We are at the YMCA concert hall in Jerusalem, a beautiful auditorium in the neo-Moorish style, built between the years 1928 and 1933. Hand-painted geometric patterns and flower motifs decorate the enormous dome dominating the space and the impressive proscenium arch framing the stage. On a large screen, aligned with the burgundy velvet curtain that marks the borderline between the stage and the apron, we watch the first few shots from Michał Waszyński’s 1937 Polish-Yiddish film Der dibuk (The Dybbuk), the first and most renowned cinematic adaptation of the highly acclaimed play created in the years 1913 to 1917 by the Russian Jewish writer S. An-sky.1

We watch a group of Hasidim gathered around their rebbe (Hasidic rabbi), swaying and singing wholeheartedly a solemn Hasidic tune. What we see is a cinematic remake of a tish (from tish, table in Yiddish), a Hasidic ritual in which the Hasidim gather around their rebbe and share food, listen to lengthy speeches on the Torah, sing (often wordless melodies), and sometimes also dance ecstatically. Below the screen is the Jerusalem Street Orchestra, a group of 28 young players and their conductor, Ido Shpitalnik. The group is known for playing in public spaces and alternative venues, striving to expose new audiences to classical music. For the time being, though, only a single clarinet and a single violin are playing an enchanting Hasidic melody, accompanied by a faint humming sound, the source of which is unclear; is it the film’s soundtrack or the live performers? Towards the front of the stage, distributed between its two sides, are five additional performers, all in elegant black-and-white attire that seems to correspond with the black-and-white 80-year-old film. These five lend the show their voices and manipulate objects to make sound effects, and will later be joined by an operatic singer in a bright red dress. For the time being, however, they simply stand there, humming softly, we now realize, without moving their lips, as do the musicians. While we, the audience, let ourselves be immersed in the humming, we also wonder what to expect of this performance. Is this intended as an homage to the classical Yiddish film, and to the most famous of Jewish plays?2 Is it an ironic takeoff on the traditional, remote world depicted on screen? A provoca-
While we have scarcely begun to ponder these questions, the spiritual ceremony of the tish comes to end, and the camera focuses on two young Hasidim, warmly embracing each other. When one of them opens his mouth, live dubbing begins: the actors at the front of the stage pronounce the exact words said by the film actors, in a process that might be called “reverse lip-syncing,” in which live sound replaces recorded sound (here: the movie’s soundtrack), rather than the other way around, as in the common playback. While in common playback live performers rely on recorded sound as a convenient shortcut, in tonight’s “reverse lip-syncing” the performers insist on the “superfluous” live reproduction of technologically produced sounds, i.e., the voices (and music) already given in the film and translated into English and Hebrew in subtitles on the bottom of the screen (only the film’s opening and ending subtitles, including credits for the filmmakers, remain in the original Polish).

Upon hearing the first few words many in the audience burst out laughing, although nothing is particularly funny in the words spoken, which are taken directly from the original film, nor in the way they are vocalized and acted. Why, then, do so many people laugh? It may be that it is hilarious, embarrassing, or even disconcerting, to hear Yiddish in the 21st century; it is a language associated with otherness, a lost world, and ultimately also with death. Perhaps it feels as if a mummy has escaped from its crypt, the mummy being the historical film and the Yiddish language itself. True, it is still possible to hear Yiddish in Jerusalem these days, spoken by ultra-Orthodox Jews who use it to express and strengthen their independence from mainstream Zionist Hebrew culture.3

3. On Yiddish among ultra-Orthodox Jews and the effort to retain this language and battle the dominance of mainstream Hebrew (in Israel) or English (in the United States), see Dalit Assouline (2017).
It is much stranger, however, to hear it articulated by secular, hip, politically involved, and well-known artists—quite opposite of the typically conservative image of Yiddish, associated with the ultra-Orthodox, or with old people. It might also feel odd to view the long dead actors of Waszyński’s Polish-Yiddish _Der dybbuk_, filmed in black and white in picturesque Eastern European locations, while hearing the vivid voices of the actors onstage, with hints of Argentinian and Israeli accents.

