

THE HERO AND HIS DEATH.  
HEBREW THEATRE BETWEEN NATIONAL REVIVAL AND VOICES OF DISSENT

What is peculiar to Hebrew theatre, besides its brief and uncommon history, is the way its birth, development, and fortunes closely intertwine with and are unavoidably conditioned by another equally brief and uncommon history—the rebirth of a Jewish nation. The subject matter of the following pages is Hebrew-language theatre, whose history spans over a mere century or little more, taking into account also the first experiments at the amateur level from the late 19th century.<sup>1</sup> Throughout its history, this form of art evolved from being a tool for the national revival to voicing the most radical and daring dissent.

1. *A portrait of the hero*

The national revival enterprise entailed a process of identity building, which in turn required its founding myths, first and foremost a prototypical hero. An iconic picture, representative of the history of the Hebrew theatre, features exactly that hero. It is a stage photograph from the first production of *He walked in the fields*<sup>2</sup> (הוא הלך בשדות), a play adapted from the same-named novel by Moshe Shamir (1947). The black-and-white picture frames two young actors against the backdrop of a bare scenery: a woman, who is standing on the right and looks away, and a man, who is sitting back on three stairs on the other side and stares at her. Both wear short trousers, a simple shirt, and sandals,

thus being immediately recognizable as old-time kibbutzniks.<sup>3</sup> The actors are Emanuel Ben Amos and Hanna Maron, who play the parts of the hero Uri and his partner Mika.<sup>4</sup>

The picture is highly representative forasmuch as it sums up the links between drama and history, arts and myth, shows and politics. And those links are anything but occasional and marginal in Israeli history. On the contrary, it can be affirmed that the birth of the Hebrew theatre is closely intertwined with the linguistic-national revival. The former is not to be seen as a mere follow-on from the latter, nor was the connection between the two enterprises a random association stemming from a coincidence in time. It was instead a two-way relationship. The linguistic-national revival created the context in which the first theatrical experiments took place between Europe and the Land of Israel. Theatre, in turn, actively contributed to the enterprise, playing a prominent role which was recognised and exploited by the Zionist establishment.

Shamir's novel *He walked in the fields* was adapted for the stage by the author himself and by Yosef Millo, who had chosen the text and would direct the performance for his young Cameri Theatre, founded four years earlier. Besides being an enormous success, the show was a milestone in the history of the Hebrew theatre as well as in the history of Israel. Premiering on the 31st May 1948, two weeks after the Israeli Declaration of Independence, it was the first theatrical production in the newly-founded

<sup>1</sup> Drama written in Hebrew has existed at least since the 16th century. For the centuries that preceded the birth of modern Hebrew theatre (i.e. secular theatre performed on stage before an audience), see R. ESPOSITO, *La nascita del teatro ebraico. Persone, testi e spettacoli dai primi esperimenti al 1948*, Accademia, Torino 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Also translated *He walked through the fields*.

<sup>3</sup> On the kibbutz way of life in those years and its recognisably peculiar style, see O. ALMOG, *The Sabra. The creation of the New Jew*, translated by H. Watzman, University of California Press, Berkeley - Los Angeles - London 2000, pp. 209-214.

<sup>4</sup> The photograph was chosen as the cover image for G. ABRAMSON, *Modern Hebrew drama*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London 1979.

State, staged in the midst of the First Arab-Israeli War. Two decades later, in 1967, the novel was adapted into a film, also directed by Millo. The hero was played this time by Assi Dayan, whose father was the charismatic Moshe Dayan, an actual national hero.<sup>5</sup> Moshe Dayan had fought all the battles of Israel since the 1930s, with the Haganah, the British Army, and finally the Israel Defence Forces, where he reached the highest rank as Chief of the General Staff. In that landmark year of 1967, during the Six-Day War, he was Minister of Defence and reached enormous popularity at home and abroad following the landslide victory.<sup>6</sup>

*He walked in the fields*—the novel, the play, and the film<sup>7</sup>—tells the story of Uri, a kibbutz-born young man who joins the Palmach, the underground Jewish forces in the Land of Israel, on the eve of the War of Independence. Uri is the ideal (and idealised) representative of the 1948 generation, that is the youth who were born or raised in the Land of Israel and entered adulthood just in time to fight the War of Independence.<sup>8</sup> He is a native of the Land, a kibbutznik, and a Palmachnik all-in-one. From the first lines, he is introduced as showing a bold character, even though some inner fragility can be discerned. His sense of belonging to the community and to the place is complete, providing him with solid roots. His values and principles are firm and well defined, and he fulfills his mission by placing the common good ahead of his own and his partner's. Finally, and above all, he is the hero who sacrifices himself for the national cause. Even his name embodies the ideal of the New Jew.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>5</sup> A trait of the hero, the high birth, is «amply echoed in the film version by the real-life «royal» lineage of Assi Dayan». M. DEKEL, *Citizenship and sacrifice: The tragic scheme of Moshe Shamir's He walked through the fields*, «Jewish Social Studies» 18/3 (2012), pp. 197-211, p. 207.

<sup>6</sup> ALMOG, *The Sabra*, cit., pp. 127-128 explains the veneration for Moshe Dayan and other «Sabra heroes» as follows: «The emergence of the «Hebrew general» seems to have been the culmination of the Zionist movement's dream. After a hiatus of two thousand years, Jews could finally take pride in their own men of war—Hebrew-speaking Napoleons and Hannibals».

