From a Transient to a Resident
The Acco Festival of Alternative Israeli Theatre, 2001–2004

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A New Beginning

The Acco Festival of alternative Israeli theatre has been an annual event since its inception in 1980. Oded Kotler—an actor, director, manager, and entrepreneur—first had the idea to establish a festival of alternative theatre in Israel. The impetus for the first Acco Festival grew out of the opinion that theatrical activity throughout Israel was too institutionalized and that there was no forum for alternative political and artistic expression. Reactions to the first festival were sympathetic: theatre critics thought that as a phenomenon, the festival was probably the...
best thing that had happened to Israeli theatre in many years. The late Minister of Education, Zvulon Hammer, declared that the Ministry would continue to support the Festival.¹

The Acco Festival, presented over three or four days during the Succoth holiday, consists solely of world-premiere performances prepared especially for the Festival and supported by its budget. Since there is almost no way for independent theatre artists to gain financial support for their work in Israel, the Acco Festival constitutes the main framework for the creation of alternative theatre. However, in a state where the defense budget has first priority, government subsidy of cultural issues is a small fraction of the budget.²

For two decades, the artistic directors of the Acco Festival (usually reappointed every two years) attempted to define the concept of “alternative” Israeli theatre. The fact that most of them hailed from mainstream theatre was evident in their emphasis on dramatic texts and their preference for established theatre directors over interdisciplinary artists. This traditionalist approach made the Festival less open to emergent talent, where the potential for artistic breakthrough often lies. In the second half of the 1990s, the question arose as to whether the Festival was fulfilling its mission to provide an arena for alternative theatre. Then, in 2001, in its 22nd year, the Festival Board of Directors appointed Atay Citron as artistic director.¹

From the very beginning, Citron determined that the Acco Festival would act as a catalyst—a tool to stimulate, encourage, and foster the creation of alternative theatre in Israel. To ensure the implementation of his ideas, his appointment was extended from two to three years. During the third year, his appointment was extended for one more year in light of the Festival’s 25th anniversary. In contrast with past artistic committees appointed by previous Festival directors, not one member of his carefully chosen committee belonged to the established theatre scene.³

The mutual support, sense of partnership, and deep friendship that developed among the committee members, in addition to their artistic and political common language, found reflection in the spirit of the Festival. During Citron’s tenure, “alternative” no longer meant a supply of oxygen for mainstream theatre. In fact, the works directly challenged the conventional concept of alternative theatre as a stepping stone for the Tel Aviv mainstream, making the Festival a radical event.

The sociopolitical contextualization of the Festival, as it developed under Citron, provides an opportunity to acknowledge the creative work of left-wing voices in Israeli society. Theatrical culture does not evolve miraculously out of nothing; certain people contribute to it in accor-

¹ The website of the Acco Festival is: http://www.accofestival.co.il.
² For example, the Ministry of Culture budget for 2005 was 430 million NIS, while the Defense Ministry’s budget was 58 billion NIS.
³ All information is based on interviews with Citron in the summer of 2005.
⁴ The members of the committee under Citron were: Yuval Meskin, a radio personality who edits and presents programs on culture and art, has introduced many unknown fringe artists to the public, and participated in the Acco Festival for many years; Dr. Naomi Yoely, a specialist in puppet theatre and storytelling as well as an actor and a director; Noya Lanncet, a director and teacher of theatre and directing who has also worked with plastic artists on installations and, as a dramaturge, was very helpful in developing texts for rehearsals; Derar Sulliman, an actor and director in the Jaffa Arabic Hebrew Theatre who, although working in the mainstream arena to make a living, is primarily a fringe artist, and his responsibility in the framework of the Artistic Committee was primarily to develop new material in Arabic, to introduce Arabic writers to the Festival, and to attend rehearsals; Mali Baruch, a graduate of the Hebrew University Theatre Department in Jerusalem who served as Citron’s personal assistant and coordinated Arab-Jewish projects and translating texts, as she is fluent in Arabic and does literature translations into Hebrew.

Figure 1. (previous page) One of the eight empty black dresses from Raida Adon’s video-art, Fasateen, which was filmed at Lifta, an abandoned Palestinian village on the edge of Jerusalem. (Photo by Yoram Milo, courtesy of Atay Citron)
dance with their own values, limitations, perspectives, and artistic abilities. I maintain that the combination of theory and practice that characterizes Citron’s professional biography created the perfect breeding ground for the establishment and implementation of a “positive, alternative vision” (Alcoff 1988:418–19). In pedagogical terms, a “positive, alternative vision” basically implies a vision that is likely to inspire people to fulfill their potential.

In fact, Citron is the first Acco Festival director to have a theoretical background in experimental theatre, performance art, and the avantgarde tradition. He carried out his doctoral studies in the Department of Performance Studies at Tisch School of the Arts, New York University, from 1980 to 1984. In his dissertation, “Pageantry and Theatre in the Service of Jewish Nationalism in the USA, 1933–1946,” he reconstructed and described, in a thrilling and suspenseful narrative, the creative work of American Jews during the Holocaust who produced huge pageants that they hoped would influence public opinion and help save European Jewry. Subsequently, Citron published articles on body art, ritual, and the affinity between the Euro-American avantgarde and modes of performance in traditional societies. Upon his return to Tel Aviv, he staged two experimental performances that, at the time, were an artistic novelty in Israel. More than anything, however, it was Citron’s directorship of the School of Visual Theatre in Jerusalem (1993–2000) that shaped the way in which he functioned as artistic director of the Festival. The interaction with teachers and students in Jerusalem furthered his interest in interdisciplinary performance. The annual presentations of students’ work proved to him that a large enough audience was both interested and excited by it. Consequently, school graduates played an important part in the transformation that took place in the Festival. As principal of the School of Visual Theatre, mentoring young artists at the beginning of their professional life, Citron developed the expertise of a pedagogical artist. Similar to Peter McLaren’s concept of pedagogy (1993), Citron’s pedagogy is both that of a teacher who generates a platform for artistic processes and a cultural provocateur who constructs areas of possibility where ideas and the means of representation are repeatedly examined. Over and above his deep involvement in all aspects of the Festival, Citron has made his mark as an artist-pedagogue in cultivating the emergence of two clusters of performance: performances in Arabic, staged by Palestinian theatre artists, as well as Jewish-Arab collaborative performances that gave the Festival an intercultural character; and interdisciplinary work, which enabled artists from various fields (painting, sculpture, poetry, music, video) to challenge the conventional concept of theatre.

5. Citron’s first performance, *En Zo Ben Zo* (1987) by Eldad Ziv, staged in the framework of street theatre, won first prize at the Israel Festival; a year later, Citron and Ziv staged *Yanti Parazi*, also written by Ziv, at the Jerusalem Khan theatre under the artistic directorship of Amit Gazit.

6. The School of Visual Theatre was established in 1986 by a group of puppeteers who had previously founded the Karon (Train Theatre). These artists envisioned and fostered a new generation that would bring about an encounter between the art of puppet theatre and other interdisciplinary art forms. The teaching staff at the School consists of puppet theatre artists, sculptors, painters, actors, stage directors, and video artists. Hadas Ophrat, the life and soul of this group, directed the school from 1986 to 1992. Today it is directed by Yuval Rimon, an artist and member of the Zik Group, which was founded in 1985. The Group mounts performances that integrate sculpture with action in real time. Other media, such as music and video, are incorporated as well; their work is generally known as performance art. The Group includes artists from various fields of art and design, including sculptors, ceramicists, industrial designers, musicians, and architects.

