

Ideology of Form in Storytelling Theater: The Politics of Inter-medial Adaptation in *Discovering Elijah, A Play about War*

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The performance *Discovering Elijah, A Play about War* (first performed in Israel in 2001), directed by Ruth Kanner as storytelling theater, is based on a literary-documentary text about the 1973 Yom Kippur War written by S. Yizhar, a notable Israeli writer. This is one of the instances in which Kanner's postdramatic search has generated unique directorial patterns that, while not precluding performances of written plays, rely on the power of words, mostly through adaptation of non-dramatic texts. The article focuses on the striking, unsettling performance *Discovering Elijah*, performed by the Ruth Kanner Theater Group, as a case study to a hermeneutic view according to which the ideology is embedded in the structure itself and becomes an "ideology of form." In this case, this phenomenon is inherently structured in theater which is created most dominantly through the inter-medial co-existence (or clash) of different sign-systems—telling (a reductive formulation of the epic principle) and showing. The spatial-anecdotal array by which the story of war is presented in the performance seems to intensify patterns of narrative logic which can be seen as a paradigm of Superstructure. But in the encounter between the narrative action and the physical-perceptual performative acts is embedded a constant tension between a need for an overall rationale for war and a concrete, appallingly incomprehensible experience. It is through this tension that the theater "strikes back," activating its opposing power.

The performance *Discovering Elijah, A Play about War*, directed by Ruth Kanner¹ as storytelling theater, is based on a literary text—the novel *Discovering Elijah* (1999) by S. Yizhar, a notable Israeli writer. Yizhar wrote his book following his experiences in the 1973 Yom Kip-

1. *Discovering Elijah, A Play about War*, based on a novel by S. Yizhar, directed by

pur War, which the great majority of Israelis believed was a justifiable war that couldn't be avoided.² The experiences and testimonies on which the book is based were documented during Yizhar's meetings with soldiers around the Sinai desert as a noncombatant member in a delegation of civilians conscripted by the IDF (Israel Defense Forces) to conduct such interviews.

Ruth Kanner, one of the most important and prolific creators in contemporary Israeli theater, has been developing for years, in distinctly unique ways, the principle of storytelling theater, familiar from the works of Dario Fo, Peter Brooks *Mahabharata*, Michael Alfreds, and others.³ Nowadays, Kanner's works are performed by the Ruth Kanner Theater Group working in Tel Aviv. Her creative postdramatic search has generated unique directorial patterns that, while not precluding performances of written plays, rely on the power of words, mostly through adaptation of non-dramatic texts—among them a theatrical adaptation of a historical-cultural research study. The literary-documentary text *Discovering Elijah* was first performed in Israel in 2001, in the Acre Fringe Theater Festival, where it was awarded the Best Performance Award, and has since been performed dozens of times (including an English version in New York).⁴

Storytelling theater may be defined, albeit in very general terms, as a theater which is created most dominantly through a performative act of telling, and which combines telling and showing (direct dramatic-theatrical realiza-

Ruth Kanner; Actors: Ronen Babluki, Shirley Gal-Segev, Tali Kark, Lior Raz, Yusef Sweid, Doron Ronen; Music: Ori Drummer; Stage design: Puncho Edelberg; Costume design: Hagit Vitman; Lighting design: Shaked Vax; Sound: Green; Making Musical instruments: Yuval Kedem; Producer and Stage Manager: Guy Godorov; Theater Group Manager: Irit Sturm – Bat-Sheva Dance Company.

2. The Yom Kippur War, during which thousands of Israeli soldiers were killed, started on October 6, 1973, on Yom Kippur—a day of religious fasting, during which all Jewish businesses are closed and there is no traffic in the streets. It took place on two fronts: with Egypt (which resulted in Israel occupying the Sinai Peninsula) and with Syria (which resulted in the occupation of the Golan Heights). Despite early warning signs, Israel's defense policy (which came to be known, mockingly, as "The Concept") was that these Arab countries were not ready for war. While the consensus in Israeli society was that the fighting was necessary and the achievements worthy, the resulting lack of trust in the political and military leadership led to great social upheaval. In 1977 the Labor party lost the elections for the first time to the Likud Party headed by Menahem Begin, who in 1978 signed a peace treaty with Anwar Sadat and returned the Sinai to Egypt.
3. For an elaborated view see Wilson 120-42.
4. In December 2007 a performance was held to mark a year to the death of S. Yizhar. An English version was performed in 2005 at the Israel Non-Stop Festival in the JCC, Manhattan, NY.

