

# Multicultural Shakespeare: Translation, Appropriation and Performance

---

Volume 21

Article 3

---

6-30-2020

## Being European: "Hamlet" on the Israeli Stage

Reut Barzilai

*University of Haifa, Israel*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digijournals.uni.lodz.pl/multishake>

---

### Recommended Citation

Barzilai, Reut (2020) "Being European: "Hamlet" on the Israeli Stage," *Multicultural Shakespeare: Translation, Appropriation and Performance*: Vol. 21 , Article 3.

DOI: 10.18778/2083-8530.21.03

Available at: <https://digijournals.uni.lodz.pl/multishake/vol21/iss36/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Arts & Humanities Journals at University of Lodz Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in Multicultural Shakespeare: Translation, Appropriation and Performance by an authorized editor of University of Lodz Research Online. For more information, please contact [agnieszka.kalowska@uni.lodz.pl](mailto:agnieszka.kalowska@uni.lodz.pl).

Reut Barzilai\*

## Being European: *Hamlet* on the Israeli Stage

**Abstract:** One of the most prolific fields of Shakespeare studies in the past two decades has been the exploration of local appropriations of Shakespeare's plays around the world. This article, however, foregrounds a peculiar case of an *avoidance* of local appropriation. For almost 60 years, repertory Israeli theaters mostly refused to let *Hamlet* reflect the "age and body of the time". They repeatedly invited Europeans to direct *Hamlet* in Israel and offered local audiences locally-irrelevant productions of the play. They did so even though local productions of canonical plays in Israel tend to be more financially successful than those directed by non-Israelis, and even when local national and political circumstances bore a striking resemblance to the plot of the play. Conversely, when one Israeli production of *Hamlet* (originating in an experimental theatre) did try to hold a mirror up to Israeli society—and was indeed understood abroad as doing so—Israeli audiences and theatre critics failed to recognize their reflection in this mirror. The article explores the various functions that *Hamlet* has served for the Israeli theatre: a rite of passage, an educational tool, an indication of belonging to the European cultural tradition, a means of boosting the prestige of Israeli theatres, and—only finally—a mirror reflecting Israel's "age and body." The article also shows how, precisely because *Hamlet* was not allowed to reflect local concerns, the play mirrors instead the evolution of the Israeli theatre, its conflicted relation to the Western theatrical tradition, and its growing self-confidence.

**Keywords:** Theatre, appropriation, Zvi Friedland, Konrad Swinarski, Dinu Cernescu, Rina Yerushalmi, Steven Berkoff, Habima Theatre, The Cameri Theatre of Tel Aviv, Itim Ensemble, Haifa Municipal Theatre.

Hamlet famously argues that "the purpose of playing" is to hold the "mirror up to nature, to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure" (3:2:17, 18-20). Yet throughout the twentieth century, Israeli institutional repertory theatres repeatedly refused to appropriate *Hamlet* so as to let it reflect or comment on local concerns.<sup>1</sup> Even

---

\* University of Haifa, Israel.

<sup>1</sup> There are five government-subsidized repertory theatres in Israel: Habima (the Israeli National Theatre), The Cameri Theatre of Tel Aviv, the Haifa Municipal Theatre, the Jerusalem Khan Theatre and the Beersheba Theatre. The only Arabic-speaking

when Israel's political circumstances at the time of the play's production bore a striking resemblance to its plot, local theatres offered their audiences Marxist, Romanian or universal inflections of *Hamlet* with no local relevance. Conversely, when one production of *Hamlet* (staged by the experimental Itim Ensemble) did attempt to hold a mirror up to Israeli society, and indeed was understood abroad as an allegory on militarist Israel, local audiences and critics failed to recognize their own reflection. It was only in 2005, in its sixth Israeli production, that *Hamlet* was staged in a manner that both commented on local reality and was received as such.

This study reviews the history of *Hamlet* on the Israeli stage, from its first production in 1946 to the present day. It offers a short account of each production, the major trends in Israeli theatre at the time of its staging and the concurrent national and political circumstances. It then discusses the reception of each production, based on contemporary newspaper coverage, published interviews with actors and directors and scholarly analyses.<sup>2</sup>

Israeli productions of *Hamlet* have been studied in the past, most notably by Sharon Aronson-Lehavi, Pnina Porter in an unpublished dissertation and Avraham Oz in several studies of Shakespeare productions in Israel. This paper differs significantly from previous work in that its main interest lies in the relationship between *Hamlet*, Israeli theatre and Israeli society. Rather than an analysis of the performances themselves, the study explores the various functions that *Hamlet* has served in Israeli theatre. The first part focuses on the five productions of the play in the twentieth century, showing how Israeli theatre perceived *Hamlet* as a rite of passage, an educational tool, a sign of belonging to the European cultural tradition or a means of boosting the prestige of the theaters themselves. The second part focuses mainly on the play's 2005 production, which effectively and successfully staged *Hamlet* as a mirror reflecting contemporary local concerns.

The study foregrounds and explains the prolonged reluctance of Israeli theatre to engage with *Hamlet* and appropriate it in a locally relevant way. It shows how—precisely because the play was not allowed to comment on “the age and body of the time”—its productions instead reflect the evolution of Israeli theatre, its conflicted relationship with the Western theatrical tradition and its growing self-confidence.

---

repertory theatre in Israel is Haifa's Al-Midan Theatre. To the best of my knowledge there has been no production of *Hamlet* in Arabic in Israel to this day. This study, therefore, outlines the history of *Hamlet* in Hebrew-speaking repertory theatres, which appeal mainly to a Jewish-Israeli audience.

<sup>2</sup> I am grateful to The Israeli Center for the Documentation of the Performing Arts for granting me access to its valuable collection of newspaper coverage of Israeli theatre productions.

## Part I: Twentieth-Century Israeli *Hamlets*

Zvi Friedland, Habima Theatre, 1946

The first production of *Hamlet* in Tel Aviv preceded the birth of the state of Israel by two years. It premiered on 26 May 1946 at Habima Theatre and was directed by Zvi Friedland. *Hamlet* was the first Shakespearean tragedy staged by Habima, and the play's premiere, wrote a contemporary critic, "was more eagerly awaited than any first night in Palestine for many years" (F. M.).<sup>3</sup>

Unlike its successors, Habima's decision to produce *Hamlet* was motivated, at least in part, by national concerns. Friedland set out to "protect the theatre's honour" and prove to the British rulers of Palestine that Habima could successfully cope with an English masterpiece, after hearing from British officers that Habima was merely a limited, local Jewish theatre (Finkel 194). *Hamlet* served other national goals as well. Hebrew theatre in Palestine at the time, especially Habima, was committed to promoting the Hebrew language and educating the local Jewish population. Friedland's *Hamlet*, according to contemporary reviews, succeeded in both. The Hebrew translation of the play, commissioned for this production from the poet Avraham Shlonsky, was immediately recognized as a momentous cultural achievement. Critics also agreed that "such a play is appropriate for educating an audience, and especially youth, to appreciate theatre and thought" (Sussman).

The production of an English masterpiece under British rule invites a post-colonial analysis, but the case of Hebrew theatre in Mandatory Palestine differs from the post-colonial paradigm of colonizing (British) and colonized (native) cultures, in which "[c]olonial masters imposed their value system through Shakespeare, and in response colonized peoples often answered back in Shakespearean accents" (Loomba and Orkin 7). Shakespeare's plays, and *Hamlet* specifically, were not performed in Mandatory Palestine with the intention of inculcating the English language in the local populace, as was the case in other British colonies. On the contrary, *Hamlet* served the Zionist agenda by enriching and helping promote the revival of the *Hebrew* language in a population with a high proportion of immigrants.

Another important difference is that Habima was not exactly "native". The theatre was founded in Russia in 1918 and operated under the auspices of the Moscow Art Theatre, where Konstantin Stanislavski was one of its main patrons. It relocated to Palestine in 1931, after extensive tours in Europe and the United States, including performances of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* in Germany and England. Habima considered itself a European theatre, albeit

---

<sup>3</sup> The English translation of sources in Hebrew throughout the article is mine.

a Jewish one.<sup>4</sup> It did not owe its Shakespeare to the British Mandate. Nevertheless, its mission to educate the Jewish population in Palestine in the Western tradition marks it as an agent of Western culture in a non-Western region. In fact, Israeli theatre's function as an agent of the West was to prove central in shaping the history of *Hamlet* on the Israeli stage in the twentieth century.