7. In Israel, there are Palestinians who are Israeli citizens (Arab Israelis) and there are Palestinians under the ‘Palestinian Authority’ who are residents of the Occupied Territories. In this article, “Palestinians” refers to Arab Israelis unless otherwise specified.

8. Although the intercultural and the interdisciplinary events often overlapped in the Festival, for the purpose of the present discussion I have decided to distinguish between them. Discussing the performances in Arabic first, I shall present the political context of the Festival during the relevant years. I am familiar with several of these performances and have written articles about some of them. In lengthy conversations with Citron, the personal stories and creative processes of the artists emerged.
From Theory to Praxis

After becoming artistic director, in a call for artists and in press interviews, Citron declared a new artistic-cultural agenda: the transformation of the Acco Festival from a “transient” to a “resident” entity—applying the well-known “site specific” term to the particular circumstances of the Acco Festival. This would make Acco the festival into a cultural event that would become part of Acco the town, so that the artists could establish a dialog with their co-residents and become active partners in transforming the entire city into a Festival city. The concept of making the Festival a resident entity arose out of the riots in 2000 that followed the October uprising in cities with a mixed Jewish-Arab population, such as Acco, Nazareth, and Jaffa. The uprising expressed the solidarity of Israeli Palestinians with residents of the Occupied Territories who had started the Al-Aqsa Intifada. The stormy demonstrations continued for three days and Israeli police used live ammunition to suppress the demonstrators. In the end, 13 Israeli Arabs were killed by police fire.

As a result of the tense atmosphere, the Festival’s steering committee decided to cancel the event. This was an unprecedented decision and it was later amended to a postponement. Ultimately, the Festival took place from 2 to 4 November, a month after the original date, in a reduced form, and without any of its famous outdoor events. Over the course of 2001 Acco, like other mixed Arab-Jewish cities in Israel, lost most of its Jewish visitors. In this context, the declaration of a “resident” Festival constituted a political act as it was inherently an invitation to (Jewish) citizens of Israel to return to the Arab part of the town where the Festival traditionally had taken place. At the same time, significant steps were taken to encourage Palestinian citizens to attend the Festival. For example, one of Citron’s first suggestions to the steering committee was that programs and posters appear in Hebrew and Arabic. (It is significant that no Arab person was on the steering committee, which indicates the status of the Arab population in municipal decisions.) Members of the committee strongly protested Citron’s suggestion of bilingual posters, claiming that it would drive away the Jews. And indeed in 2001, as before, only Hebrew appeared on the poster; but, for the first time in the history of the Festival, parts of the program were translated into Arabic. From 2002 on, the poster appeared in both languages. The realistic dimension inherent in his “positive, alternative vision” was evident in Citron’s actions. Despite his acute awareness of the erosion from Israeli discourse of words such as “reconciliation” and “coexistence,” Citron adhered to a vision that, through the Festival, one could gradually establish an island of sanity in Acco.

Citron transformed his vision into praxis. First of all, Palestinian theatre artists were invited to participate in the Festival as equal partners. Several Arab plays had been staged in previous years, and in 2000 the Festival included three Arab plays. However, these three plays were not subsidized by the Festival and did not participate in the competition; they were classified as “guest performances.” Arab citizens of Israel were guests at a Jewish-Israeli Festival of “alternative” theatre. For Citron, equal participation meant the division of the Festival resources among all theatre artists—Arabs as well as Jews. In the 2001 Festival, of the 12 works selected for staging by the artistic committee, three were in Arabic, and since then, at least one work in Arabic has been staged every year.9

Another aspect of the transformation of Citron’s vision into praxis concerns the city of Acco and the area of the Festival. Since its inception, the Festival was held in the closed tourist area of the Citadel of the Christian Crusaders, which, with its Knights’ Halls, lies in the heart of the Old City, between the sea and the grey, primarily Jewish, apartment blocks. Citron’s desire to conduct a living, breathing dialogue with the history, cultural memory, architecture, and in particular with the people of Acco was further complicated by his theoretical perception of the Old City as a natural arena for site-specific performance. New questions were asked: What does

9. Of the three plays chosen, one encountered production difficulties and therefore only two were staged.
the city of Acco mean in the context of the Festival, and what are its boundaries? Is it only the lovely tourist area of the Knights’ Halls, in which the Old Acre Development Company has invested so much money,10 or does it also include the Arab section, with its neglected infrastructure, crowded living conditions, and severe economic distress?11 Citron objected to the employer-employee relations between the city’s Jewish population and the Festival, and to limiting the connection between the Arab population of Acco and the Festival to the hummus bars and other stalls enjoyed by visitors.

The realization of Citron’s vision of a living dialogue between the Festival and Acco residents began to take shape in 2001. The work Cannon Fodder by the artist Honi Hame’agel began with Abdu Mata, a professional tour guide and (Palestinian) resident of Acco, playing the part of an Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) officer, while participant-spectators were placed in the position of his subordinates, playing army recruits. Abdu Mata “harassed” the participants and, toward the end, exclaimed, “Come on, we’re going to the refugee camp, Balata,” and led the participants in a kind of “drill march” through the alleys of the city. It did not require great imagination to make the connection between Arab Acco and the refugee camps in the Occupied Territories, a connection that points to the ongoing civilian inequality on the borders of the State of Israel. For those who took part in this event, the persistent neglect of the Arab neighborhoods of Acco was no longer invisible.

A vibrant dialogue with Arab residents of Acco was the essence of yet another piece in the 2001 Festival: The Bride of Acco by Adva Drori, a graduate of the School of Visual Theatre. Drori invited local Arab performers to join her and a few other Jewish video and performance artists from Tel Aviv in a work that included magic, musical acts, clowning, video art, and boxing—along with Drori herself standing on a revolving platform and roasting toy soldiers on a charcoal grill. The event was originally to have taken place on board The Queen of Acco, a local tour boat, but the boat owner backed out. Drori was forced to find another location, and the performance was finally staged on the roof of an old public building on the waterfront. The peaceful site was disturbed by Drori’s bizarre rites of war that included grilling toy soldiers and cutting up meat, and by the aggressive Arabic RAP MWR (Mahmoud, Waseem, Richi), a local group from Acco. A total of 40 performers participated in the piece: Jews and Arabs, professional and amateur, worked together to create an artistic event—a phenomenon not to be taken for granted in the Middle East.

The performance Fasateen (“Dresses,” in Arabic) was a site-specific theatrical event staged to prod the cultural-historical memory of a place and a community. It also demonstrated the manner in which Citron promoted projects: he both attended and contributed to their production process. Raida Adon, an Israeli Arab art academy graduate, arrived at the last minute for the presentation of proposals for the 2001 Festival. She showed a video that had been filmed at Lifta, an abandoned Palestinian village on the edge of Jerusalem. Unlike other villages during the 1948 war, the houses of Lifta were left intact and empty. Their residents became refugees. Adon’s video, amazingly powerful in its political cry, presents eight empty black dresses. One is positioned at a window; another floats in a pool like the body of a woman who has committed suicide; another “walks” the paths of the village, and so on. Only the sound of the wind is heard. The camera repeatedly returns to the image of clouds moving swiftly across the sky.