tion).⁵ The practice of Epic Theater bears close affinity to this procedure, being a displayed formulation of the representational act. The theatrical epic becomes unmistakably equivalent to the level of narration in literature in cases where dramatic characters function as agents of showing (*Zeigen*) and a demonstrative status is ascribed to the actors.⁶ While such a formulation is particularly explicit in the case of a Brechtian theory of acting, it actually applies the principle of narration to all dramatic means, and it is certainly not bound to any clear stage manifestation of a storyteller character.

When the act of telling becomes realized performatively or dramatically through a character (such as Tom in *The Glass Menagerie* by Tennessee Williams), demonstration is bound together with a point of view.⁷ For Brecht, such a point of view must be of a distinctly critical outlook.⁸ But the ideological value implanted in this model consists of more than direct dialectical relation or opposition to the represented event. When the act of storytelling becomes a dominant performative principle, ideology is embedded in the structure itself. I will call it, following Fredric Jameson's *The Political Unconscious*, an "ideology of form"—"that is, the symbolic messages transmitted to us by the coexistence of various sign systems which are themselves traces or anticipations of modes of production" (76). In the context of this article, ideology of form is any stand, belief or political stance which while applied to a theme is derived from a performative structure. Following this framework, the adaptation strategies of a literary work into performative storytelling can function as a political act by implicitly applying ideological value to the "coexistence" or "clash"—or, more accurately, to the inter-medial encounter—between the "story sign system" and the "performance sign system."

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5. The combination of telling and showing is a definition accepted by Ruth Kanner herself, who referred to it in her MFA thesis (Kanner, "Story Telling Theater" 3-4). The terms and the basic distinction between telling and showing is known from Wayne C. Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction*; see Booth 3-20.
 6. On showing in Brecht's work, see Brecht in Willett 121-29. On the equivalence between storytelling and acting based on the epic principle of showing, see Wilson 48-55.
 7. A well-known example of performative storytelling which is connected to a point of view is Ariane Mnouchkine's *1789* in which the narrators, representing the claim that the revolution was "confiscated" from the people, are also endowed, in the spirit of a neoclassical *Comédie des comédiens*, with the attributes of a group of comédiens depicted as bateleurs, that is, clowns or acrobats.
 8. Brecht sees this point of view as a distancing mechanism. As Hans-Thies Lehmann points out in his discussion of post-epic narration, this act may also serve to create nearness in its "foregrounding of the personal" (110).

Ideology manifested in form is an essential part of the politics of the *Discovering Elijah* adaptation and thus of its implied rhetoric. Kanner's dramaturgic adaptation maintains, as a whole, the dominance of the narrative level in the literary work by assigning it to a storyteller character, played by a female actor (Tali Kark).⁹ Stage soldier figures are subordinate to the narrative development and participate in its telling and presentation. From the original dense text, fluctuating between bombardments and terror of death and trivial survival in the Sinai sand dunes, only segments remain, edited into thirteen episodes. The non-methodical literary travel in Sinai converges into a constant, designed performance space: an un-elevated acting space, covered with a sand-yellow sheet of cloth. Backstage and in the wings there are a few props, among them a large pneumatic tire, boxes, tin pots and pans. Backstage are also unique music and sound machines, which also serve as a salient visual component: a vertical apparatus with a thick string, and a system of metal tubes used for percussion, which are moved like rainsticks and emit sounds as fires are lit beneath them and air is blown through them. Above the backstage area, as part of the mechanical-musical background, several rotating fans are hung.

As I will demonstrate, the inter-medial encounter between theater and literary text in this unsettling performance, structured as a storytelling theater, functions as ideological formation. In the encounter between the narrative action and the physical-perceptual performative acts is embedded a constant tension between a need for an overall rationale for war and a concrete, appallingly incomprehensible experience.

