

Shelly Zer-Zion, *Habima beBerlin: miysudo shel teatron tziyoni* (Habima in Berlin: The Institutionalization of a Zionist Theater). Jerusalem: Magnes, 2015. 282 pp.

Habima, Israel's national theater company, was founded in Russia and is frequently associated with early 20th-century Russian theater, in particular with regard to its artistic methodology. In her exploration of Habima's 1926–1931 European and overseas tour, and especially its extended stay in Berlin, theater historian Shelly Zer-Zion challenges this trend. In her view, Habima drew its inspiration from two separate and distinct theatrical models – not only that of Russia, which then spread to Central Europe and to large Jewish immigrant communities in the United States, but also one that was rooted in the German-Jewish spirit of *Bildung*. (All of its productions, however, were staged in Hebrew.) Rather than focusing on the company's theatrical productions, Zer-Zion takes a more historical approach, charting the brutal end of German–Jewish dialogue in the early 1930s, the relocation of Habima to Palestine, and its role as a refuge for German Jewish actors and creators who fled Germany.

Zer-Zion's research is presented by means of numerous details that elegantly generate a solid and stimulating story. She follows the founding of Habima; the intimate relations both among members of the company and vis-à-vis playwrights, directors, and musicians; the evolution of stardom (in particular, that of Hanna Rovina); the company's management; and the formation of its philanthropic society (Patronatsvereinigung) in Central Europe. The first chapter follows Habima's European tour in 1926, which ended in Berlin, and analyzes the reception of the company's "Moscow plays," among them *The Dybbuk* and *The Eternal Jew*. In the

second chapter, *Zer-Zion* examines the gradual canonization of Habima from 1927 to 1928, when the group was mostly anchored in Germany, though it also frequently traveled to the United States and Palestine. The third chapter focuses on Habima's final visit to Berlin in 1929–1931; by this time, the company's members were divided over the option of settling in Palestine as opposed to continuing to focus on European tours. Finally, the book's epilogue is dedicated to Habima's departure from Berlin to Palestine. One of the last performances of the group in Germany, which took place in Würzburg in November 1930, ended in a Nazi-instigated pogrom protesting the employment of Jewish actors at a time when many German actors were unemployed (an event that is documented, albeit sketchily, in the memoirs of several of Habima's actors).

The move to Palestine entailed a painful separation from the company's first administrative heads, Margot Klausner and her second husband, Yehoshua Brandstaetter, who stayed in Europe while expecting their first-born child; the couple was subsequently involved in theater life in Palestine (and later, Israel), and they were also instrumental in the establishment of Israeli cinema and television. Among Klausner's many achievements was her mobilization, on behalf of Habima, of many members of Berlin's elite, including Thomas Mann, Alfred Döblin, Ernst Deutsch, Walter Hasenclever, Leo Kestenberg, Jacob Steinhardt, renowned publisher S. Fischer, Fritz von Unruh, Franz Werfel, and Lion Feuchtwanger, alongside some of Germany's wealthiest Jews.

Zer-Zion emphasizes the special route of fin-de-siècle Hebrew institutions such as Habima. Many of them were established in East European communities whose elite (because of *numerus clausus* restrictions) were educated in Central Europe. The pogroms in Eastern Europe drove such institutions – which included publishers, newspapers, theater groups, and the artists and writers linked to them – to the more tolerant and receptive realm of Central Europe, with Berlin at the center. However, beginning in the mid-1920s and, even more so during the early 1930s, many groups and individuals continued their journey to prominent Jewish communities in the United States and to Palestine. As *Zer-Zion* shows, Habima's repertoire reflected this trend.

What made Habima so exceptional and successful among other Jewish Yiddish-speaking theater groups was its choice to perform in Hebrew, “a language that always had a unique status in German culture” (p. 96). Whereas Yiddish was looked down upon by many German-speakers, the use of Hebrew – the sacred language of canonical texts – gave Habima an aura of dignity and grandeur. In addition, the Berlin audience was drawn to Habima's East European Jewish orientation. This appeal went beyond the elite Jewish circle, as suggested by the guest lists of Habima's parties, which included not only members of German Jewish cultural and commercial elites but also Zionist activists and renowned German writers such as Mann and Döblin. In *Zer-Zion*'s view, Habima's popularity among the German Jewish elite reflected a post-assimilationist desire to be involved in Jewish culture without practicing Zionism.

During the 1920s, Habima continued to produce plays, such as S. Ansky's *The Dybbuk*, that had been successful in its early years in Eastern Europe. The company's repertoire also included biblical plays that were interpreted as part of Habima's vocation

to revive the Jewish people – in the view of Hayim Nahman Bialik, Habima was to “take upon itself the mission of prophetic drama; it will prove to Europe the possibility of attracting the hearts of the masses not only through cheap emotions,” and, in so doing, the Hebrew theater would “soon become a sacred site” (p. 31). Bialik expected Habima to become not only a cornerstone, but a leader, of the revived Hebrew culture. In similar vein, Berl Katznelson, one of the Yishuv’s prominent intellectuals, voiced his wish that Habima would relocate to Eretz Israel.

Habima’s Hebrew-language production of plays such as the Moscow repertoire and later the Palestine and Central European biblical and Jewish plays, including Richard Beer-Hoffman’s *Jacobs Traum* (Jacob’s Dream), Stephan Zweig’s *Jeremiah* and Shalom Aleichem’s *Der oytser* (The Treasure), was a major act of preservation in the face of pogroms, the rise of dictatorships, and finally, the worst catastrophe in Jewish history, the Holocaust. In its deep commitment to Jewish-Hebrew culture, the company was effectively acting out one of the oldest of Jewish rituals: the obligation to commemorate the history of the nation. Zer-Zion has convincingly shown Habima’s versatile path and the ways in which its contribution to Israeli history goes well beyond theatrical influence.

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