

Gesher: Russian Theatre in Israel: A Study of Cultural Colonization. By OLGA GERSHENSON. Bern: Peter Lang, 2005. xiii, 214 pp. £23.30. ISBN 0820476153

The Russian-speaking community of former Soviet Jews in Israel numbers more than a million people. However, its cultural output, its flourishing literature, journalism, theatre, and art are rarely examined in critical scholarship, neither is the community familiar to the general public due to the lack of translations, exposure, and analysis. This is why Olga Gershenson's book, *Gesher. Russian Theatre in Israel: A Study in Cultural Colonization* is a very important contribution to the nascent field of Russian-Israeli cultural studies. While focusing on the most famous Israeli theatre troupe, 'Gesher' (The Bridge), Gershenson succeeds in mapping a very large territory of contemporary Israeli cultural landscape by exploring the life of Russian immigrants in Israel and analyzing their complex relationships with *sabras*, the native-born Israelis. As such, Gershenson's book is an invaluable guide to anyone who is interested not only in theatre arts but also in the dynamics of immigrant communities and their cultural production.

¹ F. M. Dostoevskii, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. by R. Pevear and L. Volokhonsky (London: Everyman's Library, 1997), p. 237.

In the context of theatre arts and the larger society, Gershenson questions the various social categories applied to Gesher theatre-makers and to the immigrant community as a whole. On the one hand, *alyiah*, the immigration of Jews from the Diaspora, is the cornerstone of Israeli society and Zionist ideology, and the foundation of Israel's survival; on the other, the immigrants themselves are often resented and viewed as profoundly foreign and even alien to Israeli culture and society. Russian Jewish immigrants are thus confounded by the expectations of 'coming Home' and the reality of marginalization that imposes on them the role of the Other. Gesher's art is situated at the very core of this paradox, making the theatre not quite Russian yet not quite Israeli either. Gershenson builds her analysis of Gesher on the foundation of the theories of hybridity, claiming that Gesher is the quintessential example of a cultural hybrid, a polyphonic multicultural artistic environment that is yet to be accepted as such by the Israeli ideological elite.

Following the Russian philosopher and literary scholar Bakhtin, Gershenson presents Gesher as an example of complex dialogic imagination — that is, the incorporation and interweaving of various voices to create a sum much greater and more generative than the parts — and of the artistic qualities associated with the fusion of multiple genres, styles, languages, and cultural traditions. According to Gershenson, hybridity is first and foremost a phenomenon of cultural exchange, which 'brings forward contestation and collision' (p. 107). Thus Gershenson traces the dynamics of the exchange between the Russian immigrants and the native-born Israelis through a meticulous examination of critical responses from the Israeli press to Gesher's various productions. She notes that throughout the 1990s the voice of Russian Israelis has been at best marginal as an immigrant cultural expression appearing on the periphery of Israeli media and art. In the case of Gesher, however, theatre critics who publish reviews function not only as taste arbiters but also as gate-keepers who determine the troupe's position in Israeli culture and attempt to bring the theatre-makers to order if the critics perceive subversion or threat to established norms.

The central recurrent motif in the relationship between the theatre and the critics is that the critics systematically fail to approach Gesher on artistic terms by evaluating its aesthetics. Rather, they focus on the theatre-makers' cultural identity and social position often at the expense of actually reviewing the plays, the acting, or the direction. Gesher's artistic director, Yivgeny Arie, a towering cultural figure with unusual vision and scope, emerges as the main target of often personal attacks that border on xenophobia and intolerance. Gershenson's model of analyzing Gesher's controversial media reception (parallel to the public reception embodied in ticket sales) is presented as an extension of postcolonial theory, yet would most certainly benefit from a new name.

Conceptualizing Gesher as the result of the cultural synthesis so common in Israel as well as of the complex network of channels of mutual influence between Russian émigrés and the *sabras*, Gershenson calls this model 'Mutual and Internal Colonization' in the sense that sometimes Israeli critics sound condescending towards Gesher's art, functioning as a colonizer, and sometimes self-deprecating, elevating Gesher's achievement to the levels above Israeli culture, thus functioning as a colonized. It is valuable to apply the terms of postcolonial critique to the analysis

of Gesher's art and its reception since the writer clearly focuses on the power dynamics implied in all discourse. Yet this terminology might be slightly misleading to those readers who will pick the book up off the shelf thinking in conventional political terms. *A study in cultural colonization* is not connected to any actual geopolitical conflicts in the Middle East; it is in fact an analysis of *internal* Israeli dynamics of power, ideology, cultural and linguistic identity, and the judgment of artistic expression. Gershenson succeeds in bringing our attention to all these important aspects of the Israeli cultural landscape and her book is a milestone contribution to the understudied arena of Russian-Israeli culture.

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ANNA P. RONELL