

MODALITIES OF ISRAELI POLITICAL
THEATRE: *PLONTER, ARNA'S CHILDREN,*
AND THE RUTH KANNER GROUP

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Israel enjoys an exceptionally high and still growing *per capita* theatre attendance. In the last years, however, the nine better subsidized theatres, playing to an overwhelming majority of about 85% (Pilat Report 2004), have learned to avoid the constantly burning socio-political issues, many of which are related to the ongoing occupation of Palestinians, and have been supplying a socially and politically lukewarm repertoire. Some fringe theatres, on the other hand, are still too often stuck with overly blatant, simplistic message-oriented shows, addressed to the already convinced but dwindling left-wing minority. Moreover, since (only) Jewish Israelis live in a moderately democratic regime, it should be noted that there is no censorship on Israeli theatre productions, except theatre managers who cut “dangerous” lines and situations, not out of fear of the authorities but of losing audiences. Israelis, quite clearly, don’t want to repeat on stage the horrors they see presented on TV.

In a survey/research conducted in the year 2000, about 100 interviewed leading Israeli theatre makers, actors, designers, and musicians expressed a high degree of dissatisfaction with their art. An overwhelming majority believes most Israeli theatre performances are “much too commercial and simplistic,” that they are “sweetish” and lack taste, “art,” and sophistication (Levy 2007). Despite such devastating opinions, strongly supported by theatre and cultural critics, the nine bigger and relatively better-subsidized theatres in Israel enjoy a still growing number of audiences, and the main houses are often full to the brim. A recent follow-up survey to that of 2000 clearly indicates that the “satisfaction” factor has dropped yet further, as shown in the scathing reviews, among others, by Marmari (2008)

and Hatab (2008). Facing not only the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but the weakening of social benefit systems (for the sick, the elderly, the poor), as well as public scandals regarding the corruption of political and economic leaders, Israeli mainstream theatres keep offering slick “low message-oriented” melodramas, often quite well acted, sometimes even well designed. To Vladimir’s question “Was I sleeping (*alias*: enjoying a fun show) while the others suffered?” (Beckett 1986: 83), most (frustrated) Israeli theatre makers and goers will have to respond “not really asleep, just nodding, and the cries I heard were in Arabic, far away, couldn’t figure them out [...]”

This article focuses on three socio-artistic positive examples of Israeli theatre, and proposes to deal with re/presentations of the immoral reality of the Israeli occupation of the Palestinians, primarily from the oppressor’s point of view. I contend that the socio-artistic and often ideological discrepancy between the theatre makers described here and their audiences is dealt with through various modalities of “psycho-political” self-referential stratagems. Instead of a head-on attack on the (assumed) moral complacency of the audience, *Plonter* (April 2005) employs humour relying on existing models used by Israeli stand-up TV comedians. By mocking the medium the show often ridicules both the message and its recipients. The Ruth Kanner Group performances resort to pseudo-self-referential modes, e.g., to exposing onstage a number of financial and public-relations aspects, as in *At Sea* (May 2006). They use “soft” aesthetic techniques of meta-theatricality. Juliano Mer-Khamis’s documentary film *Arna’s Children* (Released 2003) plays with the medium-oriented discrepancy between theatre and film and harnesses the gap to its political-moral message. In this sense, the onstage fictitious dialogue both reflects and necessitates the yearned for real offstage dialogue.

The Ruth Kanner theatre Group was established in 1998 in Tel Aviv and has since developed a unique theatre language that ensues from an indigenous contemporary Israeli “feeling.” Kanner has succeeded in theatrically reflecting some of the crucial identity quests in contemporary Israel, thus being socially relevant and often quite political, as well as the Israeli geo-cultural landscapes, expressed in the acting, gestures, colours and sounds, cries, whispers, speech and silences. Kanner studied acting and directing at Tel Aviv University’s theatre Department and at NYU and has been teaching at TAU almost since her graduation. Following Max Reinhardt, she believes that the

purpose of acting is to expose lies and rid people of senseless conventions. "To do this, you don't need only talent, perseverance and a certain measure of letting-go of the actor's private self, but a lot of courage too," says Kanner (2006). Creativity, in Kanner's group, is indeed a liberating activity through which the members shake off stage artistic and social-political conventions. Some of Kanner's latest productions, moreover, offer a unique political theatre model to Israeli audiences, Arab and Jewish alike.

More intensively than most Israeli theatre directors, Ruth Kanner has been exploring the unique encounter between the Hebrew language and the real as well as dramatic Israeli spaces, on- and off-stage. Since theatre, as such, requires language/place interaction, Israeli theatre too had to forge such an interaction, both a "language" to play with and a space to play in. Modern Israeli theatre "returned" to the Promised Land after hundreds of years of Jewish exile with the first immigration waves of Zionism in the early 1900s and needed to reinvent Hebrew and use it for non-religious purposes, like theatre. Space, on the other hand, also needed "reappropriation." In a sense, the socialist Zionists in those early days transposed European notions of theatrical space to their new-old country. They superimposed their previous exile yearnings over the now very real and harsh "Land of Our Fathers." Moreover, the actual "offstage," stretching not only into the auditorium but right beyond the walls of any theatre building in Palestine in those days, meant that Hebrew theatre then was indeed a celebration of "acting ourselves in our country and language." This culturally and historically particular combination of language and space is in itself politically explosive. Since 1998, Kanner and her group have been thoroughly engaged in long-term workshop explorations and relatively short-lived production runs—often an obvious give-away for non-commercial "quality theatre"—that have managed to convincingly re/present some of the main Israeli identity *qua* political issues on stage.