To a large extent, Habima's national goals—promoting Hebrew, educating the local population and proving to the British that Hebrew theatre could successfully stage *Hamlet*—precluded a thoroughgoing local appropriation of the play. Rather, these goals necessitated a rendition that would be both faithful to Shakespeare's "original", as it was perceived at the time, and consistent with its representation in Western theatres. Indeed, Friedland mostly emulated contemporary European and American production styles. His three-and-a-half-hour *Hamlet* featured monumental palace scenography and lavish regal costumes, both of which situated the play in the distant past, possibly in its medieval origin. The production even included a live orchestra in the Russian tradition.

Friedland's *Hamlet* was a deliberately grand production befitting an important cultural moment, in which a world masterpiece became available for the first time to the Hebrew culture emerging in Palestine. However, translating *Hamlet* into Hebrew was not its only aim; it also sought to offer audiences the first uniquely Jewish *Hamlet*. This was achieved mainly through Friedland's editing of the plot and Shimon Finkel's portrayal of the protagonist.

Even for a three-and-a-half-hour performance, Friedland was obliged to edit the text. He cut Hamlet's speech to the players and eliminated Fortinbras entirely, ending the play with Horatio's "Good night sweet prince / And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest" (5:2:338-39). Yet Fortinbras was not cut solely due to time constraints. In her review of the production, Margot Klausner, one of the founders of the Israeli theater and film industry, interpreted this directorial decision as Friedland's response to the glorification of Fortinbras as a resolute, brave military leader in the (then recent) productions of *Hamlet* in Nazi Germany (6). The first Hebrew *Hamlet* thus excised the Nazi hero from the Jewish stage.

Although Friedland never explained his decision to cut Fortinbras, Finkel did write about the profound sense of responsibility he felt in "being the first Hamlet in Israel" and his efforts to create a distinctly *Jewish* protagonist, a Hamlet with a redemptive "messianic mission" (198). Finkel's Hamlet has been described as "a pure sacrificial figure, unrelentingly fighting for justice" (Aronson-Lehavi 317). The production as a whole, writes Sharon Aronson-Lehavi, conveyed a "sense of self-justice and victimization in the midst of a cruel world" which was related to the "feelings of the Jewish people" shortly

---

<sup>4</sup> A more appropriate paradigm would therefore be Homi Bhabha's model of hybridity.

after the Holocaust (317). Indeed, the portrayal of Hamlet as a redemptive sacrificial figure and the production's ending in death embodied this moment in Jewish history—after the Holocaust and before the establishment of the Jewish state.

The first Hebrew *Hamlet* was thus a synthesis of two conflicting impulses. On the one hand, it was designed to prove—both to the British and to local audiences—that the emergent Hebrew theatre in Palestine was good enough to stage a production of the world-famous English masterpiece on a par with its productions in established European and Russian theatres. On the other hand, its creators sought to offer audiences a Hebrew *Hamlet* with a distinctly Jewish inflection, indeed reflecting “the age and body” of their time.

For decades after Friedland's daring production, Israeli theatres shied away from illuminating *Hamlet* in a local light, focusing instead on proving, like Habima did, that they could stage the play just as well as more established Western theatres. To this end they commissioned European directors to stage *Hamlets* with no local relevance. It would be 40 years before an Israeli would direct *Hamlet* again; the next two Israeli *Hamlets* were directed by Eastern Europeans and engaged with issues that were only of concern in the directors' countries of origin. These were dis-located local appropriations.

Konrad Swinarski, The Cameri Theatre of Tel Aviv, 1966:  
To Be or Not to Be—European?

The second production of *Hamlet* in Israel was staged by the Cameri Theatre of Tel Aviv 20 years after Habima's production. The Cameri had previously staged only one Shakespearean tragedy, *Romeo and Juliet* (1957), directed by Israeli director Yosef Milo. For its first *Hamlet* the theatre commissioned Konrad Swinarski, an esteemed Polish director who had previously worked with Bertolt Brecht at the Berliner Ensemble. At this time Swinarski had just finished directing Tadeusz Różewicz's *The Card Index* at another Israeli playhouse.

Unlike the grandeur of Friedland's monumental palace, Swinarski's stage, which he designed himself, featured the seaport of a dilapidated Elsinore, where sacks (of grain?) were continually being unloaded, counted, registered and carried away. The stage was dominated by a grey, prison-like structure surrounded by a stone wall, which inspired, according to press reviews, a general atmosphere of dread and violence. Claudius (Yosef Yadin) was so convincingly portrayed as a kind-hearted uncle and a benevolent monarch that Hamlet's intense dislike of him seemed puzzling. Horatio was an opportunist, or a traitor, who transferred his service and allegiance to Fortinbras immediately after Hamlet's death. Fortinbras himself was a thug in a shiny white suit that contrasted sharply with the dark, shabby background.

Swinarski's production took an ideological socio-political stance, influenced by Marxist theory and Jan Kott's recently published *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*. Yeshayahu Weinberg, the Cameri's managing director at the time, explained that Swinarski saw the play as a clash between the old (the armed feudal lords, represented by Hamlet's father) and the new (the generation of commerce and diplomacy, represented by Hamlet and Claudius) (Weinberg). Swinarski, like Kott, believed that "the new" can never fully break away from the "negative tradition of the past" and must eventually appear as a defective, debased version of itself (Weinberg 6-7). In this production, Fortinbras, an impeccably dressed capitalist bully, personified the debasement of the promising ideal of free commerce and diplomacy.

Critics noted the production's shift away from the romantic view of the "philosophizing, contemplative Hamlet" and its focus on politics rather than philosophy (Feingold). Yet the nature of Swinarski's political message remained largely obscure for the actors and critics alike. "It was obvious that there was some new interpretative attempt", wrote one critic; it "was not made explicit in the production, but [...] it sufficed to ruin all the relationships in the play" (Evron, "Death and Commerce"). Actor Oded Kotler, who gave up the leading role during the play's rehearsals, described this production as "Konrad Swinarski, fuelled by Tel Aviv booze, directing Shakespeare's *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* in Shlonsky's Hebrew, with a Marxist orientation" (196). It was a recipe for failure.

The international mix that Kotler notes was hardly accidental. Whereas before the foundation of the State of Israel local theatres relied mainly on local directors and original plays, in the 1950s and '60s Israeli theatres tended to invite foreigners to stage world masterpieces (Levy 140). Israeli theatre historian Shosh Avigal points out Israel's deep "sense of isolation and enclosure" in those years, "surrounded by seven enemy Arab countries and without even television broadcasting to connect it to the Western world" (31). Israeli artists, "who were mainly the product of Western culture", she writes, "found themselves virtually imprisoned in an ambivalent island of Western culture within the Middle East, physically rooted in the East while spiritually focused on the West" (Avigal 31).<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> In the 1950s Israel absorbed a mass immigration of Jews from Arab countries such as Morocco, Yemen, Iran, Iraq and Libya. It was thus not only surrounded by Arab countries but also *contained* a large Jewish-Arab population, in addition to its marginalized Muslim and Christian Arab populations. Ella Shohat describes the cultural anxiety aroused in the European-Jewish population by the arrival of these Oriental Jews. She quotes David Ben-Gurion, Israel's prime minister at the time, who said: "We do not want Israelis to become Arabs. We are in duty bound to fight against the spirit of the Levant", and the Israeli diplomat Abba Eban, who argued that the "object should be to infuse [the Oriental Jews] with an Occidental spirit, rather than allow them to drag us into an unnatural Orientalism" (Shohat 4). The state settled

Interestingly, in an interview for *Al HaMishmar* the Cameri's administrative director, Yitzhak Kolker (more commonly known as Itzik Kol), presented the theatre's decision to commission Swinarski with a different emphasis:

Like every theatre, the Cameri has long aspired to stage a Shakespearean tragedy [...] [However, we] failed to find a director who could [do so]. Our directors claimed that they had nothing to say through *Hamlet*. Now we have an "optimal cast" for staging the play and a director who wants to direct it, Konrad Swinarski. He thinks he knows what the Danish Prince can say today to an Israeli audience.<sup>6</sup> (Meron)

By claiming that "every theatre" stages Shakespearean tragedies, Kolker implicitly identifies "theatre" with "Western theatre". Moreover, by implying that the Cameri's aspiration to be like every Western theatre is hindered by the incompetence of Israeli directors, Kolker draws attention to the tension between being Western and being Israeli (living in the Middle East but aspiring to be part of the West). The Cameri's ambition to consider itself equal to "every" Western theatre, on this view, necessitated commissioning non-Israelis with proven records in Western theatres to direct Shakespearean tragedies. Thus, whereas Friedland directed *Hamlet* to prove to the British that Habima was more than a limited local theatre, Swinarski was commissioned to direct *Hamlet* because the local theatre considered itself limited.

