

FROM *THE DYBBUK* TO *BEST FRIENDS*



A play by Israeli playwright Anat Gov is soon to open in London. It ran for four years in Tel Aviv and its theme is friendship. LINDA BEN ZVI reports on just how far Israeli theatre has travelled.

It is almost impossible to read a newspaper or listen to a television newscast without finding some item about Israel: the latest movements toward peace in the region, continuing confrontations between Arabs and Jews, terrorist attacks. Yet, for all the attention the country receives, very little has focused on its culture, the area that provides the clearest insight into the nature of

Personal happiness was never mentioned as a competing value to the communitarian ethos.

a society and the forces that shape its political and social actions. Few forms of culture are more revealing of the complex structure of Israeli society than theatre. In bold strokes Israeli drama reflects the country's drama: its birth pains, dreams, growth, maturation, disillusionment, and, for better or worse, its normalisation.

Theatre in Israel, and for that matter theatre involving Jews, has a relatively short history, since traditionally Jews were forbidden to participate in such activities. The *Talmud Yerusalami* (Berakot, 4b), has a prayer thanking the Lord for making us "frequenter of yeshivas and synagogues" and not of "theaters and circuses; for I labour and they labour, I – to inherit the garden of Eden and they – the pit of destruction" Despite

Purim Spiels (Purim plays), Jews had to wait until the Haskalah (the Enlightenment) at the end of the 19th century to begin to find their place and their voice in world drama.

And it wasn't until 1917 that modern Hebrew theatre began, not in Eretz-Yisrael (the Land of Israel) but in Moscow, where a Zionist-motivated group, calling itself Habima (the stage), began performing in Hebrew, under the sponsorship of the famous Moscow Arts Theatre, and overseen by its legendary director Konstantin Stanislavsky. Habima's 1922 production of *The Dybbuk*, based on the ethnographic work of An-ski, became its signature work, when the group travelled to Germany and America in the late 1920s and finally settled in Israel in 1931.

Yet, despite *The Dybbuk*, and a few other plays with Jewish content, the early Israeli theatre still had to rely on the international repertoire that rarely had Jewish characters, or if it did – as in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* – showed them in negative ways. As the poet J. Karni noted, the Jewish society in pre-state Israel did not only want art in Hebrew but Hebrew art; not only Ibsen and Molière translated but plays that arose from the very experience of Jews now that they had finally returned to their homeland.

On May 15, 1948 the State of Israel was declared. Two weeks later, as the War of Independence raged, the Cameri (Chamber theatre)—established in 1944 as "a young theatre for a young country," whose actors spoke Hebrew without Habima's Russian inflections or classical mannerisms – presented *Hu Halach Basadot* (He Walked through the Fields) by novelist Moshe Shamir.

Nine months later, and several days before the cease-fire which ended the fighting, Habima followed suit with Igal Mossinsohn's *Be'arvoth Hanegev* (In the Plains of the Negev), a semi-documentary play about the siege of a kibbutz that was even then making newspaper headlines.

Both works were groundbreaking in subject matter and form, and both set the pattern for the type of theatre Israel was to produce for the next 15 years. They presented young fighters unquestioningly sacrificing themselves for the good of the group. When Dan, the young hero in Mossinsohn's play, wants to get married he explains to his father: "It's a whole chapter in Zionism, see? The continuity of the generations, the prolongation of the race."

Personal happiness is never mentioned as a competing value to the communitarian ethos. Parents and children share the same moral vision requiring that the needs of the individual be secondary to that of the country. When the sons fall, their parents and the kibbutz enshrine them in myth and song, which uplift the greater community.

This new type of theatre provided more than Zionist ideals; it also offered an education to the flood of new immigrants arriving in the country by staging for them what it meant to be an Israeli: how Israelis were expected to talk, behave, even dress. The three major theatres, which now included the workers Ohel (Tent) theatre were based in Tel Aviv, but they began performing throughout the country, thus providing a unifying bridge between city and outlying settlements, as well as between diverse people who had little in common except their religion.

By the early 1960s, the country was changing and so too was the theatre that reflected it. More secure, both began to look beyond their borders for models. 'Made abroad' had a cachet that home grown social institutions and arts still did not carry. Besides, a country busy with its own development had little time to create sufficient theatre to fill its country's growing needs. Playwrights staged abroad – Pinter, Brecht, Miller, O'Neill, and Williams – found audiences in Israel, and the themes and structures of these plays were embraced by a society that was looking for models in a period when television was not yet available.