Kanner's theatrical language is suggestive, imagistic, and often profoundly metaphorical. She orchestrates texts, costumes, music, lights, and movement usually in deliberately small, intimate spaces where interaction between stage and audience is understandably intensified, often highly self-referential. Though politically explicit, her productions are never blatantly aggressive. With exquisite tactfulness, nevertheless, she succeeds in bridging the over-

simplification of Israel's poor, political fringe theatres and the escapist, overly "poetic" and relatively rich in production-value tendency of the main stages. The delicate balance between aesthetics and "politicalness" is particularly noticeable in Kanner's productions *Amos* (1999), *Discovering Elijah's* (2005) and *Dionysus at the Dizengoff Centre* (2004).

Amos examines the fate of a field rodent stuck in an irrigation pipe in a field below the Carmel ridge minutes before the water is turned on. If Aristotle was right, the only dramatic space in this presentation is narrow, besieged and totally closed; the time is equally condensed, hence the plot inevitably becomes a theatrical metaphor, suggesting, obviously, inescapability. The self-conscious little personified animal soon turns into a truly stunning "other" in this allegory, which indeed leaves the extrication of the metaphor to the spectators' imagination. Structurally, Kanner organized a cycle within a cycle: "the rodent in the pipe, above it Man, above Man the narrator, who can be perceived as a divine voice" (Burstein 1999). Actress Tali Kark does not pretend to be a rodent in her role, but delivers this creature's existential plight with virtuoso conviction, thus linking between the necessarily first-person, trapped situation of the condemned on the one hand, and the potential pity it may receive from the on-lookers, on the other. Cheap catharsis is certainly not tried here. Stage metaphors are usually an invitation to a double dialogue: between their own "signifier" and "signified," as well as between the theatrical event and its audience. Rather than placating audiences with ready-made images, as many main stage productions do, Kanner appeals to her audience's creative and intelligent imagination, implicitly encouraging people to be active spectators.

To indulge in a brief comparison, the main-stage production of *Hebron* by Tamir Greenberg (2007) portrays the universal meta-narrative of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict through a mytho-poetic universal language, but uses some of the most clichéd stage semiotics and a richly decorated set for portraying Arabs with kaffias and religious Jews who kill each other's babies, without dealing with the actual horrors of the Israeli occupation in the West Bank. Kanner offers the opposite: in *Amos* "only a rodent" is about to die in a besieged space (not unlike the streets of the real Hebron and lately Gaza), economically designed with a few real irrigation pipes on an empty stage, exposing both its staginess and emptiness. This design

indeed proved to serve as a gap, a discrepancy that both critics and audiences could fill with their own interpretations. In yet another comparison with fringe theatre productions, at the other extreme of the Israeli “Rep versus Fringe” axis, *Ziona’s Trip* by Omri Yavin (2007) is a snide but loosely structured pseudo-quest play that takes its audience on a little stroll in Old Jaffa’s streets, deliberately ignoring some 1,000 years of Arab history that have shaped the place just as Hebrew history in the past 100 years has, or Napoleon’s short-lived attack—in fact an apt ironic remark. Despite a few delightful images (mock interpretation of a sculpture depicting the Binding of Isaac and Jacob’s Dream, for one), interesting movement patterns and a lively, direct stage-audience interaction, the show does not succeed in combining the personal story with Jaffa the city. Jaffa was a blooming Palestinian cultural **centre** around the turn of the 20th century, but the implied, yet still too obvious national-moral-political undercurrent narrative did not really pay homage to its past, or alternatively—satirize the present Israeli regime.

The most typical dramatic space in pre-State Israeli drama is a cultivated field, indeed a perfect meeting place between the returning sons and their Promised Land. “We’ve come to build and be rebuilt,” as the Zionist slogan promised. A passing rodent stuck in the irrigation pipes is of little consequence. This image alone, to be thus interpreted, already places Kanner as a conscious (though she has explicitly admitted it only lately, alas, in a private conversation) political director who, nevertheless, does not impose her message on the audience but demands a profound re-examination of both old and contemporary pioneering myths. In *Amos*, the rodent is not necessarily Palestinian. He can just as well represent environmental issues or Thai foreign workers who have lately been tilling our land. Still, the rodent’s “other” consciousness is portrayed as inescapable as his sure death. *Amos* received the first prize at the Acco Fringe Festival in 1999: “A masterfully constructed theatrical work of art, which integrates story-telling theatre and Movement theatre [...] Directed with flair and beautifully acted. The director, the musician and the two actresses created a total event, combining text, movement, music and visual elements into a stirring, spellbound show” (The Award Document 28 September 1999). Critics joined with equally rave reviews. “While chasing ‘the other’ [...] *Amos* presents the most unexpected ‘other,’ and, moreover, surprisingly, the most exciting

'other' in a fascinating theatre piece which is also pure poetry" (Bar Yaacov, 29 October 1999). On their tour in Japan—to mention just one review, the Kanner Group received more excellent press, such as "Amos from Israel presented a fresh taste of direction with live music performance... this movement will stimulate the Japanese theatre industry" (Imamura, 5 April 2001). Michael Handelsaltz (28 September 1999) wrote: "A show with unique qualities on a totally different level, a clear theatrical language, a moving world against all odds, a unique aesthetics, a little beautiful pearl." Amir Yefeth (30 September 1999) wrote: "An engaging, painful struggle for survival, flashes of brilliancy and original theatrical messages that make for a rare, special, different theatrical experience. It is the world of all those who have found themselves in impossible situations and tried to find a way out."

