

‘Why Were Our Yemenite Brothers Insulted?’: *Love as Strong as Death* as a Prequel to Mizrahi Presence in Israeli Theatre

YAIR LIPSHITZ AND NAPHTALY SHEM-TOV

The article traces the production and reception of Love as Strong as Death, a dramatization of the Song of Songs that was performed in Mandatory Palestine in the years 1940–42 by a group of Yemenite Jewish actors. We argue that the tensions between the actors’ amateur status and their image as embodying a long-lost Biblical heritage were emblematic of the inherent contradictions within the hegemonic Ashkenazi Zionist discourse and the Orientalist perception of the role of Yemenite Jews in it. By exploring both Yemenite and Ashkenazi voices in and around the production, we analyse how the stage, the theatre hall and the written press all served as contested sites regarding the participation of non-European Jews in Hebrew theatre and culture. In the paper’s conclusion, we demonstrate how Love as Strong as Death anticipated later debates in Israeli theatre about the place of Mizrahi Jews on stage and in the auditorium.

Love as Strong as Death (*Aza Kamavet Ahava*) by Aharon Pollack is a biblical play in Hebrew based on the Song of Songs. The play was first performed in Mandatory Palestine in 1940 and then again in 1942.¹ In both instances, it was directed by Moshe Halevy and performed by an ensemble of amateur Jewish Yemenite actors. This paper will trace the circumstances of the play’s production and reception (rather than focus on a literary analysis of the dramatic text) in order to reveal an early case in the history of Hebrew theatre in which both the theatre hall and public discourse functioned as sites for power struggles between Ashkenazi Jews (of European descent) and Mizrahi Jews (from the Middle East and North Africa). Moreover, the play’s reception captures the ongoing negotiation of the circumscribed place of Yemenite Jews, as actors and spectators, in both the theatrical world and the political–cultural context of Mandatory Palestine. The play and its reception anticipate the ethnic identity politics in Israeli theatre and shed light on central conflicts that would fully occupy centre stage only a few decades later.²

***Love as Strong as Death* and the search for a Hebrew biblical theatre**

The Hebrew Bible was an instrumental text for Zionist culture’s broad project of rejuvenating Jewish nationalism through the return to the Land of Israel and the

Hebrew language.³ Hebrew theatre took part in reclaiming the Bible for the sake of Zionist nation-building through various plays that dramatized key biblical stories and made the Bible live again on stage.⁴ Of the many biblical texts that inspired Zionist culture, the Song of Songs was particularly fundamental, mainly due to its elaborate descriptions of landscapes and nature and its liberated celebration of the body. The Song of Songs was a major thematic feature in the visual arts of the early twentieth century in Mandatory Palestine, and later also in popular music, professional dance and folk dance.⁵ It was in this context that Pollack wrote *Love as Strong as Death*, which is one of several early attempts in Hebrew to deal with the dramatic potential of the Song of Songs.⁶

The notion that the Song of Songs was written as drama can already be found in Antiquity, especially in Origen's interpretation of the Song.⁷ This is probably due to the fact that the Song is the only biblical book composed entirely of direct speeches, without the mediation of a narrator. In 1642, John Milton identified the Song with a specific dramatic genre: the pastoral.⁸ The characterization of the Song as pastoral drama persisted well into the nineteenth century, and can be found among eminent bible scholars of the time such as Franz Delitzch.⁹ Interpretations of the Song as drama had developed in two main directions: one saw its main plot as a love story between two main protagonists, a female one (often referred to as the 'Shulamite') and a male one, identified as a shepherd by some and as King Solomon by others. The other interpretive strand considers the Song's plot to be a love triangle, between King Solomon, the Shulamite and the shepherd.¹⁰

In his play, Pollack also conceives the Song of Songs as pastoral drama, and consequently dramatizes the contrast between the simple, idyllic shepherds' lives and corrupt, sophisticated urbanity. Like those who interpreted the Song's plot in triangular terms, *Love as Strong as Death* presents an entangled story about three characters, King Solomon, Shulamit (the Hebrew word for 'Shulamite', now serving as a given name) and her lover, Eitan the shepherd. The play's opening and ending scenes are set in King Solomon's palace in Jerusalem. In keeping with the pastoral tradition, the city and palace are characterized as a space of hedonistic cynicism and display an apathetic view of love as acquired only by means of money or power. Solomon is presented as a tyrant, who by this time in his life echoes Ecclesiastes' worldview and sees in everything 'vanity of vanities'. When a debate arises regarding the question of whether true love still exists in the Land of Israel, the king is told about the love between Shulamit and Eitan. Solomon orders his aids to bring Shulamit to his harem, and the scene then moves to depict the idyllic love between Shulamit and Eitan in the countryside. The dialogues between the two are replete with allusions to the Song of Songs, which paint their relationship as both sensual and innocent. The play, however, ends tragically: Eitan is killed in an uprising against the king's men who come to seize Shulamit, and she commits suicide. In the final scene, Solomon is informed of Shulamit's death but admits that by now he had entirely forgotten about her and his initial decree that set the plot in motion. All that had transpired was in vain – and King Solomon resumes his nihilistic tone.

The play was first performed in 1940 by a group of Yemenite actors directed by Moshe Halevy, founder of Ohel theatre. Halevy, who emigrated to Mandatory

Palestine from Russia in the early 1920s, founded the theatre with a vision to create a socialist proletarian theatre which would also produce plays inspired by the biblical landscape of the Land of Israel.¹¹ Already in the 1920s, Halevy declared to his actors that performing biblical plays is part of an attempt to 're-ignite the glorious past, with all its beauty, its heroism and creativity ... Until finally – the vision of the future, the vision of the rebirth and renewal, a return to the earth and our re-awakening; a return to a life of creativity and vigour.'¹² According to Halevy, biblical theatre was part of the Zionist mission of Jewish national rebirth. Pursuing this mission, Halevy staged several biblical plays in the Ohel theatre, such as *Jacob and Rachel* (1928), in a quest for the proper theatrical language to convey his biblical vision.¹³ As part of his work on *Jacob and Rachel*, Halevy also turned to the liturgical cantillation in Yemenite synagogues as inspiration for the proper 'biblical' pronunciation of Hebrew onstage.¹⁴

In *Love as Strong as Death*, Halevy takes this theatrical affinity between the Yemenites and the Bible a step further. In this production, they were not only a source of inspiration for the proper pronunciation of Hebrew but also became actors who physically embody the biblical world. Indeed, in his autobiography, Halevy writes that, for him, working with the group of Yemenite actors was a virtual return to the Bible:

The Yemenites drew attention by virtue of traits inherent in their blood and education, their correct Hebrew accent, the Oriental cadence and melody in their speech, the unique plasticity of their movements, and in their warm and easily excitable temperament. They saved me a lot of trouble and work, which I would have had to invest in putting on a biblical play with Ashkenazi actors. However, they lacked the experience and elementary knowledge in acting methods, and as a result, I worked with them on the same play for an extended period of time, a year and a half, trying to get them to do the best they could.¹⁵

The association between Yemenite Jews and the Bible is not unique to this play, or even to the local theatre at large. As we will see in a moment, this linkage is a fundamental element in the Zionist cultural discourse in the first half of the twentieth century. However, the very existence of a Yemenite theatre group in the 1940s also involved social and political struggles between Yemenite and Ashkenazi Jews in Mandatory Palestine. In order to fully understand the different contexts within which *Love as Strong as Death* was produced and performed, we need first to take a broader look at the place of Yemenite Jews in the social, political and cultural spaces of the Jewish community in Mandatory Palestine.

