

JEWISH DRAMA, THEATRE AND IDENTITY

Theses

The relationship between drama and theatre is closely linked in all ages and places to the history and formation of identities. This is the thrust of *Geschichte des Dramas* (1990) by Erika Fischer-Lichte, Professor of Theatre Studies at Freie Universität Berlin [in Hungarian: *A dráma története* (Fischer-Lichte 2001)], in which the history of European drama is analysed in terms of a history of identities. This, then, is the conceptual schema that serves as the starting point of my own analysis too, bearing in mind however that there is of course a question as to what extent might Fischer-Lichte's model actually be applicable, if at all, to the analysis of the relationship between Jewish drama, theatre and identity, given that there are numerous issues pertaining to the history of Jewish drama and theatre that do not figure, or figure in very rare instances only, in the history of European drama and theatre.

Such are, for instance, the fundamentally uniform, yet superficially divergent characteristics of Jewish culture and sense of identity in different diasporic contexts. This may be readily illustrated by, for instance, the significant differences between the culture and identity of an assimilationist Ashkenazi Jew from Hungary and those of a Sephardi Jew from Turkey, which are driven principally by the differences between their respective histories, religious practices, social environments and the respective languages that they speak. But there are similarly significant differences in the respective identities of religious and non-religious Israelis, and further layers of complexity are added by cases such as the differences between the respective dual identities of Spanish conversos and reformist Hungarian Jews, or for that matter, the enormous influence of Western and in particular Italian and French culture on 19th century Sephardi Jewish culture and sense of identity.

As to the respective dual identities of Spanish conversos and reformist Hungarian Jews, the conversos – in mortal danger of the Inquisition – were compelled to adopt a dual identity that was Catholic to outside appearances, but covertly maintained a Jewish identity even where knowledge of Judaism became sketchy over time, though in the event of successfully escaping from the Iberian Peninsula to relatively freer regions, the dual identity was quickly relinquished and all necessary steps were immediately taken to fully restore an exclusively Jewish identity. On the other hand, in Hungary the concept of a dual Hungarian and Jewish

identity was the outcome of the 1867 Jewish emancipation law, which gave rise to an implicit social contract that offered complete social acceptance to the Jews of Hungary in return for the adoption of a Hungarian and Jewish dual identity that would involve complete linguistic and cultural assimilation to the social mainstream in Hungary. But these and such differences between divergent Jewish identities are only one of numerous compelling issues that a researcher must of necessity take into consideration when attempting to apply Fischer-Lichte's model within a Jewish context. At the same time however, many of these issues do open up research areas that are not capable of application within the framework of this model. My research therefore did not only include an examination of whether it is possible to analyse the history of Jewish drama and theatre in terms of a history of Jewish identities, but also the question of how Jewish drama and theatre could emerge and evolve at all, given that the origins of the hostility between Jewish tradition and theatre are rooted in the inherently antithetical world views of Judaism and Hellenism. From a Jewish religious standpoint, the ancient Greek polytheistic religious practices that were closely associated with classical Greek theatre were completely unacceptable, as was the practice of men playing female roles in ancient Greek theatre productions. And above all, the concept of tragedy and the tragic worldview were *a priori* uninterpretable within the context of a Jewish worldview.

Jewish drama and theatre nonetheless did come into being, and not just in secular Jewish culture. Its forms of expression first emerged in the special circumstances associated with Purim, and then – just as exceptionally – in Jewish drama and theatre productions that had emerged in 17th century Sephardi synagogues in Amsterdam, whilst in the 20th century certain borderline manifestations of Jewish theatre had achieved success in pioneering a way forward even in the world of orthodox and ultraorthodox communities. Additional research opportunities were thus presented within the overall framework of the history of Jewish drama and theatre by the very nature of Jewish religion, tradition, history and identities, and given the profound relevance and interest of these domains to our core subject matter, the nature of the relationships and influences between religious and secular Jewish culture, and between a religious and secular sense of Jewish identity or identities inevitably became a collateral focus of our enquiry, albeit self-evidently outside the scope and unanalyzable in terms of the model proposed by Fischer-Lichte that provided my point of departure. Last but not least, the points of contact that came to light along boundaries between the various domains of enquiry then gave rise to further questions, which in turn inspired searching for possible answers to those questions.

Although a collateral focus on the nature of Jewish religion, history, culture and identity did inevitably form an indispensable dimension of the analysis, the examination and illumination of the relationship between Jewish drama, theatre and identity did remain the principal focus of the research throughout. There is in fact a natural synergy between the principal and collateral foci of this work, because an appreciation of the changes in Jewish drama, theatre and identity over time does not merely provide a perspective on some of the major changes in the course of Jewish history, but also illuminates the changes over time in major Jewish religious movements, and corresponding changes in the opinions held by their respective adherents as to what a proper Jewish religious way of life ought to entail. For instance, as a consequence of changes over time and place, the orthodoxy of *Mikveh (Ritual Bath)*, a play by the Israeli playwright Hadar Galron, is quite different from the orthodoxy presented in *Yentl*, a musical based on *Yentl the Yeshiva Boy* by Isaac Bashevis Singer. It also needs noting that despite the profound antipathy of Jewish religious tradition to the theatre, theatre or theatre-like manifestations may actually become at times the very vehicle for preserving a Jewish religious identity. All of this merely confirms the familiar fact that Jewish tradition is indeed capable of integrating external influences in accordance with the *halacha*, the body of Jewish religious law and jurisprudence, and thereby to exemplify how a nation or individual may remain true to itself and yet be fully integrated in its surrounding majority or mainstream society.

My study starts out stating that it would focus on three domains of enquiry: Jewish drama, Jewish theatre and Jewish identity, which together would comprise the leitmotif of the work. These three domains of enquiry are tightly interlinked and even intertwined over the centuries or even millennia of Jewish cultural history. They became intertwined as early as the period of Hellenistic civilization in antiquity, when the adherents to Jewish traditions vehemently objected to the theatre – especially in the Land of Israel which was under Greek occupation at the time – because they saw its principles and practices as sharply conflicting with the *halacha*, particularly regarding the laws laid down in the *Torah*, the Jewish Bible, prohibiting idolatry and proscribing men dressing up in female clothing or vice versa. In that case, it was therefore precisely the presence of these strict prohibitions that served as the vehicle for preserving Jewish identity:

אָרוּר הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשֶׂה כְּסֵל וּמִסְכָּה תוֹעֵבֶת יְהוָה, מַעֲשֵׂה יָדָיו תִּרְשׁ וְשֵׁם בְּפִתּוֹ.
(דברים תבוא כז טו)

Cursed be the man that maketh a graven or molten image, an abomination unto *Hashem* [*The Name*, i.e. The Eternal One], the work of the hands of the craftsman, and setteth it up in secret. (Dvarim/Deuteronomy 27:15)

לא-יִהְיֶה כְּלִי-גִבֹר עַל-אִשָּׁה, וְלֹא-יִלְבֹּשׁ גִּבֹר שְׂמֹלֶת אִשָּׁה: כִּי תוֹעֵבֶת יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ, כָּל-עֲשֵׂה אֱלֹהִים
(דברים תצה בכ ה)

A woman shall not wear that which pertaineth unto a man, neither shall a man put on a woman's garment; for whosoever doeth these things is an abomination unto *Hashem* thy God. (Dvarim/Deuteronomy 22:5)

But it was not only Jewish tradition that put forward the idea that the theatre was dangerous for morals and corroded the sense of identity. In a letter he wrote to D'Alembert in 1758, the eighteenth century French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau objects against the recommendation put forward by the Encyclopedists for a theatre to be built in Calvinist Geneva, on the ground that it would exert dangerous and even crushing pressures on the identity of the Genevans. Rousseau likewise considers it dangerous that men and women enjoy themselves side by side in a theatre, an objection that echoes the strict requirement in the halacha that there be always a *mehitza* or partition to separate men and women in public venues, such as synagogues. Nonetheless, there was a class of Hellenized Jews even in late antiquity that in fact adapted the culture of theatre in one form or another, together with other elements of Greek culture. Evidence of this, for instance, is the amphitheatre in Caesarea built by Herod the Great in Roman times, as well as a number of dramas written by Hellenized Jewish playwrights. It was in this period that the first known Jewish play was authored in Alexandria by Ezekiel the Tragedian, where the appellation of „tragedian” to his name would suggest that he might in fact have written several dramas (Stemberger 2001: 55), although only the Latin version of his *Exagogé* (Exodus) and some fragments of its original Greek version remain extant. The topic of the play is indisputably Jewish, but we have no information as to whether he intended the play for a Jewish or non-Jewish public, and neither do we know whether it was to be read or performed. But such works as the one by Ezekiel and possibly even by other Jewish dramatists do not change the fact that the Jewish religious authorities strictly forbade the theatre and theatre going for Jews.

