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Jewish Theatres

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Contents

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Foreword

> If it wasn't for Jews, fags, and gypsies, there would be no theater.
> Mel Brooks, *To Be or Not To Be* (1983)

The essays collected in this issue of *Skenè* deal with Jewish theatre at large – that is, theatre written and staged by Jews, about Jews, mostly (but not only) for Jews, in Hebrew or in other languages used by Jews in history. They show how much Jewish theatre diversified throughout the history and the cultures of the Jews,[1] yet maintaining a quite distinctive character of a tradition within a tradition. They also show several instances of how the tensions, polarities, and contradictions that have marked Jewish societies and Jewish tradition since the Renaissance were referred to or openly denounced in Jewish theatre.

As evidenced in these essays, the main question underlying the Jewish theatrical tradition was the quest for what Zehavit Stern defines a usable Jewish theatrical past, and how to build one within a wider cultural and religious tradition that had inherited no 'classic' dramatic canon from its past, nor even any theatrical text at all – with the one possible exception of the lengthy sequence of dramatic dialogues included in the Biblical book of *Job*. In its post-Biblical period, Judaism has mainly been a tradition of religious law and practice codified by the class of the rabbis. Right at the beginning of the formative period of rabbinic Judaism, the rabbis disavowed theatre as a despicable form of blasphemous admixture of their idea of Judaism with the surrounding dominant pagan cultures of the Hellenistic and

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[1] I here refer to the definition by Biale 2002.

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Roman period; or else, they only legitimated it when used as a farcical celebration of the generally hostile confrontation between the Jews and their pagan neighbours and/or rulers (such is the case, for instance, of the enactment of the Biblical story of Queen Esther, a specific theatrical genre which will later be named *Purimshpil*, as we will see further). In the Babylonian Talmud, the canonical compilation of rabbinic legal and intellectual tradition (fourth to seventh cent.), the following normative statement is found: "Our rabbis say: One must not go to theatres [*tarteyaot*] nor to circuses, since in such places people entertain themselves with pagan entertainments" (tractate *Avodah Zarah*, 18b). The rabbinic paradigm of Judaism became mainstream in Jewish tradition until and even beyond the onset of secularisation in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, to the extent that it is commonly referred to as Judaism *tout court*. Theatre and theatres were thus formally and normatively considered as places, both symbolic and concrete, of cultural, possibly even religious promiscuity and hybridization with non-Jewish cultures, critically endangering the kind of Jewish identity that the rabbinic class meant to promote.

Nevertheless, as shown in several of the essays collected here, starting from the Renaissance, rabbinic tradition and the literary and social practice of theatre were mutually linked in a dialectical relationship by which, especially in Italy, several of the most important authors of Jewish theatre of the modern age emerged precisely from the ranks of the rabbinical class. Such are the cases of Leon Modena (1571-1648) (whose allegorical rewriting of the Biblical story of Queen Esther is analysed in Chiara C. Scordari's essay), Mosheh Zacuto (d. 1697), and possibly Mosheh Ḥayyim Luzzatto (1707-1746). Leone de' Sommi Portaleone's (d. 1597 ca.) *Quattro dialoghi in materia di rappresentazioni sceniche* (*Four Dialogues on Scenic Performances*), composed in Mantua in the second half of the sixteenth century, were the first and definitely most influential attempts at formulating a specifically Jewish theory of theatre. De' Sommi established that theatre as a genre in Jewish literature should have moral instruction as its ultimate aim: he thus found a viable mediation between the normative ruling of the rabbis, the deeply rooted ideology of Hebrew as the sacred tongue, and the new Renaissance taste for literature and theatre. As Fabrizio Lelli puts it in his essay, "if the play form *was* novel for Hebrew, its capacity for creating parables and proverbs was well-known, and so *could* make it even more marvellous as a medium for theatrical entertainment". Morally-focused allegorical drama was thus established as the most important subgenre in Jewish theatre – and the most practiced one too, well into the twentieth century, as we will see here.