The image of Yemenite Jews: natural workers and biblical remnants

In modern times, Yemenite Jews immigrated to Palestine/Israel in roughly four waves. The first three waves took place before the establishment of the State of Israel: The 1882 immigration (known as *E'ele Betamar*) and the 1911–14 immigration (*Aliyat Yavnieli*) under Ottoman rule, and the 1919–48 immigration wave during the British mandate. By 1948, approximately 20,000 Jews had emigrated from Yemen to

Mandatory Palestine, constituting a small minority within the Jewish population of 650,000 living in Palestine. The fourth wave occurred during 1949–50, in which approximately 50,000 Yemenite Jews arrived to the newly established State of Israel.¹⁶

While the dominant majority of Jews immigrating to Palestine prior to 1948 was of Ashkenazi origin, the Yemenites were a prominent ethnic group among the Jews of the Middle East who did arrive in Palestine before the establishment of the state. The Yemenite Jews were important for the Zionist project for reasons both symbolic and practical. On a symbolic level, the Yemenite Jews were perceived by Zionists as preserving the authentic Jewish tradition and heritage from the biblical period. This stemmed from an image of Yemenite Jewry that can be traced back to the mid-nineteenth century, as a community that seemingly existed isolated from foreign cultural influences, such as European colonialism or other, more acculturated Jewish communities.¹⁷ Thus, the Ashkenazi-dominated culture viewed them as authentic agents of the preservation of the biblical Hebrews' culture.¹⁸ The Yemenite Jew was perceived not only as the bearer of ancient Jewish knowledge, but also as personifying, in their accent, clothes, appearance, bodies, and traditional song and dance, the 'ancient Hebrew', as if they had emerged from the biblical stories themselves. In other words, because it was allegedly stagnant and had not changed for generations, the Yemenite Jews' cultural legacy was not viewed as significant in and of itself, but rather as a living archive frozen in time through which the biblical Hebrew past could be restored. From a Zionist point of view, the Yemenite Jews were thus conducive to the project of restoring the Hebrew former glory of ancient times.¹⁹

At the same time, the position of the Yemenites within the Jewish community of Palestine stemmed from practical considerations as well. Constituting a source of 'cheap labour', the Yemenites were employed by Ashkenazi farmers and relegated to a life of poverty. Ironically, this modest way of life fed into the stereotypical perception of the Yemenites as humble people satisfied with what they had. Thus, they could compete with Arab workers in the Zionist effort to 'conquer the labour' – a concept aimed at creating a purely Jewish economy. The incorporation of Yemenites as cheap labourers encouraged Zionist institutions in the early 1900s to increase Jewish immigration from Yemen; however, it was this enterprise that forged an orientalist distinction within the Jewish community between Ashkenazi workers and Yemenite workers. In line with the concept of the 'natural worker', the Hebrew Zionist culture constructed the Yemenite Jew's image in terms of the orientalist stereotype. The Yemenite was presented as inferior, primitive and chauvinistic, but also as industrious, 'content' and suitable for agricultural work. This justified not only their low wages and meagre living conditions, but also their employers' patronizing and condescending attitudes toward them. At the same time as they were perceived as 'natural workers', the Yemenites were seen as lacking education and ideological consciousness, as opposed to the Ashkenazi 'idealistic worker', who was cultured and ideologically motivated, and therefore deserving of higher wages.²⁰ This attitude included the allotment of land for building agricultural settlements only to Ashkenazi pioneers who became, in time, the heroes of the meta-Zionist narrative. In contrast, the

Yemenites were relegated to the margins of the Zionist narrative where they attained neither actual capital nor the prestigious labelling as pioneers and national leaders.²¹

Thus, the Yemenite stereotype was based on two foundations: the inferior, primitive natural worker and the original biblical Jew. This dual stereotype facilitated the Yemenite Jews' positioning at the lowest rung on the social ladder and blocked their social mobility. Still, the Yemenites took steps to change this status quo. For instance, Zechariah Glosca, Avraham Tabib and Shalom Cohen, who were amongst the founders of the Histadrut (General Organization of Workers in Israel), soon came to realize that the union would do nothing to defend the Yemenite workers' rights. Consequently, they left the organization and founded the Yemenite Association as a means to promote the Yemenites' economic, social and cultural rights in all aspects of life. As Sammy Smootha notes:

The Yemenites themselves were so keenly sensitive to this attitude that one of their contemporary leaders complained at the 18th Zionist congress [in Prague] in 1933 that the members of his community were still second-class citizens in Palestine, like non-Aryans in Germany.²²

However, these efforts, including active participation in decision-making in the national institutions, were rejected. The institutions saw in the Yemenites' political organizing a threat, and consequently employed two basic strategies to disassemble the Yemenite Association: first, by instigating disputes within the Association, interfering in official appointment processes, and sowing conflicts between members of the Association and Yemenites associated with the Histadrut. The second strategy was symbolic, but even more effective: it involved the stigmatization of the Yemenite Association as ethnically isolationist, as suffering from an inferiority complex, and, mainly, as posing a threat to national unity. This vilification was particularly cynical given that the Yemenite Association called for the Yemenites' integration in national institutions, the realization of Zionist solidarity, and the provision of ethnically unbiased and equal opportunities to all.²³ As we will see later in this paper, these claims arose in the discourse surrounding *Love as Strong as Death* as well.

In his analysis of the Yemenite character in the Hebrew theatre throughout the twentieth century, Dan Urian found that in the first half of the century, this double stereotype was consolidated in comical plays and skits in which the Yemenite Jew is presented as either a source of inspiration for biblical plays or as grotesque and ridiculous.²⁴ Drama and theatre also took part in the negative stigmatizing of the Yemenite Association. The most blatant example of this was M. Kedmi's play *The Yemenite Congress* (1934), a grotesque comedy about an unruly congress of leaders and representatives of Yemenite workers and tradesmen that gets out of hand to the point where police are called in to disperse the crowd. The congress delegates are tradesmen of 'Yemenite' trades of low social status: bakers, shoe polishers, matchmakers, falafel vendors, floorers and porters. According to Urian, this text features all of the stereotypical characteristics of Yemenites: primitive, dirty and cultureless, speaking defective modern Hebrew, argumentative and rude, ape-like in their coarse gestures, unmodern in their religiosity, lacking Zionist ideological

awareness and susceptible to political manipulation.²⁵ While ostensibly a political satire, *The Yemenite Congress* nonetheless echoes the national institutions' negative stigmatizing of the Yemenite Association and sustains and justifies the national institutions' orientalist racism toward Yemenite Jews.

