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BRIDGING THEATRE: GESHER'S TRANSITION FROM RUSSIAN TO HEBREW

In 1991 Geshet was founded as a Russian-speaking theatre in Israel. Yet, only a year later, Geshet transitioned two of its first performances from Russian into Hebrew. The transition was painful and arduous. Neither Geshet's director, nor the actors spoke Hebrew. Almost all of them were new immigrants from the Soviet Union. The actors had to learn texts by heart without understanding the language. What were the reasons for this urgent transition? How was it carried out? Finally, what changed in the theatre's life and work after the language transition? In this essay, which is a part of an ongoing research project on the history and reception of Geshet, I will address these three questions. First, I explore the reasons for the early transition of Geshet from Russian into Hebrew; second, I document the transition, providing glimpses into the life and work of the theatre troupe through an ethnographic account. Third, I analyze the consequences of the transition for the theatre's style of acting and directing, its productions, and reception. I conclude by situating Geshet between the Russian theatrical tradition and the Israeli cultural context. Geshet is a cross-theatre.

Geshet: A sketch

During the last decade, the Israeli social landscape was transformed by the arrival of over 900,000 Soviet Jewish immigrants (about 15 percent of the Israeli population). This vast immigration wave brought a range of cultural producers and new audiences with the taste for Russian culture. Riding this wave, Slava Maltzev, Evgenii Arye, and a cohort of devoted disciples founded the Geshet theatre.

Maltzev's and Arye's experience and credentials opened doors to Israeli cultural bureaucrats and gave access to Russian-speaking audiences. Arye, holding degrees in psychology and directing, was a disciple of the great Russian director Georgii Tovstonogov. Before Geshet, Arye directed at such leading venues as Malyi and Bol'shoi Drama theatres in Leningrad, and the Maiakovsky, the Drama, and the Ermolova theatres in Moscow. He directed a Russian film *The Dresser* (1987) and taught theatre courses at the prestigious GITIS. His theatre productions won several major directing awards in the Soviet Union and abroad.

Maltzev, with academic training both in theatre management and directing, was one of the most enterprising producers of Russian theatre at that time. In 1986 in Moscow he founded the Creative Laboratories (*Vsesoznoe Ob'edinenie Tvorcheskie Masterstvie*), a conglomerate of several theatre troupes united under one managerial and financial roof. This project became famous throughout the USSR and Europe as the innovative force in contemporary Russian theatre.

To develop their concept of a Russian-language theatre in Israel, Maltzev and Arye had to comply with the influence of the Zionist ideology that placed immigrant absorption high on the list of national priorities. Therefore, officially, Geshet was designed as a theatre of new immigrants, producing in Russian for the immigrant audiences. Plans for the future included a transition into Hebrew, the production of Israeli plays and co-productions with other Israeli theatres. This assimilation-inspired concept was reflected in its symbolic name – *Geshet* – a bridge in Hebrew, gradually connecting immigrants to the new culture and language. The concept enabled Maltzev to obtain the organizational and financial support for the establishment. Despite the stated ideological mission of the theatre, Maltzev and Arye saw it as an aesthetic and cultural endeavor devoid of any overt political agenda. They resisted the narrow definition of the theatre as a "Russian" or "immigrant" theatre, and insisted on its artistic value.¹

During its first year, the Geshet theatre took a shape that was maintained over time. It was a theatre based on the work of a permanent ensemble. A sole director with a strong artistic vision, serving as both an aesthetic authority and a spiritual mentor, headed the troupe. Geshet's ethos, its dedication to art and the high value of the theatre work, meant that the company functioned like a family.² The company members spent long hours together; they worked, rested, ate, and slept at the theatre: this family-like structure brought about close-knit relationships between actors and director and an intense emotional life within the troupe. Geshet's patriarchal social organization placed the father-like figure of director on top and the other family/company members beneath him.

1. Geshet's history stands in contrast with the history of Habima, the Israeli theatre with Russian Jewish roots. Habima, originally created in Moscow as the Hebrew-speaking theatre, was driven by the idea of Hebrew language revival. It was one of the Stanislavsky's studios, with Vachangov as a director. In the early thirties the Habima troupe immigrated to Palestine and established the first Hebrew theatre in Tel Aviv. For further reference, see Emanuel Levy, *The Habima: Israel's National Theater 1917-1977: A Study of Cultural Nationalism* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1979).

