

COMPARATIVE JEWISH LITERATURES

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Their Lives, Our Words

*Edited by Phyllis Lassner and
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“Why Don’t You Move On?”: A Sort of Play in Three Acts and Three Standing Ouations

Roy Horovitz

Prologue

Time: March 2013.

The TimeKeepers, a theater production I am acting in, is touring South Africa.

It is the first time that we’re performing in a country where the majority of the audience has little connection to the Second World War or the Holocaust. Every show that we do is followed by a Q&A, with sessions often lasting longer than the show itself. The audience is very heterogenic: young, older, whites, blacks, Jews, Gentiles. For some members of the audience, our show is the first time that they hear about the concentration camps and the Jewish yellow star.

One night, a white woman stands up and says: “Your show is very moving. It was a good theatrical experience, but why don’t you move on? Seriously?! I really don’t see the point in you coming here, all the way from Israel, with another play about the Holocaust. It’s been what, seventy years already . . . Move on! What’s wrong with you, trying to make the whole world feel guilty and sympathize with you? Come on, guys, give us a break.”

She was very articulate and charismatic. Within seconds, she transformed the whole vibe and managed to turn it against us. Furthermore, I immediately realized that she certainly had a point: Israeli theater *does* have a serious,

central preoccupation with the Holocaust. It *does* seem like we are not "moving on" . . . What could I say? All eyes turned to me with great anticipation; I took a deep breath.

"Look," I opened. "In my opinion, the customer is always right. If you find our play to be an anachronistic piece, what can I do but feel sorry? However, may I please ask you something?"

"Sure."

"You aren't Jewish, are you?"

"No, I'm Christian."

"No offence please, but to the best of my knowledge, some 2,000 years ago, there was a man named Jesus. He ended his life on the cross and ever since then the Christian world hasn't stopped blaming the Jews for his unfortunate fate. One body, a long time ago, whereas the Holocaust involves the loss of over 6,000,000 bodies of our people, just seventy years ago. Do you really think that something is wrong with our proportions? Let me assure you: Once you move on from your single case, we'll reconsider."

I don't know how where I got this answer from. All I do remember is that woman turning pale while I enjoyed the loudest applause I'd ever received in my entire career, and an unforgettable standing ovation (the first one, two more to come later on in this chapter . . .). It certainly brought an end to the discussion that night, but the questions still stay with me: Should I / we move on from the Holocaust? Is it possible? And—above all—*do I want to?*

Act 1: Child and Adolescent

It is seven years later. I have a PhD in literature and theatre, and I receive an invitation to write a short academic autobiography about my work in the field of the Holocaust, both as an artist and a scholar. This invitation is a great honor, yet raises a reflexive question (why me? What could I contribute?) and how to even approach the matter. I study the genre and find that the goal of an academic autobiography is "to shed light on your history, as you do for the history of someone else . . . To analyze as a historian, the link between the history that you make and the history that made you."¹ Something deep inside me is drawn to this mesmerizing retrospective adventure. A quick overview revealed that over the years I have indeed accumulated quite some mileage in exploring the Holocaust: writing essays, teaching relevant courses, and no fewer than ten productions that I either directed or participated in (which I usually also initiated). The opportunity to tie what seemed like sporadic episodes to a holistic narrative appeals to me, so I sit and write.

I was born in 1970, the youngest child in the family, born much later than my siblings. My mother, Miriam (may she rest in peace), was born in Israel to a large family of rich merchants, who came to Israel from Aleppo, Syria.

My father, Yitzhak (may he also rest in peace), was born in Berlin in 1927, his parents' only child. In January 1933, when he was six years old, Hitler came to power. A few weeks later, a few children beat up my father in the school yard. My grandfather understood it was time to leave Germany. The family made Aliyah to Israel (then Palestine) and settled in the city of Haifa. Thirty-six years later, I was born in that very same city.