The tension between Europeanness and provincialism was particularly evident in the heated debate about Israeli theatre—its repertory, its aims and its status in relation to established European theatres—ignited by Swinarski's production. Even critics who deemed the production a complete failure applauded the Cameri for daring to stage *Hamlet*, considering the production an important step in the development of Israeli theatre. The controversy was about *how* a world masterpiece should be staged in Israel, or, more specifically, what degree of adaptation or appropriation should Israeli theatre allow itself.

Critics espousing the more traditional view insisted that if "one of our theatres finally dares to stage *Hamlet*, it would do well to avoid 'revolutionary' attempts at interpretation" (Evron, "Death and Commerce"). "Only a country where this play is a regular part of the theatrical repertory can allow itself to

---

many of the immigrants in *ma'abarot*—transit camps not much better than tent cities, constructed on the Israeli periphery. As early as 1953, the State of Israel, although in dire financial straits, initiated a project called "Theatre for the Ma'abarot", which brought theatrical productions to these temporary settlements in order to improve the Hebrew of Oriental Jews and expose them to Western culture and values.

<sup>6</sup> Kolker disregards the Cameri's 1957 production of *Romeo and Juliet* and erroneously presents *Hamlet* as the Cameri's first production of a Shakespearean tragedy.



experiment occasionally with unusual interpretations”; Israeli audiences, by contrast, needed “first get to know the play as it is” (ibid.).

Critics holding the opposing view denounced the demand for “an unchanging, conventional, univocal and literary” representation of *Hamlet* that lacks “life and adaptability” (Feingold). Critic Ben-Ami Feingold, for example, protested the demand that the play should be staged “as it is”, arguing that Israeli audiences expect only the “*Hamlet* that exists in their [...]closed and retarded minds”, and are therefore averse to “new and different attempts”. The only way to overcome Israeli theatre’s “depressing provincialism”, he asserted, was to continue staging innovative and challenging interpretations of canonical plays, even if such productions fail (Feingold).

Whereas critics who took the traditional view blamed the director’s radical interpretation and its baffled execution by the actors for the failure of Swinarski’s *Hamlet*, progressive critics blamed their traditionalist colleagues, the Israeli theatrical tradition and the audiences for the production’s poor reception. Feingold argued that Israeli theatre suffered from a “severe case of fear of heights” when confronted with Shakespeare, consequently failing to challenge its audience with novel productions of his plays (Feingold). The unflattering reception of the Cameri’s *Hamlet*, he contended, “does not attest to a failure on the part of Swinarski and his actors but to the failure of our very mediocre critics, whose narrow-mindedness rules out anything that is beyond convention-bound aesthetic mediocrity” (Feingold). Prominent Israeli author Shulamit Har-Even likewise insisted, “We have been presented with a *top-notch European production*, despite the insecurities on stage and in the audience” (8; my emphasis). Swinarski’s European production was not at fault; the problem was that the local actors, critics and audience were regrettably not European enough to appreciate it.

The question underlying the passionate debate regarding Swinarski’s production was thus “to be or not to be—European”. The next two productions of *Hamlet* in Israel also suffered from an identity crisis, as detailed below.

Dinu Cernescu, Habima 1983-84:  
To Be or Not to Be—Romanian?

The third Israeli production of *Hamlet* premiered at Habima in December 1983, less than two years after the 1982 Lebanon War, a tumultuous period for Israeli theatre and society. The conflict now known in Israel as The First Lebanon War was initially presented as “Operation Peace for Galilee”, a 48-hour limited military operation in Lebanon intended to stop the continual bombarding of northern Israeli towns from across the border. The operation, however, deteriorated into a prolonged, bloody and unpopular war. The Israeli public

protested against the death toll of what was perceived—for the first time in Israeli history—as an unnecessary or unjustified military conflict. Many were also outraged by the IDF’s silent consent to the massacre of hundreds of Palestinians in the Lebanese refugee camps Sabra and Shatila, an outcome of the Israeli incursion.

Israeli theatre at the time “was a theatre of protest”, both in “original drama and in local interpretations of translated classics” (Avigal 37). Thus, in 1983 Habima also staged *The Trojan Women*, Euripides’s anti-war play. *Hamlet*—featuring “the imminent death of twenty thousand men” led by Fortinbras on a futile military campaign—was not allowed to reverberate the Israeli public’s outrage at the devastating death toll of an unnecessary war. Instead, Habima presented its audience with a *Hamlet* about Communist Romania.

The production was staged by leading Romanian director Dinu Cernescu. Cernescu’s *Hamlet* opened with “Denmark’s a prison”, a line that was repeated twice more during the performance (Weitz). Scenic designer Lidia Pinkus-Gani accordingly planned the stage as a box constructed of high black walls, bare interiors, barred windows and narrow slits through which the characters spied on each other. It was dominated by a transforming apparatus that alternately represented Old Hamlet’s tomb, Claudius’s throne and Ophelia’s grave.

Cernescu made significant changes to the plot, rearranging scenes, omitting existing ones, adding new ones and redistributing some of the lines. His Ophelia was an astute politician who aspired to become queen, feigned madness and was eventually murdered by Gertrude. Horatio was a traitor in Fortinbras’s service and masqueraded as the Ghost of Hamlet’s father, intending to turn the prince against Claudius and thereby pave Fortinbras’s path to the Danish throne. At his coronation, however, Fortinbras, dressed in a heavy Russian coat, murdered Horatio, laughed insanely, and ended the play by yelling: “And now, silence!”

If critics were baffled by Swinarski’s interpretation, Cernescu’s *Hamlet* was unanimously understood as a political play about Eastern Europe and the Russian forces controlling—and silencing—it. However, in interviews with the Israeli press Cernescu repeatedly insisted that the issues he stressed “in the play [were] just as relevant to Poland, Israel or France” (Nagid).<sup>7</sup> Ironically enough, Cernescu even tried to emphasize his production’s specific relevance to Israel, claiming that his Horatio “tries to serve the foreign invaders”, while “Fortinbras

---

<sup>7</sup> It is no accident that Romania, Cernescu’s homeland, is absent from this list of countries to which *Hamlet* is relevant. Sarit Fuchs, who interviewed Cernescu, writes that when she doubted his insistence on the universality of his production, Cernescu’s interpreter whispered to her: “He cannot tell you anything else. He has to go back to Romania” (Fuchs, “We’re All Spies”).

embodies the external danger, which is very timely for many nations—particularly Israel” (Pomerantz). Cernescu obviously did not realize that for the first time since its inception, Israel was preoccupied not with foreign invasion but with the implications of its own invasion of another country.

Israeli theatre critics were not convinced by the director’s claims regarding the production’s local relevance. “The main problem of Cernescu’s *Hamlet* is that it responds to a political reality that is very real and pressing in Romania or Poland but is no more than an academic problem in Israel”, wrote one critic, adding that this *Hamlet* inspires “yearning for [...] a political production rooted in the here and now” (Weitz). Another critic asserted that while in dictatorships “one has no choice but to (ab)use sacred texts” in order to express a political opinion, “in a relatively free society it would be better to avoid such tricks, for which the only excuse is censorship” (Evron, “Castrated *Hamlet*”).

When critic Sarit Fuchs declared in *Ma’ariv* that “Cernescu’s *Hamlet*, even if he denies it, is an Eastern European one”, she presumably did not know how valid her assertion was. Cernescu’s production of *Hamlet* in Tel Aviv was in fact a re-production of a *Hamlet* he had directed at Bucharest’s Nottara theatre in 1974.<sup>8</sup> This production, of which the Israeli press was apparently unaware and which Cernescu himself neglected to mention, is now recognized as a milestone of political adaptations of Shakespeare, in the spirit of Jan Kott, in the Eastern European Communist Bloc.<sup>9</sup> It was described as “the most daring Romanian representation of Kott’s notion of the Grand Mechanism” (Nicolaescu 150), and the “first time in the history of *Hamlet* productions” that a Shakespearean performance “involved a subversive dimension intended to challenge the structures of authority in the Communist state” (Matei-Chesnoiu 205). This groundbreaking political production was in fact identical to the one Cernescu directed in Hebrew in Tel Aviv, from its unique stage design to the changes in the plot. Contrary to Cernescu’s claims, the third Israeli *Hamlet* was Romanian after all.

