

Olga Levitan, Yair Lipshitz

## The Wandering Jews of the Jewish Theatre

DOI: 10.31168/2658-3364.2022.1-2.02

The very notion of dedicating an entire issue to Jewish theatre as seen through the prism of the Wandering Jew merits some elaboration. After all, the Wandering Jew is fundamentally an anti-Jewish image, which emerged in early modern Christian Europe in order to reaffirm Jewish landlessness and exile. According to the legend of the Wandering Jew, this figure showed up in various European cities and towns, attended churches, and displayed clear sorrow and remorse whenever Jesus's name was mentioned. When asked about his background, he revealed that he was a cobbler in Second-Temple Jerusalem and witnessed Jesus's procession through the Via Dolorosa. Jesus asked the cobbler to allow him to rest for a moment by leaning on the wall of his house, and when the cobbler refused he was cursed by Jesus with eternal wanderings.<sup>1</sup>

Why then frame our current discussion of Jewish theatre with a character that was used to present the Jewish diasporic condition as proof of Jews' eternally cursed status? A simple answer could be that the Wandering (or Eternal) Jew in fact figured prominently in one of the most important plays in the history of early Jewish and Hebrew theatre – David Pinski's *Der Eybiker Yid* (The Eternal Jew), which was part of Habima's early and groundbreaking repertoire in the 1920's. However, by focusing on the Wandering Jew, this collection of essays also participates in a broader shift in the historiography of Jewish theatre and in a reconsideration of its relation to place.

According to Shimon Levy (1992, 7), among the many reasons given for the relative absence of theatrical activity in Jewish societies throughout history is the lack of a "strong bond between culture and land". Gershon Shaked (1970, 9) also mentions the view that "plays cannot be developed among a nation which has no homeland and no theatre". The rationale behind such explanations is that theatre is a grounded art-form, one that requires a physical space in order to flourish. Diasporic Jewish culture, therefore, is unable to develop theatre due to its weakened sense of rootedness in place. By implication, it is only once the ties between culture and land are restored – mainly through Zionism – that a true Jewish theatre can emerge. At any rate, the Wandering Jew in such a narrative cannot do theatre.

---

<sup>1</sup>For more on the legend, see [Anderson 1965; Hasan-Rokem and Dundes 1986].

This is of course a problematic explanation, as it downplays the richness and breadth of Jewish theatres which have thrived for decades in diasporic conditions in Yiddish, Arabic, Ladino and other languages. Indeed, putting too much emphasis on the “bond between culture and land” as a condition for theatre might elide the importance of wandering in theatre history. This is true regarding theatre in general (one cannot imagine the development of early modern theatre in Europe without wandering troupes), and even more so regarding Jewish theatre.

The history of Jewish theatre is very much a history of wandering: the travels of plays and troupes, the migrations of artists and audiences. This is not to say that there was no sense of being grounded in the theatres of Warsaw, New York or Buenos Aires, but rather that wandering was a productive rather than inhibiting force to the creativity of Jewish theatre. It is hardly incidental that Sholem Aleichem’s Yiddish serial novel about a Jewish theatre troupe is titled *Blonzhende Shtern* (Wandering Stars, 1909-1911), and that Nahma Sandrow’s seminal book on Yiddish theatre history, *Vagabond Stars* (1996), alludes to that image. As an analytical concept, wandering resurfaces in more recent scholarship of Yiddish theatre, as evidenced in the titles of Debra Caplan’s *Yiddish Empire: the Vilna Troupe, Jewish Theater and the Art of Itinerancy* (2018) and Diego Rotman’s *The Yiddish Stage as a Temporary Home* (2021).

While the image of wandering may seem self-evident with regard to Yiddish theatre, it is striking to note its presence in the context of other Jewish theatrical cultures. A relatively recent anthology of translated Israeli plays has been titled *Wanderers, and Other Israeli Plays* (Aronson-Lehavi 2009), suggesting that even after the Zionist project and the re-rooting of Jews in the land of Israel, the wanderings have never ceased. Similarly, Sarit Cofman-Simhon (2020) reads the prevalence of suitcases on the Israeli stage as a sign that the Wandering Jew has returned. The Wandering Jew’s legacy can also be found in one of the greatest pieces of Jewish-American theatre, Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America* (1995), which begins with a rabbi’s eulogy to a dead Jewish grandmother. She was, according to the rabbi, “a whole kind of person, the ones who crossed the ocean, who brought with us to America the villages of Russia and Lithuania”. Even her descendants, who have comfortably settled down and acculturated in America, still harbor that wandering – or in the rabbi’s succinct words: “In you that journey is.” (16-17).