2. For further discussion of social organization of Geshet theatre, see my "In Family Trap: Ethnography of Metaphorical Speech in the Geshet Theatre," a paper delivered at the Eighty-sixth Annual National Communication Association Convention, Seattle, WA, November 2000.

During this early period, the theatre also developed artistically. Geshet's professional perfectionism and traditional theatrical standards shaped it as an aesthetically innovative but not avant-garde theatre. Its repertoire was composed of mainstream classics and modern European and Russian plays (e.g., *Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, *The Idiot*, and *Three Sisters*), and later included some contemporary Israeli plays (e.g., *Adam Resurrected*, *Village*, and *Eating*). In this type of theatre there was no place for experimental productions, political agendas, audience involvement and other features of non-conventional theatre. Geshet's technically immaculate productions resulted from lengthy systematic rehearsals and the detail-oriented approach of the director, actors, and other artistic and technical staff. Geshet was both a director's and actors' theatre. Its productions were a combination of director's concept and the acting of a coordinated ensemble, where every cast member had a striking stage presence, engaging personality, and Stanislavsky-cum-Goncharov's professional training. The conceptual character of Geshet's productions did not result in a minimalist staging. From the outset, Geshet was a theatre of production values. The visual aspects of the staging (lighting, sets, costumes, and movement) were always luscious. As for sound, Geshet's in-house composer, Avi Binyamin, created an impressive original score for every major production.

In 1991 Geshet was founded as a small low-budget theatre of immigrants. In 1992 the company started to perform in Hebrew. By 1993 Geshet established itself as a major public theatre in Israel, supported by the establishment, recognized by the national and international theatre communities, and popular with the audiences. The transition into Hebrew played a crucial role in achieving such a resounding success.

Why the urgent transition?

Originally Geshet was designed as a Russian-language theatre in Israel with the vision of a gradual transition to Hebrew: it was to be a bridge from one culture to another. However, this was a long-term, and not an immediate plan. What caused Geshet to deviate from its original plans and to embark upon the nearly impossible task of performing in Hebrew before the actors could even speak it? Two main factors influenced this decision: first, ideological pressure from Israeli theatre critics, and second, financial pressure from the audience. As to ideological pressure, traditionally, Israeli critics saw the main function of local theatre (as well as other forms of cultural produc-

3. Andrei Goncharov, a student of Meierkhold, was a major public stage figure and an artistic director of the Maiakovskii theatre. His bright, emotional, and non-realistic style greatly influenced Evgeny Arye and the Geshet actors. Arye worked with Goncharov at the Maiakovskii theatre and taught with him at GITIS.

tion) as the dissemination of Hebrew language and Zionist ideology. Therefore, acting like watchdogs of the Zionist ideology, these critics insisted on Geshet's performance in Hebrew. As for financial pressure, performance in Russian impeded Geshet's accessibility to a wider Israeli audience, and thus endangered the theatre's financial survival.

Critics' pressure. One of the goals of Israeli cultural policy, predicated on the assumption of the powerful social influence of art, is the dissemination of Hebrew language. Therefore, the politics of language became a stumbling block in the public discourse about Geshet. Governmental support for a Russian-speaking theatre was on the agenda of such discussion. A critic Haim Nagid wrote: "It is clear to all of us that encouragement of the theatre in Russian language is against the Israeli ethos, but it is also clear that the theatre, as its name states, is a bridge (*gesher*) to Hebrew."⁴ The only justification that the critic found for Geshet's existence was the prospect of its successful induction into the Zionist ethos.

By 1992 Geshet mounted four major productions in Russian: *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* by Tom Stoppard; *Dreyfus File* by J. C. Grumberg; *If It Was Only Possible*, a compilation of excerpts from three classic Russian plays: *The Infant* by Denis Fonfizin, *The Marriage* by Nikolai Gogol, and *The Bedbug* by Vladimir Maiakovsky; and *Molière* by Mikhail Bulgakov. These productions received great press. Critics admired the directorial concept and the work of actors. Paradoxically, the more the critics praised the productions, the more they condemned the troupe for performing in Russian.