<sup>7</sup> Each one of the three versions has distinctive

The tragedy intrinsic to the story of a young man sacrificing himself in the fight for national independence—such as Uri and other stereotyped Sabra fighters—stems from a collective conflict and a common commitment, as well as from the character's need to create and affirm a new self. He is therefore a tragic hero and an institutionalised hero, suitable for school curricula.

The contrast with the character of Mika could not be more striking: she is European, she is a Holocaust survivor, she is uprooted, and she is in search of stability. On the strength of his native pride, Shamir seems to suggest that the only chance at redemption lies in the assimilation to the reality of the newborn country, in the absorption of its values, in the adjustment to the new way of life. He offers the public the portrait of a new figure bound to significantly contribute to the process of building the collective imagination, and he does it at the right moment. It is a portrait from inside, since the author Shamir himself, who was born in the Land of Israel in 1921, belongs to the 1948 generation no less than his hero Uri. And also because the director Millo had founded a new theatre aimed especially at native or near-native audiences and performers.

It cannot be said that intellectuals of the time were unaware of this process of identity building. The contrary is witnessed, for example, by the words of sociologist Samuel Koenig:

The kibbutz member (...) is considered not merely as the real pioneer who carries the greatest burden in the task of building the country but also as the prototype of the new Hebrew. He has been

features and should be treated autonomously. Unless stated otherwise, these pages refer to the play and its 1948 production and reception.

<sup>8</sup> For a thorough examination of the myth represented by that generation, see E. SIVAN, *Dor Tašah. Mitoš, deyoqan ve-zikaron*, Maarachot, Tel Aviv 1991, where Shamir's novel is mentioned as the book that left the deepest imprint on the public consciousness (p. 56). The word *Tašah* is a series of Hebrew letters used as numerals to write 708, designating the Jewish year 5708, which lasted from the 15th September 1947 to the 3rd October 1948. The alphabetic numeral system is a common way of writing dates from the Jewish calendar.

<sup>9</sup> See ALMOG, *The Sabra*, cit., pp. 91-95.

raised to the position of hero and held up as an example to be emulated by young and old.<sup>10</sup>

Back in 1948, subject and timing concurred to the impact of the show.<sup>11</sup> The play was shown throughout the country during the War of Independence, performed in army camps as well as in theatre halls, with total identification between characters and audience, stage and reality, plot and history:

The experience of watching the performance during the War of Independence, when the same songs were sung on the stage as in the trenches and on the battlefields—in what could be called «real time»—made a very strong impression on the spectators, and it would take at least two decades to free themselves from this strong sense of togetherness and total identification in the theater.<sup>12</sup>

The first production of *He walked in the fields* was seen by 172,000 people.<sup>13</sup> It means that nearly one quarter of the Jewish Israelis saw the Sabra hero sacrificing himself on the stage for his country. In the middle of the war and in the most dramatic moment of the birth of a nation, the audience was offered not only a hero to admire but also a role model. A fictive character thus became the perfect national hero and a contemporary myth. Later criticism challenges this straightforward understanding of Uri as a strong-willed hero and the ideal representative of Zionist values,<sup>14</sup> yet the play and its protagonist were nevertheless welcomed as the embodiment of national ideology at the time of the first production. The show even «became known as the Israel Defense Forces' «secret weapon» and a morale booster among combatants».<sup>15</sup>

## 2. *The fathers of the hero*

One could be tempted to see *He walked in the fields* as sheer propaganda, but the case is less straightforward. It was said above that a tight connection exists between the birth and fortunes of Hebrew theatre and the linguistic-national revival enterprise. Such a connection did not exist simply because theatre was a political tool. It existed because both enterprises—theatre and Zionism—shared ideas and goals. Hebrew theatre was taking its first steps, especially as regards original drama, and was moving from the same ideas that brought pioneers to the Land of Israel and inspired the founders of the State.

An artistic production that values Zionist collectivism, military action, and the common good above the individual might suggest a sort of Zhdanovian cultural policy dictated by the State. Yet, looking at the context, it becomes apparent that things are less linear than that. At this stage in Israeli history, political establishment, cultural circles, and the art scene intermingle, are close to each other, and in some cases are the same thing. After all, authors, directors, and actors are mostly Zionist pioneers to the Land of Israel themselves, reflecting in their lives the ideological identification of Zionism and theatre. And even a young David Ben-Gurion, the future first Prime Minister of Israel, besides writing theatre reviews, made attempts at dramatic writing.<sup>16</sup>

Such an identification can be traced back to the very origins. On the 8th October 1918, a newly-founded company staged a show in Hebrew in Moscow. *Habima*, regarded as the first professional theatre in Hebrew, had been created at the initiative of Nahum Zemach, Menahem

<sup>10</sup> S. KOENIG, *Israeli culture and society*, «American Journal of Sociology» 58/2 (1952), pp. 160-166, p. 161.

<sup>11</sup> The novel and the play were actually set before the end of the British Mandate, but this did not prevent readers and spectators from connecting the text to the War of Independence. See Y. SCHWARTZ, *The Zionist paradox. Hebrew literature and Israeli identity*, translated by M. Shapir, Brandeis University Press, Waltham, MA 2014, p. 146.

<sup>12</sup> F. ROKEM, *Hebrew theater from 1889 to 1948*, in L. BEN-ZVI (ed.), *Theater in Israel*, The Univer-

sity of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, MI 1996, pp. 51-84, p. 82.

<sup>13</sup> M. KOHANSKY, *The Hebrew theatre. Its first fifty years*, Ktav, New York 1969, p. 158.

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, DEKEL, *Citizenship and sacrifice*, cit.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 198. See also KOHANSKY, *The Hebrew theatre*, cit., p. 157.