In a study of the reception of canonical plays in Israel Bilha Blum notes that Habima’s 1983 *The Trojan Women* is the only twentieth-century Israeli

---

<sup>8</sup> In the earlier production (with which Cernescu toured Bulgaria), Denmark was likewise “visually literalized as a prison” and “Old Hamlet’s coffin morphed into Claudius’s throne, then into the wedding table and into Gertrude’s bed, to end with its recycling of Ophelia’s tomb” (Nicolaescu 150–51). The Bucharest production also featured the same alterations to the plot: Horatio as the arch-schemer of the play, serving Fortinbras and masquerading as the Ghost, and Fortinbras ending the play by “silencing ... his new subjects” (Nicolaescu 151).

<sup>9</sup> In the 25 newspaper articles, of varying lengths, that I was able to retrieve, only one short and anonymous piece noted in passing that “Cernescu has already directed *Hamlet* in his homeland” (“Being Hamlet”).

production of a Greek tragedy (albeit in Jean-Paul Sartre's version) that was performed over 100 times (49). Blum attributes the production's unique success to its accurate reflection of the public (anti-war) atmosphere in Israel at the time of its staging. Whereas *The Trojan Women* was performed 123 times, Cernescu's locally-irrelevant *Hamlet* was performed only 86 times.

It seems that Israeli theatregoers, like the progressive critics cited above, now began to seek out theatre that reflected their own concerns. The next production of *Hamlet* in Israel, which premiered only five years after Cernescu's, indeed tried to "hold a mirror" up to contemporary Israel and engage with its major socio-political issues. Unfortunately, Israeli critics and audiences failed to recognize their own reflection in this mirror.

Rina Yerushalmi, Itim Ensemble / The Cameri, 1988–92:  
To Be or Not to Be—Israeli?

Some 42 years after Friedland's production, the fourth Israeli *Hamlet* was the first to be directed by an Israeli, and, to this date, remains the only Israeli production of the play to be directed by a woman. Since Israeli repertory theatres did not entrust locals with *Hamlet*, Rina Yerushalmi, who had previously directed *Macbeth* at the Haifa Municipal Theatre (1986), staged her *Hamlet* at Matan: The Centre for Experimental Theatre, and later founded the experimental theatre group Itim Ensemble. The production, which won the 1990 Margalit Award for Best Director and Best Production, premiered at the Akko Festival of Alternative Theatre and was later adopted by the Cameri, where it ran for three years. It was also performed at the International Shakespeare Festival in Braunschweig, Germany, 1990; the BAM, New York, 1992; and the International Holland Festival, Amsterdam, 1992.

At the Cameri Yerushalmi's *Hamlet* was staged in an old rehearsal studio renovated to look like a black box. The dominant colors were brown and black, creating a deliberate "effect of something out of a 1930s film intrigue" (Ben-Zvi 375). There was no stage, and the "minimalist setting allowed Yerushalmi to focus her production on physical, choreographic, and psychological imagery produced by her group of young actors", led by Shuli Rand as Hamlet (Oz 845).

Yerushalmi restricted the number of spectators to 80, kept the lights on throughout the performance to ensure that the audience was clearly visible, and deliberately transgressed spatial boundaries between play and audience. In order to inspire a "feeling of direct connection and participation with the action", she explained, the audience's seats were "in single rows so that the spectators are not protected by people in front or behind them" (Ben-Zvi 374). The actors sat on chairs adjacent to the audience's seats, coming forward to perform their roles

in a circle of light at the center of the hall and then returning to “their chairs in the audience, from which they watch the action until they are to appear again” (Ben-Zvi 374).

Yerushalmi thus removed the spatial and visual distinctions between actors and spectators, with Hamlet emerging from the audience and coming back to die among its members. What was the rationale behind this ploy—was *Hamlet* indistinguishable from its Israeli audience because it was an Israeli *Hamlet*, or because its events could play out anywhere? The answer to this question appears to be contingent on time and place: Yerushalmi answered it differently while the play was still running and in interviews held in retrospect, and the production was understood differently when performed in Israel and abroad.

In the play’s program at the Akko Festival, Yerushalmi explained that she deliberately avoided an interpretation and localization of *Hamlet* and had instead deconstructed the play into its various components in order to emphasize its universal moral aspects, especially those related to revenge (Porter 159–60). In a 1995 interview with Linda Ben-Zvi, Yerushalmi reiterated her belief that “*Hamlet* arouses in us a need to examine the way we relate to existential issues of our lives” (Ben-Zvi 377). She also explained that at the heart of the play were two interrelated existential questions: “to be or not to be” and “to kill or not to kill” (Ben-Zvi 377). For Yerushalmi, the social demand “to kill” entails a personal loss of the will “to be”; as the Itim Ensemble website states, she “subversively found in Hamlet’s death wish a reasonable reaction to the murder/revenge that he should execute” (“Itim Ensemble *Hamlet*”).

The difficulty of reconciling “social morality” with personally motivated actions, Yerushalmi argued, exists in *every* society, allowing any audience to see itself reflected in the play (Porter 159). But although presented in universal terms, these conflicts—“to be or not to be” and “to kill or not to kill”—were especially pertinent in Israel. At this time the country was coping both with the first Intifada (the Palestinian uprising against Israeli military rule in Gaza and the West Bank, 1987–1993) and with the weekly death toll exacted by the South Lebanon Security Belt, imposed following the Israeli occupation of Lebanon in the First Lebanon War.

In a 1996 interview with Ben-Zvi Yerushalmi stated that she chose *Hamlet* because of its local (rather than universal) relevance: “I needed to do the play. If I were sitting in London, I would not need to address such questions. I chose the play because it is debating the morality behind killing ... This is the most painful issue facing Israel today” (Ben-Zvi 377–78). “I don’t change the play to fit our situation”, she continued; “*Hamlet* offers insights into who we are and why we are. The real issue for *Hamlet* is should he or should he not kill” (Ben-Zvi 378). For Yerushalmi, *Hamlet* and Israel engage with the same issues: the morality behind killing another person and the impact of the need to kill on the will to live.

Yerushalmi was disappointed by the failure of Israeli audiences and critics to understand her production's local relevance. In fact, one of the most remarkable aspects of this production was the contrast between its reception in Israel and abroad. Whereas critics abroad "tended to see in this production an allegory on Israel as a belligerent society" (Kaynar 75), local audiences and theatre critics failed to recognize themselves in the mirror that Yerushalmi held up to them.<sup>10</sup>

Yerushalmi attributed this failure to contemporary Israeli audiences' poor understanding of the theatrical language. "Education about theatre by the critics has been very poor," she argued, "limited to 'I like the play, I don't like the play,' instead of allowing the audience to understand how to see a play's language so that the audience can make up its own mind" (Ben-Zvi 378). I would like to suggest that Yerushalmi's theatrical language, which preceded its time, was not clear enough. In fact, in addition to her explicit presentation of this production as universally rather than locally oriented, Yerushalmi consistently weakened the local message that she was trying to convey.

As an example of the poor understanding of theatrical language in Israel, Yerushalmi describes the misunderstanding of the play's opening:

[At] the beginning of the performance, the company stands in silence [...] In Israel you stand still once a year for the commemoration of the dead soldiers in all our wars. Audience and critics didn't see the connection (probably because we didn't have the sirens that mark the moment). (Ben-Zvi 378)

The sirens, as Yerushalmi acknowledges in a parenthetical remark, are the absolute signifiers of Israel's Memorial Day; without them, the opening of the performance was no more than a moment of silence, disconnected from the national context she wished to suggest.

Another example of the unrealized local potential of Yerushalmi's production is its portrayal of the Gravedigger. The production's page on the Itim Ensemble website exemplifies Yerushalmi's "political interpretation" of *Hamlet* through "the Gravedigger, who was dressed in military uniform [and] invited Hamlet into the grave while singing a lullaby" ("Itim Ensemble *Hamlet*"). The powerful connection between the young generation, the military and its invitation into the grave was lost on local critics, but through no fault of their own. The Gravedigger was dressed in a long military coat of the kind that the IDF does *not* use. Since he was also barefoot and seemed to be naked underneath the coat that reached down to his knees, the Gravedigger looked nothing like an Israeli soldier.

---

<sup>10</sup> Only one critic noted in passing that "Yerushalmi [did] not ignore the political aspects" of the play, but did not specify what these aspects were (Yaron).

“For the political potential of Shakespeare’s plays to be released”, writes Wilhelm Hortmann, “three things must come together: a political or social situation crying out for critical comment; a director and ensemble willing, able (and also ruthless enough) to use the plays for this purpose; and audiences alive to the sociopolitical climate and therefore primed to catch allusions” (213–14). Yerushalmi, it seems, was not ruthless enough. Breaking the association of Shakespeare’s classic with other contexts—a medieval European monarchy, Marxist Poland, or Communist Romania—required a more explicit theatrical language.

