for that reason the ghost agrees to Tamar's request. Nevertheless, oriental dancing also belongs to Arab culture and signifies that Tamar is not only a Jew, but also has Arab elements in her identity, therefore the ghost can become close to her. In this interpretation, there is perhaps a suggestion of contention with the present Israeli cultural discourse, which is geared only toward the West and not toward the Arabs.

### *The Prologue and Epilogue Scenes*

Urian explains that love stories between Arabs and Jews on the Hebrew stage are a metaphor for the aspiration for peace among the nations, and their failed ending testifies to the complexity of realizing this peace within the context of Middle Eastern political realities. The play starts from the failed ending of the love story of the mixed couple. In their nostalgic memories, two points of view are expressed until focusing on the ownership of the abandoned house, then the opportunity for the late realization of their love signifies a solution to the ownership conflict.

The plot ends in an argument between Tamar and Amir about the right to inherit the house. It is cut short, then the actors "come out" of their characters and function as participants in the community-theatre group, deliberating what would be an appropriate ending for the plot. Different voices arise: some of them ask for the couple to break up and for Amir to inherit the house as the legal owner; others ask for a marriage, but then the problem of the different religions arises; and still others suggest that Amir consider Tamar's condition and offer her the house. Finally, the group decides to conduct a marriage between the couple though without any religious symbols in the ceremony, therefore the audience cannot know whether it is a Jewish or Arab marriage ceremony. Furthermore, the wedding is portrayed artificially and theatrically, emphasizing illusion and the lack of realization of this ceremony outside the medium of theatre.

The love story is apparently a successful one, because the ex-lovers rehabilitate their old love and solve the ownership problem. It is not surprising that the group used a metatheatrical stratagem to contend with the plot's resolution in order to reflect their indecision: on the one hand, their aspiration for peace moves them to a "happy ending" between the lovers, and on the other, they present it as a artificial symbolic solution that blurs a clear political opinion of the real ways toward solution, or at least political guidelines of their vision. Thus the observation of Urian about the failures of Arab-Jewish love stories on the Hebrew stage is still correct here. The efforts to decontextualize the ceremony from any national or religious signs weaken and even remove the radical and political meaning of the "happy ending" of the love story. Consequently, there is no direct and clear statement about the Arab refugees and their properties beyond a general will for peace, which avoids honest debate.

### **The Ethno-Gender Oppression**

According to Lev-Aladgem and First, from the 1990s onward Israeli community theatre has been feminized, largely by a second generation of Mizrahi low-status women who have used the theatre to present their story, design their identity, and empower themselves as well as their women spectators.

In the play, there are two scenes that deal with the woman's oppression in the patriarchal oriental society. In the first scene, the Arab woman is the main figure and it illustrates her relationship with her husband in the conservative environment in which they live. In the second scene, the Mizrahi woman suffers from violent oppression by her husband. Mohanty argues that the West perceives Third World women (Arab and Mizrahi in our case) stereotypically: they have a limited life, are oppressed sexually, and are poor, ignorant, traditional, and passive victims.<sup>13</sup> In the performance, these stereotypes are presented, but they are challenged by the female figures that try to liberate themselves from these oppressed images.

There are three representational modes of Arab women on the Israeli stage that mirror three phases in the development of representations of Arab women in Israeli theatre history: 1) as sexual objects, 2) as deserving women, and 3) as subjects with conscious aspirations. In the play, the Arab and Mizrahi women are depicted in the third mode (Urian). This mode has been developed by women playwrights from the 1990s at the margins of Israeli theatre, especially in the Akko Festival for Alternative Theatre (Shem-Tov 2007, 2009). The Arab female character is portrayed as trying to achieve equality and independence within conservative Arab society, as well as within the Israeli establishment that oppresses her. These plays focus on the activities of Arab women and represent them as complicated and human figures, situating Arab women as leaders of the plays' plots; some of the plays construct women's aspiration for emancipation through the Palestinian struggle against Israeli oppression. Unfortunately, women's expectations to be granted Palestinian national rights and equality, as well as their rights as women, are dashed, because Arab society distinguishes between the national demands for collective rights and independence and women's rights, and denies the latter. The Arab woman as an active hero of the plot highlights feminist issues and attempts, unsuccessfully, to break the chains of the patriarchal society.