Adon wished to transform the work into a theatrical event and locate it near her grandmother’s house in Acco. Citron and members of the artistic committee, who were looking for works connected with Acco, were thrilled by the video but wondered what could be added to the work

10. Acco has a variety of spellings: Acre, Akko, Acco. Acre is used by the Old Acre Development Company.
11. It should be noted that some performances were held outside the area of the Knights’ Halls in Festivals before 2001; some were held on the beach and some in the harbor, on a boat. However, there was no specific theory, ideology, or principle involved in performing outside the area of Knights Halls.

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as a whole. They finally agreed to accept her proposal on condition that Adon would work with a director. Adon approached Mazen Gattas, a theatre director living in Rama, a village in the Galilee. Gattas’s story is fascinating in itself: he studied theatre in Kiev and, according to Citron, the closest thing to his heart, apart from his Palestinian identity, is his “Russian soul” and what he learned from his Russian teachers about traditional theatre. Mohamed Ali Taha wrote the monologues for each of the “dresses,” working together with Gattas and Adon. The three disagreed constantly: Who is speaking? Can Adon “speak” in her own voice, or does Gattas “know” what Adon’s voice says? Citron, who consistently participated in the process, encouraged Adon to fight for her voice. It was his understanding that the radical spirit of Fasateen lay primarily in questions relating to ownership of the artwork and the struggle stemming from the working method of an authoritative director who felt the need to subdue the actress.

The rehearsals were initially held in a nursery school but moved from the closed space of the school to Sheik Abdullah Square, a courtyard in the Old City, which once had a well and a tree. The courtyard residents became part of the theatrical event. Adon went into their apartments and peeped out through their windows, bringing together the residents of the square as participants in her performance. The performance’s framing narrative was about a woman who returned to the courtyard of her childhood, where she searched for the wedding dress her mother sewed years ago. As she searched for the white dress she “entered” other black dresses,

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Mazen Gattas (1954–2006) was a theatre director from Kfar Rama in the Galilee who participated in the Acco Festival in 2001 and 2002 with productions that included Fasateen (2001), and Shintiyan (2002). Gattas’s El Laz theatre opened for the 2004 Festival in a renovated building on 13th Street in the Old City, promising to be the center of theatre in Acco. Mazen, deeply committed to an honest dialogue between Jews and Palestinians, was a true friend. This article is dedicated to his memory.

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Figure 2. This piece by Honi Hame’agel was part of the exhibition The Zionist Vision. Cannon Fodder, directed by Honi Hame’agel, Acco Festival, 2001. (Photo by Dana Micheli, courtesy of the Acco Festival archives)
each with its story, but never found her own. Adon’s stage presence became a vital and physical symbol of the memory of those who once lived and a tribute to those who still live in the courtyard. She and the current residents were partners in the act of remembering, their political struggle permitting neither tenderness nor comfort. The final scene told the story of Rose, a woman who became a freedom fighter, hijacked a plane, and was captured by Israeli security forces. In prison, wearing her black dress, Rose was raped by an Israeli secret service interrogator on an altar-like construction in the center of the square. We don’t see the rapist; he was represented by the dough Rose violently kneaded into her face as she lay prone on the ground. She was a victim, both as a woman and as a Palestinian. In direct contrast was Raida Adon’s impressive stage presence: black-haired, tall, with strong, expressive features that conveyed a powerful femininity—anything but a victim. Her stage figure became a living symbol of the square’s inhabitants, who now shared and acted out their silenced memories.

In our conversations, Citron explained that the “miracle” of Fasateen lay not only in its artistic and emotional expression and the refugee narrative it unfolded, but also in the solution it found to the problem of translation. He believed it was legitimate to present Arab performances at the Festival without translation since Arabic is an official language in Israel and the Arab public is entitled to see theatre in their own language. It should be noted that while the Arab-Palestinian population in Israel speaks Hebrew, most Jewish citizens do not speak Arabic. However, only a very small Arab audience attends the Festival in Acco—evidence of the lingering gap between concept and reality. The artists understood that the non-Arabic speaking Israeli audience needed to hear what they had to say, and Citron made it clear to Gattas that he would provide a translation. But, a moment before the beginning of the dress rehearsal, with people already seated in their plastic chairs in the square, Citron realized that the promised translation had not been prepared. Citron remembers going to the microphone in a panic and asking audience members who did not speak Arabic to sit with Arabic speakers. He asked the latter to whisper a translation to their neighbors. There was an instantaneous response; Citron saw the writer Ali Taha turn his chair around to face the audience and begin to weep. The
whispering was particularly moving because the themes were so difficult and violent. Citron remembers the performance primarily as an event ensconced in whispers, an event at which dialogue emerged from the absence of translation.

At the end of the dress rehearsal, the residents of the square agreed to accompany the performance as simultaneous translators for the three days of the Festival. This event took place outside the area of the Knights’ Halls, a site where, without the protection of IDF soldiers, the Jewish-Israeli spectators unequivocally experienced a sense of foreignness and otherness, requiring them to become “residents” for a short time in the “backyard” of the Israeli Arab hosts and to assume the role of witnesses. Since *Fasateen* took place on the narrow border between reality and theatrical fiction, at a time when Jews avoided being in places with a largely Arab population, from the viewpoint of the Jewish-Israeli spectator, observing/participating in this event was necessarily a political act. In this sense, the performance fulfilled the aim of transforming the Festival from “transient” to “resident.”

*Fasateen* was a turning point in Gattas’s professional life. In 2002, he directed the actress Khula Elhaj-Dibsi in *Shintiyan* by Iyad El-Haj. (“Shintiyan” are the long underpants traditionally worn by Arab village women.) The play, performed in the intimate reception room of the Lighthouse Hostel in the Arab City, narrates the story of the dead residents of Kfar Yassif (a Galilean village) through an old woman’s memories. The performance shared first prize with the play *Ori* by the musician Ori Drumer. In 2003, Gattas decided to move his theatre from Rama to Acco. Gattas’s El Laz theatre opened for the 2004 Festival in a renovated building on 13th Street in the Old City, promising to be the center of theatre in Acco.

It is worth mentioning Samach Hijazi, a theatre director and Palestinian Authority resident who submitted a proposal for the staging of Heiner Müller’s *The Mission* with Arab actors who are Israeli citizens. The final result suffered from difficult artistic and technical problems, but

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12. *Ori* tells about the journey of a dead embryo, carried by the character known as Mendele Moykher Seforim, which means “Mendele the Bookseller,” by the well-known Jewish writer, Shalom Yakov Abramowitz. Together, they wander the realms of Eastern European and Jewish memory. These are imaginary realms peopled by *Musselmans* (a term for the wraith-like Holocaust survivors), a woman in bed, and other characters that burst out of a closet. The embryo, a wooden doll, has Dromer’s face painted on it.
this was peripheral. In order to facilitate Hijazi’s participation in the Festival, it was necessary to procure permits for his stay in Israel. During the work, Citron saw Hijazi wandering around Acco, a man free of the Occupation and among Arabs who do not live in constant fear. Hijazi’s story was a personal one, but it became part of the Festival’s general goal: to create an island of sanity.