What are we then to make of this live Yiddish dubbing that remakes, rather than translates or adapts, the words uttered in this interwar “talkie”? The ostensibly futile act in _Der Dybbuk 1937–2017_ feels like a heroic, Don Quixotic gesture, a desperate attempt to “revive” the Yiddish language, or at least to imagine such a possibility. This gesture, no less audacious than Don Quixote’s holding to the already obsolete chivalric norms, may be better understood in light of the film’s historical screenings. Paradoxically, back in 1938, when Yiddish was the mother tongue of the majority of Jews living in Palestine (and in the world), _Der dybbuk_ was screened in Palestine dubbed into Hebrew (rather than in Yiddish with or without Hebrew or English subtitles). Back then, dubbing this renowned Yiddish film into Hebrew was a clear ideological statement, rooted in the Zionist negation of the Eastern European Jewish diaspora and its infamous language, Yiddish. Now, on 22 November 2017, this performance of live Yiddish dubbing in the heart of Jerusalem reverses the Zionist negation of the diaspora by making the silenced language present onstage and in real time. True, in practical terms the Yiddish dubbing performed here is superfluous, both because it reiterates the exact words of the original film, and since most of the audience does not understand Yiddish (or understands only a little), and would rely on the Hebrew or English subtitles. Yet, it is exactly this redundancy that endows tonight’s performance with a symbolic meaning, marking it a radical political and aesthetic choice: to voice a silenced language; to enliven the petrified object of the historical film; to allow, perhaps, the living to possess the dead, rather than vice versa, as in the play’s original possession story. Reedited and shortened from 2 hours to 50 minutes, _Der dybbuk_ screened for _Der Dybbuk 1937–2017_ better suits contemporary sensibilities; accompanied by live music, sound effects, and dialogue, An-sky’s famous drama becomes more entertaining and vivid than ever. At the same time, however, the reverse lip-syncing recreates, to use Walter Benjamin’s terms, the aural “distance,” i.e., the charged awareness of an ineffaceable gap between art and life, or perhaps merely gestures towards the aura, typically lost in the age of technical reproducibility.6 It thus endows this classic drama of love and death, created a century ago, with yet another layer of meaning.

An-sky’s drama of _amour fou_ narrates the story of Leye, the daughter of a rich merchant, and Khonen, a poor orphan dedicated to the study of Jewish religious texts, who fall in love with each other. When Sender, Leye’s father, arranges a more suitable match for his daughter, Khonen desperately turns to Kabbalistic magic, which ultimately leads to his death. Then, in the midst of Leye’s wedding ceremony, Khonen returns to Leye’s body as a “dybbuk,” a possessing spirit. In the play, the exorcism ritual that follows reveals Leye and Khonen’s love to be predestined, since Leye’s father Sender and Khonen’s long-dead father Nisn had promised to marry their unborn

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4. The performance’s title, _Der Dybbuk 1937–2017_, is a somewhat odd mixture of the Yiddish transliteration (_der dybbuk_), and the English one (_The Dybbuk_). Throughout the article I use the common Yiddish transliteration (when referring to the play or to its 1937 cinematic adaptation), but refer to the 2017 performance by its given title.

5. An ad in the daily _Davar_ proudly pronounced the dubbed version of the film “a great victory for the Hebrew language” (Migdalor Cinema 1938), and in a review published in the same newspaper the reviewer (signed A.F.) praises the choice to use dubbing (rather than subtitles) for this film, referring to it as a major “revolution” (A.F. 1938:4). Interestingly, while films in English and French were often screened with subtitles, a film produced in the language most widely spoken and understood among Palestine’s Jewish population was dubbed—as if to prevent people from hearing a forbidden language. This no doubt has to do with the language war declared by Zionists on Yiddish. Articles from _Davar_ can be found at http://jpress.org.il.

children to each other. In the film, this background story is moved to the opening and thus serves as exposition, rather than as a secret revealed. In both the play and its cinematic adaptation, however, Der dybbuk is a story in which not one but two of the dead return to trouble the living: a dead lover takes over the body (or soul) of his beloved, while another dead person (Nisn), conjured up in an exorcism ritual, returns to demand a debt from his soulmate, or first love (Sender). These spirits and ghosts, which lie at the heart of An-sky’s curi-

ous amalgam of Eros and Thanatos, are over-

shadowed in this performance by other deaths, other demons: those of the culture destroyed by the Nazi genocide and of the language so fiercely rejected by Zionism. The diasporic lan-
guage, associated with the dead, whose very sound is strange and puzzling, especially in this

context of contemporary art, has come to haunt the audience. The credits that appear now on the screen introduce Polish, another language evoking the memory of Zionism’s rejected Eastern European Jewish diaspora. New credits for the editors and performers of Der dybbuk 1937–2017— the Sala-Manca group, Adi Kaplan, Shahar Carmel, the Jerusalem Street Orchestra, and the singer Ann Elizabeth — are seamlessly inserted into the old ones, using the same language (Polish), and the same design, as if to warn us: beware of manipulation!