#### *The Wedding of Sana (Scene 6)*

Sana and Amir return from their wedding ceremony to their home, while the sounds of the celebrating crowd are heard in the background. Amir is joyful and happy, but Sana is sad and silent. All attempts by Amir to encourage her to talk and be close to him fail. He thinks that her difficulty is caused by her worry about having sex with him for the first time, so he offers to sleep only beside her, not with her. Finally, Sana expresses her frustration at her family's oppression and that she could not choose her husband as she wished. Sana tells Amir that she does not want to be his wife. Amir is very surprised, even refuses to believe her, but eventually he agrees to a divorce. However, Sana understands that her family will not accept her as a divorcee, thus she prefers to stay with him. The Arab man is purposely represented as patient and understanding, not as oppressive—the oppression is caused by the norms of the society that subjugate this couple. Hence the characters' design has not been reduced to the stereotypical violence and chauvinism of Arab men. Sana, as an Arab woman, is aware of her rights, but she is not prepared to pay the high cost of her liberation. Her choosing to give birth to only one child expresses her protest against Arab norms and the expectations of a large family.

#### *Tamar Leaving Her Home (Scene 4)*

The calm atmosphere of the home is broken by Tamar's shouting, "Children, Daddy is home." Immediately, the family stands to attention at the front of the stage and prepares to receive him like a group of soldiers. He comes and sits on his armchair and, without words, commands his family to serve him. Tamar brings him food, his daughter washes his feet, and his son arranges a pillow for his comfort. When, with fear, they ask him for some money, he is angry and the military metaphor becomes realized: he puts on a military cap and begins to count from one to ten. During the

counting, the family dons military uniforms and stands to order. It is seen as a regular, known, and hated ritual, but suddenly, that day, after many years of violent oppression, the children decide with surprising courage to resist and demand that he change his horrible behavior. After some doubt, Tamar joins them and starts her transformation, with her children's support, to a liberated woman. Her husband refuses to change and therefore the family leaves him. The Mizrahi father seems to be represented stereotypically—he is violent, vulgar, and cruel—but the fact that this scene is a parody by using a military metaphor to describe the family's power relationship suggests that the origin of the oppression is in the army and aggressive Israeli society and is not an essential feature of an imaginary oriental mentality.

*From Autobiographical Experience to a Theatrical Text*

Israeli community-theatre frequently applies the devising performance mode, which emphasizes collaborative creation and improvisation and does not accept the written text as the starting point in the process or as superior for the performance (Heddon and Milling). This process includes two main phases (Lev-Aladgem 2006b, 270): the first, "the incubator" stage, contains the workshop in which the participants explore their life materials and learn acting skills from the director and shape them to a theatrical event. This stage is characterized by empowerment at the personal and group levels, because it is prepared privately and creates a safe framework for self-exposure. The second stage is the group's performance in front of the community audience to stimulate a debate between the self-text onstage and the spectators in the auditorium. This stage's purpose is an empowerment at the third level, which includes all the community members who take part in the theatrical event.

The forced engagement of Sana and the violence in Tamar's home are scenes that are based on the autobiographical experiences of the performers. Naturally, an adaptation of biographical materials requires change and editing. Different situations in the reality that covers an extended time and space are compressed and reduced to one dramatic scene onstage. The violence that the performer suffered in her real family continued for many years in silence and under constant terror. However, this terror is designed in a parodic mode that reduces the strength of suffering embodied in the biographical experience. The practitioners preferred to perform only the act of liberation—to present Tamar's leaving and her transformation. The change in Tamar that is generated is emphasized more than her helplessness during most of the years of her marriage. This dramatic decision challenges the passive image of the Third World woman and empowers the performers and woman spectators. However, in real life, the performer who embodied Sana was not interested in marrying the man her family chose for her. Despite the difficulty of being single at her age in Arab society, she broke off her engagement and worked to pay off the debts that accumulated because of this. In the play, Sana is married to Amir against her will; she is presented as docile, because she consciously gives up and behaves more or less by the norms of society. The meaning of the narrative representation of these women tends to perpetuate, in some sense, social stereotypes, in contrast to the autobiographical experiences on which these narratives are based.

In reality, these women decided to start their process of liberation, each one in her own way and time. Nevertheless, the Mizrahi woman is portrayed as liberated, whereas the Arab woman is represented in the play as weak and captive to the patriarchal order. Thus the directors preferred to maintain the internal hierarchy between these two groups of oppressed women, as Mizrahi-Shapira explains: "We preferred to reflect the usual situation of the Arab woman who most of the time keeps going with the norms and is afraid to swim against the stream" (Mizrahi-Shapira interview). They found this situation troubling and believed it significant enough to reflect onstage.



