

Olga Gershenson, *Gesher: Russian Theatre in Israel. A Study of Cultural Colonization*

New York: Peter Lang, 2005, 214 pp. £23.30/\$39.95 pb. (ISBN 0-8204-7615-3)

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 the book as critical ethnography, framed from the standpoint of colonial and post-colonial theory and drawing on the methods of discourse analysis, using as raw material personal interviews with troupe members, observations, publicity materials, and press reviews of the performances. *Gesher* (Hebrew for *Bridge*) was founded in 1991—soon after the inception of mass immigration of former Soviet Jews to Israel—by two Russian theatre directors, one of whom (Evgeny Arye) is still its chief. Russian immigrant actors formed the core troupe, although later some Israeli actors joined too. In order to attract Israeli audiences, *Gesher* soon became bilingual and, by the late 1990s, performed largely in Hebrew with Russian and English sub-titles. As a public theatre, *Gesher* received government funding which—along with sustained popularity among both Hebrew and Russian speakers—ensured its sustainability. By the late 1990s, critics described *Gesher* as the most professional Israeli theatre; it won awards in many international festivals and toured half the globe with its best performances.

Gershenson describes *Gesher* as an ultimate example of cultural hybridism reflecting processes of 'mutual colonisation' 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 respect 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 everyday Israeli culture through the lens of Orientalism and position themselves as Europeans, i.e. as culturally superior. Thus *Gesher* became a strong messenger of cultural colonisation, viewing its mission as the education of 'esthetically 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 migration-bound syndromes. The hegemonic Hebrew mainstream relates to the 'Russians' with equal shares of paternalism (as social misfits, product of totalitarian state), demonisation (as mafia/con artists and prostitutes corrupting Israeli society), and admiration (as educated and professional carriers of great culture). These complex twists of narcissism and inferiority in the mutual attitudes of native Israelis and Russian immigrants—'the double figures of colonization' in the author's words—set the scene for the relations between *Gesher* and its audiences and theatre critics which are explored in the book.

The subsequent pages offer a 'thick description' of all pivotal *Gesher* performances during 1991–2000 (illustrated by black-and-white photos), focusing on the mainstream theatrical criticism appearing in their wake and reflecting the constructions of host-immigrant relations in the cultural domain. Gershenson follows changes in *Gesher*'s repertoire, starting from the Russian classics (*Idiot*, *Three Sisters*), including world classics (*Tartuffe*), and later incorporating Israeli-Jewish themes paying tribute to Israeli Zionist mythology (*Village*, describing the life of pre-state settlers in Palestine, *Gesher*'s most popular hit, followed by the *City*). The author describes how critics' affections towards *Gesher*'s style in classic performances (described as 'bright emotional theater verging 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), *Gesher* featured *Eating*, a political satire based on a biblical tale and referring to the Israeli colonisation of Palestine. Sensing apparent mockery towards popular Israeli culture in the acting,

costumes and music, the critics questioned the right of the Russian newcomers to question Zionist values and make fun of the politicians. The book closes with an overview of *Gesher's* history, pointing to its 'ambivalent position *vis-à-vis* hegemonic ideology, simultaneously perpetuating 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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