The 1967 war changed Israeli society and its theatre. Along with euphoria of victory came a growing sense that the country had come of age and needed local playwrights to give voice to its experiences and directions. Gone were the idealistic plays presenting unquestioned Zionist values; more and more theatre held up a mirror to the real problems facing the country: absorption of immigrants, the growing schism between rich and poor, the plight of those who were falling through the socialist economic and social net. Documentary theatre, introduced by the American director Nola Chilton, began to stage the real stories of groups never before seen on the Israeli stage: the poor in development towns, women, oriental Jews, those being left behind by material progress.

The playwright who best captured the self-critical tenor of the times was Hanoch Levin, the most important playwright Israel has produced to date. Beginning in 1969, only two years after the war, the 26 year-old writer presented a satirical cabaret entitled *You and Me and the Next War* questioning the inevitability or necessity of parents sending sons off to war. Two years later his *Queen of the Bathtub* went further in attacking the myths of Israeli heroism and self-sacrifice, showing those who were getting rich in the process. What is more, Levin introduced new theatrical forms, building on the works of Brecht and Beckett, and moving away from the realism of the earlier generation of playwrights.

Until his untimely death in 1999, Levin continued to act as the conscience of society, his 56 plays shining an uncompromising and revealing light on the foibles and weaknesses of the expanding Israeli bourgeois society. Other playwrights continued this trend, most notably Joshua Sobol, who came from documentary theatre, and who often used extensive research to rethink issues related to Holocaust, early Zionism, and the struggle with Palestinians. However, the focus of these plays and others being written at the time was still the community.

It was only in late 1980s that playwrights, reacting to the pressures of daily life, started to write plays whose characters were not simply reflections of a political or social position or idea, but individuals seeking love, hope, and fulfillment. Drama reflected a society concerned with private problems and desires rather than political and social struggles that seemed incapable of solution.

And what of Israeli theatre today? Five years into the new millennium, and 57 years after the establishment of the State, theatre is still one of the most popular forms of culture in the country. Audiences continue to fill the six public theatres (Habima, Cameri, Beit Lessin, Haifa, Beersheva, and Khan), and many smaller fringe theatres have sprung up.

In Tel Aviv alone, there are currently 47 different plays being staged, 23 written by Israeli playwrights, 11 translations of British and American writers, ranging from Shakespeare to Neil Simon, Eve Ensler, Brian Friel and Martin McDonagh, the remainder coming from the international repertoire including works by Molière, Beckett, Strindberg, and Ibsen. There is even one play being done in Yiddish, something early Zionists, dedicated to the Hebrew language, would not have imagined.

Both as a cultural resource and as an educational tool, theatre became a central art form in Israel.

Few of these plays directly address the political issues confronting Israel now; most deal with human dramas of survival. There is also little that distinguish them as Israeli except that the language of presentation is Hebrew. They illustrate that in its culture Israel is more and more becoming part of the contemporary world, sharing its interests and problems, a nation like all other nations; and the theatre it is producing, for better or worse – and some would say for the worse – is often indistinguishable from any other national theatre in subject matter and style.

London will soon have an opportunity to see an example of this new international theatre that might be set anywhere, when Anat Gov's *Best Friends* opens. It is a play about friendship among three women from their early teens to their 40s, and is played by six actors: three young, three older women. Gov's lines are funny and sharp; the staging of director Edna Mazia (herself a successful playwright) was fast paced, both women able to juggle the 'before and after' scenarios concerning the sexual, cultural, and social mores that shape the characters. The play is not a serious feminist critique, more *Sex and the City*, than Caryl Churchill. It ran for four years in Tel Aviv; it will also probably be a hit in London, illustrating that Israel too can produce plays that go down easily, travel well, and audiences seem to enjoy.

Linda Ben-Zvi is Professor of Theatre Studies at Tel Aviv University. Among her books are *Theatre in Israel* (University of Michigan Press), three studies on Samuel Beckett, and her just published biography, *Susan Glaspell: Her Life and Times* (OUP).

Left: *The Dybbuk* Dept of Theatre Arts, Tel Aviv University
Directed by Tzvika Serper; Yaron Assarod as Sender
Below: *Best Friends*, Cameri production

