

Gershenson, Olga. *Gesher: Russian Theatre in Israel: A Study of Cultural Colonization. Studies on Themes and Motifs in Literature*. New York: Peter Lang, 2005. xiii + 216 pp. \$39.95 (paper). ISBN 0-8204-7615-3.

During the last fifteen years, Russian-speaking immigrants became one of the largest linguistic groups in Israel. Russian-language media, including newspapers, television channels, radio, and internet blogs, run by Israeli residents, developed into a prominent cultural product, with a significant impact both in Israel and around the world. It has been long accepted that this media affects primarily a Russian-language audience of Jews from the former Soviet Union. But does it? And what happens if it outreaches to the host society of Hebrew speakers? What kind of Russian culture will be suitable for “export”? How will the Hebrew public understand and react to such a culture? These are among the questions that Olga Gershenson poses in her new study of the history of the Russian-Hebrew Israeli theater Gesher (“The Bridge”).

Established in 1990 as the first Russian-language theater in Israel, the troupe soon became one of the most popular theatrical groups in Israel. Its repertoire ranged from adaptations of Dostoevsky’s *The Idiot* to plays about early Zionist settlements. The performances were presented in Russian and in Hebrew. One of the main theses of the book is that the existence of Russian theater in Israel threatened some of the Zionist-inclined critics, who were not prepared to accept the fact that a government-subsidized theater functioned in another language besides Hebrew. In analyzing the reception of each performance, Gershenson skillfully uses the terms of methods of postcolonial reading. She points out that while the majority of Israeli elites saw immigrants from the Soviet Union as “projects in need of improvement,” many immigrants believed that culturally, they stood above their host society. Gershenson compares how Israeli critics understand Gesher’s productions with how artists and directors envisioned them. As a result, a reader can virtually feel the tension between cultures. For example, Israeli critics have no problem when Gesher stages Dostoevsky’s works because they feel that Gesher’s Russian-born actors have the authority to interpret the Russian classics. But when Gesher stages a play on the Holocaust, the Israeli media is troubled because Gesher “desecrates” one of the “holy cows” of Israeli culture, which includes a monopoly on how to relate to the Holocaust and its survivors. Theater directors and artists, on the other hand, feel that their perspective can enrich Israeli understanding of this tragedy. As a result, Gershenson suggests, we observe an example of mutual colonization.

To prove her thesis, Gershenson uses a wide range of sources, including publications in the Hebrew and Russian Israeli press, as well as detailed interviews with Gesher’s directors, actors, and other personnel. It seems that the book would have been enriched by additional surveys of the public, the patrons of the theater, both Russian- and Hebrew-speaking. Patrons’ views are often quite different from those of the theatrical critics, and analysis of these views would have added nuance to the picture of dual colonization. Nevertheless, Gershenson’s pioneering study is a rich

and intellectually stimulating work on the culture produced by Russian immigrants in Israel, and my hope is that it will be followed by similar quality scholarship on this important topic.

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