A wider circle of intercultural enterprise concerned Jewish-Arab workshops that took place throughout the year, the fruits of which expanded and sustained the activities and events of the Festival. The Acco Street Theatre Workshop was designed for Arab and Jewish youth with the purpose of offering tools for learning nonverbal communication, mutual trust, and physical cooperation—skills also required for participating in street theatre. In 2004, directed by Moshe Malka, the group put on the play *Smile, Here Is a Donor!* The participants used the event to criticize the notion that American donations of money for the purpose of “peace-making” might resolve the complex problems of Jewish and Palestinian efforts toward coexistence. It was difficult to recruit participants: only four Arab boys and one Jewish girl joined the workshop. In Jaffa, Osnat Elkabir facilitated another workshop, *A Common Language*. Elkabir, an artist who exudes warmth and optimism, is a dancer-musician who studied for ten years with the finest Indian teachers of music, theatre, and movement. In the workshop, Common Language participants developed a new movement and musical idiom inspired by...
traditional Indian dance, songs, and melodic patterns that were neither Hebrew nor Arabic. In 2004 they produced their third performance, *Pancha Tantra*, based on Buddhist parables about animals, telling stories of friendship, hostility, war, and peace. Elkabir was on the stage throughout the performance (accompanied by two musicians) demonstrating traditional Indian dance movements from *kathakali* and inviting the audience to repeat them after her. She also taught the audience a catchy song and playfully coaxed their delighted participation.

Common Language performances are positive, cheerful, and loving, and the result is a lively theatre that finds a way to transform audience members into active participants. Arabs do not play Jews and Jews do not play Arabs; “big” issues, like coexistence, are not discussed—participants “simply” act together.

**Projects**

While some of Citron’s projects were not realized primarily due to budgetary shortfalls, they are worth mentioning for the insight they offer into his “positive alternative vision,” specifically in the context of deepening the connection between the residents of Acco and the Festival. For instance, Citron wanted to open a study center for weekend theatre workshops for youth, to be facilitated by theatre practitioners from Israel and abroad. The work produced would have been considered as potential Festival productions. Unfortunately, there was not enough money to renovate the neglected huts in the Festival area. An attempt was also made to run Festival performances on weekends throughout the year for visitors to Acco. (This was to be mainly for internal tourism because, at that time, Israel was not a popular tourist venue for foreign visitors.) However, the plan fell through when the Old Acco Development Company responsible for archeological tourism did not cooperate with the Festival. Another idea was the B&B project. Citron envisioned a huge profit for Acco locals if visitors to the Festival had lodging in the town. This meant convincing nearly a hundred families to open their homes during and after the Festival, which never came about.

One plan that was successful came to fruition for the 2002 opening performance, *Today Only!* Twenty vendors from the Old City participated in the Festival for the first time. They invested a great deal of effort in designing their stalls, organizing their shops, and preparing songs for the entertainment of visitors. Their participation indicated that the Arab city vendors finally acknowledged the value of the Festival: it potentially meant the return of the Jewish population to the city and therefore to their shops. Nonetheless, Citron did not think there was a significant connection between the ordinary people of Acco—Jewish or Arab—and the Festival. It takes years of determined work to bridge the gap between Arab and Jewish communities in Israel.

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13. There is only one youth hostel and one very expensive hotel in Acco. The Festival visitors don’t usually stay over, and if they do, they stay in surrounding kibbutz guest houses.
More than just commercial interests are required: nothing short of a new national agenda, one that promotes principles of social justice.

The Artist-in-Residence project was conceived to advance the intercultural emphasis of the Festival and to expand its artistic boundaries by promoting performance art. This project was designed for an artist who was invited to live in the city for three months during which s/he would develop a work connected to Acco, to be presented to the audience for the first time during the Festival. The inaugural artist in 2002 was the photographer Ahlam Shibly, who, through her photographs, attempted to communicate an encounter between the five senses and the Old City of Acco. A year later, the artist Tal Gilboa turned her rented apartment in Acco into a public gallery for the duration of the Festival. Her work, *A Woman Waiting for a House Call*, combined installation and performance, and included Acco artists Shir Bar-Sheshet, Atalia Malka, and Camelia Said, who shared the inner, intimate spaces of Gilboa's apartment. Their works included photography, sculpture, and theatre.

In 2004, for the Festival's 25th anniversary, Citron and the artistic committee decided to expand and slightly change the Artist-in-Residence project. Curators Drora Dekel and Ziv Sher invited 22 Jewish and Arab artists from the Galilee and Acco to present their work together in an exhibition called *Connected Vessels*. Each local artist joined up with a visiting artist and they began to work together in pairs or groups. The artists visited the Old City, had meals together, and discussed political, social, and cultural issues. The teams produced paintings, sculptures, performance art pieces, and installations. These works were exhibited at the Turkish Bazaar in the Old City—an enclosed, domed market with many small stores—which was turned into an alternative gallery for the duration of the Festival. The exhibition brought one of the most picturesque streets in the market to life. The rent for stores on the street, which had been renovated in 1997 by the Old Acco Development Company, was so high that vendors had to leave; the Bazaar had remained empty for years. For community leaders, turning the shops into individual galleries in the framework of the exhibition suggested the possibility of an alternative use for this part of the city that could attract tourists and strengthen the local economy. As thousands flocked daily to see the exhibition during the Festival, it brought to light the potential for tourism inherent in the combination of an attractive site and good art. The Artist-in-Residence project not only exposed Festival visitors to new artwork that integrates different media, but also promoted ongoing dialogue between the Festival as an organization and the city of Acco, as well as dialogue between Jewish and Arab artists. As a pedagogical tool, the Festival continued to raise consciousness among artists and residents through its emphasis on cooperation through creative work.

This merging of theory and praxis is evident in a host of activities, including the poster design that serves as the Festival's visiting card. One of Citron's first moves was to change the traditional logo of the Festival—a pleasant, noncommittal, laughing clown face. Citron suggested a human figure taking a “suicidal” leap into the water, like the Arab children of Acco who risk their lives jumping from the rooftops into the sea before the eyes of people sitting in restaurants at the port. In the end, the graphic artist designed a kind of imp/mermaid leaping out of the water, illustrating the concept of the Festival as an arena for turning the order of things upside down. (The laughing clown was reduced and moved to a corner of the poster.) Since 2001, a different Festival poster has been prepared every year. The lively, vital, visual images on the various posters have played an important part in projecting the uniqueness of the Festival as a forum for alternative theatre. Naturally, the call to artists to submit work for the Festival has also been redefined. Although it is not explicit, the wording indicates a preference for works that are not based on written texts. The call asks for work that blurs the boundaries between the various art forms. Thus the door opened to new artists who may not have been asked to participate before 2001. By the third year, 2003, the majority of the 150 proposals were for non–text-based works. Surveying the applications, including those not among the 10 or so performances chosen to participate, it is clear from the range of themes indicated in the propos-
als that the artistic decisions made by the Festival encouraged artists to challenge conventional assumptions, such as the assumption that theatre work begins with a play.