<sup>16</sup> Ben-Gurion served as an editor for *Ha-ahdut*, the weekly of the Poale Zion party, where he published at least one theatre review. Two brief Socialist plays that appeared on the same periodical (20th January

Gnessin, and Hanna Rovina and it had been accepted as a studio of Stanislavskij's Moscow Art Theatre.<sup>17</sup> The project—acting in Hebrew—besides sounding as an unreasonable idea, was a political act. Two decades later, Hanna Rovina would remember what the members of the collective had in common:

The young actors who came to the studio were typical Russian Communists, for whom Jewish nationalism was entirely alien and Hebrew completely unknown. The first thing Tsemakh had to do was explain to them the idea of Habimah and make them believe in it. He had the opposite problem with a second group of young people whom he accepted into the studio despite their lack of acting experience. He took them in because of their Jewish national views and knowledge of Hebrew. And he was successful in bonding these two groups into a unified whole.<sup>18</sup>

The language choice was thus connected to—and motivated by—the «Jewish national views». As it already happened for writing, also acting in Hebrew on stage was an expression of national revival. «It was also, as Amalia Kahana-Carmon says, an expression of solidarity with «the enterprise of the Jews in the Land of Israel»».<sup>19</sup>

1911, pp. 14-17; 24th February 1911, pp. 18-22; 3rd March 1911, pp. 16-20) under the pseudonym Ba'al ha-ḥalomot ('The lord of the dreams') are attributed to him. See D. MELAMED, *Ḥaverim, lamaḥoz ḥafašnu! Qadimah. Šamah, le-ereš-mizraḥ-ha-šemeš!*, «Haaretz» (10th October 2017), <<https://www.haaretz.co.il/literature/1.4510897>> (accessed 15th January 2020).

<sup>17</sup> On the history of Habima, see E. LEVY, *The Habima, Israel's national theater, 1917-1977. A study of cultural nationalism*, Columbia University Press, New York 1979.

<sup>18</sup> From a 1939 article quoted in V. IVANOV, *Habimah*, «YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe» (2010), <<http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Habimah>> (accessed 15th January 2020).

<sup>19</sup> N.R. SCHARF GOLD, *Betrayal of the mother tongue in the creation of national identity*, in E. MILLER BUDICK (ed.), *Ideology and Jewish identity in Israeli and American literature*, State University of New York Press, Albany, NY 2001, pp. 235-258, p. 238.

Habima could fully carry out its project in 1931, when it permanently settled in Tel Aviv. Several amateur theatre companies had preceded it in the Land of Israel since the Ottoman era, including a company directed by Gnessin prior to Habima.<sup>20</sup> In the 1920s, the rebirth of Hebrew was an accomplished fact. It was even recognised as one of the official languages of the British Mandate for Palestine, along with English and Arabic. At this stage, when the role of Hebrew as the main language of the street, of the books, and of the institutions was no longer in question, professional companies were founded or arrived from Europe.<sup>21</sup>

The quality of the shows increased dramatically following the injection of talents trained in Germany or Russia. At the same time, the expectations of audiences and critics also increased, going beyond a simple contentment found in watching a show in Hebrew. A remark in a review appeared on Haaretz in 1920 is indicative of the attitudes towards theatre: «this time we sat in the theatre not out of «national duty» to hear a performance in Hebrew, but out of pleasure».<sup>22</sup> Theatre in Hebrew, even in the form of amateur performances such as the ones staged in the Land until then, was a praiseworthy enterprise per se, and it had to be supported «out of national duty».

<sup>20</sup> For a list of the performances, see S. LEV-ARI, *Appendix 1. The beginnings of theater performances in Eretz-Yisrael, 1889-1904*, in BEN-ZVI, *Theater in Israel*, cit., pp. 403-413; N. HASAK, *Ha-te'aṭron ha-ivri be-'Ereš Yiśra'el ba-šanim 1904-1917. Seqirat ha-maḥazot ve-ha-ḥašagot*, M.A. thesis, Universitat Tel Aviv, Tel Aviv 2000.

<sup>21</sup> Among the latter, it is worth mentioning the TAI (*Te'aṭron 'Ereš-Yiśre'eli*, also known as Palestinian Theatre), founded in Berlin in 1924 by Miriam Bernstein-Cohen, Menahem Gnessin, and others. The most prominent theatre founded locally was the Ohel ('Tent') Workers' Theatre, established in 1925 by Moshe Halevy, former member of Habima, with the support of the Histadrut, the powerful trade union. See ESPOSITO, *La nascita del teatro ebraico*, cit., pp. 106-131.

<sup>22</sup> From a review of a performance by Ha-Te'aṭron Ha-ivri be-'Ereš Yiśra'el, a professional company founded in Tel Aviv by David Davidov. Quoted in KOHANSKY, *The Hebrew theatre*, cit., p. 60.

Theatre was called to carry out an educational role for language. But all arts were seen as a social tool and writers were considered by the Labour establishment «an organic part of the national body»,<sup>23</sup> since they were «the principal creators of national symbols».<sup>24</sup> And David Ben-Gurion believed that the «whole intellectual community must participate in heart, soul, and deed to the state-building effort».<sup>25</sup> A close connection is all too apparent, and it appears as a two-way relationship. Art is worthy of support, but also the contrary is expected—art is called to contribute.

Drama subjects—such as re-enactments of a semi-mythical past based on the Bible or depictions of the contemporary experience of the pioneers in the Land of Israel—seemed instrumental to the building of national identity. The central themes were the connection with the land and the national consciousness. The Zionist enterprise puts itself up as the alternative to the Diaspora, rejecting both traditional Jewish society and assimilation to non-Jewish nations. It is an alternative that finds its cultural roots, or its founding myths, in the language and the land of the ancient Israel.

