Olga Geneshnov, *Gether: Russian Theatre in Israel: A Study of Cultural Colonization*  
New York: Peter Lang, 2005. 214 pp. £23.50/  

This unusual first book is an in-depth case study  
of a fascinating phenomenon—an immigrant  
theatre troupe that became a major event in  
the cultural mainstream of the host society. The  
author has a rich and versatile background. She  
studied Russian Philology in Russia, majored in  
Communications and Journalism in Israel, and  
received her PhD in Cultural Studies at the  
University of Massachusetts. She defines the genre  
of her book as critical ethnography, framed from  
the standpoint of colonial and post-colonial  
theory and drawing on the methods of discourse  
analysis, using interviews, material personal interviews  
with troupe members, observations, publicity  
materials, and press review of the performances.  

*Gether (Hebrew for Bridge)* was founded in  
1991—soon after the inception of mass immi-  
gration of former Soviet Jews to Israel—by two  
Russian theatre directors, one of whom (Olga  
Arve) is still its chief. Russian immigrant actors  
formed the core troupe, although later some Israeli  
actors joined too. In order to attract Israeli  
audiences, Gether soon became bilingual and, by  
the late 1990s, performed largely in Hebrew with  
Russian and English subtitles. As a public theatre,  
Gether received government funding which—along  
with sustained popularity among both Hebrew and  
Russian speakers—ensured its sustainability. By the late 1990s, critics described  
Gether as the most professional Israeli theatre; it  
won awards in numerous international festivals and  
toured half the globe with its best performances.  

Geneshnov describes Gether as an ultimate  
example of cultural hybridism reflecting processes  
of ‘mutual colonization’ between the hosts and  
immigrants. In the opening theoretical chapter,  
she reviews multiple Russian connections in the  
early Israeli history (most founding fathers of the  
nation being Russian or Polish Jews), with  
the lingering impact many Israelis still feel towards  
high Russian culture, especially its literary, musical  
and theatrical traditions. Israelis are rather ambivalent  
about their own cultural identity, stretching  
between its European/Western roots and its  
Middle Eastern location, spiced with the mixed  
ethnic composition of the populace and multiple  
Levantine and Arab influences. Many educated  
Russian immigrants perceive every Israeli culture  
through the lens of Orientalism and position  
themselves as Europeans, i.e. as culturally superior.  
Thus Gether became a strong messenger of cultural  
colonization, viewing his mission as the education  
of ‘ethnically underdeveloped’ Israeli audiences  
by means of high-quality productions of Russian  
and European drama. On the other hand, the  
actual social status of most Russian immigrants  
(including intellectuals) in Israel is rather inferior  
and marginal, due to their poor command of  
Hebrew, financial difficulties, and other migra-  
tion-bound synergies. The hegemonic, Hebrew  
mainstream relates to the ‘Russians’ with equal  
shares of paternalism (as social misfits, product of  
totalitarian state), demonization (as mobocratic  
artists and prostitutes corrupting Israeli society),  
and admiration (as educated and professional  
carriers of great culture). These complex waves of  
narcissism and inferiority in the mutual attitudes  
of native Israelis and Russian immigrants—the double  
figure of colonization’ in the author’s words—set  
the scene for the relations between Gether  
and its audiences and theatre critics which  
were explored in the book.

The subsequent pages offer a ‘click description’  
of all pivotal Gether performances during 1991–  
2006 (illustrated by black-and-white photos),  
focusing on the mainstream theatrical criticism  
appearing in their wake and reflecting the  
construction of host-immigrant relations in the  
cultural domain. Geneshnov brings changes in  
Gether’s repertoire, starting from the Russian  
classics (Idiot, Three Sisters), including world  
classics (Tartuffe), and later incorporating Isra-  
aeli-Jewish themes paying tribute to Jewish  
Zionist mythology (Village, describing the life of  
pre-state settlers in Palestine, Gether’s most  
popular hit, followed by the City). The author  
describes how critics’ affections towards Gether’s  
style in classic performances (described as ‘bright  
emotional theatre venting on grotesque with  
imaginative stage ideas and fresh acting’—in the  
best traditions of Meyerhold and other giants of  
Russian theatre) suddenly wilted when, in 1999  
(on the eve of the national elections), Gether  
favoured Lanning, a political satire based on  
a biblical tale and referring to the Israeli colonisa-  
tion of Palestine. Sensing apparent mockery  
towards popular Israeli culture in the acting,
costumes and music, the critics questioned the
effect of the Russian newcomers to question
Zionist values and make fun of the politicians.
The book closes with an overview of Gehr's
history, pointing to its "ambivalent position vis-à-
vis hegemonic ideology, simultaneously perpetu-
ating and resisting it. This book about theatre,
written by a social scholar, helps in "tracing
connections between cultural policy and political
economy within the context of Zionist ideology"
and is a great read in cultural studies generally
and immigrant cultures in particular.

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