Yerushalmi’s production thus failed to realize its potential as political commentary. An effective, indeed a *first*, localization of *Hamlet* required a stronger and clearer message. The stage, it seems, was not yet set for a truly Israeli *Hamlet*. This was still the case seven years later: for the play’s next Israeli production a foreign director was again invited to recycle a European production of *Hamlet*.

Steven Berkoff, Haifa Municipal Theatre, 1999–2000:  
Being European (Again)

For its first production of *Hamlet*, the Haifa Municipal Theatre commissioned British director Steven Berkoff to recreate a *Hamlet* he had directed and starred in 20 years earlier with the London Theatre Group. Except for its Hebrew translation and Israeli actors, there was nothing new in this production. Not only did Berkoff publish a scene-by-scene description of it in his book *I Am Hamlet* (1989), but as part of its prolonged European tour, his *Hamlet* had already been performed—in Haifa and elsewhere in Israel—in 1980.<sup>11</sup>

Berkoff’s 1999 production of *Hamlet*, which also travelled to the Autumn Festival in Rome, was nevertheless well received by both audience and critics. Berkoff did not remain in Israel to enjoy the production’s success; he spent a month (January 1999) working with the local actors in Haifa and left Israel before the premiere. The production, like Berkoff’s original one, was minimalist, lacking props and scenery (even without swords for the final duel) and relying heavily on the actors’ physicality and movement. Being a recreation of a 20-year-old European production, Berkoff’s *Hamlet* did not engage with local affairs. This was unfortunate because, as was the case with Cernescu’s 1983 production, in 1999 there was an obvious analogy between *Hamlet* and the state of affairs in Israel.

The 1990s were an especially turbulent decade in Israeli history. The peace treaty between Israel and Jordan (1994) and the Oslo Accords between

---

<sup>11</sup> For Berkoff’s account of this tour see Berkoff (“Hamlet at Passover in Israel, 1980”).

Israel and the Palestinians (1993–95) brought with them tangible hope for the end of the bloody conflict between Israel and its neighbors. Some Israeli Jews, however, perceived the Oslo agreements as a threat to the survival and wholeness of the Jewish state, and the radical right-wing opposition to the peace process eventually led to the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in November 1995, and to Benjamin Netanyahu's rise to power in the ensuing elections. Meanwhile, Israel was also coping with waves of terrorist attacks, in which suicide bombers set off explosions in buses, cafés and shopping malls, killing dozens.

In an interview with Sarit Fuchs, Berkoff, a British Jew, referred to Israel's contemporary political circumstances and maintained that Netanyahu, then at the end of his first term, jeopardized the future of the Jewish State "by alienating millions of Arabs" (Fuchs, "Some Character"). Fuchs astutely criticized the absence of these views from Berkoff's production, pointing out the obvious parallel between *Hamlet* and contemporary Israeli politics and implicitly suggesting that it was cowardly to complain about politics in newspaper interviews and disregard it in one's art:

Strange. If Berkoff had decided to make committed theatre, risky theatre, he would have easily and obviously [...] presented this triple analogy: Claudius, the King of Denmark, who is responsible for the murder of the previous king, as Bibi [Netanyahu]; the murdered king—the Ghost—as Rabin; and Hamlet as an Israeli Everyman. (Fuchs, "Some Character")

Asserting that "*Hamlet* is a political play", Fuchs also stressed the political resonance inadvertently created by the casting of actor Doron Tavory—an activist for peace between Israel and the Palestinians—in the leading role. "[W]hoever is familiar with Tavory's history," she noted, "knows what he is saying when he shoots out [...] in sarcastic desperation" Hamlet's speech about Fortinbras (Fuchs, "Some Character"):

... to my shame, I see  
The imminent death of twenty thousand men,  
That for a fantasy and trick of fame  
Go to their graves like beds, fight for a plot  
Whereon the numbers cannot try the cause,  
Which is not tomb enough and continent  
To hide the slain. (*Hamlet*, 4:4:59-65)

Tavory himself, however, denied that the production offered a "political interpretation", and insisted that it intended "to tell the story in the most naïve way" (Amir).



Unlike Cernescu in 1983, Berkoff was aware of the parallels between contemporary Israel and *Hamlet's* Denmark, and even acknowledged these similarities and their perception by Israeli audiences, in a piece he published in *The Independent* ("Finding a Ready Market for a Hebrew *Hamlet*", n.p). Yet he, too, merely recreated in Israel a production he had directed in another place at another time. The fifth Israeli *Hamlet*, was thus, once again, directed by a foreigner with no attempt at a local appropriation, despite the obvious similarities between its plot and Israel's national circumstances at the time of its staging.

Berkoff's production, created in the late 1970s with a European audience in mind, was certainly not meant to be "about" Israeli politics. However, as Hortmann notes, sometimes "extraneous events and conditions [...] can suddenly charge plays with contemporary meaning. In such cases it is not even necessary to alter the text; it is the act of performing a particular play at a particular historical juncture that constitutes the political significance" (216). Why should the production's obvious local relevance, once it had surfaced, be actively denied by the director and the leading actor? The answer may lie in the history of the Haifa Municipal Theatre, which for many years was at the forefront of political theatre in Israel, staging controversial original plays (most notably by Yehoshua Sobol) and groundbreaking political productions of canonical plays (such as a Hebrew/Arabic production of *Waiting for Godot* in 1984). Such provocative political productions are often not profitable, and the theatre may have been trying to reassure prospective playgoers that its treatment of *Hamlet* was "safe". Such caution may have been unnecessary. The next Israeli production of *Hamlet*, which alluded both to the Rabin assassination and to Israel's military rule in the Occupied Territories, was the most successful production of *Hamlet* in the history of Israeli theatre.

### Twentieth-Century Israeli *Hamlets* in Context

In her study of the reception of canonical plays in Israel Bilha Blum shows the tendency of Israeli repertory theatres, beginning in the 1970s and especially in the 1980s and 1990s, to adapt canonical plays to local circumstances rather than emphasize their universal aspects (62). "Israeli productions of Shakespeare's plays", she notes, likewise "shifted from documenting and recreating the plays' original plot and era to making relevant contemporary statements that apply to the spectators' present reality" (165). Israeli theatre's prolonged reluctance to locally appropriate *Hamlet* thus stands in sharp contrast with its growing tendency to adapt other canonical plays to the Israeli contexts in which they were staged.

The absence of a local contemporary statement in *Hamlet* productions is closely associated with Israeli theatre's unwillingness to entrust local directors with this play. Whereas *Hamlet* was repeatedly directed by foreigners, other Shakespearean plays were directed by Israelis, with varying degrees of adaptation to local circumstances. Thus, all four Israeli productions of *Richard III* (1966–1992), five out of the eight productions of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1949–2001) and three out of the six productions of *Romeo and Juliet* (1957–2000) were directed by locals, including a co-production of the latter in which Jewish actors from the Khan Theatre played the Capulets in Hebrew and Arab actors from the Al-Qasba Theatre played the Montagues in Arabic (1994).<sup>12</sup>

How can *Hamlet*'s unusual staging history in Israel be explained? Was it fear of heights, as Feingold diagnosed in 1966? Did Israeli theatre managers indeed believe that Israeli directors could not handle *Hamlet*? Or did they assume that this was the belief of their audiences? This seems unlikely. Blum shows that productions of canonical plays directed by Israelis are consistently better received and more financially successful than those directed by foreigners (61). Financially—and Israeli theatres have been struggling with budgetary problems for decades—it pays off to offer locally relevant productions of world masterpieces. Why, then, did Israeli repertory theatres repeatedly commission foreigners to direct locally irrelevant *Hamlets* for almost 60 years?

It seems that, due to its unique status in the Western canon, Israeli repertory theatres used *Hamlet* not to reflect the “age and body of the time” but to project their own image of themselves as belonging to the European theatrical culture. Friedland emulated American and European styles to show the British that Hebrew theatre was on a par with Western ones; Swinarski, a rising star in the European theatrical arena, would, it was hoped, sprinkle some stardust on the Israeli scene; and both Cernescu and Berkoff reproduced in Israel *Hamlets* they had directed in Europe. What could be a better way to mark the Israeli theatre as a European one than to have the most famous Western play directed by famous Europeans?

This state of affairs changed with Omri Nitzan's production of *Hamlet*, which premiered at the Cameri Theatre in January 2005. Nitzan both fleshed out the unrealized political potential of Yerushalmi's production and emphasized the obvious similarity between Israeli politics at the turn of the twenty-first century and the plot of *Hamlet*—a similarity that was ignored in Berkoff's production. His riveting locally-relevant rendition of the play was so enthusiastically received that it ran for more than six years and a thousand performances.