The language of Geshet performances became a pressing issue in the critical reviews of all their early shows. In his review of *If It Was Only Possible*, Eliakim Yaron demanded Geshet "to act in Hebrew." In a review of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, Shosh Avigal advised Geshet "to make a bit of an effort to try to get to us in Hebrew." The critic even took a condescending motherly tone promising to be kind in her future reception of the theatre: "It would be possible to forgive them [Geshet actors] all the mistakes in Hebrew, if they had tried to do an authentic original play . . . even if it was in the broken and stuttering Hebrew of new immigrants."⁵ Later, the fact that

4. "Geshet: Tiatron hadash besafa harush hukam baisrael" [Geshet: New Russian-language theatre is founded in Israel], a review by Haim Nagid, *Maariv*, Dec. 14, 1990.

5. The Hebrew term for "new immigrant" (*olim*, plural *olim*) has positive meanings sanctified by Zionist ideology, which sets immigrant absorption as a top national priority. Yet, in everyday usage this term has developed degrading connotations pointing to the incompetence and ineptitude of new immigrants, and emphasizing their "otherness."

Arye does not speak Hebrew would become a centerpiece of critical attention in reviews and profiles.⁶

In the Israeli context, the choice of language is a political question because it determines the legitimacy of the theatre and therefore justifies public funding. For this reason, in Israel, discussions of language of performance quickly transformed into debates on cultural policy:

Is there a place for one more public theatre based on Russian language in the state of Israel? Is there a place for a cultural ghetto that will eternalize the Diaspora, and will turn them [Russian immigrants] into some sort of new *yekim*? Geshet theatre creates a precedent by its mere existence, because it receives public subsidies (from the same meager source from which all theatres are subsidized. . .).⁸

In this review by Shosh Avigal, Geshet was perceived as a cultural "other" threatening familiar ideological and cultural frameworks. The comparison with the German wave of immigration is telling: the critic was threatened by the potential superiority of Russian culture, which Geshet represented. Thus, the newspaper pages with early articles about Geshet and its productions became a cultural battlefield, establishing a pattern for the future reception of Geshet's work. This ideological pressure, applied by the critics and intertwined with the pressure from the audiences magnified questions of language, cultural identity and culture policy in Israel.

Audience pressure. At first, both Arye and Maltzev were oblivious to the pressure to perform in Hebrew. In his interview on Israeli television in 1991 Arye expressed a utopian position towards the universality of theatrical language that crosses over cultural and linguistic divides:

I saw recently in Moscow a German show *Three Sisters* by Peter Stein. I absolutely didn't care what language they are performing in, because the theatrical language is somewhat international. I understood

6. "Litush miktzoi - nituk svivati" [Professional polish - detachment from the environment], a review by Eliakim Yaron, *Maariv*, Oct. 20, 1991; "Teudat zehut marshima" [Impressive ID], a review by Shosh Avigal, *Hadashot*, Dec. 6, 1991. For analysis of media representation of Yevgeny Arye, see my "Voices of Hybridity: Media Coverage of Geshet Theatre in Israel," a paper delivered at the Eastern Communication Association Convention, New York, NY, April 2002.

7. The word *yekim* refers to German Jews who immigrated to Israel in the thirties and forties. *Yekim* were notorious for their high-cultured background and condescending attitude towards nascent Israeli culture.

8. "Teudat zehut marshima" [Impressive ID].

what fills their [Germans'] life. I dream that when Israeli audience comes to our show, they will experience similar emotions.

Later Maltzev and Arye realized that Israeli audiences would not attend unless Geshher performed in Hebrew. Even though Geshher provided simultaneous translation to their productions in Russian, the popular Israeli audiences could not be bothered with the headphones. Given the theatre's ambition to appeal to wider Israeli audiences, this was an important factor. In the same interview for Israeli television, Arye drew a connection between the status of the theatre and the profile of its audience: "I really want and dream that not only Russian-speaking audience comes to us, but also Israelis. At first, theatre circles, then Israeli intelligentsia. I want to create a good serious theatre."