**Interdisciplinary Works**

Two groups of artists emerged as Citron’s policies took shape: those who clearly had a background in the visual arts and those who came from the School of Visual Theatre. A network of both graduates and teachers of the School of Visual Theatre performed at various Festivals, offering an artistic alternative to subsidized, mainstream theatre. In the first year under Citron, *4 Play* included four short works by new graduates: *The Saga*, a surrealist puppet theatre for adults, directed and designed by Amit Drori; *Dead-Sea Fish* by Ben Cohen; *Hanna’leb and Her Shabbat Dress*, with concept, adaptation, direction, and acting by Ilanit Ben-Ya’akov; and *Why Not Take All of Me?* with concept, direction, and implementation by Tammy Ben-Tor. In structuring the Festival, the organizers followed the model of an art exhibition, presenting a variety of short performances connected by their rich visual language. The involvement of artists from the School of Visual Theatre increased in the 2002 Festival. Among them, Moshe Malka, a street theatre artist, directed Jean Genet’s *The Blacks*, with the actors of the Natala theatre and Rawda Saliman, an independent Palestinian actress. The Natala actors are Ethiopians who received part of their professional training as unenrolled students during the time Citron was the school director. Malka emphasized the dimension of violent ritual in Genet’s play, stressing the color of the participants’ skin, their athletic physiques, and their Hebrew vocalizations and intonations. The “nice” image attributed by the Israeli establishment to the Jewish Ethiopian immigrants was shaken and undermined by the performance. The presence of Saliman, the one Palestinian, in the role of the white oppressor, generated the mask-play and oppression games that are intrinsic to Genet’s work.

The artist Elit Weber staged *Esbet*, based on the Biblical story of Tamar. Tamar, a widow, wants a child. Pretending to be a prostitute, she is impregnated by her father-in-law. Two actor-dancers participated in the performance, with five puppet parts attached in various ways to their bodies. The performance continued the theatrical language developed by Weber in the work she did at the School of Visual Theatre, particularly in a piece based on “Farenheim” by Shmuel Agnon.

*The World Is Round* by Gertrude Stein, conceived and performed by Josef Sprinzak, is an audio-performance that, through sound games and rhythms, transforms a children’s story into a horror story. The performance was staged together with *Songs of a Helmet and a Corset*, created and acted by Tāl Haran, a movement teacher at the School of Visual Theatre. In *Songs of a Helmet and a Corset*, Haran transforms a barbed-wire fence into a dress and a cradle through

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14. In the end, Ben-Tor’s work was pulled for personal reasons.
her dance and movement, while singing emotionally charged songs from the days of Zionist “innocence” in Arabic. The fruitful connection with the graduate students continued with Amit Drori, who staged *The Saga* for the 2001 Festival and in 2003 directed *Plasmatica*, a story about the journey of three embryos attempting to return to the womb—the embryos represented by puppets with realistic heads and very small bodies.

In the end, the panel of judges awarded the Excellent Performance Award for Festival 2004 to Yaniv Schentzer and Mia Jankowitz’s *Cloning*, a decision that illustrated the dramatic change in the profile of artists chosen to participate in the Festival. Schentzer is a graduate of the School of Middle Eastern Classical Music in Jerusalem. He used to work at the School of Visual Theatre as a technician and wrote the music for *The Saga* (one of the 2001 plays in 4 Play), the first production he worked on as part of Drori’s creative team. During *The Saga’s* tour through Croatia, Schentzer met the Croatian sculptor Jankowitz. Upon their return to Israel, the two started work on *Cloning* for the Festival, in which 20 people participated, among them members of the Gamelan orchestra from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and amateur Ethiopian actors. Schentzer and Jankowitz’s main task was to create visual images: dozens of ears, noses, fingers, sculptures of human figures in varying shapes and sizes, and hairy masks. The performers combined these elements, reminiscent of the Middle Ages, with advanced technology, creating a contemporary-primeval-future factory for human babies. All the objects were positioned in a large, dim, cavelike hall that gradually filled up with more masks and sculptures undergoing mutation and cloning. Accompanying the performance were electronic and traditional instrumental musical compositions, live singing, and sounds from mechanical objects. During the performance, the performers created environmental sculptures out of the aforementioned elements. The group could not rehearse the entire performance because no space was similar in size to the Posta hall in Acco. The entire montage was organized and came together for the first time at the Festival. The dress rehearsal was catastrophic, not because of the materials of the event or the form it took, but because of the flood of spectators. After the dress rehearsal Schentzer, Jankowitz, and Citron decided to limit the number of spectators to 30 in order to facilitate the audience’s experience of the event. The hybrid multimedia nature of the event blurred the boundaries between an orthodox theatrical production and an exhibition of visual art. The participants’ commitment to the work and their sense of responsibility for each one’s part in the event were clearly evident. In this sense, over and above the aesthetic aspect, *Cloning* reminded the local theatre community of the power of art to bring people together.

There were also performances staged by well-known and respected visual artists: *A Drop of Milk* by Hila Lulu-Lin (2002) and *What’s on Your Mind?* by Michal Heiman (2004). Citron invited Lulu-Lin and Heiman to present their work at the Festival to draw in people who usually attend art exhibitions but not theatre or dance performances. His expectation was, in fact, only partially realized. Lulu-Lin and Heiman’s artworks brought art critics and fans to Acco, but this group focused only on these two pieces and did not show any interest in other performances.
However, according to Citron, both works, together with *Me Dea Ex* by the internet artist Neora Shem-Shaul (2003) were challenging in terms of form, raising questions regarding the recognized and safe boundaries of conventional theatre.

For the hour-and-a-half long *A Drop of Milk*, spectators were invited to make their way among the objects and events of the installation located in an underground maze beneath the Knights’ Halls, accompanied by ten artists and another seven assistants. We entered the installation through a kilometer-long narrow tunnel that required us to stoop and enter the tunnel one at a time. One after another, spectators went inside and emerged from the tunnel; upon exit, each spectator faced a wall of metal mesh stuck through with hollow loaves of bread. This, in accordance with the cultural constructs in Israel, immediately referenced hunger and the Holocaust. In the installation space were sculptures, projections on large video screens and small monitors, and other sound and lighting effects. The smell of wine lay heavy in the air; the smell and simultaneous performances were reminiscent of a nightclub. But, unlike the decadent, nondialogical nature of nightclub culture, the events and the space invited focused attention and dialogue. As he described in our conversation, Citron witnessed behavior at *A Drop of Milk* that was different from the usual kind of theatre viewing. For instance, one person sat opposite a pair of acrobats who performed an act that could have been either artistic gymnastics or the prelude to a sex act. The spectator gazed fixedly at the two when they were not performing, as if waiting for the moment they would again demonstrate their skills. A group of high school students gathered in front of one of the artists who was wearing a full head-to-toe body suit on which various body parts were traced. The performer stared at one of the students; the student responded by playing the “staring” game. The performer had no scenario for the event; after a period of exchanging glances, the student began to cry.