Discovering Elijah evokes the event of the 1973 war with Egypt through the searing text by S. Yizhar (one of Israel's highly appreciated writers), which, in and from a perspective of time, tries to penetrate the surface down to the individual tremor and ask the moral questions that seep through the story of that war. A narrator in a participant-observer role, alternately appearing and disappearing, investigates the events, perhaps as an outsider who becomes an insider. Five actors create the events. The show consists of thirteen separated images of various action zones, lightly marked and then erased, like drawings on (the desert's) sand. After each scene the actors leave the central acting area and sit on the verge of "offstage," half "there," half resting and waiting. From the end of scene nine onwards, however, the action plays continuously, as if the separation into scenes is no longer necessary, or possible, or relevant. The progression of the show reflects the standpoint of the observer in the internal structure of the show. At first the narrator is documenting, examining the events. Gradually and gently he indeed becomes an insider, an active participant, drawn more and more into the depth of horror, into his own vulnerability, into the fragile boundary between life and death: the semi-fictitious onstage situation reflects a desired same response from the audience.

The production presents a disintegrated reality made of fragments bereft of their normal contexts. It re-examines the elements constituting war: words, images, violent impulses, fear and its concealment, running in the desert, searching for consolation. Elijah is

not only the person looked for. In Jewish tradition, it should be noted, the prophet Elijah is the forerunner of the Messiah, He who brings peace. At the same time, this is an investigation of the modes of representation of the local war narrative, a typical motif in Israeli drama.

The desert, where the war was fought, is beautifully portrayed through sand dripping from an army shoe. Live music is performed with unconventional instruments, specially made for the production. String, wind, and percussion instruments are played by currents of hot air heated by fire. If sound can be a space, Ori Drommer's music created it. His sound establishes order, determines fates, envelopes the show and carries it to nonverbal places, turning into an inseparable part of the actors' bodies.

Critical response to the show was exceptionally positive: "It affected me like a stroke of lightning. An original, highly imaginative theatrical orchestration [...] this is a tremendous undermining of the myth of war," wrote Elyakim Yaron (3 March 2001). Michael Handelsaltz (3 October 2001) said: "The text, in astonishing Yizharic Hebrew, describes the despair and chaos of the Yom Kippur War. [...] The power and uniqueness of *Discovering Elijah* is such that it puts one off viewing anything else after it." Shai Bar Yaakov (October 22 2001) wrote about "[a] highly imaginative, hair-raising performance that turns into a hallucinatory, heartrending voyage into the past. A slippery truth lurks among the dead bodies and the still living people in the battlefield. An agonizing, fascinating, and, regretfully, highly relevant performance." Eitan Bar Yossef (11 October 2001) talked of "a stirring theatrical experience, which attempts to dismantle and reassemble the war experience, the fear, stupidity, violence, horror, glory and death. Apparently the nightmare of 1973, it is, actually, an apocalypse that takes place now [...] in front of our eyes [...] What happens here is that one-time miracle, which cannot be described in words; one cannot help but fall under its spell. Rumor has it that even S. Yizhar himself, who sat in the audience with that legendary Elijah by his side, was sobbing [...] This is an extraordinary work in the full and deepest sense of the word."

In the final scene, performed by actors alone the narrator is driving the blue Volkswagen van—no props, no design - through the scorched battlefields. Soldiers are trapped in black holes, swirling round as if in perpetual motion. The Volkswagen character is asking:

“Did it have to be this way, really?” The narrator is entering Suez City:

[A]nd suddenly there’s a big house with big balconies covered in red bougainvillea [...] and underneath, below the balconies [...] luxurious sofas are scattered [...] and on one of them someone is sitting, feasting on white grapes. “Hey, visitors,” he says, motionless. And then something happens, because someone raises his head and sees something, and then he jumps up from his place like fire flaring up, jumps up and stands, stands and jumps, jumps and runs, ahh, he screams, ahhh, and comes and takes his large arms and spreads them [...] and throws himself hugging, and hugging and hugging [...] and in fact it’s him, it’s really him, look at him, it’s him, it’s Elijah, here he is, and it’s him, our Elijah, smiling at us [...] Shalom, Elijah [...]. (Yizhar 1999: 198)

Conventional “good theatre” often plays on a functional, aesthetically well-designed stage. This exceptional (“good”) theatre designs its own dramatic spaces through words and movements and as few as possible props, as the story develops. Especially if it is a quest play, trying to reveal or discover (the Hebrew word *gilui* means both) a character called Elijah, a prophet and a regular guy at the same time. A touch of tentative optimism hovers over the very end of this apocalypse provided we make fewer wars.

