

Shapiro Prize Winner



Diego Rotman, *The Stage as a Temporary Home: On Dzigan and Shumacher's Theater (1927–1980)* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2017), 354 pp. Paperback, \$33.00.

Diego Rotman tells the story of Shimon Dzigan (1905–1980) and Yisrael Shumacher (1908–1961), Yiddish theater actors in Poland who performed together from the mid-1930s until 1960, when they went their separate ways. For 30 years, the duo entertained audiences in Europe, Israel, the United States, and South America. Rotman takes a neglected story that, on its face, would not seem to command wide appeal and makes it accessible, engaging, and entertaining. He does so with sharp, beautiful prose and industrious research, perceptively integrating the personal stories of Dzigan and Shumacher with the momentous historical events that rattled their lives.

Rotman's rendering of Dzigan and Shumacher offers an illuminating look at the complex intersection between politics and theater. Censorship and heckling, the Holocaust, displacement, and Zionism; satire, fantasy, and reality—all are interwoven in this captivating tale, both sad and funny, much like the art and artists Rotman celebrates.

Based on the author's doctoral thesis, *The Stage as a Temporary Home* explores a nearly forgotten culture that significantly impacted early Israeli society and politics. Rotman provides the Hebrew reader with a window on the Yiddish theater and humor scene in Poland and Russia prior to World War II and into the early 1940s. The tension between traditional Jewish life and urban modernity is skillfully addressed. While the first part of the book is largely historical, the second part analyzes the clash between Dzigan and Shumacher's theater and Israeli audiences in the 1950s and 1960s. That clash mirrored a broader contest between the so-called New Jew and the Diasporic Jew, with all its enduring complications

for the Jewish-Israeli psyche. Rotman evinces great affection for his subjects and much between-the-lines criticism of an Israeli society that has thoroughly neglected its cultural roots.

The book's way of examining the decades-long and multi-country Yiddish theater career of Dzigal and Shumacher is innovative. Rotman's analyses and quotations provide insight into the artistic world of the two collaborators as well as the independent work of Dzigal. The duo's satirical performances were virtually the only serious and biting critiques of Israeli society and government policy available to Israeli audiences in the first two decades of the fledgling state. Dzigal and Shumacher were universally acknowledged as masters of the satirical revue as an art form, plying their craft in Israel and throughout the Jewish world for 23 years as a team. Dzigal's solo career lasted an additional two decades.

Rotman's research is based on photographs, audio tapes, interviews, and other archival material, presented in scholarly but humorous fashion in Yiddish and then Hebrew translation. His work is a delight to read. But what sets it apart from other historical works on important Zionist figures in this year's Shapiro Prize competition are its brilliant analyses of the way Dzigal and Shumacher's satire reflects not only the broader social and political currents of the day, but also the 'excommunicated' status of the Yiddish language in Hebrew-centric Israel, where a 1950 law even forbade Yiddish theater performance by Israeli citizens.

Instead of revisiting the usual comparison to traditional village entertainers, Rotman highlights the modernistic trends that shaped the duo's artistic lives. Rather than mark them as representatives of the Diaspora and the disappearing Jewish world, the book positions their satirical comedies as part of a modern Diasporic culture that influences Israel and is influenced by it. Dzigal and Shumacher's language, their humor, and the subjects to which their performances were addressed all provide an acerbically critical look at Israeli culture and politics. The Yiddish stage represents a type of voluntary exile, a politics of resistance and survival. Defining themselves through Yiddish, Dzigal and Shumacher were unable to transition into Hebrew. The two artists refused to reinvent themselves, preferring the niche over the Israeli center.

The Stage as a Temporary Home weds idiosyncratic aspects of Jewish tradition and culture with the overarching universal themes of courage, freedom of speech, and, ultimately, space and being. It is an important book for theater scholars, for those wishing to understand the place of critical artists in social and political life, and for readers interested in the Israeli culture wars that pitted Hebrew against Yiddish and resulted in the marginalization of the 'language of the Exile and Diaspora'. In short, this book is eye-opening, funny, dead serious, and an important contribution

to our understanding of Jewish life in Eastern Europe before World War II and in Israel thereafter.

The Shapiro Committee concluded that *The Stage as a Temporary Home* is a top-quality book on all accounts and is worthy of the 2019 Yonathan Shapiro Prize for Best Book.

Committee Members

Raphael Cohen-Almagor, Tamar Hermann, Hanna Herzog,
Sam Lehman-Wilzig, and Ruvi Ziegler