Not only, therefore, *can* Wandering Jews do theatre – they are in fact instrumental to the creative impulse of many Jewish theatres and their histories. Rather than a cursed, rootless figure, as they were imagined in anti-Jewish pamphlets, Wandering Jews re-emerge on stage and in the auditorium as vital, energizing, and deeply theatrical. They are, in many ways, the engine of Jewish theatre.

\*\*\*

The issue “Wandering Jews of the Jewish Theatre” explores the phenomenon of wandering and migration in the context of the Jewish theatre, past and present, discussing it from very different points of view. The idea of this collection of articles is to expose the wandering elements in a variety of fields: biographies of Jewish theatre artists, great Jewish theatre productions that include wandering narratives, wandering characteristics of Hebrew and Yiddish as stage languages, and Jewish cultural tradition in its dialogue with other cultures. In this collection, Yiddish theatre history is not separated from the history of the Hebrew theatre; rather, both of them are presented as Jewish theatre experiences that share wandering features. The discussion also relates to fundamental aesthetic issues in the performing arts and to their social, political and cultural functions, with the study of Jewish theatre being seen as a laboratory, representative of the cultural history of the twentieth century. All the articles in this collection contain unique elements that are manifested either in the subjects of the study, which have not been previously discussed, in the specific angles from which these subjects are approached, or in their mixed methodology.

The collection comprises four sections: Theory and History, Archive, Monologues about Jewish Theatre, and Book Reviews. This structure manifests both the vertical principle of study and the horizontal principle of analytic thought. The vertical discussion relates to the past, present, and to some extent also to the future of Jewish theatre, highlighting the importance of archives and archival research as well as the voices of contemporary artists. The horizontal examination explores the expressions of wandering and migration in the Jewish theatre’s past and present from different perspectives, including theoretical, aesthetic, historical, archival and cultural analysis.

The Theory and History section opens with an article by Yair Lipshitz, which focuses on the play *The Eternal Jew* by David Pinsky. Written in Yiddish, translated to Hebrew and performed by the Habima theatre (1923), it became one of the most important and well-known productions of the Jewish stage. However, the discussion, which combines cultural and textual analysis, relates less to theatre history and more to the philosophical study of the structure of time. The author examines the play together with its cultural sources, treating it as a unique case study for revealing the formation of the concepts of time, history and messianism in Jewish tradition and in Jewish modernistic culture. In fact, the article presents a theoretical introduction of sorts to the discussion developed in this issue.

The next article, by Boris Yentin, applies two points of views in its discussion of the history of Habima’s production of the *The Eternal Jew*. On the one hand, Yentin discusses the reconstruction of Habima’s *The Eternal Jew* in the contemporary play *Tzemach*, which is a coproduction of Habima and the Malenki Theatre (2017, Director: M. Teplisky). The current play is dedicated to

Nachum Tzemach, one of Habima's founders and its legendary first executive director and actor, who performed the role of the Wandering Jew in Habima's play. The article explains how the narrative of the Wandering Jew reflects Tzemach's personal biography. On the other hand, Yentin analyzes the current attempt to reconstruct and reenact the expressionistic language of the early Habima, emphasizing the role of this kind of reconstruction in studying and experiencing history.

A combination of historical, aesthetic and philosophical discussions appears in Freddie Rokem's article, which focuses on the analysis of Hebrew letters and words as a performative element in the historic production of *The Dybbuk* (Habima, 1922, Director: E. Vakhtangov) and in the contemporary Israeli play *The Hebrew Notebook: And Other Stories by Franz Kafka* (2013), directed by Ruth Kanner. Here the Hebrew language itself is examined as a subject of wandering from Moscow to Prague and Tel-Aviv, as the very juxtaposition of the two productions, which were innovative for their times, gives a fresh perspective and a new understanding of the role of words as a meaningful performative act. Through this discussion, Rokem explores the historic changes in the perception of the Hebrew language and its socio-cultural meanings.

The subject of Yiddish theatre in the Theory and History section is presented by the articles of Vladislav Ivanov, Ruthie Abeliovich and Evgenia Khazdan. Each of them relates to a different angle of Yiddish theatre history, revealing its unique character.