Language and land are both essential to the identity building of the New Jew. A farmer and a soldier, secular and collectivist, independent and strong-willed, the Zionist pioneer copes with the thousand-year-old trauma of persecutions by departing once and for all from his father—the Jew from the shtetl, perceived as submissive both to the Jewish religious authorities and to the violence of the world around. The

New Jew is called to cut ties with the Old World, including its lands and languages, even the Jewish ones, such as Yiddish.<sup>26</sup>

Few plays originally written in Hebrew dealt with contemporary life in the Land of Israel, and none of them possessed literary value. Notwithstanding, in 1937, Habima inaugurated the genre with *Watchmen* (שומרים) by Ever Hadani, directed by Zvi Friedland. Although it used invented names, the play was inspired by the recent history of the underground organisations Ha-Shomer and Nili, remembering the real events that twenty years earlier led to the death of Yosef Lishansky.<sup>27</sup> The next play produced by Habima on the contemporary experience was *This earth* (האדמה הזאת) by Aharon Ashman, which premiered in 1942 under the direction of Baruch Chemerinsky. The story takes place in the fictive Yarkiyah, a settlement in marshy lands tormented by malaria, oppressed by the Ottoman authorities, and threatened by Arab neighbours.<sup>28</sup> Leaving the place seems the only choice, until the pioneer and hero Yoel Yoshpe wins the trust of the settlers with a dramatic speech and persuades them to stay «here, on this earth». In the epilogue, the public learns that Yarkiyah finally thrived thanks to the labour and sacrifice of its pioneers. The enterprise shown on stage, and the real events that inspired the play,<sup>29</sup> fitted perfectly into the Zionist narrative, which celebrated the obstinacy and resolve of the settlers. Poised between nostalgia and propaganda, *This earth* was the first real success for the genre with its 213 performances.

<sup>23</sup> M. KEREN, *The pen and the sword. Israeli intellectuals and the making of the nation-state*, Westview Press, Boulder, CO - London 1989, p. 27.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35. On the ambivalent attitude of Ben-Gurion towards literature, cf. A. SHAPIRA, *Ben-Gurion and the Bible. The forging of an historical narrative?*, «Middle Eastern Studies» 33/4 (1997), pp. 645-674.

<sup>26</sup> On the identity building of the New Jew, see ALMOG, *The Sabra*, cit.

<sup>27</sup> Lishansky, who had immigrated with his father from Russia after losing the rest of his family in pogroms, was a member of Nili, a Jewish spy ring assisting the British against the Ottoman empire.

Captured by Turkish police, he was tortured and hanged in Damascus.

<sup>28</sup> On the space as the antagonist in the Hebrew theatre, see S. LEVI, *Te'atron yisre'eli. Zmanim, halalim, 'alilot*, Resling, Tel Aviv 2016, pp. 27-32.

<sup>29</sup> The play was written to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of Hadera, a small settlement built in 1891 south of Haifa by early Jewish immigrants from Russia, which became a sort of national myth. In its first two decades, the settlement lost half its population to malaria, but it was never abandoned and the swamps were finally drained. Hadera, which was made into a symbol of the struggle in adverse conditions, is now a town of nearly 80,000 inhabitants.

### 3. *The hero and his brothers*

After the War of Independence, several productions followed in the footsteps of *He walked in the fields*. Realistic plays on contemporary times were written, or adapted from novels, and staged by the main theatres. With few exceptions, theatre remained faithful to the national mood, still offering stereotypes and reinforcing the founding myths. But it was also, in a certain measure, a new theatre that received the lesson of the Cameri, a theatre who spoke the language of a new generation of native Israelis.

This was theatre with a new language. The Zionist rhetoric of *Chaim*, whose European remnants could still be recognized, was exchanged for a new language—a developing slang mixed with broken syntax and words in Arabic; the language of the local inhabitants, for whom the homeland was taken for granted». <sup>30</sup>

The secular sacredness of the Land at the centre of *This earth* returns in Yigal Mossinson's *In the wastes of the Negev* (בערבות הנגב), produced in 1949 by Habima. During the War of Independence, Avraham and David, father and son, refuse to evacuate a kibbutz which has been cut off and fight side by side to stand their ground. In the end, the kibbutz is saved but the Sabra son is killed in battle. A story of heroism staged through «a collection of romantic clichés and rhetoric». <sup>31</sup> Despite its limits, or precisely for its limits, it was a great success. The grieving audiences experienced identification and found justification for their recent losses. And the biblical reference to the *'aqedah*, the binding and near sacrifice of Isaac (Genesis 22), cannot go unnoticed: it is the sacrifice of the Sabra hero, again, but this time with the help of a father whose name is Avraham. What is worthy of note, is that the father «is deemed no less heroic for having willingly sent his son to his death». <sup>32</sup> The

offering of one's own son as a sacrifice to the nation-god is narrated and perceived as a heroic act, the highest expression of self-renunciation on behalf of the higher common good. The consent given by the sacrificial victim reinforces the parallel with the biblical Isaac. <sup>33</sup>