The pressure from the audiences was connected to the negotiation of a cultural position of the theatre. Maltzev and Arye were afraid of cultural marginalization – the threat of Geshher being perceived as an "ethnic venue" haunted them. In the 1999 television program, Arye admitted: "I realized that without that [performing in Hebrew] we will be a small theatre. Like in Moscow we had a gypsy theatre. Some people who like this culture will go there. Without that [Hebrew] we won't be an Israeli theatre." Maltzev, who was aware of the politics of theatre reception in Israel, made his point even more poignantly: "We don't want to be hostages of the Russian audience."⁹

In addition to his fear of cultural marginalization, Maltzev had financial reasons for his assimilationist zeal. Given his understanding of cultural politics in Israel, he was preoccupied with Geshher's survival if it did not succeed in attracting mainstream Israeli theatre audiences. Initially, modest government subsidies had to be complemented by ticket sales at the level of 40-50 percent of the theatre budget. Later, in 2001 Maltzev commented:

... it was very difficult to attract Israelis, they came, said that we were wonderful, but didn't stay. . . . And then I understood that this is a critical question, a question of our future, that no one will advance us as a Russian theatre, no one needs us, we'll be pathetic losers, like Russian street,¹⁰ like Russian deli stores. And we wanted to be part of them, their favorite thing. And that is when we made a historical decision – to transition into Hebrew.¹¹

9. Quoted in "Lo rozim lehiot bnei-aruba shel kahal rusi" [We don't want to be hostages of the Russian audience], an interview by Moshe Ben Shaul, *Mazariv*, May 10, 1992.

10. "Russian street" refers to Russian-language culture industry in Israel.

11. From a field research interview that I conducted with Maltzev in June 2001. Subsequent quotes are taken from this interview unless otherwise indicated.

Maltzev referred in this quote to another important aspect of the cultural situation in Israel, namely the low social status of immigrant cultural and economic venues. The only way to overcome this limitation was to speak to the audiences in their own language.

How was the transition carried out?

The transition of the theatre to Hebrew became a milestone in its history. The most interesting result of this transition was the creation of an unprecedented model of theatre production in a multilingual environment, which Geshher discovered by trial and error.

The decision was made to start the transition with two plays: *Dreyfus File* and *Molière*. The next stage was to implement this decision, and here the theatre encountered real problems: no one knew how to stage a play in a language that none of the actors spoke or even understood.

Arye and Maltzev decided to take advantage of the Hebrew proficiency of one of Geshher's actors, Mark Ivanir. Ivanir, being bilingual and bicultural, occupied a unique position in Geshher. Born in the USSR, he was raised and trained as an actor in Israel. In 1992 Ivanir became the resident linguistic and cultural expert at Geshher, or as the troupe put it, "a bridge within the bridge." To support him, the theatre turned to Miriam Yahil-Wax, who was both a translator and a theatre professional. Despite her enthusiastic attitude towards Geshher, she was initially very skeptical about its transition into Hebrew:

At first when they had this idea to play in Hebrew, they brought me as an expert, and I said: "That's impossible, totally impossible, cannot be done." And then they started in a usual Israeli way – from impossible. They said to me: "Mark knows Hebrew." "Yes, Mark knows Hebrew, but they don't know! How do you want them to speak?" "He will tell them how to speak and they will imitate." I said: "Ok, let them work with Mark." I was sure that nothing would happen. And Mark dictated texts to them and they wrote it down in Cyrillic letters.¹²

This work laid the foundation of the unique system of linguistic training practiced by Geshher. Ivanir explained the details of the process:

We are talking about people who don't speak Hebrew at all. . . . And they had to start to play a role in Hebrew – by learning it by heart without understanding what they are saying, like singers in opera. . . . And it was hell. . . . And we are talking [about transcribing] every sentence,

12. "Russian/Jewish Workshop," a talk by Miriam Yahil-Wax and Mark Ivanir delivered at the BITE-99: Barbican International Theatre Event, London, UK, June 1999.

every word. The emphasis on every word and in every sentence, otherwise you wouldn't be able to say what you are trying to say. It means doing entire thing word by word.¹³

The Geshet actors, together with Ivanir, had to process the Hebrew texts in the following way: on one page of a lined school notebook they put Hebrew text transcribed in Cyrillic letters, on the adjacent page they put diagrams of sound waves, indicating intonation and pitch of the words. After a day of rehearsals in Russian, the actors had to learn the Hebrew texts by night, memorizing not only the text, but also every rise or fall of intonation, the pitch and the pace of every single word.

