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Holot Legislative Theatre
Performing Refugees in Israel

The moment is electric. I am sitting in the intimate Tmuna Theatre in Tel Aviv on a sunny day in March 2018. On one side of the sparse stage, a young man holds an Israeli flag; facing him, a skeptical mass bears multicolored flags. The young man (Doron Lev) asserts in Hebrew: “What happened to the Jewish people in the Holocaust must not happen again. We must define the duty of the countries of the civilized world to give asylum to refugees.” The stage image and text position Israel at the 1951 UN Assembly as singularly concerned with asylum seekers. “Israel” speaks within a framework of universal rights, derived from historical Jewish experience, yet haunted by an unnamed “uncivilized” realm.

Then the image shifts, complicates, as two dark-skinned men (Omad Shakur and Awet Asheber) pick up Israeli flags and join Doron in refuting the Assembly’s fear of refugee “floods.” With Doron, they express revulsion at proposals to “concentrate” asylum seekers in detention centers. These African actors, standing as Israelis, are themselves refugees from Darfur and Eritrea, detained for several years in Israel’s Holot center.

Like thousands of others, Shakur and Asheber came to Israel seeking asylum from...
violence that is a byproduct of global economics and local wars. The refugees’ “day jobs” in marginal Israeli spaces (restaurants, factories) had been tolerated by the state, while also triggering demographic and labor anxieties among some in the Israeli public. A few years ago, the state began rounding up African refugees and more aggressively policing its southern border with Egypt. The Holot detention center in the Negev desert housed asylum seekers for months, and sometimes years, until the Israeli Supreme Court ordered the center closed in 2018. Before that closure, Shakur, Asheber, and several other African asylum seekers had been engaged in a workshop process informed by Augusto Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed (TO), joined at various points by Israeli allies. How they arrived in Israel, and what actions witnessing audiences might take in response to their predicament, is the subject of the Holot Legislative Theatre (HLT).

Both company and production, HLT presents social dilemmas created by Israeli state policy towards asylum seekers through modular, interactive performances. Based on the refugees’ testimonies and personal stories, these performances offer a rereading of the 1951 UN Refugee Convention, aiming to arouse public and legal debate leading to political transformation (Alon 2018). Performances on the streets, in kibbutzes, community centers, schools, and within professional theatres activate Israeli publics in multiple realms. HLT’s epic dramaturgy additionally adapts TO to an explicitly racialized Israeli context that models democratic processes on and off the stage.

HLT emerged from an 18-month development process. Moved by reports of asylum seekers from Darfur and Eritrea trapped between Egypt and Israel, denied refuge by both, Israeli filmmaker Avi Mograbi approached theatre artist Chen Alon in 2014, just after the Holot detention center had opened. Mograbi shared an idea to use theatre to illuminate Israel’s complex position towards refugees. Like Mograbi, as an Israeli citizen with refugee grandparents, Alon felt a sense of connection to the asylum seekers and had been participating in supportive marches and demonstrations. Alon and Mograbi thus agreed to visit Holot one day a week over several months, with the goal of creating TO with asylum seekers. The theatre would make participants visible as refugees rather than as infiltrators, illuminating the conditions that defined their status.

Mograbi and Alon proceeded slowly, grounded in tactics of political organizing and informal ethnography. Alon, a TO scholar-practitioner and cofounder of the Palestinian-Israeli alliance group Combatants for Peace, worked to identify potential participants in Holot through African activists living in south Tel Aviv. Then, in their weekly visits to Holot, Alon and Mograbi “hung out” with persistence, like “white anthropologists” (Alon in Perelman 2018). After several weeks of hanging around—meeting, talking, bringing requested food from Tel Aviv—a few of the detainees agreed to try out some theatre games, mostly hoping to learn English and Hebrew. They

2. For more details about polarized theatre and Combatants for Peace see Alon (2011, 2014).
discovered instead the language of theatre and the therapeutic and political power of TO.

According to participants interviewed by Vered Lee, the TO games restored hope in a site designed to create despair (Lee 2015). TO games worked to “make the body expressive” while moving participants along a spectrum from individual-emotional to collective-activist (Boal [1979] 1985:126). Boal proposes that TO “rehearses revolution” by illuminating and activating responses to oppression (155). As documented in Mograbi’s film Between Fences (2016), the small group of six to eight participants worked with expressive games to eventually craft Image Theatre pieces—embodied tableaux that metaphorically sketched out their position as refugees.