Yael Feldman has dealt thoroughly with the ways in which the shaping of modern Hebrew culture drew upon previous tradition and myths. In particular, she investigated secular rereadings of the *'aqedah* in the Zionist discourse. <sup>34</sup> The sacrifice of Isaac is actually not enacted in the biblical account, but in the context of modern nationalism it is reimagined as a metaphor for noble death, a self-sacrifice for the collective good. Its militaristic reenactment can be traced back to at least 1919, in the wake of World War I, when the phrase *ošer 'aqedah* («joy of the binding», i.e. of the sacrifice) expressed the enthusiasm for the newly formed Jewish Legion. <sup>35</sup> The oxymoron was coined by Berl Katznelson, one of the founders of Labour Zionism, and was quickly forgotten, only to reemerge mysteriously after his death. It appeared in a Passover Haggadah published in 1949 by Kibbutz Na'an, which was the same kibbutz where Mossinson lived at the time. The Haggadah was apparently edited by his older half-brother Moshe, who had been close to Berl Katznelson and was therefore familiar with the phrase in its original context. <sup>36</sup> While it is evident that Mossinson's play reflected the spirit of the time, a link between the reappearance of the phrase in the playwright's home kibbutz and the sacrifice of the son onstage cannot be ruled out.

The integrity of the hero was questioned in Nathan Shacham's *They will arrive tomorrow* (הם יגיעו מחר), produced in 1950 by the Cameri theatre. The play, set during the War of Independence, is about a platoon of Israeli soldiers stuck in a minefield. The conflict between the two commanding officers provides dramatic tension through the ideological clash between

<sup>30</sup> D. URIAN, *Zionism in the Israeli theatre*, «Israel Affairs» 8/1-2 (2001), pp. 43-55, p. 46. The title *Chaim* refers to a play by Menachem Bader published in 1942.

<sup>31</sup> G. ABRAMSON, *Drama and ideology in modern Israel*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1999, p. 19.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> DEKEL, *Citizenship and sacrifice*, cit., p. 207.

<sup>34</sup> Y.S. FELDMAN, *Glory and agony: Isaac's sacrifice and national narrative*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA 2010.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 92-93.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 41, 145-146.

non-monolithic characters. Stereotypes are nonetheless perpetuated and the validity of the national enterprise is not challenged. Doubt is cast, but it is not yet a break.<sup>37</sup>

The sacrifice was mentioned above as a pillar of the pioneer ethos. And it was said that, as a motif in drama, it reproduces the biblical episode of the *'aqedah* in a war context. Another motif is recognisable, which will recur in theatre depictions of war, also decades later: the protagonists are stuck in a besieged space, «a location of the *few*, with the *many* encroaching outside».<sup>38</sup>

Drama also perpetuates what Yitzhak Laor defines the «sabrocentric view»,<sup>39</sup> marginalising new immigrants in the scenario of the War of Independence. Besides being marginalised, they are also depicted as unfit for fight, being right off the boat, unfamiliar with weapons, and non-Hebrew-speaking. They can be perceived as bourgeois individualists unaccustomed to hard living and unwilling to sacrifice themselves, in brief: foreign to the national ethos. And they are seen as victims: former deportees and now cannon fodder. The War of Independence is depicted as a Sabra-only enterprise, while the subtext seems to charge the new immigrants, including the survivors of the camps, with cowardice. The reality of the war was quite different: one quarter of the fighters were Holocaust survivors and the casualties were almost equal among the veterans and the new immigrants.<sup>40</sup>

Aggressive masculinity is another trait inherent to depictions of the national hero, with a predictable marginalisation of another category—women. These are the weeping mother or the young partner or the hero. And they try to stop the young fighter in his quest for heroism, luring him into settling down in what is constantly depicted as a trivial bourgeois life.

This limitation is also reflected by *A regular play* (מחזה רגיל) by Yoram Matmor, a semi-absurdist play produced in 1956 by the

Cameri where fighters are shown as alienated from normal life after the war. One of the ex-soldiers complains as follows:

Zipporah wants to get married, to live in a two-roomed flat, she wants a child, to buy a refrigerator ... she wants to waste life. And every day on the way to the office and in the high rise I'll die a little, and for what? So that I'll have a comfortable life? That's not what I want.<sup>41</sup>

This conflict, with the depiction of the woman as a hindrance to the hero's aspiration to sacrifice, is a recurring motif. It cannot but bring to the mind an argument between Uri and Mika in *He walked in the fields*:

MIKA: I want a house which I'll never have to leave. You understand? With big stones... with thick walls. I want to get some fun out of life. I want quiet—for myself and it's not much—because once I wanted much more...

URI: In short—you want me not to join up [with the commandos]. You want my father to be in Italy and twenty members of the kibbutz in twenty other places, and the boys of my age in the units and in action and in prison, and I don't know where else—and me in some damn hut with pictures on the wall, a curtain—and someone from the youth group...<sup>42</sup>

The theatre's attitude towards national ethos and myths slowly and silently changed from the mid-1950s, when original Hebrew drama started dealing more and more with other subjects, such as «family, community problems, the Holocaust and the changes taking place in the kibbutzim».<sup>43</sup>

The dramatic economic and social changes seen in Israel during the 1960s and a growing influence of Western culture had an effect on the arts. Theatre, both public and commercial, experienced a general openness to new themes and

<sup>37</sup> ABRAMSON, *Drama and ideology*, cit., pp. 21-23.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18. On the besieged space see also LEVI, *Te'atron yisre'eli*, cit., pp. 37-39.

<sup>39</sup> ABRAMSON, *Drama and ideology*, cit., p. 25.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>41</sup> Y. MATMOR, *Maḥazeh ragil*, «Proza» 19-20 (1978), pp. 36-47, p. 46 (as translated in ABRAMSON,

*Drama and ideology*, cit., p. 33).