Vladislav Ivanov focuses on the famous GOSET production *The Travels of Benjamin III* by Mendele Mocher Sforim, characterizing it as an artistic farewell to the Jewish shtetl. The production is described and scrutinized in the context of the Russian-Jewish avantgarde theatre. The author stresses the meanings of the language of constructivism and the amazing variety of forms of performative action in GOSET's production. Ivanov suggests a number of notions that are important for understanding GOSET's performative language, such as "fantasy and compassion", "biomechanics and psychology", "national and universal", insisting on the necessity of these combinations in order to characterize the duality of the performance. Actors Solomon Mikhoels and Benjamin Zuskin are among the main figures of discussion.

Ruthie Abeliovich suggests a new perspective on Yiddish theatre as a transnational network in which plays, authors and artists circulated between Jewish diaspora centers in Eastern Europe and America. However, while most theater historians describe the path of Yiddish theater as travelling from Europe to America, Abeliovich traces the reverse movement from America to Europe, discovering a previously unexplored context of cultural and artistic exchange. Especially interesting is that the main hero of her research is the marginal figure of the prompter, who is presented as a kind of mediator and instrument for understanding the inner life of Yiddish theatre and its successful crossing of the Atlantic Ocean. Involving the geographical aspects of theater and their

cultural importance, the article paves the way for a new paradigm in Yiddish theatre research.

The study of musical characteristics of Jewish folk-theatre performances (Purim-Spiel), as presented in Evgenia Khazdan's article, relates to the revolutionary research concepts of Moses Beregovski, the prominent scholar of Jewish musical folklore. The article scrutinizes the formation of Beregovski's methodology and analyzes his ideas, which were ahead of their time. These include the absence of strict genre separation within traditional musical culture, the inhomogeneity of the folk tradition, the inclination to "borrow" elements from other sources, and authorship as an integral part of tradition. This "study of a study" is meaningful in its meta-research effect. The article also relates to the social context of Beregovski's biography as a scholar of Jewish musical folklore in the Soviet Union.

The Theory and History section ends with Diego Rotman's article, which discusses the construction of two contemporary sukkahs by Sala-Manca, which is a Jerusalem-based multidisciplinary group that Diego Rotman is a part of. Rotman presents the project as a kind of Jewish ethno-performance and an exclusive art-research project. Rotman traces the physical and symbolic phases of sukkah construction, their transportation from one geographical and cultural area to another and their transformation into cross-cultural performative objects characterized by deeply dialogical relationships with the desert Bedouin and Germanic cultures. The project and its examination embody the practices and the ideas of wandering through history and cultures; it is no coincidence that this article was chosen to end the Theory and History section of the issue.

The second section of the issue, **The Archive**, presents the publication, exposure and analysis of rare archival materials from the history of Jewish theatre. The three articles in this section restore their protagonists—Osip Dimov, Peretz Markish and Itzhak Machlis—to the cultural discourse.

Olga Levitan publishes and discusses the unknown correspondence between Osip Dimov and the Habima theatre, preserved at the Israeli Center for the Documentation of the Performing Arts in Tel Aviv University. The correspondence is presented as a basis for the reconstruction of the relationships between the Jewish migrating playwright and the Jewish migrating theatre at the end of 1920s and the beginning of the 1930s, revealing the characteristics of cultural reality in Russia, Germany, the United States and Palestine.

Aleksandra Polian describes the corpus of forgotten war plays by Peretz Markish from various archive collections in Russia (the Russian State Archive of Literature and Art, The State Archive of the Russian Federation) and in Israel (The Diaspora Research Center at Tel-Aviv University). Only three of them were performed on stage, and none of them were published in their original version. The overview of the plays, together with their detailed discussion, allows to explore different strategies in representing the Holocaust and Nazi characters in the Jewish-Soviet cultural discourse. A combination of textual

and socio-cultural analysis results in exposing Markish's plays as an important source for both Soviet history and Holocaust studies.

The third article, by Lubov Oves, explores the heritage of Itzhak Makhlis, the once-famous and later-forgotten theatre and cinema designer, portrait painter and great master of theatrical caricature. Oves rediscovers Makhlis's theatre works, bringing them back into the discourse of academic research. She not only describes in great detail the collection of Makhlis's works in the Petersburg Central State Archive of Literature and Arts, but also analyzes their plastic language and stylistic characteristics. The reconstruction of the artist's biography embodies the fate of Soviet-Jewish artists as a whole, including the story of his transition from the Jewish shtetl to the upper echelon of Soviet artists, his work as a designer of the legendary "Chapaev" movie, and his years as a prisoner in the GULAG.