Rabbinical strictness in the interpretation and application of the halacha continued throughout late antiquity and the middle ages, and although religious ritual does carry certain theatre-like elements in every culture or at least touches on theatre-like elements on a number of points,

religious ritual and theatre had arisen out of quite different psychological and community needs, and as within Christian communities, secular theatre within Jewish communities also emerged in opposition to religious ritual, rather than from it.

It is an indication of the strictness of Jewish tradition that historically it only permitted theatre within the particular context of Purim celebrations, when everything turns topsy-turvy and things that would be forbidden at other times are not only permitted, but literally become a *mitzvah* or good deed to be done out of a sense of pious religious obligation. Nonetheless, the theatre did actually make an appearance within the framework of Jewish tradition itself, as did drama too, and it is in the Book of Job that the first signs of this may already be discerned. Whilst at first glance this may seem contradictory, what the history of Jewish culture and tradition actually demonstrates is that this was not contradictory at all, but very much part and parcel of the essence of Jewish tradition and Jewish identity. In matter of fact, a scope for reinterpreting tradition in the spirit of that tradition and of the Torah – and in the course of that to also take into account changing circumstances in the surrounding world – was just as indelibly encoded in Jewish tradition as the injunction not to follow in the ways of other nations, and has been thus encoded right from the very beginnings of Jewish tradition, ever since the time when according to Jewish tradition, the people also received the Written and the Oral Torah on Mount Sinai. Judaism therefore reworks external influences to its own image and integrates them in its own particular ways into its belief system, as can be seen for instance in giving free play to the theatre during Purim, or in the clearly discernible influence of drama in the Book of Job, where however it must be remembered that the notion of tragedy in the Hellenistic sense is uninterpretable in a Jewish context. The reason for that is the belief in the omnipotence and righteousness of the Eternal One of the Jewish people, which is diametrically opposite of the worldview projected in Greek tragedy, in which rival capricious gods compete with one another with varying success, though the real powers are actually wielded by the Moirai or Fates with their unpredictable machinations behind the scenes, which then thrust the tragic heroes of Greek drama into adversity and ruination without any possibility of ultimate recompense and restitution. In sharp contrast to this, divine justice had in fact been ultimately dispensed to Job in a characteristically Jewish ending to his story. As a direct consequence of this basic difference between the Hellenistic and Judaistic worldviews, „Jewish tragedy” and „Jewish drama” could only emerge after European drama and theatre did in fact proceed to reinterpret the theatrical concepts, philosophies and conventions inherited from Greek antiquity.

In the early modern period we no longer encounter merely the emergence of Jewish theatrical initiatives and Jewish drama – which occurred first and foremost in Italy, where Jewish drama and theatre emerged under a particular set of historical circumstances, though only from time to time and under some or another specific external pressure or need – but at a certain point in time Jewish theatre and drama actually became the means of strengthening or even relearning Jewish identity, rather than a means threatening to undermine it. The case in point is the story of the refugee conversos of Amsterdam who succeeded in escaping the Inquisition in Spain and Portugal. It was with the single-minded intention of strengthening their inadequate knowledge and understanding of Judaism that closet dramas were written for them, such as the synagogue performances of *Diálogo dos montes* (*Dialogue of Mountains*) by Rechuel Jesurun (which in the spirit of Jewish tradition only contained speeches delivered in monologues). Centuries later this didactic perspective would also become characteristic of the Ladino-language Sephardi theatre. In the 19th century, for Sephardi Jews living in the Ottoman Empire and its onetime territories, the theatre became a vehicle for propagating Westernization and for developing and expressing a modern Sephardi identity. The formation of this modern Sephardi identity was driven by the desire to modernize by adopting the trappings of Western culture, so the Sephardi Jewish minority living in the Islamic world could also enter and become a part of Western culture, which was seen as highly prestigious in the Sephardi Jewish world. Accordingly, the primary focus of the emerging Sephardi theatre in the modern era was emphatically on matters didactic in the domain of social issues, rather than on any aspects of the art of the theatre or matters of aesthetics. First preference was given to translations of Western classics, while the themes of the original Ladino dramas included events from Jewish history, contemporary stories from the Sephardi Jewish world, and propaganda pieces disseminating Western ideas. Going to the theatre and theatrical performances became instances of assimilation to the Western way of life in an Islamic environment, with theatrical performances serving not only to disseminate modernity and Western culture, but – in a characteristic alignment with Jewish tradition – also performing charitable purposes. The theatre thus served to strengthen both the Jewish and the modern, Europeanised aspects of the identity of the Sephardi theatre goer, who had in practice acted as a local torch-bearer of the high prestige culture of the West.

The Yiddish Theatre also set out to give voice to a likewise modern, yet particularly Jewish identity. In the golden age of Yiddish culture, the creation of Jewish dramas and theatre

productions by and for the Ashkenazi Jews of Eastern Europe manifested an aspiration to bring into being their own Yiddish-language culture whilst rapidly modernizing under the influence of the ideas of the *haskalah* (the Jewish Age of Enlightenment starting in the latter half of the 18th century in the German lands) and becoming as fully familiar with secular culture, as they remained proudly confident of their Jewish identity. After the father of Yiddish theatre, Abraham Goldfaden, established his own theatre-company in Iași, the success of his plays subsequently led to the founding of several more Yiddish theatre companies in Russia and Poland. Goldfaden's theatre was entertainment-focused, an amalgam of the fashionable entertainment genres of the age and traditional Jewish *purimspiels*, thus the importance of his theatrical pieces in the history of Yiddish and Jewish theatre is primarily owing to their pioneering character, rather than any aesthetic values that they might have carried. Goldfaden had shown that it was possible to „make” Jewish theatre, which in turn made possible the subsequent rise of Yiddish art theatres, which was then followed at the beginning of the twentieth century by An-Ski's renowned play, the *Dybuk*, which soon left behind the narrow confines of Jewish theatre and received widespread critical acclaim around the world. Whilst however the non-Jewish world perceived the *Dybuk* as offering an authentic glimpse into the traditional way of life of Ashkenazi Jews in Eastern Europe, the play also signalled the emergence of a profound crisis in that world.

In Eastern Europe, Yiddish culture and theatre had fallen victim first to the 19th century Russian pogroms and the waves of mass emigration that this touched off, and then it was utterly crushed by the Shoah and subsequent Stalinist persecutions in the USSR. In the Land of Israel, Yiddish language and culture were of course abandoned as a matter of principle in favour of Modern Hebrew and a Modern Hebrew culture from the very beginnings of the Zionist settlement project, whilst in the United States it was only nostalgia for a onetime homeland, where the parents and grandparents might have been born, that kept Yiddish language and culture surviving for a while, though with the rapid decrease in the number of Yiddish speakers, the rich tradition of Yiddish culture and theatre entered a period of terminal decline from the middle of the twentieth century and is increasingly withering away in contemporary USA.