## Summary

This community theatre is very unusual, because it breaks accepted images and stereotypes. The common element in both the Mizrahi and the Arab is more valuable and creates a profound dialogue that attempts to cross the boundaries of Zionist discourse, and also permits a certain discussion on silenced issues. This common element was articulated in the workshops and in the performance: the Mizrahi participants sometimes used Arabic when telling their Moroccan memories; Middle Eastern music was used in the workshop exercises; confusion was created by casting a Mizrahi actor to represent an Arab character and vice versa. These articulations made it possible to build a bridge between Arabs and Jews that is forbidden in Zionist discourse.

Nevertheless, the experience of designing and representing themes is not simple, and it hides contradictions, difficulties, and different sensitivities. The abandoned house and the inheritance question could arise and illuminate silenced political issues, though these matters remain open and blurry. The decontextualization of this issue from the history of the Arab–Israeli conflict, and the blurring of the refugee problem, presents the difficulty of formulating a clear political statement. Avoidance of a direct message was articulated by how the conflict over the house was solved. The “happy ending” of the love story of Tamar and Amir was designed artificially and theatrically, and points to the contradiction between the will to live together without fighting and the lack of readiness to make painful concessions to achieve this aspiration.

Another common issue of these communities is the Arab and Mizrahi women’s representation as a “subject with conscious aspirations,” in opposition to the feminist view, which stereotypically demonstrates the Third World woman as a passive and oppressed subject. Tamar takes responsibility for her life and her children and despite the difficulties, she leaves her violent husband and finds a new home. Sana is not afraid to tell her groom Amir that she does not love him, although she does not separate from him.

*Here? Now? Love?* is, essentially, looking for how to relate to the political complexities and still construct a dialogue and weave threads among the interpersonal and international identities of the group’s participants. The group therefore moves between expressions of the pain and political and social taboos to create and emphasize common threads that connect and make possible a dialogue without collapsing the framework itself. It signifies a certain way and process of how there can be a fertile dialogue without formulating any absolute political solution. Consequently, the Arab and Mizrahi participants try to challenge and subvert the Zionist discourse by integrating different discourses, and bringing them together on one juncture. But they nevertheless largely maintain the boundaries of the Zionist discourse, because they are concerned that crossing these boundaries could cause their dialogue to collapse. *Here? Now? Love?* is an attempt, then, to design together a co-narrative through negotiation about its meanings, and to be released, not always successfully, from the burden of Zionist discourse that dichotomizes Arab–Jewish identity, rather than give space for political solutions that might emerge out of the theatrical work.

---

*Naphtaly Shem-Tov* teaches in the Department of Literature, Arts, and Linguistics of the Open University of Israel. His Ph.D. dissertation, “Akko Festival as a Site of Struggle,” concerns an Israeli alternative festival. His articles about Akko Festival have been published in *Studies in Theatre and Performance* and *Theory and Criticism* (in Hebrew). His research interests include community theatre, ethnicity, and culture identity. Currently, he is researching the functions of theatrical improvisation in teaching educational theatre.