---

<sup>12</sup> The production was co-directed by Eran Baniel (Khan) and Fouad Awad (Al-Kasba).

## Part II: Israeli *Hamlets* in the Twenty-First Century

Omri Nitzan, The Cameri Theatre, 2005:  
Being Israeli

Omri Nitzan has been a leading figure in the Israeli theatre scene since the 1970s. In addition to directing plays by prominent Israeli playwrights, as well as by Brecht, Becket, Ibsen, Strindberg and others, Nitzan served as the artistic director of several leading Israeli repertory theatres from 1980 to 2017 (Yerushalmi 482–83). He is also the Israeli who has directed the largest number of Shakespeare's plays in Israeli history ("Omri Nitzan—Artistic Director"). Before tackling *Hamlet* in 2005, he had already directed eight Shakespearean plays and even Verdi's *Othello* (2001). Nitzan added a local dimension to most of his Shakespearean productions, often through the scenography, designed mostly by Ruth Dar, and the casting. His *Twelfth Night* (Habima, 1980), for example, was situated on an Israeli beach, and his *Much Ado about Nothing* (Haifa, 1983) was set in Mandatory Palestine (Yerushalmi 498).

Nitzan's *Hamlet*, which premiered on 2 January 2005, won all the major Israel Theatre Awards for 2006 and participated in international Shakespeare festivals in Gdansk (2005), Bucharest (2006), Washington (2007), Moscow (2009) and Shanghai (2009), to great critical acclaim. Reviews in the Israeli press lauded it as "undoubtedly the best thing the Israeli theatre has seen in many years;" Nitzan, wrote one critic, "takes a classic [and] turns it into a meaningful contemporary play without stripping it of its true [...] meaning" (Ajzenstadt, 42). If Israeli theatre has moved from faithfully reproducing canonical plays to updating them and adapting them, Nitzan's *Hamlet*, which alludes to twenty-first-century Israel while avoiding historical exactitude, achieved both. It was perceived as doing justice to Shakespeare's text while effectively holding up a mirror to Israeli society, as both "timeless and contemporary" (Handelsaltz, "*Hamlet*").

The feature that made Nitzan's *Hamlet* relevant to both time and place was mainly its dissolution of spatial, temporal, functional and linguistic boundaries between the play and the audience. Ruth Dar's anti-naturalistic scenography collapsed the distinction between audience space and performance space. The production transgressed temporal boundaries by continuing during the intermission. In addition, Nitzan effectively cast the audience as the Danish court and invited the spectators to participate in the performance. Most importantly, Nitzan inserted allusions to contemporary Israel into the text and used IDF-like uniforms to make a clear statement about Israel's belligerence.

Nitzan's *Hamlet*, like Yerushalmi's, was performed in one of the Cameri's rehearsal studios (the Cameri 3, seating 165). This small auditorium

had no stage, and the action took place mainly in five performing spaces: four of them encircled the audience, and the fifth, an aisle resembling a catwalk, divided the audience in two. Since the lighting design ensured that the audience remained visible throughout the performance, Nitzan effectively enabled the spectators to see themselves—literally and symbolically—from the minute they took their seats.

The seats were swivel chairs that allowed a view of the entire auditorium, but also created a slight sense of dizziness and disorientation. Spectators occasionally had to turn their chairs 180 degrees to watch scenes that took place behind them, and when the auditorium was dimmed between scenes, the audience had no idea where the actors would appear next. The spectators were thus literally kept on the edge of their seats.

The lighting design projected a pattern of windows on the auditorium walls, suggesting that the audience was in the Danish palace with the characters. In this production, the spectators were cast as the Danish courtiers; they were, in Hamlet's words, "mutes"—actors without speaking roles—rather than "audience to this act" (5:2:314).

The performance opened with the royal procession (act 1 scene 2) entering through the audience door. Claudius (Gil Frank) marched through the auditorium to a podium with a microphone, began with "Though yet of Hamlet, our dear brother's death, the memory be green", then gestured to the audience to rise for a minute's silence in memory of the late king (1:2:1).<sup>13</sup> Following the moment of silence, during which the spectators played along with his show of mourning for his brother, Claudius continued his speech.<sup>14</sup> Upon the reference to his recent marriage to the Queen, the actors started clapping and signaled to the spectators to join in. Having thus cheered Claudius's marriage to Gertrude, the audience became the referent for his "Nor have we herein barr'd / *Your* better

<sup>13</sup> Since the text of the play was adapted to a contemporary linguistic register, when quoting from the production I shall supply the Hebrew original and an English translation of it. The corresponding lines in the play are cited in the body text or referenced in the notes. Here the text of Nitzan's production reads:

"זכרו של המלך המנוח / אחינו / טרי עדיין בלב כולנו."

"The memory of the late king, our brother, is still fresh in our hearts."

<sup>14</sup> Although audience involvement is a relatively standard feature of experimental or fringe theatre, the Cameri is a mainstream repertory theatre with productions normally performed on proscenium stages in auditoria seating hundreds. The expectation that the audience participate in the performance, especially at such an early stage, was a startling (if pleasant) surprise. Those spectators who had previous knowledge of the play may have felt uncomfortable fulfilling Claudius's orders. Those who tried to defy him by remaining seated (as I did when I watched this production for the first time), found that the cast continued gesturing towards them to rise until, embarrassed by the gazes of the entire cast and audience, they eventually complied, thereby learning a painful lesson about the difficulty of resistance.

wisdoms, which have *freely* gone / With this affair along. For all, our thanks” (1:2:14-16; my emphasis).<sup>15</sup> Thus, less than five minutes into the performance the spectators became Claudius’s accomplices in the usurpation of the crown, the incestuous marriage to Gertrude and the disappointment of Hamlet’s ambition.

This active, though silent, complicity, which was crucial for the local political dimension of the play, was not without consequence. Laertes (Amir Krief) later stormed into the auditorium (through the main door) with a semi-automatic rifle, shot in the air, then aimed his weapon at Claudius. With the armed rebel at one end of the auditorium and the King at the other, the audience—Claudius’s court—remained in the line of fire until the king managed to placate the rebel.

Nitzan’s production also subverted temporal boundaries, most notably by continuing during the intermission—happening, as it were, in *real* time. The most important way in which Nitzan localized his *Hamlet*, however, was by inserting into the text direct allusions to Israel of the twenty-first century.

The performance text was based on T. Carmi’s translation of *Hamlet*, which Nitzan edited and adapted with the help of poet and literary scholar Dan Almagor. The result was a fluent and lively modern Hebrew text, which contributed to the production’s here-and-now quality by making the characters sound local and contemporary, and, even more so, by inserting allusions to Israeli reality, such as rendering Shakespeare’s “certain convocation of politic worms” as “a glorious *Knesset* of worms” (4:3:19-20).<sup>16</sup>

A subtle, though crucial, allusion to Israeli reality was inserted in the closet scene. Among the many abusive epithets Hamlet hurls at Claudius during this scene, Nitzan and Almagor inserted “עשב שוטה” (*eshev shoteh*), meaning “a stray weed” or a “wild weed”. This phrase, originating in the idiom “every garden may have some weeds”, does not appear either in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* or in Carmi’s translation. While it would not capture the attention of foreign audiences, Israelis—certainly in 2005—would immediately recognize the term as an allusion to the assassin of Prime Minister Rabin in 1995, not far from the Cameri Theatre building.

The Rabin assassination was a shock for Israelis of all political affiliations. Until 4 November 1995 it was almost unimaginable that an Israeli prime minister could be assassinated by an Israeli Jew—metaphorically, by his brother (the Hebrew term for “civil war” literally means “war of brothers”). Two phrases were repeated again and again in the ensuing social upheaval: “stray

<sup>15</sup> "ובעשותנו כך לא התעלמנו מעצתכם הנבונה, שקראה 'אמן' לכל מעשינו. ועל כך – תודה." "

“And in so doing we have not overlooked your wise counsel, which said ‘Amen’ to all we have done. For this – our thanks.”

<sup>16</sup> "כנסת מפוארת של תולעים" "

weed” and “silent majority”. Leaders of the religious right were quick to dissociate themselves from the assassin by condemning him as a “stray weed” in their garden. Leftist Israelis attacked leaders of the right (among them Netanyahu) for their acquiescence in the face of escalating calls for violence against Rabin in the months before the assassination. Rabin’s followers also openly berated themselves for their own silence, repeatedly referring to the “silent majority” of Israelis who, until the night of the assassination, did nothing to show Rabin their support.<sup>17</sup>

The association of the traumatic assassination of Rabin with Claudius’s act of fratricide and regicide added a powerful local dimension to the audience’s role as the Danish court. Nitzan’s casting of the audience as the silent accomplices of a man who murders his brother and then takes over the state was not just a way of bringing the audience closer to the world of *Hamlet*; it was a political act that underlined the parallels between Elsinore and Tel Aviv.

