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Cultural Colonization, Border-Crossing, and Hybrid Formations: The Case of Russian Theater in Israel

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Gershenson, O. (2005). *Gesher: Russian theater in Israel—A study of cultural colonization*. New York: Peter Lang. XIII, 214 pp. ISBN 978-0-8204-7615-5 (paperback).

When *Gesher* [Hebrew for "bridge"] Theater was founded in 1991 by immigrant artists from the former Soviet Union as a Russian-speaking theater in Israel, nobody could have imagined that only 15 years later, it would be the recipient of the highest cultural award given out annually by the State on the Day of Independence—the Israel Prize. Had this gesture of public recognition occurred a little earlier, the words of praise that accompanied it might well have served as an opener for Gershenson's study of the cultural politics associated with *Gesher*'s extraordinary artistic path and ideological journey. The festive wording of the rationale for the 2006 award stressed both the theater's world-class artistic success and its role as a bridge between Russian-speaking immigrants and mainstream Israeli culture. Indeed, the achievement represented by this moment of State recognition further capitalized on the ideological role played by *Gesher* in the Israeli cultural scene. The discourse surrounding the establishment of this unique theatrical venture and its tumultuous cross-cultural journey has served both to highlight and to mystify core issues in Israeli cultural politics. This book deconstructs this journey, using it as a localized cultural site in and through which contemporary questions of cultural contestation, struggle, accommodation, as well as the possibilities of hybrid formations associated with immigration, can be fruitfully explored.

The unique positioning of *Gesher* as a cultural venture must be considered against the background of the politics of immigration to Israel. The Jews' immigration to the

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land of Israel/Palestine has been at the heart of the Zionist project of reterritorialization and the revival of Hebrew language and culture. As Gershenson puts it: "Zionism justifies immigration, whereas immigration reinforces the Zionist idea" (p. 5). The ideological support for Jewish immigration to Israel/Palestine as the national Jewish homeland has been not only central to Israeli public discourse but also translated into policies legally and materially promoting the so-called "absorption" of Jewish immigrants in Israeli society. The implementation of these policies, however, has proved to be an intensely troubled affair. In the arena of cultural production, in particular, the nation-building ethos of the Zionist project was not easily harmonized with the goals and proclivities of the immigrant cultures with which it came into contact. The cultural ventures and tensions that emerged out of this contact make up the cultural history of modern Israel, of which the Russian immigration of the early 1990s is an important chapter. Keenly aware of the larger cultural context of this recent immigration to Israel, Gershenson has made it her project "to understand the complex relationships between the Soviet immigrant and Zionist discourses" (p. 11), proposing to study these relationships within a "cultural colonization" framework.

Gershenson's detailed and incisive analysis thus takes us beyond public pieties concerning nation-building, offering a critical discussion of the theatrical history of *Gesher* against the background of the history of the large-scale immigration from the former Soviet Union to Israel in the early 1990s, which brought close to a million newcomers to join a population of some 6 million Israelis. The story of *Gesher*, as narrated by the author, juxtaposes several points of view—that of its founders—well-known Russian theater directors, Yevgeny Arye and Vyatcheslav Maltzev—and other core participants in the theatrical troupe; that of members of the Israeli establishment and activists; and, most importantly, the voices of a range of critics, the gatekeepers of the Israeli theatrical scene. The story of *Gesher*, as it emerges from this account, is not a seamless tale of gradual movement from the marginal position of an immigrant theater to that of a recognized national and international cultural venture. Rather, it is a story of an ongoing, complex process of social and cultural negotiations between the newcomers and the host culture, which had their ups and downs over the years. The author describes the immigrant troupe and the host society as entangled in a cultural conversation characterized by what she identifies as a locally distinctive process of "mutual colonization."

This process of "mutual colonization" is grounded in the particular cultural-historical circumstances that surround the founding of *Gesher*. As an institution founded by and geared to Russian-speaking new immigrants to Israel, the troupe found itself in a marginalized position vis-à-vis the dominant Zionist ethos that encouraged Jewish immigration on the one hand yet required newcomers to accommodate to mainstream Israeli culture. Within mainstream Zionist ethos, the Hebrew language and Hebrew culture were upheld as the cultural capital all newcomers had to aspire to. Therefore, the possibility of cultural accommodation was epitomized by the shift to Hebrew as a language of production. The Zionist commitment to Jewish immigration (*aliyah*) was thus coupled with a sense of

cultural hierarchy and a colonizing attitude. At the same time, the immigrant artists, who were deeply steeped in Russian culture, saw themselves as Europeans encountering a local, newly formed Levantine culture (albeit, with European and specifically Russian cultural roots). They brought to their cross-cultural encounter with their host culture an attitude of cultural superiority, echoing their attitude towards Asian groups in their land of origin. Inscribed into the local Israeli scene of cultural contestation around the East/West binary that organizes ethnic relations in Israel, this complex positioning of Russian immigrants resulted in a paradox. The author captures the relationship between Israeli mainstream culture and Russian immigrant culture in terms of a model of "mutual colonization." This model describes a process of cultural negotiation in which the immigrant culture and the host culture both play the roles of colonizer and colonized *vis-à-vis* each other. Throughout the book, Gershenson shows persuasively that this process shaped the cultural history of *Gesher* at every step. In particular, the choice of repertoire and the language policy of the troupe were repeatedly affected by the changing expectations of the Israeli public and the ever-broadening aspirations of the troupe's artistic leaders and members.