My father and his family escaped Europe and the horrors of the Holocaust before it was too late. They fled, but their spirit remained behind. They kept the language and mentality of their homeland, and yearned for European culture all their lives. This yearning was never spoken of, but through some miraculous alchemy their memories also trickled down to me. The Holocaust haunts me. My friends always joke that if I do not read a Holocaust book at bedtime, I won't be able to fall asleep and whenever I go on vacation, I always make sure to pack *Sophie's Choice* or *Every Man Dies Alone* . . . The Holocaust remained unspoken in our house. To satisfy my immense curiosity, I obsessively consumed books, films, and TV shows on the subject.

One of my earliest memories is watching the documentary series *Pillar of Fire* on Israeli television. I first learned of the existence of the innocent-looking showers, that were in fact gas chambers, in the death camps while watching one of its episodes. I can still remember the dreadful sound of the heavy doors shutting on the miserable victims. For years, I would shower with the shower curtain open, and got into the habit of smelling the water, before taking a shower, just to check. This continued throughout my adolescence. The showers at the basic training camp in Israel where I was based after being drafted into the army at the age of eighteen, had no curtains. There, the question of "to close or not to close" became irrelevant.

I was a sensitive and introverted child. I discovered theater in fifth grade. A friend from school enrolled into a drama class and convinced me as well. It was love at first sight. Playing characters, standing on stage and improvising, I felt that I found my place. I quickly combined my interest in the art that I discovered with subjects that fascinated me. When we were asked to present characters and monologues, I instantaneously chose to perform Weiskopf's monologue from Joshua Sobol's play *Ghetto* (which later became my permanent dramatic monologue, which I performed in every audition, including the one for acting school):

Oy oy oy, ay ay ay! Why the crying, why the weeping? Times are hard? So what's new? When did our people have it easy? Hardship makes us strong. Take me, for example. Before the war I had a little tailor's shop. The Germans came, pushed us into the ghetto. The shop's gone. Finished. So did I cry? Of course not. Will tears bring it back? Hell no! Instead of crying I held my wise Jewish Kopf in my hands, and I said to myself: Why do they call you Weiskopf? You've lost your shop, it's true; now if you lose your Kopf— you're kaput . . .²

I savored the immense gift that acting offered. For the first time in my life, I could not only read about things, but also act them out physically. I discovered the power of theater, the art of both the fleeting moment and the present which makes it possible to return to the scene of the crime, to resurrect the dead, and sometimes even find happiness and beauty amid the horror.

The coupling of the Holocaust with theater raises complex aesthetical and ethical questions, or to use Joshua Sobol's quotation of Hermann Kruk: "no theater in a graveyard." Yet at the same time, linking the two concepts is widespread. After Weiskopf, I moved on to Yossaleh, the protagonist of Ben-Zion Tomer's *Children of the Shadow*, and the *Poisonous Mushroom*—a musical revue of Bertolt Brecht, which I directed with my classmates at school. As a theatergoer, I also found myself drawn to "Holocaust plays" such as Hanoeh Levin's *The Child Dreams*.

The Holocaust features centrally in Israeli theater. No other historical event or theme has such intensive treatment in Israeli art. The South African woman was right: Israeli theater is not letting go of the subject! One hundred original Israeli plays can be classified as "Holocaust plays." This number is not surprising: Drama has always found extreme situations deeply alluring; and the horrors of the Second World War offer fertile ground for inspiration.

A salient feature of Israeli theater's treatment of the Holocaust is the manner in which it focuses only on Jewish suffering and ignores the historical common fate shared with other victims of the Nazi regime and the dreadful war. As Yuval Noah Harari states: "history isn't a single narrative, but thousands of alternative narratives. Whenever we choose to tell one, we are also choosing to silence others."³ In my own works, I wish to enter in this exact space, to tell the untold story and make place, alongside the Jewish story, for the suffering of others: homosexuals, Japanese, second- and third-generation survivors and even the Germans themselves. I try to draw that veil of Israeli dramaturgy around these and other issues that Israeli playwrights tend to ignore. For instance, I commissioned two prominent playwrights (Hanoeh Reim and Roi Rashkes) to each write a play (*Stills*, a semi-documentary play, written by Reim and directed by me, was staged at Habima National Theater in 2001; *Sadako—The Crain Princess*, written by Rashkes, tells the story of the Japanese girl Sadako Sasaki, "Japan's Anne Frank," who was a victim of the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima. The play was staged in Tzavta in 2015 under my direction). I also brought and staged foreign plays written by playwrights from Germany, South Africa, the United States, and Australia. To fulfil this dream, I had to first finish my military service. Once released from the IDF, I auditioned for the top three acting schools in Israel (with Weiskopf's monologue, of course) and was accepted to all three. I chose Nissan Nativ Acting Studio. My father agreed to pay for my studies if I promised him that, after finishing them, I would study a "real" profession that would provide me a safety net. I made the promise (but in my heart, I didn't promise to keep it).