Another politically charged Hebrew term employed in this production although it does not appear in the English version is *כיבוש* (*kibbush*), occupation, which designates Israeli military rule over the Palestinian population in the Occupied Territories in the West Bank. Nitzan employed this term four times, always in relation to Fortinbras (who wore an IDF-like uniform) and his pointless military campaign against Poland.

Fortinbras (Aviv Zemer) and his Captain (Morris Cohen) carried weapons and were dressed in khaki uniforms that highly resembled those of the IDF. The Captain’s description of their campaign included two occurrences of *kibbush* (occupation), none of which originated in Shakespeare’s text:

Truly to speak, and with no addition,  
We go to **occupy** a little patch of ground  
That is not worth much.  
[Only for the glory of the **occupation.**]<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> H. Shmuel Erlich documents “the widespread public reaction of remorse and guilt” after the assassination, which often manifested itself in utterances such as “‘we did not do enough’ and ‘we are all guilty’”. He also notes Leah Rabin’s anguished cry “Where have you been?” to “those who came to express their support after the murder” (Shmuel Erlich 196).

<sup>18</sup> These lines correspond to act 4, scene 4, lines 17-19. In Hebrew (my emphasis):

למען האמת,  
ובלי קישוטים מיותרים: אנחנו  
מתכוונים ל**כבוש** חלקה קטנה  
של אדמה, שאינה שווה הרבה.  
רק לתפארת ה**כיבוש**.

Hamlet himself then reiterated *kibbush*/occupation twice in his subsequent soliloquy, which Nitzan cut and rearranged to shift its emphasis from Hamlet's self-reproach to a discussion of death and occupation, and which was delivered from Claudius's podium to highlight its political nature. "Only for the glory of the occupation", Hamlet says,

I see how death swoops down on tens of thousands,  
Who for a dream of occupation and a trick of fame,  
Go to their inexorable burial like beds.  
To fight for a piece of dirt so small  
That cannot contain them living,  
and will not contain them in their death.<sup>19</sup>

The plot of land that Fortinbras and his army went to occupy in their IDF-like uniform, and for which so many are to die a futile death, thus became not just an occupied territory, but the Occupied Territories.

Fortinbras appeared again in the play's last scene. He entered immediately after Hamlet's death, marched through the auditorium in his khaki uniform, asked no questions and sat on the King's empty throne. The dialogue died with Hamlet; barely a quarter remained of the play's last 42 lines, and only Fortinbras spoke. Nitzan left no trace of Fortinbras's request to hear the story, of his orders to "bear Hamlet like a soldier to the stage", or of the reverent sincerity that can be read into his lines (5:2:375). Claiming the kingdom on the grounds of "fathers' rights" (another allusion to right-wing Israeli political discourse, which stresses the ancestral rights of Jews to the Holy Land), Fortinbras kicked Hamlet's body away from the podium to lie at the horrified audience's feet.<sup>20</sup> Now began the reign of Fortinbras, the rule of death and occupation, with the spectators, for the last few minutes of the performance, becoming his subjects.

Soon, however, the play was over, to the sound of deafening music. The actors took their bows, the spectators cheered them enthusiastically and then exited to the streets of Tel Aviv. It was up to each of them to decide whether the rule of death and occupation ended when they left the auditorium, or whether the story (again) continued in real time.

---

<sup>19</sup> These lines correspond to act 4, scene 4, lines 32-66. In Hebrew:

בשביל תפארת הכיבוש  
אני רואה כיצד המוות עט על רבבות אדם,  
אשר בגלל חלום כיבוש ושטות של תהילה  
הולכים אל קבורתם הבלתי נמנעת כאל שנתם.  
להילחם על פיסת עפר כל כך קטנה,

<sup>20</sup> שאין בה מקום לכולם בחייהם, והיא לא תכיל אותם גם במותם.  
”יש לי זכות אבות בממלכה הזאת”

Maor Zagouri, Kibbutzim College of Education / Habima, 2015

The seventh Israeli production of *Hamlet* was directed in 2015 by Maor Zagouri, a young and highly successful Israeli playwright, screenwriter, and director, at the Theatre Department of the Kibbutzim College of Education, and was later adopted by Habima, where it ran until 2017. Zagouri departed significantly from Shakespeare's text: he added a chorus of nine women who delivered Hamlet's monologues as well as the Ghost's lines (which were consequently understood as voices inside mad Hamlet's head); cut several characters (e.g., Fortinbras, the actors); replaced "The Mousetrap" with an allusion to Disney's *The Lion King* (itself loosely based on *Hamlet*); redistributed some of the lines, and even changed the play's ending. In its final scene, Hamlet does not die, but rather takes his dead mother's crown and wears it; it is Horatio, a traitor who cooperates with Claudius, who dies instead. The play ends not with Hamlet's "the rest is silence", Horatio's "good night sweet prince" or Fortinbras's "bear Hamlet like a soldier to the stage", but with Hamlet's "Who calls me coward?" (5:2:337, 338, 375; 2:2:523-24).<sup>21</sup>

As Margaret Jane Kidnie argues, the "criteria that are sufficient to mark out 'the work'—and so to separate it from adaptation, or what is 'not the work'—constantly shift over time [...] in response to textual and theatrical production" (7). Adaptation, she shows, is defined at a specific time by "communities of users who accept, reject, or, more often, debate as genuine a new print edition or a particular theatrical enactment" (Kidnie 7). Zagouri's production, described in local reviews as a "fascinating improvisation on Shakespeare's *Hamlet*" (Handelsaltz, "Jam Session") and "*Hamlet* by William Zagouri" (Slonim), was indeed perceived as an improvisation on the play rather than as a rendition of it. Nevertheless, it was well-received by both audience and critics.

The seventh—and so far, last—production of *Hamlet* in a mainstream Israeli repertory theatre was thus a fearless, innovative, radical improvisation on Shakespeare's classic. Israeli theatre, it seems, has finally overcome its fear of heights. *Hamlet* is not sacred—or necessarily foreign—anymore.

## Conclusion

"The act of representing a Shakespearian play," notes Alexander Huang, "is not simply a process of representing that play itself but rather the dynamics between the locality Shakespeare represents and the locality the performers and audience

<sup>21</sup> "מי קורא לי פחדן?"

This line is based on Hamlet's "Am I a coward? / Who calls me villain...." (2.2.523–24)



represent” (190). When an early modern English play about medieval Denmark is staged in twentieth-century Israel by Polish, Romanian and English directors who ignore the locality of the actors and the audience, the dynamic Huang indicates becomes especially complex.

As Eli Rozik-Rosen notes, the production of world masterpieces in repertory Israeli theatres serves two purposes: on the one hand, it marks Israeli theatre’s self-inclusion in Western culture; on the other hand, it serves the spectators’ need to see themselves, their culture and their society reflected in these plays (41). Except for Friedland’s early interpretation, Israeli productions of *Hamlet* in the twentieth century served mainly the first purpose—to mark Israeli theatre as part of Western culture. This purpose, which motivated the repeated commissioning of non-Israelis to direct the play, shaped the complex dynamic of localities (Shakespearean, Israeli, Eastern European, Western European) described above. This dynamic, in turn, reflected Israeli theatre’s conflicted sense of locality: geographically in the East while aspiring to belong culturally to the West.

Although some of the reviews quoted in this paper treat Shakespeare’s text as “sacred”, and although what Feingold identified as Israeli theatre’s fear of heights is undeniable, productions of *Hamlet* on the Israeli stage were *not* traditional or straightforward ones, as might have been expected. In fact, except for the first in 1946, Israeli productions of the play tended to be radical adaptations, in terms of either plot or theatrical form. Swinarski’s and Cernescu’s productions were both dis-located local adaptations of the play; they were mirrors reflecting other places. In addition, since Yerushalmi’s 1989 production, all the performances of *Hamlet* in mainstream repertory Israeli theatres integrated elements from experimental theatre, such as the transgression of traditional spatial boundaries between the audience and the play. It was not a sense of reverence or fear of heights that underlay the history of *Hamlet* on the Israeli stage, but a strong desire to be considered European.

