

An Unholy Trinity

Three artistic directors have a monopoly over Israeli theater, and while many theater artists have been hurt by this anti-democratic situation, very few have protested it. The implications go much further than the world of theater → ETAN BLOOM

*Good my lord,
will you see the players well bestowed?
Do you hear, let them be well used;
for they are the abstract and brief
chronicles of the time*

Shakespeare / Hamlet

Over the last few years, more and more theater artists in Israel have been calling for reform within the field of Israeli theater, and, in particular, regarding the rotation of the theater artistic directors. The three main artistic directors being targeted explicitly by the reform advocates are Omri Nitzan (Cameri Theatre since 1993), Tzipi Pines (Beit Lessin Theatre since 1993) and Ilan Ronen (Habima since 2004). It should be noted that Nitzan has also been the artistic director of Habima and Ronen has headed the Cameri.^[1]

The main argument against their over-extended terms – which are possible only because of the current regulations and norms of Israeli theater – is that they have created a situation in which the trio dictate and impose their artistic interests and promote their own productions while neglecting to nurture young directors and create a platform for new writing. All in all, conclude the reform advocates, these artistic directors have been thwarting new artists and artistic alternatives that might threaten their hegemonic and nepotistic conduct. Actors, writers and directors that they don't like are

rejected, denying them the possibility to establish themselves. Although there are many theaters in Israel, these three – Cameri, Habima and Beit Lessin – provide most of the work and obtain most of the material and symbolic fortune of Israeli theater.

The centralization in the field expresses itself not only in the extremely long terms of the artistic directors, but also in the over-extended power of a few limited buyers, who shape the tastes of the particular socioeconomic layer that constitutes the majority of the theater-going audience. These audience members often buy season tickets or receive them at work as a bonus, which diminishes the audience's impact on the artistic processes; it is the "buyers" who have the power to determine the audience's taste.

Theater, like any form of art, can be a path to salvation from taboos and superstitions. In enabling us to see "the other," theater can even enable us to see the possibility of a better future. But, in some cases, art can also blind its audience, by reaffirming its stiff preconception of reality, legitimizing the ruling depressing forces of the state, the military and other manifestations of our post-capitalist era.



It should be said that this kind of theater, defined many times in general terms as "commercial" or "entertainment," has always taken an important part in the development and survival of theater art as a whole; it feeds an inherent need and function of our identity – the need to forget, to escape temporarily from the burdens of our lives through the symbolic form of theater.

The core consumers of the first kind of theater are usually educated, between 25 and 50 years of age, "modern individuals" with free professions who prefer to purchase a ticket to a specific show, the same way they decide which movie to see or concert to hear – in other words, those who do not need or want mediators (like the subscription system or workplace "buyers").

For this age group, contemporary theater in Israel is mostly irrelevant, and doesn't have the same impact as cinema, literature or television in shaping their ideas and lives.^[2] The flexible use of the term "artistic" within an almost completely commercial marketing system has blurred the distinctions between the artistic and the commercial, and this has led to the loss of potentially vibrant audience members in Israel. The current situation, described briefly above, was created partly due to the long regime of the aforementioned trio; the "chaotic" conditions continually create an atmosphere of a "state of emergency," which for obvious reasons has enabled these veterans to defer any attempt to regulate the field. Also, it seems that

over the years the differences have been completely erased between theaters, in terms of artistic agenda, style or milieu, which means an actor can "belong" to any theater because most of them work within the same paradigm and cater to the same audiences.

Although this reality has affected most theater artists for quite a while (almost two decades), there has been almost no resistance by those most affected (actors, directors, critics, university scholars, audiences, etc.). The most likely reason behind the lack of resistance is the fear that, by supporting new rotation regulations, the theater community might be improving its long-term future (although harming itself in the short term). More than a few stories that have circulated among theater people warn

Image

Shachar Cotani / *sanbiki no saru*
2011, pencil and digital coloring

[1] Omri Nitzan was the artistic director of Haifa Theater (1980–1985); Habima Theatre (1985–1990) Israel Festival (1990–1993); Tzipi Pines was the artistic director of Be'er Sheva Theater (1981–1993); Ilan Ronen was the artistic director of the Jerusalem Khan Theatre (1975–1982); the Cameri Theatre (1984–1992) and the Young Company within Habima (1996–2004).

[2] The irrelevance of today's theater has been expressed harshly by theater people themselves. Miki Gurevich, the artistic director of the Khan Theater, said: "Artistic directors can say today 'we wouldn't see the shows we are producing; I really believe in that. I think that we are lowering the standard in a catastrophic way. And I think that what we need now is to elevate the standard. Simply. Drastically.'" Miriam Kaney, the head of the Play Writers' Association, said that even "people

from the theater departments at the universities don't go to see [Israeli] theater. This is a crime and injustice and a total destruction of the future of theater. Both quotes are from the protocols of the conference "Public Theater and Private Theater in Israel," edited by Dr. Diti Ronen, organized by the Ministry of Science, Culture and Sport, 2006, p. 83-34.