In an inaugural image, a general stood on a block eating a banana while a crowd watched from below. The image communicated the conditions that provoked refugees’ departure from Eritrea, which resonated with the South Sudanese participants. From this beginning, the company created further images that appeared in the HLT production. These included a human fence, signaling efforts to cross the border. A movement machine of dishwashing and cheese-making gestured towards invisible labor in Israel. Absurdist bureaucratic scenarios indexed the exhausting rituals of the state that discipline the body of the detainee. In workshop development, these theatrical sketches illuminated the refugees’ conditions to each other and to themselves, strengthening a poetic as well as collective critical consciousness. After working together for almost a year, building trust, confidence, and theatre, the group agreed to invite a few Israeli actors, most involved in other projects with Alon (Mograbi 2016). They joined together to create what Alon terms a “polarized” TO model (Alon 2018).³

Where Boal had advocated for TO to be confined to oppressed communities, Alon had extended the practices over several years to include those in the dominant culture committed to political struggle with the oppressed. In this “polarized model,” each group (for example, Israelis and Palestinians, prisoners and students) bears witness to the other, exploring power dynamics between them while modeling new ways of being together. In the case of HLT, the initial group of refugees and allies first performed in the Holot center in the summer of 2015 for a rapt audience of thousands, including a few hundred visiting Israelis. The company then procured a weekend pass for detainees that allowed for their performance in Tel Aviv. After the release of the first group of asylum seekers in 2015, HLT performed throughout Israel at the invitation of various communities and at rallies designed to pressure Israel to close the Holot Center. The production I witnessed in Tmuna included a “second generation” of detainees led by members of the first group that had trained as TO facilitators (thought-provoking facilitators that TO practitioners often refer to as “difficultators”). The expanded Tmuna production emerged from this deliberate multiplication of people and expansion of training.

While the Tmuna production had more performers and scenes, the minimalist design was consistent with other HLT performances. The minimal design enables mobility while also drawing attention to props and costume accessories that indicate how power accrues, shifts, and divides. Basic black costumes are augmented by red scarves, caps, a blazer, medals on a jacket, each accessory signaling the social status of the refugee, the soldier, the businessperson, the dictator. These details also enable conscientious cross-ethnic casting: Israelis sometimes portray migrants and vice versa. Props unify and distinguish as well. Thin bamboo poles, reminiscent of director Peter Brook’s aesthetic, signal walking sticks as well as fences, flags, prison bars, and rifles. When not engaged in a scene, actors sit upstage atop stools beside cardboard boxes that double as prop storage, arranged in an arc. The size of the boxes seems to approximate what refugees might be able to carry with them in exile.

Like its design, the production’s dramaturgy draws attention to changes in material conditions. Pieces can be excerpted as visually dynamic street theatre, presented on a blanket.

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³ Mograbi documents the creative process in his film Between Fences (2016).
in the desert, or performed on a professional stage. At any given performance, scenes incorporate up-to-the-minute legislative developments around refugee status and switch out different personal scenarios. Several scenes are designed to be excerpted for interactive forum theatre sessions, which almost always follow the longer productions. While the production devised for the Holot center, which I witnessed as a digital archive and saw live in Tmuna, is adaptable in many ways, it is the carefully conceived dramaturgical structure that enables the slightly different framings and emphases in different settings.

The structure, as I characterize it, incorporates five phases, progressively illuminating refugee subjectivity and leading to audience activation: (1) preparing the ground; (2) (dis)orientations; (3) inquiry about the refugee; (4) investigations of refugee life; and (5) dialogues. Each phase dynamizes both dialectical and ensemble energies, keeping the audience alert to historical resonances, repressive power dynamics, and possibilities for alliance and transformation.

In Tmuna, “preparations” are initially immersive and playful, then shockingly political. The audience enters to the sound of the ensemble at play, singing childhood songs in various languages. The joyful scene warms up both actors and audience. We warm our ears to the linguistic collage, our eyes to the array of bodies; we warm to the ensemble. This immersive engagement then shifts to a more overt orientation. Alon steps forward to speak about the theatrical process and politics of the production. In Tmuna, a guest artist followed Alon: spoken word activist Yossi Tsabari. As a self-identified Arab Jew from Yemen, Tsabari interrupts conventional ethnic polarities. He also disrupts and plays with text in a mode reminiscent of Brecht’s Verfremdungseffekt tactics. Tsabari revises a well-known childhood song to critique Israel’s hard-line Defense Minister, Avigdor Lieberman. He then takes up Emile Zola’s “J’Accuse,” published in 1894 as a response to the flimsy conviction of French Jewish officer Alfred Dreyfus for spying.4 Tsabari’s contemporary accusation references the 71 Israeli Knesset (parliament) members who had recently voted for refugee deportation. As Tsabari calls the members out, ensemble actors hold up signs inscribed with their names. The Knesset members’ names eventually obscure all of the African asylum seekers in the ensemble; the moment makes the HLT members’ racial polarity starkly visible.

Having prepared the ground, oriented the audience to the company and current political context, making explicit the connection between historical anti-Semitism and contemporary racial anxieties, the ensemble stands. We become more familiar with the makeup of this group as they step forward together, uniformly clad in black T-shirts, with Israelis in black pants and Africans in jeans. A divided ensemble, they collectively look at us, then to

4. In 1894 French Jewish officer Alfred Dreyfus was convicted of spying despite flimsy evidence and a cover up on the part of the army. Zola’s editorial, “J’accuse,” decried both the army and state and resulted in Zola’s conviction for libel.
They pick up their walking sticks and softly begin to sing a song in the Eritrean language of Tigrinya, “Nesamama,” a call from the earth to love each other.

