

The stage as a temporary home: on Dzigan and Schumacher's theater, 1927–1980

(*ha-Bamah ke-vayit ara'i: ha-te'aṭron shel Dz'igan ve-Shumakher, 1927–1980*), by Diego Rotman, Jerusalem, Magnes Press, 2017, pp. 344, 98 NIS, ISBN 978-965-7759-30-1

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To cite this article: Adi Mahalel (2019) The stage as a temporary home: on Dzigan and Schumacher's theater, 1927–1980, *East European Jewish Affairs*, 49:2, 175-177, DOI: [10.1080/13501674.2019.1690855](https://doi.org/10.1080/13501674.2019.1690855)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501674.2019.1690855>



Published online: 27 Dec 2019.



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The stage as a temporary home: on Dzigan and Schumacher's theater, 1927–1980 (ha-Bamah ke-vayit ara'i: ha-te'aṭron shel Dz'igan ve-Shumakher, 1927–1980), by Diego Rotman, Jerusalem, Magnes Press, 2017, pp. 344, 98 NIS, ISBN 978-965-7759-30-1

Diego Rotman is an Israeli artist and scholar of Yiddish culture. His recent book, *The Stage as a Temporary Home: On Dzigan and Schumacher's Theater (1927–1980)*, is the result of a decade of research and fascination with the Yiddish comedic duo, Dzigan and Schumacher. Shimen Dzigan (1905–1980) and Yisroel Schumacher (1908–1961) started performing as part of the Yiddish vanguard theater called *Ararat*, which Moyshe Broderzon ran in Łódź, Poland during the mid-1920s. In the mid-1930s, they became an independent comic duo in Warsaw that specialized in creating political satire. The outbreak of the war in 1939 forced them to seek refuge in the Soviet Union, a move that would prove to be both a blessing and a curse. At first, they were able to tour and perform in Yiddish, as long as they adapted their act to comply with Soviet state ideology. In 1941, however, they were arrested and imprisoned in a labor camp where they remained for four years. They eventually made their way to the newly founded state of Israel, where they continued to perform.

Rotman devotes the first four chapters of his book to a chronological, cultural history of the comic duo. In the fifth and last chapter, he focuses on analyzing their performance art, mainly their Israeli repertoire. As much as the author would have liked to analyze their early performances closely, there are no videos or audio recordings, and only a few complete written transcripts of their European stage acts. The author instead uses numerous press reviews, Dzigan's autobiography, archival materials, and testimonies in order to recreate a captivating and meticulously crafted cultural historical narrative. Especially noteworthy is his account of the way the duo coped with the destruction of Polish Jewry while they were still in postwar Poland through moments of stage silence, each of which concluded with the catch phrase "*abi m'zet zikh!*" ("the main thing is we see each other!"). These commemorative pauses, which gave expression to unspeakable loss, allowed them and their audiences to take part in a process of communal healing.

Fortunately, Dzigan and Schumacher appeared in several films during the 1930s and late 1940s, giving the author the opportunity to examine their performance style. The author especially excels in his detailed analysis of their postwar film *Undzere Kinder* (Our Children) (1949). The film was meant to be about the rebirth of Polish Jewry. The two main characters, played by Dzigan and Schumacher themselves, travel across Poland and visit various orphanages, camps, and shelters, conversing in Yiddish with child survivors about their traumatic experiences. Through their infectious youthfulness, the children were meant to indicate the ongoing vitality of Polish Jewry. But as the author shows, this idea was mainly an exercise in fictional narrative. The child-actors in the movie did not actually speak Yiddish, the national emblem of Polish Jewry; they just memorized their lines. In fact, none of the cast and crew members took part in this imagined Polish-Jewish rebirth, but instead dispersed elsewhere soon after the film was shot, mostly to Israel.

Chapters 4 and 5, which are devoted to their years in Israel, comprise a significant part of the author's overall analysis. In these chapters, Rotman argues that during the 1950s Dzigan and Schumacher – and later Dzigan alone after his long-time partner's untimely death – brought an unmatched level of political satire to Israel. He observes that their insistence on performing in Yiddish was itself an act of defiance against the oppressive anti-Yiddish measures established by a Jewish state that privileged Hebrew. They encountered multiple obstacles and were forced to endure many tribulations because of their choice. They had to go out of their way to prove that they were "a foreign act not based in Israel" and had to pay higher taxes than Hebrew-speaking performers did (as a result, the high rates of Israeli income tax became a major target of their satire). They were forced to include Hebrew in their performances (a requirement which they cleverly fulfilled by adding performances by a Hebrew singer in-between their sketches), and more. Their enormous popularity worked in their favor. This buoyed them and defeated the state's attempts to shut down their act completely.

Rotman was able to utilize sound recordings, transcripts, and videos (mainly of Dzigan performing two comedy specials for Israel television in the mid-1970s) from their Israeli period. The author examines at length their long sketch "*Der nayer dibek*" (The New Dybbuk), in which all of their satirical targets were condensed: the authoritative rule of Mapai and David Ben-Gurion, played by Schumacher as the Tzadik of Płóńsk (the town in Poland where Ben-Gurion was born); the pinnacles of the new Hebrew culture in the Habima Theater's *Ha-Dybbuk* (Dzigan parodied the iconic actress Hanna Rovina, playing the possessed Medina'le, the little state); and the poor treatment of new immigrants (symbolized here by *the Dybbuk* who wants to flee back to Europe). Rotman shows how in later years Dzigan's biting satirical voice softened, especially after 1967 when he started to view his act more as a national source of comfort than as an edgy voice of dissent. Especially notable in this time period is his comical portrayal of Golda Meir giving a monologue describing her encounter with President Nixon. Utilizing the

long standing comedic monological tradition of Yiddish literature, his treatment of her is friendly, not biting. As Rotman remarks, the post-1967 years finally saw the rise of new dissident voices in Hebrew theater, such as the playwright Hanoach Levin, a development that owes much to the legacy of Dzigal and Schumacher.

The Stage as a Temporary Home offers a rich and thoughtful account of these legends of Yiddish comedy, who in their heyday regularly and successfully toured the Americas, Europe, South Africa, Israel, and wherever Yiddish speakers resided. Whenever possible, the author accompanies the Hebrew translations with the original Yiddish texts, making for a very pleasurable and worthwhile experience for the bilingual reader. The weak points of the book – which are minor compared to its many positive and fascinating aspects – are the author's occasional over-reliance on press reviews at the expense of his own analytical voice. At times the reviews offer rare eye witness accounts and should appear at the forefront, but in other cases the reader would have benefited from receiving more of Rotman's unique scholarly perspective. Also, a lengthier introductory chapter, focusing on comedic theory and laying out the author's main arguments, would have made this book more complete. Otherwise, Rotman has written a masterfully crafted, definitive account of these major figures which will appeal to readers interested in twentieth-century Yiddish comedy and the politics of culture in Israel.

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/13501674.2019.1690855>