Based on Tamar Berger’s book and adapted by Avner Ben Amos and Ruth Kanner, *Dionysus at the Dizengoff Centre* was produced by the Tel Aviv University theatre and the Acco Theatre Festival. The piece deals with a central Tel Aviv shopping centre known country-wide, built on top of a poor Jewish neighborhood located, in turn, on top of a Palestinian vineyard. Here Kanner again presents “others,” this time explicitly Palestinians, some rich, some poor, some honest, some not. When “we” (predominantly Jewish audiences), however, look into this stage mirror, we do not know whether the reflected image is truly ours, because it may be “theirs.” The piece does not accuse its mixed Arab and Jewish audiences. Rather, it seems to demand a profound understanding of the victim’s position, in which one feels forever bereft of any possible moral and emotional reparation/redress.

In *Dionysus at the Dizengoff Centre* Kanner digs downward and manages to theatrically merge archaeology with psychoanalysis. The result is a unique estrangement, like coincidentally meeting a close relative in a bus station. We know every wrinkle on his forehead, but

feel unsettled: how will strangers look at him? Thus we become the others. *Dionysus at the Dizengoff Centre* certainly suggests it is not only the actual name of the shopping mall. He is also the god of theatre. It is a study in comparative suffering, an archaeological-theatrical dig into the multilayered past, ours and theirs. Like other archaeological digs, this one, too, is intensely political: how deep do we want to dig? As deep as we believe our roots are hidden? Or those of the people who were there before us? After us? With us? Does the layer we reach really reflect who we are? Want to be?

Kanner's story-theatre works teach the slick, commercial stages as well as the simplistic, highly committed fringe theatre a lesson in therapeutic art, not because they are meant to be didactic, but because they do not compromise their art and manage to be political as a result of their quality. Kanner's political theatre avoids measures taken by real politicians. It excels in fine brinkmanship between the aesthetic and the social-political mainly because she lets her audiences draw the conclusions by themselves.

THE ISRAELI *PLONTER*—POLITICAL THEATRE ON THE ISRAELI MAIN STAGE

Plonter (a complicated “knot” or “tangle” in Israeli slang) is a 2006 Israeli production, staged by the Cameri Theatre in Tel Aviv, one of the biggest and best-subsidized theatres in Israel. The aim behind the *Plonter* project was to create a dramatic dialogue involving four Arab-Israeli and five Jewish-Israeli actors in the explosive thematic of the century-long Palestinian-Israeli conflict in order “to identify with the Other” (as quoted in the programme). *Plonter* presents a unique blend of daring and consensus; or, more blatantly, as the Arab saying goes, “[it] throw [s] stones after the caravan has passed.” I thought of presenting this play as a test case of the Israeli theatre's artistic-political daring some time ago, when the Lebanon war was still lurking in the back drawer of the Israeli Defense Ministry. Now that it had actually been fought, as had another terrible one in Gaza (winter 2008-9), reality seems to have changed completely, and the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict is overshadowed by much larger world forces, such as extreme Shiite movements (Hezbollah), Iranian nuclear policies and US interests. Whereas “our” own direct problem as Israelis is that of the Occupation, Israel, at the same time, serves as a powerful force in a much larger context. The feet of reality are faster

than the wings of imagination—especially in Israeli theatrical fiction, *Plonter* included.

Plonter is, in fact, the collaborative work of nine Israeli and Palestinian (from the occupied territories) actors who were invited to participate in the project soon left, because their people at home did not tolerate their collaborating with the Jewish Israeli actors. Israeli Arab actors were hence invited to replace them, and prepared for their roles with field research and history lessons, and visited Palestinian towns, Jewish settlements and checkpoints over a period of seven months. The work constitutes part of a growing body of political fiction in Israel, generated mostly by young Jewish writers, reflecting a broader intellectual movement known as post-Zionism, which questions the validity of Israel as a Jewish state. In the English programme Yael Ronen, initiator and director of this group, says: “This is a new generation’s quest to define our own identity as Israelis.” Ronen also co-wrote and directed *The Guide to a Good Life*, a scathing critique on the moral deterioration of 12 young Israelis as a result of the occupation and its detrimental influence on inter-personal relationships.

On the small stage of the 165-seat Cameri auditorium *Plonter* has run several times a week for more than three months. A German friend, theatre director Alex Stillmark, who had worked at the Berliner Ensemble, had seen *Plonter* before I did, and recommended it to me: “I did not know Israeli theatre was so daring, so self-critical.” At the time I begged to differ, because of the many more daring Israeli productions I had seen. Now I think he was right, at least in this particular context of a blatantly political show mounted on an Israeli main repertory theatre stage. Hence, the question to be addressed is whether *Plonter* has achieved its intended goals—aesthetic as well as message-oriented—in the particular setting of a commercial theatre that has otherwise been defined as “extremely moderate”...