Literary-Ideological Search for Rationale: Theatrical Intensification

Throughout the spatial-anecdotal array by which the story of the war is presented on stage, a single, constant goal is evident: to find Elijah. That is the book's starting point, which also opens the performance—told by the narrator who, facing the audience frontally, gestures with her hands as if remembering or reconstructing:

9. The narrator figure seems to preserve the old Platonist distinction between the mimetic narration characteristic of drama and the diegetic narration characteristic of the narrator's mediating act. According to Marie-Laure Ryan, in order to uphold the latter, the act of telling must take place in written or spoken language. When a narrator figure which is part of a performative context maintains its characteristics while being part of an array of mimetic means, it becomes a case of "narrative across media" (see Ryan 1-40).

Shortly after they crossed the canal on that bridge of rafts that was built behind schedule and in a hurry and seemed about to collapse listing on its side under every heavy vehicle crawling and passing with the utmost caution, from side to side, and after two actually toppled suddenly and turned over and fell into the water and their men were only barely saved and pulled out, and there was no time not for them or for anything and only make it, fast, before the Egyptians notice, when was it exactly, on Tuesday, no? Yes, on the 16th of October, yes, and since then we haven't heard a thing about Elijah.¹⁰

This breathless description, whose syntax and rhythm convey the pressing sense of urgency in the crossing of the Suez Canal in a state of chaos, confusion and deafening noise, only allows the readers/spectators/actor to take breath at the temporal point of wondering, and to take an end-of-the-sentence full-stop only when Elijah is mentioned. Who is Elijah? From the narrator's subsequent words we learn that he is a veteran paratrooper who participated in the conquest of the Wailing Wall in the 1967 War, one of four to survive out of an entire company that had entered the Old City of Jerusalem. Why he is being looked for, and who exactly (only known to us as "we") is doing the searching—that remains unclear. The discovery axis remains abstract, as is fit and proper, since its significance is not to be found in factual details.¹¹ Elijah is the support that endows the literary narrative and its dramaturgic adaptation with a form or pattern; the narrator is constantly driven not only by his/her interviewing mission, but also by the motivation to find Elijah, which is resolved in the final sentences of the book and performance. Although Elijah is not often mentioned in the performance, the pattern of discovery cannot be seen as a minor one once we identify it as a formal process that conveys an immanent ideological message, thus serving as "content of form."¹² The pattern of discovery is a distillation of the motivation to find a rationale and gain control which is expressed by all narratives—that is, by any selective, discursive category in which events correspond to a comprehensible, controllable construct (or poiesis).¹³

10. All the quotations are taken from the unpublished performance text, translated by Edeet Ravel.

11. Yizhar in fact used his extended mission in the Sinai desert to search for his son-in-law Eliezer, who, like Elijah, is a paratrooper in the reserve army who raises flowers for export in civilian life.

12. Jameson 99.

13. On narration as a mental construct, see Rigney 263-83. Yizhar's narrative as a

The retrospective story of the war is not just a poetic operation but an ideological one if we regard it—following Althusser—as a Superstructure¹⁴ substitute, the equivalent of a political-ideological mechanism that ensures the existence of the social game (in this case, a war game) and subordinates all its events and characters. In the performance, the narrating voice is identified with a stage figure whose constant presence is the anchor that brings unity to an anecdotal structure. The narrator stage figure indicates the analogy between Superstructure and theatrical meta-structure, which echoes and intensifies the literary narrative.

However, as an integral part of the ideology of form, the narrative structure—as well as the narrative pivot of the search for Elijah—is not used to reaffirm but is instead wholly recruited, first by Yizhar and then by Kanner, to an undermining of the rationale of war.¹⁵ The fundamental casting of doubt is an especially loaded issue in this particular socio-historical context. The sweeping consensus in Israel regarding the Yom Kippur war was that it was justified and that Israel was compelled to defend itself and was thus driven to territorial conquests. That consensus has since been in constant need of revalidation, in light to subsequent wars and public criticism regarding their necessity (such as the Second Lebanon War in the summer of 2006). The need for such a rationale was especially strong in light of the prevailing public impression that there was no guiding hand, that both the military command and the political leadership had no control over what was happening in the field. The local social context of both the literary text and the performance is extended to refer to a deep-seated need “to discover” a justification for the violent impulse and the uncontrollable results of any war.