At the same time, the Yemenite Jews' presence in the performing arts during this period was heavily charged with their association with the biblical Jew. This is already exemplified by the Yemenite theatre group that preceded the one discussed in this paper: 'Shulamit: A Mizrahi (Oriental) Theatre Group' was led by Shlomo Ben-Menashe and founded by the Histadrut's cultural committee. The latter's interest in founding 'Shulamit', as was the case in its supporting Halevy's group, was linked to its objective to encourage Yemenite workers to join its ranks as part of its struggle against the Yemenite Association. In 1937, 'Shulamit' produced *A Visitor from the Land of Israel in Yemen*, a folkloristic play featuring traditional Yemenite customs, liturgical benedictions, stories, song and dance.²⁶ In the current context, it is important to emphasize that the group's name, 'Shulamit', is inspired by the Song of Songs' Shulamite. This in itself establishes a connection between the performance of Yemenite Jews and the Bible, in general, and the Song of Songs, in particular – a linkage that was later deepened in *Love as Strong as Death*. In her review of the 'Shulamit' troupe, poet Leah Goldberg noted that 'the primitive is communicated so naturally, with such charm', while insisting that 'still, one cannot assume that from this a new theatrical art form will grow. We have come too far with our Europeanism and will under no circumstances renounce the lesson we learned in the West over two thousand years.'²⁷ Such attitudes were shown towards Yemenites in other forms of the performing arts as well.²⁸ Yemenite female singers such as Bracha Zefira, Shoshana Damari, Esther Gamlielit and Hana Aharoni, who appeared regularly in full traditional costume in satirical revues, were well received but still perceived as exotic, as if they echoed the Hebrew biblical world on stage. The Song of Songs was a central theme in the performances of Yemenite singers and dancers. In particular, the repertoire of Shoshana Damari, one of the most celebrated female singers in pre- and post-State Israel, was filled with allusions to the Song of Songs. In dance, Sarah Levy-Tanai's choreography also mixed traditional Yemenite dance movements with texts from the Song of Songs.²⁹

All of the above formed the background against which *Love as Strong as Death* was produced. Unlike the folkloristic performance of the 'Shulamit' troupe a few years prior, *Love as Strong as Death* was a staging of a dramatic text, which at the time was the standard of professional artistic theatre and bestowed upon the production the aura of literary quality. Nonetheless, the reactions of both critics and the public to this shift were complex and contradictory, and raised the question as to the place of Yemenite Jews in Palestine's cultural arena.

'Those people who did not experience the cultured and mad Europe': *Love as Strong as Death* between East and West, between the biblical and the professional

Love as Strong as Death is an interesting example of a performance based on a play written by an Ashkenazi Jew which assumes additional meaning by the very fact that

Yemenite actors perform it. Although the original play does not explicitly relate to the ethnic identity of the characters on stage (indeed, they are all viewed as 'Hebrew', of an era preceding the ethnic diversification of Jews in diaspora), it is possible that the casting of Yemenites added further levels of significance to the text. Thus, for example, Shulamit's first words in the play, spoken from backstage prior to her entrance, are: 'Do not stare at me because I am dark, because I am darkened by the sun' (Song of Songs 1:6).³⁰ This direct quote from the Song of Songs characterizes the biblical female protagonist as 'black', and while she bids the audience not to take note of the colour of her skin, the fact that she speaks these words before appearing on stage obviously causes the spectators to focus on this aspect of her appearance. In this particular performance, Shulamit's labelling as 'black' highlights the extent to which the casting here differs from traditional casting and from Hebrew–Ashkenazi theatre's customary 'whiteness' at the time. In this case, the non-traditional casting of Yemenite Jews constitutes a case of 'conceptual casting' in which 'the director intentionally uses the identity of the actor and connects it to the character in order to provide a more complex interpretation of the play'.³¹ The conceptual foundation of the non-traditional casting here is not only related to Shulamit's character, but to the broader issue pertaining to what type of body is most suited to represent the Song of Songs (and in fact, the Bible at large).

Pollack's play was 'Yemenized' in this production also through Genia Berger's stage and costume design.³² Shulamit's costume features a traditional Jewish Yemenite headdress (Fig. 1), while in some scenes the characters sit on divans smoking a hookah (Figs 2 and 3). The visual vocabulary of the play therefore made a direct link between biblical times and Yemenite culture – the Bible was imagined as Yemenite through and through.

Yemenite culture informs the production's music and choreography as well. Reviews in the papers mentioned that 'there are performances of Yemenite singing and dancing in the play'.³³ Like playwright Pollack, director Halevy and designer Berger, composer Mark Lavry was of Ashkenazi descent.³⁴ However, it seems that he did not work alone on the score. In the newspaper *Davar*, Yonah Wahab gives credit also to Yemenite singer and composer Yehiel Adaki, whose name has disappeared from the official promotional materials, noting that the 'music is mostly sourced from Jewish Yemenite songs and liturgical melodies sung in the synagogue, beautifully adapted by Lavry and Adaki'.³⁵ Adaki (1903–80) was highly invested in the preservation of traditional Yemenite song in Mandatory Palestine and Israel and fought to establish its cultural status at a time when it was perceived as inferior. He composed at least one of the songs preserved from the play, '*Ozi Vezimrat Yah*' ('The Lord is my Strength and my Song'), which later became a popular folkdance.³⁶ It should be noted that Wahab, our only source that gives equal credit to Adaki and Lavry, is herself of Yemenite origin.

This fact is significant on two levels: first, it is indicative of the extent to which the actual documentation of the theatrical performance (and accordingly, the possibility of theatre historians to later reconstruct it) is a battleground of sorts in which the opposing voices of various stakeholders, agendas and worldviews struggle for dominance. As we



FIG. 1 Sketch of costume design by Genia Berger to *Love as Strong as Death* (from the collection of the Yehuda Gabay Theater Archive at the Sha'ar Zion Library-Beit Ariela, Tel Aviv).

will see, these conflicts will extend even further, informing the documentation of the play's reception as well. Second, the question of Adaki's artistic status, reflected in the fact that his work was not credited almost anywhere, is symptomatic of the deep-rooted tension underlying the production – the hierarchy between the Ashkenazi creators who are perceived as professional artists and the Yemenite performers who are presented as amateurs with no artistic training.

Halevy's brief statement regarding the production, quoted earlier in this paper, indeed situates the production between two poles with an inherent tension between them: the perception that the Yemenite Jews ostensibly facilitate direct access to the biblical past, on the one hand, and the view that they are not 'developed' enough in Western theatrical terms. Halevy notes the 'traits inherent in [the] blood and education' of the Yemenite actors and sees the group's theatrical performance as strongly tied to a biblical knowledge that is ingrained in the body, with the Yemenite actors literally embodying the Bible.³⁷ It should be noted that in the discourse



FIG. 2 Sketch of set design by Genia Berger to *Love as Strong as Death* (from the collection of the Yehuda Gabay Theater Archive at the Sha'ar Zion Library-Beit Ariela, Tel Aviv).