The set, illuminated at times by actual television footage of Jewish and Palestinian funerals, terror acts, Arab towns, Jewish settlements, demonstrations, smoke and fire background, brings the already very close offstage on to the stage as an inescapable mixture of reality and virtuality, not without the added ironic touch of the audience being forced to experience in the theatre what they all know from watching TV at home or seeing on the street. The main stage set is a wall, representing the very one that is being built to separate Israel

and the West Bank, cutting through Palestinian houses. One actor plays the “role” of the constantly active TV and radio, and is often slapped across the face to shut him up, signifying both the Israeli’s understandable addiction to the media and their equally understandable disgust with it.

Plonter is the result of a work in progress of the entire cast, who all play both Arab and Jewish roles. It can roughly be described as neo-Brechtian, a loosely linked series of 17 scenes of interspersed comparative suffering, filtered mostly through the individual gaze of individually, often emotionally characterized occupied and occupiers, of mutual terror, humiliation, bereavement, rage and revenge. The play also deals semi-humorously with the relatively minor incidents of Israeli prejudice and ignorance regarding Palestinians. In one of the more touching scenes, a Palestinian is asked to show his ID card on an Israeli bus, and finally bares his bottom. In another scene Israeli soldiers catch an Arab boy who has thrown stones at them, beat him up and act out his mock execution in front of a firing squad. They then bring him to his father who beats him up again, by which time even the soldiers find the beating too harsh and try to stop the father. He finally responds with rage: “No, no! This is as far as it goes! You won’t tell me what to do. Excuse me! This is my child! This is my house!” In another scene Palestinian children play a game in which they all want to be a *shaheed* (suicide bomber, martyr), and the little girl gets the role, because she can pretend to be pregnant by hiding the explosives on her belly.

The narrative is loosely structured around the killing of the 11-year-old Khalil Barhoum by an Israeli soldier. For the sake of both dramatic and actual balance, a Jewish baby is killed too, by a Palestinian terrorist. Mourning and revenge on both sides are presented as practically identical. The play mocks Israeli moderate left-wing attitudes and ends with an almost overt call to refuse to serve in the army. Mother Zippi asks her soldier son: “Shall I give you a lift to your army base?” And the final answer, closing the show is “No.” In the final scene both Palestinians and Israelis come and go, enter and exit, indeed sharing the actual stage that has developed in the show into one country. It is a pessimistic ending, proving that violence cannot be restricted to inflicting it only on “Others.” The end of *Plonter* presents parents separating, beating up children, an external situation that becomes profoundly personal, internal and inescapable.

The audience is almost forced to draw the conclusion: stop the occupation.

Ronen did not want to preach to the converted, namely, to the Israeli radical left. Rather, “I want this play to reach as wide an audience as possible.” She has probably succeeded, at least according to the overall analysis by most Israeli theatre critics and some foreign ones as well: “Even though lightened by flashes of comedy, the impact on audiences is profoundly disturbing” (Doudai 16 June 2005). Michael Handelsaltz (29 May 2005) observed that *Plonter* is played by actors whose involvement is personal, human, banal—rather than explicitly political. Noting that one woman in the audience had commented that “it’s too long,” Handelsaltz added: “Correct. The occupation too.” He concludes:

The show is not without flaws, and it polarizes and simplifies reality. But this is also its strength. The great danger, of course, is that the Israeli audience will see the play, check it off on the square marked “conscience,” and go home full-bellied and pleased. Theatre cannot do much more than that. Usually it does a lot less. If viewers go home with one image that bothers them, it’s already something.

Elyakim Yaron (6 June 2005) regarded the show as a brave and honest attempt to bring the painful conflict onstage, indeed a dialogue “under fire,” that gives the show its fuel—“theatre returns here to its therapeutic roots”; and he repeated his complimentary review on the radio. Sarit Fuchs (3 June 2005) saw *Plonter* as a heart winner. High-school students would be taken to see it, she (rightly) prophesied, because the show is replete with directorial inventions, humorous moments and a lot of dynamic zest. However, Fuchs was unsure as to whether it is, in the end, an optimistic production implying that we are all simply being carried away with momentary craze and fury; or else profoundly pessimistic because the actual message is that reality cannot be changed, therefore let’s laugh at it. Eli Weisbert (n.d.) praised the artistic integrity of *Plonter* in bringing normal characters onstage, in avoiding sentimentality, and in inserting many moments of true compassion for both sides. He also noted the voice given to the Arab characters and their players—the sound of Arabic is rare on Israeli stages--and the fact that there is no “Other” in this presentation. Ben Ami Feingold (n.d.) used his review to give director Ronen a history lesson and encouraged her to write a more balanced play, in

which not “the occupation” is the culprit but pan-Islamic myths and the Arab countries’ refusal, for example, to accept the partition plan in 1937. Matan Vilnai, ex-Minister of Culture and ex-army general, called Yael Ronen on the phone, too, to correct her knowledge of history (Haaretz, 20 October 2005).

Besides enjoying a much larger than usual critical coverage, the *Plonter* creators were frequently interviewed on TV and radio. In one such interview, Ronen said that left-wing Israelis are sometimes worse than the right-wing extremists; they are the “full-bellied Tel Aviv bourgeoisie that goes to a demonstration once a month but insists that its sons join a specialized top combat unit [...]” “The cast held numerous after-show discussions with the audience, adults and youngsters alike. The Cameri Theatre produced a rich programme booklet in the show’s two languages, Arabic and Hebrew, and—assuming foreign visitors would come to see it—an English one too. In the larger Hebrew booklet all the actors were interviewed, and wisely so, about their personal connections to this particular project. The Cameri also published a Hebrew collection of quotes from seminal articles on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and added a number of anti-war, anti-Israeli government poems by laureate poets Dalia Rabikowitz, Mahmoud Darwish and others.