The search, constructed as a temporally consistent narrative progres-

whole, to use C.G. Prado’s terms, blurs the distinction between factual and fictional; but, in any case, the difference between these two categories is negligible if we see this narrative as part of the widespread phenomenon of organizing events in coherent patterns that may be repeated and elaborated on. All of us take part in that organization—we are all “story weavers”—which is vital to our existence and survival (see Prado 115-37).

14. See Althusser 8-10.

15. Yizhar’s stance regarding the war implies awareness of a dual position in relation to historical narrative: on the one hand, its positivist perception as a linguistic construct enables historical reconstruction; on the other hand, it is perceived as a construct to which, as Hyden White observes, the stylistic characteristics of verbal fiction apply. In Roland Barthes’s view, historical narrative is discourse (to be distinguished from *histoire*) that turns history into epistemology. See White 1-33; Barthes 3-20; Munslow 39-81.

sion, is anecdotal and haphazard, lacking a causal pivot. Suddenly, as the narrator tells in the last moments of the performance, in the Egyptian city of Suez turned ghost town, we arrive at a large house with balconies and luxurious armchairs, in one of which someone is sitting, eating grapes. In the performance the narrator addresses the audience, extending her hands forward: "...but in fact it's him, it's really him, look at him, it's him, it's Eliyahu,¹⁶ here he is, and it's him, our Elijah smiling at us, Shalom Eliyahu." The pattern of discovery, which in fact is propelled only by the horrifying arbitrary energy of the war journey, ends with Elijah's sudden appearance, *deus ex machina*, as a total surprise.

The episodic composition (which is evident in the book but turns into a distinct structure in the performance) also contrasts with the linear causal pattern of the search for Elijah. This literary composition is established as an internally coherent stage syntax, but in the last scenes of the performance the distinction between episodes is blurred, they are less clearly focused around an obvious *gestus*, and the general impression is of growing disorientation.

The desire for an overall explanation and its inherent impossibility are also sustained, even intensified, in the performance—in segments based on the narrator's words and encounters in the book—by explicit references to different types of explaining super-powers. After the opening scene, the actors all stand frontally, dressed in uniform, and repeat the same sentence over and over again in increasingly intense recitative and movement (thus becoming part of the narrator function):

Once soldiers rose and mounted horses and rode all colourful with flags waving and trumpets blowing and lances and banners and the horses all beautiful and the horsemen and regiment after regiment all in order would go out galloping. And of all this nothing remains, not horses not camels not flags not banners not the sound of trumpets blowing. A bare desert, a hot wind, barbed wire fences with every godforsaken scrap of paper clinging to them, when suddenly a giant eagle spreads its mighty wings and rises....

As the last sentence is recited one of the actors holds up a newspaper, spreads it like wings and says:

... and is nothing but an evening newspaper, which the wind blew open until it caught on the fence which caught it and clutched it clinging and all its news torn to bits and scattered to the wind.

16. Eliyahu-Elijah in Hebrew.

The narrator's consistent theatrical presence is expanded into a small army, whose voices and actions ask whether or not a higher authority exists. Unable to find a convincing logical or political justification for the war, they turn to a glorification of the past. The actors' ecstatic movement enables the narrators-soldiers to present and experience an identity which is activated and justified by an obscure, unquestionable authority: a king, a general, and, just as powerfully, the idea of Beauty. But the very same repetitive physical energy immediately recharges and demonstrates the sense of erosion experienced by the unglorified soldiers in the open desert. The verbal rhetoric of negation ("not horses not camels not flags ..."), recited to the rhythm of the actors' movements, is added onto the mostly empty acting space and the notion of the unadorned, achromatic body. The soaring desert eagle, identified for a moment with forgotten splendour, is reduced to a newspaper, and the news it contains is scattered around, unable to explain or justify the soldiers' presence there.

In a dialogue between the narrator and a seated soldier who is peeling potatoes over a large cooking pot we hear fragmented testimonies about the army crossing the Suez Channel; these experiences and rumours, while funnelled by the narrator, are removed from the level of narration and are subjugated to the point of view of a marginal soldier who has no authority and to the trivial act of peeling. In the background, the confusion is intensified by stage figures crossing the stage, carrying objects back and forth with no clear aim.