The impressive space of the YMCA hall, which seats 600 and is almost entirely sold out, is now filled with sounds—not only Yiddish and its emotional and political reverberations, but also magnificent sound effects, patiently created and meticulously synchronized by the Foley artists (who rely on simple means,

7. As Naomi Seidman argues, “The Dybbuk presents not one, but two pairs of lovers—the two men whose bond has the force of fate and the young boy and girl who reenact the love of their fathers. The heterosexual love affair/possession is at stage center, but the key to understanding its otherworldly power lies in the homoerotic friendship that refuses to remain relegated to the past or to the background” (2003:233).
such as paper, nylon, and water), and beautiful, dramatic music, at times so turbulent that it impedes our ability to hear the actors. This doesn’t affect the audience’s understanding, since most of the audience rely on the subtitles anyway. The film’s new live soundtrack, replacing the recorded one, borrows only a little from the original (composed by Henekh Kon), which flaunted its Jewish character through Cantorial singing and Klezmer and Hasidic music. Instead, the revised soundtrack consists mainly of Bedrich Smetana’s set of symphonic poems known as Ma Vlast (My Homeland), especially its second movement, the Vltava (The Moldau). Smetana’s romantic piece, composed between 1874 and 1879, is abundant with folk motifs and dramatic moments and thus suits this melodramatic film well. It also conveys the spirit of European nationalism and its fascination with folklore—a zeitgeist also absorbed by An-sky, a dedicated ethnographer who strove to transform his findings into a work of art. Yet Ma Vlast, and especially the “Vltava,” was clearly chosen for another reason: its main musical motif greatly resembles the Israeli national anthem, Ha-Tikva (The Hope). This short motif, repeated seven times in the “Vltava” (four in the opening and three in the piece’s finale), is multiplied in this performance, since Smetana’s melody is played over and over again. The effect is repetitive, persistent, even coercive, as if the “Vltava,” that is Ha-Tikva, forces itself on the audience. It is not only the past that haunts the present, but also the present forcefully interfering in the past through enchanting yet domineering music.

How are we to understand this Zionist intervention in An-sky’s diasporic myth, which depicts an 18th-century religious community untouched by modernity and walled off from the non-Jewish world? Is this a comment on the Israeli anthem and on Israel at large, a reminder that the Eastern European diaspora is not only Zionism’s rejected Other, but also the birthplace of this ideology, rooted in 19th-century European nationalisms? Is Israeli culture possessed by the dybbuk of the lost language, of the demolished Eastern European diaspora? Is Yiddish a subversive hidden voice within Israeli Hebrew, possibly a voice through which other Others, such as Arabic, are also being heard? Is contemporary Israel a safe refuge, a solution for a stateless ghostly existence, or does the diasporic dybbuk, like Khonen, endanger its host? All these questions hover in the air while we let ourselves be immersed in Smetana’s captivating music and in this mesmerizing romantic-macabre tale. It is in this sense that we experience what Benjamin and Theodor W. Adorno termed a “constellation” or a “configuration”: the heuristic juxtaposition of different elements that enables one to uncover a completely new meaning.8 The music, the gestic act of live dubbing and sound effects performed at the front of the stage, and of course the reedited film, are constellated together in a way that is acutely relevant to this very present moment and place.

In constructing such complex relations between past and present, the timeless and the contemporary, the work adds new meanings to a film already burdened with numerous layers of historical significance. By 1937, the year Waszyński’s Der dibuk was shot, An-sky’s play had already been produced in Yiddish, Hebrew, German, and English by a variety of art theatres around the globe. The play’s worldwide acclaim no doubt contributed to the film’s allure, even among non-Jewish or non-Yiddish-speaking audiences, and it became one of the most successful Yiddish films ever. Not that all the press was good; Frank Nugent, film critic for the New York Times, found it as odd

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8. On the term “constellation” in Benjamin and Adorno, see Martin Jay (1993) and Robert Kaufman (2010). In Benjamin’s “Epistemo-critical Prologue” to his study The Origin of German Tragic Drama (Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels; 1928) Benjamin famously writes: “Ideas are to objects as constellations are to stars” (see Benjamin [1996:34]). While the metaphor of “constellation” originates in the clusters of stars (and is often employed in relation to visual structures, such as the Eisensteinian montage or the cubist collage), it seeks to depict what may be created in artworks in any aesthetic genre or form that challenge aesthetic norms and accepted truths. As Kaufman shows, “constellation” is also a key notion in Adorno that appears most explicitly in Adorno’s unfinished Aesthetic Theory (Ästhetische Theorie), yet shapes also other works such as “The Essay as Form” (see Kaufman [2010:214]; see also Adorno [1997:171, 173, 233]).
“as a documentary film of life among the pygmies or a trip to the Middle Ages” (1938). Notwithstanding this critic’s anti-Semitic bias, his review rightly points to a key characteristic of the film — its rich profusion of ethnography. While An-sky sought to aestheticize his ethnographic findings, the film based on his play popularized folkloristic materials, such as Hasidic folktales, Kabbalistic magic, and rites of exorcism, transforming them into a consumable spectacle of mysticism and Yiddishkeit. Thus, for example, the film offers a mystical (rather than social or psychological) interpretation of the dybbuk, and presents an elaborate Jewish wedding scene, absent from the play. This ethnographic abundance, which in 1938 struck the New York Times critic as bizarre and repellant, seems to be a significant factor in the film’s contemporary appeal, and makes it well-suited to serve as a site of memory, commemorating the destruction of Eastern European Jewish culture. The film’s dark, macabre tones, and the fact that it was made only two years before the onset of the World War II, contributes to its memorializing position. Indeed, several scholars have gone as far as referring to this work as a kaddish, a Jewish prayer for the dead.