Acting classes are an intensive and visceral experience. Those were challenging years for me, but they shaped me as a professional and a human being, for better or worst. I would just say that I now try to be a better, more sensitive teacher to my students, than some of my own teachers were.

Act 2: Actor

I left acting school without a sense of security. Unlike my classmates, I had no job offers waiting for me. I experienced doubts as to whether I could make it. I traveled to England to rest and to find focus. Benny Barbash's book *My First Sony* had just come out and I took it with me to London and read it with bated breath. The novel follows the unraveling of an Israeli family from the point of view of the son—eleven-year-old Yotam. The boy is obsessed with documenting and tape-recording everything. In *My First Sony*, I found my first dream role. I convinced Barbash to adapt his book into a one-man show, which premiered at the Theatroneto Festival in 1996. The show was received enthusiastically by critics and audiences alike and has been running ever since, for over twenty-five years. The book was translated into many languages and became an international best seller. It is taught in prestigious universities like Harvard and Yale, to which I was also invited to perform. I also toured with the play in Canada, South Africa, Germany, the Netherlands, Slovakia, Australia, and Egypt. The play's successes gave me back my confidence and established the long line of "Holocaust-plays" in my career:

And so, Dad became a ghost writer, which is someone who writes other people's stories for them and signs their names. Each of these survivors had his own way of telling their story. There was Sonya Kravitz of Grodna, who lived for two years in a pit, in a pigsty, with good Gentiles, and before important things she would say to Dad: "pay attention!" Or: "write it in my words!" Or: "let me emphasize!" For example, she said "Inside it, inside our pit, in the pigsty on the banks of the river Niemen, childhood passes by. The clothes we brought with us are too small, the shoes don't fit. Henya, who was a year old when we came, learnt to speak. I got my period. Emphasize!"⁴

While I was working on the play, I also fulfilled my promise to my father and enrolled at Tel Aviv University. I studied psychology, but soon switched to BA studies in the Theater Department, continuing to reassure my parents that this course could provide me with the "security net" they had wished for. I finished my studies (with distinction) and immediately continued on to my master's degree; I also began to teach in the department, taking on courses for students of acting and directing. In one of them, I focused on

monologues and dialogues from Holocaust plays. At the same time, I was invited to teach Israeli theater at the University of Texas at Austin and in the Hebrew Program at Middlebury College, Vermont. Witnessing students from Saudi Arabia and Egypt encounter Israeli plays was an unforgettable experience for me. At the same time, I also started working as an actor, first in Haifa theater and later in cinema (including a very silly film alongside Antonio Banderas and Sir Derek Jacobi).

However, my highlight as an actor came with my next Holocaust show, *The Timekeepers*, by American playwright Dan Clancy, winner of the Obie Award. If, in *My First Sony*, the Holocaust was in the background, in *The Timekeepers* it is front and center. The plot of the play takes place in Sachsenhausen concentration camp and depicts an encounter between three prisoners: Jewish watchmaker Benjamin (yellow star); Hans, a flamboyant homosexual (pink triangle); and a German criminal (green triangle), who acts as a kapo, watching over the other two. Hans and Benjamin fix watches that the Nazis plunder from their victims.⁵ At the beginning of the play, they are suspicious of each other, but quickly form a strong friendship. The uniqueness of the play lies in the way it combines brutal scenes (like the one in which the kapo makes Hans perform oral sex on him) with moments of humor (Hans and Benjamin as the "odd couple"):

Benjamin: I am married to Sarah for twelve years now. I knew her all my life. Our families were friends—even as little children our families would say: "Sarah and Benjamin," "Benjamin and Sarah" . . .