As a result of the huge exodus of Jews from Russia towards the end of the 19th century, a Yiddish theatrical culture had quickly come into being in New York, and subsequently became highly influential in the evolution of American theatre and of the American

entertainment industry in general. The American Yiddish theatre was brought into being between 1880 and 1914 by feelings of nostalgia, the emergence of a new, freer Jewish identity, and the urge to build social capital and community networks by individuals torn out of their birth communities in the old country. According to Mel Gordon, a historian of the theatre, who quotes an observation by Hutchins Hapgood, a journalist in the period, low-paid Jewish men and women would regularly spend five dollars a week on theatre out of their weekly pay of ten dollars (*The Drama Review* 1980: 3). In the beginning, the audiences came mostly from the less educated segments of the Jewish communities; the emphasis in the performances was on entertainment and community building; and the tenor of the plays was generally sentimental. A new era began however with the appearance of Jacob Gordin, a Russian-born American playwright, who endeavoured in his work to integrate the most modern theatrical trends into Yiddish drama. *Mirele Efros* (1898), seen as a kind of female version of *King Lear*, was perhaps the most notable among his plays. As already mentioned, the terminal decline of the American Yiddish theatre began in the early fifties, when the number of Yiddish-speaking communities began to wane, while the Hasidic and other ultra-orthodox communities, who continued to keep the language alive, disdained, by definition, all theatre for religious reasons. The influences of the American Yiddish theatre are however very much in evidence to this day as mainstream American theatre and cinematic art had been – and continue to be – immensely influenced by writers, actors and composers from a Yiddish cultural and theatrical background. This is especially true of the genre of the musical – which might well be regarded as „the” iconic genre of the American melting pot – given that writers, actors and composers from a Yiddish cultural and theatrical background had played a major and highly significant role in bringing into being this uniquely American theatrical genre.

It was also the influence of the *haskalah* that was the driving force behind the rise of both majority-language Jewish theatre in the diaspora and the emergence of the Modern Hebrew theatre in the Land of Israel. The ideals of the *haskalah* aimed for the modernization of the traditional Jewish way of life. In the diaspora, the process of modernizing demanded the acquisition of fluency in the language of mainstream society and a thorough familiarity with its culture, and simultaneously with this the modernization of Jewish culture and religion. On the other hand, for those in the diaspora that were committed to the cause of a Jewish national rebirth in the Land of Israel, it was the modernization of the Hebrew language that was seen as the key to building a Jewish future fully consonant with modernity. Jewish emancipation in

the 19th century produced rapidly spreading linguistic and cultural assimilation in Western and Central Europe, and with this the appearance of Jewish writers, artists and composers in mainstream culture. From this point forward the problems associated with assimilation – in milieux that were not necessarily or particularly welcoming – became the chief and indeed the virtually sole concern of Jewish drama and theatre in the diaspora. This was in sharp contrast to the subsequent emergence of Modern Hebrew drama and theatre in the Land of Israel, where issues around the identity of a proudly Zionist „new” Jew became the focal points of interest. In the diaspora, it was only in a small number of cases, such as in that of An-Ski’s *Dybuk*, that the sole concern of Jewish drama would still remain in the narrow domain of the risks posed by the temptations and threats of the non-Jewish world to a strictly observant Jewish identity. In very sharp contrast with this, Jewish characters appearing on stage in most Jewish drama produced in the diaspora would either be struggling with the agonising dilemmas of assimilation or with the consequences of having already lost their Jewish identity completely.

In Hungary, the processes of linguistic and cultural assimilation began during the Hungarian Age of Reform. It was at that time that the idea of „Hungarians of the Mosaic Faith” had emerged, and it was in that period, during the era of reform, and in particular during the 1848 War of Independence, that the first generation of Hungarian Jewish authors emerged who actually began to write in Hungarian. A great number of Hungarian Jews participated in the War of Independence, though it was only in the waning days of the war that they received full civil rights (which however they promptly lost upon the Hungarian defeat). Two decades later, it was in an optimistic period that the Jewish Emancipation Law became enacted in 1867, and from then on, a very large segment of Hungarian Jews became sincerely committed to their newly won Hungarian Jewish identity, as guaranteed by law. The cultural and linguistic Hungarianization of Jews was strongly supported by both mainstream Hungarian society and in particular by the leadership of Hungarian Reform Judaism, the Neolog elite, and as a consequence of this only two specifically Jewish theatres are known to have operated in Hungary between the Emancipation and the Holocaust, and as to performances in Yiddish, there were barely any Yiddish language theatrical performances at all in Hungary during that period. The first Jewish theatre was the Kisfaludy Theatre in Óbuda, which opened in 1897 and continued to operate until 1934. The second was the by now thoroughly documented and researched Goldmark Theatre which was set up under duress in response to the enactment of Hungary’s Nuremberg-style anti-Jewish laws. The theater operated within the framework of a

project by the National Association of Hungarian Israelites for Community Education (Országos Magyar Izraelita Közművelődési Egyesület or OMIKE) to aid Jewish artists adversely impacted by the anti-Jewish laws, and in the particular case of the Goldmark Theatre to provide work for Jewish actors driven off the stage by those laws. After the Shoah it became virtually impossible to establish any kind of a Jewish theatre in Hungary. On the one hand, many an outstanding actor, director and author had perished in the hell on earth of the ghettos and concentration camps, of the slave labour service in the Hungarian army, of starvation, or of the pogroms by the Arrow Cross, the native Nazi movement in Hungary. On the other hand, during the communist era, Jewish life could only continue within the narrow confines of the religious congregation, with the communist authorities proscribing and viewing with profound suspicion all manifestations of Jewish identity other than religious worship within the congregations, so that even victims of the Shoah could only be described in public writings as „victims of fascism.” The Holocaust itself was not permitted any appearance on stage during the first two decades of communist rule, and only in the seventies were two musicals (*The Three Nights of a Love Affair* [*Egy szerelem három éjszakája*] and *An Imagined Report on an American Pop Festival* [*Képzelt riport egy amerikai popfesztiválról*]) allowed to begin to deal more openly with the subject. After the regime change in 1989, the Jewish cultural renaissance in Hungary also brought about the emergence of a number of Jewish theatrical companies and alternative theatrical workshops opposed to the mainstream. Such was for instance the Budapest Jewish Theatre (which later became the Salto Mor(t)ale Association), established by Róbert Vajda and Ádám Schönberger, which remained in operation for almost ten years. However, the most significant Jewish theatrical company that emerged since the regime change is the Golem Theatre whose performances have been receiving ever increasing critical acclaim since its establishment in 1999 by András Borgula.

No discussion of Hungarian Jewish theatre can be complete without also covering the genre of the cabaret, a special and popular area of the theatre of straightforward entertainment which not only has a grand tradition in Hungary, but the Hungarian cabaret tradition also has a unique character heavily influenced by Jewish culture that makes it markedly different from the cabaret traditions of Berlin, Vienna or Paris. This is how Dezső Kosztolányi described the Hungarian cabaret in his *The Cabaret (A kabaré)*, published in 1922:

Our cabaret is unlike that of Paris which evokes the snappy wit and charming mischievousness of Montmartre pubs frequented by university students; it is not

bloody, deadly and mentally exhausting as the cabaret of Berlin; and it does not flaunt a vacuous lower middle-class dissoluteness as the cabaret of Vienna. Ours has been of a much higher standard from the outset, much more lustrous and fastidious, and much more demanding from a literary perspective. We have furnished our cabaret with all the intellectual opulence a small people are capable of. There are hardly any outstanding Hungarian writers who would not have appeared in the repertoire of the Hungarian cabaret and would not have regarded that as an honour and privilege, because instead of lowering their standards in their contributions to the cabaret, they worked to raise the genre to their own customarily very high literary standards (Kosztolányi 2. 1978: 778).