The symbolic role of the 1937 film in contemporary culture is no doubt a crucial factor for shedding light on the current iteration. While it is hard, perhaps impossible, to nail down Der Dybbuk 1937–2017 to any specific political ideology, one thing remains clear: this performance is a gesture of revival. The film’s multilayered ethnographic display, experienced as “a trip to the Middle Ages” by some, and as a source of national pride by others (Kon 1937), is revived in this performance not only through live dubbing, live music, and live Foley art, but also by way of editing, which makes the film feel smoother, more harmonized, and mostly cuts out what may have historically been too long and possibly boring for audiences. Consequently, the edited version complements the taste of contemporary viewers accustomed to a faster pace and is indeed quite entertaining.

Significantly, the performance does intervene in one key place, namely the film’s closing image: a burning candle. Whereas in the original film, the candle flickers and then dies, symbolizing Leye’s death, in the reedited version the flame flickers, dies, and then returns to life. This subtle change suggests that Leye, and thus also Khonen’s soul within her, remain alive. In the words of Diego Rotman, a scholar of Yiddish and theatre, and one of the performance’s creators: Leye refuses “to perform her death [...,] to enter the archive. Lea [Leye] comes back from the past to remain present, to dance with the living.” This is, perhaps, what this performance is about in a nutshell: bringing the dead — the obsolete film, the destroyed culture, and the defeated

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9. For further consideration of the play’s and the film’s ethnographic spectacle and the film’s iconic position in contemporary culture, see Stern (2011).

10. For Diego Rotman’s interpretation of the show, see Rotman (forthcoming). Rotman’s article offers many interesting insights and a glimpse into the creative process behind this performance.
language — back to life. Yet what does this gesture of “revival” ultimately mean? Rotman defines this “ghosted performance” as a “collaboration with the dead” involving the film’s long dead actors, and as a “possible way for Yiddish cultural continuity.” In my view, however, the gestalt revival ultimately enhances the gap between the context of the original film and that of the current performance, evoking an acute sense of loss.

Acknowledging the basic life/death tension behind the work, many questions are nevertheless left unanswered long after the screen has come down and the audience’s applause receded. This work is hard to classify in terms of the relations between the original and its remake, more than a mere homage and yet avoiding the violence typical of appropriative acts. Copying, possession (in the sense of property) and dispossession, documentation and plagiarism are matters with which the two multidisciplinary artist duos involved in this performance (and apparent at the front of the stage) have long engaged: both the Sala-Manca group (Diego Rotman and Lea Mauas), working in the fields of performance, video, installation, and new media; and Adi Kaplan and Shahar Carmel, graphic artists, writers, film editors and Foley artists.11 In their installation The Eternal Sukkah Project (2014–2015), the Jerusalem-based Sala-Manca group purchased an illegal Bedouin shanty and carefully reassembled it at the Hansen House Center for Design and Technology, reclaiming it as a Jewish sukkah. In another work, titled Absentee Landscapes (2017), they built an unauthorized replica of a 19th-century sukkah from Germany owned by the Israel Museum.12 Kaplan and Carmel tackled questions of documentation and aesthetic appropriation in Heim (Home; 2014), a short mockumentary on the history of the Jerusalem Hansen House (formerly an asylum for people with leprosy), where they applied a pseudo-historical narration (in German) to found footage. In all these works, as well as in Der Dybbuk 1937–2017, the artists tend to evoke questions rather than provide answers. Destabilizing pregiven notions of authenticity and historicity, they refrain from projecting any single allegorical interpretation on Der dybbuk as many previous productions have chosen to do.13 Through their open-ended gesture of revival, Kaplan, Carmel, and Sala-Manca offer an alternative way of constellating past and present, the original and its remake, life and death. The term “constellation” is closely related to another important Benjaminian notion, that of the “force field” (Kraftfeld), which is what a historical state of affairs becomes when “penetrated by actuality” (Benjamin 1989:60). The Benjaminian suggestive metaphor of a penetrating actuality brings to mind the central metaphor of Der dybbuk: possession, as both embodied and spiritual penetration. Whereas the play portrays how the dead take possession of the living, Der Dybbuk 1937–2017 offers an alternative, Benjaminian interpretation of Der dybbuk, inducing a force field in which the present intervenes in the past. By way of their “reverse lip-syncing,” a subtle and yet also operatic gesture of revival, the actors let actuality penetrate the historical state of affairs, namely the Nazi genocide and the catastrophic destruction of Eastern European Jewish culture. Similarly, the live musical accompaniment, constellating Western romantic classical music, 19th-century European nationalism and folkloristics, and the Israeli national anthem, constitutes a constructive intervention, seeking, in Martin Jay’s words, to “shatter received wisdom as well as reconfigure the debris in new and arresting ways” (1993:1).