<sup>42</sup> M. SHAMIR, *He walked through the fields*, translated by A. Hodes, in H.S. JOSEPH (ed.), *Modern Israeli drama. An anthology*, Associated University Presses, London - Toronto 1983, pp. 19-78, p. 50.

<sup>43</sup> URIAN, *Zionism*, cit., p. 47.

styles and to international tendencies, including the introduction of musicals. These were years of innovation and experimentation, both in drama and in productions, with the abandonment of the naturalistic tradition and the fading of national commitment. During these years, Israeli theatre made an effort to overcome its provincialism. It absorbed and developed the lessons of Brecht, Pirandello, and the Theatre of the Absurd and moved away from local reality.

#### 4. *The death of the hero*

A sudden awakening to local reality came with the Six-Day War (5-10 June 1967), but narratives on the stage were quite different than before. From the beginning of the 1960s, the New Wave<sup>44</sup> Israeli fiction had rebelled against the traditional narrative and rejected the stereotyped mythical figure of the institutionalised hero, calling into question the national enterprise. It was from the stage, however, that the most direct and uninhibited attack came, when a young playwright defied the euphoric climate of celebration and the national mood of self-righteousness following the victory in the war.

In August 1968, a new show was staged in Tel Aviv by a small group of young actors from the Department of Theatre Arts of Tel Aviv University. The title was *You and me and the next war* (את ואני והמלחמה הבאה), the director was Edna Shavit, the author was 25-year-old Hanoch Levin (1943-1999).<sup>45</sup> It was a satirical cabaret alternating songs with short sketches, dialogues or monologues.<sup>46</sup> The satirical cabaret was a form of entertainment known in Israel since the 1920s, with famous theatres such as the Kumkum and

the Matate, companies such as Batzal Yarok, and authors such as Ephraim Kishon. But that kind of satire was harmless, a sort of institution-alised satire that did not challenge some sacred national values. Levin's method was quite the opposite.

The show opens with the *Parade for the victory of the Eleven-Minute War* (מסדר הניצחון (של מלחמת 11 הדקות)). A general takes the platform and delivers a speech:

GENERAL: Soldiers and commanders of the brigade, my heroic brothers-in-arms, my sons, my fathers! Eleven minutes ago, we went out, shoulder to shoulder, heart to heart, to meet the foe, we went out to defend the sovereignty of our state, our national heritage, the lives of our loved ones at home and our own lives. We faced a foe greater than us and we overcame him by dint of the spirit that moves within us. Within eleven minutes, we succeeded in annihilating, liquidating, scattering, trampling, cutting off, destroying, shattering, and crushing our foe. Yet, the battle was not easy. A steep price of blood we paid. But when we came upon death, we looked him straight in the eye, we laughed in his face, we spat on his scythe, and we fouled the holes of his skull so much his own mother was ashamed of him. Indeed, the battle was heavy, harsh and stubborn. Eleven minutes ago, you went out of here, an entire brigade with its weapons and supplies, and you didn't come back. None of you came back, and I am standing here now and talking to an empty field.

(Pause)

Empty. (He looks for someone on the field and tries to continue the speech.) Soldiers...

(Pause)

Soldiers... (He stands helpless a moment, and suddenly he raises his eyes to the sky.)

Soldiers!

(Salutes).<sup>47</sup>

<sup>44</sup> The phrase was used by Gershon Shaked as the title of his monograph *Gal ĥadaš ba-siporet ha-ivrit*, Sifriyat Poalim, Tel Aviv 1971. It refers to a new tendency appeared in Israeli fiction at the end of the 1950s with the works of a new generation of authors, *Dor ha-medinah* («The State generation»), who reached adulthood after the Independence, as opposed to the previous generation, *Dor Tašah* («The 1948 generation», see above, note 8). The New Wave challenged, both in forms and themes, the realist fiction that was instrumental to the process of identity building and previously dominated Israeli literature.

<sup>45</sup> On the life and work of one of the most prolific and influential Israeli playwrights, see N. YAARI, *Le théâtre de Hanokh Levin. Ensemble à l'ombre des canons*, Éditions Théâtrales, Montreuil-sous-Bois 2008. A four-episode documentary series in Hebrew was recently produced by the Israeli public television channel Kan 11 (previously Channel 1): *Ĥayyim she-ke-dugmatam 'od lo' ra'inu me-olam. Ĥanokh Levin*, <<https://www.kan.org.il/program/?catid=1109>> (accessed 15th January 2020).

<sup>46</sup> The texts were written by Levin, the music by Alex Kagan and Beni Nagari.

<sup>47</sup> English translation by B. Harshav, in H.



The very first text is a sardonic parody of military speeches, with their triumphalism, empty rhetoric, and clichés, which sound as a vain attempt to make sense of the human losses by glorifying the unnecessary deaths. This is also a very specific satire, since Levin targets both the name of the recent war and an actual Israeli general. «Six-Day War» was a glorifying name that deliberately emphasised the short duration of the conflict in order to proudly underline the unprecedented victory won over a bigger enemy in so little time, a fact perceived in Israel and abroad as a sort of miracle. Replacing «Six-Day» with a surrealistic «Eleven-Minute» was most irreverent, a real blow to national pride. Also the words about looking at the death straight in the eye are an overt reference. They parody a general then considered a Six-Day War hero and regarded as a national myth, Shmuel Gonen, who actually declaimed in a speech: «We stared at death, and he lowered his eyes».<sup>48</sup>

By dismantling the elements of public consensus and militaristic culture, Levin challenged the collective voice of Israel, deconstructed the myths of its foundation, and brought into question the idea of self-righteousness. This is most evident in another sketch, the duet *What did we fight for?* (על מה נלחמנו?). Two neighbours are discussing about whether returning the territories or not, when a third neighbour, a mother, approaches and shares her point of view:

NEIGHBOUR: My dear sir and madam, what did we fight for?