There were thirty cabarets in Budapest alone until 1918/19, with Mihály Kertész, Zsolt Harsányi, Ferenc Molnár, Frigyes Karinthy, Dezső Kosztolányi, Ernő Szép, Jenő Heltai or Zsigmond Móricz among its best-known contributors. Traditional Hungarian cabaret existed on the margins of theatrical life and depicted primarily the world of the petty bourgeoisie and the middle class in Budapest, although representations of the upper class and the aristocracy also made appearances in the Budapest cabaret from time to time. But the main characters of course mainly came from the first two groups, with the action being generally located in a middle class apartment, a coffee-house, an office, a solicitor's chambers, or perhaps in a doctor's consulting room. The characters were virtually always lovable, albeit fallible, often bumbling and ham-fisted, though at other times shrewdly making good in the maze of everyday life as lower level officials, solicitors, journalists, middle class women and maidservants in the middle class milieu of Budapest. Thus the authors put on stage characters from a world with which they were thoroughly familiar and also incorporated the everyday vernacular of that world in the language of the stage, including slang and narrative techniques typical of Jewish stories since their Biblical beginnings, as well as typically Jewish humour and self-deprecation which could be bitter at times and mocking at others, but never hurtful. Renowned contributors to the genre included, among others, Endre Nagy, László Békeffy, Dezső Kellér and László Vadnai, the creator of the *Hacsek* and *Sajó* comic duo, as well as Károly Nóti, who was also the screenwriter of *Hyppolit, the Butler* (*Hyppolit a lakáj*), one of the greatest Hungarian movie hits of the prewar era. Subsequently Nóti also contributed in Hollywood, while Mihály Kertész, or Michael Curtiz as he became known there, achieved Hollywood fame and fortune as a renowned movie director. Through them and other talented Hungarian Jews in Hollywood, the Budapest-style cabaret became a significant influence in

American movie making, as it likewise became a significant influence on Israeli theatre and films too, through the work of Ephraim Kishon and other talented Hungarian Jews who settled in Israel.

Hungarian Jewish drama and theatre, as Jewish drama and theatre in all of Central Europe, was highly receptive to the force of post-emancipation external influences that were prying open the framework of traditional Jewish way of life and rapidly leading to its disintegration. This process of this disintegration is the theme of *Péntek este (Friday evening)*, a drama by Dezső Szomory, in which the young wife of an older rabbi is torn out of her community by her love affair with a young aristocrat, the figure of seducer in the play. In *Tímár Liza házassága (The Marriage of Liza Tímár)*, a play by Sándor Bródy, it is the way of life of the upper classes of non-Jewish society that is attracting like a magnet the female lead character. In contrast, *Leviát György (György Leviát)*, a play by Károly Pap, moves beyond the heedless faith in assimilation that characterized Hungarian Jewry from their 1867 emancipation onward, and depicts an instant when that faith begins to be shaken to its core under the impact of certain events in the first world war. On the other hand, what *Lyon Lea (Lea Lyon)* – another play by Bródy – brings to the stage is the destruction of the spirituality of a Jewish community by the brutality of war, and how the peace-loving foundations of the diaspora Jewish identity of that community are utterly overwhelmed in the process. After the Shoah and having personally experienced the horrors and traumas of the Holocaust, some at least of the Jewish playwrights in Hungary had come to feel a strong need to rethink the options available for living with a diasporic Jewish identity. Among them we find Tamás Simon, a young Jewish playwright of the immediate post-war years, who startled his public by a dramatic Judaization of the myth of Don Juan, a topic that had hitherto been totally absent from Jewish culture. In his *A zsidó Don Juan (The Jewish Don Juan)*, the character in the title role adopts a non-Jewish identity in an attempt to free himself of the other-determination imposed on Jewish existence by the non-Jewish world. On the other hand, *Szívzsídó (Jew [at] Heart)*, a play by Róbert Turán, takes the tragic life story of Dezső Szomory to present the tragedy of those Hungarian Jewish generations which until the end of the first world war had grown thoroughly accustomed to being fully emancipated, only to find that a mere two decades later they were to be brutally denied not only the right to assimilate, but their right to life too.

The American Jewish identity was formed by the interacting influences of equality before the law, the practice of partial discrimination against Jews and the segregating model of social organisation based in the profound social value placed on strong religious and/or ethnic group identities that generally characterized American society. The partial discrimination against Jews meant that while equality before the law was guaranteed by the federal constitution, certain career options had long remained unattainable for Jews, as for instance professorial or research positions in the best private universities. At the same time however, in other areas – such as in artistic and cultural fields or in the entertainment industry – it was not merely that the opportunities for success had often vastly exceeded those in Europe, but that hitherto unimaginable opportunities opened up for great numbers of Jewish creative artists to participate, together with members of other groups excluded from the Anglo-Saxon Protestant elite, in the creation of brand new genres of drama and theatre, such as the musical theatre or cinematic art. Simultaneously with this, American Jewry was also able to thrive and flourish in terms of a fully Jewish American identity, owing to the fact that co-existing in terms of vibrant group identities formed such a fundamental organising principle of American society. However, it was also the case for Jews in America that the so-called „American way of life” and attaining the „American dream” were oftentimes only achievable through assimilation or through the reduction of the externalities of the religious way of life, albeit that was generally driven by internal ambitions, rather than external compulsion. Consequently, the principal theme of American Jewish drama had always been the conflict between a Jewish identity and the eagerness to embrace the American way of life. The characters are situated at one or another point of partial or full assimilation, and are either struggling against the loss of their Jewish identity or have completely lost it already.

Jewish playwrights and performers began to emerge in every area of the American theatre from the middle of the 19th century. The dramatist David Belasco, or impresari and theatrical managers, such as Charles Frohman, Marc Klaw and Abe Erlanger, or the Brothers Shubert and many other Jewish theatre people have played an enormous role in the formation and development of the early American theatre. In fact, the overall Jewish contributions to American theatre have been of such magnitude that the renowned English director Tyrone Guthrie had at one time facetiously remarked that if Jews were withdrawn from the American theatre, „[it] would collapse about next Thursday” (Schiff 2004: 13). But it was not only in the beginnings of the American theatre or in the successes of Broadway that Jewish creative artists and managers have played an enormously important role; Jewish participation was

prominent both in the emergence of off-Broadway theatre and in the post-war countercultural movements that culminated in the countercultural revolution of the sixties, as is aptly illustrated for instance by the work of The Living Theatre in New York City, an experimental theatre project that involved decades of collaboration between the wife and husband team of actress Judith Malina and painter/poet Julian Beck. Although the importance of putting Jewish themes on stage had already been clearly appreciated during the first decades of the twentieth century, particularly in respect of dramatizations of the issues around Jewish identity, it was only some decades later – in parallel with the firming up of the dramatic language of the American theatre and the robust expansion of the literature of the American drama by the mid-twentieth century – that second and third generation Jewish playwrights writing in English began to present dramatic representations of high aesthetic quality on the issues around Jewish identity and around the options of living with a Jewish identity in contemporary American society. The most significant among these more or less contemporary American Jewish dramatists – Arthur Miller, Alfred Uhry, Donald Margulies, Tony Kushner, Wendy Wasserstein – have put on stage, among others, dramatic representations of the issues around Jewish identity and assimilation, as these questions confront characters across a broad range of Jewish social classes in the United States, from the petty bourgeois to the upper middle class, such as for instance the upper middle class characters of *Driving Miss Daisy* by Alfred Uhry or the petty bourgeois or middle class ones in *Death of a Salesman* or *Broken Glass* by Arthur Miller, or those in *The Loman Family Picnic*, *The Model Apartment* or *What is Wrong with this Picture?* by Donald Marguelis. The plays may not cover all of the colourful diversity of Jewish American life, but the snapshots they provide of Jews wrestling with the many contentious issues around identity and assimilation in Jewish America do offer some profound insights over a wide spectrum of questions on what it means to be Jewish in America. As to the characters in these plays, in virtually all cases they are shown to have either abandoned their religious identity completely or are in the midst of a process of moving away from it, whilst endeavouring to find their own true selves and their place between two worlds.