The second purpose that Rozik-Rosen identifies—reflecting local audiences’ concerns—was achieved only in 2005, almost 60 years after *Hamlet*’s first Israeli production. This was the first time since Friedland’s groundbreaking work that a local director (Omri Nitzan) was commissioned by a repertory Israeli theatre to stage a politically relevant production of *Hamlet*. Nitzan was a perfect match for this almost unprecedented role, for two reasons. One is that he had a proven record of (successfully) staging more Shakespearean plays than any other Israeli director. The other is that as the artistic director of the Cameri at the time, Nitzan was uniquely positioned to commission *himself*.

Nitzan’s production—an effective *glocal* rendition of the play, a palimpsest of global and local meanings—served both purposes identified by Rozik-Rosen. It was an easily identifiable Western masterpiece, celebrated by an American critic as “*Hamlet* as Shakespeare would have Wanted It” (Ritchey),

while at the same time reflecting Israeli concerns (such as the fleeting reference to Rabin's assassination).

The global success of Nitzan's *Hamlet* paved the way for Habima's adoption, a decade later, of Maor Zagouri's radical appropriation of the play. For the first time in the history of Israeli repertory theatre, a *local* director made drastic changes to *Hamlet*. This production, like Yerushalmi's, originated outside of mainstream Israeli theatre, yet ran at Habima—Israel's National Theatre—for two years. No trace, it seems, is now left of Israeli theatre's fear of heights.

### WORKS CITED

- Ajzenstadt, Michael. "Review of *Hamlet*, by William Shakespeare, Directed by Omri Nitzan, The Cameri Theatre of Tel-Aviv." *Plays International* 20.7-8 (2005): 42-43, 62. Hebrew.
- Amir, Yirmi. "Hamlet Arrives in Haifa." *Yedioth Ahronoth* 28 January 1999: n.p. Hebrew.
- Aronson-Lehavi, Sharon. "Israel." *Hamlet-Handbuch: Stoffe, Aneignungen, Deutungen*. Ed. Peter Marx. Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 2014. 317-20.
- Avigal, Shosh. "Patterns and Trends in Israel Drama and Theatre, 1948 to Present." *Theatre in Israel*. Ed. Linda Ben-Zvi. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996. 9-50.
- Bar-Nir, Dov. "Being Hamlet." *Ma'ariv* 20 April 1983: n.p. Hebrew.
- Ben-Zvi, Linda, ed. *Theatre in Israel*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996.
- Berkoff, Steven. "Hamlet at Passover in Israel, 1980." *Jewish News* 18 April 2016. <https://jewishnews.timesofisrael.com/hamlet-at-passover-in-israel-1980/>
- . "Finding a Ready Market for a Hebrew Hamlet." *Independent* 1 March 1999. <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/finding-a-ready-market-for-a-hebrew-hamlet-1077619.html>
- Blum, Bilha. *Between Playwright and Director: A Dialogue*. Jerusalem: The Hebrew University Magnes Press, 2006. Hebrew.
- Evron, Boaz. "Castrated *Hamlet*." *Yedioth Ahronoth* 4 January 1984: n.p. Hebrew.
- . "Death and Commerce in the Elsinore Palace." *Yedioth Ahronoth* 4 April 1966: n.p. Hebrew.
- Feingold, Ben-Ami. "Swinarski's Version—A Challenge and Its Meaning." *Al HaMishmar* 24 May 1966: n.p. Hebrew.
- Finkel, Shimon. *On Stage and Backstage: Autobiography of an Actor*. Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1968. Hebrew.
- F. M. "Habimah's Hamlet." *Palestine Post* June 1946: n.p. Hebrew.
- Fuchs, Sarit. "Some Character." *Ma'ariv* 5 February 1999: n.p. Hebrew.
- . "We're All Spies." *Ma'ariv* 22 December 1983: 5. Hebrew.
- Handelsaltz, Michael. "Hamlet – An Actor for His Generation." *Ha'aretz* 9 January 9 2005.

- . “Maor Zagouri in a Jam Session with Shakespeare.” *Ha'aretz* 27 October 2015. Hebrew.
- Har-Even, Shulamith. “To Innovate or not to Innovate? That is the Question.” *Ma'ariv* 13 May 1966: 8-9. Hebrew.
- Hortmann, Wilhelm. “Shakespeare on the Political Stage in the Twentieth Century.” *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Stage*. Ed. Sarah Stanton and Stanley Wells. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. 212–29.
- Huang, Alexander C. Y. “Shakespearean Localities and the Localities of Shakespeare Studies.” *Shakespeare Studies* 35 (2007): 186-204.
- “Itim Ensemble—*Hamlet*.” Itim Ensemble. 12 February 2018. <https://www.itim-theatre.com/blank-e7372>. Hebrew.
- Kaynar, Gad. “The Cameri Theatre, the First Fifty Years.” *The Cameri of Tel Aviv: 50 Years of Israeli Theatre*. Ed. Rivka Meshulach. Tel Aviv: Daniella De-Nur Publishers, 1997. 12-131. Hebrew.
- Kidnie, Margaret Jane. *Shakespeare and the Problem of Adaptation*. New York: Routledge, 2009.
- Klausner, Margot. “With the Performance of Hamlet.” *LeAhdut HaAvoda* 27 June 1946: 6. Hebrew.
- Kotler, Oded. *Many Days*. Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2016. Hebrew.
- Levy, Emmanuel. *The Habima—Israel's National Theater 1917–1977: A Study of Cultural Nationalism*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1979. Hebrew.
- Loomba, Ania and Martin Orkin. *Post-Colonial Shakespeares*. London: Routledge, 1998.
- Massai, Sonia, ed. *World-Wide Shakespeares: Local Appropriations in Film and Performance*. London, New York: Routledge, 2005.
- Matei-Chesnoiu, Monica. *Shakespeare in the Romanian Cultural Memory*. Madison, Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2006.
- Meron, Noga. “Two Holding *Hamlet*.” *Al HaMishmar* 2 April 1965: n.p. Hebrew.
- Nagid, Chaim. “On *Hamlet* and Politics.” *Ma'ariv* 21 November 1983: n.p. Hebrew.
- Nicolaescu, Madalina. “Kott in the East.” *Empson, Wilson Knight, Barber, Kott*. Ed. Hugh Grady. London, New York: Continuum, 2014. 130-53.
- Ohad, Michael. “The Mousetrap.” *Ha'aretz* 16 December 1983: n.p. Hebrew.
- “Omri Nitzan—Artistic Director.” The Cameri Theatre of Tel Aviv. 7 February 2018. <https://www.cameri.co.il/omri>. Hebrew.
- Oz, Avraham. “In Blood Stepped In: Tragedy and the Modern Israelites.” *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespearean Tragedy*. Eds. Michael Neill and David Schalkwyk. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. 833-47.
- Pomerantz, Marsha. “Habimah's *Hamlet*.” *The Jerusalem Post* 16 December 1983: n.p.
- Porter, Pnina. “The Reception of Shakespeare's Plays in Israeli Repertory Theatres: Intentionality, Implementation and Effect According to Press Reviews.” Diss. Tel Aviv University, 2004. Hebrew.
- Ritchey, David. “*Hamlet* as Shakespeare Would Have Wanted It.” *West Side Leader* 6 May 2008. <http://www.akron.com/akron-ohio-entertainment-news.asp?aID=2603>
- Rozik-Rosen, Eli. “Universality and Actualization in Israeli Theatre”. *Motar* 7 (1999): 41-50. Hebrew.

- Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*. Ed. Philip Edwards. Updated ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- Shmuel Erlich, H. "Adolescents' Reactions to Rabin's Assassination: A Case of Patricide?" *Adolescent Psychiatry: Annals of the American Society for Adolescent Psychiatry* 22 (1998): 189–205.
- Shohat, Ella. "Sephardim in Israel: Zionism from the Standpoint of Its Jewish Victims." *Social Text* 19/20 (1988): 1–35.
- Slonim, Nir. "Review of *Hamlet* by William Zagouri." Mako. 8 December 2015. <http://www.mako.co.il/culture-books-and-theatre/theatre-reviews/Article-6ffe44dda4e7151006.htm>. Hebrew.
- Sussman, E. "*Hamlet* at Habima." *Davar* 1946: n.p. Hebrew.
- Weinberg, Yeshayahu. "Not in the Orthodox Fashion." *Al HaMishmar* 24 May 1966: 6-7, 10. Hebrew.
- Weitz, Shosh. "When the Bear Growls the Muses Fall Silent." *Yedioth Ahronoth* 6 January 1984: n.p. Hebrew.
- Yaron, Elyakim. "Rina Yerushalmi: A Lesson in Experimental Theatre." *Ma'ariv* 23 December 1988: n.p. Hebrew.
- Yerushalmi, Dorit. *The Directors' Stage: On Directors in the Israeli Theatre*. Or Yehuda: Dvir, 2013. Hebrew.