Using in-depth interviews with members of the troupe, as well as textual discourse analyses of promotional materials and published press accounts, Gershenson deftly follows the production history of all major *Gesher* plays performed over the years and their critical reception. She points to the gap between the directors' artistic aspirations, stylistic preferences and professional self-image, and the web of ideological tensions and divergent aesthetic norms in terms of which each production effort was interpreted. While, in 1991, *Gesher* started as a theatrical venture that provided work opportunities for new immigrants and addressed immigrant audiences in Russian, it soon shifted to performances in Hebrew (even before the actors mastered the language), in addition to those in Russian. It also expanded its repertoire to include plays beyond the Russian classics, including some native-Israeli ones. The shift to Hebrew, the inclusion of native-Israeli actors in the troupe, and the adoption of local organizational patterns of production and marketing all indicated the growing "Israelization" of *Gesher*. Yet in many ways, *Gesher* also remained a Russian theater, continuing to produce first-rate, stylistically distinctive plays based on a totalistic group effort that native-Israeli actors found difficult to accommodate. Performing in Hebrew and Russian on alternating nights, addressing mainstream Israeli and immigrant audiences as well as diverse publics on its world tours, *Gesher* became a hybrid cultural venture par excellence.

Gershenson's analysis shows how the critical reception of the different plays put on by *Gesher*—some from the classical Russian canon, some from world classical and modern theater, others derived from the local repertoire and relating to the Israeli-Zionist experience—was both artistically and ideologically driven. Primarily, she shows how difficult it was for critics to accept the hybrid nature of *Gesher* as a product of the interplay of mainstream Israeli and Russian immigrant cultures. Gershenson's nuanced treatment of this essential hybridity, as expressed both in the production process and in the quality of the theatrical performance it yielded, seems

to me the most compelling aspect of her broad-ranging analysis. She correctly identifies the profound cultural challenge that *Gesher*'s hybrid nature has posed for the boundary-policing spirit of Israeli nation-building ethos, and shows how some of the theatrical productions out of the troupe's repertoire constituted transgressions of various types. Gershenson also shows how the favorable or unfavorable critical reception of specific plays can be convincingly linked to the theater's positioning vis-à-vis the cultural consensus regarding the Zionist ethos. Thus, Yehoshua Sobol's play *Village* (1996) is described by the author as "true Israeliana," with its nostalgic overtones to prestate years, including the Russian roots shared with contemporary immigrants. Marked as an ongoing critical and box-office success, the reception of this play indicated the Israeli public's appreciation for *Gesher*'s ability to become such an eloquent spokesperson for the country's core Zionist values. By contrast, its production of Yaacov Shabtai's *Eating* (1999), a play based on a biblical theme whose rendering implicitly criticized Israel's treatment of the Palestinians, was short-lived and met with rather harsh critical reception. This critical response, as the author argues, was associated with the feeling that the troupe had overstepped its proper ideological bounds—*Gesher* was still seen as too much of a cultural outsider for such criticism to be accepted as appropriate, even cleansing, soul-searching.

Gershenson's recounting of *Gesher*'s cross-cultural journey presents a fascinating analysis of the ongoing cultural and ideological negotiations that accompanied each play's production and reception. While temporally anchoring her analysis in the chronological tale of *Gesher's* founding and development, she shows that this journey was marked by both high and low points, and that *Gesher*'s positioning of itself within the Israeli cultural landscape was by no means a linear process of acculturation by new immigrants as its ultimate success might suggest. Thus, while *Gesher*'s establishment was due to its founders' ability to manipulate Israel's ideologically driven immigration policy, and while the theater was appreciatively received as an artistic venture, it was also held in check in terms of its ideological horizons. Founded and initially supported as an immigrant theater, *Gesher*'s hybridity also meant that it had a difficult time extracting itself from this marginalized cultural niche as an immigrant, i.e., not fully Israeli, artistic project.

It is precisely this ambivalent, in-between positioning that makes *Gesher* such an interesting case study for the understanding of wider processes of cultural hybridization in immigrant settings. This study, thus, makes a significant contribution to a growing scholarly literature on transnational cultural enterprises that is increasingly attentive to the intricate colonizing relations scholars have been tracing in various diasporic and globalized contexts. This growing body of literature partially replaces the nation-building paradigm grounded in an all-embracing notion of national community. The lens provided by the colonization paradigm offers a fresh look at processes of cultural production and reception, one that acknowledges the multivocality and fluidity of cultural performances and the transcultural negotiations they embody. This book, like another recently edited book (Stein and Swedenburg, 2005), which also thematizes East/West relations associated with the politics of Israeli and Palestinian culture in comparable ways, invites us to reimagine the Israeli cultural scene as a site of

contestation. Gershenson's study also offers a richly textured example of ways in which border-crossing cultural performances can be studied in the globalizing context of today's multicultural societies. Brimming with descriptive detail and intriguing analytic insights, the book also makes for an enriching cross-cultural reading experience, provided by an author whose personal journey across the cultures whose contact she studies has clearly informed her observations, interpretations, and text.

Reference

Stein, R.L., & Swedenburg, T. (Eds.). (2005). *Palestine, Israel, and the politics of popular culture*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.