Jewish intellectuals of the Renaissance such as de' Sommi were well aware of the need to build a Jewish theatrical repertoire – or rather, draw-

ing on a distinction influentially proposed by Diana Taylor and referred to by Zehavit Stern in her essay, the need for a Jewish theatrical *archive* (Taylor 2003). Minority identity, historical memory of suffered persecutions, and satire of Gentile persecutors merge in the first typically Jewish theatrical subgenre, namely, the rewriting (first as poetry, and later specifically for the stage) of narratives taken from the Hebrew Bible, particularly – as stated above – of the book of *Esther* with its unsettling narrative of thwarted pogroms and pre-emptive violence against real or potential enemies of the Jews. Performances based on the story of Esther were staged on the occasion of the feast of *Purim* (whose mythical foundation is narrated in the Biblical book); in time they came to be called by the Yiddish name of *Purimshpil* among the Jews of Central and Eastern Europe, though they are first attested in Jewish communities of Italy in the Renaissance, due to the crossed influences of various literary traditions: i. medieval Christian miracle plays, ii. Greek and Roman theatre as it was being rediscovered by Humanist scholars, and iii. *midrash*, the vast exegetical and homiletic literature on the Bible produced in Hebrew by the rabbis in late antiquity and the middle ages.[2] The adaptation of motifs taken from the Bible and from early rabbinic literature to theatrical genres – in particular to the erudite situation comedy of Italian Renaissance – already emerged in *Ẓaḥut bediḥuta de-kiddushin* (*A Comedy of Betrothal*), ascribed to Leone de' Sommi and widely considered as the earliest comedy ever written in the Hebrew language. As stated in Fabrizio Lelli's essay, de' Sommi made explicit references to *pilpul* (the dialogical and dialectical discussion of issues of religious law as it took, and still takes, place in traditional Orthodox rabbinic schools) and used it dramaturgically in a parodistic perspective. This is possibly the earliest literary example of the self-deprecating tendentious humour analysed by Freud in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905) and popularised by Yiddish literature and Jewish American theatre and cinema of the 20th century.

Leon Modena's allegorical tragedy *Ester* (Venice 1619), once again based on the Biblical book, is here analysed in detail by Chiara C. Scordari. The play is dedicated to the Venetian lyrical poet and *salonnière* Sarra Copio Sullam, a distant relative of Modena's, then targeted as a potential convert to Christianity by Ansaldo Cebà, also a poet and the author of an epic poem on *Queen Esther* (*La Reina Ester*, Genoa 1615). Cebà's fictional Esther, a believer in the future coming of Christ, was being used by the poet as an *exemplum* for Copio Sullam. The most prominent female character in Modena's play is rather that of Vashti, the queen repudiated by king Ahasuerus and replaced by Esther. In Modena's rewriting of the Bib-

[2] On the *Purimshpil* see Rosenzweig 2011.

lical story, nourished with a vast acquaintance of Italian early Baroque literary tradition, queen Vashti – otherwise an almost irrelevant character in the Biblical book – commits suicide at the beginning of the play, thus being turned into a sort of non-Jewish symbol of the loyalty of the Jewish people to themselves. On the other hand, Esther represents both the conforming to other peoples' will and the concealing of one's own identity. The play is therefore an allegorical representation of the option between martyrdom (*kiddush ha-Shem*, "sanctification of [God's] Name") and crypto-Judaism – a decision Jews had often had to take, starting from the persecutions by the Crusaders until the expulsions from Spain (1492) and Portugal (1497). In order to pursue his literary aim, Modena made Vashti into a sort of proto-feminist heroine. Yet, on a practical and political level, the Jewish attitude towards Gentile authority and power endorsed by Modena in his play remained the same as it had been at least since the middle ages – that is, a loyalism of the same kind advocated by Simone Luzzatto, Modena's contemporary and fellow rabbi in Venice, in his *Discorso sopra il stato de gl'Hebrei* (*Discourse on the Condition of the Jews*, Venice 1638; see Veltri and Lissa 2019), and thus expressed by one of Modena's characters: "Have there ever been Jews who, in captivity and submission, have become seditious, traitors, rebels, or who turned against their prince or lord? This never happened. Rather they are humble sheep who live obediently".[3] Last, Modena depicts the character of Mordechai as a type of the so-called "court Jew" – a peculiar social profile in Iberian Judaism before the expulsions (see Yerushalmi 1971) – and of his "two-hats existence" as both a courtier loyal to a non-Jewish kingdom and a devoted Jew who refuses to kneel in front of idols. Modena's *Esther* is thus at the same time a staging of, and a plan for, the Jewish existence confined in ghettos (the first ghetto of modern Europe had of course been established in Venice in 1516).