In her work Death 24 x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image, film scholar Laura Mulvey discusses the double nature of the photograph as an index, a material trace physically con-

11. Adi Kaplan (b. 1967, Ein Haahoresh Kibbutz, Israel) and Shahar Carmel (b. 1958, Tel Aviv, Israel) live together in Tel Aviv and regularly exhibit their work in Israel. They both studied painting at Tel Aviv’s Kalisher Art Academy from 1992 to 1996. Their works are held in several private collections in Israel and abroad. For their latest graphic novel see: https://www.editionpatrickfrey.com/en/books/diary-lev-afor-adi-kaplan-shahar-carmel.

12. For further information on the Sala-Manca see their website http://sala-manca.net.

13. A notable example is Krzysztof Warlikowski’s production for TR Warszawa (2008), which presented Polish culture as haunted by a Jewish past.
nected to a reality, and yet also as the uncanny, oscillating between absence and presence, the animate and the inanimate, life and death; or, in Roland Barthes’s words: “that rather terrible thing that is there in every photograph: the return of the dead” ([1981] 1993:9). Reading André Bazin’s “The Ontology of the Photographic Image” ([1967] 2005) alongside Barthes’s Camera Lucida, Mulvey exposes the great affinity between the two French thinkers while also highlighting a significant difference between them: whereas for Bazin, photography transcends death (which Mulvey relates to his Catholic belief in life after death), for Barthes, the photograph helps us dive into death and to accept mortality (Mulvey 2006:54–66). A fictional film rather than a photograph, the 1937 Der dibuk is nevertheless strongly rooted in these two aspects of the photograph: the index and the uncanny. A material trace of the Eastern European Jewish culture destroyed so shortly after its making, the film also evokes uncanny feelings, rooted in our knowing that the world onscreen, not only that of the storyline but also that of the filmmakers and actors, is tragically lost. By turning this film into a live performance through live music and sound effects, interventional editing, and above all, through the ostensibly futile act of live dubbing, reiterating the exact words of the original film, this work offers a third way of engaging with death, which is neither Barthes’s divining into death, nor Bazin’s spiritual or divine transcendence. Rather than embalming the dead (the origins of art according to Bazin), it endows them with an afterlife, or rather, to use Walter Benjamin’s words, with a “weak messianic power” (1968b:254–56), rooted not in a religious belief, but rather, in human empathy (Einfühlung) and sadness, and in the desire to resist the victor, give voice to those who are stepped over, and thus brush history against the grain.

References


Holot Legislative Theatre
Performing Refugees in Israel

Sonja Arsham Kuftinec

The moment is electric. I am sitting in the intimate Tmuna Theatre in Tel Aviv on a sunny day in March 2018. On one side of the sparse stage, a young man holds an Israeli flag; facing him, a skeletal mass bears multicolored flags. The young man (Doron Lev) asserts in Hebrew: “What happened to the Jewish people in the Holocaust must not happen again. We must define the duty of the countries of the civilized world to give asylum to refugees.”1 The stage image and text position Israel at the 1951 UN Assembly as singularly concerned with asylum seekers. “Israel” speaks within a framework of universal rights, derived from historical Jewish experience, yet haunted by an unnamed “uncivilized” realm.

Then the image shifts, complicates, as two dark-skinned men (Omad Shakur and Awet Asheber) pick up Israeli flags and join Doron in refuting the Assembly’s fear of refugee “floods.” With Doron, they express revulsion at proposals to “concentrate” asylum seekers in detention centers. These African actors, standing as Israelis, are themselves refugees from Darfur and Eritrea, detained for several years in Israel’s Holot center.

Like thousands of others, Shakur and Asheber came to Israel seeking asylum from

1. All quotations are from the HLT company’s English translation of text collaboratively devised by the ensemble of asylum seekers and Jewish Israeli allies with directors Chen Alon and Avi Mograbi. The text includes theatrically heightened documentary scenes, citations from the UN Refugee Convention, and (in the production that I saw) one scene excerpted from a play by Israeli author Hanoch Levine. Actors credited with creating the production I attended include: Tamar Alon, Abraham Arada, Awet Asheber, Yonatan Astifanus, Barkat, Maya Buenos, Germai, Rotem, Goldenberg, Ferezgi Habte, Yehshulu Hagos, Doron Lev, Roni Levanon, Nuraldin Mussa, Liat Shabtai, Omad Shakur, Eyal Murvitz, and Shaharit Yerushalmi, with props designer Kineret Kish. Background on the project’s development is derived from Ha’aretz articles and interviews with Chen Alon on 18 March 2018.