This process was painful, especially for the actors of the older generation. In the Israeli documentary, *Mishpachat Geshet* [Geshet Family] (1993), actors described their experience of acting in a new language. Leonid Kanevsky: "It was horrifying – unrecognizable language. French – recognizable, German – recognizable, Hebrew – is unrecognizable, unfamiliar." Vladimir Halemsky used a brutal metaphor to render his experience of learning Hebrew texts: "We hit the texts into ourselves as if with a hammer." Grigory Liampe, a veteran of Russian theatre, disagreed with the whole idea: "An actor should act in a language he thinks in." Later, Maltzev confirmed: "It was a tragic work."

How did the actors learn their parts without knowing the language? Actor Evgenia Dodina had her own method; she tried out her Hebrew on cab drivers:

I learnt texts in Hebrew, I just learnt it by heart without understanding, and I tried my Hebrew texts out on the cab drivers: "I am begging you, yield to your destiny, go through all the most horrifying challenges, which you will face. What is the opinion of crowd to you? You know how wavering it is." I checked that way what would happen, whether they understand me or not, and if he responded: "Why, honey?" It meant that he understood.¹⁴

After the actors learnt their parts well enough, they started the rehearsals, using Russian, Hebrew, and English. The rehearsal on stage was in Hebrew, Arye and the actors spoke Russian, and Arye and Yahil-Wax communicated in English. Both Yahil-Wax and Ivanir also served as the director's "ears" – they translated for Arye into Russian or into English what the actors were saying on stage, and enabled him to direct the rehearsals in Hebrew. In terms of vocal work, Arye had to rely on Yahil-Wax and Ivanir completely.

13. *Ibid.*

14. From a field research interview that I conducted with Evgenia Dodina in June 2001.

Geshet's three-language process was "patented" during the transition of the first two shows into Hebrew. For years to come the theatre followed the same scheme. First, the play was read or staged in Russian; then the actors together with a linguistic coach learned the texts in Hebrew, and only then the Hebrew version was rehearsed on stage. Later on, when the Geshet troupe included native Israeli actors who did not speak Russian, their rehearsal process became even more complex. The play was no longer first staged in Russian. The rehearsals were in Hebrew all along, and a translator was required to mediate communication between Arye and the Hebrew-speaking actors. And so Geshet's method was completed: it was laborious but productive.

What changed after the transition?

Geshet's multilingual model had unexpected consequences for its artistic production, including the acting and directing style of the theatre. First, differences in pace and intonation caused the actors to alter their style for performance in Hebrew; second, close work with the texts resulted in greater acting precision; third, prioritizing language over performance changed an established hierarchy within the troupe. Alongside changes in artistic production, there was a revolutionary change in the media and audience reception of the theatre: the critics cheered and the audience increased.

The linguistic shift greatly affected the acting style. One reason for that is a linguistic difference – Hebrew words are shorter than Russian, and the pace of speech is faster. Therefore, the same performance in Hebrew is 10–15 minutes shorter than in Russian. Since the early productions were rehearsed in Russian, and only later transitioned to Hebrew, that meant that the whole show, every gesture, every movement on stage had to speed up. The faster pace required a significant amount of acting skill.

Other differences stemmed from the social use of language – linguistic pragmatics. Hebrew intonation is dramatically different from Russian. Therefore, in order to project a certain feeling in another language, the actors need to employ different intonation and other expressive vocal strategies. In order to express a certain emotion in Hebrew, Russian-speaking actors could not use their affective memory to the same extent as they could in their mother tongue. In that case both actors and director had to rely on Ivanir, Yahil-Wax, and other linguistic coaches.