Hans: If my father had to say: "Hans and Kurt," "Kurt and Hans," he would probably throw up.⁶

One of the salient features of new and controversial writing about the Holocaust, dating from early 2000, is the fact that it incorporates humor into Holocaust stories. For example, the heated debate surrounding the release of Roberto Benigni's film *La vita è bella* (1997) is well remembered. This mix of horrors and comic devices was seen by some as an amoral reduction of the historical truth.⁷ Yet, those in favor of the genre have claimed that humor is an inseparable part of the human experience and can be used as an effective psychological survival mechanism in times of stress, pointing towards the plethora of testimonials regarding the existence of wild humor in the ghettos and the camps.⁸ This ethical and aesthetical debate was also present in our rehearsal room, and we kept asking ourselves how the audience would react to this play. We were worried not only about the humor but also about whether the Jewish-Israeli audience would be able to accept an a Jewish prisoner being depicted *alongside other victims*. This panoramic representation, as stated above, can find no equivalent in any original Israeli Holocaust play.

The Timekeepers first premiered in 2002, at Tmuna Theatre, a small fringe venue, and quickly became a huge success. The critics raved about the

play. It ran to hundreds of performances and represented Israel in prestigious festivals around the world, including twenty-five shows at Edinburgh Festival, and won the "Audience Choice" Award in the International Fringe Theater Festival in Edmonton. *The Timekeepers* became the most internationally toured Israeli play (alongside Hanoch Levin's *Requiem*). Many of the tours were funded by the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Thus, for instance, in 2010, the play was sent on tour to San Francisco as the representative of "Gay Israeli Culture" (some viewed it as a cynical attempt to "pink wash" international opinion of Israel and present it in a liberal, flattering light, given the rising criticism of the incumbent government's policies). I remember vividly one particular trip to Germany in 2008. I invited my father to join us, thinking that returning to Germany would offer him some kind of closure. I could not have anticipated what was to come: At the end of the celebratory show, we sat as—we usually did, we three actors from Israel—for a Q&A with the audience. The discussion was in English with the German theater director hosting. At a certain point, a man from the audience got up and spoke: "thank you for a wonderful evening. I especially liked that Hans and Benjamin, the protagonists of your play, are not nice. When Hans, for instance, blackmails Benjamin and doesn't give him news about his son until he receives some payback from him, it sends an important message that the victims were also racist and homophobes, not just the Nazis, and that we're all human. That each one of us is also a Nazi." A murmur passed through the crowd, I saw the host beside me move in discomfort.

Suddenly, my father stood up from his seat in the middle of the fifth row and gave a long monologue in fluent German. I could see that he was very upset, but since I do not speak the language, I could not understand a word he said. Naturally I looked to the host who was supposed to translate for us, but he was transfixed by my father. Once the speech was over and my father sat down, something incredible happened: The crowd stood up as one and clapped (the second standing ovation. Remember? To be continued . . .). I could not understand what had just taken place, but one thing was clear: My father was the star of the evening and had stolen our thunder! They later explained to us that he, who could not stay silent, said something along these lines:

I was born here in 1927. When the Nazis came to power, my schoolmates beat me because I was Jewish. I return here, seventy-five years later, with my son, not to hear one of you clearing his conscience and comparing victim to victimizer. If the play showed us a lack of solidarity between the different prisoners, it is because someone put them in an impossible situation in which they had to survive at all costs. There are people who are responsible for the horrible situation they found themselves in. We did not come all the way here from Israel so that someone here will use

us to cleanse the Germans' guilt. And we will not leave here until everyone is clear about the humane and historical lesson that is to be learned from this event.

Five years later, when I myself stood before the member of the audience in South Africa and answered her in a similar fashion, my cast members joked that "the apple did not fall far from the tree."

In *The Timekeepers*, which is still running, I found the ultimate recipe, one that would define my later works, as an actor and mainly as a director: Focusing on a private case (that the viewers can connect with more easily than with abstract masses), expanding the narrative beyond the Jewish context, and injecting the humor that I find necessary. Comic relief is as vital as oxygen if we are to grapple with this subject.