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violence that is a byproduct of global economics and local wars. The refugees’ “day jobs” in marginal Israeli spaces (restaurants, factories) had been tolerated by the state, while also triggering demographic and labor anxieties among some in the Israeli public. A few years ago, the state began rounding up African refugees and more aggressively policing its southern border with Egypt. The Holot detention center in the Negev desert housed asylum seekers for months, and sometimes years, until the Israeli Supreme Court ordered the center closed in 2018. Before that closure, Shakur, Asheber, and several other African asylum seekers had been engaged in a workshop process informed by Augusto Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed (TO), joined at various points by Israeli allies. How they arrived in Israel, and what actions witnessing audiences might take in response to their predicament, is the subject of the Holot Legislative Theatre (HLT).

Both company and production, HLT presents social dilemmas created by Israeli state policy towards asylum seekers through modular, interactive performances. Based on the refugees’ testimonies and personal stories, these performances offer a rereading of the 1951 UN Refugee Convention, aiming to arouse public and legal debate leading to political transformation (Alon 2018). Performances on the streets, in kibbutzes, community centers, schools, and within professional theatres activate Israeli publics in multiple realms. HLT’s epic dramaturgy additionally adapts TO to an explicitly racialized Israeli context that models democratic processes on and off the stage.

HLT emerged from an 18-month development process. Moved by reports of asylum seekers from Darfur and Eritrea trapped between Egypt and Israel, denied refuge by both, Israeli filmmaker Avi Mograbi approached theatre artist Chen Alon in 2014, just after the Holot detention center had opened. Mograbi shared an idea to use theatre to illuminate Israel’s complex position towards refugees. Like Mograbi, as an Israeli citizen with refugee grandparents, Alon felt a sense of connection to the asylum seekers and had been participating in supportive marches and demonstrations. Alon and Mograbi thus agreed to visit Holot one day a week over several months, with the goal of creating TO with asylum seekers. The theatre would make participants visible as refugees rather than as infiltrators, illuminating the conditions that defined their status.

Mograbi and Alon proceeded slowly, grounded in tactics of political organizing and informal ethnography. Alon, a TO scholar-practitioner and cofounder of the Palestinian-Israeli alliance group Combatants for Peace, worked to identify potential participants in Holot through African activists living in south Tel Aviv. Then, in their weekly visits to Holot, Alon and Mograbi “hung out” with persistence, like “white anthropologists” (Alon in Perelman 2018). After several weeks of hanging around—meeting, talking, bringing requested food from Tel Aviv—a few of the detainees agreed to try out some theatre games, mostly hoping to learn English and Hebrew. They...
discovered instead the language of theatre and the therapeutic and political power of TO.

According to participants interviewed by Vered Lee, the TO games restored hope in a site designed to create despair (Lee 2015). TO games worked to “make the body expressive” while moving participants along a spectrum from individual-emotional to collective-activist (Boal [1979] 1985:126). Boal proposes that TO “rehearses revolution” by illuminating and activating responses to oppression (155). As documented in Mograbi’s film Between Fences (2016), the small group of six to eight participants worked with expressive games to eventually craft Image Theatre pieces — embodied tableaux that metaphorically sketched out their position as refugees.

In an inaugural image, a general stood on a block eating a banana while a crowd watched from below. The image communicated the conditions that provoked refugees’ departure from Eritrea, which resonated with the South Sudanese participants. From this beginning, the company created further images that appeared in the HLT production. These included a human fence, signaling efforts to cross the border. A movement machine of dishwashing and cheese-making gestured towards invisible labor in Israel. Absurdist bureaucratic scenarios indexed the exhausting rituals of the state that discipline the body of the detainee. In workshop development, these theatrical sketches illuminated the refugees’ conditions to each other and to themselves, strengthening a poetic as well as collective critical consciousness. After working together for almost a year, building trust, confidence, and theatre, the group agreed to invite a few Israeli actors, most involved in other projects with Alon (Mograbi 2016). They joined together to create what Alon terms a “polarized” TO model (Alon 2018).

Where Boal had advocated for TO to be confined to oppressed communities, Alon had extended the practices over several years to include those in the dominant culture committed to political struggle with the oppressed. In this “polarized model,” each group (for example, Israelis and Palestinians, prisoners and students) bears witness to the other, exploring power dynamics between them while modeling new ways of being together. In the case of HLT, the initial group of refugees and allies first performed in the Holot center in the summer of 2015 for a rapt audience of thousands, including a few hundred visiting Israelis. The company then procured a weekend pass for detainees that allowed for their performance in Tel Aviv. After the release of the first group of asylum seekers in 2015, HLT performed throughout Israel at the invitation of various communities and at rallies designed to pressure Israel to close the Holot Center. The production I witnessed in Tmuna included a “second generation” of detainees led by members of the first group that had trained as TO jokers (thought-provoking facilitators that TO practitioners often refer to as “difficultators”). The expanded Tmuna production emerged from this deliberate multiplication of people and expansion of training.