FIG. 3 Sketch of set design by Genia Berger to *Love as Strong as Death* (from the collection of the Yehuda Gabay Theater Archive at the Sha'ar Zion Library-Beit Ariela, Tel Aviv).

surrounding the production, Halevy was not alone in purporting these views. At the play's premiere gala, which was sponsored by the Yemenite Youth of the Histadrut in Tel Aviv, several speakers, both Yemenite and Ashkenazi in origin, highlighted this unique connection between the Yemenites and the Bible. For example, Israel Yeshayahu, director of the division for Yemenite and Middle Eastern-North African Jews at the Histadrut's Executive Committee, 'highlighted the importance of the concept and the implementation of presenting biblical characters by Yemenites who did not wander from one diaspora to the next ... and therefore preserved Hebrew originality in their speech, music, movements, and overall character'.³⁸ Similarly, in her review in *Davar* newspaper, Yonah Wahab also emphasizes 'the fresh connection between the actors and the biblical literary material. Yemenites based their lives on the Bible, and it is their Jewishness'.³⁹

Halevy's argument, however, presents a tension between such biblical knowledge – which, from the hegemonic viewpoint, was lost to Ashkenazi Jews – and a different bodily knowledge, the knowledge of 'acting methods', which, given its roots in European culture, is knowledge the director had acquired. In Halevy's opinion, work on the performance lasted eighteen months precisely because the Yemenite actors lacked 'the elementary experience and knowledge in acting'.⁴⁰ The time and effort saved according to Halevy by working with non-Ashkenazi actors on biblical material was, in fact, spent on transforming Yemenite Jews into theatre actors.

Halevy therefore claims for an inherent conflict between two types of embodied knowledge: biblical knowledge and theatrical knowledge. The first is identified with the past and the East and is embodied in the Yemenites. The second is identified with the present and Western culture and is embodied in professionally trained (Ashkenazi) actors. This tension forges a bind for a Zionist theatre project that aims at returning to the biblical past, in which an 'authentic' embodiment of the Bible necessitates working with amateur actors. This inner conflict stems from the Yemenites' double labelling, as mentioned earlier: on the one hand, as representing the biblical past to which Ashkenazi Zionism strives to return; and on the other hand, their inferior cultural status which allegedly prevents them from professionally performing that very biblical past on stage.

This dichotomy also characterizes the production's reception in the written press, which was mainly dominated by the Ashkenazi hegemony. In Leah Goldberg's relatively sympathetic review, she stresses that it would be a mistake to expect encountering 'real theatre' from an amateur group. Goldberg writes that 'it is hard to speak of individual acting here' and recommends that the Yemenite ensemble focus on 'more group scenes'. Moreover, she regrets the ensemble's propensity for being 'overly "dramatic"', and calls for 'more simplicity and innocence' in the play.⁴¹ Delineating a distinct boundary between artistic professionalism and the Yemenites' stage work, Goldberg implies that turning professional would undermine the Yemenites' collective national role as representing an innocent, uncorrupted past.

Other critics in the press expressed a similar view, even when they seemed to prefer the Yemenites' amateur 'simplicity' over European artistic sophistication. In their review published in *9 Ba'erev*, a critic who identified as M. Pb. praised the play's folkloristic style

and noted that it 'is not part of pretentious, foppish and often hollow "high art" ... They are, after all, amateurs.'⁴² In his comparatively enthusiastic review of the play, *Haaretz* critic Emil Feuerstein maintains that the principal value of the Yemenite actors is indeed the fact that they are 'the closest to the spirit of the Bible, those people who did not experience the cultured and mad Europe which would have certainly distanced them from their true environment, that is: the East'. This common orientalist combination of a patronizing attitude on the one hand, and admiration for Eastern simplicity which the Europeans had lost, on the other, is echoed once again toward the end of Feuerstein's review in which he praises the play as 'a promising beginning in the development of the art of primitive acting (in the good sense of the word)'.⁴³

Returning to the pastoral form at the foundation of *Love as Strong as Death's* conception of the Song of Songs, we can say that the Yemenite body performing the Song becomes in itself a site of interwoven tensions and fantasies between urbanity and untouched 'nature'. Here, these are exemplified by two sets of embodied knowledge: urbane Western theatre acting and an uncorrupted biblicality, respectively. Taking note of this pastoral paradigm, *9 Ba'erev* critic M. Pb writes: 'We, city dwellers for generations, have been granted a Hebrew shepherds' play'.⁴⁴ *Love as Strong as Death* seems to fulfil a deeply rooted Zionist pastoral fantasy, in which diasporic 'city dwellers for generations' finally reach the long-lost biblical Land of Israel, with its bucolic shepherds' scenes.⁴⁵ However, this cannot be achieved without inherent contradictions, requiring the Yemenite performer to oscillate between two opposing types of bodily knowledge – one that they 'naturally' harbour and one that they have allegedly not yet acquired.

It is worth noting that Halevy himself took steps to promote the Yemenite actors' artistic professional status. In his autobiography, he writes:

There were a few young men and women in the group with obvious natural talent, and they played with the idea of becoming a permanent theatre. However, while I would have tended to help them achieve this goal, 'Ohel' vehemently opposed this new enterprise and demanded that I stop working on the play. It went as far as an inquiry at the Histadrut's executive committee, which ruled that I should be allowed to finish working on the play *Love as Strong as Death*, on condition that I do not do any further work with the same group. Without me, the group could not survive and dissembled. What a pity! Now, with the establishment of the State and the influx of immigrants from the Eastern countries, this kind of group would undoubtedly be of much use, and its work, a blessing not only for the new immigrants but for the entire community.⁴⁶

Obviously, this institutional struggle played out at the expense of the Yemenite group. Ohel's demand that Halevy abandon the project, in conjunction with the committee's compromise ruling, set a distinct and effective boundary between professional and amateur theatre and between East and West. Ultimately, the institutional objection to the very possibility of professionalizing the Yemenite group brought about its demise.

'Why Were Our Yemenite Brothers Insulted': the audience in the eyes of the critics

In circumstances that are not fully clear to us, the play was staged again in 1942 by a Yemenite group. It is unclear from surviving documents whether this was the same production that was revived, or whether it was some remake of the show with the same actors or others. Regardless, in that year, the production of the play evoked some extraordinary responses.

A report by G.Z. on the performance of the play in Jerusalem was published in *Haboker* newspaper under the title 'Hamama and Yihyah Sharaby Go to Edison'.⁴⁷ A centrally located Jerusalem movie theatre, Edison occasionally functioned, as was customary at the time, also as a venue for theatrical performances. The names Hamama and Yihyah Sharaby are used not to identify specific individuals, but rather as generic and stereotypical names for Jews of Yemenite origin. The title, therefore, reflects the underlying theme of the article, which barely deals with the play itself and focuses instead on describing the Yemenite audiences who had come to see the play. The article opens with the following statement:

Theatre folk, stage enthusiasts, backstage dwellers, and simple audiences, if you want evidence of the value and influence of art on the lives of the masses come to Jerusalem and stroll through the poor neighbourhoods. Go to the downtrodden 'shantytown', walk through the filthy alleyways ... it is there that you will feel the beating of the heart of 'the theatre' and all this thanks to the Yemenite group that performed *Love as Strong as Death*.