In another episode, the narrator meets a company commander who describes how they'd survived a battle. Contrary to his secular-socialist upbringing on a kibbutz, that commander suddenly discovers "a new sound," an expression "as perfect as a pearl," which he keeps repeating: "Divine Intervention." The storytelling of the events and the dramatic transformation experienced by this soldier coincide. This equivalence between the act of telling and the discovery of an overall explanation is also manifested as the narrator, standing by the soldier figure, raises his arm and places the palm of his hand over the soldier's head, like a Jewish skullcap or an expression of a higher power. That discovery—we are told—made the commander smile, as "suddenly he has found the thing." But that discovery is nothing but another ideology, a rationalization adopted ad hoc in order to find comfort in a general organizing principle. In Richard Rorty's words, the commander longs to find a "stamp which had been impressed in all of us" (26). Such an impress would not be blind,

... because it would not be a matter of chance, a mere contingency.
It would be necessary, essential, telic, constitutive of what it is to

be human. It would give us a goal, the only possible goal, namely, the full recognition of that very necessity, the self-consciousness of our essence. (Rorty 26)

The war presented in this performance is an extreme embodiment of a contingency. The formation of stage imagery undermines the linear pseudo-causal logic of the search plot, as well as the idea of Providence in its different manifestations. A fierce doubt concerning the historical necessity to fight keeps building up in the spectators' consciousness, finally expressed directly, in Yizhar's words, at the end of the performance:

Did it have to be? Now this sentence plays again and again, not letting go of you.... did it have to be this way? ... did all this really have to be this way? Really? ... did all this have to be? Really?

Narration and Acting Practices: Theater Strikes Back

The ideology of form imprinted in theatrical means is not manifested in a schematic division between the narrator as a focusing agent who embodies the rationale and a focused-upon experience—that of the soldiers in the field, locked in a concrete space of incomprehensible horror. While the supposed or longed-for existence of a rationale is imprinted in the act of narration, the narrator is not unequivocally identified with any overall consented explanation and his /her doubtful point of view is acted-out on stage.

The performance begins with all the actors—except the narrator—standing alongside the acting space in ordinary clothes, and then putting on their uniform in front of the audience. That preparatory act by the actors is manifestly analogous to the speedy mobilization of the IDF reserve forces when the war started; moreover, the overt donning of a theatrical character is connotatively perceived as a symbolic ritual acceptance of collective identity, required of any subject who serves his country by fighting a war. Opposing this collective ritual, the narrator has a female stage identity which is clearly distinguished from male warfare. Her clothes—dark, loosely cut pants and blouse—differ from the others' mainly khaki costumes. Some of her gestures retain traces of an image used by Kanner in her work with the actress playing the narrator—the Fool image, charging the narrator's external position with duality: on the one hand, it incorporates a wondering, even childish point of view, enabling the narrator to describe the horror of dead bodies with a marveling expression and shaking limbs, as if studying the anatomy of death and slowly internalizing its finality; on the other hand, the rhetoric of the description of war and the question of its necessity is sophis-

ticated and critical, as befits a Fool. The acted narrator is a constant, unmediated bodily presence who also functions as an experiencing agent (and thus as an intradiegetic narrator),¹⁷ who has an emotional (and not rational) point of view. After describing an encounter with drooping-headed dead bodies, during which it is not yet clear who's who ("Is that Danny? Is that Gadi? Does anyone know?"), while everyone else on stage is running and singing a song of camaraderie between soldiers, the acted narrator bursts into tears, sobbing deeply.