To be a victim means to “own” something you once lost and cannot retrieve. Only the victim can decide upon the proper reparation (Ophir 2001: 263). Both Israelis and Palestinians argue that they are victims—of the Holocaust, of the Naqba, of the occupation—and *Plonter* indeed insists that this exclusivity is the main issue of its unsolvable theatrical conflict. Using a soft-core version of post-Zionism, directorial ingenuity and an inventive mixture of post-modern techniques, *Plonter* often goes deeper than meets the eye. True, the production suffers from various flaws, such as oversimplification, superficial texts, lack of good argumentation and a TV-oriented sequence structure. On the other hand, it is self-consciously aware of its flaws, flaunts its own artifice in ridiculing the typical TV approach (its own and its audience’s) and presents a moderate version of an Israeli docudrama.

Rather than conclude, I may ask whether an established commercial theatre like the Cameri, in the particular context of the entire Israeli theatre scene, should have avoided producing this inconclusive, sometimes repetitive and perhaps politically not clear

enough production, or else should have offered it to its audience (as it did) in the hope that some of them might take action? Brecht, as we know, failed. Whereas the Cameri itself produced Hanoach Levin's (the most scathing satirist and playwright in Israel until his death in 1999) *Murder* and other plays, theatres such as The Arab-Hebrew theatre and productions like *Dual Solitude* were more explicit by far in condemning the occupation. One may, then, truly wonder about the degree of "daring" expressed in the theatrical techniques of humour, relative understatement and political explicitness that the Cameri employed. *Plonter* is as daring as the Cameri's expectations of its middle-class audience. Based on the financial and critical success, the Cameri was right to produce the play.

"BRING THE SUN TO THE CASTLE"—
ON THEATRE IN *ARNA'S CHILDREN*

Arna's Children (2003) is a personal documentary about children in Jenin who participated in a theatre established and run by Arna Mer-Khamis, written and directed by her son, Juliano, an actor and director, and primarily a theatre maker. A decade later these children become Palestinian freedom fighters in the battle of the Jenin refugee camp, and suicide bombers in the Jewish town of Hadera. The film is replete with profoundly humanistic, social and political issues; it is shot and edited with unsentimental matter-of-factness, yet another reason why it is convincing and exciting; many professional film critics as well as deeply moved spectators have responded to it. Rather than dealing with the overall qualities of the film, the following discussion proposes to focus on "theatre." Theatre functions as "a place to see," it is also a main component and central motivating image in the film and serves as its built-in interpretation. Moreover, it reveals a dramatic layer that illuminates both the filmmakers and its participants-protagonists.

The film opens with a mass demonstration against the curfew imposed by the IDF on the refugee camp in Jenin, focusing on Arna organizing the event, shouting to the Palestinian drivers to honk their horns, asking them to ignore the demand to stop at the improvised barriers for identity control and weapon checks. Arna wears a kaffia, the most easily identifiable piece of Arab clothing, and speaks Arabic with a strong Israeli accent. She had already worn the kaffia when she was in the "Palmach," the pre-1948 War Jewish commando unit to

which she belonged. Now she wears it also in order to hide her head, bald because of radiation against cancer, of which she will soon die. Arna behaves as an actress in complete accord with the role she took upon herself. As a woman who established children's homes, support and learning centres, as well as a Children and Youth Theatre in Jenin, Arna's "costume" is a complex theatrical-cinematographic metaphor, happening in "reality," since the film is a documentary . . . Wearing the same headdress, she identifies with her explicitly anti-Arab army pals of long ago who liked to wear kaffias and, much more so, with her Palestinian friends now. The kaffia indeed covers Arna's bald head; it is a "theatrical prop" and an image which, in this context, represents friends and foes then and now.

In the next sequence Arna's five years of work with the children is celebrated in a Jenin auditorium. Arna, in a simple white dress, with brusque cordiality asks one child whether he is willing to "accept responsibility"—"to do what?" we, the spectators, ask, already prepared for some kind of a political message. The child nods, and Arna commands: "Don't let anyone get on the stage!" The subtext of this request for keeping order, in the social, national, and clearly political sense of the film, really suggests: "the stage is ours." The following sequences support this impression. First, a child choir sings with Arna: "Why are all the children of the world free and I am not?" Then Arna holds a brief speech in front of a largely young, chirpy, and noisy audience: "The *Intifada* [uprising, "awakening"] for us means fighting for freedom, liberty and knowledge—these are basic values!" She yells, perspires and her theatrical body language is utterly convincing, because she obviously believes in these things.

Throughout the film Juliano's voice-over intervenes, explains, but does not interpret the events. Arna received the alternative Nobel Prize, and used the US\$ 50,000 to build a little theatre on top of Zachary Zbeide's parents' home. At the time one of the children in the theatre, he will later be the commander of the El-Akza regiment in Jenin, known also for his intimate relationships with the Israeli peace activist Tali Fahima (Shohat 31 December 2004).