Against the background of these distressed Yemenite neighbourhoods, which are proof of the power of the art of theatre to elevate the lives of the masses, G.Z. describes in great detail the excited anticipation for, during and after seeing the play. G.Z. juxtaposes the Western audience that is accustomed to theatre – 'dressed in tailcoats and fancy dresses' – and the Yemenite audience, most of whom 'had never been to a theatre in their life'. For the latter, the theatre constitutes a force that instils 'sparks of light in the darkness of the people's destitution'. This comparison between the theatre's light and the darkness of the Yemenites' daily lives recurs towards the end of the article: 'The audience returned to its dim homes and carried in its heart a ray of light which would not hasten to go out.' Even if well-intentioned, the enthusiastic tone in which G.Z. writes about the play is deeply grounded in a paternalistic viewpoint in which Western theatre is cast as the white redeemer whose role is to shed light, if only momentarily, upon dark Yemenite existence.

Throughout his review, G.Z. couples his depiction of the Yemenites as immersed in darkness with the idea that they are also steeped in religious traditionalism and are ignorant as to theatre etiquette.⁴⁸ The article describes how in Yemenite synagogues, an argument developed whether theatre was a type of idolatry or at the very least, might prevent people from studying the Torah. At the same time, when it was decided that going to the theatre was permitted, preparations for the event are described in ritualistic-religious terms: 'That Tuesday, on which the group performed, was like Passover eve. From the early morning hours, fancy outfits were laid out,

cleaned, and heavily perfumed.' From a Western-secular viewpoint, this folkloristic positioning of the Yemenites within religious contexts contributed further to their linkage to a traditional past *vis-à-vis* modern Western theatre.⁴⁹ The text moves on to portray how, as they paraded toward Edison, the Yemenites snacked on sunflower seeds – littering the sidewalk with discarded hulls. This popular pastime had for some time been viewed in Israeli culture as an offence to proper social conduct, an uncultured, vulgar behaviour of 'hooligans'. Indeed, G.Z. notes that upon arriving at the theatre, they were asked to refrain from eating the seeds, adding that 'if someone failed to oblige, a spectator nearby would glare at their neck or cheek until they stopped. And if this did not suffice, they were scolded: "Savage, stop!" – and that would be the end of the conversation.' In its role as redeemer, the theatre constituted an acculturating and Westernizing institution for the 'savage' Yemenites.

In an attempt to present the exception that proves the rule, G.Z. describes the 'intellectuals of the ethnic group and their functionaries ..., including a number of accredited doctors and lawyers, respected by all' who sat in the first rows of the theatre 'in all their glory'. The rest of the Yemenites, in contrast, are depicted as poor and ignorant, servants to the upper echelons of society in Mandatory Palestine. Thus, for example, G.Z. describes Yemenite women as those 'who are accustomed, from childhood, to the taxing work of laundering, cleaning, and other forms of housework' and who 'were blinded by the luminous lights and astounded by the balconies and private boxes'. A similar portrayal concludes the article:

The extent to which the play is popular is evident in the fact that most of the housemaids in Jerusalem were late to work the next day, and when they were asked by their employers, 'Victoria, Sultana, Violet, or Elizabeth, why are you late?' – they answered: *Love as Strong as Death*.⁵⁰

Presenting this scenario as factual (although one may wonder how G.Z. had any access to it) verifies and sustains the power relations between the Ashkenazim and Yemenites in the Jewish society in Mandatory Palestine. While theatre might shed some light on the Yemenites' lives, they ultimately return to their 'dark' everyday and to their subservient role. The play may momentarily destabilize their status as service providers (hence, the maids being late to work), but the social hierarchical order is quickly restored.

It is interesting to note that the article barely describes the play itself. One scene is described as if incidentally, but only to facilitate a description of the audience's response to it. G.Z.'s focus is entirely on the audience: their preparation for the event, presence in the theatre, and the impact the play has on them. In their capacity as audience members, the Yemenites could have had an opportunity to shift away from being folkloristic objects of the hegemonic gaze, as they were often presented on stage, and become subjects who are now those who watch, respond to what they are seeing, interpret it and assume ownership over it (indeed, G.Z. writes: 'each one of them felt as owning it and took responsibility for its success'). In this sense, it is possible that the Yemenites' status as audience members threatened the Ashkenazi hegemony even more than their status as actors, granting them more potential subjectivity and agency. Accordingly, G.Z.'s text effectively restores the hierarchical order. His detailed

description of the audience renders them, too, an object for the (presumably Ashkenazi) readers' gaze and as part of an overall oriental exotic event.

This article outraged the Yemenite Association, and its leaders responded by sending a scathing letter to *Hamashkif* newspaper underlining both the writer's and the newspaper's editors' racist and patronizing attitude:

Although we are already aware that your newspaper does not print what we have to say (not because it is insignificant, but because its writers are of a different 'race'), we will continue to implore you until it will not be bearable anymore.

...

Apparently, there are among the writers at *Haboker* those who imagine they descend from the founders of theatre in the world and that a gentleman-like attitude and understanding in art is solely in their hands. If this is not the case, one wonders what is the origin of the arrogance with which they gaze askance at the Yemenites in the Land of Israel, a normal ethnic group, which, indeed, lacks the 'Western culture', but also lacks exoticism and ignorance.⁵¹

This is a unique document for its time in terms of its critical tone. The text distinctively opposes the exoticization of the Yemenites – in this case, precisely those sitting in the audience. Particularly interesting is the writers' argument that Ashkenazi Jews (as represented by G.Z.) see themselves as people who have art, theatre and culture naturally in their blood – as if they were born to a biological dynasty of 'theatre founders'. In many ways, this claim mirrors the perception of the Yemenites as physically embodying the Bible. Similar to Halevy's account, here, too, cultural knowledge – whether of the Bible, Western theatre or Western culture in general – is presented not as abstract, theoretical or intellectual knowledge that can be learned, but rather as already ingrained in the body. However, as reflected in their letter, the members of the Yemenite Association are opposed precisely to the idea that any biological body has ownership over any body of knowledge. Even if the writers acknowledge the existence of cultural difference (i.e. that Yemenite culture is not Western culture), they oppose essentializing it and engraving it into the body so that, subsequently, cultural knowledge could not be acquired, transferred or shared. What is at stake, the letter implies, is the Yemenite Jews' ability to take part in the theatre – as actors and spectators – in a manner that may destabilize the boundaries of the hegemonic definition of cultural belonging and ownership.

The letter ends with a critique of G.Z.'s depiction of the group's distinguished members, the doctors and lawyers in the first-row seats: 'Every baby knows that there are still no Yemenite doctors, and only one lawyer, and if this is the case, why this mockery and untruth'. Thus, the writers not only undercut G.Z.'s credibility as a newspaper reporter, but also expose the way in which those 'honourable' Yemenites, who achieved 'modern Western' goals, serve in his text to backhandedly deride the Yemenite community at large. This candid scrutiny at social inequalities, as opposed to an exoticizing point of view, exposes precisely what G.Z. attempts to obscure: the letter

does not deny the difficulties and injustices in the lives of Yemenites in Mandatory Palestine. On the contrary, it brings them to the fore in a way that demands actual social change.