The reshaping of the public sphere in Jewish micro-societies of 18th-century Italian ghettos is described in Michela Andreatta's essay from the perspective of liturgy as musical theatre: a complexedly structured moment of piety (even of a mystical kind), self-representation, and socialization that had a crucial – though not yet adequately acknowledged – importance in perpetuating Jewish identity and community structures in Italy during the long age of ghettos and Counter-Reformation. The case studied here is the dramatic reading of Mosheh Zacuto's poem *Tofteh arukh* (*Hell Arrayed*), a description of Hell and its chastisements published posthumously in Venice in 1715 and nocturnally recited in Ferrara in 1720 by the *Ḥadashim la-Bekarim* (*Daily Renewal*) Jewish confraternity. Performances and stagings of this kind, whose musical accompaniment was often assigned to Gentile com-

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[3] Translation by Scordari. On Jewish loyalism see Yerushalmi 2005.

posers, could reach the scale of full-fledged operatic productions. Zacuto was well acquainted both with the kind of affective piety that was a hallmark of Christian Counter-Reformation, and with the style and rhetoric of non-Jewish baroque literature – both aimed at eliciting the inwardness of their audience, not only at a spiritual level (many of these performances were strongly characterised by mysticism), but mostly at an emotional and aesthetic level, no longer in an exoteric but rather in a collective dimension: an actual "theatre of the mind", as Andreatta describes it, rather than a theatre of action. From the cultural perspective, the walls surrounding Italian ghettos were much more of an osmotic barrier than is still generally imagined (cf. e.g. Andreatta 2016, 7-12).

The aforementioned issue of creating a Jewish theatrical archive was taken very seriously in the quantitatively most relevant of pre-Israeli Jewish theatrical traditions: the one that was expressed in the Yiddish language. The first written collections of *Purimshpil* were compiled at the beginning of the eighteenth century by the German Christian scholar Johann Jakob Schudt.[4] No earlier than the fourth quarter of the nineteenth century, abreast of the emergence of Jewish nationalism, there began theatrical productions in Yiddish, starting from Avrom Goldfaden's recitals at Shimen Mark's *The Green Fruit-Tree Garden* café in Iaşi in 1876 (see e.g. Berkowitz 2002, 10ff). With this came an inner-Jewish rediscovery and ennoblement of the *Purimshpil*, no longer considered as a low-level form of entertainment nor as a reason for embarrassment regarding the surrounding dominant cultures, but rather, in Zehavit Stern's wording, as "a historical artifact and a source of national pride".

As stated above, Stern applies to Yiddish theatre Diana Taylor's differentiation between the "repertoire" and the "archive" of theatrical tradition – a differentiation that can also be formulated as that between the *langue* and the *parole*, or between the canon and the performance, of theatre as a literary genre. The case considered by Stern is that of the *Tsentral Teater* established and directed by Zygmunt Turkow in the 1920s in Warsaw. The core themes that can be identified in the trajectory of the *Tsentral Teater*, and of Yiddish theatre at large, are, in Stern's words, "the unique nature of modern Jewish nationalism, and the special path that Yiddish culture took in what regards the weighty tasks of nation building and cultural rejuvenation". But another crucial issue at stake here was the relation between the intellectual class of Ashkenazi *Ostjudentum* (which will come to constitute the first ruling class of the new State of Israel) and the working class of the

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[4] In the 3rd volume of his *Jüdische Merckwürdigkeiten* (*Jewish Notabilia*) (Frankfurt and Leipzig 1714) and in his *Jüdisches Franckfurter und Prager Freuden-Fest* (*Jewish Festivals in Francfort and Prague*) (Frankfurt 1716).