This acting stance of the narrator, that rejects narration itself as an overall rationale, is expanded through another central acting factor—a "blue double-cabin Volkswagen" transporter used by the interviewing delegation to which Yizhar belonged (in the novel the vehicle is literally mentioned). The car becomes a stage figure, also played by a female actor (Shirley Gal-Segev). The Volkswagen, in a blue dress and with large glasses referring to headlights, presents itself in German, as befits its origins (in fact reciting technical details about the Volkswagen engine, taken from a manual). Then she accompanies the narrator and a group of other characters on their journey (driving is signified by moving rhythmically to the sound of a string instrument). Her outsider position, which is a defamiliarization in its old formalist sense, becomes vital to a re-observation of the "routines" of war. Being a stranger stage narrator, the national Superstructure is put into question, the validity of the difference between "enemy losses, their losses" and "our" losses is no longer obvious. Much like the narrator's increasing assimilation into the action, the Volkswagen gradually stops speaking German and starts speaking Hebrew, with less and less foreign accent, and later on puts on khaki uniform and ties the blue dress to its waist; that is, it is transformed from an offshoot of the narrator figure into a soldier figure. Even the car's emotionally-loaded German otherness is integrated into the fighting Israeli "us," but her multicultural presence undermines the coherent narrational rationale dependent on belonging, on the common search for Eliah.

One of Yizhar's critical strategies is making the language that constructs the story a territory of escapism—as if one can take refuge from the experience of war in the verbal procedure itself (for instance, duplication of the word "dead" which is thus emptied of meaning). On stage, verbal territories of escapism become articulated, appropriated by acting. Moreover, perfor-

17. On focalization and the degree of participation of the narrator in the story (an intradiegetic participation, in the case of both the book and performance), see Genette 189-94; Rimmon-Kenan 71-85; 94-105.



*Fig. 1. Tali Kark (narrator), Shirley Gal-Segev (blue Volkswagen).
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mative situations are embedded within the narrational practice, functioning as enclaves of an alternative narrative in which the Superstructure is, nevertheless, implanted. In one episode, based on a war performance described by Yizhar and structured as theater-within-theater, the soldiers are told that the artists have arrived. A long-haired artist appears, speaking gibberish, his intonations, sounds and pelvic movements all making it patently clear that he is telling particularly dirty jokes over the microphone, while his on-stage audience remains utterly impassive, unable to find comfort in this nonsensical talk. Then the stage is suddenly flooded with a pandemonium of sound and yellow lights: an air raid. During this bombardment, the shocked artist jumps into a big tire while verbally representing the action by repeating the word “fire” into the microphone. The soldiers who were unresponsive to the artist’s performance now keep yelling, with matching crude hand gestures: “We’ve screwed up a MIG”¹⁸—and the vulgar collective sublimation thus

18. This is a literal translation of the sentence, not taken from the English version of the performance. Kanner gives this episode as an example of the category she calls “the aggressive collective body” (“Body in War” 225-26).

becomes connotatively associated with the familiar format of dirty jokes. After the shock of the air raid the performance continues, but in a totally different manner: the artist suggests that they all sing together songs composed to lyrics by Rachel, a canonical early twentieth-century Israeli poet. The sing-along appeals, this time in a “correct” idealizing verbal territory, of comforting solidarity. When, in another episode, Foxtrot is mentioned, someone explains that it’s “a dance from my grandmother’s time.” The soldiers start dancing merrily to a spiritedly sung tune. The dancing and singing is a diversion which is suddenly replaced by a voice-over tune whose sound fills up the acting space, and the dancing becomes wilder and faster. The music, so it seems, is expropriated from human improvisation and made part of the theatrical meta-language equivalent to the level of narration.

In another manifestation, achieved by acting practices and arranged as a performance to be looked on by an internal spectator, the narration is deprived of its controlling stance by being a verbal duplication of a physical action. The Volkswagen character takes on the narrator role, telling in great detail, in the present tense, about an incidental event—a soldier taking a shower. The stage figure of the naked soldier, meticulously soaping himself, stands behind the vertical pipes of the music machine in the back. The pipes are associated in this scene with the water running over the body (which, according to the verbal description, pours from a pail of water positioned on a pole). The voyeuristic foreign car/narrator, facing the audience rather than the showering soldier, describes the sight with wonder and pleasure. The body is cleaned, one part after another, “so that everything will be absolutely clean from the filth of so many days,” and eventually the soldier “dries himself with the motions of summer vacation and the beach...” These are brief moments of respite from the fighting collective, during which the narrative shifts from the space of war to the shower performance, focalizing the audience on the intimate territory of the personal body which is expropriated from “ordinary” state of affairs in war.