Twentieth century American Jewish drama was thus also grappling with the dilemmas of assimilation, albeit within the context of a sharply different set of historical circumstances from those that European Jews had to face. The American Jewish identity was not shaped by blood-soaked persecutions or the experience of the Shoah as that of the Jewish people in Europe; instead, it was moulded by the wide-open opportunities to achieve success in most

walks of American life, and driven in many cases by a powerful yearning for acceptance into the upper class social circles of America's WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) elite. *Driving Miss Daisy* by Alfred Uhry presents an upper class Jewish family in the American South and its dilemmas concerning assimilation; the family has not yet abandoned its Jewish identity, though rapidly heading in that direction. On the other hand, Arthur Miller's play, the *Death of a Salesman*, is about the life and failures of a Jewish family that abandoned its Jewish identity. The family is unable to find a new identity for itself and having left behind the Jewish roots that could have protected them from the utter emptiness of a life full of failures, it flounders helplessly between the longed for WASP world and the abandoned world of their forebears. The fact that the family is not explicitly and expressly presented as Jewish enables Miller to universalise the issues and dilemmas around assimilation and thus to imply that people sharing any group identity whatsoever could suffer the same kind of wretchedness and distress upon the loss of that identity as the Loman family did.

The musical theatre, however, presents an entirely different picture in a number of respects. The 19th century saw the emergence of operas with Jewish themes which, in accordance with the particular requirements and formulas of the genre, were presented in terms of proudly assertive Jewish heroes who, if need be, were fully prepared to die for their faith. Thus, it was not at all accidental that it was an opera, Fromental Halévy's *La Juive* (*The Jewess*), that was the first European stage production in which Judaism was presented as a value, rather than its opposite.

Halévy's opera is extensively examined in a monograph by Diana R. Hallman, a cultural musicologist at the University of Kentucky, in terms of its place in 19th century social history and history of music, and its contemporary reception (Hallman 2002). The monograph is a detailed and comprehensive work of scholarship in which Hallman describes the origins of the opera and the creative process of bringing it into being, and examines the micro-history of the Halevy family within the context of the macro-history of French Jewry, the depiction of Jewish-Christian relations in the work, and the respective portrayals of the two principal Jewish characters of the opera – Eleazar and Rachel – as literary and theatrical stereotypes. The monograph concludes with addressing in some detail the nature of French Jewish identity as shaped by the context of the political and ideological upheavals of the mid-19th century. The period was dominated by the battles between monarchists and republicans on the one hand, and on the other hand by the conflicts between the Catholics and the adherents of left

wing and liberal ideologies, all of which had significant impacted the evolving French Jewish self-image.

Notwithstanding Hallman's aim to be comprehensive in her analysis, her monograph fails to account for the mostly Italian operatic influences on *La Juive* and the especially Italian romantic literary parallels to it, yet these would have been crucial in particular to a contextual understanding of the figure of Eleazar. The thesis of her book is that what *La Juive* offers is basically a critique of the power of the Church and of the influence of religion in general, which would perforce align with the sharp critique of Judaism by Voltaire, as well as by virtually the whole of the French Enlightenment. The French Enlightenment, which proclaimed the universality of mankind, perceived Judaism as harbouring unwarranted feelings of superiority and a tendency to set itself apart from others, and for that it levelled particularly stinging criticisms against it, with perhaps Rousseau having been virtually the sole exception to this. However, as Hallman does point out, a number of prominent Enlightenment figures, such as Montesquieu and Abbé Grégoire did not actually attribute the perceived 'faults' of the Jews to the Jews themselves, but to the social environment in which they were forced to live and survive (Hallman 2002: 7).

The Halévy family was one of those Jewish families who opted to assimilate during the French revolution. Catholic and monarchist anti-Judaism inevitably drove the Halévy brothers to align with the intellectuals of the revolution, who proclaimed, in the spirit of the Enlightenment, positions sharply critical of the Church and of religion in general. But the Halévy brothers soon found that the revolutionary intellectuals were themselves not free of anti-Judaic prejudices, even though expressed in the context of a general anti-religious stance. This, then, was the situation that drove both their political cautiousness and political ideals: they admired Napoleon, but also sympathised with the socialist ideas of Saint-Simon, and though keeping their distance from it, they also supported the revolution in July 1830 (Hallman 2002: 19, 53). Their sense of identity rests upon the ideals of the Enlightenment, espousing in particular the ideal of the *citoyen* or citizen of the state, French in their case, which guarantees equal rights to all, irrespective of their religious affiliation. The significance of *La Juive* is generally perceived in the literature of the field as a function of its projection of the self-image of an assimilating French Jewry. One of the linguistic manifestations of this self-image was the break with the *juif/juive* (*Jew/Jewess*) appellation, instead of which French Jews regarding themselves as enlightened and committed to reforms preferred to use *Israelite*

to describe their identity. Eleazar, on the other hand, embodies the medieval *Jew* rejected by the French Jewish reformers and assimilationists of the 19th century. Implicit therefore in *La Juive* is not just the assimilationist identity of French Jews, but also the internal conflicts inherent in that identity. But the opera also brought about an important development that is neither highlighted by Hallman, nor by the rest of the literature of the field: the fact that with the arrival of *La Juive*, for the first time ever Judaism, the Jewish religion was presented on stage as a thing of value and worth, and that also for the first time ever an opera composed by a Jew projected a proudly Jewish identity onto a non-Jewish stage. On these points the opera transcended the opposing positions of the assimilationists and traditionalists, and had simply asserted that Judaism was indeed of value and worth. The preservation of Jewish identity – even at the cost of death, as in the case of Rachel – is thus shown to be completely on par with the preservation of any other religious or ethnic identity. The success of the opera with non-Jewish audiences was therefore particularly significant, since it would have been for the first time that they came face to face with an authentic and proudly professed Jewish identity.

Another 19th century Jewish-themed opera was *Sába királynője (The Queen of Sheba)* by Károly Goldmark, in which the adaptation of the familiar Biblical story was also a means to pay respects to Emperor Franz Joseph – who was seen by contemporaries as embodying the figure of the wise ruler – in whose empire the Jews were able to live freely and remain true to their Jewish identity, enjoying the same kind of serene peacefulness and golden age that they once did in the Kingdom of Solomon. In light of this, *The Queen of Sheba* does not merely recount a Biblical tale, but reinterpreting it, depicts a world that offers an identity that makes it possible for anyone to become a citizen in good standing and promises a uniform value system driving equitable civil rights for all. The newly forming citizenship identity that emerged at the beginning of the 1870s did not merely seem an enormously desirable civic option for the Jewry of the Habsburg Monarchy, but also a solution toward eliminating the remaining burdens of the past. Beholding the court of Solomon provided a satisfying sense of reassurance for the audience, and for Jews a reinforcement of the sense that they were participants in a new golden age. The forces threatening this new Jewish identity and the influences urging the abandonment of the Eternal One and of its divinely ordained value system could only be external ones that were however kept at bay by the wise ruler, tradition, and above all by the Eternal One. The opera holds up a mirror to that relatively short period in time when for a significant segment of Jews the crossing of boundaries by way of assuming that newly available citizenship identity was not perceived as any kind of a danger or calamity

threatening their Jewish identity, but as an opportunity offering security and reassurance in the same identity. Whilst the manipulations and unpredictable whims of a Queen of Sheba (or for that matter a Tsarist Russia), and her constant repressive presence in the lives of her subjects – and even in those of subjects of other royals or states – would loom high over all of those subjects as a clear and present oppressive threat, the contrary positions taken by a King Solomon or an Emperor Franz Joseph would lead them to refrain from involving themselves in the private lives of their subjects except where their subjects called for that in their own interest, and even then the wise rulers would only intervene with justice and benevolence to the minimum necessary and unavoidable extent.