shtetlach, the mainly Jewish country villages of Central and Eastern Europe. In 1923 the *Tsentral Teater* staged Shloyme Ettinger's satirical comedy *Serkele* (written around one century earlier), where the hypocrisy of Orthodox Jews was contrasted with the authentic devotion of the Jewish representatives of Illuministic rationalism (the *maskilim*). *Serkele* was written in the wake of Molière's comedy and of Lessing's bourgeois drama, but also of the moral drama of the late Renaissance and Baroque as made popular in Italian ghettos (as seen in Andreatta's essay) until Mosheh Ḥayyim Luzzatto's early seventeeth-century allegorical dramas.[5] Yitskhok Shlosberg's stage music for *Serkele* was inspired by Jewish traditional music from Galicia; also specific museum research was conducted for Moyshe Apelboym's set design and stage costumes. Shifting as it was in between the musealised, ossified dimension of the archive and the living performance of the repertoire, the staging of *Serkele* was thus, in Stern's wording, the "staging of a national heritage". Likewise, the staging at the *Tsentral Teater* of Mendele Moykher Sforim's *Der Priziv* in 1924, forty years after its writing, was (and was presented as) the recovery of a historical document, that included a *Purimshpil* scene. Turkow endeavoured to promote a new Jewish theatre by recognising the *Purimshpil*'s antiquity as "archive", drawing a parallel between it and modern-age non-Jewish comic theatre (especially the Italian *commedia dell'arte* and the French *cabotine*), and entangling the latter in the earlier from the dramaturgical standpoint – the same interwoven perspective from which Yitskhok Schiper, a close friend of Turkow's, was writing the history of Jewish theatre in those same years (Schiper 1923-1928). Still, the traditional perception and reception of *Purimshpil* as a low-level form of theatre and cultural heritage impaired the final success of Turkow's experiment.

After the Shoah and the foundation of the State of Israel, the plurality and pluralism of the cultures of the Jews exploded as a contradiction and a conflict between ideologies, for example between the new Israeli ruling class, mostly of an Askhenazi origin, and the immigration of Jews from the Sephardi and near-Eastern diaspora from 1948 onwards. What had been the quest for a 'usable' Jewish past in Yiddish theatre came to conflict with the official cultural policy of the new State. The official ideal of the Jew and Israeli citizen was now that of the *sabra*, the free and independent native, a winner who only spoke the Hebrew language as invented anew by Eliezer Ben Yehuda (1858-1922), as contrasted with the traditional loser's image of the European *Ostjude*, fearful, subdued, and persecuted, expressing himself in a low-level Germanic dialect as Yiddish. As Lelli points out, a liter-

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[5] See Danieli 2003's edition of Luzzatto's *La-yesharim tehillah* (*Praised Be the Righteous*).

ary production in Yiddish had started in sixteenth-century Italy (with Elijah Levita's adaptation of chivalry novels in the Italian vernacular such as *Buovo d'Antona* and *Paris e Vienna*) precisely as a contamination and entanglement of genres and languages. Diego Rotman recounts in his essay the misfortunes of the Yiddish language and its literature and theatre in the first decades of Israel's history – what Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin described as the "negation of exile" (Raz-Krakotzkin 1994 quoted by Rotman), that is, the suppression of a Jewish past now perceived as embarrassing and of its "lachrymose" commemoration, according to Salo W. Baron's famous definition (Baron 1928). By the same token, Israeli Zionist ideologues could only tolerate a theatrical art in Yiddish that would "divest itself of the diaspora clothing and wear Hebrew uniform in sound and in style" (thus the critic Asher Nahor in 1953 in the newspaper *Ḥerut*, quoted by Rotman). Although the Yiddish stage was by now richly endowed with an "archive" of its own – one much older and richer than its Israeli counterpart –, and although it was totalling many more performances and public than the Hebrew-speaking municipal or national theatres such as the Cameri or the Habima, State organisations and Israeli press remained politically and intellectually averse to Yiddish cinema and stage. After the Eichmann trial of 1961, Yiddish and its theatrical literature did gain some ground in Israel, if mainly in the perspective of the musealisation of an almost extinguished civilisation (the "vanished world" photographed by Roman Vishniac in the 1930s; Vishniac 1983). Yiddish theatre was meant to be received first and foremost in Hebrew translation, and even so, it was still perceived as more akin to folklore than to 'high' culture. A reclaiming of the Yiddish stage as Israel's "intangible heritage" (thus Rotman), no longer perceived as incompatible with *sabra* culture and Zionist ideology, was made possible in 1965 by Shmuel Bunim's recovery of *Purimshpil* – once again – in his direction of Itzik Manger's *Di Megile lider* (*The Esther Scroll Poems*, written in 1936) in the original Yiddish in the Hammam Theatre in Jaffa. The immigration of Yiddish-speaking actors and writers from Russia in 1969-1971 led in 1975 to the establishment of the state-financed Yiddish Kunst Teater, which was nonetheless used as a vehicle for the assimilation of the new immigrants. Even in 1976, in the newspaper *Davar*, Zeev Rav-Nof defined Yiddish theatre as a "commercial melodrama . . . which today is nothing more than nostalgia" (quoted by Rotman) – precisely, the nostalgia for the vanished world of the *shtetl*. Likewise, Michael Handelzalts, reviewing in *Haaretz* the premiere of Sholem Aleichem's *Shver tsu zayn a yid* (*It's Hard to be a Jew*) directed by Israel Becker in 1988 at the Yiddishpiel Theater (then recently established in Tel Aviv by Shmulik Atzmon-Wircer), stated: "At least one good thing had come out of Zionism: it had made this type of theatre a thing of the past" (quoted by Rotman). Nowadays Yiddish culture is no longer perceived as a