The last two sections of the issue are Monologues about Jewish Theatre, written by contemporary artists from Russia and Israel, and the Book Review. The monologues' section presents a variety of current points of view on Jewish theatre. The suggestive juxtaposition between them is inspiring and productive for thinking about Jewish theater today. Among the artists who talk, think and analyze the idea of Jewish theatre on the basis of their personal practice are several important figures from the Russian and Israeli theatre worlds, including Boris Yukhananov, Igor Pechovich, Oleg Lipovetzky, Ruth Kanner, Yehuda Morally, Michael Teplitsky, Dina Konson and Maya Arad Yasur. The monologue section includes an extract from Maya Arad Yasur's play, *BOMB* translated to Russian. The book review section offers Vassili Schedrin's discussion of Diego Rotman's book, *The Yiddish Stage as a Temporary Home*, which is dedicated to Shimen Dzigan and Isroel Shumacher, the famous wandering comic duo of the Yiddish theatre. The book was published in Hebrew and in English and awarded the Shapiro Prize as the best book in Israel Studies in 2019.

It may be worth mentioning that this issue contains a number of deliberately created inner correspondences between the authors. Thus, Ruth Kanner and Michael Teplitsky, whose productions are discussed in the Theory and History section, present their understanding of Jewish theatre in the Monologue section. A book written by Diego Rotman, who contributed his *sukkah* study to the Theory and History section, is analyzed in the reviews' section. Yair Lipshitz, whose article opens the Theory and History section, is a co-author of these introductory notes. Boris Yentin, the author of the analysis of the *Tzemach* production, is co-editor of the Monologues section. The production of *The Wandering Jew*, analyzed in Lipshitz's paper, is reconstructed in a production analyzed in Yentin's. All this creates an effect of wandering themes and thoughts within the issue itself, as well.

## Works Cited

- Anderson 1965 – Anderson, G.K. *The Legend of the Wandering Jew* (Providence: Brown University Press, 1965).
- Aronson-Lehavi 2009 – Aronson-Lehavi, S. (ed.). *Wanderers, and Other Israeli Plays*. New York: Seagull Books, 2009.
- Caplan 2018 – Caplan, D. *Yiddish Empire: the Vilna Troupe, Jewish Theater and the Art of Itinerancy*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018.
- Cofman-Simhon 2020 – Cofman-Simhon, S. “The Suitcase as a Neurotic Container in the Israeli Theatre: The Return of the Wandering Jew”, in *Migration and Stereotypes in Performance and Culture*, eds. Yana Meerzon, David Dean and Daniel McNeil (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 77-99.
- Hasan-Rokem and Dundes 1986 – Hasan-Rokem, G. and A. Dundes (eds.). *The Wandering Jew: Essays in the Interpretation of a Christian Legend* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986).
- Kushner 1995 – Kushner, T. *Angels in America* (New York: TCG, 1995).
- Levy 1992 – Levy, S. *Mekatrim Ba-bamot: Iyunim Be-drama Ivrit* (Tel Aviv: Or-Am, 1992).
- Rotman 2021 – Rotman, D. *The Yiddish Stage as a Temporary Home: Dzigal and Shumacher’s Satirical Theater (1927-1980)* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021).
- Sandrow 1996 – Sandrow, N. *Vagabond Stars: a World History of Yiddish Theater* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996).
- Shaked 1970 – Shaked, G. *Ha-mahazeh Ha-ivri Ha-histori Be-tekufat Ha-tehiyah* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1970).

## Olga Levitan

(Jerusalem, Israel)

PhD in Theatre Studies,

Lecturer, Department of Theatre, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem  
Chair, The Israeli Center for the Documentation of the Performing Arts,  
The Faculty of the Arts, Tel Aviv University (retired in May 2022)

Email: olga.levitan@mail.huji.ac.il, levitan@tauex.tau.ac.il

ORCID: 0000-0003-2266-6252

## Yair Lipshitz

(Tel-Aviv, Israel)

PhD in Theatre Studies,

Senior Lecture, Department of Theatre Arts, Tel Aviv University

Email: yairlip@tauex.tau.ac.il

ORCID: 0000-0003-2339-4084