Thus Jewish heroes and the issue of Jewish identity began to make an appearance on the opera stage as early as the mid-19th century. On the other hand, Jewish operetta and ballet did not emerge until the 20th century. The lack of Jewish operetta is probably explained by the nature of the genre, whilst that of Jewish ballet by the fact that Jewish dance art began discovering and developing its own Jewish character only in the twentieth century – thus comparatively late, and then too for the most part in Israel only. The lack of Jewish themes in the genre of the operetta is actually quite surprising, given that the period leading up to and around the turn of the 20th century, in other words the period which was broadly contemporary with the first stage appearance of *The Queen of Sheba*, was the golden age of the genre, including of course that of the Austro-Hungarian operetta of the Habsburg era. Even though it may well be tempting to consider the possibility that there might indeed be traces of Jewish (self)representation in operettas, the fact that the operetta was hallmarked by the primacy of entertainment would have perforce excluded incorporation of any serious sociological dimensions in the genre, such as the questions around Jewish identity, except perhaps in a highly oblique manner. It is also probable that an Imre Kálmán would have regarded the issues around Jewish emancipation and social acceptance as closed and resolved, even after the traumas of the First World War. In any case, it can certainly be averred that forms of Jewish self-representation, if any, appeared at most marginally in operettas, the probable reasons being not just the characteristic worldview of the genre, but simple disinterest in heavier calibre social issues on the part of the authors.

It is notable, however, that *Menyasszonytánc (Bridal Dance)* by Ferenc Fegyva Jávor, István Kállai and Tibor Miklós, one of the most successful contemporary Hungarian operettas, is a klezmer operetta that straddles the domains of klezmer, of operetta and in part that of the

musical too. The play is about Hungarian Jewish life and identity in Transylvania in the third decade of the twentieth century, where being Hungarian and Jewish meant living life as dually in the minority in a majority Romanian environment. The operetta handles the issues of anti-Semitism and of religious and ethnic tensions with more than usual courage, and then ultimately resolves those tensions in ways that perfectly fit the requirements of the genre. The play proffers the possibility of choice regarding identity or at least part of an identity, albeit it also cautions that in certain historical situations an identity will also depend on others. The protagonist of the play is Rózsi, who does not become another person from one day to the next, nonetheless her community proceeds to cast her out on the basis of some scuttlebutt going around that she was Jewish. Her (supposed) Jewishness proves offensive to the people around her; only the village teacher is willing to accept a Jewish Rózsi, though after a lot of agonising, her sweetheart András does too, as well as his father. The happy end of the story is only ensured by the lucky outcome of discovering that Rózsi was not Jewish after all. In the final scene the rabbi and his friend the parson, who can be regarded as one of the *raisonneurs* of the play, commiserate about how awful it must have been for Rózsi the period during which she was regarded as a Jew. The fact that a Jewish identity was appalling even for the supposedly enlightened parson, a close friend of the rabbi, actually serves as a forewarning that the happy end could not really be regarded as a complete one, and indeed, may well turn out to be just an illusion. The closing words of Herskovics, the Jewish publican, are thus likely to leave the audience with an uneasy feeling: „Do you know what is really awful? That you regard it as so awful that she was one of us for a while. If only each one of you would try it . . . just for two weeks . . . ”. There is nonetheless a glimmer of hope in the words of Herskovics, the hope that interpersonal experience can bring about a measure of empathy that would be able to transcend prejudices. The *Menyasszonytánc (Bridal Dance)* thus follows the requirements of the genre in that it projects an ultimate hopefulness and delivers a happy end whilst successfully incorporating a Jewish theme into an operetta, even though relatively late, of course, after the first emergence of the genre.

As for Jewish ballet, I chose *Purim* to represent the genre in this study, a contemporary dance production by Ferenc Fegyva Jávor, Róbert Turán and István Juhos. The story of Esther, Queen of Persia and the Persian Jewish community that she was able to save from destruction is one in which hope, courage and a proudly assertive Jewish identity are triumphant in the struggle against those who would do deadly harm to Jews in ancient Persia. At the same time, in this production *The Book of Esther* blends into the everyday routine of the shtetl, a Jewish

village or small township in the Pale of the Settlement of the Russian Empire, and with this the story of persecution and miraculous escape, of holding one's ground and of the justness of the Eternal One, actually becomes ageless and independent of time and historical era. The script in fact departs from the Biblical story on a number of points. On the one hand, pogroms occur even before Haman's plot to destroy the Jews, and this is what explains why Mordechai enjoins Esther not to reveal her real origins (The Book of Esther 2,10). On the other hand, the Bible does not go into the details of the fortune-telling scene, thus Haman's manipulation does not actually appear in *The Book of Esther*. The incorporation of the pogroms into the story of the ballet highlights the tragic experience of the persecution of Jews throughout history, particularly in view of the tragedies of the 19th and 20th centuries, whilst Haman's manipulation underscores the culpability of the perpetrators. Given the way that Haman manipulated the fortune-telling process, he cannot in any way shift the responsibility for the consequences of his action to some external force or to some other circumstances outside his control. The Hamans of this world always perpetrate their evil deeds entirely of their own free will; their motivations may differ – it might be greed or something else – but their decisions are all their own. Each individual is entirely responsible for his or her actions, Haman for his evil, Esther for standing her ground, and each has the power of choice. The choice made by Esther – as at a fateful point in time by Mordechai too – is above all also about choosing a Jewish identity. Just as Rachel and Eleazar, the two protagonists of *La Juive*, neither could Mordechai permit himself to bow down before Haman at that particular point in time and remain true to himself, whilst Esther felt obliged to intervene and reveal her true Jewish identity for the same reason. What is at stake in the story of Purim is not just taking responsibility for 'owning' one's own Jewish identity, but taking responsibility for owning one's entire true self, because if one is unable to profess one's beliefs and true feelings except in the greatest secrecy, then one is compelled live forever in concealment and hiding.

In contrast to the minuscule number of Jewish operas, operettas and ballets, there are numerous musicals with Jewish themes, which is explained by the relative recentness of the genre and the circumstances of its emergence. The genre of the musical emerged in the United States, where it soon became „the” quintessentially American genre, and as such, one of the most important vehicles for the cultural expression of the American identity. Among the prominent architects of the genre of the musical and overall a new language of music in America, quite a number had Russian, German or Austro-Hungarian Jewish backgrounds, as for instance George and Ira Gershwin, Oscar Hammerstein, Richard Rogers, Lorenz Hart,

Jerome Kern or Frederick Loewe, and most among them were perfectly familiar with the traditions of European musical theatre. These Jewish American composers and lyricists blended together a wide diversity of elements in their musicals, including aspects of European music and theatre, Jewish liturgical music, klezmer music, the Yiddish theatre whose language was their mother tongue, Afro-American musical trends and the white Anglo-Saxon musical and theatrical traditions of America, as well as other influences. Overall, these Jewish American composers and lyricists had played a highly significant part in the creation of this new genre right from the outset. Following the Second World War, and in particular from the beginning of the sixties, musicals had come under the influence of counterculture musical genres such as the rock and a little later the pop. Simultaneously with this a transformation took place in what was regarded as acceptable subject matter in the primarily entertainment-focused musical theatre, and attention began to be directed in the musicals toward subjects, such as the situation of disadvantaged minorities or the aspirations of the civil rights movement, and there were numerous Jewish American composers and lyricists who played an important part in these cultural developments too.

The development of the American musical was largely the making of immigrant talent from non-WASP social groups. Whilst non-WASP social groups in America were excluded from the realms of political power until the middle of the 20th century, they could and did contribute immensely to both popular and high culture; in popular culture, for example, it was first and second generation immigrants from Europe who brought into being the entire American entertainment industry. Their huge role in creating American culture is explainable in large part by the fact that in contrast to Europe, where fostering and maintaining cultural activities, particularly those of high culture, generally depended on financial support by governments run by the respective political elites of each country, in the United States the various domains of culture were always financed almost exclusively by private individuals and foundations. The emergence of the genre of the musical also coincided with the flowering of the Yiddish theatre and the great waves of emigration from Russia. The Yiddish theatre – which nurtured a feeling of community for Yiddish speaking Jews in the United States, and satisfied a nostalgia they might have felt for their onetime homeland – was greatly popular with its public, and its popularity made it possible for many a Yiddish author and actor to develop and hone their talents to the point where they could easily find their place in the newly developing mainstream genre of the musical. Beginning with the nineteen sixties, when a new Jewish generation that grew up after the Shoah began to take interest in the onetime

homeland and traditions of their parents and grandparents, musicals began to appear with partly or wholly Jewish themes and with Jewish characters in even musicals that did not have specifically Jewish themes. Some of the musicals that dealt with Jewish themes, as for instance *Fiddler on the Roof*, did so unequivocally in the spirit of nostalgia; others, as for instance *Yentl*, though they might have related to Jewish traditions in a somewhat more critical vein, did so with a similarly unequivocal nostalgia, albeit bringing to the stage moments when some aspects of that tradition were beginning to come under significant challenge by the modern world. In Hungary, the first production of a musical, in the early seventies, coincided with the increasing popularity of counter-culture as hallmarked by rock music. The *Képzelt riport egy amerikai popfesztiválról* (*An Imagined Report about an American Pop Festival*) not only brought to the stage the spirit of a freer world and an American kind of mentality, thereby enabling members of the audience to vent their personal anger at so-called „existing socialism” in Hungary, but the „rebellious” nature of the musical also manifested itself in its explicit presentation – for the first time on the Hungarian stage – of the post-traumatic pain and distress of the survivors of the Shoah, which society as a whole completely failed to confront, just as completely as it had failed to confront the entirety of the Holocaust itself.