## Notes

1. Mizrahi Jews originate from Arab countries. I discuss this term specifically later.
2. The theatre group did not have a special name. This is very common in Israeli community-theatre groups, which are only titled by the framework or place in which they create.
3. The differences between Arabs and Jews are expressed through nationality and religion. However, the production's process and the play itself mostly focused on the national level. Therefore I chose to not refer to the latter, because it doesn't seem relevant to the analysis.
4. Gerri Moriarty (2004) writes about her experience as community artist in directing the Catholic and Protestant participants in a community-theatre group in Northern Ireland. She analyzes the complicated situation of two rival, national religious communities that came together to create a community-theatre project, and she asks similar questions as ours. It is interesting to note that this project also organized its plot around a love story and wedding ceremony.
5. The play was also performed in a community-theatre festival at the Givaatim Theatre and at Tel Aviv University and the Hebrew University for theatre students during October–November 1998. In this article, I especially relate the performances that took place in Ramle.
6. The sources I used to analyze the production are 1) a video documentation of the performance, 2) the play itself, and 3) my interview with Oshrat Mizrahi-Shapira.
7. Professor Ella Shohat is an Israeli-born Mizrahi woman, a feminist activist, and a scholar in women's and cultural studies who teaches at New York University.
8. See [http://www.cbs.gov.il/publications/local\\_authorities03/pdf/p244.pdf](http://www.cbs.gov.il/publications/local_authorities03/pdf/p244.pdf) (in Hebrew). On a continuum of 1 to 10, where 10 is the highest level, Ramle is rated at 4.
9. Azmi Bishara is a Palestinian intellectual and Israeli citizen who over the past decade led Balad—an Arab political party in the Knesset. The Israeli intelligence service suspected that he was assisting Lebanese terrorists and therefore he fled the country.
10. Throughout this article, the names of participants have been changed to protect their privacy.
11. Mizrahi-Shapira notes that in the workshops both Jews and Arabs brought Middle Eastern music, and this was one of the cultural elements that created a common denominator among them.
12. Later, I expand on the feminist view of the play. Here I note only this, because this scene demonstrates the significance of the complex connections between national and gender-oriented views.
13. Israel is considered a Western country, but sociologically the Arab and Mizrahi populations are perceived as minority communities in Israeli society; accordingly, both Arab and Mizrahi women are stereotypically identified. Chandra Talpade Mohanty's view has influenced Arab and Mizrahi women, who have demanded equal representation in Israeli feminist organizations that had denied their unique issues because the organizations were led by bourgeois Israeli-Jewish women of European origin. Arab and Mizrahi women established their own feminist movements to help improve their low status.

## Works Cited

- Bhabha, K. Homi. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994.
- Chetrit, S. Sami. *The Ashkenazi Revolution Is Dead*. Tel Aviv: Bimat Kedem, 1999 (in Hebrew).
- Heddon, Deirdre, and Jane Milling. *Devising Performance: A Critical History*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.
- Lev-Aladgem, Shulamith. "Ethnicity, Class, and Gender in Israeli Community Theatre." *Theatre Research International* 28.2 (2003): 181–92.
- . "What Do You Mean by Rehabilitating Us? Are We Cripples?: Project Renewal from the Standpoint of Community Theatre." *Israeli Sociology* 8.1 (2006a): 7–27 (in Hebrew).
- . "Remembering Forbidden Memories: Community Theatre and Politics of Memory." *Social Identities* 12.3 (2006b): 269–83.
- . "Counter-Theatre: Symbolic Protest and Social Activity in Jerusalem." *Theory and Criticism* 30 (2007): 111–34 (in Hebrew).
- . "Between Home and Homeland: Facilitating Theatre with Ethiopian Youth." *Research in Drama Education* 13.3 (2008): 275–93.
- Lev-Aladgem, S., and A. First. "The Israeli Theatre as a Site for Performing Gender and Identity." *Feminist Media Studies* 4.1 (2004): 37–50.
- Mizrahi-Shapira, Oshrat. Personal interview with author, 15 September 2009.
- Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses." *Colonial Discourse and Post-colonial Theory*. Ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman. London: Prentice Hall, 1993. 196–220.
- Moriarty, Gerri. "The Weeding Community Play Project: A Cross-community Production in Northern Ireland." *Theatre and Empowerment: Community Drama on the World Stage*. Ed. Richard Boon and Jane Plastow. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004. 13–32.
- Morris, Benny. *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947–1949*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1987.
- Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon, 1979.
- Shem-Tov, Naphtaly. "Akko Festival as a Site of Struggle in the Theatrical and Social Fields, 1980–2004" (Ph.D. diss., Tel Aviv University, 2007) (in Hebrew).
- . "Celebration and Confrontation: Akko Festival of Israeli Alternative Theatre." *Studies in Theatre and Performance* 29.1 (2009): 93–106.
- Shenhav, Yehouda. *The Arab Jews: A Postcolonial Reading of Nationalism, Religion, and Ethnicity*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford UP, 2006.

Shohat, Ella. "Sephardim in Israel: Zionism from the Point of View of its Jewish Victims." *Social Text* 19/20 (1988): 1–35.

———. "The Invention of the Mizrahim." *Journal of Palestine Studies* 29.1 (1999): 5–20.

———. "Rupture and Return: Zionist Discourse and the Study of Arab Jews." *Social Text* 21 (2003a): 49–74.

———. "Reflections of an Arab-Jew." *The Flying Camel*. Ed. Loolwa Khazzoom. New York: Seal Press, 2003b.

Urian, Dan. *The Arab in Israeli Drama and Theatre*. Tel Aviv: Or-Am, 1996 (in Hebrew).