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**REVIEW OF *GESHER: RUSSIAN THEATRE IN ISRAEL—  
A STUDY OF CULTURAL COLONIZATION* BY OLGA  
GERSHENSON**

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*Gesher: Russian Theatre in Israel—A Study of Cultural Colonization*. By Gershenson, O. (2005). New York: Peter Lang.

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In *Recovered Roots: Collective Memory and the Making of Israeli National Tradition*, Yael Zerubavel observes that “the construction of a new nation’s memory is one facet of creating a new national culture, and cultures do not lend themselves well to academic disciplinary divisions” (xvii). As a force that can at once bolster and subvert the construction of stable, nationalistic identity, artistic culture—art museums, concert halls, public theatre, and the like—continually presents opportunities and challenges for confronting national memory. Consider the rampant public debate that occurs, for example, when a celebrated composer chooses to perform Wagner, whose music is understood to embody the brutality of Nazi aspirations, in an Israeli concert venue. Artistic culture, and its easy articulation with national memory, identity, and ideology, is interrogated in a number of academic disciplines that employ methodologies privileging aesthetics and sociological criteria. Nevertheless, exploring the communicative dimensions that bind artistic expression with other forms of political and cultural dialogue is key to understanding these relationships. Enter Olga Gershenson’s acute study of the Gesher public theater, a touchstone for contemporary Israeli identity politics.

A Russian-language company at its inception, Gesher received state-sponsored funding in a Zionist Israeli context historically dedicated to creating and maintaining a uniformly Hebrew culture. Conceived during the massive wave of migration that brought nearly a million Russian Jews to Israel during the 1990s, Gesher (Hebrew for “bridge”) was positioned as an instrument for acclimatization and absorption of immigrants into

Israeli society. Instead, as Gershenson points out, Geshher disrupted the process of nurturing a discrete national memory, and in so doing, presents a productive site for study. Gershenson's book, *Geshher: Russian Theatre in Israel—A Study of Cultural Colonization*, casts attention toward the rupture nurtured by Zionist practices in a post-Zionist age. Like postmodernism, post-Zionism evaluates those perspectives that encourage boundaries and categorization; in Israel, post-Zionism critiques and questions Zionist presumptions favoring “melting pot” absorption at the expense of multicultural voice. *Geshher* studies Geshher as a site for current Zionist and post-Zionist discourse.

For scholars in communication and rhetorical studies, the book situates theater and its reception as pivotal forms of cultural discourse. Unlike other studies that evaluate artistic and cultural practices, *Geshher* centers its inquiry upon the discourse among cultural players— theater practitioners, artistic critics writing in mainstream media, and ideologically minded authorities of the state—as the focus for analysis. In so doing, Gershenson combines ethnographic research with textual, discourse, and archival analysis that is useful for communication scholars of various specialities. In addition, *Geshher* presents a resource for studying assimilation, immigration, and changing patterns of cultural practice for Russian and Israeli studies contexts. Gershenson, an assistant professor of Judaic and Near Eastern studies at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, holds degrees in philology and communication from schools in three different countries; she is well suited for this purpose.

From the book's first page, Gershenson reflects on the theater's name, “bridge,” as a metaphor for hybridity, connection, and difference. The name invites critics and audiences to read its artistic production ideologically. Although Geshher often attempts to eschew political overtones, “the decision to be ‘beyond politics’ is itself a political decision, and both critics and audiences are aware of it,” notes Gershenson (4). This creates a discursive context in which the theater is used to embody and trigger broader debates regarding national identity and legacy. Moreover, Israel's Russian migration has stirred exigencies that defy simple immigrant/nativist identities. Upon arrival in Israel, many Russian immigrants, particularly those who support or participate in the theater, developed a sense of their own cultural superiority when they compared their tradition with contemporary Israeli artistic culture and its more “naïve” audiences (58). Gershenson offers a theoretical model of mutual and internal colonization to recognize and reflect upon how this alters Geshher's reception among critics. In this way, *Geshher* complicates the positioning of subaltern voice and its impact on nationalist aspirations.

Interrogating discourse centered on the Geshher theater contributes to and complicates how to critique representations of the unrepresented.

Gershenson does not dwell on the positioning of the subaltern directly, but does note that immigrants rarely appear in forms of Israeli popular culture. Read by Israeli art and entertainment critics as an immigrant troupe, Gesher was branded by some as culturally separatist due in part to performing early productions in Russian. When Gesher undergoes the difficult process of staging in Hebrew, critics remain concerned about its Zionist prospects. Gershenson observes that Gesher's branding as a "project" designed to "mobilize" Russian absorption into Israel taps language that "belongs to the domain of war, rather than art" (34). The rupture revealed by the "immigrant theatre" is exacerbated by Israeli critics who "consistently ignore this hybrid position, fixating instead on the ideology-driven questions of identity politics" (180). For critics of communication, *Gesher* offers the opportunity to consider alternative avenues for discourse that are more productive and inventive.

Gershenson discretely separates her theoretical work from her field work with the theater and its media reception. Discursive contexts—cultural, ideological, historical, political, aesthetic—are intricately developed for the reader. A rich variety of text is analyzed including interviews with cast members, their performances, the linguistic transitions and translations from Russian to Hebrew, internal correspondence, entertainment reviews from critics, and documentation from state authorities. Audiences, though, are addressed broadly, often in terms of attendance and resulting box office success or failure. Expanding the ethnography to include voices of individual audience members would enhance the reader's perspective even further. Although the reader is exposed to debates that occur among critics and their dialogue with state authorities and Gesher practitioners, an elaborated analysis of the relationship between audiences and critics could advance the critique.

*Gesher* recognizes how artistic culture is inherently political and ideological, and that evaluating aesthetics alone tells little of the story. It is interesting, for example, to read Gershenson's interpretation of how creative choices are affected by "the limits of ideology" (40). Nevertheless, the book could acknowledge this relationship more directly. How do subaltern attempts to nurture voice fit within the model of mutual and internal colonization that is offered? Likewise, what does this teach us about our evolving understanding of whiteness (and its discontents)? And given its unique position for stirring ideological discussion, what does the discourse about Gesher reveal about the current state of post-Zionism, or the wider declination of nationalism? Gershenson has assembled a meticulous study of cultural discourse, but the reader could benefit from further application in broader contexts.

This book should compel further study of how popular and artistic cultural forms evolve in response to political and ideological constraints. It

fits well with other studies such as Raz Yosef's *Beyond Flesh* that have sought to give due attention to the reception of popular and artistic expression and its contribution to ongoing ideological discourse. *Gesher* is an engrossing, eminently readable narrative for readers of all sorts, and Gershenson has composed a unique and valuable study of discourse for scholars representing a variety of academic disciplinary divisions. This is a book that can bridge different disciplines even as it exposes the difficulties inherent to the bridging of different cultures.

### **REFERENCES**

- Yosef, R. *Beyond Flesh: Queer Masculinities and Nationalism in Israeli Cinema*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2004.
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