Whilst the Hebrew and Yiddish renaissance both emerged in Russia as parallel developments, the center of gravity of the Hebrew renaissance soon moved to the Land of Israel. This was also the story of *Habima* (*The Stage*) – today the Hebrew National Theatre – that was originally formed in Russia in 1912 by Nachum Zemach, though it was not until 1917 that a successful Hebrew language theatre group had first made its appearance (Abramson 1979: 33). That was the year in which the *Hebrew Studio* was established under the patronage of no less a personage than Konstantin Stanislavski, one of the most influential figures in the development of the modern art of the theatre, who was filled with enthusiasm about the possibility of a Hebrew language theatre. The Hebrew Studio subsequently became one with the Habima as a Jewish national theatre company performing in Moscow, then moved to British Mandatory Palestine in 1928 and ultimately became the National Theatre of Israel in 1958, having played and continuing to play to this day a crucial role in the formation of the Jewish national identity of not just its audiences but of its own Jewish national identity as well. Its founder, Nachum Zemach, envisaged a theatre featuring Hebrew language plays which would ultimately move to a permanent home in the Holy Land. In order to create a theatre group that was not merely of high artistic standard, but also a flag-bearer of modern

Hebrew culture, Zemach carried out significant community building work as well. He personally financed the training of the actors and actively sought out Stanislavski's professional advice, who in turn suggested that it would be best if the Armenian Yevgeny Vakhtangov would be invited to work with the actors to lift their professional standards. Zemach's initiative at first did not however appear to promise much success initially. The formation of the Hebrew language theatre group was accompanied on the one hand by the all too real problem that few in the audiences actually understood Hebrew, and on the other hand by the profound distrust of Russian Jewish communists who regarded Hebrew as a „clerical and nationalist language” (Rozik 2013: 187). It is worth mentioning however, that An-Ski's *Dybuk*, originally written in Russian, then translated into Yiddish, did get to be performed in the Sephardi dialect of Hebrew too, by the Hebrew Studio in 1918, and despite the fact that few among the audience understood the language, the performance was a great success and was received with much enthusiasm by both the Jewish and non-Jewish intelligentsia in Moscow, among others by Gorki, who returned to watch several of the performances.

It was in 1928 that the Habima began to operate in the Holy Land, where there were already several other smaller theatre groups in existence at the time. In the beginning, the purpose of the Hebrew theatre was significantly didactic, not unlike that of the Ladino-language theatre of the Sephardi Jewish communities. Thus, the Hebrew theatre aimed at propagating the ideals of Zionism, at fostering and spreading the knowledge of the Hebrew language among the immigrants from the diaspora, and at putting on stage representations of the new Jewish identity of the Zionist pioneer, not least to thereby strengthen that identity in the audience, many of whom would have been newcomers to the country. The ideal of this new Jewish identity – which strove to leave behind the *Galut*, the exilic diaspora, in every sense and every way – was the fighting *sabra* (native-born Israeli) who was not only a hard-working tiller of the soil, but someone who was also equally at home in both European and Jewish culture, and who could furthermore be religious or non-religious, though if religious, not at all in the sense of Jewish religiousness in the *Galut*.

As in the case of every newly forming nation, Israeli authors of the period were endeavouring to shape this new Israeli identity into artful manifestations in their works, and indeed to mythicize it, with the theatre serving as the primary conduit for that mythicization. The first dramas written in the Land of Israel had a solidly didactic and overwhelmingly social focus, their chief aim being the imparting and strengthening of an Israeli Jewish identity. This was

especially true of the first few years after the establishment of the state. The style of the plays was in many respects reminiscent of the dominant socialist realism of the period in the communist block, although the dramas written in British Mandatory Palestine and subsequently in the State of Israel did diverge from East European-style socialist realism in one essential point. In contrast to the ideology of internationalist class warfare embraced by socialist realism, in Mandatory Palestine and subsequently in the State of Israel a special amalgam of national romanticism and socialist realism emerged as the dominant creative trend or movement, one which the generations of sabras could feel as entirely their own. Its social acceptance was indisputable because it was born of actual social expectations, in sharp contrast to social realism, which peoples of Central and Eastern Europe could never accept or identify with. The dominant ideology driving this distinctive and in some respects eclectic movement was naturally that of Zionism and its nation building idealist ethos. The playwrights were mainly of Ashkenazi background and generally of Russian, Polish or German Jewish descent. The majority of the plays were about the everyday experiences of sabras, about life in the kibbutzim, and in the forties and fifties, the War of Independence had also made its appearance in some plays, with depictions of the everyday experiences of the soldiers fighting in that war. The problems of new immigrants, however, were barely if at all addressed in dramas that were being written in that period (Abramson 1998: 7). As in the case of theatrical dramatizations of every newly forming national identity and national culture, it was to capture and dramatize the mythoi, the foundation narratives, values and archetypes of a once again Jewish Land of Israel that the Palestinian Jewish and subsequently Israeli theatre was aiming to accomplish. The audiences were seeking to understand the truth and reality of who were, and the theatre was endeavouring to provide clarifying answers to this. From the beginning of the 1920s, plays written by Nathan Bistrizski, Aharon Ashman or Sh. Shalom (also known as Salom Jozsef Sapira) were about the life of the pioneers and the challenges facing them, generally presented in terms of typical figures, rather than characters with strong individuality.

Later however, as in other modern cultures, the theatre became the chief medium for exploring doubts emerging about the new Jewish identity in the State of Israel, which was then followed by an era of myth destruction, though new myths were also being created in the period. It needs to be born in mind that while in Western Europe and in the United States it took hundreds of years to develop the concept and form of the nation and for the evolution of forms of individual identity appropriate to that concept and form, in Israel there were only a

few short decades available for forming a concept of the nation and of national identity in the modern sense of these terms, thus the process of working out and working through these notions was also incomparably faster, more intensive and more radical than either in Western Europe or in the United States. In the domain of Israeli theatre, one of the consequences of this national identity-forming process was the theatre increasingly becoming a locus of the conflict between the secular and religious communities in the country – between the secular „left” and the religious „right,” as these positions became termed in Israel’s distinctive political context – so a theatrical performance could often generate political passions, especially when the presentation of the way of life of the religious communities was demonizing, as was often the case in the past.

