Few scholars have written about the impact of Russian immigrants on Israel's cultural scene, and in that regard alone, Olga Gershenson's book provides an important contribution to the study of cultural change in Israel. Using a combination of ethnographic, interview, and archival research, the author has created a compelling portrait of the lively and diverse world of Russian theater in Israel. This book will be of interest to scholars and practitioners of cultural studies, theatre, and Russian-Soviet Jewish identity.

The Russian theater in Israel has been a vibrant and dynamic cultural force, with a rich history and a unique identity. Gershenson's book explores the ways in which this theater has evolved and shaped Israeli society. She argues that the theater has played a crucial role in the process of cultural assimilation and integration of Russian immigrants into Israeli society.

In addition to her research, Gershenson has conducted interviews with key players in the Israeli theater scene, including directors, actors, and playwrights. These interviews provide a rich and nuanced perspective on the development of Russian theater in Israel.

Overall, Gershenson's book is a valuable contribution to the study of cultural change in Israel. It is a must-read for anyone interested in the history and development of Russian theater in Israel.
asked: How could absorption be adequately accomplished if the plays were staged in Russian? After the first productions, these gatekeepers of Israeli culture criticized Gesher’s approach, arguing that “Gesher [was] a bridge to nowhere ... [and] slows down the klita [absorption] of the artistes” (53). In other words, Israeli critics saw Gesher actors as Russians first and as actors second, and found it difficult to simply engage with the productions as theater per se. Gershenson traces how critics always framed their analyses and reviews within the parameters of whether Gesher was “Israeli enough,” absorbing into Israeli culture quickly enough, or spoke well to Israeli (i.e., native born) rather than “just Russian” audiences.

Gershenson’s analysis really shines when she describes the torturous linguistic translation methods employed in Gesher’s first productions. Not only did cultural critics chastise Gesher for performing in Russian, but Israeli Hebrew speaking audiences would not attend their performances in Russian either. Therefore, Gesher actors were compelled to stage plays in Hebrew, despite their lack of knowledge of the language. Gesher’s staff decided to transition from Russian to Hebrew with two plays (Dreyfus File and Maltese), but no one involved had ever staged a play before in a language that actors did not speak nor understand. Gershenson describes a three-language adaptation process. First they translated and transcribed the Hebrew text in Cyrillic and diagrammed the sound waves to indicate pitch and intonation. Then, Gesher’s actors memorized every single word, intonation, pitch, and pace of the original text. While the rehearsals by day initially took place in Russian and English, the actors learned their Hebrew through memorization at night. Eventually, once the actors learned the Hebrew parts, they began rehearsing in Hebrew, although few of the actors understood what they were saying in the first few productions. The critics and audiences responded with thunderous applause and approval, with critics noting that Gesher had laudably strived toward the ideological goal of cultural integration through language, even if the productions seemed a bit stylistically ‘bombastic’ for Israeli audiences.

There are two minor problems with Gershenson’s Gesher, one theoretical, the other a methodological quibble. Most significantly, the author’s reliance on postcolonial theory and discourse analysis did not always adequately describe or do justice to the complexity of her subject matter. Colonization theory, as Gershenson characterized it in an early theoretical chapter of the book, can sometimes appear to rely too heavily on psychoanalytic notions of the interpersonal relationships between colonizer and colonized, and often does not account sufficiently for the agency of the participants in the unfolding immigration drama Gershenson describes. At times, her theoretical framework seems too structural, and could have been enhanced by using recent theories of hybrid cultural identities found in the anthropological and sociological ethnography literatures on globalization. Gershenson focuses so heavily on the textual record of theater critics’ reviews, sometimes at the expense of theorizing about and fully considering the importance of how new immigrants enacted novel strategies for adapting to new and sometimes hostile conditions. This consistent theoretical focus on discourse seems oddly jarring, given how richly descriptive her later chapters are in explaining critics’ reactions to Gesher’s processes of linguistic and cultural translation, reception, and hybridization.

And finally, a methodological wish for future studies of this kind. Gershenson clearly spent much time developing rapport and gaining the trust of Gesher’s actors and staff. As an insider (Gershenson also immigrated to Israel from Russia in the early 1990s), she possessed the right cultural capital to fully immerse herself in what undoubtedly was an ethnographically rich social and theatrical setting. The descriptions of how Gesher’s actors learned to stage plays in Hebrew before actually speaking and understanding the language are wonderful. How much richer might the book have been to have included detailed ethnographic descriptions of Gesher’s rehearsals, and the struggles between producers to realize their vision as that vision changed over time? Perhaps this is a methodological issue across the disciplines, but as a sociologist, I wanted to read more ‘thick description’ about the unfolding dramas onstage, as well as onstage.

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