The next scene is a theatre class where the children shout, roar, and perform animal exercises, fully convincing as children who enjoy an exciting teacher. Juliano reveals what will happen to them, and will later return in a flashback to this sequence of rehearsals, indeed the very reason why he returned to Jenin: Nidal will be killed, Yussuf will

be killed, little Ashraf, Yussuf's friend, will be killed in a battle into which he flung himself after watching an Israeli shell kill a girl who died in his hands. Ala'a will be killed. He is being filmed a number of times, sitting on the ruins of his home, introverted, wringing his hands. In another psycho-dramatic exercise Arna attempts to help the children cope with their wrath about the demolition of their homes. Ashraf, following Arna's explicit demand, shows what he would do to those who destroyed his house. He begins to beat her up, and she encourages: "Good, good, that's how it is when you're angry." She gives all the children some brown paper sheets to tear. They do, with bemused yet full awareness that this is at once serious and a game. "When we're angry, we must express our anger," she says and sends the kids to paint and draw. Ala'a paints a ruined house with a flag on top. In eight years he will lead a Palestinian unit to war. Did Arna's theatre "educate" him to do so? Most Palestinian towns and villages never had a children's (or any other) theatre, and still raised a generation of fighters against the occupation.

Arna's theatre, as seen in her son's film, is the theatre of the oppressed, often close in its techniques to Augusto Boal's (1985: 124 ff.), with reference to how the actor relates to him/herself and to the audience. However, Juliano does not employ active audience participation, including suggestions to alternative developments in the plot. Rather, he believes in the magic of stage lighting, sets, and music, namely, in the illusory nature of theatre. The lively audience, as the one sequence shows, clearly enjoyed an intensive theatre experience, understood the story, and gratefully applauded at the "right" moments in a play by Gassan Kanafani, author, playwright and PLO activist, killed when his car was booby-trapped and blown up by the Israeli Defense Forces.

In the next sequence Juliano asks one child to copycat his English teacher, a person who does not appear in the film but is obviously presented as a physically abusive educator. Though physical punishment is known to be common in many Arab schools, and, therefore, beating up pupils tends not to be taken too seriously, Juliano implies that oppression from the outside corrupts, in the sense that it encourages violence within the oppressed community just as badly. Juliano stops the child, noticing he was truly getting carried away in the game and had lost the necessary distance required in

theatre. The child does not manage to be both “in” and “out of” the played role.

The rehearsal in a scene called “I Shall Bring the Sun” takes place on a ladder. “Watch the ladder, the floor is slippery too,” warns Juliano (who manages with great elegance to be both “in” the film as well as direct it), but one must not stop at the literal meaning of the rehearsal safety measures. In the filmed reality it might well have been that alone, but in the finally edited and screened product this is a subtly ambiguous premonition about dangerous climbing and a highly slippery non-theatrical reality of the children-to-become-fighters.

An Israeli TV team comes to interview the children. The children speak of their initial distrust toward Juliano and Arna, suspecting them of spying for the Israelis. Soon they changed their minds: “Arna’s like my mother.” Juliano encourages the child to speak directly to the camera and say (to him): “I thought YOU were a spy” instead of “I thought Juliano was a spy.” This too is an important lesson for a young actor: address your partner on- and off-stage directly, Juliano tells him, directly referring to both politics and theatre. The child continues: “Then we saw you favor us, you’re for us, not against us. No Arab has ever done with us such things.” Juliano, son to a Jewish mother and an Arab Palestinian father, did not teach only theatre to the children of Jenin, who had never seen a theatre performance in their lives. He obviously taught them *through* theatre.

Then come the scenes when the young actors receive their newly prepared costumes for the show. The film, indeed a documentary about the company, shows them trying them on with the deeply meditative excitement of Kathakali actors, who wear their makeup, masks, and costumes while “entering” their roles in a similar process. The costumes shaped the children’s behavior, helped them internalize a glory and royalty quite different from the destruction, filth and poverty in the refugee camp. Then the performance itself: “My dear daughter, I hereby command you to bring the sun into the castle. If not—thou shalt not be Queen!” The little princess cries, claiming this is not possible, and runs away, for the time being. Later she will perform her mission superbly. The children’s acting style is lucid, precise, and charming, though when needed, also gross, and even violent when they exchange smacks. Reality is not far off stage, despite the required stage propriety. Whoever has worked in

community theatre or with children is well aware of the empowerment process the participants and staff often undergo during the process and of the underlying psycho-social messages.