Despite the writers' concerns, *Hamashkif* printed their letter under the title 'Why Were Our Yemenite Brothers Insulted?'. While the title expresses (or perhaps feigns) bewilderment at the Yemenite Association's response to G.Z.'s account, its perception as an 'insult' frames it as irrational, childish and exaggerated. Indeed, in a note preceding the letter, *Hamashkif*'s editorial staff writes:

We are providing a platform for the Yemenite Association in the Land of Israel, and we do not maintain that the Hebrew press is not accessible to our Yemenite brothers. We were obliged to remove several lines from the letter, which were written in a particularly harsh tone, and we believe that our brothers' sense of inferiority is baseless.

Despite the fact that the Hebrew press was not meant to be inaccessible to 'our brothers' the Yemenites, the newspaper did in fact censor parts of the letter they considered as overstated. To our knowledge, the original full statement of the Yemenite Association did not survive and we therefore cannot determine its content. The editors clearly thought that it is within their prerogative to determine which emotions are appropriate and which are not, what the acceptable level of their intensity is, and which claims are completely unfounded. It is worthwhile to notice that the letter itself does not reflect any 'sense of inferiority', as the newspaper argues, but protests against those who perceive Yemenites as inferior. The framing of the letter as an expression of a 'sense of inferiority' shifts the responsibility for those feelings from whoever instigated them back to the 'insulted' Yemenites. The title, the editor's note and the editing of the letter itself all combine into a reframing of the protest from the vantage point of the Ashkenazi hegemony.

Hamashkif's editorial handling of the Yemenite Association's letter represents yet another manifestation of the various levels in which *Love as Strong as Death* as a theatrical event was interlaced with ethnic conflicts and tensions: on stage, backstage, in the theatre hall, and in the press that reported, interpreted and subsequently documented the event. On all of these levels, the following questions emerge: Who has ownership over the theatrical event and its interpretation? What types of knowledge are embodied in the performer's body? What dangers may be inherent in the notion of knowledge as being embodied? How do struggles between East and West over cultural participation manifest in the theatrical event and in the ways in which it is framed and documented? Despite the Yemenite group's short-lived career, these questions which had just started to form around *Love as Strong as Death* continued to accompany Israeli theatre in its future development, to which we now briefly turn in way of conclusion.

Conclusion: *Love as Strong as Death* as anticipating debates in Israeli theatre

The Yemenite stereotype and its attempted deconstruction as formulated in the discourse surrounding *Love as Strong as Death* continued to reverberate in Israeli

theatre. In 1949, Yemenite choreographer Sarah Levy-Tanai founded the Inbal Ensemble as a theatre–dance group of Yemenite performers, and developed an artistic language based on Yemenite music and dance movements. Defying the perception of Yemenites as amateurs, the ensemble worked for four decades, was supported by renowned choreographers such as Jerome Robbins and Anna Sokolow, and achieved international success.

Unlike the dance field, the acceptance of Yemenite Jews to dramatic theatre was slower. Almost two decades after *Love as Strong as Death*, Saadiya Damari's 1957 play *Hamevaser (The Herald)* was performed by the Smadar group under the auspices of the Ohel theatre. The play told the story of Yemenite immigrants to Palestine in 1910 in what is known as the 'Yavnieli immigration'.⁵² The play portrayed the immigration movement as messianic in its motivation, and featured traditional Jewish Yemenite songs and dances performed solely by Yemenites.⁵³ Although sponsored by the Ohel theatre, the Smadar ensemble, like the Yemenite group of *Love as Strong as Death*, was not perceived as an integral part of the theatre, which still set clear boundaries between professional and folk theatre.

From the 1970s onwards, Yemenite theatre artists' criticism of this policy intensified and gradually progressed from the margins to mainstream theatre. In 1977, Hatikva Neighbourhood Theatre Workshop, a community theatre led by Bezalel Aloni, produced a performance dealing with Yemenite Jews' liturgical poems as a response to the total absence of Yemenite–Jewish culture in the education system. *Ahava Efsharit (Possible Love)* (1984) by Rafi Aharon was produced in the Orna Porat Children's Theatre, the first repertory theatre for young people in Israel. The play criticizes the Ashkenazi Jews' disgraceful attitude toward the Yemenite immigrants in the early twentieth century. *Kriya (Ripping)* is a short story by Bracha Seri which was adapted twice for the stage in the mid-1980s: first by Seri herself in 1984 (and performed by Sigalit Arusi) and again in 1987 by director Amir Orian at The Room Theatre. The story deals with a Jewish Yemenite teenager who was raped by her older husband. The text does not only critique the injustices of the Israeli establishment, but also the patriarchal values of the Yemenite Jewish society. It was one of the first Mizrahi feminist plays on the Hebrew stage, and gave voice to experiences and points of view hitherto unperformed in Israeli theatre.⁵⁴

Yet, despite these slow advances into mainstream theatre, even in the 1990s critics continued to perceive the Mizrahi audience through orientalist stereotypes evocative of G.Z.'s description of the audience attending *Love as Strong as Death*. Shmuel Hasfari's 1992 musical, *Hamelech (The King)*, which was produced by the mainstream Beit Lessin theatre, tells the life story of Zohar Argov, an extremely popular Israeli singer of Yemenite–Jewish origin, and features renditions of his hit songs. Argov is referred to as 'The King' of Mizrahi music given his mesmerizing effect on Mizrahi audiences, as opposed to the cultural tastemakers who viewed his repertoire as 'inferior music' for a long while. In her review, critic Shosh Weitz described the Mizrahi spectators of *The King* as 'speaking loudly and responding to the dialogue on stage; and when they were asked to be quiet, they replied in tones and a manner associated with drivers at a stop light on a hot August day'.⁵⁵ Similarly, critic Shosh Avigal described how the

Mizrahi spectators joined in the songs, held up lit lighters and clapped during scenes depicting Argov's rise to fame as a way of identifying with the character, and not necessarily as applause for the quality of the acting.⁵⁶ Avigal sees the Mizrahi audience's reaction as childish and primitive: 'The play aims low to an audience that does not know and does not want to know how to distinguish between reality and fantasy. This is deficient theatrical education.' Even at the end of the twentieth century, the critics still perceived the Mizrahi spectator as primitive, inferior, vulgar, rude, childish, and even as a savage who does not understand the fundamental basis of the theatrical medium.