Act 3: Director and Scholar

After receiving my master's degree, I directed dozens of plays in most theatres in Israel. Many of them were "Holocaust plays." I was also fortunate to work with two of the best actresses in Israel, Lea Koenig and Miriam Zohar, both Holocaust survivors, and now in their nineties.

In *The Haunted Stage*,⁹ Marvin Carlson presents a holistic conceptualization of theater as a "memory machine." In using this metaphor, he shows that each component of any production carries with it its own significant cultural history. He argues that a salient characteristic of every theater show is its "ghosting": Each participant brings to the stage his or her own "ghosts" of personal and professional biography, and these ghosts act as a crucial part in interpreting the work. The encounter between actors and audience, the pillar of every theatrical event, does not take place in an empty mental space:

The "private" lives, real or imagined, of famous actors and actresses have been a source of great interest to the theatre going public and have unquestionably affected that public's reception of the artists' work.¹⁰

In this context, it would be difficult to find two other actresses whose physical presence and public personas are so identified with the memory of the Holocaust and Jewish culture in Eastern Europe as Koenig and Zohar. Between 2011 and 2021, I directed Koenig in no fewer than eight different productions, and Zohar in four. I will briefly discuss a few highlights:

Koenig is the daughter of two great Yiddish actors. She considers it a sacred duty to preserve the Yiddish language and its glorious culture. I bore witness to her dedication when we traveled to New York in June 2019. The city was hosting an international festival to celebrate 100 years since the

foundation of the first Yiddish theater in town. Koenig performed a show that I directed at The Museum of Jewish Heritage. It included monologues and songs in Yiddish and won the hearts of the audience. When the clapping subsided, someone shouted: "what about something in English?" The actress took the microphone and said something along these lines:

Excuse me, ladies and gentlemen. Tonight, I came to you to speak in the name of the great Yiddish authors and poets. There are performances in English in many other places in this city, every night. But Yiddish was sentenced to death. This great culture was pushed away and not allowed to thrive. I, myself, perform in Israel, every night, in Hebrew. Not in the language my parents spoke. So forgive me, but tonight I will speak in no other language.

And again (a third time, halleluia!) the audience gave her a standing ovation.

I directed Zohar in 2017 in *Certificate of Life*, a play written by Jewish-Austrian playwright Ron Elisha. The protagonist, Clara Reich, is a Holocaust survivor who is required to come, on a yearly basis, to the German consulate to renew her certificate, which allows her to continue receiving her pension. Reich takes advantage of this annual appointment to make the young German clerk there miserable, and degrades her continually: "Her welfare is not my primary concern," she explains.¹¹ In a typical monologue, she confronts the young clerk with the absurdity of their bureaucracy:

For twelve long years, the German people expended every fiber of their being in annihilating us. They tried everything in their power, from bullets to piano wire to starvation to torture to gas. And then the war ended. And the dust settled. And, to their utter disbelief, there we were. The Jews. Still alive . . . And so, every year since the fall of the Reich, the very same Germans who were consumed with orchestrating our deaths insist that we prove to them that we are still alive . . . So I ask you: Is that or is that not an irony of the most delicious order?¹²

Certificate of Life is also a comedy drama. Watching Reich confront the German clerk gave the Israeli audience a deep sense of satisfaction. In the survivor's caustic words, they saw a proper "Zionist" response to the murderers and their heirs.

My next collaboration with Zohar carried a similar quality. We worked on Victor Gordon's *You Will Not Play Wagner*. Here, she plays Esther Greenbaum, a rich American Jew and a patron of an international conducting competition that takes place every year in Tel Aviv. One of the competitors, a young Israeli, wishes to conduct a piece of Wagner's music and causes a scandal. The play revolves around his confrontation with Greenbaum, who

refuses to lift the ban on playing Wagner in Israel. At the apex of the play, the heroine gives a poignant monologue:

My past's irrelevant; just one of thousands who survived, many of whom live here, who experienced worse, much worse—thousands—straight from the camps with nothing—less than nothing, to a new country that all too often, to its shame, failed to even bid them welcome—did not know what to do with them; shunned them, looked away, saw them as weak, pathetic—a danger, yes, to the spirit of the new Jew who'd resolved not to give one inch to *anyone* ever again. *Never again*. No submission, no surrender, no gas . . . and let me say it so you clearly hear—*No Wagner! You, Yaakov, will not play Wagner* . . . No doubt the time will come when they *will* forget or just no longer care . . . where people like me will become an obstacle to what they see as progress.¹³