The actors’ bodies are exploited in several cases to convey a striking sense of vulnerability which is not simply an ideological act opposing the collective super-imposition to fight, but rather serve for re-evaluating the option of a personal judgement and responsibility in a state of war and the validity of its collective dictum. Stunned, the Volkswagen stands with the narrator by a dead body and wonders, with a strong German accent:

Who knew him? Who was his friend? And his mother, did she feel at that moment ... did her heart miss a beat? They don’t know yet that they’ve lost a son.



*Fig. 2. Yussef Sweid (metonymic dead soldier).
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In this episode, the encounter with many dead soldiers is summarized in the metonymic action of a single soldier-actor, lying down on a crate, slowly changing positions. Vis-à-vis this cruel anatomy of death, the distinction between sides loses its validity. The dead subject is only qualified by his being a friend or a son and appears both as an intimate and universal body.

In one episode, the stage figures are under bombardment. The soldiers are spread around the acting space, standing by “holes in the ground” indicated by wooden black discs hurled against the floor, mumbling prayer-like texts of personal hope for surviving that inferno. While rehearsing this scene, Kanner used a game whose traces are evident in the actors’ final demeanor: the narrator throws red rubber balls at the actors-soldiers, and whoever is hit by a ball stops saying his lines—he is out of the game. The text heard is mostly a mumble, turning into a musical factor that changes according to the actors’ actions. The game is a metaphoric simulation of the fear of death in war.¹⁹ The story is literally present all the time, but it is subjugated to an immediate acting action, one which merges the actors’ alert awareness and vulnerable body with being in a state of war.²⁰

19. In Schechner’s terms, this may be seen as a variation on a symbolic “homeopathic” manifestation of hors-theatrical violence. See Schechner 55-56.

20. Kanner introduces her description of the balls game in these words: “How can we

Following an episode that includes testimonies of the horrible trauma of the battle of what was known as the “Chinese Farm” in Sinai, describing a grinded, blown-up, defenseless body, the dynamic of war is depicted as a resurrection of sorts: “How does a man gather himself and get up and stand on his feet, how does he get up from the sand,” the narrator begins by asking. The group of actors-soldiers, standing in a frontal line, performs an energetic movement phrase in which a hand extended forward is repeatedly “aimed” like a gun. One of them ends this episode with the words: “I am nothing, only a thing that runs and shoots fire, God what’s left of me.” It is tempting to think that by turning the weapon into a hand gesture (rather than using a gun prop) and equating the actor’s body with the soldier’s body, responsibility for the killing is diverted from the instrument to the fighting person. And yet it is hard to claim responsibility when resurrection is conditional on the collective necessity “to gather,” and when the embodied gun becomes a synecdoche that imposes its partial meaning on a whole person.

Narration and Sensory Presence: Theater Conquers

The perceptual simulation of the war is not only a performative representation of an experience, but also fulfills the narrator function—and by doing so validates the theatrical relocation (or “conquest”) of the literary text. The components of the designed space can be easily related to the daily improvised and slovenly signs of military presence. At the same time, most of them are in fact remains of theatrical equipment and props—packing boxes (that can also be seen, in the play’s military context, as ammunition boxes), big black loudspeakers, old spotlights, iron podium legs, fans. Creating an image of the theatrical apparatus related to acting, these elements thus appropriate the literary act of narration and turn it into a theatrical one. The designed space juxtaposes different sand references: sand is indicated by the yellow sheet of cloth that covers the acting space, and actual sand is at times poured out of a soldier’s shoe or backpack as he crosses the stage, thus evoking the phenomenological quality of the actual sand.²¹ The cloth, clearly identified as an icon of sand, plainly preserves the signifi-

represent this extreme psychological state, the authentic trembling of the body facing its annihilation, on stage? Maybe in order to achieve it, we should look for the real responses of the real body of the actor in the show?” (“Body in War” 229).

21. On phenomenological attitude related to corporeality (or corporal presence), see for instance States 369-79.



Fig. 3. Group of Soldiers.