Geshet turned the potential recipe for disaster – a lack of Hebrew proficiency – to its benefit: due to the careful work with the text, the acting became precise and thoughtful. There was nothing random in Geshet's Hebrew performances, nothing unexplained artistically. Careful work with the texts and almost compulsive attention to detail paid off. Miriam Yahil-Wax reconstructs how a multilingual work led to the great artistic achievements:

The work that Mark was doing all these years, the work that I am doing, is bringing us to work on a text in such a great detail, that we never would have reached had we worked on it only [one] time. It reminds me that when Beckett was asked why did he write his plays in French, he said, because in French he had to think about every word. And it is the same for us -- we have to think, we have to explain, have to prove: why is it that way? Why is it there? And we come up with fine results.¹⁵

The linguistic change also influenced the social hierarchy in the troupe. Traditionally, the older and more distinguished actors had enjoyed a higher status within the theatre collective but the linguistic transition put them in the position of students of a much younger and inexperienced colleague. Ivanir was 26 in 1992 but he knew the language, and the Russian actors had to take his word for it. They constantly challenged Mark, and put his knowledge to test. However, they also were thankful to him, and grew to depend on his support and appreciate it. If Ivanir was not on stage, he was behind the scenes, ready to help, to whisper a forgotten word, and to give a cue. When he was on stage in his part, in addition to his acting, he also monitored the other actors' performances for problems, and came to the rescue if needed:

A few times I helped. And the audience was quite confused, because the text had to come from the other side, but it came from me. . . . We had an old actor, he is not with us anymore [passed away] who refused to go onstage for three years if I didn't stand behind the stage, he was so insecure. . . .¹⁶

Despite all these difficulties, both *Dreyfus File* and *Molière* were transitioned into Hebrew and ready for performance. The stakes were high: both Yahil-Wax and Arye recalled the very first performances as a terrifying and nerve-racking experience.

Nevertheless, later performances showed that as difficult as it is, the work of Geshet was generously appreciated by the audiences. The actors, Israel (Sasha) Demidov, Natalia Voitulevich-Manor, and Evgeniia Dodina, describe the different experience of performing in front of the Hebrew-speaking and Russian-speaking audiences. Russian theatrical tradition has a long and influential history, that makes Russian-speaking theatre-goers more critical. It also gives them a context for perception of a specific production. Israeli theatre is young, and has its origins in Hebrew theatre in the pre-Israeli Palestine at the dawn of the twentieth century. Geshet actors talk about the "natveté" of

15. "Russian/Jewish Workshop."

16. *Ibid.*

the Hebrew-speaking audiences, their unreserved responses, and intense emotional connection with the performers. The downside of these audiences is their lack of ability to contextualize and historicize a particular performance.¹⁷

The main contribution of the transition into Hebrew was the unique cultural positioning of Geshet. Its Russian acting and directing style, and the Hebrew language of production presented Geshet in a very favorable light to critics and audiences. It was, as Maltzev put it, "a Russian culture in Hebrew." The "otherness" of the performers was mitigated by their great assimilation-inspired desire to perform in Hebrew, to be part of Israel. Yet, they did not claim to be "real Israelis" and to displace Israeli cultural producers from their position of cultural competence, in that they did not dispute the ownership of symbolic capital.¹⁸ Thus Geshet's adherence to the conventions of Russian theatrical tradition also turned to its advantage.

Symbolically, *Molière* in Hebrew premiered at the 1992 Israeli Festival in Jerusalem, the most prestigious theatre festival in the country. Bulgakov's play about life and work of Molière, and his relationship with Louis XIV, his patron, explores the questions of coercive power and artistic freedom. The plot is reminiscent of Bulgakov's own relationship with Stalin. In the play, Molière's show ridiculing the hypocrisy and corruption of religious institutions enrages the archbishop of Paris. The only obstacle to the archbishop's wish to destroy Molière is the king's patronage. But even the royal powers gradually give in, and Molière's play is banned (as was Bulgakov's *Molière* in Soviet Russia).

Enthusiastic previews, such as Aviva Zaltzman's, emphasized the transition into Hebrew: "Geshet theatre does not want to be locked in the ghetto of Russian culture and language." However, both Omri Nitzan, artistic director of the festival, and Slava Maltzev, Geshet's manager, worried about the fate of the production and its appeal to Israeli audiences.¹⁹

The first performance of *Molière* was met with standing ovations -- the audience was applauding the actors for their incredible effort of acting in He-

17. From field research interviews that I conducted with Israel (Sasha) Demidov, Natalia Voitulevich-Manor, and Evgeniia Dodina in the summers of 1999-2001.

18. Later, when Geshet mounted a production based on the Israeli play, which was critical of Israeli society and politics, its reception brought up a new set of issues around the cultural identity of the theatre-makers. The critics, who savaged the production, felt that Geshet was not "Israeli enough" to criticize the local reality.

