BRIDGING THEATRE: GESHER'S TRANSITION FROM RUSSIAN TO HEBREW

In 1991 Gesher was founded as a Russian-speaking theatre in Israel. Yet, only a year later, Gesher transitioned two of its first performances from Russian into Hebrew. The transition was painful and arduous. Neither Gesher'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 theater'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 Gesher, I will address these three questions. First, I explore the reasons for the early transition of Gesher 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 theater's style of acting and directing, its productions, and reception. I conclude by situating Gesher between the Russian theatrical tradition and the Israeli cultural context. Gesher is a cross-theatre.

Gesher: 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, Slavik Maltzov, Evgenii Arye, and a cohort of devoted disciples founded the Gesher theatre. Mal'tzov's and Ar'y's experience and credentials opened doors to Israeli cultural bureaucrats and gave access to Russian-speaking audiences. Ar'y, holding degrees in psychology and directing, was a disciple of the great Russian director Georgii Tovstonogov. Before Gesher, Ar'y directed at such leading venues as Mal'y and Bol'shoi Drama theatres in Leningrad, and the Maksikovsky, the Drama, and the Emslovtheatres in Moscow. He directed a Russian film The Doctor (1987) and taught theatre courses at the prestigious GITIS. His theatre productions won several major directing awards in the Soviet Union and abroad.
During the early period of the theatre, its artistic development was often seen as the result of a modernist and avant-garde outlook. The early productions were generally characterized by their innovative and sometimes experimental approach to traditional forms, often leading to a rethinking of classical and modernist European plays. The concept of the theatre was developed in cooperation with the Moscow Art Theatre, under the direction of Konstantin Stanislavski.

Following his success in Moscow, GD showed a strong interest in promoting the ideas of the Moscow Art Theatre in Israel. The theatre's first years were marked by a strong presence in the cultural and intellectual life of the country, becoming a symbol of cultural exchange between Russia and Israel. GD's vision was to create a theatre that would not only entertain but also educate its audience, fostering a new understanding of theatre and its role in society.

In 1992, GD received a grant from the Soros Foundation for a new programme in theatre arts. This programme, known as the Israeli Theatre Institute, aimed to support the development of young theatre artists and to promote the creation of new works. The programme included a residency programme for playwrights, director training, and a network of professional development opportunities. The initiatives were supported by renowned theatre artists from around the world, including Israelevich, who played a key role in its establishment.

The theatre was declared a major cultural institution in Israel, receiving government support for its operations. This allowed GD to continue to engage in the production of innovative and thought-provoking works, including a new series of contemporary Israeli plays that had a significant impact on the Israeli theatre scene. The theatre's success in these areas was recognized internationally, and GD was awarded several prestigious awards, including the Israel Prize for Theatre in 2000.
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 theater'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 theater was on the agenda of political 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 (geshet) to Hebrew." The only justifiability that the critics 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: Rosencreants and Guelderesten are Dead by Tom Stoppard; Dreyfus File by J.C. Grimmberg; If It Was Only Possible, a compilation of excerpts from three classic Russian plays: The Marriage of Figaro, The Marriage of Nikola Golovich, and The Bedbug by Vladimir Maiakovksy; and Moisei 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, Eliyakim Yaron demanded Geshet "to act in Hebrew." In a review of Rosencreants and Guelderesten are Dead, Shosh Avigal advised Geshet "to make a bit of an effort to try to get to us in Hebrew." The critics even took a condescending motherly tone, promising to be kind if 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." Later, the fact that


5. The Hebrew term for "new immigrant" (oleh, plural aliim) has positive meanings sanctified by Zionist ideology, which assimilated absorption as a top national priority. Yet, in everyday usage this term has developed degrading connotations pointing to the incompentence and ineptitude of new immigrants, and emphasizing their "otherness."
Makaveev referred to this process in another important aspect of the cultural and economic venues. The only way to overcome this limitation was to speak to the audience in their own language.

How was the transition carried out?