Smell and taste were an important part of the experience of the event. The air was filled with the contrast between the heavy smell of wine and the taste of milk, which was offered to participants. Simple transparent glasses were arranged on a long silver bar and half-filled with milk. Lulu-Lin herself, dressed in a clinging garment that accentuated her breasts, poured the milk from a white jug into the glasses with measured movements, replacing the ones that were taken. At the end of the bar on a high stool sat a dwarf handing out, with a pair of tongs, sweet or salty biscuits according to the preference of the participant. The milk, with all of its cultural implications of maternal nurturing and the Israeli institution of “Tipat Halav” (in English, “a drop of milk”; an educational social group for young mothers that instills norms of “correct” childcare) provided the conceptual basis for the installation: indoctrination by social institutions. The interpersonal interactions, the nonverbal dialogue, and the multisensory environment comprised a new experience for spectators who were accustomed to more traditional theatre.

Toward the end of the performance, one of the performers climbed a white ladder and began to...

![Figure 10. A Drop of Milk, with the visual artist Hila Lulu-Lin, Acco Festival 2002. (Courtesy of Atay Citron)](http://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/pdf/10.1162/dram.2007.51.4.47)
chant the story of his immigration to Israel and his difficulties as an Arab-Jew (that is, a Jew who immigrated from an Arab country). Undirected, the audience fell silent and gathered about him. Had the Festival framework in some way affected Lulu-Lin’s artistic decisions in her creation of a situation that actively and physically brought the audience together? The event ended with an image projected onto a video screen positioned behind the milk-bar: a rain of red hearts and white skulls, an image that illustrates the culture of death intrinsic to Israeli culture since its inception.

Me Dea Ex (2003) is an adaptation of the Medea myth, based on texts by Euripides, Seneca, and Müller, with quotations from Laurie Anderson, the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish, and the Beatles—plus ironic comments by the creator of the performance, Neora Shem-Shaul. The audience sat in the center of a three-dimensional cyberspace scene projected onto a 360-degree screen. Together with a virtual audience participating over the internet, the audience could influence events through SMS text messaging on their cell phones. Participants could choose the order of the scenes and direct interaction between computer figures and “real” ones. Seated in a tall, mechanized wheelchair, with the audience surrounding her, was the actor Khaula Elhaj-Dibsi, a Palestinian Medea who took bitter revenge on Jason/Creon by sending their two children to carry out a terror attack. This was reported in a news flash at the beginning of the event as “A murderous terror attack in the capital”: scores of wounded, thirteen killed, plus the two young suicide bombers who lived in a refugee camp with their mother, Medea. This was immediately followed by a conversation between M, the consciousness of Medea, and the male computer voice called D:

M: It was horrendous. Extreme.

D: Looking up “pain” in the dictionary. Do you mean “discomfort”? Or a symptom of physical hurt?

M: Look up “suicide”! Look up “massacre”! The children are dead! No one deserves to die like that. Children marching to their death. Couldn’t you have prevented the murder? (Shem-Shaul 2003)

Jason was presented as an Israeli aviator who was as pompous as a military general and cut off from all feeling. The words given by Euripides to Jason—“You live here, not among barbarians. This country has taught you what justice is and how to behave according to the law instead of with violence”—have not lost their relevance (Shem-Shaul 2003). The sharp contrast between the cyberspace and the impressive presence of the actor Elhaj-Dibsee not only brought the character of Medea to life, but also gave her a very human quality as a woman who is shattered and in pain. The event evoked a series of questions: Is our daily life a virtual reality from which we can flee by pressing the “escape” button? Can we, with our fingers on the right button, make meaningful choices, or is the game fixed, with all actions ending in loss? Or, perhaps the only choice is to ask questions, an issue which this event raises. Undoubtedly, Me Dea Ex, despite its technical production problems (such as computer breakdowns during the performance), was one of the most daring attempts undertaken in Israel to break through both intellectual and aesthetic barriers. The event presented the interrelations between the virtual world and the real world, the use of internet culture as a means to a theatrical event, and raised the primary question—Is the Palestinian resistance a terrorist organization or is theirs a legitimate struggle for freedom?

The performance What’s on Your Mind?—Michal Heiman Test No. 3 had a completely different thrust. Heiman’s two previous works, Michal Heiman Test (M.H.T.) No.1 (1997) and

15. SMS stands for Short Message Service and is a text-messaging service via a digital network between mobile phones and/or the internet.
16. From Me Dea Ex’s website, where some texts appear in English (http://www.medeaex.org).
Michal Heiman Test (M.H.T.) No. 2 (1998) were enactments prompted by a psychological test, the “Thematic Apperception Test (TAT),” based on a box containing an arrangement of 32 pictures.\footnote{These images are presented to the examinee, who is asked to respond to each one. The interpretation of the responses helps to reveal the main urges, sensations, feelings, and conflicts that make up the examinee’s personality.} In both of Heiman’s tests, images came from her collection of photographs taken by amateur photographers or “unknown photographers.” These included images of terror attacks from newspapers as well as from public archives, family albums, etc. In both tests, she brought together the practices of photography and psychology to the museum. At every enactment site, she reconstructed a therapy room; and the second test was just for women. The spectator was invited to lie down on one of two couches and to describe to the examiner what she saw in the photographs presented in the cardboard box.

The theatrical frame in the Acco festival enabled Heiman to expand the intimate-individual therapy framework into a stringent group dynamic. During the Festival there were 13 “performance sessions,” each with different participants. In each session one or two psychologist-facilitators worked together with six volunteers (men and women recruited for the Festival) who were lying on beds that were part of an impressive construction of three double-decker beds, each bed equipped with a television screen and microphone. The volunteers were hidden from the audience, who were seated in front of the construction and viewed brief video-art works, which were also shown to the volunteers. At the end of the viewing, the volunteers were asked to press a button that would switch on a red light in order to obtain permission to speak from the facilitators. People in the audience who wished to respond were asked to get up and speak into the microphone located at the edge of the stage. The idea of this third test, What’s on Your Mind?, did not concern images like the other two tests but rather ten films that Heiman had either collected from other artists or created herself. The psychologists were asked by Heiman to try and bring the volunteers to an agreement and produce one text. Whatever was said was documented by a court typist sitting beside the construction, with the words projected immediately onto the screen above. Within a strict framework the participants (volunteer-performers and audience) were asked to play the game of interpreting an artwork for 50 minutes, the therapeutic hour.

The work was not without problems. For instance, in the performance I viewed, the instructions of the two facilitator-psychologists focused on “What do you feel?” rather than “What do you see?” and what the volunteers said was not, on the whole, particularly challenging. Nonetheless, the work provided the audience with a multidimensional impression: the construction flashing with red lights, the voices of unseen people, the video-art films, the skilled work of the court typist, the technology that enabled an instantaneous transition from spoken to written...
text, the behavior of the facilitators, and the response of the audience. There, audience responses were strong: behavior that ranged from total silence to shouting. Some people left angrily during the event. Citron praised *What's on Your Mind?—Michal Heiman Test No. 3* for expanding the boundaries of theatre. The work of interpretation, was both a source of dramatic tension and the theme of the work. The drama lay in the game the volunteers played with the audience. In this sense, the work defined an alternative to the meaning of narrative and plot and to the roles of the actor/spectator and the connection between them. Likewise, Heiman drew a similarity between theatrical work and therapeutic work, forcing the spectator to consider the connection between spectator, artist, the work, and the question of where the work of art takes place.