The changes in European and Western politics and culture, especially in consequence of the social upheavals of 1968, also had a large role in the changes that were transforming Israeli theatre and drama. On the one hand, as a consequence of this radical turn of events, and in response to both the political problems and tensions in Israel and the cultural and political influences that shook Western culture to its foundations, it became acceptable to put countercultural drama on the stage, and to openly depict matters, such as the situation of the minorities or sexuality and gender issues, in ways that not so long ago would have been quite unimaginable. Israeli culture had always reacted quickly and responsively to international changes, thus it was not surprising at all that new ideas and trends soon made their appearance in the Israeli theatre too. On the other hand, it was just as essential a development that a new generation that had come of age had, in the meantime, began to seek its roots, as a result of which the Shoah had come to be accorded an ever increasing role in Israeli drama. The memory of that traumatic historical experience inevitably continued to be carried by the large number of survivors living in Israel and impact heavily not just on their own life, but on the lives of their children and grandchildren too, thus it became increasingly untenable to continue to studiously ignore the trauma of the Shoah in Israeli public discourse, and Israeli theatre too had to give due recognition to the all too obvious fact that the experience of the Shoah had in the meantime inevitably become an inalienable part of Israeli Jewish identity. This was the socio-political context in which Israeli dramatists first began to openly and provocatively question the idea of an Israeli identity built on Zionist ideals, whilst responding with ever increasing intolerance to the rapidly strengthening assertiveness of the orthodox, and in particular the ultra-orthodox segments in Israeli society, whose religious identity they generally tended to demonize on stage. It was in this context too, that the plays of such

leading Israeli dramatists as Hanoch Levin or Joshua Sobol had come to carry messages of radical anti-Zionism, though in contrast to Sobol, Levin makes less reference to current political affairs in Israel and his tone is also less provocative. Regarding Levin, a sabra like Sobol, it might also be worth mentioning that he originally started out in the genre of satirical cabaret, but soon broke with the „constructive satires” of Ephraim Kishon (Abramson 1998: 203), whereupon his style became cruder and more cruel.

At the same time, purely entertainment-oriented theatre that either did not touch on political matters, or did so only tangentially, was also gaining ever increasing popularity in Israel on a parallel trajectory. From the nineteen nineties onwards we witness a further significant change, as the religious right began to discover the latent political opportunities in theatre-like performances. So although subject to strict restrictions, certain forms of the more traditional kind of theatre could nonetheless begin to appear in productions by and within religious communities. Apart from religious female stand-up comedy and street theatre, this change in religious attitudes to the theatre was also evident in theatre productions by women for female audiences in the Samaritan Community Theatre. At the same time, whilst playwrights from a religious background were beginning to make their mark in the secular theatre, there was also a noticeable shift in attitudes regarding the depiction of the religious way of life, as a result of which demonizing depictions have become ever fewer and far between. Instead, the depiction of the religious world is these days becoming a lot more nuanced, which may well lead to a reduction of tensions between the secular and religious communities; in addition, in certain cases drama and the theatre can also lead to a strengthening of religious identity, as happened for instance in the case of the Amsterdam conversos too.

The plays of Leah Goldberg, Hanoch Levin, Joshua Sobol and Hadar Galron span the entire story of the State of Israel from its phoenix-like rise from the ashes of the Shoah until the end of the twentieth century. *The Lady of the Castle*, a play by Leah Goldberg, was written barely ten years after the Holocaust, and was as yet it still only focused on exploring issues arising from a collision between Israeli and diaspora Jewish identities. In sharp contrast to Leah Goldberg's concerns, the provocative dramas of a new generation of playwrights that emerged in the sixties and seventies take issue with Israeli identity itself and cast doubts upon the myths about it. Plays by Hanoch Levin or Joshua Sobol do not merely challenge Israeli society for having given up its onetime socialist ideals, but also take issue with the Zionist ideal itself. *The Labour of Life* and *Suitcase Packers* by Levin, which also appeared on the

Hungarian stage, present issues that are clearly of universal scope as though they were typically Israeli problems. The *Ghetto* by Sobol, on the other hand, involves transparently confected attempts to show that behavioural patterns arising in the extreme circumstances of the Vilnius ghetto in fact reflect actual identity strategies in contemporary Israeli society and politics. But Sobol's play is nonetheless an outstanding dramatic achievement, because away from its overblown political analogies, the play does present in nuanced ways typical human behaviour patterns in an extreme situation where life is under constant threat of death, whilst also showing possible ways of preserving a Jewish identity under even those harrowing circumstances. The sole religious character of the *Ghetto* is however a petty fake, in sharp contrast to the depiction of orthodox Jewish people in *Mikveh* by Hadar Galron, who presents a far more nuanced picture of orthodoxy and of the life of an orthodox Jewish community through addressing issues around that most intimate aspect of observant Jewish life, the ritual bath for observant Jewish women. The generally anti-religious stance of secular Israeli theatre is in odd contrast to the orthodox religious background of Hadar Galron, who despite her seemingly blasphemous choice of subject matter and location, nonetheless becomes in effect a defender of orthodox religious identity in *Mikveh*. After all, Galron presents orthodox Judaism and the orthodox religious identity as a matter of much worth and value, whilst bringing closer to a secular audience the way of life of an orthodox Jewish community, even though in the course of doing so she does not hesitate to exercise sharp criticism about certain negative issues that need to be confronted and resolved within orthodox Judaism.

Utilizing various anthropological theories, Erika Fischer-Lichte posits that the processes involved in identity changes manifest elements of the ritual of transition, the three phases of which are the initial phase of separation, the middle phase of transformation and the end phase of integration, with theatre bringing to the stage presentations of the issues and conflicts associated with these phases. At times these presentations can precisely reflect the identity or changes in identity of the audience, at times they might not, whilst in certain cases theatre presentations may well critique the identity or changes in identity of the audience. The history of Jewish drama and theatre confirms Fischer-Lichte's observations and there is no question of the applicability of her description of the phases of transition to various periods in the development of Jewish drama and theatre.

It follows from the characteristics of Jewish history that we may often speak of several parallel Jewish identities or even identities that are direct opposites of one another, with the

clashes and collisions between these competing Jewish identities sensitively reflected in the mirror held up to them by Jewish drama and theatre. The East European Yiddish-language theatre, the Ladino-language Sephardi Jewish theatre in the Ottoman Empire and its successor states, the Modern Hebrew-language Israeli theatre and Jewish theatre in the languages of the majority or mainstream society in diasporic environments, had all emerged as responses to the challenges of modernity in widely differing social, historical and cultural contexts, offering likewise widely different interpretations of modernity whilst endeavouring to maintain themselves as distinctly Jewish, above all through dramatizations of the Jewish identities that they brought to the stage. Generally these dramatizations involved bringing to stage confrontations between strictly orthodox and modern Jewish identities, whilst in Israel such dramatizations also concerned collisions between the secular and religious world views, between the commitment to Zionism and degrees of alienation from it, and to a lesser extent also the tensions between the Ashkenazi (European Jewish) and the Mizrahi (non-European) Jewish identities.

Thus, while Fischer-Lichte's theory is particularly fitting in its applications to an examination of the relationship between Jewish theatre and Jewish identity, the inescapable necessity of reference to Judaism and its tenets in any such analysis unavoidably raises additional considerations beyond the domain of the theatre. In antiquity and the middle ages, theatre appeared to be a cultural manifestation that either could not be integrated into Jewish tradition or at most only certain of its elements were perhaps capable of being assimilated to it, though only on the peripheries of that tradition. Despite this, a richly diverse and extremely versatile Jewish theatre has come into being. As a unique development in Israel, some productions of Israeli theatre even became capable of faithfully and accurately reflecting changes in even orthodox religious identity. In certain cases these productions even serve to strengthen an orthodox Jewish identity or, as may be the case, to integrate that theatre into Jewish tradition within the strict framework Jewish religious orthodoxy. Apart from the openness and multi-coloured diversity of the Jewish theatre, its history manifestly demonstrates a seemingly alien art form becoming filled with authentic Jewish content that remains true to itself and simultaneously becoming capable of exploring across the boundaries of a variety of neighbouring domains whilst remaining anchored within its own context.

From an academic perspective, research into Jewish drama and theatre must of necessity traverse the boundaries of numerous fields of scholarship: in addition to the history and the

history of contemporary attributes of Jewish theatre and Judaism, and thus the history of teatrology and the history of religion, research must also touch upon general historiography, the histories of literature, art, music, folklore, popular culture and philosophy, as well as the history of ideas and cultural anthropology. Given this wide-ranging interdisciplinarity and multidisciplinary inherent in a study of Jewish drama and theatre, interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary approaches potentially hold many further opportunities for research into this subject.