While the Tmuna production had more performers and scenes, the minimalist design was consistent with other HLT performances. The minimal design enables mobility while also drawing attention to props and costume accessories that indicate how power accrues, shifts, and divides. Basic black costumes are augmented by red scarves, caps, a blazer, medals on a jacket, each accessory signaling the social status of the refugee, the soldier, the businessperson, the dictator. These details also enable conscientious cross-ethnic casting: Israelis sometimes portray migrants and vice versa. Props unify and distinguish as well. Thin bamboo poles, reminiscent of director Peter Brook’s aesthetic, signal walking sticks as well as fences, flags, prison bars, and rifles. When not engaged in a scene, actors sit upstage atop stools beside cardboard boxes that double as prop storage, arranged in an arc. The size of the boxes seems to approximate what refugees might be able to carry with them in exile.

Like its design, the production’s dramaticurgy draws attention to changes in material conditions. Pieces can be excerpted as visually dynamic street theatre, presented on a blanket.

in the desert, or performed on a professional stage. At any given performance, scenes incorporate up-to-the-minute legislative developments around refugee status and switch out different personal scenarios. Several scenes are designed to be excerpted for interactive forum theatre sessions, which almost always follow the longer productions. While the production devised for the Holot center, which I witnessed as a digital archive and saw live in Tmuna, is adaptable in many ways, it is the carefully conceived dramaturgical structure that enables the slightly different framings and emphases in different settings.

The structure, as I characterize it, incorporates five phases, progressively illuminating refugee subjectivity and leading to audience activation: (1) preparing the ground; (2) (dis)orientations; (3) inquiry about the refugee; (4) investigations of refugee life; and (5) dialogues. Each phase dynamizes both dialectical and ensemble energies, keeping the audience alert to historical resonances, repressive power dynamics, and possibilities for alliance and transformation.

In Tmuna, “preparations” are initially immersive and playful, then shockingly political. The audience enters to the sound of the ensemble at play, singing childhood songs in various languages. The joyful scene warms up both actors and audience. We warm our ears to the linguistic collage, our eyes to the array of bodies; we warm to the ensemble. This immersive engagement then shifts to a more overt orientation. Alon steps forward to speak about the theatrical process and politics of the production. In Tmuna, a guest artist followed Alon: spoken word activist Yossi Tsabari. As a self-identified Arab Jew from Yemen, Tsabari interrupts conventional ethnic polarities. He also disrupts and plays with text in a mode reminiscent of Brecht’s Verfremdungseffekt tactics. Tsabari revises a well-known childhood song to critique Israel’s hard-line Defense Minister, Avigdor Lieberman. He then takes up Emile Zola’s “J’Accuse,” published in 1894 as a response to the flimsy conviction of French Jewish officer Alfred Dreyfus for spying.4 Tsabari’s contemporary accusation references the 71 Israeli Knesset (parliament) members who had recently voted for refugee deportation. As Tsabari calls the members out, ensemble actors hold up signs inscribed with their names. The Knesset members’ names eventually obscure all of the African asylum seekers in the ensemble; the moment makes the HLT members’ racial polarity starkly visible.

Having prepared the ground, oriented the audience to the company and current political context, making explicit the connection between historical anti-Semitism and contemporary racial anxieties, the ensemble stands. We become more familiar with the makeup of this group as they step forward together, uniformly clad in black T-shirts, with Israelis in black pants and Africans in jeans. A divided ensemble, they collectively look at us, then to

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4. In 1894 French Jewish officer Alfred Dreyfus was convicted of spying despite flimsy evidence and a cover up on the part of the army. Zola’s editorial, “J’accuse,” decried both the army and state and resulted in Zola’s conviction for libel.
each other. They pick up their walking sticks and softly begin to sing a song in the Eritrean language of Tigrinya, “Nesamama,” a call from the earth to love each other.

The next section disrupts this loving unification and orients the audience instead to a lexicon of terminology about refugee status developed with human rights lawyers. Rendered like a liturgy, through choral responses with shared gestural imagery, the lexicon is initially disorienting. It establishes the status of refugees through repeated choral phrases: “Leaving the Homeland: State of Emergency; Law: None; Court Trial: None; Dictatorship.”