**Theatre in Sites of Conflict**

The dramatic changes in the Festival during Citron’s leadership were inspired by three main underlying convictions: the belief that artistic breakthroughs in postmodern theatre do not usually come from theatre artists but from visual and multimedia artists; the ambition to make an artistic center that significantly influences Israeli theatrical discourse; and a vision of the Festival as part of the fabric of life in Arab Acco within the multicultural context of Israel. As artistic director, Citron was able to implement a theoretically and politically grounded artistic program, developing the Festival as a niche for artists who are not part of the Israeli mainstream theatre industry. Before Citron, some of the Acco Festival productions went on to larger venues in Tel Aviv. Because of the kinds of artists and artworks Citron brought in, the Acco Festival is no longer just a springboard to the mainstream Israeli stage; the level of work that the Festival is now known for has made it the pinnacle of achievement for alternative performance artists.

This severing of the Festival from the commercial theatre industry and the redefinition of its goals constituted a pedagogical approach that not only affected artists but also the entire Israeli theatre community. In 2004, as part of the 25th anniversary of the Festival, a conference was convened for those artists and researchers who deal with questions concerning alternative theatre. This was the first professional-academic conference to take place at the Festival, and it was devoted specifically to the creative work of the artists who performed at Acco. At the conference, Citron did not refer to the Festival's artistic highlights but to ongoing Jewish-Arab collaborative projects. His choice reveals his uniqueness: a pedagogue-artist who perceives his role as challenging how Israelis, both Arab and Jewish, perceive theatre art within their commu-

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18. The session ending the two-day conference presented the research of students who participated in an annual seminar devoted to the various aspects of the Acco Festival. It took place during 2003/2004 in the Department of Theatre Art at Tel-Aviv University and was facilitated by Dr. Hadassa Shani.
nity. However, the choice to consistently stage performances by Palestinian artists has its price because the pool from which to choose is still small and only a few of the performances have really challenged traditional conceptions about theatre. The attempt to maintain a vital, fruitful dialogue with Arab Acco largely constitutes an obstacle to a dialogue with Acco’s Jewish community. It is important to note that this unfortunate phenomenon is part of the history of the Festival. Citron’s emphasis on Arab Acco served to accentuate the absence of Acco’s Jewish residents from the festival.

But despite the multicultural Jewish-Arab context of the Festival, it is important to mention the lack of voices from other sectors: the Ethiopian, Caucasian, Georgian, and Mizrachi Jews are all hardworking populations who suffer from the laws and privatization processes that govern the Israeli economy. Despite the pressing nature of the economic situation in Israel, Citron told me that during his tenure, no projects dealing with socioeconomic issues were submitted to the Festival. The question remains as to whether such initiatives can be encouraged by developing workshops that focus on issues of social justice. Moreover, high ticket prices affect the audience profile. The Festival has indeed brought back representatives of the academic community, but distanced those practitioners who are significant in mainstream theatre and who previously

A Letter from Jaffa
Atay Citron

22 March 2007—I have just returned from Vienna, where my friend, Warren Rosenzweig of the Jewish Theatre of Austria, organized a festival and a conference under the ambitious Hebrew title, “Tikun Olam,” which means “World Repair.” I like this title, with its explicit ambition. Without ambition of this kind, our failure has no meaning. Realizing that as theatre artists our ability to repair this world is limited, to say the least, some of us still need a motive to create—a motive beyond the bubble of art and entertainment. We have been around long enough to know that the damage brought about by greed and its synonyms, represented by politicians and their allies, cannot really be repaired. But we can put our finger to the hole, like that Dutch boy who stopped the water from flooding his country. We can plug the hole and scream in the hope that the scream—raw, or carefully shaped and meticulously crafted—will move people to feel, to think, perhaps even to take action.

When I was appointed Artistic Director of the Acco Festival, I did not see myself as a warrior. It turned out, however, that in order to give a stage to an Arab-Jewish dialogue, I had to put up my shield and raise my sword. I should have expected as much: it was during the second Palestinian Intifada, and Jews in Israel were living in fear of suicide bombers on the street, in restaurants, in hotels. When one is afraid, it is difficult to have sympathy for the fear of others, and in our case, for the Palestinians who live under Israeli occupation—their fear of the Israeli soldier, of curfew, of the Jewish settlers. In an atmosphere of fear, suspicion, and hostility, one cannot simply say, “Let’s print the festival poster and program in Hebrew and in Arabic for the first time in 20 years, because Arabic is an official language in this country and Arabs should feel welcome to a festival that takes place in their part of town.” In 2001, resistance to that stand was very strong. It was not until 2002 that the poster announced the Festival in three languages: Hebrew, Arabic, and English. I am glad to see this continues and hope it will prevail and become the norm.

It is also gratifying to see that it has now become the norm to have an Arab on the Festival’s artistic committee; and that Israeli Palestinian theatre artists are beginning to see the Festival as a legitimate venue for the expression of their talents and their hopes, but also their anger and frustration. (Alternative theatre, for some reason, tends to be sympathetic to these emotions.) It is especially satisfying to see Jews and Arabs working together on the same show. A few Arab actors perform quite regularly on the stages of the Hebrew repertory theatres, and mixed casts are a regular occurrence at the fringe companies of the Arab-Hebrew Theatre in Jaffa and the Acco Theatre Center. Only recently, however—at the 2006 Acco Festival—did I see a piece, A Gypsy Wedding, that was created by two young Israeli Palestinians—Firahs Rubi and Ihab Bahus—and performed by Jewish actors. It was a milestone: the primary position of power, that of the director, was shared
attended the Festival. In the particular context of Israeli theatre—a small scene where artists know each other and share the same financial resources—shouldn’t the pedagogical effort also address mainstream practitioners? Might the Festival play a part in enriching the entire Israeli theatrical scene? Aside from such questions, I believe that the Acco Festival’s reformation illustrates exciting possibilities for rethinking the role of theatre in sites of conflict. As demonstrated in this article, the Festival has become an arena that enables the audience to participate in a dialogical theatre, to communicate with different voices, and to experience the “other” in real time. Moreover, encouraging artists to develop a theatre where the audience actively participates, the Acco Festival can trigger and stimulate the political awareness and activism essential in sites of conflict such as Israel.

Epilogue: Acco after Atay

The 2005 Festival, with Daniela Michaeli as artistic director, converged primarily in the well-known tourist area of the Knights’ Halls. Despite Michaeli’s declaration that her goal was to “re-examine the boundaries and language of theatre,” the artistic choices followed the usual pre-Citron course. Only two of the nine performances were outside the Knights’ Halls: by two Arabs, and the actors were all Jewish. The actors and one of the directors are graduates of the theatre department at Haifa University, where I am now the Chair; it is rewarding to finally believe that there is a future for an artistic dialogue between Jews and Arabs in Israel.

At the conference in Vienna, I spoke about Arab-Jewish cooperation at the Acco Festival in the years during my tenure (the period discussed in this article). I would like to share a few of the thoughts I have now, looking back at this collaborative effort.