It is only from 2000 onward that the Yemenite–Jewish narrative becomes increasingly present in Israeli theatre. *Yesh Li Kinneret (I Have a Kinneret)* (2000) by Haim Idish premiered on the mainstream stage at the Beer Sheva Municipal Theatre. The play criticizes the Ashkenazi pioneers who drove out the Yemenites who lived and worked in the agricultural village Kinneret next to the Sea of Galilee between 1912 and 1929, and points as well to the erasure of this shameful event from history by the pioneers' descendants. The play offers a counter-history to Nathan Alterman's successful play *Kinneret, Kinneret* (1961), in which the Ashkenazi pioneers in 1920s Kinneret are nostalgically presented in all their glory. In Alterman's play, the Yemenite character is presented as primitive, ridiculous and grotesque; an interpreter of dreams and seller of talismans, as opposed to the Ashkenazi pioneers who labour in agriculture. However, in historical reality, the Yemenites of Kinneret worked the land, lost children to disease, and were ultimately expelled two decades later by the Ashkenazi pioneers.⁵⁷ In *Yesh Li Kinneret, Zion*, the protagonist who was driven out of Kinneret, explicitly protests against the Yemenite stereotype established in Alterman's play by referring to it as a 'delusional play full of falsehood and lies'. The expulsion of the Kinneret Yemenites also comes up in *Tzeva Hamayim (The Color of Water)* (2019) by Goren Agmon, at the centre of which is a love story between a Yemenite woman and an Ashkenazi pioneer in Kinneret. The story ends with a double expulsion of the Yemenites and the ostracized pioneer who joins them.

In recent years, Israeli public discourse has been shaken by the controversial affair of children and babies, mostly of Yemenite origin, who had gone missing (and were allegedly kidnapped) during the large immigration waves of the 1950s.⁵⁸ *Yoldot (Parturients)* (2017) by Hannah Vazana Greenwald deals with this affair and discloses the health system's failures and the ongoing judicial whitewashing.⁵⁹ Another play to tackle this affair is *Galaby* (2022) by Hagit Rechavi, in which Zohara Adani returns after thirty years to search for her twin sister who disappeared in the early 1950s. These performances call for an acknowledgement of events in Israel's past that are still hotly debated, and aim at incorporating the Mizrahi narrative back into national and personal histories.

Following the rise of identity politics and multiculturalism that have recently become dominant in the public and theatrical discourse in Israel, Mizrahi artists are re-performing Zionist history through the lens of institutional injustices. Only after more than sixty years does the demand of the Yemenite Association's letter from 1942 finally begin to be accepted: the demand to represent the Yemenite Jews onstage and

in theatre halls not by way of stereotyping, but as a 'normal ethnic group'. The voice which was largely silenced is being heard only now, not as an 'insult', but as protest.

NOTES

- 1 Throughout the paper, we will refer to 'Mandatory Palestine' as the political entity under the rule of the British Mandate between the years 1918 and 1948, prior to the establishment of the State of Israel. The term 'Land of Israel' will refer to the same geographical territory as it was traditionally called by Jews for centuries.
- 2 'Hebrew theatre' refers to Hebrew-speaking theatre in Mandatory Palestine and elsewhere prior to the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. 'Israeli theatre' refers to theatre in Israel after 1948.
- 3 Anita Shapira, 'The Bible and Israeli Identity', *AJS Review*, 28, 1 (2004), pp. 11–42.
- 4 Freddie Rokem, 'The Bible and the Avant-garde: The Search for a Classical Tradition in the Israeli Theatre', *European Review*, 9, 3 (2001), pp. 305–17, here p. 306.
- 5 Ilana Pardes, *Agnon's Moonstruck Lovers: The Song of Songs in Israeli Culture* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2013), pp. 35–51.
- 6 Aharon Pollack (1862–1960) was born in the city of Berdichev (current Ukraine) and immigrated to Palestine in 1910. He was, amongst other things, an opera singer, founder of the Opera of Eretz Israel, and a Bible scholar.
- 7 Origen, *The Song of Songs – Commentary and Homilies*, trans. R. P. Lawson (New York: Newman Press, 1957), pp. 20–1; p. 58.
- 8 John Milton, 'Reason of Church-Government', in Don M. Wolfe, ed., *Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, vol. 1 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), pp. 814–15.
- 9 Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament in Ten Volumes: vol. VI – Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon*, trans. James Martin (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), pp. 8–11.
- 10 Duane Garrett, 'Introduction', in *World Biblical Commentary, vol. 23B: Song of Songs, Lamentations* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2004), pp. 76–81.
- 11 See Chaim Shoham, 'A Biblical Play – Helping to Create a New Hebrew Culture (a Chapter in the History of Hebrew Theatre)', *JTD: Haifa University Studies in Jewish Theatre and Drama*, 1 (1995), pp. 61–83. For a broader view of Ohel, see Dorit Yerushalmi, 'Toward a Balanced History: Ohel, the "Workers Theatre of Eretz Yisrael" as a Cultural Alternative to Habima (1935–46)', *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies*, 13, 3 (2014), pp. 340–59.
- 12 Quoted in Shoham, 'A Biblical Play', pp. 66–7.
- 13 On *Jacob and Rachel* see Shoham, 'A Biblical Play', pp. 61–83; Ruthie Abeliovich, *Possessed Voices: Aural Remains from Modernist Hebrew Theatre* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2019), pp. 123–56.
- 14 Abeliovich, *Possessed Voices*, p. 149.
- 15 Moshe Halevy, *Darki Alei Bamot (My Path on Stages)* (Tel Aviv: Masada, 1955), p. 204 (Hebrew).
- 16 See a detailed discussion of the Yemeni immigrations' waves in Bat-Zion Eraqi Klorman, *The Jews of Yemen: History, Society, Culture*, vol. 3 (Ra'anana: The Open University, 2008), pp. 193–404 (Hebrew).
- 17 See Noah S. Gerber, *Ourselves or Our Holy Books? The Cultural Discovery of Yemenite Jewry* (Jerusalem: Ben Zvi Institute, 2013) (Hebrew).
- 18 Yael Guilat, 'The Yemeni Ideal in Israeli Culture and Arts', *Israel Studies*, 6, 3 (2001), pp. 26–53.
- 19 Yaffa Berlowitz, 'The Inter-Ethnic Encounter: Mizrah in the Eyes of Ashkenaz', in *Inventing a Land, Inventing a People: The Literature of the First Immigration* (Tel Aviv: Kibbutz Hame'uhad, 1996), pp. 80–113 (Hebrew).
- 20 Meir Amor, 'Interests in the Palestine Office Concerning the "Yavnieli Aliyah"', *Afikim* (August 1987), pp. 18–19 (Hebrew); Gal Levy, 'Ethnicity and Education: Nation-Building, State-Formation, and the Construction of the Israeli Educational System', PhD dissertation, London School of Economics and Political Science, 2002, pp. 74–7.