From this spare choral frame, the piece moves to address the question, “What is a refugee?” The subsequent scene integrates Awet Asheber’s refugee story with a Greek chorus of Israeli women reading articles from the 1951 UN Refugee Convention that define power and underlines the conditions that enable the violence that sustains these networks, integrating the direct address of a soldier who tortures Asheber: “I was tied up like him many times [...] without a trial, without a reason.” From the social, the scene shifts to the historical UN Convention detailed above. “Your words have a strong scent of racism,” Lev warns the Assembly in Hebrew, late in the scene. “Yesterday it was us,” adds Asheber now appearing as the cross-cast Israeli delegate, but speaking in Tigrinya, “tomorrow it’s you.”

The words hang in the air as a soldier (indicated only by cap and physicality) clicks his heels and removes the multicolored cloth flags from their bamboo poles. Three Israeli women don red scarves while chanting Article 33 of the 1951 UN Convention on Refugees (which elaborates on the prohibition of refugee refusal). The group of Israeli and African actors shifts into a huddled mass. They traverse the stage enabled by their walking sticks, then move directly towards the audience where their sticks cross to become the Egyptian border barrier. On the opposite end of the stage, also facing us, stands a collection of soldiers (portrayed by both African and Israeli actors). The soldiers mime “pushing back” the refugees, but conflict emerges among the soldiers. Some question the commands to deny water to the refugees. One tosses a canteen into the audience, trusting someone to catch it. Thus, the staged dialectic — refugees versus soldiers — is complicated by both casting and internal dissent. Refugee stories fracture as well.

Where the third section makes the asylum seeker visible through narrative, embodiment, and law, the fourth segment investigates the tenuousness of refugee life in Israel. The refugee exists in a gray area, bolstered by unofficial networks and bounced by bureaucracies. The production physicalizes the ongoing pre-

Figure 3. Ensemble members in a scene of political torture with a chorus of the Israeli members of the company reading the UN definition of the refugee. Holot Legislative Theatre, created by HLT company, directed by Chen Alon. Tmuna Theatre, Tel Aviv, 2018. (Photo by Erez Harodi)
carity with a ritualized bobbing on imagined buses. The asylum seekers sleep in a public park placed among the audience, invading “our” space. We witness how refugee labor is both restricted and desired, enabled by “policies of nonenforcement” that render them beholden to employers and civil servants. When moved to Holot, they are fined for breaking unwritten rules such as carrying theatrical scripts in Hebrew. While derived from personal stories and enacted by individuals, Holot Legislative Theatre frames each of these struggles as structural, social, and unresolved — ripe for the interventions of interactive forum theatre.

In the final stage before these forums, where the audience is invited to directly intervene in the stage action, HLT prepares the ground again through dialogical encounters between the polarized groups. The ensemble plays out a well-known scene from Israeli playwright Hanoch Levin’s *The Child’s Dreaming* (1993), of Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany on the St. Louis, a boat refused entry to “civilized countries” in 1939. The scene realizes Mograbi’s initial vision of casting asylum seekers in Jewish refugee plays.

The production moves towards conclusion with an ensemble reconnection: all the actors — Israeli, Eritrean, Darfurian — stand in a line together and briefly share their names and diaspora stories. Liat Shabtai speaks of how her grandmother snuck out of France in a suitcase. “Now I have Israeli and French passports.” In contrast, Yonatan, Awet, Omad, Nuraldin, and others have no passports. The commonalities among ensemble stories are positioned again in contrast to legal status. The audience is now primed to explore this contradiction together through forum theatre. In forum, audience members, or “spect-actors,” replace ensemble members to enact (in character) their proposed solutions to the situations presented in the play. The performance I attended also included discussion circles with asylum seekers and human rights lawyers — a mode of ongoing education and activation designed to strengthen the possibilities for legislative change.

As Boal has argued, Theatre of the Oppressed extends into life ([1992] 2002:246), and Holot Legislative Theatre likewise does not conclude even with these circles. Actors train towards enacting the effective dramaturgy of their stories in various public spheres including the courtroom and the media. They learn to perform tactically for Israeli audiences. At the same time, the ensemble not only models alliance onstage, but also practices equitable democracy offstage. The group determines together where and who performs, how they will alter the script, and share funds earned from performances. HLT thus operates as a rare performance of long-term activist alliance. Rather than a singular production, one-time workshop encounter, or short run, the company models sustainable activism and transformation. While clear-eyed in its political ideals, it is a model fueled as much by joy as outrage. The company celebrates family reunions whether this means the departure of a company member released from Holot or emigrating to Canada.

On several occasions Boal has stated that to be a citizen is not to belong to a society, but rather to transform society. For those in the company without legal status as citizens, HLT offers the opportunity for a different kind of...
citizenship and belonging, while also working towards legislative and social transformation. Holot Legislative Theatre legislates the refugee into civil society by maintaining that there’s no such thing as an “illegal” human being.

References


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