19. "Derech ioter kzara vepahot koevet" [A shorter and less painful way], a review by Aviva Zaltzman, *Devar*, May 5, 1992; "Lo rotzim lehiot bnei -- aruba shel kahal rusi" [We don't want to be hostages of the Russian audience]; "Hafakot israeliot makoriot: kiphu otanu" [Original Israeli productions: we were discriminated], a review by Tamar Lubitz, *Hadashot*, June 6, 1992.

brew.²⁰ Critical reception followed in the footsteps of audience. However, whether the reviewers liked or disliked certain aspects of production, their main focus was language. The critics mixed ideological references with aesthetic analysis. Their decisive criterion of evaluation became the theatre's "political correctness," i.e., the correspondence of its members to the ideological expectations for new immigrants, including absorption into Israeli culture and Hebrew language.

In her review of *Molière*, Shosh Weitz called it "a beautiful and impressive show." After praising the acting, directorial interpretation, and staging, Weitz commented on several problems of the productions. Firstly, Gesher "is definitely not an Israeli theatre. More precisely, not yet." Second, the actors were not fluent in Hebrew, and therefore "the gap between beautiful directorial concept and the level of text delivery is very conspicuous." Third, the Russian acting style that Weitz dubbed "bombastic" looked to her "exaggerated and archaic" in the context of Israel of the nineties. And yet, Weitz was willing to forgive Gesher all these problems because of their effort to "absorb." She even reminded the readers not to forget that Gesher is "an ensemble of immigrants."²¹ Essentially she was saying that Gesher's problems, i.e., Hebrew enunciation, acting style, and the cultural identification of the theatre, would be resolved during the absorption process. As a result of this process, Gesher would become indistinguishable from any other Israeli theatre, which, according to the critic, would be an ideal scenario.

Michael Handelsaltz also gave high praise to the artistic aspects of Gesher's work for "an interesting aesthetic claim and the enthusiasm that is able to sweep audiences."²² But his strongest support and appreciation referred neither to the actors, nor to the director, but to their Hebrew coaches. His evaluation of acting was based on the actors' mastery of Hebrew, in that his focus on language substituted for aesthetic criticism.

The reception of *Dreyfus File* in Hebrew followed the same pattern. A play within a play, *Dreyfus File* is the story of an amateur Jewish theatre troupe in Poland in the thirties. The actors, working on a production about the famous Dreyfus trial in France, fail to recognize the relevance of the plot to their life, and eventually perish in a pogrom. The seemingly straightforward plot of the play posed great challenges for the performers: they were required to play amateur actors without looking like amateurs themselves.

20. *Molière* was a visually and musically rich production with bright, emotional style of acting. Yet, when it was performed in Russian (with simultaneous translation) the Israeli public was not interested.

21. "Matzav hateatron bechi ra" [Theatre situation - bad crying], a review by Shoshana Weitz, *Tel Aviv*, June 6, 1992.

22. "Teudat kavod lemoreihem" [Appreciation certificate to their teachers], a review by Michael Handelsaltz, *Haaretz*, July 7, 1992.

The critics did not rave about the production. However, they expressed a deep satisfaction with the transition of the theatre into Hebrew, and took a forgiving tone towards the Hebrew proficiency of the Gesher actors:

Despite the fact the Hebrew text sometimes sounds awkward, and it is clear that they [Gesher actors] do not always understand it, their trustworthy acting transcends the accent. It is far away from what is recognized here as a Russian pathos of early Habima. Within minutes one stops thinking of immigrant absorption and gets immersed into the play.²³

This response, like other reviews, jumbled ideological reference (immigrant absorption) and aesthetic analysis (acting style).