The production premiered during Miri Regev's turbulent time as Minister of Culture, when the subject of cultural boycott and artists' self-censorship was at the heart of public debate. Zohar, who was not afraid to voice her opinion against Regev's policy, was happy to take part in a play that encourages critical thinking.¹⁴

I completed my PhD in 2019, and immediately joined the Department of Comparative Literature in Bar-Ilan University as a senior lecturer. My practical work in the theater nourishes my academic research and vice versa: Back in high school, after watching *Ghetto*, I wrote an extensive paper on cultural life in the Vilna Ghetto, for which I received a national award from the President of Israel at the time, Chaim Herzog. My writing is practice based and I aspire that it may always have a practical application in the field of theater. In recent years, I published articles about the (lack of) representation of the "pink Holocaust" in Israeli theater and my work with the Koenig-Zohar duo, which I view as a calling. I truly regard it as a generational "passing of the torch."

Epilogue

Theater is the art of the present—as the great acting guru Stella Adler taught us: "On stage, it is always present." And yet, good theater strives towards timelessness. Returning to the question from the South African woman with which we opened—"Why don't you move on?"—my answer is: Because I do not wish to! The Holocaust continues to drive me forward with deep intensity. I keep extracting valuable lessons from this event: If the Nazis attempted to reduce the personal identification spaces of their victims by labeling them as "Jews," "communists," "homosexuals," "Gypsies," and so forth, then I seek to avoid definitions and expand my horizons. I constantly

strive to widen the perspective: To act, direct, research, and teach both in Hebrew and in English, in Israel and abroad.

In the next year, I am planning to direct two more plays that reflect on the Holocaust. Just like in the shower room of my childhood, I have no intention of closing the curtain.

Notes

- 1 Pierre Nora, *Essa is d'ego-histoire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987), 7.
- 2 Joshua Sobol, *Ghetto*, trans. Jeremy Sams. Scene 9. Never published.
- 3 Yuval Noah Harari, *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow* (London: Vintage Publishing, 2017), 205.
- 4 Benny Barbash, *My First Sony*, trans. Dalia Bilu (London: Headline Review, 1999), 141–6.
- 5 The Oscar-winning film, *The Counterfeiters* (Best Foreign Film Category, 2017), which presents the story of the Nazis use of prisoners with artistic skills to counterfeit British bills and coins during the war, also takes place in Sachsenhausen.
- 6 Dan Clancy, *The TimeKeepers*, scene 3. Never published.
- 7 See, for instance, Kobi Niv, *Life Is Beautiful, But Not for Jews: Another View of the Film by Benigni*, trans. Jonathan Beyrak Lev. Filmmaker Series, No. 107 (Lanham, MD, and Oxford: The Scarecrow Press, 2003).
- 8 See, for instance, Itamar Levin (ed.), *"Meebe'ad ladma'ot" ("Beyond the Tears: Jewish Humor Under the Nazi Regime")* (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Yad Vashem, Yedioth Ahronoth, 2004).
- 9 Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003).
- 10 Ibid., 85.
- 11 Elisha, Ron. *Certificate of Life*. Scene 11. Never published.
- 12 Ibid, Scene 2.
- 13 Gordon, Victor. *You Will Not Play Wagner*. Scene 2. Never published.
- 14 For instance, this is how the play presents the young conductor's arguments: "Banning music does nothing—nothing to stop antisemitism; how can it? *Parsifal* should contribute no more pain to a Jew than a Mercedes driving through the streets of Tel Aviv—and shit, look around—there're enough of them! It makes no sense—none at all—I refuse to be part of such thinking . . . Look around you. We don't ban *them*, their technology—even their money—no—so we ban their culture. Why? Because that way we protest while we sacrifice nothing. We repeat their stupidity! . . . like *them*, like Chairman Mao Zedong, we ban culture! To our shame, we choose the same path" (Ibid, Scene 3).