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tion gap and even functions blatantly as the protective fabric commonly used to cover a stage and, in this case, as an acting surface that could contain any image and any war. Music machines and fans are also characterized by a dual association: their overall effect, including the noise and fire by which sound is produced through tubes, is perceived as part of the reality of war, particularly one known for its widespread use of armored cars and missiles; at the same time, it is an exposed stage machine, whose explicit symbolic function turns into an extension of the narrator's presence; the machine both "tells about" the war and presents it.

The actors are dressed in uniquely designed clothes, which can connote khaki uniforms, attesting to the slovenliness of hastily mobilized reserve soldiers. However, the clothes deviate from a clear image of uniforms and include elements such as torn sleeves, patches, pockets, fabrics that are frayed or sewn out of shreds of cloth. These clothes look almost clownish—as if they were costumes owned by the troupe to which the theater equipment on stage belongs—and yet they associate the soldier image to an exposure of the body and the vulnerability of skin and flesh. The image seared on the spectators' mind combines with the soldiers' function as actors/clowns-storytellers. The clear tendency to decrease the *mise en scène's* degree of iconicism, manifested in evident deviations from the familiar, supports the notion that it is also an extension of the narrator function. In addition, it also neutralizes quite effectively the local-realistic features of war, contributing to an allegoric a-historical perception of the performance as being “about war,” any war.

The traces of literary text support the narrative operation, but the very same elements are also subordinated to the theatrical-experiential system that makes the spectators confront war as a phenomenon. The intense inexplicable, chaotic state of war is embodied in the actions and in the dialogic, multi-voiced, non-hegemonic discourse. In some situations, the performance inclines quite clearly toward the latter—corresponding with what Chantal Pontbriand defines as performance that “aims to show the real without mystification” (157) by means of sensory inundation, to the point of shocking spectators and blocking their ability to focus on a logocentric image. This is evident most saliently when the music machines flood the space with strong, piercing sounds, and the spectators' focus is clouded by yellow light and intense, multi-directional stage movement. At the peak of these situations the narrator as a coherent focal point and the pattern of discovery are almost forgotten, dissolving while the spectators' pulse quickens as they are enveloped by the stage experience.

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As a postdramatic storytelling theater, *Discovering Elijah* actively and creatively preserves traces of the original medium's procedures. This inter-medial theatrical adaptation is not just a formal practice having to do with genre and style. The representation of war, subjugated to the performative context, is a complex (more or less elliptic) manifestation of an ideology of form. I have claimed that, as a starting point, this manifestation includes the pattern of discovery—the search for the missing soldier Elijah that is de-

picted in the book and is intensified in the performance. I have suggested that this pattern, which epitomizes narrative organization as a whole, should be seen as a symbolic embodiment of the need to search for a rationale or an overall explanation for a state of war. This pattern attests to dependence on a rational anchor, while refuting the very possibility of such a rationale.

The theatrical act of telling is thus confronting the pseudo-rational dimension of war with acted practices and perceptual manifestations. But its refutation does not stem from a schematic (warring) distinction between telling and showing, since in this performance the modes of showing are also an extension of the narrator's function, while the lack of orientation, to the point of sensory inundation, is also realized in the act of telling and in the narrator's assimilation into the experience of war. The need for a rationale is propelled by the act of telling. Nevertheless, whenever that need is felt, in the very same context, it is also refuted by an outsider narrational stance (especially that of the non-combatant narrator and the car figure), or by splitting any possible explanation into multiple fragmentary testimonies, by the very material presence of the theater (against which the war can be looked on as un-real), by the appearance of war life as a distracting show (although conveying the unsolved tension between the personal sphere and a collective consent subdued to a Superstructure), by images of a vulnerable exhausted body that has lost its overall justification (who is both personal and metonymic and still held as possibly responsible), and by sensory theatrical presence (especially through sound and light).

Kanner's direction and Yizhar's story share a common anti-war ideological goal; and yet, the theatrical adaptation of the story results by necessity in inter-medial tension, which embodies the ideological struggle between the need for an overall logos for war and the experiential dissociation of the soldiers tossed into the desert. Working within the bounds of that duality, the theater has the power to provide an experience of reality that opposes any possible rationale; it can even, at times, "silence" the act of storytelling, which fundamentally strives (even when it isn't meant to succeed) toward organization and meaning.

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