Why did we shed so much of our precious blood?

The conquered land is in our hands,

but my own son is not between my hands;

so I have to say in his name: only the one who dies can never be returned.<sup>49</sup>

LEVIN, *The labor of life. Selected plays*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA 2003, p. XVII.

<sup>48</sup> D. URIAN, *Representations of war in Israeli drama and theater*, in R.S. HARRIS - R. OMER-SHERMAN (eds.), *Narratives of dissent. War in contemporary Israeli arts and culture*, Wayne State University Press, Detroit, MI 2013, pp. 281-299, p. 292. My translation of Gonen's sentence takes into account that the word «death» is masculine in the original

The central point is the contrast between «our hands» and «my hands». The mother's transition from *us* to *me* is the most revolutionary. Under her grief, the collective ideals, the shared struggle, and the undisputed sense of unity miserably collapse.

The show ends with the title song, which sounds prophetic in its ironic evocation of the war as a looming presence and a constant in Israeli life:

כשאנחנו מטיילים, אז אנחנו שלושה-  
את ואני והמלחמה הבאה.  
כשאנחנו ישנים, אז אנחנו שלושה-  
את ואני והמלחמה הבאה.  
את ואני והמלחמה הבאה,  
והמלחמה הבאה עלינו לטובה.  
את ואני והמלחמה הבאה,  
שתמציא מנוחה נכונה.  
כשאנחנו מחייכים ברגע אהבה,  
מחייכת איתנו המלחמה הבאה.  
כשאנחנו מחכים בתדר הלידה,  
מחכה איתנו המלחמה הבאה...<sup>50</sup>

When we go for a walk, there's three of us  
You and I and the next war.  
When we sleep, there's three of us  
You and I and the next war.  
You and I and the next war,  
The next war will be for the best.  
You and I and the next war,  
Which will bring a right peace.  
When we smile in the moments of love,  
The next war smiles with us.  
When we wait in the delivery room,  
The next war waits with us...<sup>51</sup>

Levin's first show was staged in a Tel Aviv club, the Barbarim, and other low-profile venues.<sup>52</sup> Two years later, his third show was pro-

Hebrew. A merciless portrait of general Gonen will be painted by Hillel Mittelpunkt's play *Gorodish* (Gonen's birth surname), produced by the Cameri in 1993.

<sup>49</sup> Translation mine.

<sup>50</sup> All the texts by Hanoach Levin are available in Hebrew on the website <<http://hanoachlevin.com/>>.

<sup>51</sup> Translation mine.

<sup>52</sup> A general rehearsal had been staged in the din-

duced by the Cameri, thus attracting much more attention. *Queen of bathtub* (מלכת אמבטיה) offers a cabaret structure, but themes from the political debate are linked to everyday home situations showing the absurdity of local reality. The title sketch is an allegory of the conflict set in the flat of a regular family, whose members represent the different souls of Israeli society. The mother wants to kick out her husband's cousin, who lives in the same house, and exhorts her family to occupy the toilet and the bathroom. When the son shouts «The toilet is in our hands!», his words cannot but echo the famous words transmitted on the army wireless by Lt. General Mordechai «Motta» Gur, commander of the brigade that conquered the Old City of Jerusalem three years earlier: «The Temple Mount is in our hands!»

The rhetoric of the sacrifice is deconstructed in the sketch titled *The binding* (העקידה), where the biblical episode is reinterpreted through a comical and surreal dialogue between Abraham and Isaac:

ABRAHAM: My son, do you know what I am about to do to you?

ISAAC: Yes, father. You are about to slaughter me.

ABRAHAM: God ordered me.

ISAAC: I don't hold it against you, dad. If you must slaughter me, do it.

ABRAHAM: I must. I'm afraid I have no choice.

ISAAC: I see. Don't get down on yourself. Just rise and raise the knife on your son.

ABRAHAM: I'm just doing it as a messenger of God.

ISAAC: Sure, dad, as a messenger of God. Rise as a messenger and raise the knife as a messenger on your only son that you love.

The dialogue continues on the same passive-aggressive tone:

ABRAHAM: Good, it's exactly what I needed at my age. If it makes it easier for you, blame me. Me, your broken, old father, who at his age must climb a mountain with you, bind you to an altar, slaughter you and after all this will still have to tell everything to your mum. Do you think I have nothing better to do at my age?

ing hall of kibbutz Netzer Sereni. When a provocative text about the Western Wall was sung to the tune of the national anthem, the audience first reacted with insults and then started throwing chairs at the

ISAAC: But I understand you, dad. I'm not complaining, really. If they told you to slaughter me, to cut off your offspring with your own hands, to stain your hands with your own blood, I am ready. Please, slaughter me, dad, slaughter me.

It is known that in the Bible an angel stops Abraham at the last moment and the sacrifice is avoided. Also in Levin's version there is a providential divine intervention, yet Abraham does not hear the voice of the angel, neither does the audience. It is Isaac who stops his father swearing that he heard «a voice from the sky».

ISAAC: For quite a while already you've been hard of hearing. Here he comes again: «Lay not thine hand upon the lad».<sup>53</sup> Don't you hear?

...

ABRAHAM: Well, if you heard, apparently you did. I'm a little deaf, as you say.