Several thousand spectators have attended the Acco Festival performances over the years. Most of them were Jewish and among them, I assume, the majority was supportive of an Arab-Jewish dialogue as a way of life and the various peace initiatives, though they failed. Except for a few individuals, Arabs came only when we managed to raise funds to subsidize their tickets. The Hebrew press gave considerable attention to our effort, but this attention was not always positive. I concede that it is realistic to acknowledge that people do not change their long-held views as a result of attending our shows. So what did change, if anything? Probably the participants: amateur and professional theatre people. For almost all of them, working with a member of the “other side” (Jewish or Palestinian) was a new experience. In most cases, problems that arose during the creative process had little to do with the conflict between the two nations or with politics. It was in the Arab-Jewish youth groups, that were learning street theatre techniques and developing outdoor performances for the Festival, where change occurred. Initially, there was apprehension and even racist preconceptions. But triggered and nourished by the collaborative process, friendships between Jews and Arabs developed in some surprising ways, even among participants who initially had been hostile.

I changed, too. Working in Acco offered a unique opportunity to know Palestinian Israelis, their work, their cultures, their family lives, their political positions. I made one true friend—the director Mazen Gattas, who decided, to an extent as a result of our fruitful collaboration and friendship, to move his small theatre from his home village in Rama to Acco’s old town. He worked for more than a year to renovate a dilapidated shop on the lane leading to the port and intended to inaugurate it with an original piece about the Jewish Holocaust, to be followed by a piece about the Palestinian Nackbah. Unfortunately, Mazen died at the age of 52, almost two years ago, before he had a chance to lead his theatre in the direction he had envisioned.

Working in Acco was not only about fostering Arab-Jewish relations. It was also about pushing forward the notion of interdisciplinary performance, of exploring and asking questions about alternative theatre. But as I reflect upon a very rich and complex experience, I find myself returning to one thought: there are limits to the power of theatre in our society, but it does have, or at least could have, the power to change people—even if only one or two at a time.
Impotent by Riad Masarwa and Walkman by Shir Goldberg, Moshe Ferlsten, and Shahar Pincus, an immature event attempting to-be-and-not-be theatre; the result was a distressing lack of dialogue with old Acco. Instead of the Artist-in-Residence program, a Tel Aviv artist was invited whose well-known sculptures became a bourgeois decoration for the impressive antiquities of the Knights’ Halls. For lack of budget, there were no joint Arab-Jewish projects, and the wintry weather caused cancellations of most of the outdoor events. However, Twenty, a visual concert by the Zik Group (in honor of their 20th anniversary), took place on the seashore. Hundreds of people attended and the spectacular performance, which involved fire shooting from a conical structure, jets of water cooling burning glass and fireworks, etc., was one of the highlights of the Festival. After years of discussion and argument between the Festival art committee and the production team, the price of tickets for students and youth was finally considerably reduced and the organizers were glad to see a greater attendance by young people.

Two performances shared first prize: Prumot (Unraveling) by Odelia Moreh-Matelon and Aliana Schechter, and Shmeterling, a beautiful work by the artists Guy Sherf and Elad Kynner from the School of Visual Theatre in Jerusalem. Shmeterling vacillated between a duet and a duel and was performed with specially made musical instruments sharing one string, attached to the waists of the two players, each wielding a bow. Prumot was a play in rhyme: a polished cabaret performed by two actresses—the performance being a metaphorical expression of the 2005 Festival. In the opening scene, a woman is sitting and complaining to her psychologist about being depressed and about her inability to dream. For a moment she wonders if her depression is because of the “political situation” but immediately rejects the thought. Not only did the political situation almost altogether fail to find expression during the 2005 Festival, but as a whole the event seemed to be once again a stepping stone to the Tel Aviv mainstream. In fact, Prumot successfully appeared at established fringe theatres in Tel Aviv during the 2006 season.19

The Impotent was written and directed by Riad Masarwa, who lives in Nazereth. He previously lived in Germany, where he studied theatre in Leipzig. The play is about a group of Palestinian exiles, the one piece that was not devoid of political statement. The space itself, an old hall partly in ruins, with bats flying around our heads, enhanced the story of the Palestinian refugees. Night after night the refugees meet in a dreary Berlin bar. One night, one of the characters, a Palestinian theatre director, decides to break the silence and asks each of them to tell his or her story to the others. Masarwa wrote and directed a play which, in postcolonial terms, gave form to the perspective of the Palestinian oppressed. At the end of the play, the director offers the lifeless body of the whore—the only female character—to the audience, saying: “Bring her back to life if you can,” before exiting the stage. The occupation does not only wound the occupied but also utterly corrupts the occupier. The Festival needed The Impotent more than the devoted and committed cast needed the Festival. Within the words and actions of both the oppressor and the oppressed are encoded the unspoken questions, “Who am I?” and “What is my identity?” While the audience demanded an “encore” from the actresses in Prumot, the actors in The Impotent did not earn such a response, perhaps because, in spite of their impressive acting, they presented the story of the “other”—the Palestinian story.

Some theatre critics maintained that under the new artistic directorship the Festival was once again devoted to mainstream theatre and was therefore an unqualified success, whereas others missed the experimental work characteristic of Citron’s tenure.20 In any case, it happened that

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19. Tel Aviv fringe theatre comprises a number of small theatres, also subsidized, although minimally, by the Ministry of Culture. The title “fringe” does not necessarily mean that their work is politically or aesthetically challenging.

20. Zvi Goren (2005) thought that the festival’s daring had vanished and claimed that this was the reason for its commercial success; Eitan Bar Yosef (2005) longed for the enthusiasm of the previous festival; Shai Bar Ya’akov (2005) thought that the festival had once again become Tel Aviv’s fringe theatre.
in 2005 the Jewish Succoth fell during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. The Arab vendors in the city, who depend upon the income from the Festival visitors, opened their stalls despite the fast required during Ramadan. Unfortunately the Festival, an organization hosted by the Arab city, did not find an official way to wish the vendors and residents “Ramadan Karim” (happy holiday); visitors continued as always to enjoy the fish and hummus restaurants and the tang of the pomegranate juice, with no acknowledgment of the sacrifice required of the Muslim vendors. However, in conversations with Daniela Michaeli, I was impressed by her determination to continue the relationship with the Arab residents that Atay Citron had developed over the years and once again to include more interdisciplinary works in the Festival.

Typical of the never-ending story in sites of conflict, Israel in the summer of 2006 was engaged in a war against the Hezbollah in Lebanon. Residents in northern Israel spent August in the shelters; bombs fell on Acco and no one knew when or how the war would end. By the end of August, there was a ceasefire. The residents of Acco were still mourning their dead, coping with the destruction of buildings, and processing their trauma when the Festival opened in October. As was the yearly ritual, the Festival took place in the Knights’ Halls where artists presented the fruit of their endeavors. Since the performances had been planned before the war, the Festival could not be expected to respond to the most important event of that particular year. Thus there was, understandably, a severe discrepancy between the immediate traumatic memory and the experience of the performances. Still, one dares to hope that the next Festival will relate to this last war or to the one that is now threatening to break out.

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21. The conversation with Michaeli took place during the Festival and continued in December after she read my article “Limitation: Acco Festival, 2005,” published in T eatron: An Israeli Quarterly for Contemporary Theatre 16.