

Preliminary Consideration for the Project

Israeli theatre is strongly characterised by contemporary Hebraic dramatic art. Alongside the still frequently performed satirical works of Hanoah Levin, its established stages also host well-made plays on virtually all topics of social life, for example adolescence, emancipation, the quest for identity, conflicts between mothers and daughters, couples' relationships, the search for meaning and proof of God's existence. The fact that these plays often, in some way or another, focus on the army, occupied regions or war experiences, on the ghetto experiences of grandfathers or on the Shoah, ultra-Orthodox Jews, assassinations or the coexistence of Jews and Muslims does not mean that Israeli dramatic art is predominantly political. In fact, it is everyday life itself that politicises issues in Israel and is full of trauma. The plays reflect this fact without automatically attaching political tendencies.

The independent scene in Israel, which is nowhere near as well-funded and supported as in Germany and is virtually ignored by the media, above all complements this picture by adding formal and aesthetic diversity in the form of more poetic, harder-to-access or post-dramatic texts, newly-epic road movies or collectively developed pieces with an elementary use of videos. The deconstruction of allegedly fateful identity is a major topic.

In Germany, the whole scene is rather unknown. Pieces by Joshua Sobol were frequently performed for a while and David Grossmann has attracted attention but a major dramatist like Levin, who died at a very young age in 1999 and wrote around 70 plays, is virtually unheard of here. There are, of course, scouts who observe the Israeli scene. The Schaubühne am Lehniner Platz theatre in Berlin, for example, presents dramatic art in Hebrew time and time again at its F.I.N.D. Festivals, Israel was invited to perform three new pieces at the Heidelberger Stückemarkt festival in 2010 and the Theater Nestroyhof in Vienna held a small festival on new Israeli dramatic art last May. The inclusion of these plays in German-language programmes as a matter of course is, however, a long way off.

This may be due to the fact that in the German-language theatre world, contemporary pieces do not belong to theatres' core activities, but instead represent an area requiring support and funding. On top of this, the case of Israel also absolutely involves a political fear of perceiving art on its own merits. Even at the Heidelberger

Stückemarkt festival in 2010, festival-goers were immediately confronted with the question of: Why Israel and not Palestine too? After the jury of the festival, which is also a competition, decided against selecting one winner from the six German-language plays and another winner from the three Hebraic pieces and instead chose to combine the amounts for both prizes and divide them up among all nine entrants in 2010, an open letter expressing the mortification of the three Israeli dramatists Yaron Edelstain, Roni Kuban and Oded Lifshitz stated that:

"We are used to being criticised for the constant tensions in our country and the complexity of the conflict in which we live. Outside of Israel, we are often forced to not present ourselves as individuals, but as political intermediaries. Now and then, this situation is justifiable when we answer questions on the political situation in order to satisfy outsiders' curiosity, but in other cases, we suffer from being labelled as 'Israeli'. We do not want to be punished by generalisations, but to be seen as individual and professional artists."

The dialogue that is always initiated by the performance of a foreign-language play to an increased extent, namely the dialogue of cast members with the author's piece, the dialogue of the cast members among themselves on the author's piece and the dialogue of the cast with the audience by means of the author's work, seems to be vexed in the case of Israel, as described by Bertolt Brecht's poem "An die Nachgeborenen" (*To Those Who Follow in Our Wake*): "What times are these, in which / a conversation about trees is almost a crime?/ For in doing so we maintain our silence about so much wrongdoing!". As these lines suggest, presenting the living environment of Israel in theatre demands theatre makers to make a statement. The question is, what statement should be made with regard to these tragic conflicts about which we know far too little? This truly is a vicious circle, or maybe also a mistake.

In the 50th year of diplomatic relations between Germany and Israel, the Academy of Arts wants to instigate a dialogue between Israeli and German dramatists that may contribute towards them not viewing each other as representatives of governmental policy, but as individual artists who want to bring complex perceptions together in one form and on the stage. This dialogue should most definitely discuss the topic of the differences between the dramatists' world experiences. Practical artistic dialogue is also important and can be used to ask the questions that connect all contemporary playwrights: How should we write in times of Facebook and artistic series television?

How should we speak to an audience that is increasingly organised in niches in everyday life? How can we find modes of working that serve the cause and not the tool? And, of course: How can we finance ourselves if we do not conform to the topics currently in demand (Zionism in Israel, the future in Germany and work as the case may be)?

The Israeli theatre artists of the third generation are ready and even eager to discuss matters with their German colleagues on a level playing field. Their isolated position in the Middle East strengthens their feeling of belonging to the European and, indeed, the German scene in particular and the decades of diplomatic relations have paved the way for young Israeli artists to now again come to Berlin even due to their German roots. (Although, of course, the funding system in Berlin also plays a major role...) It is time for us to lose our fear of the excess of existential experience with which we are confronted when working with these young artists and to use Israeli dramatic art as an opportunity to journey into a society that is more than just a sum of irresolvable conflicts.

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