threat for Israeli culture, and a National Authority for Yiddish Culture was established in 1996. And yet, the activity of the Yiddishpiel Theater is still perceived as a sub-cultural niche phenomenon: in Rotman's words, a "museological project of remembrance".

A defining feature of Judaisms since antiquity has been the expectation of a messiah who will come to gather the Jewish people, redeem it from exile in the Diaspora, and lead it back to the Land that its God had long promised to them. In the Jewish tradition, such an expectation almost unavoidably determined a teleological understanding and framing of history – and of Jewish history in particular. Although modern Israel was born a secular, officially non-religious State, the religious stream within Zionism read and still reads its history and its very existence (including the harsh conflict with the Arab countries and the socially excruciating issue of disputed territories) as the fulfilment of that expectation. This made it possible that Jewish religious performative traditions were continued in Israeli theatre, either in a secular, sometimes even critical perspective, or else through their re-reading by a recent theatrical tradition originated in the Orthodox environment (e.g. in Amichai Hazan and Oshri Maimon's *Tikkun ḥaẓot* [*The Midnight Amending*], of 2017, analysed in Yair Lipshitz's essay). The idea of Zionism as the civil religion of the new Israel was well represented already as of 1936 in a line from Nathan Bistritzky's play *Ba-laylah ha-zeh* (*On This Night*): the generation of the fifth wave of immigrants to Israel (*aliyyah*) (1929-1939) "is not afraid of profaning the sacred, because it sanctifies the profane" (translated by Lipshitz).

For sure, the relationship between Jewish theatre and Israeli theatre can be described in terms of obvious discontinuousness. Yet, one should also discern the endurance of performative practices, metaphors, and symbols that can be traced back to the space occupied by theatre in the social life of Jewish communities, confraternities, and mystic circles since the early modern age. A meaningful example of this continuity is described in Yair Lipshitz's investigation of the nocturnal setting of some Hebrew plays written by Jewish playwrights settled in Mandatory Palestine (1917-1948) and in the State of Israel as a metaphor of the time of exile, whose end was coveted and prayed for by the Jews over almost two thousand years (one cannot but recollect the title of Elie Wiesel's successful autobiographical retelling of the Shoah: *La nuit*, of 1958), but also as a meta-time that Jews should devote to meditation on Time – that is, on their history and destiny. The symbolism of night and darkness can be traced back to canonical and non-canonical Jewish and Jewish-Christian religious writings of late antiquity, from the Dead Sea Scrolls to Johannine literature and the Talmud, but it is peculiarly explicit and meaningful in Jewish liturgy from the sixteenth century onwards, as seen for instance in the nocturnal reading of Mosheh

Zacuto's above-mentioned poem *Tofteh arukh* – or even more so, in the nocturnal Kabbalistic ritual of *tikkun ḥaẓot*, the "midnight amending" of the universe (whence the title and content of Hazan and Maimon's aforementioned play), a ritual by which pious Kabbalists from the sixteenth century on strived to cooperate on the amending of the Godhead's inner dynamics and of a cosmos that had originally been corrupted by the interference of Evil in God's plan (see Idel 2020). It was also at night that, according to the Biblical book of *Exodus*, the Jews were delivered by their God from slavery in Egypt and were therefore born as a people – the most important founding myth of Judaism, one still ritually commemorated today in the yearly reading of the Passover Haggadah, where the formula "On this night" that gave its title to Bistritzky's aforementioned play is to be found.

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