The first phase of the transition was the transition from the Hebrew film industry to the Hebrew-language film industry. The second phase was the transition from the Hebrew film industry to the Hebrew-language film industry. The third phase was the transition from the Hebrew film industry to the Hebrew-language film industry. The fourth phase was the transition from the Hebrew film industry to the Hebrew-language film industry.

The transition from the Hebrew film industry to the Hebrew-language film industry was carried out in a number of ways:

1. Translation of films into Hebrew.
2. Production of films in Hebrew.
3. Distribution of films in Hebrew.
4. Screening of films in Hebrew.
5. Promotion of films in Hebrew.

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wise you wouldn't be able to say what you are trying to say. It means do-
ing entire thing word by word.

The Geshet actors, together with Ivair, 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 re-
hearsal in Russian, the actors had to learn the Hebrew texts by night, memo-
rising 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 Geshor [Geshet Family] (1993), actors described their experience of acting in a new language, Leonid Kanovsky: "It was horrifying - unrecognizable language. French - recognizable, German - recognizable, Hebrew - unrecognizable, unfamiliar." 13 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 Livshitz, a vet-
eran of Russian theatre, disagreed with the whole idea: "An actor should act in a language he thinks in." Later, Maltere 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 driv-
ers.

I learnt texts in Hebrew, I just learnt it by heart without understand-
ing, 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 understood me or not, and if he responded: "Why, honey?" It meant that he understood.

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 Yahili-Wax communicated in English. Both Yahili-Wax and Ivair 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 Yahili-Wax and Ivair 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 be-
came 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, differ-
ces in pace and intonation caused the actors to alter their style for per-
formance in Hebrew; second, close work with the texts resulted in greater acting precision; third, prioritizing language over performance changed an es-
tablished hierarchy within the troupe. Alongside changes in artistic produc-
tion, 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. There-
fore, in order to project a certain feeling in another language, the actors need to employ different intonations 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 Ivair, Yahili-Wax, and other linguistic coaches.

Geshet turned the potential recipe for disaster - a lack of Hebrew profi-
ciency - to its benefit: due to the careful work with the text, the acting be-
came 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 Yahili-Wax recon-
structs how a multilingual work led to the great artistic achievements:
The Hebrew-speaking audiences, their unreserved response, and intense emotions were factors of great satisfaction for the performers. The exuberant acceptance of the audience, especially in the cities, combined with the support of the host countries and the media, created an atmosphere of enthusiasm and excitement.

The Hebrew theatre has become a dynamic force in Jewish life, bridging cultural and linguistic divides. Its impact is not confined to Israel. The performances are now seen as a way to connect with one's heritage and cultural roots.

The greatest joy for the director was the young talent that emerged, showing a deep understanding and dedication to the art of theatre. The role of education cannot be overstated in preserving and passing on the legacy of Jewish theatre.

The director's dream was to bring to Israel a young generation of theatre professionals who would continue and expand the work begun by the pioneer generation. This is a significant milestone in the history of Jewish theatre.
The critics did not rave about the production. However, they expressed a deep satisfaction with the transition of the setting from Hebrew, and took a

...
from Stanislavsky’s method, with the principles of Meyerhold’s montage, as well as with Vachutina-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 Vachutina’s “theatre as celebration” and the aesthetics of grotesque, Gether creates brighty emotional theatre that often incorporates elements of movement, simple, and cabaret. Under the influence of Meyerhold’s constructiveism, Gether 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.

Gether is a fixture of superb production values, yet it is in a commercial theatre, catering to the tastes of conservative audiences by staging blockbusters. Gether does not see theatre as entertainment. It is motivated by the idealistic belief in the high moral and educational value of theatre as it forces its audience to think, to suffer, to go through significant personal experiences, and to “work on themselves” (rephrasing Stanislavsky).

Gether’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 most unionized clubs. Some public theatres work in the civic-drama tradition of Nola Chibon, involving the audience and making the text relevant to their community. Outside of the institutionally supported theatre, there are fringe productions, such as Dudi Mayman’s troupe, which base performances on personal experiences of the actors. Gether produces neither Broadway-style shows, nor docs-drama, nor fringe productions.

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