The next section disrupts this loving unification and orients the audience instead to a lexicon of terminology about refugee status developed with human rights lawyers. Rendered like a liturgy, through choral responses with shared gestural imagery, the lexicon is initially disorienting. It establishes the status of refugees through repeated choral phrases: “Leaving the Homeland: State of Emergency; Law: None; Court Trial: None; Dictatorship.”

From this spare choral frame, the piece moves to address the question, “What is a refugee?” The subsequent scene integrates Awet Asheber’s refugee story with a Greek chorus of Israeli women reading articles from the 1951 UN Refugee Convention that define power and underlines the conditions that enable the violence that sustains these networks, integrating the direct address of a soldier who tortures Asheber: “I was tied up like him many times [...] without a trial, without a reason.” From the social, the scene shifts to the historical UN Convention detailed above. “Your words have a strong scent of racism,” Lev warns the Assembly in Hebrew, late in the scene. “Yesterday it was us,” adds Asheber now appearing as the cross-cast Israeli delegate, but speaking in Tigrinya, “tomorrow it’s you.”

The words hang in the air as a soldier (indicated only by cap and physicality) clicks his heels and removes the multicolored cloth flags from their bamboo poles. Three Israeli women don red scarves while chanting Article 33 of the 1951 UN Convention on Refugees (which elaborates on the prohibition of refugee refusal). The group of Israeli and African actors shifts into a huddled mass. They traverse the stage enabled by their walking sticks, then move directly towards the audience where their sticks cross to become the Egyptian border barrier. On the opposite end of the stage, also facing us, stands a collection of soldiers (portrayed by both African and Israeli actors). The soldiers mime “pushing back” the refugees, but conflict emerges among the soldiers. Some question the commands to deny water to the refugees. One tosses a canteen into the audience, trusting someone to catch it. Thus, the staged dialectic—refugees versus soldiers—is complicated by both casting and internal dissent. Refugee stories fracture as well. We hear several monologues, stories from the perspectives of women raped by Egyptian soldiers, of men left behind at the border, and of children caught in between.

Where the third section makes the asylum seeker visible through narrative, embodiment, and law, the fourth segment investigates the tenuousness of refugee life in Israel. The refugee exists in a gray area, bolstered by unofficial networks and bounced by bureaucracies. The production physicalizes the ongoing pre-
carity with a ritualized bobbing on imagined buses. The asylum seekers sleep in a public park placed among the audience, invading “our” space. We witness how refugee labor is both restricted and desired, enabled by “policies of nonenforcement” that render them beholden to employers and civil servants. When moved to Holot, they are fined for breaking unwritten rules such as carrying theatrical scripts in Hebrew. While derived from personal stories and enacted by individuals, Holot Legislative Theatre frames each of these struggles as structural, social, and unresolved—ripe for the interventions of interactive forum theatre.

In the final stage before these forums, where the audience is invited to directly intervene in the stage action, HLT prepares the ground again through dialogical encounters between the polarized groups. The ensemble plays out a well-known scene from Israeli playwright Hanoch Levin’s *The Child’s Dreaming* (1993), of Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany on the St. Louis, a boat refused entry to “civilized countries” in 1939. The scene realizes Mograbi’s initial vision of casting asylum seekers in Jewish refugee plays.

The production moves towards conclusion with an ensemble reconnection: all the actors—Israeli, Eritrean, Darfurian—stand in a line together and briefly share their names and diaspora stories. Liat Shabtai speaks of how her grandmother snuck out of France in a suitcase. “Now I have Israeli and French passports.” In contrast, Yonatan, Awet, Omad, Nuraldin, and others have no passports. The commonalities among ensemble stories are positioned again in contrast to legal status. The audience is now primed to explore this contradiction together through forum theatre. In forum, audience members, or “spect-actors,” replace ensemble members to enact (in character) their proposed solutions to the situations presented in the play. The performance I attended also included discussion circles with asylum seekers and human rights lawyers—a mode of ongoing education and activation designed to strengthen the possibilities for legislative change.

As Boal has argued, Theatre of the Oppressed extends into life ([1992] 2002:246), and Holot Legislative Theatre likewise does not conclude even with these circles. Actors train towards enacting the effective dramaturgy of their stories in various public spheres including the courtroom and the media. They learn to perform tactically for Israeli audiences. At the same time, the ensemble not only models alliance onstage, but also practices equitable democracy offstage. The group determines together where and who performs, how they will alter the script, and share funds earned from performances. HLT thus operates as a rare performance of long-term activist alliance. Rather than a singular production, one-time workshop encounter, or short run, the company models sustainable activism and transformation. While clear-eyed in its political ideals, it is a model fueled as much by joy as outrage. The company celebrates family reunions whether this means the departure of a company member released from Holot or emigrating to Canada.

On several occasions Boal has stated that to be a citizen is not to belong to a society, but rather to transform society. For those in the company without legal status as citizens, HLT offers the opportunity for a different kind of
citizenship and belonging, while also working towards legislative and social transformation. Holot Legislative Theatre legislates the refugee into civil society by maintaining that there’s no such thing as an “illegal” human being.

References


Alon, Chen. 2018. Personal interview with author. Tel Aviv, 18 March.