After its 1992 premiere, *Molière* remained in the repertoire for two years. *Dreyfus File* was Gesher's "staple" for many years after that. By 2001 it had been performed 188 times (91 in Hebrew, 97 in Russian) - the numbers indicating a resounding success.²⁴

Gesher: A cross-theatre

During its first year, Gesher's structure, policies, mode of artistic production, budget, and relationships with audiences and critics were established. The transition into Hebrew was an important step in the theatre's development that in many ways defined its future. What kind of theatre did Gesher become after its transition into Hebrew? Situated between Russian theatrical tradition and the Israeli theatrical context, Gesher defines itself as a professional Israeli theatre: the Gesher troupe, comprised of Soviet immigrants and veteran Israelis, performs mostly in Hebrew, and occasionally in Russian. Its productions are geared towards general theatre - going audiences in Israel. Its repertoire is similar to that of other major Israeli companies. Gesher shows never deal with the topic of Soviet immigration to Israel or life in contemporary Russia. Its government funding comes from the same sources as that of other public theatres. Besides the cultural identity of the troupe members and their accents, this theatre is apparently no different from any other company in Israel. And yet, it is.

The legacy of Russian theatrical tradition is conspicuous in the work of the Gesher ensemble. Like Goncharov, Arye unites traditions of the Russian actors' theatre with the full control of a director's theatre. In his directorial approach Arye synthesizes the rich tradition of psychological theatre derived

23. "Amin velelo patos" [Credible and without pathos], a review by Shosh Avigal, *Hadashot*, Dec. 20, 1992.

24. In Israel a production is considered a box-office success if it was performed 100 times.

from Stanislavsky's method, with the principles of Meierkhol'd's montage, as well as with Vachtangov-style theatrical poetry. Following Stanislavsky's tradition, the work of the theatre is based on long systematic rehearsals of a permanent ensemble and a small number of productions. The actors are encouraged to inhabit the world of the play, to act with both psychological and physical precision. Yet, under the influence of Vachtangov's "theatre as celebration" and the aesthetics of grotesque, Geshet creates brightly emotional theatre that often incorporates elements of movement, singing, and cabaret. Under the influence of Meierkhol'd's constructivism, Geshet uses "active scenography" and multimedia techniques (such as film) in a way that parallels contemporary Western theatre. Yet, whether the scenic effects, sound, and lighting are realistic or symbolic, they are concept-driven.

Geshet is a theatre of superb production values, yet it is not a commercial theatre, catering to the tastes of conservative audiences by staging blockbuster. Geshet does not see theatre as entertainment. It is motivated by the idealistic belief in the high moral and educational value of theatre arts: it forces its audiences to think, to suffer, to go through significant personal experience, and to "work on themselves" (rephrasing Stanislavsky).

Geshet's style is distinctive in the context of Israeli theatre. The major Israeli public theatres, such as the Cameri or the contemporary Habima, are typically led by a manager, rather than an artistic director. The theatre management invites a director and actors for a specific production, and the theatre mounts numerous productions, which means that the rehearsal and production period is short, and several productions are in the works simultaneously. Like theatre in the United States, Israeli theatre is increasingly influenced by the market economy and the conservative bourgeois values of theatre audiences, especially due to its marketing system based on collective subscriptions and ticket sales to mass unionized clients.²⁵ Some public theatres work in the docu-drama tradition of Nola Chilton, involving the audience and making the text relevant to their community. Outside of the institutionally supported theatre, there are fringe productions, such as Dudi Maya'an's troupe, which bases performances on personal experiences of the actors. Geshet produces neither Broadway-style shows, nor docu-drama, nor fringe productions.

Geshet has distinctive dramaturgy. In recent years, Geshet's repertoire has begun to resemble that of other Israeli theatres. However, it is far from Israeli drama, which whether it is realistic, satirical, or lyrical, draws from political events and local sensitivities. Geshet's acting style remains in the Russian

25. For extended discussion of theatre condition in Israel, see an article by Shosh Avigal, "Patterns and Trends in Israeli Drama and Theater, 1948 to Present," in *Theater in Israel*, ed. Linda Ben-Zvi (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1992), pp. 9-51.

tradition, distinct from the Israeli acting style that is generally understated, realistic, and often minimalist in its emotional expressiveness.

In the Israeli cultural and social context, Geshet's transition into Hebrew proved to be a savvy survival strategy. Moreover, the transition that started as a conformist adherence to ideological and financial pressures led to fine artistic achievements. Careful work with the text allowed actors and director to reach a higher level of concentration and precision. By crossing the bridge from Russian to Hebrew, Geshet situated itself between the Russian theatrical tradition and the Israeli cultural context, and was able to succeed artistically and financially, by forging significant connections with a wider Israeli audience.