In a TV interview inserted in Juliano's documentary as a play-within-a-play, one child says, seemingly fully conscious of the triple medium (film, theatre, television): "I want to use my power [...]" "The interviewer asks whether he'd be willing to imitate an Israeli soldier, and immediately the child assaults one of his buddies, beats him up, draws an imaginary pistol, pretending to be an interrogator. In Jenin not only Mer-Khamis is the director, reality is too. Yussuf the child wears a typically Israeli army "dubbon" (thick wind-proof jacket), indeed the complementary opposite to Arna's kaffia. Asked if he wants to be a soldier, Ashraf says boldly, with slight scorn and pseudo-friendliness to the Israeli TV interviewer: "Yes, a Syrian soldier:"

Q. Theatre expresses anger, protest [...] you protest through the theatre [...]

A. Yes, identity, love of life [...]

Q. Does theatre have the power to influence, to show "the situation" to the audience?

A. I forget the audience, concentrate on my feelings, I give myself from within, so that the audience will be with us.

Q. Do you feel it is like throwing stones?

A. Like a Molotov cocktail, power, happiness, pride [...]

Q. What's your dream?

A. (After Juliano whispered to him on camera) I want to be the Palestinian Romeo, Julia will be from the family, from Jenin [...]"

Ashraf may or may not have known about the Shakespearean Romeo's end. Was Julia's character an image of his homeland? Or the girl who will die in his arms in just a few years? Could Arna herself be a kind of Julia from "another" family? Ashraf will be killed, his shrouded body carried on a tractor platform brought to be buried. The thematic links created here between Julia, Arna, homeland and Jenin mothers interviewed in the film before and after their sons were killed is, again, extremely suggestive in its subtlety.

Juliano drives to the hospital to bring his dying mother for a last visit to Jenin. On the way he asks her about the Palmach. In unmistakable Palmach-like slang she says that those were splendid times, "age, age, from 17 till 19." "Has she done bad things?" he asks, focusing on her then politics towards Palestinians. She replies: "It was

a time of bragging, beauty, hubris. I drove a jeep, took hitchhikers, let them off, drove on the sidewalks, and drove everybody off, down to the road." Arna, we learn, was also Gandhi's chauffeur and as such chased Bedouins. Gandhi, nickname for Rehavam Zeevi, later became an extreme right-wing politician, killed by Palestinian fighters. Since those days Arna has worn the kaffia, but the head underneath it has been significantly transformed. Here and now, through making theatre in Jenin, she seems to correct the wrongs of her youth. There are hugs, kisses and tears when she is filmed in the Jenin street, her friends happy to see her, knowing also that she is going to die.

Juliano receives his mother's body for the necessary ritual identification "of the deceased" and the Julia motif hovers again in the film, yet in a different context. Arna is wrapped in blue shrouds; Jenin's dead fighters in white. After her death the theatre closes. Thirteen days after the Jenin siege, Juliano visits the town again, and all the "future" flash-forward sequences in the first part become the recent past in the second, almost "a present."

Contrary to a film that works as a continuum, and because of the time gap between filming and screening, live theatre is necessarily bound to the present, always re/presenting whatever is "presentified" onstage. In this sense, too, Juliano's documentary is surprisingly theatrical. The "presentness" of theatre *qua* back and forwards flashes, as a theme and motivating force in *Arna's Children*, as well as an image of tension between "the real human being" and its artificial-fictive representation, is exquisitely combined in the film. Even the ritual reading of the "farewell" letter, shortly before Yussuf and Nidal perform their suicide bombing mission in Hadera, fully clad in their combat costumes, is deeply moving in its artificial, almost kitschy theatricality. In an improvised memorial session Juliano holds for the fallen children of the theatre, he mentions that his "anger broke out again," a sequence referring to the beginning of the documentary and the psychodrama exercised years back. Ritual is a long tested mode of coping with a killed son, great injustice, or a demolished home. Traditional modes of behaviour, sometimes blatantly extroverted and deliberately rigid, not unlike certain theatre traditions, attempt to keep together what otherwise might be emotionally torn to pieces.

Among all the ruined houses in Jenin, the little theatre built on top of one of them is a home for the children who played there themselves, some of them practicing as play what will later be their

real role: "When I play I feel power, happiness, pride [...]." They will not rise to take their bows at the end of the real show. Unlike Muhammad Bakri, who underlined the slaughter in his film *Jenin*, or Nizar Hasan, who emphasized the military encounter between the Israelis and the (he suggests winning) Palestinians, Juliano Mer-Khamis deals with the humanness of his children-fighters and their personal and social background (Schnitzer, 9 March 2004). He does not judge his characters and is able, therefore, to portray convincing biographies. In the theatre, to remind again of that sequence, Juliano asks Ashraf to say "you" instead of "he." The same is asked of the film's spectator. In theatre the "you" cannot be ignored because all share the same stage. As film critic Uri Klein put it, "Beyond 'us' and 'they' there's a common destiny, a common tragedy, common wrath and despair, and, perhaps beyond all that, the common necessity to put an end to the cycle of blood [...]." (Klein 16 April 2004).

Juliano Mer-Khamis's film is, I believe, an attempt to bridge reality and theatre and expose on screen what is common to "them" and "us." He claims that *Arna's Children* is not a political film. Nevertheless, in its profound humanism it is highly political. He portrays the lives and deaths of those who try to "bring the sun to their castle" through their artistic activity and take theatre fully seriously. In a way, the youngsters are invited to take their roles to the extreme, perhaps even commit suicide, not only onstage. Answering the question whether he would have felt the same towards the miserable lives lived in refugee camps had he not been the son of an Arab father and a Jewish mother, he said: "Every person with a dollop of humanness would have reached this very same conclusion" (Namer, 2 March 2004).

NOTE

All translations are by the author.

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