- 21 Gershon Shafir and Yoav Peled, *Being Israeli: The Dynamics of Multiple Citizenship* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 75–6.
- 22 Sammy Smooha, *Israel: Pluralism and Conflict* (London, Routledge, 1978), p. 55.
- 23 Sami Shalom Chetrit, *The Mizrahi Struggle in Israel: Between Oppression and Liberation, Identification and Alternative 1948–2003* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2004), pp. 57–60 (Hebrew).
- 24 Dan Urian, *The Ethnic Problem in the Israeli Theatre* (Ra'anana: Open University Press, 2004), pp. 39–76 (Hebrew).
- 25 *Ibid.*, pp. 56–7.
- 26 *A Visitor from the Land of Israel in Yemen*, Israel Film Archive, at https://jfc.org.il/news_journal/27736-2/93509-2/, accessed 3 May 2022.
- 27 Leah Goldberg, 'The Life of Yemen in the "Shulamit" Drama Studio (June 15 1938)', in Giddon Ticsotsky and Hamutal Bar-Yosef, eds., *Literary Journal. A Selection of Newspaper Articles*, vol. 1: 1928–1941 (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuhad Sifriyat Hapoalim, 2016), pp. 245–6 (Hebrew).
- 28 See, for example, Sari Elron, 'Rina Nikova and the Yemenite Group. Israeli Dance between East and West', PhD dissertation, Hebrew University, 2010, p. 66 (Hebrew).
- 29 See also Pardes, *Agnon's Moonstruck Lovers*, pp. 47–8.
- 30 Aharon Pollack, *Love as Strong as Death* (Tel Aviv: Ayin, 1949), p. 15 (Hebrew).
- 31 Naphtaly Shem-Tov, 'Black Skin, White Pioneer: Non-Traditional Casting in an Israeli School Pageant', *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*, 18, 4 (2013), pp. 346–58, here p. 349.
- 32 Genia Berger (1910–2000) was born in Kharkov (current Ukraine) and immigrated to Palestine in 1926. Berger was a painter and set and costume designer. She designed costumes and sets for many plays produced at the Ohel theatre. Sketches for the play are held at the Shaar-Zion Library, Beit Ariela in Tel Aviv.
- 33 Anonymous, 'Love as Strong as Death: A Play Performed by the Yemenite Dramatic Ensemble', *Haaretz*, 26 June 1940, p. 5 (Hebrew).
- 34 Mark Lavry (1903–67) was born in Riga and immigrated to Palestine in 1935. He was a composer and conductor. He composed the first opera in Hebrew, *Dan the Guard* (1940). Lavry was the Ohel theatre's house composer.
- 35 Yonah Wahab, 'Love as Strong as Death', *Davar*, 19 July 1940, p. 5 (Hebrew).
- 36 Avner Bahat, 'Yechiel Adaki – Cantor and Liturgical Poet', *Tehuda*, 26 (2010), pp. 131–4, here p. 134 (Hebrew).
- 37 Halevy, *Darki Alei Bamot*.
- 38 The gala's protocol is archived at the Lavon Institute for Labour Research, file IV-257A-18.
- 39 Wahab, 'Love as Strong as Death'.
- 40 Halevy, *Darki Alei Bamot*.
- 41 Leah Goldberg, 'Love as Strong as Death in a Yemenite Drama Group', *Davar*, 11 July 1940, p. 2 (Hebrew).
- 42 M. Pb., 'Love as Strong as Death', 9 *Ba'erev*, 4 August 1940 (Hebrew).
- 43 Emil Feuerstein, 'Stages: Love as Strong as Death', *Haaretz*, 16 July 1940 (Hebrew).
- 44 M. Pb., 'Love as Strong as Death'.
- 45 On Zionism and the pastoral imagination, see also Yair Lipshitz, "'What Will You See in the Shulamite": Theatre, Pastoral, and the Spatialization of the Song of Songs in Zionist Culture', *Teoria vebikoret*, 43 (2014), pp. 157–81 (Hebrew).
- 46 Halevy, *Darki Alei Bamot*, p. 204.
- 47 G.Z., 'Hamama and Yihyah Sharaby Go to Edison', *Haboker*, 19 March 1942, p. 3 (Hebrew). G.Z. was probably Gabriel Tzifroni (1915–2011) who later became editor in chief of *Haboker* newspaper and CEO of Habima theatre.
- 48 On the common conception of Jewish religiosity's opposition to theatre, see Yair Lipshitz, *Theatre & Judaism* (London: Red Globe Press, 2019), pp. 8–32.

- 49 On the perspective that relegates religion to the past, as opposed to secular modernity, see also Janet R. Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini, 'Introduction: Times Like These', in Janet R. Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini, eds., *Secularisms* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), pp. 1–35.
- 50 G.Z., 'Hamama and Yihyah Sharaby Go to Edison'.
- 51 The Center of the Yemenites Association in Palestine, 'Why Were Our Yemenite Brothers Insulted', *Hamashkif*, 1 April 1942, p. 9 (Hebrew).
- 52 Yavnieli was a secular Ashkenazi pioneer who travelled to Yemen in 1911 posing as a rabbi to encourage the immigration of Jews for the purpose of providing cheap labour to the settlements in the Land of Israel.
- 53 Naphtaly Shem-Tov, *Israeli Theatre: Mizrahi Jews and Self-Representation* (New York: Routledge, 2021), pp. 43–4.
- 54 *Ibid.*, pp. 94–7.
- 55 Shosh Weitz, 'Following Life', *Yediot Akhronot*, 21 August 1992 (Hebrew).
- 56 Shosh Avigal, 'A Séance, Not a Show', *Hadashot*, 12 June 1992 (Hebrew).
- 57 Yehuda Nini, *Were You There or Was It a Dream: Kinneret Yemenites – Their Settlement and Expulsion 1912–1930* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1996) (Hebrew).
- 58 Shoshana Madmoni-Gerber, *Israeli Media and the Framing of Internal Conflict: The Yemenite Babies Affair* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).
- 59 Naphtaly Shem-Tov, "In Sorrow Thou Shalt Bring Forth Children": Docu-Poetic Theatre in Israel', *TDR/The Drama Review*, 63, 3 (2019), pp. 20–35.

YAIR LIPSHITZ (yairlip@tauex.tau.ac.il) is a Senior Lecturer at the Department of Theatre Arts and Head of the Cymbalista Jewish Heritage Center in Tel Aviv University. His main fields of research are Jewish and Hebrew theatre and the intersections of performance and religious traditions. He is the author of three books: *The Holy Tongue, Comedy's Version* (Hebrew, 2010); *Embodied Tradition: Theatrical Performances of Jewish Texts* (Hebrew, 2016); and *Theatre & Judaism* (2019) as part of Palgrave Macmillan's *Theatre & series*. He has also published numerous papers on topics ranging from the Israeli reception of King Lear and Salome to urban performance art in contemporary Jerusalem, and from the performativity of the Talmud to messianic temporalities in modernist Yiddish drama.

NAPHTALY SHEM-TOV (naphtalysh@openu.ac.il) is Associate Professor in the Department of Literature, Language, and the Arts at The Open University of Israel. His research interests are social aspects of Israeli theatre, festivals, applied performance and education drama. Currently, he is researching Mizrahi (Middle Eastern) Jewish artists and their ethnic identity on the Israeli stage. He has published articles in several journals, including *The Drama Review*, *Theatre Research International*, *Contemporary Theatre Review*, *New Theatre Quarterly* and *Research in Drama Education*. His books are *Israeli Theatre: Mizrahi Jews and Self-Representation* (London: Routledge, 2021); *Acco Festival: Between Celebration and Confrontation* (Boston, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2016); and *Improvisational Teaching* (Tel-Aviv: MOFET, 2015, in Hebrew).