ISAAC: Absolutely. You know that I was ready, but a voice is a voice. (*Pause.*) You saw that I was OK with it. (*Pause.*) We were both OK with it. (*Pause.*) For us both it was OK, wasn't it, dad? (*Pause.*) Wasn't it OK? (*Pause.*) Everything ended well, dad. Why are you sad?

ABRAHAM: I'm thinking about what will happen when other fathers will have to slaughter their sons. What will save them?

ISAAC: It could always come a voice from the sky.

ABRAHAM: If you say so.<sup>54</sup>

The sadness of Abraham paves the way to the next song, a tragic response to his question. *My dear father, when you stand over my grave* (אבי היקר, כשתעמוד על קברי) tells about the present, when the sacrifice of the son was made and there is no happy end.

אבי היקר, כשתעמוד על קברי  
זקן ועייף ומאוד ערירי,  
ותראה איך טומנים את גופי בעפר  
ואתה עומד מעלי, אבי,

אל תעמוד אז גאה כל-כך,  
ואל תזקוף את ראשך, אבי,

actors. The sketch was consequently removed from the final version.

<sup>53</sup> Genesis 22,12.

<sup>54</sup> Translation mine.

נשארנו עכשיו בשר מול בשר  
וזהו הזמן לבכות, אבי.

...

אבי היקר, כשתעמוד על קברי  
זקן ועייף ומאוד ערירי,  
ותראה איך טומנים את גופי בעפר—  
בקש אז ממני סליחה, אבי.

Father dear, when you stand over my grave,  
Old and tired and forlorn here,  
And you see how they bury my body in the earth  
And you stand over me, father dear,

Don't stand then so proud,  
And don't lift up your head, father dear,  
We're left flesh facing flesh now,  
And this is the time to weep, father dear.

...

Father dear, when you stand over my grave,  
Old and tired and forlorn here,  
And you see how they bury my body in the earth—  
Then you beg my pardon, father dear.<sup>55</sup>

There is no longer a hero. There is only a dead young man, unjustly sacrificed, who sings from the grave.

But the death of the hero was hard to accept. Being produced by the Cameri, the show attracted the attention of many, and many were those who called for censorship. Attacks and pressure came from several quarters, including protest letters, defamatory articles, threats from politicians, and appeals from bereaved parents' groups. On the 4th of May 1970, someone even called in a bomb threat during a performance. It was a fake alarm, as evidenced by an inspection during the intermission, and the show went on regularly. The Cameri tried to withstand the pressure and intimidation, but it finally surrendered. On the 19th of May it was announced that the show would close after only 19 performances.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>55</sup> LEVIN, *The labor of life*, cit., pp. XIX-XX.

<sup>56</sup> L. LEVIN, *This week in Haaretz 1970 / 'Queen of the Bathtub' ignites tensions*, «Haaretz» (5th May 2011), <<https://www.haaretz.com/1.5008194>> (accessed 15th January 2020).

## 5. Conclusions

During the first years following the Six-Day War, Levin's challenge to national myths and values was an isolated voice in the triumphant and euphoric victory mood. Since 1973, with the trauma of a war that surprised the country and was almost lost, disillusionment and confusion became more and more common. There is no going back from the path opened by Hanoach Levin. This obviously does not mean that all Israeli theatre became theatre of protest. It means that it became mature, freeing itself from its role in the national enterprise. What one can witness is the end of the heroic narrative—the death of the hero. The deconstruction of national myths will be carried out by other playwrights, such as Yehoshua Sobol, Motti Lerner, Hillel Mittelputnik,<sup>57</sup> while Levin's later works will move away from the local reality, broadening their view on the human condition.

The death of the hero was a necessary sacrifice for the growth of Hebrew theatre. Given the fact that it leaves behind the Zionist founding myths, does it entail the end of Zionism as well? It is disputable.

Zionism was born from the need to achieve normalisation. Its goal was to convert a people of exiles—guests at best, persecuted and slaughtered at worst—into a sovereign people in its own homeland. In other words, it could be said that the purpose of Zionism was to put an end to Jewish peculiarity. Thus, the normalisation in themes and motifs, with the fall of national myths and the death of the hero, could be exactly a Zionist achievement, although unpredicted and unacknowledged, in the field of arts.

Raffaele Esposito  
Università degli Studi di Napoli L'Orientale  
e-mail: raffaele.esposito@unior.it

<sup>57</sup> See M. TAUB, *The challenge to popular myth and conventions in recent Israeli drama*, «Modern Judaism» 17/2 (1997), pp. 133-162.

SUMMARY

The first play staged after Israel's Independence in May 1948, Moshe Shamir's *He walked in the fields*, was regarded as a secret weapon in the ongoing war. Its hero, young kibbutznik and fighter Uri, was the embodiment of the New Israeli Jew, one of the founding myths of the nation. The birth of a Hebrew-language theatre few decades earlier was closely intertwined with the national and linguistic revival in the Land of Israel. Hebrew theatre and the Zionist enterprise were in a two-way relationship, advancing in parallel towards shared goals, with the political establishment supporting the arts and the arts reinforcing national ideology.

The hero created and hitherto promoted on stage found his death right on the stage after the 1967 Six-Day War. In the euphoric and triumphant national mood following the recent victory, Hanoch Levin's satirical cabarets abruptly introduced new narratives of the war, ridiculing the sacred national values and rejecting the rhetoric of sacrifice. The shows were met with hostility by many, yet the heroic narrative had been called into question once and for all, freeing Hebrew theatre from its role in the national enterprise and paving the way to more mature drama.

**KEYWORDS:** Hebrew theatre; Zionism; National narratives.